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### Cinematherapy with Inside Out: A Theoretical and Practical Guide

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# Cinematherapy with Inside Out: A Theoretical and Practical Guide

## Abstract

Since its release in 2015, the Disney/Pixar film "Inside Out" has received widespread critical and commercial acclaim. Despite the film's basis in established psychological theories, little has been published regarding its clinical applicability, particularly for adolescent and adult clients in traditional talk therapy. Through the use of cinematherapy, a deeper examination of the film is offered, and suggestions for treatment use are provided. Via the lens of modern psychodynamic (Intersubjectivity) and behavioral (ACT) techniques, this paper offers diverse options for integrating "Inside Out" in psychotherapy and proves that it contains clinical applicability for a wide range of practitioners.

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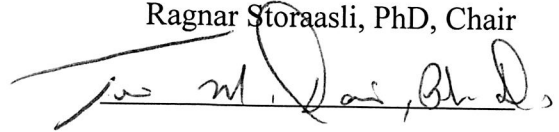
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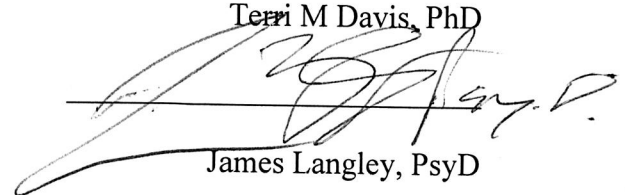
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### **Cinematherapy with *Inside Out*: a theoretical and practical guide**

Disney/Pixar's 2015 *Inside Out* premiered to record-breaking box office numbers upon release (Mendelson, 2015). The film follows Riley, an 11-year-old girl whose family has just moved from Minnesota to San Francisco. The primary action of the movie takes place in Riley's head, where the main characters are Riley's five primary emotions: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust (Rivera & Docter, 2015). As the plot progresses, audiences are introduced to themes that have been emphasized in therapy offices for decades: all emotions are important, all feelings serve a purpose, and the environment impacts emotional expression. Given its widespread release and consumption, coupled with an emphasis on therapeutically-relevant ideas, it is surprising that the film has not been discussed more widely in the psychological literature. Cinematherapy offers one avenue for integrating popular films into therapeutic work. Through cinematherapy, practitioners from diverse clinical perspectives can harness *Inside Out's* unique messages to provide a new experience for clients struggling with a host of challenges. This paper serves as a guideline for counselors working via psychodynamic and behavioral frames to understand how to utilize the film's characters, plot, and imagery with therapy clients. It is recommended that, prior to continuing, the reader have viewed the film at least once in its entirety. This will ensure optimal understanding of the following information, including references to specific scenes and characters. In addition, readers should be aware that the following paper contains references to key plot points that may spoil the narrative for those who have not yet viewed the film.

The paper is structured to provide a background understanding of cinematherapy, a relatively new technique designed to integrate films into therapeutic conversations. It then provides specific examples and suggestions for harnessing the power of cinematherapy with

*Inside Out* to aid psychotherapy clients. It is recommended that a therapist using these techniques be familiar with the film, and has viewed it at least once in its entirety. To understand how to utilize *Inside Out* as a therapeutic tool, a review of two distinct psychotherapeutic modalities will occur. Intersubjectivity represents a modern psychodynamic approach, while Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) provides a modern behavioral understanding of how to work with clients. Basic principles of each will be outlined, and specific examples from the film will be used to illustrate key theoretical concepts. The discussion will also include examples and suggestions for how to integrate the movie's key moments into therapy. Finally, the paper will conclude with an example of theoretical overlap, and suggestions for future directions.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

To date, only one article (Ali, 2017) has discussed the direct applicability of the movie to therapy. In this paper, Ali (2017) offers multiple suggestions for how to use *Inside Out* in work with children, including having child clients draw their "core memories" in orbs and discuss the emotions they would ascribe to their artwork. While this approach is applicable and makes use of the film's storytelling, it leaves something to be desired for using *Inside Out* as a metaphorical discussion point with older clients, specifically adolescents and adults. To integrate this movie into talk therapy, techniques must allow for a more flexible, less concrete approach.

Cinematherapy is a tool that has been discussed for the last century and emphasizes the use of films in therapy via metaphor and direct example. It was officially given its name in 1986 by Duncan, Beck and Granum in their use of the film *Ordinary People* with teenage girls (Powell & Newgent, 2010). Berg-Cross, Jennings, and Baruch (1990) defined it as a "therapeutic technique that involves having the psychotherapist select commercial films for the patient to view alone or with specified others." It has been viewed as an evolution of bibliotherapy-- a

practice that has been documented since 1840 during which clinicians recommend literature for patients to read between sessions in an effort to illuminate relevant themes and develop common metaphors (Calisch, 2001).

