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Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as a Career Counseling Strategy  
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AUTHOR NOTES

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### Abstract

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) has potential to contribute to career counselling. In this paper, the theoretical tenets of ACT and a selection of its counselling techniques are overviewed along with a descriptive case vignette. There is limited empirical research into ACT's application in career counselling. Accordingly, a research agenda is presented for the aim of integrating ACT with career counselling. This agenda includes suggestions to address conceptual convergence, practitioners' perspectives, counselling processes, measurement of impact, and applications in counselling.

Keywords: ACT, career counselling, acceptance and commitment therapy, emotion

### Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as a Career Counselling Strategy

Emotional functioning has been notably absent in the career development literature (Kidd, 2004), yet there are associations among career well-being, relationships, and transitions (Kidd, 2008). Personal and career counselling are inseparable when counselling is considered contextually in terms of the connectedness of career and relationship, family, cultural, and value systems (Betz, 1993; Juntunen, 2006; Richardson, 2002; Schultheiss, 2006). A relatively new approach to personal counselling and psychotherapy, called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2003), has demonstrated efficacy and effectiveness with a diverse range of clients and for a wide range of problems, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, trichotillomania, stress, pain, and negative affectivity (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006; Ost, 2008). There has also been exploration of ACT's application in organizational consulting (Bond & Bunce, 2000; Hayes, Bond, Barnes-Holmes, & Austin, 2006). The objective of this paper is to explore the potential for ACT's application in career counselling.

#### **The Conceptual Basis of ACT**

ACT (said as one word) is integrated with an empirically-based contextual theory of cognition and behaviour known as Relational Frame Theory (RFT; Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001b). ACT focuses on enhancing an individual's psychological flexibility by increasing acceptance of internal experiences, confronting experiential avoidance, contextualizing problematic cognitions, exploring personal values and associated goals, and fostering commitment to moving forward in the direction of one's chosen life values (Hayes, 2004). Career counselling similarly focuses upon those phenomena. Thus, we suggest that ACT encompasses a range of theoretical constructs, such as psychological flexibility and adaptability, values, personal agency, and approach/avoidance (outcomes of self-efficacy beliefs), which may serve to integrate career development and psychological theories for career counselling practices.

In RFT, language is taken to be the root cause of human suffering (Hayes et al., 2003). It is unusual for humans to do or experience anything without thinking about it in some way that does not involve verbally-based thoughts. Thoughts can acquire aversive *functions* when they refer to stimuli or events that are painful or unpleasant (Fox, 2009). Just as individuals try to escape or avoid aversive stimuli or events, they are also likely to try to escape or avoid painful or aversive thoughts, feelings, emotions, and other private experiences (Fox). An individual's anxiety about career indecision, for example, may be related to their past learning experiences and negatively loaded self-statements and words spoken by significant others that, when recalled in the present under situations of stress or uncertainty, painfully undermine beliefs in the capacity to make a decision (e.g., a student experiencing career indecision and imagining the critical voice of a parent saying "You are no good, and you never will be. Who do you think you are, wanting to go to college?").

According to RFT, individuals can learn ways of responding that are likely to increase the frequency of unpleasant private experiences (e.g., negative thoughts or emotions). RFT and ACT focus on the analysis of the nature of human language and cognition and the application of this to the understanding and alleviation of suffering. Like cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT), ACT focuses upon cognitions, behaviours and emotions as the grist of

counselling, particularly those cognitions that are proximal to and actively causative of behavioural and emotional distress. CBT aims to identify and change *irrational thoughts* that emanate from errors in logic (e.g., dichotomous thinking) and misinterpretation of evidence, and then replace them with logical thoughts that are appropriately based in evidence. Unlike CBT, ACT does not attempt to alter or reduce problematic thoughts, feelings, or memories as a way of alleviating suffering. Once relational frames are established, it is posited that they are very difficult, if not impossible to change (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001a). However, ACT entails techniques to change the function of cognitions and to generate flexibility in the regulation of behaviour. A detailed overview of RFT is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, the reader is referred to Hayes et al. (2001a) for a comprehensive coverage of that theory.

