

*From Senses to Symbols: Relational  
Frame Theory In Human  
Development*

*By: Darin Cairns*

# 3 Types of Worlds

- Classical: The world of reflexes
- Instrumental: The world of consequences
- Symbolic: The world of deriving

# The 1<sup>st</sup> World: Reflex and Survive

- Ouch
- Ahhh
- “What the hell is this thing?”
- Mum feels great...
- *“No idea why but things are starting to feel different...Suddenly I feel better just hearing mum coming up the stairs”*

# The 2<sup>nd</sup> World: Interact, experiment and grow

- Push, open...Push,open
- Peek-a-boo
- Pages of a book
- *“The more I do things that worked last time, the better I am at getting them to work again!”*

# The 3<sup>rd</sup> World: Things have meaning!

- New fast moving and changing world opened up.
- No longer about what my history of something is!
- It is the meaning I have learned to give that thing that determines what I do with it.
  - I used to love my Trains, but now I know they are for boys. So I gave it to Dad...
- *This is how it all happened...*

# BEING 'SYMBOLIC'

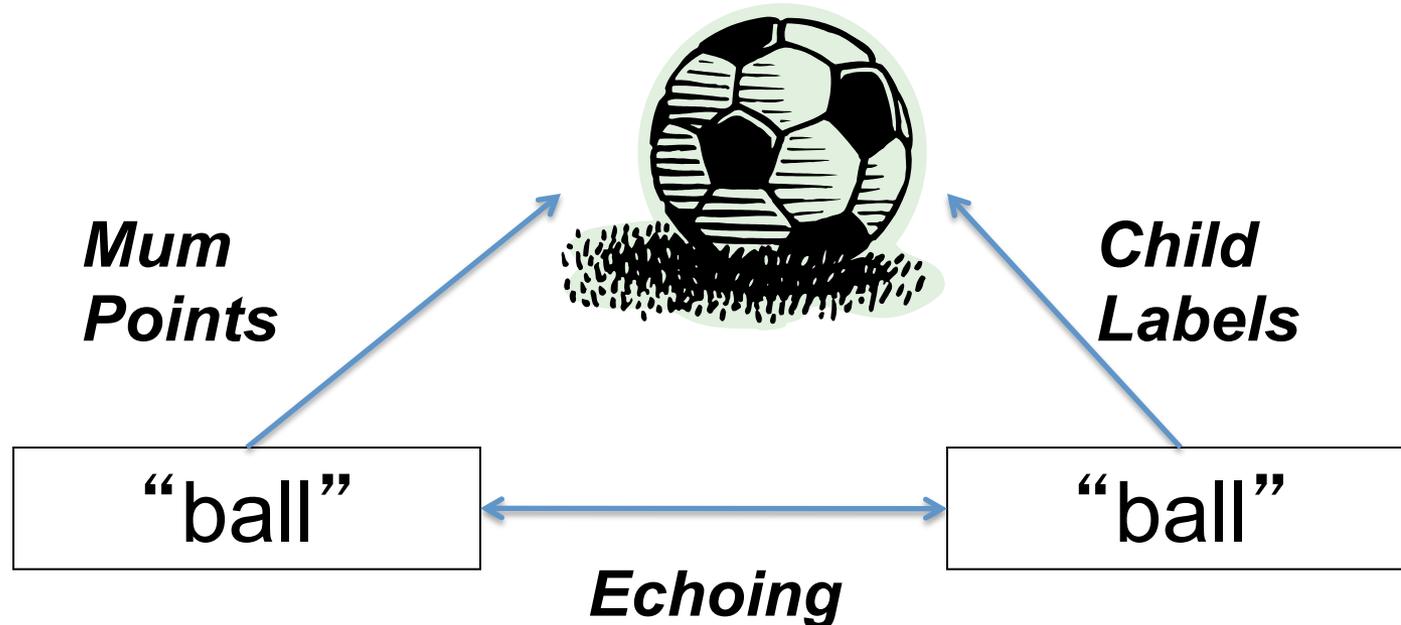
- Most people assume we mean words
- Language seems to be a major example but it does not need to be the only set of stimuli that can relate.
  - Gestures & Gaze
  - Clothing
  - Institutions
  - Art

