Exploring the relationship between psychological flexibility and self-report and task-based measures of cognitive flexibility

Abstract

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) interventions aim to increase psychological flexibility (PF) leading to positive treatment outcomes. It has been suggested that successful development of PF may depend on cognitive flexibility (CF), however there is a lack of clear empirical evidence accounting for the relationship between the two constructs. The current study investigated the relationship between PF and CF in a large nonclinical sample of younger adults (*N*=246). Participants completed self-report measures of PF, and both self-report and task-based measures of CF. Results indicated that self-report, but not task-based, CF correlated with and predicted PF (*r*= -.49, 95% BCa CI [-.58, -.38], R^2 = .236). The results are discussed with reference to rule-governed behaviour, approaches to measurement and ACT, with suggestions for future research.

1. Introduction

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes et al., 1999) is a contextual behavioural therapy which aims to increase psychological flexibility (PF) as the mechanism of change mediating treatment outcomes, distinguishing it from therapies which focus on symptom reduction (Hayes et al., 2006, 2011). Psychological flexibility (PF) is defined as non-judgemental acceptance of all psychological events, even if uncomfortable, with contact to the present moment and continued engagement in meaningful behaviours (Hayes et al., 2006).

The ACT model is underpinned by Relational Frame Theory (RFT). RFT provides a behaviour analytic account of language, complex cognition, and human psychological suffering based on human verbal abilities to relate stimuli and events through arbitrary relational cues not dependent on physical or formal properties of the stimuli, a concept and process referred to as arbitrarily applicable relational responding (AARR) (Dymond et al., 2017; Hayes et al., 2001; Hughes & Barnes-Holmes, 2016). While AARR and related rule-governed behaviour (RGB) offer the essential advantages of allowing humans to set and achieve goals, anticipate consequences and learn through the experience of others, RGB carries with it the risk of becoming trapped in rigid patterns, leading to human psychological suffering (Hayes et al., 1986, 1999; McAuliffe et al., 2014; Monestès et al., 2014). Verbal rules may override changing contingencies in the environment, leading to cognitive fusion and generalized pliance ('verbal dominance over behavioral regulation to the exclusion of other sources of stimulus control' and 'domination of rules followed to avoid social criticism or achieve social approval' respectively, (Hayes et al., 2013, pp. 183-186), reduced sensitivity to other sources of reinforcement (insensitivity to contingencies) and the potential for psychological problems (Hayes et al., 1986; Ruiz et al., 2019; Törneke et al.,

2008). Interventions targeting problematic RGB, such as cognitive defusion, can promote psychological flexibility by viewing thoughts as events created by the mind rather than literal truths, featuring in ACT protocols when ineffective RGB acts as a barrier to living a meaningful life (Hayes et al., 1999). Such protocols can reduce the power of verbal rules, allowing behaviour to move increasingly under control of changing contingencies and values (Hayes et al., 1999). RFT defusion protocols train deictic and hierarchical relational frames, framing ongoing behaviour as 'only part of me', to reduce its discriminative functions and derive new appetitive augmental rules, behaving according to changing contingencies and values (Gil-Luciano et al., 2017; Luciano et al., 2012; Törneke et al., 2015).

The ACT model of human suffering is defined by psychological *in*flexibility (PI), involving rigid behavioural responses driven by private events such as thoughts, feelings and urges, rather than values (Hayes et al., 2006; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010; Stabbe et al., 2019). Generalised pliance has been implicated in PI, leading to experiential avoidance (Luciano et al., 2012; Ruiz et al., 2019; Törneke et al., 2015). PI has been proposed as a transdiagnostic process involved in the development and maintenance of psychopathology (Boulanger et al., 2010; Levin et al., 2014). Consequently, promoting PF, a cornerstone of health and wellbeing (Gloster et al., 2017; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010), is the target of ACT interventions.

Due to the centrality of PF in ACT treatment models, there is an imperative to gain complete understanding of the PF construct. The suggestion that executive function forms the basis for PF (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010) highlights one potential route to further investigate PF. Similar to PI, executive function impairment is prevalent across mental disorders and has been proposed as a transdiagnostic process linked to psychopathology

(Buckholtz & Meyer-Lindenberg, 2012; Goschke, 2014; Mathews & MacLeod, 2005; McTeague et al., 2017).