Bibliotherapy is a well-researched topic, but cinematherapy has yet to garner a strong empirical backing. Powell and Newgent (2010) discussed only three empirical studies focused on cinematherapy, and offered a fourth examination of the method as a way to treat Major Depressive Disorder. In all four studies, the act of clients viewing films was shown to be clinically, and in many cases statistically, significant (Powell & Newgent, 2010). What's more, these studies offered an examination of cinematherapy in both individual and group work, suggesting that the method is applicable in a number of therapeutic modalities. Powell (2008) presented an in-depth analysis of anecdotal research around cinematherapy in his dissertation, and suggested that the method is well supported. He specified four handbooks that guide practice, and numerous articles.

In one of these handbooks, Hesley and Hesley (2001) noted various advantages to integrating film into therapy (e.g., extending therapy in time-limited contexts, making use of time between therapy sessions), but most critically, they emphasized that metaphorically using film in therapy deepens the relationship between practitioner and client via the creation of a common language. Solomon (1995), another oft-cited proponent of cinematherapy, averred that it creates "paradoxical healing" and helps clients understand "what not to do" by seeing emotions (rather than reading or talking about them), which may be particularly powerful since vision is the primary sense for humans (e.g., Calvert, Spence, & Stein, 2004). Regardless of whether the provider intends for a metaphorical or paradoxical translation of the film, proponents of

cinematherapy offer numerous anecdotes of incredible and sudden insight gained after viewing films targeted to illuminate specific elements of the client's presenting concerns.

When using films therapeutically, two methods are available: a clinician may spontaneously discuss a film the client has already viewed during a session, or may choose to assign the film as homework. The first method has been shown to be practiced by a majority of clinicians. Lampropolus et al. (2004) found that 90% of surveyed clinicians had discussed films in session with their clients. The study also examined the theoretical orientation of practitioners, and found that over half (54%) of self-identified psychodynamic practitioners recommended films during therapy, and 65% of cognitive-behavioral practitioners recommended films as a therapy adjunct.

If a provider chooses instead to purposefully assign a film for viewing, cinematherapy manuals suggest that the film should be selected for a specific purpose, and should ideally be viewed by the client alone (Hesley & Hesley, 2001; Solomon, 1995). Many lists exist to help clinicians select appropriate films, and some offer summaries of the key therapeutic themes highlighted in the movie. The Chi Sigma Iota web page suggests *Inside Out* as a clinical tool for helping clients who struggle to express emotions (Fifield, 2016). In a brief letter to the editor, Benarous and Munch (2016) highlighted specific movie moments that are relevant to typical emotional development in children. Dantzler (2015) suggested that cinematherapy be integrated with specific psychological theories as a supplement to ongoing therapeutic work, encouraging a deeper approach to understanding film's applicability to therapy.

Whether used for structured or unstructured discussion during therapy, *Inside Out* may have unique advantages for a cinematherapy intervention, due to its widespread commercial success and well-established psychological background. Thanks to the wide distribution granted



by Disney/Pixar, the film can be rented or purchased from numerous sources, and has also been seen by many clients who can easily discuss the plot and characters without needing to re-view. The film is also targeted for children and families, is animated, and is rated PG, making it an easily accessible and largely non-controversial suggestion for viewing. In essence, many clients have likely viewed the film and can easily recall the simple plot-points as needed in spontaneous discussion, or can easily acquire a copy of the film to view if it becomes relevant to the therapy.

The literature for using films in therapy has wide anecdotal and clinical support, and a growing empirical backing. *Inside Out*'s recent entrance into popular American culture has provided the singular opportunity to use a widely seen film, appropriate for audiences of all ages, to illustrate rich and researched perspectives on basic emotional functioning. For mental health professionals adjusting to a managed care model in psychotherapy, the ability to meaningfully deepen work in less time is crucial (Hesley & Hesley, 2001). Stories have long been used to establish metaphorical language between practitioner and patient, and *Inside Out* offers the unique chance to do so from a variety of theoretical perspectives.

### **Theories of Emotion Reflected in the Film**

Before diving into the specificity of how *Inside Out* can be applied along theoretical guidelines, it is important to recognize the psychologically relevant content present in the film. Clinical psychologist and *Inside Out* consultant Dr. Paul Ekman's theory of basic emotional development is represented from the start. The first scene opens to a blank space and audiences see an infant Riley in her parent's arms. Joy appears first, followed quickly by Sadness, and eventually the other three characters (Anger, Disgust, and Fear). This increased emotional complexity as the child ages is supported by research on emotional development (Keltner & Ekman, 2015). Joy is the leader of the emotions throughout the film, and the core plot focuses on