# The Major Types of Symbolic Relations: The Relational Frames

- Coordination
- Distinction
- Comparison
- Spatial
- Hierarchical
- Diectic
- Temporal
- Causal

# The 1<sup>st</sup> frame: “Things have names and names have meanings”

- Joint Attention and Social Referencing



Crel = Mum pointing

Cfunc = whats this?

Stimuli being related the sound “ball” and visual of the ball.

Frame being used “coordination”

Form of teaching/information being used “Joint attention”

# What I learn to do

- Following lots of example where mum tells me those names when I can sense the object I can eventually;
- UNDERSTANDING: Identify and understand how what people are talking about applies to ‘things’ .
  - Mum can now say - “Milk?” and I can turn to approach without seeing the bottle. (Plus I get the emotional/physical response I used to get from seeing it!)
- INFLUENCE: Manipulate those in the symbolic world;
  - HL: “Milk!”

# The Next Frame: ‘Not’

- I learned that things can be defined by what they are not.
- For example, I learned that if mum says to pick up ‘red’ and I pick up something else she says “not red” and I grab the other thing and she says “good girl!”

# What I learn to do

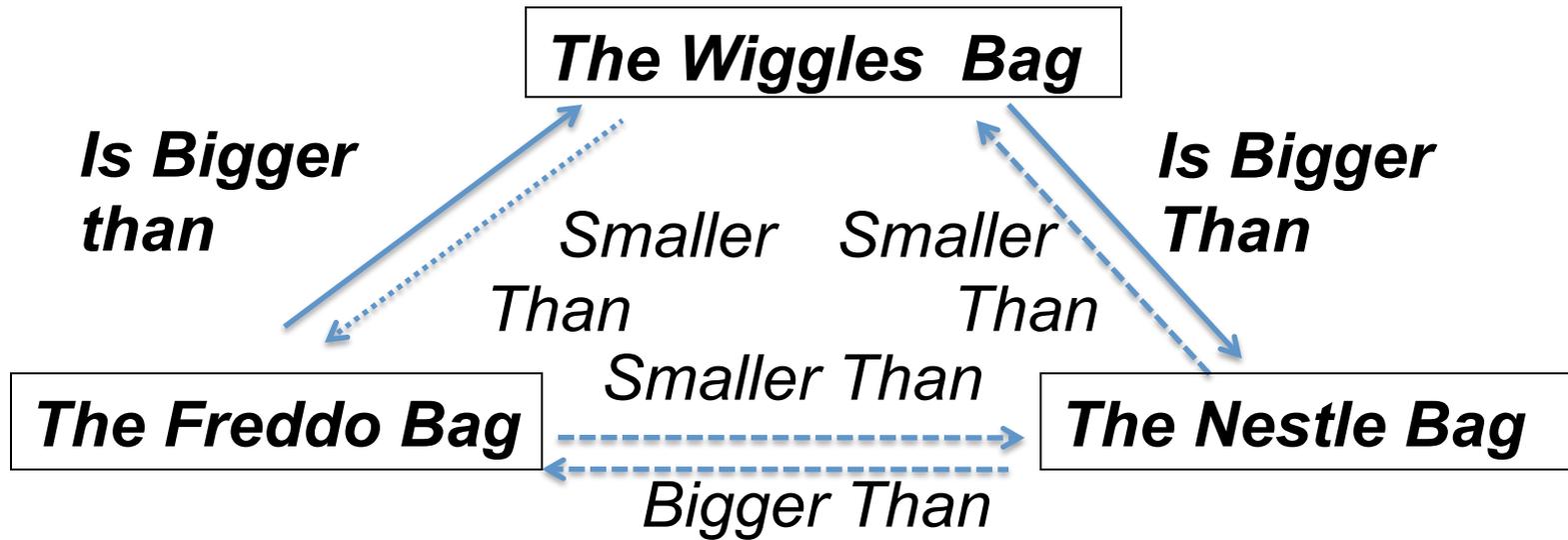
- Following lots of example where mum I can sense the object I can eventually;
- UNDERSTANDING: Use a learning skills called “Fast-mapping”. I now learn from just from working out new labels without anyone telling me!
- INFLUENCE: I can work out new ideas without needing them paired or coordinated

