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Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Fuels Innovation of Career Counselling

Tom Luken and Albert de Folter

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is a cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy that has become widely used in many countries of the world. Its success may be explained by a strong theoretical and scientific foundation, and ample evidence of positive effects in many areas (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006). Nowadays, ACT is practised not only in therapy but also in many preventive contexts, such as promoting resilience and psychological health within educational and work settings.

We have conducted a project implementing ACT in career guidance around the transition from secondary to tertiary education (ACT in LOB, <https://www.act-in-lob.eu>; Luken & de Folter, 2018). In the following sections, we will describe some of the experiences we have had with the “tool kit” that we developed. We start with an overview of the background and basic elements of ACT and follow with a case vignette that illustrates ACT in practice.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Hoare, McIlveen, and Hamilton (2012) suggested the use of ACT as a career counselling strategy. The commitment part of ACT theory and practices is used to help people find and hold direction in life. The acceptance part contributes to perceiving, in an undistorted way,

internal and external signals that may lead to correcting or changing course. The integrated ACT processes help people to remain psychologically healthy in a turbulent and demanding society.

Foundations of ACT

There are four foundations of ACT that provide important background for its use in career counselling. First, ACT originates from the world of psychotherapy and, more specifically, behaviour therapy. New in ACT was the specific attention to the context of behaviour and to the function that behaviour and thoughts have in this context. ACT does not directly aim at reducing psychological complaints, but focuses on dealing with them in a functional way. Second, ACT is rooted in the pragmatic philosophy of *functional contextualism*. Functional contextualists emphasize the importance of personal perspectives, context, interrelations, and effects, but also strive for hard scientific, generally valid statements and for ways to predict and influence behaviour (Hayes et al., 2006). Third, an important theoretical basis for ACT is the *relational frame theory* (RFT; Blackledge, 2003). This theory makes clear how linguistic constructs tend to be mistaken for reality, confusing “maps” with “territories”. This confusion entails important psychological problems, for example, living in our thoughts instead of in the present moment, or clinging to linguistic concepts and rules and thus reducing our flexibility. Fourth, ACT also has a solid empirical basis. Various aspects of the RFT and the effectiveness of many ACT instruments and practices have been confirmed in numerous situations (Hayes et al., 2006).

Contents of ACT

ACT has developed from a form of psychotherapy into a “movement.” Numerous sites in many countries offer, usually free of charge, all kinds of tools, such as assignments, metaphors, questionnaires, images, and videos, that can be used in therapies, training, and self-help.

The primary goal of ACT is psychological flexibility, which Hayes et al. (2006) defined as “the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behaviour when doing so serves valued ends” (p. 7). The opposite of flexibility is being stuck in behaviour and thinking patterns, holding outside-of-consciousness experiences that could threaten these patterns. Psychological flexibility is a key to adaptability in career development.

Central to ACT are six core processes or “pillars”: Acceptance, Mindfulness (Being Present), Values, Commitment, Self as Context, and Defusion. The six processes are mapped onto a *hexaflex* (hexa from the Greek for *six* and flex from *flexibility*; see Figure 1). The core processes and primary goal are explained below, using career contexts.