Executive functions are typically defined in neuropsychological terms, referring to higher order cognitive processes modulating lower-level cognitive functions that support abilities including flexible responding in novel situations (Banich, 2009; Diamond, 2013; Miyake et al., 2000). From an RFT perspective, executive function is defined and measured in terms of RGB, with tasks intended to capture abilities involving following or deriving rules, switching rules when necessary, and continuing with a rule in the face of behavioural control conflict (Hayes et al., 1996).

Cognitive flexibility (CF), a component of executive function, is defined as switching mental sets in response to environmental feedback, allowing flexibility in generating alternatives and changing behaviour (Dajani & Uddin, 2015; Rende, 2000). Task-shifting, or set-shifting, behavioural paradigms such as the Wisconsin Card Sorting Task (WCST; Heaton et al., 1993) are commonly used to capture CF. Perseverative errors on the task, representing behaviour maintained according to a pre-existing rule despite receiving negative feedback suggesting that the rule has changed, are indicative of cognitive *in*flexibility. Accordingly, it is suggested that the WCST captures rigid rule following reflecting insensitivity to contingencies, with previous research reporting a strong correlation between generalised pliance and cognitive *in*flexibility using the WCST (O'Connor et al., 2019).

Given the apparent conceptual overlap between PF and CF, including changing behaviour given changing contingencies, and the suggestion that executive function supports PF, the current study sought to investigate the relationship between the two constructs in a nonclinical sample of young adults, anticipating a moderate correlation.

2. Method

2.1 Sample

Participants were recruited from a nonclinical adult population via online posts to the University teaching platform, research platform Survey Circle and Facebook. Sample size was determined a priori using G*Power3 (Faul et al., 2007). To detect bivariate correlation effect size of .30 using a two tailed test, with alpha set to .05, a total of 84 participants were required to achieve 80% power. An effect size of .30 was projected based on a previous study investigating the relationship between PF and components of executive function following acquired brain injury (Whiting et al., 2017).

The total sample size of 250 participants achieved for the study deviated from initial power calculations due to higher than predicted recruitment rates. Participants who reported to be under the age of 18 years were excluded (n = 4), resulting in a final sample size of 246 participants. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants are displayed in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

2.2 Measures

The Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II) (Bond et al., 2011) was used to capture PI. The AAQ-II is a 7-item questionnaire intended to capture the broader construct of PF, targeting multiple core processes of the model (Bond et al., 2011; Hayes et al., 2006). Participants rated items such as 'My painful memories prevent me from having a fulfilling life' on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 'Never True' to 7 'Always True'. Item responses are summed to provide a total score with a theoretical range of 7-49, with higher scores representing greater PI. Previous factor analyses have established a unidimensional structure (Bond et al., 2011; Gloster et al., 2011). Internal consistency has been reported as

adequate (α = .84), with test-retest reliability acceptable at 3 months (α = .81) and 12 months (α = .79)(Bond et al., 2011). In the current sample, internal consistency of the AAQ-II with coefficient omega (McDonald, 1999) was found to be excellent, ω = .91, BCa 95% CI [.89, .93].

The Cognitive Flexibility Scale (CFS) (Martin & Rubin, 1995) is a 12-item measure capturing three elements of self-report CF: the awareness of options to be flexible; willingness to be flexible; and self-efficacy in being flexible. Items including 'I have many possible ways of behaving in any given situation' are rated on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 'Strongly Disagree' to 6 'Strongly Agree'. The summed score of items provides a measure of cognitive flexibility with a theoretical range of 12-72 and with higher scores representing greater CF. The CFS has demonstrated good test-retest reliability (r = .83) over a two-week period (Martin & Rubin, 1995) and a reported one-factor structure (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). Reliability of the CFS in the current sample is reported for positively and negatively worded items separately as method bias appeared to affect dimensionality of the scale. Adequate internal consistency was demonstrated for both positively worded, ω = .83, BCa 95% CI [.78, .87], and negatively worded items, ω = .71, BCa 95% CI [.62, .78]. Reliability of the CFS total score is also adequate (ω = .81, BCa 95% CI [.76, .84]).

The Wisconsin Card Sorting Task (WCST) (Heaton et al., 1993). The WCST was modified and adapted for online completion, providing a task-based measure of CF. Participants were asked to match a target card with one of four key cards on each trial. The stimuli on each card varied in terms of shape, colour and number. A correct match was made when the target card matched a key card on the dimension according to the current sorting rule (shape, number or colour, see Fig. 1). Participants are told the three possible

rules before the task begins, learning the correct sorting rule through trial-and-error feedback.