### **The Techniques of ACT**

ACT is an approach to counselling that can be applied to a range of problems, client populations, and settings (Hayes et al., 2003). The goal of ACT is psychological flexibility, defined as "...the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being and to either change or persist when doing so serves valued ends" (Hayes, Luoma, et al., 2006, p. 7). Through a range of techniques, ACT seeks to "...undermine the grip of the literal verbal content of cognition that occasions avoidance behaviour and to construct an alternative context where behaviour in alignment with one's values is more likely to occur" (Hayes, 2004, p. 651). The therapeutic techniques used in ACT aim to increase psychological flexibility through six interrelated core processes: *acceptance*, *defusion*, *contact with the present moment*, *self-as-context*, *values*, and *committed action* (Hayes, 2004). These core processes are elaborated in the following sections.

The notion of psychological flexibility resonates with career development theory in which adaptability is posited as a central construct of personal growth, for example career construction theory (Savickas, 2005). ACT usefully presents a counselling approach that fosters adaptability, not only for immediate crises, but for longer-term movement toward goals inherent in values.

### **Confronting the Control Agenda**

It is typical for a person experiencing unwanted private events, such as anxiety, to try to eliminate those experiences, but, according to Hayes (2004), lack of anxiety is just the means towards an end goal of being able to live a meaningful life. Paradoxically, the more an individual tries to control unwanted private events, such as anxiety, the more likely the individual will experience those events and avoid doing things in the service of their values (Hayes, 2004). Clients who present for counselling have often tried a range of strategies to overcome their difficulties and, in many cases, the reason they seek help is because their strategies have failed. Such strategies are often attempts to control unwanted private experiences, which can lead to an increase in those experiences and, consequently, further attempts to control them. Therefore, ACT therapists use techniques that help clients to confront their control agenda by helping them to acknowledge that some of the methods they have used to solve the problem are not working, and to consider the possibility that potential solutions may themselves be a problem (Hayes et al., 2003).

Many of the intervention strategies aimed at confronting the control agenda use metaphor or experiential activities. The *man in the hole* (Hayes et al., 2003), *psychological*

*quicksand*, *hungry tiger*, and *Chinese finger trap* metaphors (Hayes & Smith, 2005) are examples. The Chinese finger trap, for example, is a toy; it is a cylindrical sheath of woven bamboo, about the size of a cigar, into each end a person inserts the finger-tips of the index fingers. The only way that people can release their fingers from the trap is to relax and move their fingers slowly towards each other. If the fingers are pulled forcefully, the sheath tightens around the finger-tips. The metaphor suggests that fighting and struggling against an emotional trap is no way to defeat it; only accepting the emotional experience, understanding how the emotional trap operates (through the words etc.), and then giving in to the experience enables letting go—or being let go. Creative hopelessness is not about instilling feelings of despair or hopelessness in the client, but helping the client to recognize and give up unworkable strategies in favour of creating other ways that are more in the service of his or her valued goals (Hayes et al., 2003). Thus, ACT encourages acceptance as the alternative to control.

### **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness has been proffered as a useful career counselling strategy for focusing upon emotions (Kratzing, 2011), such as anxiety which is often associated with the uncertainty of unemployment (Jacobs & Blustein, 2008). It is typical for clients who experience symptoms of anxiety to be worried about future events that may or may not happen, and for clients who experience depressive symptoms to ruminate on the past and things that have gone wrong (Harris, 2007). Thus, such individuals may spend little time connecting with the present moment. ACT incorporates mindfulness and acceptance exercises to facilitate contact with the present moment and address cognitive fusion (Hayes, 2004).

Mindfulness involves bringing awareness to the present moment and being open, interested, and receptive to whatever private events emerge, without buying into judgmental or evaluative language. According to Kabat-Zinn (2003, p. 145), mindfulness can be operationally defined as “...the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment”. Mindfulness exercises encourage contact with the present moment and observing internal stimuli (e.g., bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings) and external stimuli (e.g., sights, sounds, smells, and touch) without judgment or evaluation (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005). A common mindfulness activity is mindfulness of the breath (e.g., Harris, 2007), which involves noticing the breath, letting thoughts and feelings come and go, and refocusing attention to the breath if it wanders. Another exercise is to ask the client to notice five things that they can hear, five things that they can see, and five things that they can feel.

