

## **DRUG TRAFFICKING, COMMUNICATION NETWORKS, AND RELATIONAL FRAME THEORY: A COMMENTARY ON SANGUINETTI AND REYES**

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Skinner's (1981) *cultural selection* involves the transmission of behavior across individuals based on its ability to improve one's daily life. In the globalized information age of today, such transmission can occur with blinding speed through a variety of communication networks (e.g., the Internet, 24-hour news cycle, smart phones, etc...). One advantage is that our behavior can come under the control of increasing amounts of stimuli to which we may have no direct contact. In this way, the behavior of millions can be mobilized with a speed that was unthinkable just decades ago. For example, Mohamed Bouazizi's recent self-immolation in Tunisia sparked the series of revolutions known as the Arab Spring (Abouzeid, 2011). Similarly, the current Occupy protests, which originated in New York, went global in less than a month (Occupy Wall Street, 2011). Both events are widely believed to have been facilitated by the Internet (O'Connell, 2011).

On the other hand, as the environment becomes increasingly networked, the potential for environmental ambiguity increases through the transmission of inaccurate descriptions of contingencies. Such descriptions could serve to desensitize an individual's behavior to particular features of the environment, which could impair the ability of the individual to function appropriately in a given set of circumstances (Houmanfar, Rodrigues, & Smith, 2009). This impairment provides the impetus for Sanguinetti and Reyes' (2011) intriguing analysis of media content related to the Sinaloa drug cartel.

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Among other things, Sanguinetti and Reyes (2011) revealed that if a news writer equates the group with a “cartel” then the writer also tends to relate the group to monetary concepts such as bribery. On the other hand, if the writer equates the group with an “organization” then the writer tends to interpret the actions of the group as intelligent and insidious. Moreover, if the writer conceptualizes the group as a “gang” then the writer tends to emphasize acts of violence.

Sanguinetti and Reyes’ (2011) work stemmed directly from Skinner’s (1957) *Verbal Behavior*, and, in doing so, presented an analysis of the variables controlling the behavior of news writers as speakers, which is surely a contribution to the literature. However, Skinner stated that his approach “applies *only* [emphasis added] to the speaker” (p. 33). Thus, if the authors wish to extend their analysis to consider the effects of writers’ word choices on their audiences, they would do well to familiarize themselves with *Relational Frame Theory* (RFT) (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001).

Over the past two decades, RFT researchers have empirically untangled the processes that account for listener behavior. From an RFT perspective, the behavior of the listener is verbal in that he/she derives arbitrarily applicable relations among stimuli that are not restricted to their physical properties. For example, even though a dime is physically “less than” a nickel, a dime is actually “more than” a nickel in terms of value. The “more/less than” relation is applied arbitrarily, based on social convention rather than physical stimulus properties (Hayes, Fox, Gifford, Wilson, Barnes-Holmes, & Healy, 2001, p. 25). This is in contrast to more traditional interpretations of stimulus control which restricts the occurrence of behavior to stimuli that are physically similar to those directly contacted by the individual, including nonarbitrary relational responding in animals (Dinsmoor, 1995; Hayes et al., 2001, pp. 24-25; Skinner, 1953, p. 132).

If the authors wish to extend their analysis to consider the impact of media reports on audiences as listeners, including the probability that a given listener will take action with respect to a media report, RFT could be of service via the Implicit Relational Association Procedure (IRAP). As discussed by Barnes-Holmes, Barnes-Holmes, Stewart, and Boles (2010), the IRAP has emerged from the RFT literature as a way to assess attitudes and biases (defined in terms of verbal behavior) on a variety of socially relevant topics. The procedure stands as an alternative to paper-and-pencil surveys in that it presents pairs of words on a screen (e.g., “cartel” paired with “bribery”) that require an evaluative response (e.g., “true” or “false”) within just a few seconds. The time constraint prevents participants from forming elaborate relational responses that would produce a “socially acceptable” response, particularly on socially sensitive issues like

racism. In other words, research suggests the IRAP could function as a lie detector of sorts (also see McKenna, Barnes-Holmes, Barnes-Holmes, & Stewart, 2007). Furthermore, research is emerging validating the IRAP as a predictor of overt behavior (Juarascio et al., 2011).

This is where IRAP research can connect with Sanguinetti and Reyes' (2011) interesting work. If one takes the position that listeners are verbal and derive arbitrarily applicable relations among things and events, then the ability to predict how audiences will respond to a given media report is likely restricted to some degree by the ability to assess a listener's relational network. The IRAP was designed to do precisely that. The question then concerns the relations that are predictive of listener action. Sanguinetti and Reyes may make the assumption that the relations emitted by the media writers are the same relations that will be derived by their listeners. However, that assumption is one that should be tested and we may now have the tools to make that possible.

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