Self-Reg and Reframing

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Abstract

Shanker Self-Reg® always begins with reframing. The concept of reframing is grounded in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Reframing constitutes an “aspect-shift” in how we see and categorize the world around us. Perceptual, experiential and creative components are all involved. The current paper explores each of these strands and how they are woven together. It then discusses how reframing applies, not only to behaviour, thought and emotion, but even to scientific research and theories.

Reframing

Shanker Self-Reg® always begins with reframing. See a child as misbehaving and you are likely to respond in a harsh, even punitive manner. See the same child as exhibiting stress behaviour and you respond by helping that child to self-regulate. What is at stake here is not a different method of “managing a child’s behaviour.” The lesson here is rather: “See a child differently and you see a different child.”

There are three essential components involved in reframing: perceptual, experiential, and creative. By digging into existing research about reframing, our goal here is not only to understand each of these strands, but also to see how they are woven together.
My thinking about reframing was originally inspired by what Wittgenstein says about “aspect-shifts.” See a philosophical question differently, he argues, and you arrive at a whole new type of answer. Wittgenstein summed up what he had in mind here when he told Con Drury that he was thinking of using a quotation from King Lear, “I’ll teach you differences,” as the motto for Philosophical Investigations. This line captures the essence of Wittgenstein’s contribution to philosophy: the distinctions that he draws, for example, between science and philosophy, or between grammatical and empirical propositions, or between first-person and third-person psychological utterances. The reason why this sort of
philosophical investigation is so important is because of the metaphysical confusions that result from failing to clarify these often very subtle logical distinctions (see Hacker 1972).

We could easily use the same quotation, “I'll teach you differences,” as a motto for Self-Reg. Here too we are concerned with vitally important differences: for example, between self-control and self-regulation; misbehaviour and stress behaviour; oppositional defiance and fight-or-flight; compliance and freeze; not listening and not processing; lack of effort and limbic braking. However, in this case what is at stake is not resolving some metaphysical confusion, but the well-being of children and teens.

The idea behind reframing in this psychological context is that when, for example, you look at a child’s behaviour through a self-control lens you may see opposition, but look at it through a Self-Reg lens and what you see is fight-or-flight. Yet reframing is not some sort of “optometrical” phenomenon: the result of changing from the green-tinted glasses of self-control to the rose-tinted glasses of Self-Reg. The perceptual shift operating here involves a fundamental shift in categorization (Goldstone, 1994).

This is an idea that goes all the way back to Plato: specifically, his idea that we see the world through concepts, which we acquire – implicitly – when we learn how to speak (Baker & Hacker, 1980). We see what our parents teach us to see: our culture shapes what we perceive. When one sees a cow one might see a sacred creature; a demon; a food source; a dumb brute; a sentient creature that thinks and feels pain.

Perceptual Reframing

Each of these “ways of seeing” is embedded in a network of concepts (Goffman, 1974). When we reframe something, we are consciously shifting from one framework to another, and an essential aspect of the reframing is learning how to map the new conceptual terrain (Berger, 2008). For example, misbehaviour is internally related to the cluster of concepts that apply to purposeful actions: intentionality, choice, explanation, justification, responsibility. It is because of these conceptual links that we automatically think of punishment as a way of responding to misbehaviour. But stress behaviour belongs to the category of non-purposeful behaviour: that is, behaviours that are caused by sub-cortical processes. Stress behaviour is tied to arousal, tension, energy depletion, neurohormones,
and in general, limbic processes. Hence our automatic reaction to stress behaviour is to understand and down-regulate.

Experiential Reframing

When we reframe, we are not simply looking at the same thing through a different lens. What we see is completely different, and we begin to understand what this is by exploring the new conceptual links. But, whereas for philosophy reframing is essentially a logical exercise, for Self-Reg reframing involves an experiential shift that is every bit as powerful as the cognitive. It is not just what we see that is so different, but, essential to this process, what we feel.

These two aspects of reframing – perceptual and experiential – are bound up with one another. The more we can tease apart the conceptual links in the new framework, the more profoundly our emotional response to a child or teen is affected. But what changes most of all is what we start to ask. For reframing not only involves a new way of answering old and established questions, but also raises entirely new ones and leads us in directions that were not, and likely could not have been discerned in the old framework.

Creative Reframing

The third essential aspect of Self-Reg reframing is that it sparks off creative new ways of thinking: about children and teens, about ourselves, about theories and experimental paradigms. In this sense, reframing is like a closure impossibility proof in mathematics (Shanker, 1988): it closes off one line of thinking (for example, self-control) while opening up a completely new one (self-regulation). This is the reason why Gödel’s theorem was so important for mathematicians and why Self-Reg is so important for parents and educators. We truly do not know where a reframing is going to lead: only that this is a path that we must follow.
Conclusion

Following the path of reframing the existing scientific literature about stress and stress management will be a key element in Self-Reg research. Through re-perceiving and re-experiencing rigorous research, and finding creative ways of thinking about how this research touches current challenges, we can take our understanding of stress and Self-Reg in hitherto unseen directions with productive results for all.

References