her journey to realize that all of the emotions, including Sadness, are vital to Riley's success. The audience is presented with an unspoken rule: to be happy is to function healthily. Typically, happiness is the first emotion developed in children, while more nuanced emotions develop later in life (D. Keltner, personal communication, May 24, 2017). Modern emotional theorists generally posit that emotions developed to help individuals adjust to their environment (Keltner & Gross, 1999). The film reflects this key idea; each emotion in the film is given a specific role (i.e., "That's Fear. He's really good at keeping Riley safe"). Ekman (1992) also discussed how emotions are vital in helping to "mobilize the organism" to respond to the environment, and will help the organism respond in ways that have been beneficial in the past. *Inside Out* gives an example of this; prior to the family relocating, the emotions seem to have a well-established routine about how to care for Riley when she is confronted by challenges. When Riley is in a new environment, however, her previous coping strategies (described in the movie as "thinking positive") do not work as well when presented with new challenges (Rivera & Doctor, 2015). One of the first signs of trouble comes when Riley's father takes a phone call and leaves his wife and child at their new house to go to work. Audiences witness puzzlement and shock from the emotions as they wonder what to do next; they have never been confronted with this particular challenge before and cannot reference their prior experiences to respond. Indeed, when an emotional response doesn't map onto previous experiences, there can be significant discomfort (Ekman, 1992).

In the film's central conflict, audiences also see that adolescence is full of loss, as social psychologist and *Inside Out* consultant Dr. Dacher Keltner discusses in several interviews about the film (Judd, 2015; Keltner & Ekman, 2015). Sadness' sudden ability to change the color of memories may be a reference to the increased emotional complexity expected in early

adolescence. Mental health practitioners can note the same process with clients. Often, clients are shocked and afraid of a new reaction to an event they have experienced before. The film offers a powerful illustration of how emotions can take on new significance during life transitions.

In the film, the control panel inside Riley's head grows. In the first scene, it is a simple button that Joy and Sadness share. Throughout the movie's main action, a different control panel appears that is more complex; there is enough space for the emotions to stand behind it, but only one emotion can operate it at a time. In one brief scene at the dinner table, viewers are given access to Riley's parents' minds, and see a different control panel where each emotion has a station and more than one can operate the panel at a time. At the conclusion of the movie, the audience is made explicitly aware of the changing emotional needs of the main character, since a new control panel is installed, (one that features the perplexing "puberty" button) symbolizing another developmental milestone for Riley (Rivera & Doctor, 2015). The increased complexity of emotions during puberty is empirically established, and seeing it on screen gives audiences and clients alike an understanding that the emotional functioning of an infant is different than that of a child, which is different than that of an adult (Keltner & Ekman, 2015). The key task of emotional development as an adolescent is to broaden emotional complexities (D. Keltner, personal communication, May 24, 2017). Through the imagery of the control panel, *Inside Out* provides a visual for how emotions change over time. Audiences see this both in the size and complexity of the control panel, but also in the way the memory orbs are suddenly allowed to be more than one color, representing a more nuanced and complex feeling.

Not only do emotions become more complex with age, but current experiences can alter past memories (Judd, 2015; Levine & Pizzaro, 2004). Perhaps this is why Sadness can suddenly change the emotions attached to memories; they are not restricted to one specific feeling. Clients

may struggle when recalling subjectively painful memories, but as this scene shows, the emotion ascribed to our memories is likely only a piece of what was experienced in the moment.

*Inside Out* offers a wealth of research-backed metaphor to explain human feelings. For mental health practitioners, however, more work must be done to bring these images alive in therapy. I now turn to examining how two different types of practitioners-- Intersubjective and ACT--might utilize the imagery present in the film. Through this examination, I hope to demonstrate that there is wide therapeutic applicability of *Inside Out* as a clinical tool and will argue that if the film has utility under these different understandings of human functioning, that it is adaptable to other approaches as well.

### **Intersubjectivity versus ACT: Foundations**

There are some similarities between Intersubjectivity and ACT. For example, philosophically, both are rooted in contextualism, with Intersubjectivity allied with description contextualism (Buirski, 2007) and ACT with functional contextualism (Hayes, 2004). In addition, both are regarded as densely interpersonal psychotherapies (e.g., see, for example, Buirski, 2007; Buirski & Haglund, 2009; Hayes, 2004; Hayes & Wilson, 1994) and both represent a rebellion against older psychodynamic and behavioral approaches, respectively (Buirski & Haglund, 2009; Hayes, 2004). Nevertheless, while Intersubjectivity and ACT may share a “family resemblance” (Wittgenstein, 1953/1973), they may be as distinct therapeutic approaches characterized by different vocabularies and conceptual practices.

### **Foundations of Intersubjectivity**

Modern therapeutic techniques can be traced back to the early 1900s, when Sigmund Freud first proposed a theory of understanding problematic human behavior due to damaged

developmental drives (Gabbard, 2010). Relational theory takes a piece of Freud's early thoughts, and focuses on interpersonal functioning (Buirski & Haglund, 2009).

While an in-depth discussion of psychodynamic theory beyond the scope of this paper, in order to understand Intersubjective practice it is important to recognize that a dynamically-oriented therapist believes problematic behaviors can be traced back to early childhood experiences, and that the essential task of the therapist is to assume a neutral, but authentic stance where a client can express him or herself freely and openly receive the therapist's interpretation of past events and their relation to present challenges (Gabbard, 2010).

### **Intersubjectivity and *Inside Out***

Intersubjectivity in practice derives from psychodynamic understandings. Instead of drive theories, it suggests that problematic human experiences are due to unmet expectations and fears learned in early childhood (Buirski and Haglund, 2009). A therapist practicing under this theory views all of the client's actions as a striving for health, and attempts to remain "flexible, fallible, and uncertain" in therapy sessions (Buirski & Haglund, 2009, p. 47). The method encourages a "listening stance" from clinicians, and to view the client as a whole person, rather than a collection of broken pieces, with each piece needing to be fixed by a specific treatment strategy (Buirski & Haglund, 2009).

With an emphasis on listening, it may at first seem atypical for a therapist to integrate something like a film into the work. Through cinematherapy, however, *Inside Out* can still provide a resource for the Intersubjective therapist. Buirski and Haglund (2009) suggest that the process of using metaphor in therapy can strengthen the therapeutic bond and create new meanings for clients: a crucial step in rapport building. The use of popular culture to illustrate psychodynamic ideas with clients is documented in the literature (see, e.g., Lake, 2003, Noctor,

2006, and Noel-Smith, 2001). Via metaphor, dynamic theory can utilize popular culture references in order to deepen discussion even with guarded clients. *Inside Out* contains metaphorical potential that can be utilized similarly.

*Organizing principles* are a key concept in Intersubjective work. Organizing principles represent how an individual has structured or made sense of his or her life experiences with others, in relation to how the individual understands him or herself and provide building blocks of the individual's personality. (Buirski & Haglund, 2009; Stolorow & Atwood, 1984). Part of Intersubjectivity's conceptualization and practice is to understand and illuminate a client's problematic organizing principles in order to deepen understanding about how to remedy distress (Buirski & Haglund, 2009).

Riley's significant early experiences are symbolized in the film as core memories: small orbs that glow brighter and are stored separately from her everyday memories. This metaphor can be helpful in illustrating to clients the centrality of early experiences and memories to current functioning. The core memories are a symbolic representation of how Riley has organized her world; they build the Islands of Personality, which in turn help Riley respond to different situations (Rivera & Docter, 2015). Riley's emotions use these core memories to help guide her towards ideas believed to bring her success. When things happen to Riley, the islands become animated, and the emotions respond with relief, knowing that Riley's actions are in line with previous experiences. In an early scene, Riley's parents send her to school and act like monkeys; the audience sees that Goofball Island reacts, and Joy notes with relief that "goofball is up and running" (Rivera & Docter, 2015). When things become bleak midway through the narrative, the islands begin to disintegrate and fall away, and the emotions become panicked as they scramble to respond to new experiences without the guidance of personality islands. Despite criticism of

these narrative devices as simplistic (Judd, 2015), conceptually connecting the Islands of Personality to organizing principles allows for a clinical discussion with clients of all ages. Throughout the movie, the level of crisis is gleaned from how much each of the islands has “gone dark” or stopped working (Rivera & Docter, 2015). When the core memories are gone, Riley’s mind literally starts to fall apart. Helping clients articulate similar complex feelings may be a way to help illuminate their organizing principles.

Depending on the developmental needs of a client, the clinician might discuss what the client’s core memories are, and then help the client understand how these memories might make up Islands of Personality, and the subsequent benefits and challenges of each island. Are the memories mostly happy or mostly sad? Do they have a connection to the client’s current struggles? Perhaps this feeling is connected to a current struggle in the client’s life. The therapist could then use the imagery provided by *Inside Out* to give clients an accessible language from which to discuss their experiences, without the use of clinical jargon. In the film, Riley is presented with exclusively happy core memories, but that is certainly not the case for all people. Perhaps clients who have experienced abuse or neglect have some sad and angry core memories that create equally sad or angry islands. Validating feelings and connecting the current feeling to memories from childhood are central tasks of the intersubjective therapist (Buirski & Haglund, 2009). What is the current feeling reminiscent of? Can it be traced to a specific Island that has gone “offline,” or perhaps a core memory that is less positive than others? Having a dialogue using metaphors from the film can create meaningful shorthand between client and clinician that can allow for therapeutic attunement central to Intersubjective work.

Another element of organizing principles is that they were formed as an effort towards health, but have become maladaptive for the individual in some way (Buirski & Haglund, 2009).

Riley's Islands of Personality were formed in attachment efforts: her parents feature prominently in almost all of the core memories. However, in her new home, Riley is finding it increasingly difficult to fit these islands into her current paradigm: her family is struggling, her friends don't appreciate her goofball personality, and honesty about how she is feeling threatens her relationship with her parents. A clinician can utilize this parallel in order to help clients understand why previously adaptive behaviors aren't working. For example, a client who is struggling to feel heard at work may find that their supervisors don't appreciate the quiet interpersonal style that was supported by their family. Helping clients understand how their islands are impacting their current struggles may deepen a conversation about how early experiences color their world view. A clinician might even encourage this client to consider how specific core memories and Islands impact their current interpersonal style.

