First and second generation of cognitive-behavioural therapies: why the third was needed?

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Abstract

The first generation of behaviour therapy, which can be dated as far back as the 1920s, sought to modify problematic behaviour by the application of basic principles of classical or respondent conditioning à la Pavlov; and/or operant conditioning, in which behaviour change is linked to reinforcing consequences. The potential contribution that language and cognition played in initiation, maintenance, exacerbation and improvement of abnormal behaviour could be acknowledged, while at the same time it could be largely ignored. The need to somehow incorporate language-based processes within behaviour therapy become obvious. In the 1970s cognitive therapy emerged as a distinct approach in response to this challenge, along with related efforts to create cognitive behavioural modification/therapy hybrid by combining cognitively based processes and techniques (e.g., cognitive restructuring), with existing respondent and operant conditioning principles and strategies. Despite clear technical and some conceptual differences between the first and the second generation of behaviour therapy, they still shared a common objective of focusing on what can be regarded as a strategy of first-order change, that is, attempting to alter the form, the frequency, and or content of abnormal behaviour. By the start of the 2000s, empirical limitations as well as philosophical reservations about the second wave of behaviour therapy, gave rise to the third generation approaches emphasizing a second-order change agenda, in which focus is shifted from altering the form or content of abnormal behaviour to the context in which it occurs. It is not easy to change the contextual factors as they are socio-verbal (language) and ubiquitous. The third wave therapies focus on aspects such as how language affects our experience, the concept of mindfulness, self as context, acceptance, commitment to values, compassion and therapeutic relationship. Some of third generation therapies presented at this workshop were: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Compassion Focused Therapy, and Mindfulness. The third wave comes to make behaviour therapy more comprehensive, depth and concerned in establishing a relationship with human problems in a broader sense.