### **Acceptance and Willingness**

Practitioners of ACT view experiential avoidance as the source of many psychological problems and propose willingness and acceptance as alternatives. Similar to the *Serenity Prayer*, ACT aims to help clients to accept the things that they cannot or need not change, and change the things that can be changed (Hayes et al., 2003). Acceptance is a method of increasing an individual's willingness to have the unpleasant private experiences that they struggle to avoid, when doing so is in the service of values-based action.

The *two scales metaphor* (Hayes et al., 2003) is a strategy that is often used to help clients to understand willingness and to see the futility of trying to control unwanted

experiences. This metaphor describes two scales like the knobs that control volume and balance on a stereo, with one representing willingness and the other representing whatever issue the client is struggling with (e.g., anxiety). The scales can go from 0 to 10; when one scale is up, the other is down. That is, when anxiety is at 10, willingness is at 0. Only the willingness scale can be moved at will—it can be set anywhere, because it is a choice, not a reaction. The anxiety scale cannot be controlled. The technique is aimed at helping clients to shift their focus from the anxiety scale to the willingness scale and recognize that they can choose willingness, but anxiety cannot be controlled and it is free to move up or down the scale.

Paradoxically, if people are not willing to have anxiety or any other private experience, it is more likely that they will experience it (Hayes & Smith, 2005). Acceptance is a method of increasing values-based action and undermining experiential avoidance, whereby clients learn to embrace their private events without attempting to change the frequency and form of those events, especially when doing so would cause harm (Heppner & Heppner, 2003).

### **Cognitive Defusion**

Problems arise for individuals when they fuse with their negative thoughts—that is, when they take such thoughts literally and believe they are true. Fusing with thoughts can lead to experiential avoidance, which may prevent individuals from doing things that are important to them. Therefore, ACT uses techniques to assist individuals to reduce the believability of their unhelpful thoughts. Better managing cognitive defusion involves experiential activities that allow an individual to observe and objectify their thoughts and to understand that thoughts are just language, and that their meanings are fluid—that is, to deliteralise their thoughts (Hayes et al., 2003). ACT uses a range of strategies, such as paradox, metaphors, stories, exercises, behavioural tasks, and experiential processes, to assist individuals to detect cognitive fusion and avoidance (Hayes, 2004).

An experiential activity that is typically used to facilitate defusion is the rapid word-repetition technique (Hayes et al., 2003, p.154), such as the “milk, milk, milk” exercise (Hayes & Smith, 2005, pp. 71-72). A client is asked to say the word “milk” and notice what the word elicits. The client is then asked to rapidly repeat the word “milk” out loudly for 30 seconds and notice what happens. The word loses its meaning and it becomes just a sound. This technique can be applied to a range of painful thoughts. A client could also be encouraged to sing her/his negative thoughts to a familiar tune or hear the thoughts in the voice of a cartoon character (Harris, 2009). For example, the client might sing “I’m going to fail” to the tune of “Jingle Bells” or hear those thoughts in the voice of Daffy Duck. Another simple defusion strategy is to include a distancing phrase, such as “I’m having the thought that...”. For example, the client could replace a thought, such as “I’m a failure”, with the phrase, “I’m having the thought that I’m a failure” to create some distance from the thought. The aforementioned defusion strategies demonstrate the goal of ACT to undermine the contexts that give rise to fusion with the literal meaning of relational frames (Vilardaga, Hayes, & Schelin, 2007).

### **The Observing Self (Self-as-Context)**

Another focus in ACT is on helping clients to distinguish between the content of private events and the context in which they occur (Strosahl, Hayes, Wilson, & Gifford,