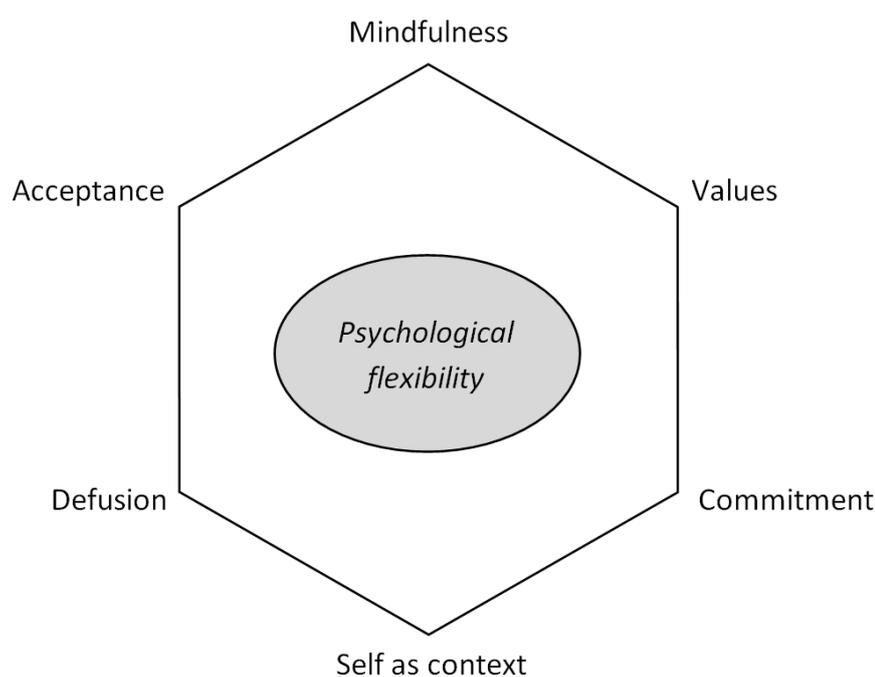


Figure 1. The ACT hexaflex. From “Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Model, Processes and Outcomes,” by S. C. Hayes, J. B. Luoma, F. W. Bond, A. Masuda, and J. Lillis, 2006, *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, p. 8. Copyright 2006 by Elsevier Ltd. Adapted with permission.

Acceptance. Acceptance is a process of unconditionally allowing or even welcoming inner experiences. In the context of career guidance, this may concern for example feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity with regard to oneself and the future. Accepting uncertainty and ambiguity better prepares a person for the unexpected developments that will inevitably come.

The opposite of acceptance is *experiential avoidance*: striving to control or remove unwanted thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. In the outside world, avoiding certain places, events, or people may be effective. Not so for inner events. Trying to get rid of them soon implies getting even more entangled. Not tolerating uncertainty and ambiguity may lead to rigid, simplified self-images and an inability to see alternatives for a future scenario—or not having images of the future at all.

Being present, or mindfulness. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who was inspired by Buddhist practices to introduce mindfulness to the Western world, described this core process 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” (as cited in Hoare et al., 2012, p. 175). Being present in this sense involves an open attention to internal experiences (thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations) as well as external experiences (awareness of sensory perceptions from the context via touch, smell, hearing, etc.). Thus, mindfulness brings alertness to what is happening in the environment, and it contributes to receiving signals from within oneself in an undistorted way. The latter is important for the functioning of our “inner compass.” Practising mindfulness also demonstrably reduces stress and fosters self-management and autonomy and the development of an employment identity.

Opposites of mindfulness are mind wandering, ruminating, and worrying. People can spend a lot of time and energy on these kinds of processes, which lead to reduced well-being and suboptimal performance on learning and other tasks.

Values. Values represent what each person really thinks is important, their desired long-term qualities of life. They express what kind of person one wants to be. Values must be distinguished from goals. Goals can be reached and then lose their motivating power; they also can be unmet and lead to frustration. Values continue to give direction regardless.

The role of values as relatively stable indicators of direction in career development has traditionally been recognized but has long been overshadowed by concepts that are easier to handle, such as capacities, interests, and personality (Hartung, 2006).

An opposite of value-oriented living is living according to verbal rules imposed by others or by oneself. Doing so leads to inflexibility and reduced psychological health. Replacing rules with values is like replacing “musts” with “wants.”

Commitment. Commitment involves choosing to actually act on the basis of values, in spite of obstacles and fears (for example, being afraid to fail or to be considered a fool). The opposite of commitment is to focus on avoiding unwanted situations and experiences. Such a focus is an obstacle to well-being and mental health. After all, one can never succeed in completely and permanently avoiding all dreaded experiences, and in the meantime, one does not get to what one really wants.