# Cultural Quirk? Coherence Games

- A little thing that starts to happen around now is we start playing ‘silly’ games (at least from what I have seen in the Oz culture)
- This is where dad tries to dress a boy in a skirt or pretends to be a girl.
- The child learns to laugh at these actions that are not consistent with taught networks.
- Equally the child learns to do such things for effect.
- Is this the start of ‘sense making’ or humour?

# The 3rd Frame: ‘Size Matters’

- Comparatives



Crel = Mum pointing and saying X is bigger than Y, other times saying Y is smaller than X.

Cfunc = which do you want? (requiring DRR)

Stimuli being related: the sound “bigger” and words representing those objects

Frame being used “comparative”

Form of teaching/information being used ‘Coordinated Information using ‘is’ ’

# What I learn to do

- Following lots of example where mum keeps labeling and asking for objects based on how they physically relate I can eventually
- UNDERSTANDING: Tell how I should respond to things based on how I am told they relate in terms of physical and other dimensions.
  - *The ocean is rougher than the pool. Where do you want to swim?*
  - *John is a worse runner than Jane. Who is do you want on your team?*
- INFLUENCE: I can make decisions now. “I’ ll take Jane”

# The 4th Frame: “Space has a language”

- Other key relations are prepositions and positional terms such as ‘in/on/under’ etc.
- Yet again we see relations that are taught via many multiple exemplars in the *physical* world are soon moved to the abstracted level and become part of the *symbolic* world
- “John is top of the class” “She is last in her grade”
- **Harper Ley**: “I am the first thing in mums mind”

# The 5<sup>th</sup> Frame: “The world of groups”

- Things are grouped to help us organise knowledge.
- This is great for academic and society. For example; we talk about animals, plants, fruit and vegetables and how they relate in arbitrary ways.
- By classifying we can respond differently to a stimuli based on how they relate.
- **Harper Ley:** Girls who have dads are called “daughters’ Men who have daughters are called ‘dads’ .

# The 6<sup>th</sup> Frame: “We are not alone”

- The first frame that does not have any literal existence.
- ‘I’ am only ‘I’ to me, to ‘you’ I am ‘you’ !!!!
- The first frame where the relational terms utilise *perspective* words
  - I, you, me, ours
  - This, That
  - Here, there
- **Harper Ley:** “I am your daughter, you are my father”, “I am over here in the play pen, you are over there in the study”

## *Famous Study: RFT takes on Borat's Cousin!*

- Baron Cohen showed us that ASD children regularly fail Theory of Mind Tasks.
- When we examine those task a person must be able to use the following frames and Crels;
  - I-YOU
  - HERE-THERE
  - NOW-THEN
- Example Study (Rehfeldt, Dillen, Ziomek & Kowalchuk, 2007)

# RECENT STUDY

- Gallagher (2006) Masters thesis.
- 4 children ages 4-7.
- Failed all Theory of Mind Tasks
- After 12 weeks training on YBH protocol.
- All could pass novel versions with 100% accuracy.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> study of this type to provide RFT can teach self relating and perspective

# The 7<sup>th</sup> Frame: “Time is a new playground”

- Time does not exist.
- It is a concept that we learn to explain to each other and use.
- We have time ‘anchors’ like breakfast, night time or 5 0’ clock.
- We navigate around them with relational terms for time.
  - “After school we are going to the shops”
  - Therefore, before the shops we will be at school”

# Update on Harper's Skills

- **Mum:** “She is constantly asking ‘when’, she wants to always know what’s happening next!”
- **Harper Ley:** I used to live in the moment and react if I arrived somewhere I did not like. Now I can react before it even happens!