2004). According to RFT, there are three senses of self that emerge from our verbal abilities: the conceptualized self (or self-as-content); the self as an on-going process of self-awareness (or self-as-process); and the observing self (or self-as-context) (Barnes-Holmes, Hayes, Dymond, & O'Hora, 2001). Self-as-content and self-as-process are similarly formulated in narrative career counselling (McIlveen & Patton, 2007b), however self-as-context has not been equivalently articulated. It is ACT's attention to self-as-context that highlights its potential for addressing the emotive dimensions of narrative in career counselling. Clients are familiar with their conceptualized selves, but may be less familiar with the other two sense of self (Hayes et al., 2003). The conceptualized self is the *I am* self—a summary of our verbal categorizations and evaluations (e.g., I am smart, I am anxious, and I am short; Hayes & Smith, 2005). This is the content of one's story about his or her self—the narrative. Individuals try to maintain consistency and live up to their own and others' views of themselves (Hayes et al., 2003). However, attachment or fusion to the story of one's life can restrict the individual from being open to other possibilities. In trying to maintain a consistent sense of self, individuals may distort, reinterpret, or filter events that are inconsistent with their conceptualized self, and are likely to defend their conceptualized self (Hayes et al., 2003). When individuals take their negative self-descriptions literally and are motivated to control them, they are likely to experience psychological distress.

The self as an on-going process refers to the fluid and continuous process of awareness and knowledge of our experiences in the present moment, such as how we are feeling, what we are thinking or remembering, and what we are seeing (e.g., "I am feeling scared and I am thinking that I can't cope with my studies"). It is similar to the conceptualized self in that verbal categories are applied to the self, however, these categories are descriptive (e.g., "Now I am feeling relaxed") rather than evaluative (e.g., "I am a kind person"). Attachment to the conceptualized self can limit one's ability to notice reactions (self-as-process) that are not in line with the dominant story (Hayes & Smith, 2005).

According to ACT, the observing-self is the most important aspect of selfhood (Hayes & Smith, 2005). There are a variety of names for this self, such as the transcendent self, self-as-context, the spiritual self, the no-thing self, the noticing self, the silent self, pure consciousness, pure awareness, and self-as-perspective (Harris, 2009; Hayes & Smith, 2005). The observing-self is not content-based and cannot be directly described. Harris (2009, p. 173) describes self-as-context as "...a 'viewpoint' from which we can observe thoughts and feelings, and a 'space' in which those thoughts and feelings can move...an awareness of our awareness". The observing-self is akin to James's (1890/1952) conceptualization of the *I* as the observer that is distinct from the observed *me*. It is also akin to the conceptualization of the *I* as a dialogical self (Hermans, 1987) that can take multiple *I-positions* and engage in evaluative dialogue among those positions that may be different roles in life, including career-related roles (McIlveen & Patton, 2007a).

Activities that bring about a better understanding of self-as-context can be used "to facilitate acceptance when the client is afraid of being harmed by his own inner experiences; to facilitate defusion when the client is overly attached to the conceptualized self" (Harris, 2009, p. 173). Experiential contact with this transcendent sense of self is promoted in a range of ACT activities, such as the *observer exercise* (Hayes et al., 2003). The observer exercise involves taking clients through a process of remembering a past event and all of the sensations

associated with that event, and noticing who is doing the noticing and the remembering. Clients are helped to notice that “you were there then, and you are here now”, and experience “in some deep sense that the ‘you’ that is here now was there then” and that the “person aware of what you are aware of is here now and was there then” (Hayes et al., 2003, p. 194). A basic mindfulness instruction “notice X” (e.g., thoughts, feelings, body, something external to the person) and “notice who is doing the noticing” is often used to help clients tap into their observing self. Whilst “X” may constantly change, “...the locus or perspective from which the noticing happens, in and of itself, never changes” (Harris, 2009, p. 174). Given that a client can struggle with inner experiences and attempts to control thoughts and feelings through avoidant activities, it may be useful to assist the client to understand that there is a psychological space from which she/he can observe painful inner experiences without getting caught up in them. Thus, self-as-context exercises can be brought in at any stage of counselling to facilitate mindfulness, acceptance, defusion, and committed action.

