



## M etaphors in ACT

### Understanding how they work

### Using them – Creating your own

The Acceptance and Commitment (ACT) therapeutic process relies much on the use of metaphors, as they are understood in Relational Frame Theory (RFT). Although it is not necessary for ACT clinicians to have extensive knowledge of RFT, knowing what therapeutic mechanisms are involved can help clinicians to use metaphors more effectively in session.

**Understanding how metaphors work, when they may be useful, and how to create them** may help considerably to adapting them effectively to each client.

Yvonne Barnes-Holmes, Lecturer at the University of Maynooth, Ireland, is an expert in RFT and ACT, and in particular in the use of metaphors in therapy. We interviewed her (see the end of this article) to gain her perspective on concrete clinical issues based on her research and clinical experience.

### **T** he tradition of metaphors in therapy

Using metaphors in therapy is a widespread and old tradition. In CBT, discussions of the most effective ways to convey information to clients are of central interest, and the use of metaphors is frequent. In CBT, the use of metaphors and analogies, as in fictitious stories, allows a reassessment of problematic situations in the third person, with the consequence that those situations then become less difficult to bear emotionally. Metaphors also have the added advantages of making the therapy more understandable to the patient, of facilitating a new perspective on the situation, and of making difficult concepts less abstract (Blenkiron, 2005).

Though seen as useful, however, metaphors are not a central tool in CBT. They are used to convey information to ensure good retention and generalization outside clinical settings (Otto, 2000). But they are not employed as a core

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element in therapy because the underlying processes don't seem to be clearly identified and thus their full potential remains unrealised. The assumption of improved information transfer is based on the idea that organization promotes memorization: the more the information is meaningful and organized into a coherent whole, the better it is retained. Metaphors are thought to facilitate this coherence. A central aspect of ACT, however, is that the process

by which metaphors work is itself critical in bringing about important behavioral change. It is assumed that metaphors can be actively constructed to foster the transformation of stimulus functions of critical aspects of the client's environment. Hence, they can and should be used systematically.

### **W** hy are metaphors useful in therapy?

An advantage of metaphors is that they allow the listener to generate his or her own conclusions about the story presented. In the context of therapy, the clinician no longer has to provide explicit instructions for more effective behavior: the client can extract his or her own meaning from the metaphor. The distinction established in behavior analysis between rule-governed and contingency-shaped behavior contributes to understanding more precisely the utility of metaphors.

Hayes et al. (1989) demonstrated that **rule-governed behaviors become insensitive to changing contingencies**. When we follow a rule, this rule can become more important than the actual consequences of our behavior. In other words, compliance with a rule can lead to the kind of behavioral rigidity that is associated with many psychological disorders. **Persons with phobias act only to avoid what they fear. Persons with panic attacks carefully monitor their heartbeat for any sign of acceleration. Persons with hallucinations spend a significant amount of time trying not to hear the voice that insults them.** In each of these cases, the sufferers are obeying their own implicit or explicit rules (e.g., "My pulse should never accelerate").

There are several types of rule following that include tracks and plys (see ACT Digest Special Issue n°1; Zettle & Hayes, 1982). Following a rule often involves a loss of psychological flexibility, although reliance on rules to adapt one's behavior has important benefits. For example, rules allow for persistence in the absence of immediate reinforcement (e.g., "Eat five fruits or vegetables each day"), gaining from others' experiences without firsthand involvement (e.g., "You shouldn't play the stock market because you could lose a lot of money"), and maintenance of long-term social norms that have undoubtedly contributed to the survival and development of our species (e.g., "Thou shalt not kill").

In behavior analytic terms, the above examples are "plys," or **rules the following of which is mediated by social contingencies**. In other words, plys are rules we comply with because of the social consequences of compliance or non-compliance. Sometimes we create rules of this kind for ourselves, such that behavior that conforms to the rule is reinforced (e.g., "I mustn't immediately trust someone I don't know"). These plys correspond roughly to what CBT calls "dysfunctional beliefs." Generally, pliance, or the class of **behavior under the control of a ply, is less flexible**: It is important to engage in the behavior simply because it conforms with the rule, whether or not the rule helps us to better interact with the environment. As environmental contingencies are not contacted, it is possible that no experiences will ever come to contradict the rule. In addition, pliance continues even if the environment changes, regardless of its effectiveness in the new context.

