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**USING THE CONCEPT OF RULE -  
GOVERNED BEHAVIOUR TO INTEGRATE  
THE COGNITIVE AND BEHAVIOURAL  
THERAPIES: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS**

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of *rule-governed behaviour* (RGB) was introduced by B.F Skinner (1969) to allow complex verbal behaviour to be amenable to the same types of contingency analysis used in most other areas of applied behaviourism. Inherent in the concept of RGB is the notion that people formulate and follow rules created by themselves and others and that this constitutes a distinct class of operant functioning. As the process of cognitive therapy is primarily undertaken in a verbal fashion, the possibility of employing the concept of RGB to redefine aspects of cognitive therapy from an operant perspective has been considered by several researchers (e.g., Zettle & Hayes, 1982; Poppen, 1989). This form of paradigmatic integration, involving the transplantation of one set of therapeutic techniques into the theoretical body of another epistemological framework, can be termed *assimilative* (Lazarus & Messer, 1991). The present essay clarifies the aims and content of such an integration as it relates to the concept of RGB and cognitive-behavioural rapprochement, and offers several theoretical advancements in this direction. Errors in rule-following and rule-formulation are discussed in terms of the role they play in cognitive assessment, and the cognitive mechanisms involved in therapeutic change are also analysed in terms of RGB. It is also shown how RGB can be conceptualised as a reciprocally-determined system of responding, similar to that espoused by the cognitive theorist Albert Bandura (1977a). Finally, some of the problems associated with the concept of RGB and psychotherapy integration are reviewed in relation to the present analysis.

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is rare at Masters level to submit a purely theoretical dissertation. As such, the present essay bears little resemblance to the experimental projects typical of those conducted at an early postgraduate level. Nevertheless, it is at this academic level which one can most commonly find advanced courses entirely devoted to the practice of “cognitive-behavioural therapy”, but with only a fraction of the curriculum reserved for debate on the core differences between the two paradigms that constitute this therapeutic intervention. A personal dissatisfaction with this omission enthused me to conduct a critical analysis of how therapists might benefit from using the concept of *rule-governed behaviour* to analyse and understand these differences. This thesis has had several minor revisions since an earlier submission.

Anyone who does not understand B.F. Skinner’s theory of rule-governed behaviour and the theoretical underpinnings of the school from which it is born is unlikely to respect the nature of the approach taken here. Because of this, a considerable amount of space has been allocated to a description of the philosophical stance taken by radical behaviourists. Part One is primarily introductory in nature and is intended to solidify and organise the conceptual tools which have been used to conduct this analysis. In contrast to the behavioural literature, Part Two outlines the fundamental tenets of four of the most influential cognitive therapies and the cognitive paradigm in general. At this point, a method by which we might usefully place the process of interpreting cognitive therapy in terms of RGB within the broader field of psychotherapy integration is offered.

Thus, Parts One and Two aim to construct a grounding for the final section, Part Three, which offers an in-depth analysis of how many rule-based clinical techniques might be used as a way for behaviour therapy to “tap-in” to those areas traditionally of concern to cognitive therapists. The final subsections of Part Three contain an evaluation of the more complex empirical and theoretical difficulties facing the concept of RGB as an integrative tool and their relation to the theoretical account given here. For the reader requiring a preparatory introduction to the field of radical behaviourism, I recommend Baum’s (1994) “Understanding Behaviourism: Science, Behaviour, and Culture”, and Skinner’s (1969) “Contingencies of Reinforcement: A Theoretical Analysis”.

I would like to take the opportunity to briefly thank those who have contributed to the completion of this thesis. I would like to thank Dr Kevin Ronan for his excellent supervision and commentary, and more generally, for his reassuring faith in my potential over the last three years. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr Alan Winton for his conversation and guidance, and for sharing his useful ideas and insight with me. I also give my heartfelt thanks to my parents, Rose and Harry, for their enduring support throughout the writing of this thesis and over the course of my tertiary education.