### **Values and Committed Action**

In the career development field, Brown (2007) has proposed a values-based theory in recognition of the strong influence of values on career choice, decision-making, and satisfaction with, and success in, one’s chosen occupation. As Brown (2007) noted, values play a central role in the decision-making process because they are the basis of goal setting. ACT places a strong emphasis on values and committed action, because the ultimate psychotherapeutic goal is to help clients to live rich and meaningful lives (Hayes et al., 2003). According to Hayes et al. (2003) “values are verbally construed global desired life consequences” (p. 206). Values are not goals, but chosen directions in life, and from those chosen directions, concrete goals, specific behaviours, and potential barriers are defined (Hayes, Strosahl, Bunting, Twohig, & Wilson, 2004). An example of a value is *I want to be a loving parent*. Values are not time-limited and cannot be obtained as something concrete. They are choices about the direction individuals want their lives to take in various life domains which can be instantiated moment by moment (Hayes et al., 2003). It is like heading West—there is no end point, because we can continue to head in that direction indefinitely (see the Compass Metaphor; Harris, 2009). A goal, however, is concrete and specific, such as heading west until we reach San Francisco, California. A goal related to being a loving parent might be to set aside time every day to ask your child about his or her day.

There are several ACT strategies aimed at helping clients identify or clarify their values in several life domains. Following are the domains typically included in ACT values clarification activities: Family and parenting relations; marriage, couples and intimate relations; friendships and social relations; career, employment, education; personal growth and development; recreation and leisure; spirituality; citizenship; and health and physical well-being (Hayes et al., 2003; Wilson & Byrd, 2004). In the Values Assessment Homework task described by Hayes et al. (2003), clients are asked to work through each of the life domains, describe their values, and generate concrete goals that relate to their values. For example, in the careers and employment domain, clients are asked to describe what type of work they would like to do in an ideal world, write about why it appeals to them, discuss what kind of worker they would like to be with respect to their employer and co-workers, and write what they would want their work relations to be like (Hayes et al., 2003). There are varieties of this type of values clarification tool, such as the Life Values Questionnaire (Harris, 2007)



and the Valued Living Questionnaire (Wilson, 2002). Addressing values through ACT assists clients to identify the life domains in which they are struggling to carry out valued activities, to recognize the obstacles, and target those obstacles using exposure (e.g., mindfulness and defusion) and behavioural activation strategies.

Career counselling using ACT would involve helping a client to clarify her/his values, to "...facilitate deep, intimate, experiential contact with values" (Harris, 2009, p. 196). There are a range of experiential activities that could be used to help a client to tap into values. For example, the *epitaph exercise* (Eifert & Forsyth, 2005; Hayes & Smith, 2005) is an evocative exercise aimed at values clarification. This exercise asks clients to imagine the headstone on their grave and to write their epitaph. The client is prompted by questions about what she/he wants to be remembered for, what she/he wants life to stand for, to be about, and what defines life.

Committed action in ACT involves defining goals in specific areas along one's valued path, then acting on those goals, while anticipating and making room for psychological barriers (Hayes et al., 2003). Clients are encouraged to gradually develop larger and larger patterns of committed action in line with values, usually starting with small steps (Hayes & Strosahl, 2004). This is akin to the contextual-action theory of career (Young & Valach, 2004) in which careers are constructed upon goals, actions, and projects. Typical goal-setting techniques in ACT involve asking clients to write down goals that are in line with their personal values in each of the main life domains. For example, a client may identify "helping children" as a value in the career/employment domain. The client would be encouraged to write measurable and observable goals in line with that particular value. For example, the client's long-term goal may be to "become a teacher". Working back from that goal, the client would be assisted to identify shorter-term goals (e.g., complete the Bachelor of Education degree) and specific behaviours (e.g., study to prepare for her upcoming exams) that can be done almost immediately towards achieving that goal. The client would also be asked to identify any perceived barriers or obstacles to achieving those goals and to recognize what she can and cannot change in relation to those barriers.