# The 8<sup>th</sup> Frame: “I can predict the future”

- Rain *causes* floods.
- Dad being late *makes* mum angry
- Gravity *makes* things fall
- Having the latest shoes *makes* you cool.
- I got told off *because* I did not pack
- The *result* of not packing up is that I got told off

# Harper Ley Learns the Power of “WHY”

- **Harper-Ley:** “Now I can work out how changing one event will change another *without* ever experimenting! Learning from experience is for dummies stuck in the 2<sup>nd</sup> world”
- **Harper-Ley:** “I can even explain why I do things. For example grandma tells me that I have tantrums because I get angry. So now I work hard not to get angry”

# My World: An Essay from Harper

- I can have frames interact with frames.
  - I don't even know where half my ideas come from!
- Meaning changes so fast and I can't seem to stop it....
- I have abstracted all relations to the point that mum can say “John is a bigger person than Scott because he said sorry” and I know that she does not literally mean John is bigger – just that saying sorry makes you bigger, and bigger means better!
- I am bombarded with symbols that change things I relationally frame or how I ‘think’ (sorry forgot my context, you guys prefer cultural terms right?).
- Nothing is as it was in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> world. Everything is what it says it is...What meaning I give it.
- I have never had so much ability to predict and influence my world.
- I am so much more powerful...But things do seem to be harder.

# Interacting, Controlling and Predicting the World: My Skills

- In the 1<sup>st</sup> world all I could do was react to the world the same way to different things
- In the 2<sup>nd</sup> world I could only respond to things in my world based on what those things had done in the past.
- In the 3<sup>rd</sup> world I could predict and plan to control my world in as many ways as my frames would let me.
- Now in my world I have discovered symbolic skills that make sense of the world and allow me to navigate it based on my sense. Rules...

# **NAVIGATING THE SYMBOLIC WORLD**

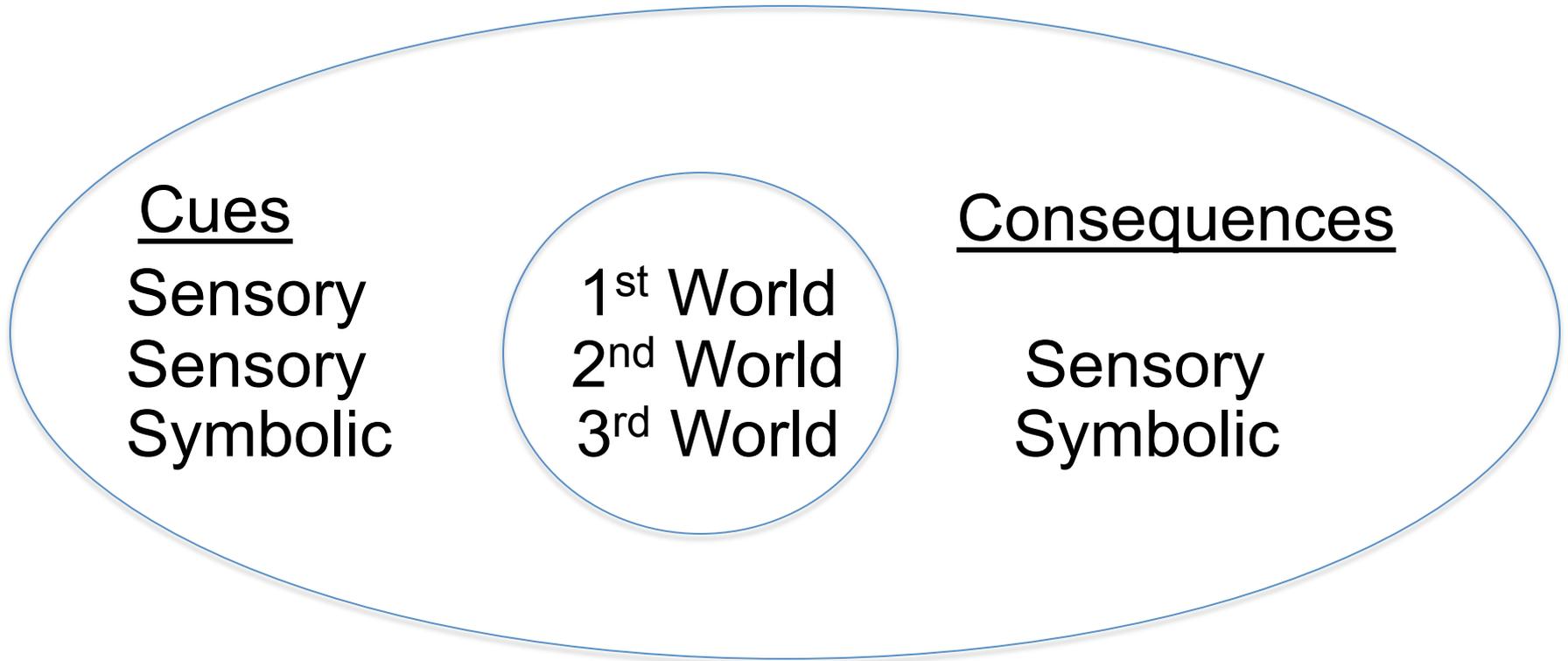
# Weapons and Tools of the 3<sup>rd</sup> World: RGB