Understanding the Islands of Personality as representations of organizing principles gives a structure to potential therapeutic discussions. However, not all of Riley's organizing principles are represented by Islands. For example, Riley appears to have developed an understanding that being happy leads to acceptance by parents. Riley responds to this idea in many ways during the movie, and ultimately abandons her mother and father to seek happier interactions in Minnesota (Rivera & Doctor, 2015). This provides explanation for clients about why they might choose to engage in otherwise unhealthy behaviors. Riley's decision to run away and return to Minnesota is not an act of adolescent defiance, but rather an attempt to reconnect with a healthy environment (Rivera & Doctor, 2015). The scene is constructed in such a way that audiences understand both the health-seeking intention and the disastrous consequences of her actions; this example is but one that might help build empathy for self and others when working with clients confronted by unfamiliar and distressing choices.



*Attunement* is a key technique in Intersubjective therapy, during which the counselor identifies or helps the client identify the feelings, and in doing so, welcomes that emotion into the space, providing a new relational experience for the client (Buirski, 2007). In the early parts of the film, Riley's parents have many opportunities to attune to her feelings, but miss almost all of them. On the family's first night in their new house, Riley's mother enters her bedroom and, despite the child's look of fear and discomfort with sleeping on the floor in an unfamiliar place, thanks her for being "our happy girl." Inside Riley's head, the emotions have pushed Joy away from the controls since there is "nothing to be happy about," but upon hearing Riley's mom talk about happiness, they quickly welcome Joy back to the helm (Rivera & Doctor, 2015). Riley's mother could have responded to the fear and disgust audiences understand Riley to be experiencing, and demonstrated that new environments are intimidating and scary. However, she does not, and Riley resorts to a happy reaction, facilitated by Joy, in order to maintain her relationship with her mother. One experience of misattunement may not be permanently damaging, but this scene gives the viewer insight into how entrenched the pattern of happiness is within Riley's home. The audience is led to believe that this is not the first time her unpleasant emotions have been deprioritized in favor of happiness. Similar misattunements provide coping skills to alleviate distress and move the individual forward (in this example, Riley is able to fall asleep) but over time can erroneously communicate that only certain feelings are welcome. In Riley's case, if any of the other emotions (Anger, Disgust, Sadness, or Fear) is at the control panel, she is having a "bad day." The therapists' role in an intersubjective treatment is to remedy experiences of habitual misattunement in order to provide a client with a new emotional experience (Buirski & Haglund, 2009). The scene described here, contained within the narrative

of the film, provides an illustration of how painful and (over time) damaging misattunements can be for clients.

The film provides metaphorical proof for attunement. In the final scene, Riley's parents hold her and tell her that they've been missing Minnesota too. Riley cries freely, and finally smiles for the first time in nearly 60 minutes of film time (Rivera & Docter, 2015). The audience is led to believe that her mood, functioning, and relationships with her parents and peers improves following the attunement to her emotional experience: she is later seen playing hockey with new teammates and laughing at her parents' embarrassing antics. A practitioner might discuss this scene with parents struggling with their child, or even use it as a way to illustrate the power of attunement. Alternatively, the scene could be used as a metaphor for what a client desires from a partner or parent.

Overall, an intersubjective practitioner should find *Inside Out* a rich template for discussing universal struggles. The film's writers reinforce key intersubjective concepts of attunement and maladaptive organizing principles. The rich landscape of the movie offers potential to strengthen therapeutic relationships and validate client distress in a new way. Deepening understanding of current relational patterns is a key task in Intersubjectivity, and *Inside Out* offers numerous opportunities to do so with therapy clients.

### **Foundations of ACT**

ACT is a contemporary brand of behavior therapy that belongs to a psychotherapeutic movement that sees *acceptance* and openness to experience as essential to effective living (Hayes, 2004; Walser, Chartier & Sears, 2011). Although consciously based on behavior-analysis and its underlying philosophy, functional contextualism<sup>1</sup>, ACT is a hybrid therapy in