Mindfulness, self-as-context, defusion, and acceptance strategies and techniques can be used to help clients to commit to actions that are congruent with their values. Some ACT therapists (e.g., Eifert & Forsyth, 2005) advocate the use of Behavioural Activation strategies to help clients to select and commit to values-based activities. Behavioural Activation Treatment (Lejuez, Hopko, & Hopko, 2001) involves selecting values-based activities, creating a hierarchy for activities, making a commitment to action, setting criteria for action, monitoring progress, and providing feedback (Eifert & Forsyth, 2005). Firstly, clients complete a values worksheet or activity to identify their values in each life domain. Then, they are asked to identify activities that will move them in the direction of those values and create an activity hierarchy, which helps them to break complex goals into smaller, more manageable tasks, and concrete plans of action. Clients are asked to commit to engage in one or more of those activities in the upcoming week and chart their progress. They are positively reinforced for completing the activities and any difficulties or barriers they experienced are discussed in the next session (Eifert & Forsyth, 2005). Defusion and mindfulness techniques are used to help clients to deal with any psychological obstacles, such as avoidance and escape behaviour, or mind and language traps (Eifert & Forsyth, 2005). The reader is referred

to Martell, Addis and Dimidjian (2004) for an overview of behavioural activation strategies that include mindfulness and acceptance components.

### **A Case Example**

**Presenting problem.** Kelly (a pseudonym used for anonymity) is a woman in her late-twenties who presented to counselling with depression, for which her medical practitioner prescribed a course of anti-depressants. Kelly's personal problems had a negative impact on her work performance and career satisfaction, which resulted in absenteeism and lower productivity. In addition, because she had been a high achiever in her workplace prior to these events, she began to question her ability to do her jobs, maintain her current employment, and whether she wanted to continue in her current role.

**History.** Kelly suffered from depression in her teenage years. She was prescribed anti-depressant medication for two years and had undergone counselling during this time. In her early twenties, Kelly was assaulted by a man while on holiday. Subsequent to this event, Kelly's insecurities and lack of trust in men became more prominent following her decision to end a relationship due to her partner becoming aggressive and dominant. Kelly also reported that she was not assertive, and held a negative belief that perhaps she "deserved" how she was poorly treated by men. Moreover, she recently started to notice these aggressive traits in the males she worked with and dealt with in her day-to-day employment, which she stated was beginning to have a negative impact on her work performance and career satisfaction. She then began to question her ability to maintain this employment as she felt she could no longer cope with the demands placed on her, and the constant conflict that she felt when dealing with these men. Unfortunately Kelly's employment suffered a set-back as she was advised that she would undergo performance management. She presented her negative feelings towards this managerial intervention, which only brought up further feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, and lack of self-esteem. Kelly was wracked by her critical and doubtful self-dialogue through which she had convinced herself that her career was in ruins and that it would never recover.

**Counselling.** The first ACT strategy implemented for Kelly was to identify her values. This process included exercises such as the bullseye and life compass (Harris, 2009). The bullseye considered four key domains (i.e., relationships, personal growth/health, leisure, and work/education) and required Kelly to plot where on the bullseye she felt she currently rated herself in relation to her values. The closer to the bullseye, the more a client is considered to be living up to their values. The life compass expanded on these key domains (e.g., relationships were broken down into social relationships, intimate relationships, and family relationships) and involved rating the importance of each value (up to a score of 10) versus where she actually rated herself on each value (up to a score of 10). Kelly was also asked to make a list of her values as a homework task, particularly to imagine her life 10 years forward (Harris, 2009). These activities assisted in identifying gaps between her values idealized and realized.

Counselling during this phase focused on defusion techniques, such as "unhooking" herself from her thoughts by way of acknowledging it was just a thought or story or words her mind was telling her, and that she did not have to act on these thoughts, but rather could choose her behaviour in line with her values, and using her values to determine what she really wanted from her job, and whether her current job was actually meeting her values. Following this reflection, she came to realise that her values were not being met, which

offered a sense of enlightenment to her as she began to see how her current unworkable actions and thoughts were affecting her psychological state.

Weekly counselling sessions continued using mindfulness (i.e., being aware of the “here and now”) by noticing things she could see, hear, feel, taste, and touch. This awareness reinforced that she was “in the moment” and this was the only moment she was able to control her behaviour, defusion, avoidance, expansion, and committed action (e.g., focusing on her values and committing to take action in line with her values). Kelly was introduced to the notion of the observing-self, which she stated helped to give her further perspective on dealing with her current situation, and another aspect from where to observe her thoughts and feelings. Subsequently, during the sessions the practitioner was able to draw together examples of Kelly’s “unworkable” thoughts and behaviours and how these were not in line with her values. Once she was able to recognise this, she became more focused on the links between values and behaviours, and how this was having a significant negative impact on her sense of well-being.