Which card does this one match with?
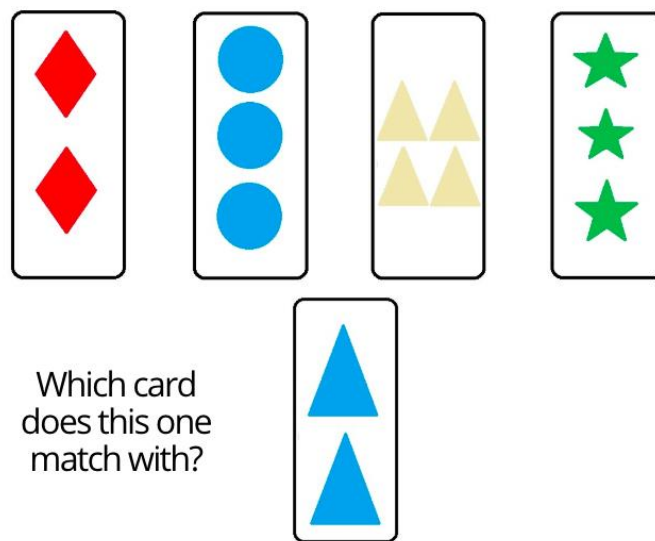
Figure 1. Card sorting task protocol

Due to inconsistencies in the literature regarding how WCST errors are defined and scored, responses on the current modified card sorting task were scored according to narrowly defined criteria described by Godinez and colleagues (2012). WCST error descriptions are displayed in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 here]

2.3 Procedure

The study received ethics committee approval. Participants self-selected via an online recruitment post directing them to the online study hosted on Gorilla Experiment Builder. Participants were presented with participant information and consent form before progressing to demographic questions, self-report measures and WCST. The order of presentation of the self-report measures and WCST were randomised using a Latin square

design. There was no opportunity to leave answers blank or to discontinue the task without withdrawing from the study, therefore there is no missing data. The study was open to participants between 28th May 2020 and 7th July 2020.

2.4 Analysis

The approach to WCST error analysis was guided by CF construct definition in the context of neurological task-based measures; *efficient errors* reflect optimal set-shifting behaviour (Barceló, 1999; Barceló & Knight, 2002), *and perseverative errors* reflect suboptimal set-shifting behaviour. Total errors were also analysed. WCST analysis focused on perseverative errors, commonly reported as the primary indicator of task-based CF (Kercood et al., 2017; Stad et al., 2019).

To mitigate minor violations of normality and outliers identified during data screening, bootstrapped confidence intervals (bias-corrected and accelerated [BCa, CI 95%,]) with 2,000 samples were computed to estimate the accuracy of correlation coefficients (Efron, 1987; Wright et al., 2011). Multiple comparisons were handled by controlling for the false discovery rate (FDR; Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995) at 5%. Age and education are known to affect performance on the WCST (Boone, 1999; Maldonado et al., 2020; Rhodes, 2004), so were controlled for in partial correlations.

2.5 Validity Checks

As the study was conducted online it is possible that some participants did not read task instructions or responded randomly when matching the target card to one of four key cards. High rates of suboptimal performance are reported in healthy research participants on common neuropsychological tests (An et al., 2012; DeRight & Jorgensen, 2015; Ross et al., 2016) indicative of low compliance and suboptimal effort that may threaten the validity of the data. To address this, separate analysis was performed on a subset of participants who

achieved over 60% accuracy on the WCST (*n* = 149). The 60% accuracy threshold has been used previously to exclude participants with poor compliance on cognitive tasks (Hedge et al., 2018).

3. Results

3.1 Bivariate Correlation Analysis

Bivariate correlations with 95% bootstrapped CI (BCa) revealed a significant moderate to strong negative correlation between the AAQ-II and CFS in both the total sample (*r* = -.49, *p* < .001 [-.58, -.38]) and 60% WCST accuracy subset (*r* =-.41, *p* < .001 [-.54, -.27]). Partial correlations controlling for age and education did not alter the coefficient for the 60% WCST accuracy subset and only marginally decreased the coefficient for the total sample (*r* = -.47, *p* < .001 [-.56, -.36]).

All coefficients between the AAQ-II and WCST indices were small and non-significant *(p >* 0.05), demonstrating no meaningful relationship between AAQ-II and WSCT scores.

Small correlations were reported between the CFS and WCST errors in the total sample. Partial correlations between the CFS and total perseverative errors computed to control for age and education did not alter coefficients substantially in the total sample (*r* = -.17, *p* < .01 [-.29, -.04]) or 60% WCST accuracy subset (*r* = -.20, *p* < .05 [-.35, -.02]).