Self as context. This core process sees the self as a context for thoughts and feelings which may be observed by an I. Although thoughts and feelings constantly change, the perspective of an observing I is a constant.

Opposites of experiencing yourself as a context are to lose yourself in intellectual, discursive thinking about yourself, and to identify with self-descriptions in static, verbal form. This kind of self-description impedes exploration, learning, development, and flexibility. Even applying positive labels to the self (e.g., “I am smart”) hinders development.

Defusion. People tend to identify with the consciously thinking and talking part of themselves. This implies that discursive thoughts and experienced reality are merged or

“fused” with each other. The purpose of defusion in ACT is not to change thoughts or to make them disappear. Rather, the intention is to change the relationship that people have with their own thoughts (i.e., to less identify with them and to take them less literally).

Case Vignette

Jessica (pseudonym) is an 18-year-old woman living in a small town in the Netherlands. She is a student in the sixth and last year of an Athenaeum high school, which prepares students for university studies. When Jessica was 14 and in the midst of some puberty problems, she was well helped by her doctor. At that time she decided to become a doctor herself. By choosing subjects from the “Nature and Health” profile in her last three years at school, she would be well prepared to study medicine.

Jessica felt sure and proud of her vocational choice. Some of her girlfriends who doubted their own vocational choices were a bit jealous. Her father, who works as a medical director at the local hospital, was delighted. Jessica never explored alternatives, even when she had to repeat her fifth year due to inadequate results in mathematics and science. Now, at the beginning of her sixth year, she is becoming quite tense. She has abandoned many of her free-time activities to study and to focus on the coming school exams. She knows that after writing those exams, she will have to pass a university admittance procedure in which grades play an important role. Her parents have noticed that she is struggling, and have proposed several times that she see a career counsellor. They don't want to discourage Jessica, but they think she needs an alternative in case she is not admitted to the study of medicine. She has finally conceded to their request.

The career counsellor Jessica and her parents have chosen uses the ACT tool kit as one of his instruments. In the first interview, he finds Jessica quite nervous and they agree to use a simple mindfulness exercise (Body Scan) to help her relax. Then they do a defusion exercise

called Looking at Your Study Choice. For 10 minutes, Jessica writes down all of the thoughts that come up on separate self-adhesive notes. After that, instructed by the career counsellor, she looks at these thoughts and mentally distances herself from them. Finally, in the exercise Seeing Yourself Through the Eyes of Someone Else, the career counsellor prompts Jessica to talk about herself as if she were someone else, sitting in an empty chair in front of them. As a result of these three exercises, Jessica is more aware of the narrowness of her plans and of her own secret doubts. Now, she is more open to reconsidering her future. As a homework assignment, she does the exercise Images of My Future, describing three very different scenarios for her situation in 10 years from now, using pictures from media, from the Internet, and of her own making.

In the second interview, Jessica completes the value-cards sorting exercise What Kind of Person Do You Want to Become? In the subsequent discussion with the career counsellor, Jessica concludes that her most important value is to contribute to the well-being and happiness of people. As a homework assignment, she completes the exercise From Values To Plan. In this exercise, she connects her values with some intermediate goals and with actions for the near future. Jessica again realizes that she considers happiness more important than health. She understands that there exist many ways to contribute to the happiness of others and that other studies, like psychology or social work, might offer interesting alternatives to medicine. In the third and final interview, medicine is still Jessica's first option, but she is no longer fixated on this, and together with the career counsellor she makes a plan for exploring activities around alternatives.

Analysis of the Case Vignette

Pressure, stress, and foreclosure.