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on both ACT and functional contextualism, please reference the Association for Contextual Behavioral Science webpage at: <https://contextualscience.org/>

terms of approach and technique, bringing together aspects of Zen Buddhism, Gestalt therapy, and humanist-existential thought. ACT is based on the view that human suffering is a fact of life magnified by struggling with events inside the skin (e.g., thoughts, feelings), but differs from traditional psychotherapies in that it does not attempt to change these events and does not view them as a barrier to a better life. From an ACT perspective, normal features of language distort and amplify unpleasant private experiences and tether individuals to unworkable solutions designed to avoid them (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001). In the end, it is *the solution* to private struggles that is the real problem; and that solution entails an agenda to acquire control over them (e.g., avoiding or changing thoughts, reducing unpleasant emotions). The paradox upon which ACT is founded is that only “radical acceptance” of what cannot be changed empowers people to recognize and change the things they can. Thus, ACT works to dismantle language traps and dissolve the “verbal glue” that prevents this radical acceptance and keep people from making *workable* choices for themselves. Through a process that is heavily experientially and pragmatically directed, ACT has the overarching goal of increasing psychological flexibility by helping people (a) abandon useless change agendas in the area of private experience where control and choice is not experienced, (b) willfully experience their own experience and be who they experience themselves to be, (c) observe their thoughts for what they really are, not what they say or say they are, (d) make contact with a transcendent sense of self, and (e) commit fully to idiosyncratic values in the domain of activities, where choice and control is possible. This process is reflected by six, mutually facilitative sub-processes that are heuristically modeled in the ACT “hexaflex” (Hayes & Smith, 2005): acceptance, defusion, present moment, self-as-context, values, committed action.

**ACT and *Inside Out***

Values are a key sub-process of ACT, which differ from goals in that they are never finalized but represent important directions in life (Hayes, 2004). *Inside Out* provides visual and concrete examples of values in the form of the Islands of Personality. These Islands were previously discussed as metaphor for dynamic Organizing Principles, but they can also be understood as representations of Riley's values. For example, family and honesty matter greatly to Riley, as is represented by her Family and Honesty Islands, themselves created through crucial life experiences whose memories crystalize into these core values. They are not simply goals but represent ongoing, important actions (i.e., she must continually strive to be honest to nurture relationships with her family; it is not enough to tell the truth once).

ACT posits that committed action in line with one's values is appetitive, while behaving in discordance with values is aversive (i.e., likely to occasion pain and suffering). In the film, the appetitive functions of Riley's behavior in relation to important values (family, honesty, friends, and so on) gradually fade and are eventually lost (the Islands "go dark"). Audiences observe Riley's usual "happy girl" persona replaced by a sour, apathetic and irritable disposition, as she confronts new experiences that challenge her existing value system. An excellent example of this transition is shown when Riley steals a credit card from her mother's purse, which is contrary to her value of being honest. In using the film therapeutically, an ACT practitioner might point out the psychological cost of behaving at odds with one's Islands of Personality (i.e. values) to help a client gain some clarity about what is really important to him or her (e.g., being honest or dishonest). Also important in this process would be identifying specific barriers that stand in the way of living a life consistent with personal values; in other words, events or relationships that threaten the client's Islands.

Although barriers to valued living are sometimes due to external factors (e.g., monetary constraints), or skill or problem-solving deficits, barriers are often internal (viz., emotional and cognitive). As noted above, ACT is built on a pragmatic foundation showing that efforts to control thoughts and feelings, while a seemingly reasonable and socially supported solution to psychological struggle, tend to exacerbate rather than ameliorate them (Hayes, et al., 1999). Thus, ACT emphasizes the functional dual sub-processes of acceptance and defusion in relation to private experience, which are both about undermining excessive literality and “letting go” in order to help clients “actively experience events as they are, and not as what they say they are” (Hayes, 2004, p. 656). The relevance of acceptance is readily apparent in *Inside Out*. A central theme of the movie is to ensure that Riley is happy and never sad. When Sadness comes into Riley’s experience early in the movie, she is shooed away or reprimanded by Joy that she does not want her near Riley, even as Riley’s emotional state worsens. An ACT practitioner would understand the paradoxical effect of fighting with emotions, as illustrated by the well-known ACT metaphor of struggling in quicksand. By the end of the movie it becomes clear that acceptance of sadness actually has adaptive functions for both Riley and her parents, leading to a tender (present) moment of connection and understanding.

Similarly, acceptance is central to another main plot of the film concerning the absence of Joy and Sadness from headquarters. In the scenes directly following their disappearance, audiences witness Anger, Disgust, and Fear fail miserably at trying to “be Joy” (Rivera & Docter, 2015) and in so doing, make matters worse for Riley who at the dinner table reacts sarcastically to her parents desire for her to be happy. Had the emotions and her parents simply allowed Riley her feelings instead of battling for her happiness, perhaps the “big idea” to run away would not have occurred, although this certainly would have made for a less than exciting

storyline! In this case, what would be bad for Hollywood might be helpful to real-life clients. To a client familiar with the film, an ACT clinician might underscore the costs of experiential avoidance (or non-acceptance) and pose the question: “Have you ever considered what would have happened if Riley had not fought against the move or if her parents had instead accepted and validated what she was feeling?” Solomon (2010) pointed out that “paradoxical healing” can occur in not doing what others are observed to ineffectively do with their struggles. ACT provides a platform to help deepen a client’s perceptions and apply such paradoxical lessons to his or her own life.