Another type of rule of particular interest to understanding metaphors is called a "track." **A track is a rule, the following of which is reinforced by natural consequences in the environment**. In other words, a **track defines a non-arbitrary relation**. For example, following the rule, "To compare two documents in Word, go to the 'Tools' menu and choose 'Compare documents'" can lead to effective comparison of the documents, regardless of how the person who provided the rule responds. If I follow a track it is because there is a correspondence between the track and the environment, which may be absent in the case of a ply.

Because plys are so effective in maintaining behaviors with hypothetical or cumulative consequences, and in teaching new behaviors without the need for direct experience, pliance seems to be more common in humans than tracking. With regard to psychopathology, **predominance of plys can be problematic** in several ways (Torneke, Luciano, & Valdivia Salas, 2008). First, behaving primarily in accordance with the consequences maintained by others, or according to their perceived expectations, makes pleasure and happiness more arbitrary. Others decide what is interesting or enjoyable, rather than it being a property of the activity itself. This may explain why some people invest so much time in therapy seeking to comply with their therapist's expectations or wishes. Furthermore, behaving primarily according to one's own plys ("My work must be beyond

reproach so that my bosses appreciate me") leads to **behavioral rigidity** that is difficult to modify. Compliance with the rule matters more than any consequences that follow, and any breach of the rule will generate uncertainty and guilt ("I can't do a perfect job anymore, they're going to hate me, I'm worthless").

To grasp the meaning of a metaphor, it is necessary to be attentive to what it contains. Indeed, metaphors don't directly provide literal significance. Providing a metaphor to a client gives him or her the opportunity to **develop the capacity for tracking**, that is, adjusting behavior in accordance with natural consequences. Providing a metaphor in therapy encourages clients to seek clues that apply to their current experience. Clients extract from the metaphor potential new perspectives that lead them to see the consequences of their actions. By providing a new way of looking at the world, we help them to **focus more closely on environmental contingencies**, thus making adjustment to subsequent changes in the environment more likely. The use of metaphor **increases the proportion of client behavior that is under the control of tracks**. Thus, the **functional value of behavior** is directly targeted, just as it is when we ask a client directly to notice it (e.g., "What is the aim of this behavior? What does it mean to you? Does it work?"). Finally, encouraging clients to extract tracks from metaphors helps them to focus on the **here and now**, and to observe what is happening in the natural environment, rather than relying on thoughts about what is happening. For all these reasons, the use of metaphor is an effective way to create psychological flexibility.

## Relational Frame Theory's analysis of metaphor

According to RFT, metaphors constitute one way to establish **non-arbitrary relations among stimuli**, and even more, to establish **non-arbitrary relations among relations**. The theory helps us to understand precisely what metaphors are, how they work, and how to create new ones tailored to each client.

### Relating stimuli

Relational Frame Theory is a modern contextual behavioral account of language that approaches this phenomenon as learned generalized relational responding (e.g., Hayes, Barnes-Holmes & Roche, 2001). These authors describe how **language allows us to relate events in infinite ways and directions, independently of the physical**

**features of the events.** For example, a child might choose a second banana rather than an apple when shown a banana and asked to choose something that is the 'same'. This is non-arbitrary relating because one banana is physically similar to the other. However, imagine now that the child is shown a banknote and then asked to choose which of two piles of coins (only one of which equals the quantity of money represented by the banknote) is the same. If the child now chooses the correct pile, then this is evidence that he can show generalized or arbitrarily applicable relational responding because this time there is no physical relation of sameness involved - his choice is instead in accordance with an arbitrary or conventional relation of sameness.