Many students experience difficulties and stress when choosing a vocation. There are so many possibilities, and the future will bring many unknown developments. At the same time, parents and teachers put pressure on students. In some countries, such as the Netherlands, the pressure is augmented by government regulations limiting student grants and possibilities for changing direction. Many students put pressure on themselves, falsely believing that their study choice will determine the quality of their life. Some brain structures, like the prefrontal cortex, are not mature enough for well balanced, considered, autonomous decision-making (Luken, 2014).

There are several ways for a student to cope with the stress of choosing a course of study, some of which are ultimately detrimental. Some students engage in ruminative thinking and exploring. Others may act as if it doesn't matter at all—as if the future does not exist. Jessica's way of coping was to cling to a premature choice. This may be described as *foreclosure*, committing without exploration (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011). One problem with foreclosure is that it often goes unnoticed, as the community is glad to see the student has made a decision. Another problem is that students get used to defending their choice and become emotionally attached to it; it is too scary or painful to think that the chosen option might not be the best, and to consider other options. Consequently, the student does not learn to explore and to reconsider. Sooner or later this causes difficulties, because exploring and reconsidering are becoming core competencies for a successful life and career.

Acceptance processes.

In order to prevent or stop dysfunctional coping strategies, an appropriate first step in many career counselling processes is exploring and accepting the feelings of anxiety that go with taking responsibility for an unknown future. Often, dysfunctional beliefs (e.g., “the study

choice is the choice of my life”) must be countered and the difficulties or even impossibilities of choosing have to be faced. The ACT tool kit (available in Dutch at <https://www.act-in-lob.eu>) and other sources (e.g., Association for Contextual and Behavioral Science, <https://contextualscience.org>) offer numerous exercises, metaphors, and other aids. In the case of Jessica, a mindfulness exercise helped her to relax, and defusion and self-as-context exercises contributed to distancing herself from her foreclosed identities as a decided student and a future doctor.

A new paradigm?

A long time ago, philosophers such as Plato and Descartes positioned the thinking “part” of ourselves on a pedestal. Ever since Parsons (1909) established the foundation of career guidance, this consciously reflecting part is expected to lead a person to and through their career. This is still the case in the prevailing narrative approach. Language plays a crucial role in this. “This self-conscious reflection uses language to both construct and constitute social realities [...] In a sense, we live inside language [...] language contains the self, and stories carry the career” (Savickas, 2013, p. 148).

ACT, on the other hand, considers language a source of many problems and human suffering (Hoare et al., 2012), because we inevitably confound the verbal world with reality. Verbal self-descriptions and rules tend to dominate direct experiences, limiting our awareness of the here and now, our freedom, and our well-being. Thus, in many instances, we identify with the narrating self and make “absurd” decisions at the expense of the experiencing self (Kahneman, 2011, p. 399).

In the alternative that ACT offers, the thinking part of ourselves is seen as an adviser instead of a governor (Hayes & Ciarrochi, 2015). We hypothesize that this view, which is corroborated by neuroscientific insights, and which is radically different from traditional and current views in the career domain, might fuel the development of a new paradigm. The

influence of Parsons is still evident in the way career guidance professionals aim at providing a thinking I with information about him or herself (e.g., by test results or by distilling a life theme from narratives) and about the world of education and work, and assisting this I in reflection, decision-making, and planning. The ACT theory and view of human nature indicate that this approach is too one-sided, and brings risks for flexibility. From the ACT point of view, the thinking I and the individual's verbal accounts must be taken seriously, but not literally and not as leading. Dreaming, feeling, wanting, doing, experiencing, and observing are just as important as a thinking. Career guidance should be less about self-knowledge, and more about self-concordance, i.e., knowing what to do as a whole, integrated human being.

Commitment processes.