*Inside Out* also offers plenty of opportunities to deal with problems related to excessive literally, which colloquially means “buying into what thoughts are saying.” Relational Frame Theory (RFT), a key theory underlying ACT, describes how humans can come to literally believe their thoughts, often by indirect means (for a basic yet comprehensive introduction to RFT, see e.g., Törneke, 2010). A nice example occurs not long after Riley’s family arrives at their new home and her father rushes off to work after taking a phone call from his employer. The emotions inside Riley’s head are initially dumbfounded at this unprecedented development and are unsure how to respond, but their comments in the seconds following suggest they are relating to her father’s leaving as abandonment (Rivera & Docter, 2015). From a RFT perspective, this scene suggests that Riley connects her father’s availability with love and caring for her and derives from his leaving that he no longer does so. Riley’s stake in needing to believe that her parents love and care for her is reflected in her fearful expression and quick suggestion that she and her mother go out for pizza together.

In the initially humorous scene that follows, Riley is aghast—Anger and Disgust have stepped forward—to observe that their pizza is covered in broccoli and she responds by leaving

the pizza parlor in a huff (Rivera & Docter, 2015). Of course, it is possible that Riley's response stems from having previously eaten broccoli and hating it; however, the scene's context suggests that Riley's idea of pizza does not include (i.e., is not coordinated with) the topping of broccoli, but likely more traditional toppings (e.g., pepperoni). Audiences presume it was Minnesota where she enjoyed traditional pizza and, in addition to being a departure from her pre-existing relational frame for pizza, broccoli reminds and exacerbates her aversion to this new San Francisco environment, while compounding a sense of losing what was familiar. An ACT practitioner might ask a client what they imagine Riley might be thinking (e.g., "They didn't put broccoli on pizza in Minnesota!" "I hate it here!" "Everything is going wrong!") Here we observe the power and "stickiness" of words and the ease by which normal language processes can produce suffering. In essence, broccoli pizza becomes "stuck" with the idea of hating a new home and the resulting action is that Riley misses out on lunch. A clinician may suggest that the client's problematic frame is similar to Riley's frame about broccoli, yet instead of missing out on a lunch, the client might be missing out on exciting life experiences. This can also be observed in another scene when Riley is disappointed to see her new bedroom. She responds by brainstorming ways to "spruce it up" (Rivera & Docter, 2015). Joy evokes this strategy because looking at the positives has served Riley well in the past; there is a pre-existing rule (viz., a conditional relational frame) that thinking positively leads to happiness. However, no amount of positive thinking gets Riley what she wants: the moving van is delayed and she is left with Sadness and Anger at the helm.

Unpleasant thoughts and feelings are a natural part life, but often create illusions of being dangerous via the processes described by RFT. The antidote from an ACT perspective is to not challenge these illusions (i.e., try to remove or reduce them), but alter their stimulus functions by

seeing them for what they really are, namely, products of prior conditioning and derived relational responding over which a person is not to blame (Hayes, 2004). ACT encourages this through defusion practices that separate thoughts from their content and through mindfulness practices that allow a person to experience themselves as being different from their thoughts and emotions (i.e., the self as a locus from which all is observed—in other words a transcendent self, or in ACT terminology, the self-as-context). These practices are set up nicely by the story within *Inside Out* and by the movie itself.

For example, in the film's plot, Joy and the rest of the emotions are essentially portrayed as independent functioning entities, separate from Riley, herself, who does not control them even as they happen to be concerned with her welfare by attempting to respond appropriately to environmental cues (e.g., Anger shows up to ensure that Riley is being treated fairly). That Riley is not the same as her emotions is even underscored at the start of the film, where Joy refers to Riley as "our girl." This parallels certain ACT defusion techniques that treat the mind or emotions as separate entities (e.g., as passengers where the client is the bus driver, or having the clients "name" their minds). In addition, many mindfulness exercises in ACT ask clients to simply notice the ebb and flow of different thoughts and feelings, while also noticing that the locus from which they are observed never changes (viz., the self-as-context).

Moreover, the animation of *Inside Out*, which casts typically regarded aversive emotions (fear, sadness, anger, disgust) in the form of cartoon characters, may serve to alter their stimulus functions. Far from being dangerous or threatening, the emotions in *Inside Out* are often funny, even clownish. A common defusion technique in ACT is having clients verbalize difficult thoughts (e.g., I am unlovable, I will never amount to anything) in a cartoon or silly voice. Doing so is often helpful in seeing a thought for what it is and bring distance between the thought and



the person. Also, thanks to marketing efforts by Disney, clinicians can purchase various toys in the form of *Inside Out* characters to have in their offices. The use of props is hardly unprecedented in ACT treatment (Stoddard & Afari, 2014) and a creative practitioner might be able to utilize *Inside Out* toys in imaginative ways to help facilitate defusion in session (e.g., child clients could be given plush soft toy dolls to act out in play therapy). By handing a client a stuffed object shaped like a threatening emotion, a counselor can facilitate a conversation about the symbolism behind the emotion while highlighting its subjective power over the client.