## Relating relations

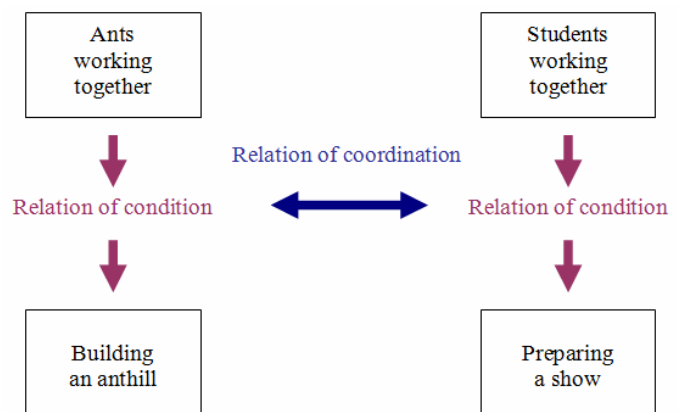
As explained by Stewart, Barnes-Holmes, Hayes, and Lipkens (2001), although relations between stimuli can be very complex (especially when it comes to arbitrary relations), the **majority of human cognition cannot be reduced to relating stimuli.** Reasoning, problem solving, and remembering all involve comparisons, analogies between sets of stimuli themselves linked by relational networks. In such complex cognitive activities, the abstract concepts involved do not have physical equivalents to allow for understanding and manipulation. For example, to understand the concept of honesty, it is not possible to refer to its composition, size, or appearance, as it is with a table or a car. **Abstract concepts are in fact extracted from multiple examples of the same relation.** For example, one can explain what honesty is by describing someone: telling a shopkeeper that he gave him too much change, or bringing a lost wallet to the police station, etc. **Understanding this concept results from the identification of the relation of equivalence between these relations.** Note that another type of relationship may also contribute to understanding the concept of honesty. For example, we can say that damaging a car while parking and not leaving a phone number is not honest. This time, we have a relation of opposition, but it still helps to grasp the concept of honesty.

## The metaphor: a relation of coordination between two non-arbitrary relations

Among the various cases in which two sets of relations enter into a relationship, metaphors specifically involve **relating two relational networks based on non-arbitrary characteristics through a relation of coordination** (Stewart et al., 2001).

Here is an example. Imagine that a teacher wants to teach his students the need to work in a group to prepare an year-of-end show. To do this, he takes his class to the forest to observe a nest of ants. The children watch each ant carrying a tiny twig, and observe the result of this cooperation, which seems disproportionate compared to the small contribution of a single individual.

In this example, children and ants are not in a frame of coordination. In other words, they are not equivalent (although they could be in another context, such as identifying them both as living organisms). Even if the teacher says to his students, "Behave like ants," he would not ask them to stand on all fours to carry twigs. And even if they were to do so, they would not become ants. **What is equivalent between students and ants in this context is the relationship each shares with another event.** If ants work together, they can build an anthill. If students work together, they can organize a show. Both relationships, which are arbitrary in the sense that they are language, however describe a non arbitrary **conditional** relation (if we work together, we can create great things, which is not defined by a social convention). Thus, according to RFT, **building a metaphor means establishing a relation of coordination between two relational networks describing non-arbitrary features of the environment** (see diagram).



## What effects are we looking for with metaphors in ACT?

When using a metaphor, the goal is to **transfer the relationship exemplified in the vehicle (the metaphor and the relational network it contains) to the target (the client's relational network).** The therapist aims to bring the client to see equivalence between these two networks. If the relation of equivalence is perceived, the functions of the stimuli in the target can be **transformed**, and the client's behavior **changed** (Barnes-Holmes, 2006). For example, in one of the best known metaphors of ACT, the quicksand metaphor, the goal is to change the behavior of clients who are struggling against their anxiety (as the only consequence of this behavior is to increase anxiety, the wisest thing to do is not to struggle). A parallel is drawn with the attempt to escape



from quicksand by struggling, which accelerates the sinking (Hayes et al., 1999). **Here, the function of struggling in quicksand (generating counterproductive effects) is transferred to the struggle against anxiety via a relational frame of coordination.** A client who grasps this equivalence can understand that trying to reduce his anxiety makes him more anxious and he may then observe the real consequences of his attempts to control his anxiety.

The relation of coordination shared by the target and the vehicle is set by a **contextual cue** (in RFT terms, a “Crel”, that is, a context that defines the relationship between two events). The cue can be arbitrary, for example, when one uses “like” or “as” (e.g., “Life is *like* a box of chocolates” would say Forest Gump). The cue can also be **non-arbitrary**. For example, **the similarity between the emotional experience of drowning in quicksand is the same as that caused when one is overwhelmed by anxiety** is a contextual cue that establishes a frame of coordination between struggling against quicksand and struggling against anxiety (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2006). Whether arbitrary or non-arbitrary cues are used to present a metaphor in clinical settings is not trivial. **Often, using arbitrary cues can encourage verbalization on the part of the client and increases his relational network, rather than transforming the stimulus functions** (see our interview with Yvonne Barnes-Holmes).