As part of Kelly’s commitment to action, alternative employment options in her workplace were explored in the counselling sessions. The process included revisiting negative thoughts and doubts that were challenged in the counselling so as to ensure that Kelly was ready to make changes. Ultimately, Kelly chose the employment option that aligned with her values.

**Outcome.** Kelly subsequently reported feeling content and satisfied with her new job (within the same company) and believed she was “doing what she really enjoys doing”. Kelly believed that she had made the right choice, and appeared to be living in line with her values, and had developed a sense of healthy well-being and meaningfulness. Kelly believed she needed to “deal” with the past assault and her relationships with men before she could fully commit to a new relationship, but felt more confident to manage the traumatic past because she had made significant progress in other areas of her life..

### **Summary**

Given ACT’s growing popularity in mainstream counselling psychology and the body of research indicative of its efficacy, we have presented ACT as a strategy for enhancing flexibility in client’s cognitive and emotional functioning in regard to career-related problems. The case of Kelly describes how mental health, relationships, career and sense of self are interrelated. Depressive thoughts, compounded by fear of men and negative experiences in an intimate relationship, led to Kelly’s difficulties with relationships with work colleagues and her subsequent diminished performance and satisfaction. In her case, ACT enabled Kelly to arrive at an understanding of how her values were in conflict with her context and to use her values to generate a different avenue for her career, and to release herself from some of the emotional strain that was contributing to her sense of anxiety and diminished esteem in context of past and present relational issues.

### **Limitations**

There are two important limitations to mention. First, a significant limitation on ACT’s transfer into career counselling practice is the lack of available research that demonstrates its efficacy for career-related problems with and without co-morbid clinical conditions. This is a cyclical problem that can only be addressed by research into its application in career counselling. Second, although training in ACT is readily available in

several nations, such as the United States of America and Australia, the extent to which career counsellors have taken up its training programs and have implanted ACT is not documented in the counselling literature. Experienced practitioners who are familiar with counselling for career and clinical problems may very well have the competence and confidence to enact its transfer into career counselling settings; however practitioners without such a broad practice-base, experience, and level of confidence may require additional supervision and training. Due caution is warranted in this regard: ACT is not recommended for beginner-counsellors who are establishing their expertise in career counselling and who have not yet mastered counselling that is suitable for complex problems.

### **Implications for Research**

Given the lack of research into ACT's application in career counselling and the rationale given herein for its potential usefulness, there is reason to establish a research program to build an evidence base to ascertain its actual utility in career counselling. We offer suggestions toward such a research program.

**Conceptual convergence.** Before commencing empirical studies of counselling practices, it is important to establish how ACT conceptually converges with and diverges from extant theories of career development and counselling. For example, problems associated with career indecision and avoidance of decision-making may be conceptualised through the social cognitive career theory (Lent, 2005), particularly its core constructs of self-efficacy and outcome expectations. Negative beliefs of efficacy and expectations and their associated emotional responses that reinforce and justify avoidance behaviour may be confronted through ACT. Thus, research may explore the extent to which ACT in career counselling effectively modifies efficacy beliefs, expectations, concomitant emotions, and behavioural progress toward goals. The theoretical foundation of ACT, relational frame theory, asserts that language is an important foundation of personal distress. Likewise, language understood as stories are the subject of the concepts and practices of narrative career counselling (McIlveen & Patton, 2007b) for which stories and the process of storying are constitutive of an individual's identity (McIlveen & Patton, 2007a; Savickas, 2011). Stories that inhibit personal growth and development may be brought into awareness and then amended through ACT's concepts of cognitive defusion and the observing self.

**Practitioners' perspectives.** It may be useful to survey career counsellors who have been trained in ACT to explore their experiences of ACT and their application of its techniques in counselling. In addition, it may be useful to survey other counselling professionals who are trained in ACT and who offer career counselling as part of their suite of services. Whilst it may be regarded as low-level, opinion-based evidence, such a study would give a preliminary feedback upon which to plan experimental or quasi-experimental studies of efficacy and effectiveness. Furthermore, exploration of the views of the two groups of practitioners may also shed light on some of the similarities and differences in practices and issues in career and personal counselling.