Correlations across all variables are displayed in Table 3 for the total sample, and Table 4 for the 60% WCST accuracy subset.

[Insert Table 3 here]

[Insert Table 4 here]

3.2 Regression Analysis

Linear regression was used to predict AAQ-II from CFS scores in both the total sample and 60% WCST accuracy subset. Results for the total sample indicated that the model explained 23.6% of the variance and was significant, F (1,244) = 75.17, p < .001, R^2 = .236. Self-report CF (CFS scores) predicted PI (AAQ-II scores) (unstandardised $β$ = -.572, p < .001, [-.72, -.43]) (see Fig. 2).
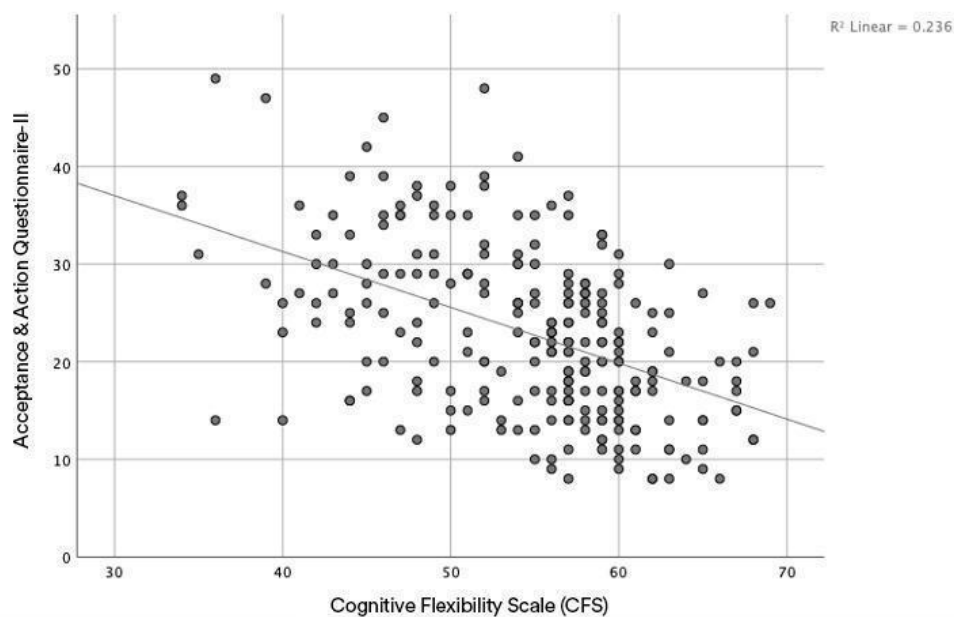
Figure 2. Scatterplot with regression line for the total sample. AAQ-II scores (intended to reflect self-report psychological inflexibility) decrease as self-report cognitive flexibility increases.

Results for the 60% WCST accuracy subset indicated that the model explained 17% of the variance and was significant, F (1,147) = 30.18, p < .001, R^2 = .17; CFS scores predicted AAQ-II scores (unstandardised $β$ = -.509, p < .001, [-.71, -.32]) (see Fig. 3).
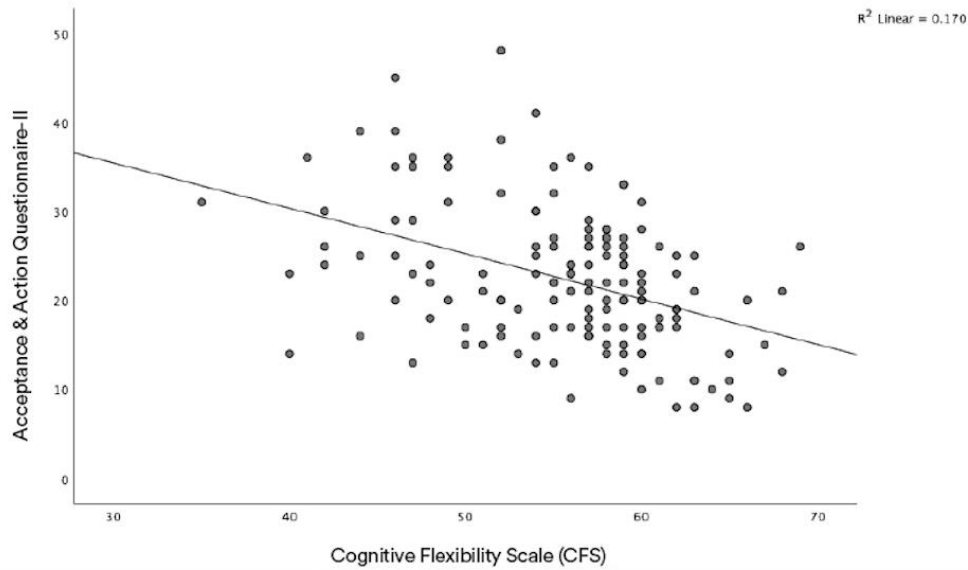
Figure 3. Scatterplot with regression line for the 60% WCST accuracy subset. AAQ-II scores (intended to capture self-report psychological inflexibility) decrease as self-report cognitive flexibility increases.