## How to build a useful metaphor?

How can one use the theoretical principles of RFT to create one’s own metaphors, adapted to each client? Three steps are needed: precisely determining the verbal material the client has at his disposal, how best to use it, and what purpose the metaphor should serve.

### What do we have?: Identifying the client’s relational network

Since the transformation of function of the target stimuli comes from the relation of coordination between the target and the vehicle, **we need the metaphor to match as closely as possible with the situation faced by the client.** This requires that the therapist identify as precisely as possible the very nature of the client’s network. For example, what is the relationship between alcohol consumption, anxiety and health? For some clients, alcohol reduces anxiety (short-term interest), but damages health (long-term disadvantage). By considering this relational network, one can find a situation that includes the same relations. For example, giving authorization to fish endangered species is beneficial in the short-term because these fish sell for a high price (thus reducing poverty among fishermen), but disturbs the

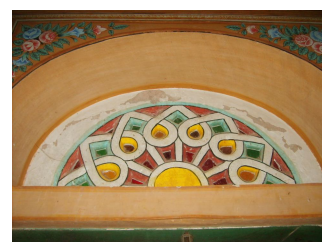
ecological balance in the long-term and reduces resources (thus presenting problems for fishermen). The relationships included in the target and the vehicle are very close. However, if the non-arbitrary characteristics of alcohol consumption are misidentified (e.g., if the client drinks to actually increase pleasure during parties), the fishing metaphor will less likely transform the function of alcohol drinking.

### For what purpose?: Determining which transformation of function is useful

The purpose of a metaphor is not simply to illustrate. Rather than a simple pedagogical demonstration, a metaphor aims to modify behavior. The therapist must not forget this goal, nor the direction in which this change will take place. Let’s take the example of a client who feels unable to go back to work as long as his depressive thoughts remain. In such a case, ACT tries to show to the client that **having depressive thoughts is not abnormal** and that if one considers them with some distance, and for what they really are (i.e., psychological events and not “road signs”), **it is possible to engage in valued actions.** From this perspective, the therapist is seeking a **modification of the function (rather than the content) of negative thoughts**, which are for the moment merely indicators that any action is impossible.

### How to use a client’s verbal material?: Finding a vehicle that best fits the target

As previously explained, if the vehicle and the target don’t match, the relation of coordination can not be established. Rather, the vehicle needs to correspond to a situation with which the client is familiar, so that the functions of the events of the network are clear to him and in addition, events prime the metaphorical relation repeated more frequently in everyday life (e.g., we created a metaphor with a yacht for one of our clients who was fond of sailing).



The vehicle may employ a situation that was directly experienced, but it can also employ a situation well understood by the social community to which the client belongs. With respect to the latter situation, even though the client has not experienced the vehicle directly, the relationships among the events of this situation can be understood. Thus, a metaphor referring to a totally impossible situation practically speaking can be very effective. For example, the “feeding the tiger” metaphor (Hayes et al., 1999) aims to show the client that avoidance of small psychological events can be temporarily effective, but will increase their frequency and magnitude across time. Avoidance is futile and counterproductive. *Imagine that you find a baby tiger in front of your door (which is indeed not usual). At first you adopt it, feed and care for it, and it is nice to you. But the more you feed it, the more it grows. It becomes stronger, greedy, out of control and very demanding. You feed it more and more to try to calm it down, but eventually you can't even go inside your home...* All of this abstraction is easily predicted although practically all of us have never fed a real tiger and probably never will.

Many existing metaphors meet the above criteria, and so they can be reused. Some metaphors may be universal or “standard” in the ACT community. However, it is recommended to attempt to consider in advance in the case of each client what his or her behavioral and verbal repertoire is and then apply the best metaphor(s) to suit the profile, rather than to automatically apply a particular metaphor, even if it is well known or standard.