**Counselling process.** With regard to research into the process of career counselling, Heppner and Heppner (2003) identified process variables as an important focus of research into career counselling, including counselling procedures such as interpretation, confrontation, self-disclosure, paradoxical intention, and stimulating action. ACT variously deploys these procedures within the conceptual parameters of RFT; thus, studies into both its

processes of implementation and outcome would be informative as to its potential transferability into the career counselling context. Furthermore, process research could explore clients' experience of ACT used in career counselling; as its emotional and relational foci may not have been part of a client's expectations of career counselling. An important dimension of counselling is the working alliance and recent research demonstrates its role in career counselling (Masdonati, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2009). Given the emotional quality of ACT, its application in career counselling would need to take careful consideration of how the working alliance influences the progress and outcome of counselling.

**Measurement of impact.** Experimental or quasi-experimental designs could be deployed to explore the immediate impact and long-term outcomes of career counselling that includes ACT. For such studies, a key consideration is what constitutes appropriate (i.e., psychometrically validated and conceptually embedded) measures that indicate change in clients. We suggest that any battery of measures used in a study should include those that address affective states, in addition to cognitive and behavioural measures. Furthermore, there should be a combination of measures of domain-specific phenomena (e.g., self-efficacy for career decision making) and general functioning (e.g., self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and stress). Further research might address whether ACT methods are more effective in the presence of certain client-related characteristics (e.g., capacity for mindfulness, personality traits).

**Counselling applications.** An important part of ACT's potential contribution to career counselling is its suite of alternative techniques that may enable counsellors and clients to better address values (cf. Brown, 2007), relationships (cf. Schultheiss, 2003), and emotions (cf. Kidd, 2004; Kidd, 2008) as they pertain to the career-related issues presented by clients. Indeed, the approach taken with Kelly and the outcomes achieved for her align with career theory and interventions that recognize the importance of values, relationships and emotion in career development. University students frequently present with challenging dilemmas in which they feel quite emotionally entwined (e.g., choosing between degree majors when different options are equally attractive; or, even more seriously, considering whether to continue or drop-out of studies). Students also need support in recovering and learning from set-backs that are not unusual or rare, but nonetheless emotionally charged (e.g., receiving negative feedback on an assessment or failing a course). Similarly, employees who are struggling to manage workplace issues (e.g., high workload, application for promotion) that are influencing their career satisfaction and motivation may benefit from career counselling that includes ACT's strategies of focusing upon the moment, particularly the moment of enjoyment of work per se rather than the troubles that surround it, and also accepting that not all their issues can be resolved and that workplaces can be ambiguous in terms of responsibilities and rewards.

The potential efficacy of ACT when used in career counselling highlights that career-related matters should be addressed in personal/clinical counselling (cf. Juntunen, 2006). The extant body of research that demonstrates the process and outcome of ACT for clinical problems (Hayes, Luoma, et al., 2006; Ost, 2008) offers a useful basis upon which to conduct research into its efficacy for career-related problems. Potential applications in need of exploration are career-related problems associated with affective disorders (e.g., anxiety or depression associated with work-related injuries) or dysfunctional coping behaviours (e.g.,

avoidance of work responsibilities to cope with associated feelings of overwhelming stress) that inhibit career functioning and development. Thus, determining the effectiveness of career counselling that includes ACT when applied in situations of clinically-significant problems might contribute to understanding the capacity of career counselling as a clinical intervention. Such research may also contribute to dialogue regarding the differences between the two domains of practice (cf., Betz, 1993).

### **Conclusion**

Given the rapid changes in contemporary life contexts, psychological flexibility and adaptability are important for maintaining well-being and mental health. ACT's focus on psychological events and processes, such as thoughts, emotions, and memories, along with its strong emphasis on values and action-oriented behaviour may contribute to such personal flexibility and adaptability. ACT has potential to contribute to career counselling that aims to utilize approaches to counselling that have been deemed the domain of personal/clinical counselling, and, therefore, contribute to a holistic approach to career development interventions.

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