For many young people, the “future self” seems like a rather annoying stranger, impeding the happy-go-lucky now. In order to foster a real concern for her future, Jessica explored several possible future selves. After that, she was open to the question, What kind of person do I want to become? ACT considers values to be the most effective core for an answer, as do many career guidance approaches. The counsellor treats the card-sorting exercise as an instrument, not as a goal in itself. The result that counts is not in the client's choice of three or four values indicated by simple words (in Jessica's case: wisdom, health, help and care, competence), but in the activation of a searching process and in the development of a lasting, motivating feeling of direction. Ideally, the value orientation is formulated in one or more active verbs and qualifications, and not in goals or desired states of being. Jessica formulated with her counsellor the following statement as a beacon, or guide: “I want to contribute to the health, well-being, and happiness of other people by helping to solve problems in a concrete way.” An advantage of formulating one's values this way is that one may always continue (i.e., there is no end-state as is the case with many goals). Another advantage is that it allows for

different ways to achieve the value (e.g., different areas of study). Commitment to the value is not contradictory to flexibility in approach. In the exercise From Values to Plan, Jessica's value is noted as an ideal self, which is coherently connected with goals and actions.

Summary and Conclusion

ACT offers well-established theories on human nature and effective practices that foster psychological health and well-being. These practices may be described in terms of six coherent processes, which can be mapped along an Acceptance and Commitment continuum. The key purpose of act is psychological flexibility.

Following Hoare et al. (2012), we have argued that ACT may fuel innovation of career counselling. In the case of Jessica, we have illustrated some of the six processes and some of the tools we have developed for use in career counselling. ACT offers ways to live with insecurity and ambiguity, and to find direction while remaining flexible and adaptable.

Traditionally, many approaches in career guidance aim at producing clear, verbal descriptions of the client's self, which permit well-founded choices and plans. The more turbulent society becomes, the more these kinds of self-descriptions may become obstacles to flexibility and adaptability. Perhaps the most important aspect of ACT as a fuel for innovation of career counselling is that it offers an alternative to the focus of traditional approaches on information processing and thinking processes.

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Biographies

Tom Luken is a work and organizational psychologist with a lifelong focus on career development. He has worked as a vocational guidance and career counsellor, trainer, researcher, professor, developer of instruments and methods, consultant, editor-in-chief of the Dutch quarterly for the career profession, *LoopbaanVisie*, and career specialist for a labour union. Now retired, he is focusing on research on ACT in the context of career development.

Albert de Folter worked in several managerial functions in the domain of career development and presided over the Commission Quality Circles of NOLOC, the Dutch society of career guidance professionals. In 2010 he started Omega advies & coaching, from which he works as an independent career counsellor. In 2013 he initiated the project on ACT in career development described in this chapter.

Practice Points for Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) Applied to Career Counselling

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- 1. Take into account the developmental stage of your client.** The developmental stage of adolescent students and their brains implies that many of them are not yet capable of making well-balanced long-term decisions. If this is not taken into account, environmental pressures may lead to pitfalls (e.g., overt or hidden feelings of insecurity, passivity or hyperactivity, rigid or confused self-concepts, foreclosed identities and inflexible plans).
- 2. Reassure your clients and help them to accept negative feelings around career development.** Help clients to realize that it's normal to experience anxiety about the future and not knowing what to do. Counteract dysfunctional beliefs about the role of career choice in life.
- 3. Practice what you preach.** For the counsellor, it is necessary to know the core processes from personal experience. Practicing them (e.g., mindful listening) has positive effects on the counsellor's own psychological health, attitude, and competence.
- 4. It's more about better feeling than feeling better.** Thinking often mitigates or even distorts feeling. Focus on direct experience rather than abstract understanding.
- 5. Regularity and variety.** The effects of working with ACT increase when exercises and core processes are practiced with some regularity for a certain time. Variety in exercises may augment the motivation to work with them and may foster their effectiveness, as they complement and reinforce each other.
- 6. Create your own career guidance tools and ACT practices.** The application of ACT in the career domain is quite new, and there is ample space for the creation of new tools and practices. Websites such as <https://contextualscience.org> and <https://www.act-in-lob.eu> offer sources and materials which might be adapted or translated.