- Rules Governed Behaviour (RGB): AKA beliefs, thoughts, reasons etc...allow us to use our frames of understanding to predict and influence our world effectively and efficiently.
  - If-then
  - When-then
  - Categories
- *“To gain access to your new account please follow the steps outlined below”*
- *“When you meet your Nanna be sure to tell how good she looks and what a good girl you are”*

# Where do rules come from?

- The verbal/symbolic community.
- How did we learn to make and value rules?
- From the verbal/symbolic community that taught you to ‘frame’ in the first place.
- 2 Key types of Rules (there are others);
  - Pliance: Source of reinforcement/punishment comes from verbal community
  - Tracking: Source of reinforcement/punishment comes from experience of following the rule

# The 'Controlling' Contexts



# My Verbal/Symbolic Community

- People we value are information sources
  - Parents/Family (ages 0-12)
  - Peers (ages 10 – 20)
  - Significant Other(s) (20-?)
  - Family types systems (eg school and work)
  - Therapists??????? (Dr Phil?)
- Cultural information sources
  - Marketing (ages 10-?)
  - Institutions (school – vocation – home)
  - Stories (Golden Books to Hollywood)

# Changes in Symbolic Control

- Mum says to 13 year old boy “you look great in those shorts” Boy immediately goes and changes.
- Girl looks tells kids off for running because teacher told her that is the rule. She pleases the teacher but can not see why no one wants to be her friend. A few months later she learns the categorical term “teachers pet” she starts to rebel.

# SUMMARY OF DEVELOPMENT FROM A FUNCTIONAL CONTEXTUAL POV

- *We seek to make sense of the world*
- We are a product of our past and the moment
- Initially we learn from association and consequences.
  - The information source is *experience/ experiential*
- Eventually we learn learn from symbolic relations.
  - The information is the symbolic community.  
Made up of;
    - Family and Social influences
    - Cultural factors such as marketing and institutions

# SUMMARY CONT'

- *We seek to predict and influence our worlds to satisfy our needs.*
- We do this through our motor and communication AND derived relational responding skills.
- The 'needs' we have at the sensory/ experiential world, soon become obfuscated and rewritten by the new 'meanings' of things.
- And this wonder of development comes from our amazing learning ability... our sensitivity to UNDERSTAND our context and our ability to INFLUENCE..... it and thus ourselves.

