

BOOK REVIEW

Book review: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

By Siobhain O’Riordan¹

Title: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: The CBT Distinctive Features Series

Author(s): Paul E. Flaxman, J. T. Blackledge and Frank, W. Bond

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This book aims to offer the interested reader a comprehensive guide to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as a modern intervention and philosophy to enhance psychological flexibility. Indeed the opening sentence of the text poses the question ‘What are the distinctive theoretical and practical features of acceptance and commitment therapy?’ (p.3). The on-going focus of the narrative moves on from the psychotherapy and cognitive behavioural tradition and attempts to answer this question by presenting two evidence-based stranded sections separating out the theoretical and practical features and themes of ACT. The authors are experts in psychology and have already contributed widely to the field, which in itself helps to offer a more convincing case for the application and effectiveness of ACT.

Divided into two general parts the content is then sub-divided across 30 shorter chapters.

Focusing first on ‘The Distinctive Theoretical Features of ACT’, Part One offers 14 short chapters to set out the scene in this light. This section covers key aspects and processes such as Functional contextualism, Relational frame theory (a concept of language and cognition at the centre of this approach) and Cognitive defusion.

The linking of acceptance and values during the course of explaining the theoretical features of ACT also helps to provide a case for the broader principles and differentiation of ACT. For example, Chapter 5 emphasises that ‘Acceptance in ACT ... involves a willingness to experience those distressing emotions and experiences that are encountered in the process of behaving consistently with one’s values’ (p.69). Components and phrases used within ACT such as ‘valued living’ (p.103) are also explained to emphasise the important role of stability alongside psychological flexibility.

To help bring together the ideas presented,

it is very timely in Chapter 11 for a diagram to be presented of the “hexaflex” model (p.130). This highlighted a very specific observation in that the book might perhaps benefit from greater use of figures throughout. Indeed perhaps this model might even have been placed at an earlier stage of the book, although this is a very minor point. Having said that, additional use of diagrams and figures might just help to further illustrate the interconnectedness of the core processes, key concepts and components of ACT theory for the reader, as they can be a little challenging to get to grips with when presented in a purely written form.

Two chapters are then included to consider the assumptive, strategic and technical differences between Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and ACT. This particular offers some potentially useful summary evaluative insights for the more informed CBT reader. Those with less knowledge may find it more helpful to seek out additional sources of literature to support their understanding of the cognitive behavioural tradition before returning to these chapters.

Part Two examines ‘The Distinctive Practical Features of ACT’ and offers up a rich range of therapeutic strategies, outlined across a further 16 succinct chapters. In contrast to Part One, the authors offer a really user-friendly style of writing to communicate the elements covered in this section. It begins by initially describing ACT-based case conceptualisation, initial assessment and working with the client’s change agenda. The content of Part Two sets out a range of practical applications, within which client-therapist dialogue, exercises and examples of metaphor help to demonstrate the application of ACT in practice. Chapters 26-28 also stand out as they provide an explanation of assessing clients’ values, working with value interventions and goal setting and tackling barriers. Readers are also helpfully signposted to a range of additional resources and reading as a next step.

In summary, the authors do appear to have achieved what they set out to do. This book has a lot to offer the experienced clinical practitioner who is keen to enhance their theoretical

understanding of ACT (as a distinctive approach) and add some additional practical techniques to their toolkit. For the novice, there are also lots of takeaways, although some aspects of the explanations about the theoretical underpinnings of this therapeutic approach may at times feel less ‘... concise and accessible (p.22)’ than intended and thus might be a little overwhelming. Whilst, I found Part One a very valuable evidence-based resource, I was aware of the range of practical applications available coming up in Part Two and so found myself rushing at times and flicking ahead. So, a learning reflection here would be that returning to Part One is a useful strategy once the practical therapeutic strategies from Part Two have been reviewed. Overall and on balance this book is definitely a key item to add to the bookshelf as a reference source and evidence-based guide to ACT. ■

Citation

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Biography

Dr Siobhain O’Riordan PhD is a chartered psychologist and chartered scientist. She is a Fellow of the International Society for Coaching Psychology and member and Trustee of The International Stress Management Association (UK). Siobhain is also a trainer and course co-director on the stress management and coaching programmes at the Centre for Stress Management.

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