In general, therefore, the **therapist has to check that the vehicle contains the same kind of relationships included in the target**. Let's look at one of our previous examples to see how to build an efficient vehicle. *One of our clients was convinced that he could not go back to work while he had depressive thoughts. Accordingly, he was staying at home all day long ruminating on the painful events of his life. He hoped that one day he would wake up and that everything would have disappeared. This relational network can be analyzed in the following way: if negative thoughts are present, then it is impossible to work (conditional relation). Our goal was to change the function of negative thoughts. We, therefore, sought a situation in which the cessation of an activity in the presence of an aversive event was clearly ineffective, as tempting as it might be. We created the “ground fog” metaphor. Imagine you are on your way to your job in the morning. Suddenly, you enter a layer of fog. It starts to be very difficult to see the road and to drive safely. You could decide to stop and wait for the fog to dissipate. But how long would it take? A day? Maybe more? If you decide to stop, not only are you going to stay in the fog, but you're going to abandon the pursuit of your valued goals (in this case, going to work). Admittedly, driving in the fog will be quite difficult, and you will have to slow down. But you will reach your destination. Maybe you'll get out of this layer of fog (to make that possible, you need to go ahead). Or maybe the fog will still be present when you arrive at work, but you won't care. What matters ultimately is that you make it to work, not that you get rid of the fog. In fact, most people in*

*this situation don't stop*. With such a metaphor, it is hoped that the function of negative thoughts change: they are still unpleasant, but they no longer represent an impassable obstacle on our way to values.

## C onclusion

Using metaphors in ACT is often very effective. Among other things, they are useful to teach new responses in difficult emotional contexts. Through figurative language, they allow new patterns, yet unexplored, to emerge. They are useful for **transferring functions among stimuli, regardless of arbitrary relations**. They are therefore the best way to use psychotherapy's main tool, language, while avoiding the traps it contains.

But like any effective tool, metaphors should be used sparingly. The **use of metaphors should be functionally oriented**, and serve the client's purpose. Of particular risk is metaphor being used to decrease the therapist's discomfort when therapy is not producing good results. Although we focus here on the understanding and creation of effective metaphors, they cannot, under any circumstances, be considered an end unto themselves.

ACT is not only about metaphors, but relies on the choice of **functionally effective tools**. Metaphors are a good candidate, but a metaphor without any functional value is like fake plastic fruits: perfect aesthetics (or kind of...), but a nutritional value close to zero!



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## Interview with Yvonne BARNES-HOLMES (Ph.D.)

**ACT Digest: One of the goals of ACT is to undermine the control of rules over patient behavior. Could you tell us how the use of metaphors can be part of that process?**

**Yvonne Barnes-Holmes:** This is one of those occasions where we have abstracted an idea from basic behavioral research and applied it to therapy without empirical evidence to support it, but the little that we do know about rule-following as verbal behavior generally suggests that this is a good idea. Pliance is implicit in all forms of therapy and of course a certain amount of pliance is required (e.g., to get clients to do homework). But some psychological conditions (e.g., depression) are characterized by rather extreme levels of pliance (usually excessive), which functions as a generic rule along the lines of ‘I must do everything I can to keep the therapist happy and then I’ll get better’. Of course, this wouldn’t work because there should really be no causal and complete relationship between the therapist being happy and the client getting better. And of course this is indicative of the type of over-arching ‘keep everyone happy’ strategy that is indeed common in depression. For ACT, we want them to learn to manage their lives by making experiential contact with their situation and assessing the overlap between this and what they value, and rules such as the one above just don’t seem to help them do that. Also if you give clients rules, you are likely to reinforce rule-following and if rule-following is the problem, then the problem will only get worse. As with all verbally sophisticated human beings anyway, we often construct rules mistakenly and because they are mistaken as solutions, they don’t work for very long in the first place and then we just come up with another rule, and so on. In order to do values and acceptance, tracking is a much better strategy and likely to be more informative and we are less likely to get sucked into details of tracking in the way that we would with pliance. It’s a bit like tracking is more realistic and even more honest and reliable than pliance, almost less verbally fraught. All you have to do is to keep your eye on your experience as it is, not as what you say it is, and let that be your guide. Because metaphors are metaphors, they alter verbal functions in novel ways and so when a problem is a verbal one, metaphors offer a perspective on it that is not really available in any other verbal format. If you instruct a client directly you will perhaps just add to the existing relational network that contains the problem. But if you put a new slant on it with a metaphor, you can start to change verbal functions that already exist. It is hard to get pliance with metaphors because they are not instructions, it’s like they inform but don’t instruct. They encourage you to see something differently and



there is often room for you to see two or three new things in a metaphor (which would otherwise take a lot of instructing). So in a way, metaphors are naturally more attuned to tracking than pliance. In fact, metaphor is a way around pliance, because there is no accurate way to interpret a metaphor and it does not require you to give a pliant response. Interestingly, I have found that clients rarely think of their problems in metaphor, but instead just keep giving themselves new rules when old ones fail. This suggests that pliance is a problem. But clients often think that they just keep coming up with the *wrong* rule, not that coming up with rules per se is a problem. So in a sense, there is nearly always an issue with pliance at the beginning of therapy. So we begin to use a metaphorical style with clients from the beginning.

**AD:** In a clinical setting, how should a metaphor be presented to a client? Should the frame of coordination that relates the vehicle and the target be established under the control of an arbitrary or a non-arbitrary Crel? In other words, should the therapist explain explicitly this relation (e.g., by saying that *struggling with anxiety is like struggling in quicksand*) or is it better to tell the metaphor and let the client feel the similar nature of the two relational networks? What outcome can be expected from these two different methods?

**YBH:** Of course, these are empirical issues and ultimately that is the best way we will learn how to proceed with these issues in therapy. But for what it is worth in advance, I would suggest the following. Sometimes you can explain a metaphor but I generally don't. If a client hasn't got the point (usually metaphors have several), then add a layer to the metaphor or use another one. Even try to get the client to give you another metaphor along similar lines. That way you will be able to assess the coordination relation that you are trying to get to with the metaphor. If you explain the metaphor you will not only kill the effect, but you will just add to the existing verbal network that is the problem in the first place. This is a poorer outcome and might even be problematic, so metaphors are best left to work for themselves. Almost by definition metaphors contain at least one non-arbitrary element that is highlighted and verbally sophisticated humans are excellent at abstracting this. We have good empirical data to suggest that when adults can't derive arbitrary relations, they look immediately to non-arbitrary relations and derive them instead. So even if parts of your metaphor don't work as you hoped, clients will often get something out of it. They are not stupid, often it is the contrary. Clients are very verbally sophisticated individuals, so more contact with the non-arbitrary world is better for them. Imagine, for example, that a client has a problematic relationship with her husband. And what you have learned so far is that the problem in large part is that the client has low tolerance of her husband's efforts to be jovial around her (as in the earlier part of their relationship). So, you say "It seems a bit like cat and mouse in your house, where you're the cat". What the client can get is that no matter what the mouse does the cat is always waiting; they bicker but at times it is funny like in the Tom and Gerry cartoons; at times she can be vicious; the mouse is harmless really; she can be in charge too and so on. There are so many

messages and you can work them to aid your cause. But if you began explaining to the client that she is the cat, she might feel defensive like you are categorizing her as vicious and thus she will focus on that element over the others. And then you really are in trouble!

**AD:** In their review of the literature on metaphors, McCurry and Hayes (1992) explained that a good therapeutic metaphor should have "multiple interpretations if the client's problems are diffuse, but fewer meanings if the client's problem is more constrained". Could you explain us this rule from an RFT view? How can a therapist vary the number of interpretations of a metaphor?

**YBH:** Again, this is an empirical issue. This is a difficult one because it is hard to predict whether a client's problems in simple terms reflect constrained relational networks or excessively large ones. My inclination is that they are often constrained in some respects, which is why they can only see one or two solutions as a way out. In simple terms, we might say that they don't see the bigger picture, like worrying over things that aren't relatively important in the fullness of their lives (like having clean hands or a tidy garden). The metaphor should fit the problem, that is the key. So, if the problematic network is constrained, then the metaphor should open it out. But if the problem is that the network is too broad and everything is in there (like the self, for example) then the aim of the metaphor is to reduce it and highlight one or two features that will shift the perspective or even just give the client something to focus on initially. Alternatively, you could think of it the other way and suggest that if a client's problematic network is broad, then the metaphor should be broad to give them a view on the breadth of the problem and if it is constrained, then the metaphor should be specific so as to hit the target. That's why this is a complicated issue. Always try to think through the metaphors clearly before using them. The question is what is the problem and what do you want them to see about that problem (not do, just see) that they can't see already. Put simply, how come the therapist doesn't have that as a problem, so what do you see that they don't, and how can you make a metaphor out of that. So, if each problem has about three key elements, what type of metaphor has all three and has them linked together in a coherent story. So for RFT, the metaphor should match the network in breadth and add something new into it, likely by changing some of the existing functions. In training, we often draw the metaphor on the board (that too is a metaphor) and try to come up with every possible derivation and how much weight each gets in that metaphor (depending on the likelihood of salience for the client). And when we are struggling with a client, we derive the problem and work out all the possible metaphorical hits we need to address it and

then we construct the metaphor that tells the best story around that, hopefully with relative emphases in the right places.



**AD:** Could you tell us a few words about the role of empathy in constructing efficient metaphors? We understand that, since the vehicle needs to match the relational network of the client, the therapist needs to adopt his/her perspective. How can the therapist refine this ability of changing perspective? How is it possible to contact the non-arbitrary properties of the client's network? How can the therapist let the client know that he understands the client's feelings? Can an RFT analysis of perspective-taking enhance the training of therapists' empathy?

**YBH:** The simple answer to this is that no therapist can feel what a client feels, even if they have struggled with the same problem and there is no point in pretending that you can. So, I tell clients from the outset that I can't feel it, and that's probably a good thing because if I did I would almost certainly end up having the same problem with it as they do (this is very empathic). So, it is an advantage that I don't in fact because then I might have an insight into it that is not on view yet to the client. But what I emphasize is that I do feel, and I am human, and in similar circumstances I would likely do what they are doing right now. And if I was to get help, I wouldn't want to go to someone who had the same problem or to someone who had no problems. That's why humans can make good therapists (and not so good ones too). Clients often have little perspective on their problems, because for them they are the problem and there is a coordination between the problem and the self. They will often say, I know having dirty hands is not really a problem, so the problem is me because I worry too much about having dirty hands. So, the coordination among dirty hands, the anxiety that comes with it and a low sense of self overall is problematic. What you want the client to see is that having dirty hands does not make you a bad person even if you get anxious about it. So the way they see it is that you can't be a whole person and have anxiety and dirty hands, so there is a distinction here that is the flip side of that coordination which has a whole human being distinct from minor things like dirty hands. This is problematic, because at one level there is hardly a comparison between whole people and dirty hands. It's like they can't be whole while dirty hands are a part of them, so that the self and the hands are coordinated when really one should only be the most minute part of the other in a tall hierarchical relation. But if you tried to explain this to a client, they would just get more anxious about being anxious about nothing, because you just added to the network. But you can use metaphors and other verbal styles that basically question "As a human being, are you not worth more than your hands. When you were a young girl, did you dream of clean hands, rather than romantic relationships and children?" This begins to alter the existing network and put lots of things higher up the network and closer to the self than hands. So in empathy it is the perspective on the problem that is to be shared or transformed, not the problem. And the empathy comes when you start to shift their perspective, not when you take on their

problem. Empathy also comes when you indicate to clients that they are better than their problems and that they are worth fighting for. When they come into therapy, they are focused overtly on key problems, but actually in a more generic sense they are really sick of being who they are right now. It's like they are more sick of that overwhelming anxiety than they are of the dirty hands. So initially I often step around the problem and focus on the self (values work helps with this) and automatically they begin to think about who they are and so they are already beginning to operate at a different level to before. This is also empathic. It's like you see the person underneath the verbal system that is attacking them, so together you go to war on the problem and it's not that you go to war on the person. That way they will feel like you are on their side against their verbal system. What we know about relations and perspective-taking can help ACT immensely (although I would say that) because empathy is a target, it is not a feeling. And the target comes when we shift their perspective and we can only do that when we see what relational networks are problematic. And RFT helps us do all this, especially because I think that the sense of self and the hierarchical perspective that goes with that are problematic in most clients that I have known. RFT also helps immensely with metaphors that allow you to see the problem, see the client's perspective and give them a new perspective on who they are, who they can be, and who they want to be.



## Y. Barnes Holmes' representative publications

**Barnes-Holmes, Y., Barnes-Holmes, D., McHugh, L., & Hayes, S. C. (2004).** Relational Frame Theory: Some implications for understanding and treating human psychopathology. *International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy, 4*, 355-375.

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