The above examples are, of course, not exhaustive of the possibilities of relating *Inside Out* to ACT, but hopefully illustrate how the film, like various ACT metaphors and exercises, could be used to augment ACT treatment with clients from a wide array of ages and with diverse presenting problems.

### **An Example of Overlap**

Finally, any exploration of the applicability of *Inside Out* should, it seems, include an analysis of the crucial scene between Bing Bong (Riley's forgotten imaginary friend) and Sadness. Multiple non-academic sources make reference to this scene as a critical learning moment, and the interaction between characters here contains direct reference to one of the film's main thematic points: all of our emotions serve a purpose (see, e.g., Langley, 2015; Talarico, 2015; VanDerWerff, 2015; Wolkin, 2015). In the scene, Bing Bong's magical rocket, in which he intended to go to the moon with the younger Riley, is unexpectedly thrown away. Bing Bong sits on the edge of the dump and begins to cry as he mourns the loss of his prized possession. Joy, in an effort to move forward to the train destined to take her and Sadness back to headquarters, tells Bing Bong that, "It's not that bad," and encourages him to avoid his emotions and move forward to the next task. Sadness, seeing Bing Bong's tears, sits beside him and

validates his feeling, telling him, “It is sad” and “You really loved that rocket.” While Bing Bong’s sadness initially increases (he begins to cry harder onto Sadness’ shoulder), he soon steps back, wipes his tears, and (to Joy’s amazement) gets up and takes them to the train (Rivera & Docter, 2015).

The scene contains moments and themes that are applicable to both ACT and Intersubjectivity. In the clip, audiences see Sadness attune to Bing Bong’s emotions, much as an Intersubjective therapist would. The interaction between Sadness and Bing Bong provide an example of attunement in action, and suggest that the act of understanding is validating, and distress can be minimized when a client allows their emotion into the space, rather than avoiding. Audiences and clients alike can draw parallels between this moment in the film and their own lives, as they witness Bing Bong’s healing via the empathic relationship forged in this moment of understanding between him and Sadness.

Through the ACT lens, practitioners may leverage this scene to illustrate a key principle: to move forward in life, one must accept that it will at times be difficult (Hayes, 2004). ACT practitioners attempt to model acceptance of life’s difficulties in an effort to provide space for clients to accept this reality for themselves. Joy’s fruitless efforts in the film illustrate the importance of this idea for audience members and potential clients. When examining the scene between Bing Bong and Sadness through an ACT lens, attention should be drawn to Bing Bong’s continued sniffles as he gets up to find the train; he is not completely done being sad, but is ready to move forward with his feelings, rather than be immobilized by them.

Despite both Intersubjectivity and ACT deriving from historically different theoretical lineages, they both reflect concepts, processes and practices that are illustrated throughout *Inside Out*. Many of the moments in the film can be utilized by practitioners working under either

modality to create potentially powerful therapeutic movement. Surely, if there is such understanding via two very different modalities, practitioners from all backgrounds can find utility in the film.

### **Conclusion and Future Directions**

*Inside Out* offers a unique and unprecedented opportunity for mental health professionals to explore complex themes with therapy clients. Since the late 1900s, therapists have been discussing and directly integrating film and movies into therapeutic work. Cinematherapy has little empirical backing but strong anecdotal evidence. A key element is the use of metaphor to help clients deepen their understanding of themselves and their presenting issues. *Inside Out* is a film based in psychological research, and offers the unique opportunity to discuss topics related to emotional experience in a direct manner. Despite its seemingly direct applicability to therapeutic work, few resources are available to discuss its use. Due to their significant differences, modern psychodynamic and behavioral theories were provided as guidelines for using this film in therapeutic work. Multiple examples of how to integrate the film's action and characters into therapy are provided under both schools of thought, indicating there is likely widespread utility to the film across all therapeutic modalities. Future writers may choose to examine the film via other models, to broaden its utility across the psychological field.

In addition, empirical backing for using film in therapy is lacking. Future directions for this project would be to create empirical evidence for the use of *Inside Out* as a therapeutic tool. A study designed to test *Inside Out*'s utility as a tool with specific clinical issues (e.g., Major Depressive Disorder, Adjustment Disorder) would greatly strengthen its utility as a psychological tool. To date, no film with such direct commentary on emotional and interpersonal functioning has been studied using evidence-based techniques. Perhaps even before a large-scale

research project, future directions could include the opportunity to simply integrate these conversations with clients and document outcomes via case study or single-subject design, similar to what Powell and Newgent (2010) have provided with *Lord of the Rings*.

Overall, the film offers a rich metaphorical backdrop for clinicians to apply with clients. Other uses for specific scenes or characters is certainly possible, and should be explored. The film's applicability to two different psychological perspectives proves its potential to create meaningful change with clients across theoretical understandings, and presents a novel chance for clinicians to integrate cinematherapy techniques into work with clients.

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