3.3 Reliabilities of WCST errors in the study sample

Reliabilities of WCST errors in the current total sample were calculated using REL_{EX}, a software tool for reliability sampling for tasks with multiple trials (Steinke & Kopp, 2020). Split-half reliability is estimated by repeatedly sampling random test splits, providing a more precise estimate than a single test split (Kopp et al., 2021; Parsons et al., 2019; Steinke & Kopp, 2020). Reliability coefficients assuming a congeneric measurement model are reported as this has the least restrictive assumptions about the data (Cho, 2016). Split-half reliability sampling using 10,000 iterations are reported in Table 3 using the Angoff-Feldt coefficient (r_{SC}) (Steinke & Kopp, 2020). The most reliable indicators of WCST performance are total errors, traditional perseverative errors and perseverative errors before a correct sort ($r_{SC} \geq .86$).

[Insert Table 5 here]

4. Discussion

To address a paucity in available research exploring the suggestion that CF is a prerequisite for the development of PF (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010; Whiting et al., 2017), the current study investigated the relationship between CF and PI in a nonclinical sample of younger adults using self-report and task-based measures. As anticipated, self-report CF measured using the CFS was a significant, moderate to strong, negative correlate of, and a predictor for, PI measured using the AAQ-II. However, there was no association between task-based CF, measured using the WCST, and either self-report CF or PI according to CFS and AAQ-II scores respectively.

Findings based on self-report measures are consistent with the notion of CF as a component of PF, adding credence to the suggestion that CF may be integral to successful development of PF (Whiting et al., 2017). Studies reporting an association between generalised pliance and both cognitive and psychological *in*flexibility (O'Connor et al., 2019; Ruiz et al., 2019) arguably suggest that RGB may underlie and help explain the relationship between CF and PF, based on dominance of verbal rules and insensitivity to contingencies implicated in both cognitive *in*flexibility and PI. It is worth noting that the task of exploring and explaining the relationship between CF and PI may be complicated by the fact that the processes originate in different theoretical models; the cognitivist view of CF emphasises the role of an internal mediating system, whereas PI developed from an RFT perspective emphasising the functional properties of verbal events, where such events are considered activities rather than products (Gross & Fox, 2009).

The lack of association between task-based CF, measured using the WCST, and self-report CF and PI is not unexpected. Firstly, a distinction between self-report and neuropsychological task-based measures of CF, such as the WCST, is evident in the extant

literature. Different aspects of CF are captured depending on the selected approach, subjective self-report or objective task based. This distinction is supported by evidence demonstrating poor convergent validity between a range of neuropsychological measures and two separate self-report measures of CF, including the CFS (Johnco, Wuthrich & Rapee, 2014) and reports of a lack of association between CFS scores and perseverative errors on the WCST (Kercood et al., 2017). Comparable inconsistencies have also been identified in the wider executive function literature (Toplak et al., 2013). Task-based neuropsychological measures of CF have been described as 'reductionist', capturing optimal performance, whereas self-report measures capture a cumulative appraisal of typical behaviour (Wennerhold & Friese, 2020; Whiting et al., 2017). Findings from the current study indicate that the aspect of CF captured by self-report measures may be most relevant to PF measured using the AAQ-II, and therefore ACT.

4.1. Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of the study's cross sectional correlation design with regards to causal inferences, and reliance on self-report measures, should be considered when interpreting the findings. Future study designs will benefit from longitudinal aspects, with multiple data points enabling predictive conclusions, and should include behavioural measures capturing PF (cf. Gil-Luciano et al., 2017; López-López & Luciano, 2017) to provide insight into the relationship between behavioural task-based and self-report measures of PF.

Finally, despite extensive use as a measure of PF and indicator of ACT effectiveness, the construct validity of the AAQ-II has been questioned. PF is proposed as a process which promotes resilience and wellbeing (Hayes et al., 2006; