Relational Frame Theory (RFT)

Authored by
mohammad looti

October 7, 2025

ARABPSYCHOLOGY.COM

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Relational Frame Theory (RFT)*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=34622

Relational Frame Theory (RFT)

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Behavior Analysis, Cognitive Science
Proponents: Steven Hayes, Dermot Barnes-Holmes

1. Core Principles

Relational Frame Theory (RFT) is a functional contextual psychological theory that proposes a behaviorist account for the development of complex human language and higher-order cognition. RFT posits that these sophisticated cognitive capacities are not the result of innate biological structures, but rather derived from a generalized, learned behavioral repertoire known as Arbitrarily Applicable Relational Responding (AARR). The core thesis of RFT is that humans learn to arbitrarily relate stimuli to one another based on contextual cues and social reinforcement, a process that establishes symbolic networks.

The theory defines language and cognition as behavior that involves 'relating' things. When an individual learns to relate one object or concept to another--such as equivalence, comparison, or opposition--they create a relational frame. Crucially, these relations are established through environmental interactions and subsequent reinforcement provided by the verbal community. Once an individual masters AARR, they can derive untrained relationships between stimuli that have no physical connection, allowing for rapid, flexible, and generative thought. This ability to derive relationships is what distinguishes RFT from simpler behavioral models and allows it to explain the complexity of human symbolic activity.

2. Historical Development

Relational Frame Theory originated in the radical behaviorist tradition and is fundamentally rooted in the early work on language acquisition conducted by B.F. Skinner. Skinner's 1957 book, *Verbal Behavior*, provided a foundation by analyzing language as operant behavior learned through environmental contingencies. However, Skinner's account struggled to fully explain the generativity of language--the human capacity to produce and understand novel sentences and relationships never directly reinforced. RFT was developed primarily by Steven Hayes and Dermot Barnes-Holmes starting in the 1980s to address this gap.

RFT sought to provide a robust, empirical, and non-mentalistic account of symbolic behavior that remained consistent with the principles of behavior analysis. It represents a behaviorist alternative to nativist theories of language acquisition, such as the one proposed by Noam Chomsky, which argued for an innate, biological Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Instead of embracing an innate biological capacity, RFT proposes that language and cognition are learned through specific interactions in the environment, particularly through repeated exposure to situations where relational responding is explicitly reinforced. This process, known as Multiple Exemplar Training

ARABPSYCHOLOGY.COM

(MET), generalizes the skill of relating arbitrary stimuli, thereby establishing the necessary psychological foundations for human language.

3. Key Concepts and Components

Relational Frames

A relational frame is a specific, generalized operant class of arbitrarily applicable relational responding. These frames are the fundamental units of human symbolic thought. Examples of basic frames include coordination (sameness or equivalence), distinction (difference), comparison (bigger/smaller), opposition (hot/cold), temporal (before/after), spatial (above/below), and hierarchical (part-whole). Once a child learns a specific relational frame, they can apply it arbitrarily to any set of stimuli based on contextual cues, regardless of the stimuli's physical properties.

Mutual Entailment

This property describes the bidirectional nature of learned relationships. If an individual is taught a relationship in one direction (e.g., A is better than B), they can immediately and automatically derive the reverse relationship (B is worse than A) without explicit training. Mutual entailment ensures that linguistic learning is swift and efficient, avoiding the need to reinforce every possible stimulus pairing.

Combinatorial Entailment

Combinatorial entailment refers to the capacity to combine two or more mutually entailed relations to derive a novel, untrained relation. For instance, if an individual is taught that A is related to B, and B is related to C, they can immediately derive the relationship between A and C. This capability is essential for abstract reasoning, complex problem-solving, and understanding syntax, as it allows for the formation of vast, interconnected relational networks.

Transformation of Stimulus Function

When stimuli are linked within a relational frame, the psychological functions (e.g., emotional impact, reinforcing value, behavioral consequences) of one stimulus can transfer or transform the functions of the other stimuli in the network. If the word 'dog' is related to the word 'canine' (coordination frame), the function of 'dog' (e.g., evoking a specific image or emotional response) will transform the function of 'canine.' This mechanism explains how thoughts and verbal rules can directly influence behavior, often independent of direct non-verbal experience.

4. Applications and Examples

RFT provides a clear, functional explanation for how humans infer knowledge and navigate

ARABPSYCHOLOGY.COM

complex linguistic environments. The simple example of a child learning about candy illustrates RFT at work: A child is initially taught that a known object, such as **chocolate**, is classified as a type of **candy** and that it **tastes yummy**. A coordination frame (Chocolate = Candy) and a comparative frame (Candy = Yummy) are established. When the child later encounters an entirely novel food identified only by the arbitrary verbal cue "This is candy," the established relational frame allows the child to derive that the new object is similar to chocolate, is edible, and will likely taste good. The child is relating the new stimulus (the unknown food) to a previously known stimulus (chocolate) based solely on linguistic cues (the label "candy"), demonstrating both combinatorial entailment and the transformation of function.

The most prominent practical application of RFT is its role as the theoretical underpinning for Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). ACT utilizes RFT principles to understand and treat human suffering, viewing many psychological disorders as problems arising from excessive or rigid relational responding. Specifically, RFT explains how verbal rules and relational networks can lead to 'cognitive fusion,' where individuals treat their thoughts (e.g., "I am worthless") as literal, concrete truths rather than simply arbitrary verbal relations. Therapeutic interventions derived from RFT aim to increase 'defusion,' helping the client shift the function of troubling thoughts from being literal dictates to being mere words or sounds, thereby reducing their behavioral control.

5. Criticisms and Limitations

Relational Frame Theory, despite its empirical success in generating derived relations in experimental settings, faces various criticisms, especially from cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists. One major critique often leveled against RFT is that it provides a detailed description of the behavioral phenomena (derived responding) but may not offer a sufficient mechanistic explanation. Critics argue that attributing complex cognitive functions solely to AARR risks circularity, where the existence of derived relations is used to prove the existence of the generalized skill (AARR) that supposedly caused them.

Furthermore, the methodology required to establish RFT principles, primarily through Multiple Exemplar Training (MET), is highly formalized and often occurs under specific laboratory conditions. Critics question whether these controlled training procedures accurately model the natural, rapid, and often informal language learning that occurs in children, suggesting that RFT may oversimplify the complex environmental factors involved in natural language acquisition. There is also ongoing debate regarding RFT's integration with neuroscientific findings; while RFT focuses on functional analysis of behavior, some researchers seek more detailed neurobiological models to explain how the brain physically processes and stores these complex symbolic relationships.

ARABPSYCHOLOGY.COM

Further Reading

Relational Frame Theory (Wikipedia)
Steven C. Hayes
Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
B. F. Skinner on Verbal Behavior

ARABPSYCHOLOGY.COM