# The Learning 'Loop': The Machine of Development

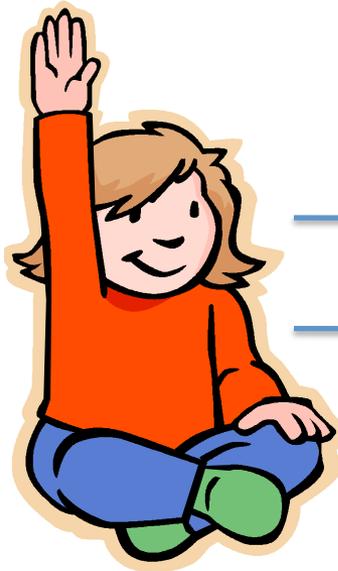
INFORMATION

*Understand*

Symbolic



Sensory



ACTION

*Influence*

Verbal

Non-verbal



# Develop for what purpose?

To **SURVIVE** so you can **LIVE**

Thought experiment:

- The Snake and the Pot of Gold
  - *Protect yourself*
- Rejection vs Achievement
  - *Protect your 'self*

# Skills for Survival, Skills for Living

## SURVIVAL

### 1<sup>ST</sup> WORLD

- PAIN
  - Hunger
  - Physical hurt
  - Unexpected shock

### 2<sup>nd</sup> World

- PUNISHMENT: Signals of things that caused pain.
  - Avoidance of negative stimulation
  - Avoidance of negative attention
  - Avoidance of tangibles

## LIVING

### 1<sup>ST</sup> WORLD

- PLEASURE
  - Relief from hunger
  - Physical touch
  - Safe Novelty

### 2<sup>nd</sup> World

- REINFORCEMENT: Signals that caused pleasure
  - Access to stimulation
  - Access to attention
  - Access to tangibles

# Skills for Survival, Skills for Living

## 3<sup>rd</sup> WORLD

- SYMBOLS OF THINGS THAT *RELATE IN SOME WAY TO PAINFUL EXPERIENCE.*
  - Protect self from certain contexts (eg where lions run, strangers lurk or risk is probable)
  - *Protect “self” from the evaluation of others*
  - *Protect “self” from attacks of self.*

## 3<sup>rd</sup> WORLD

- SYMBOLS OF THINGS THAT *RELATE IN SOME WAY TO PLEASURABLE EXPERIENCE.*
  - Seek certain contexts (eg where food is available, friends will be, good times are probable).
  - *Seek coherence with “self” (values) and context*

# But rules can't always stop Pain....

## My World Loves Me (approach)

- I can work out how to;
  - Program my Nintendo DS
  - How to manipulate my dad
  - Make myself pretty

## My World Hurts Me (avoidance)

- I can also work out that;
  - Getting a poor score on the DS means I am not as good as the other kids
  - That because Dad told me I'd been bad then I am not good,
  - That because I did not get picked in the lead in the school play then Sally must be more talented than me

# Development gone wrong: Harper's Story of Safety

- Grade 3: Today I got put in the bottom class for maths. That means a whole lot of kids are better than me. And my BFF says that maths is how you know if you are smart. So I must be dumb.
- Grade 5: I no longer like school because I am dumb. But I have learned that if I do art and English I am ok. I don't try at maths anymore because it hurts to fail all the time. Hurts less to avoid.
- Grade 7: The cool group all study together but I don't want them to see that I am not smart so I avoid hanging out with them.
- Year 11: I want to be a nurse but I am not smart so I will be an Art Teacher instead because I am good at that.
- 1<sup>st</sup> year in career: I am an ok Art teacher but I wish I was smarter.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> year: They offered me a promotion to head of dept but I am not sure I am smart enough with budgets so I said no.
- 5<sup>th</sup> year: I met a guy I like but he seems way smarter than me so I decided to stop seeing him cause he made me feel dumb. I think I'll put off dating for awhile.
- 7<sup>th</sup> year: I am lonely, I hate my job and I hate myself....
- How did all this go so wrong????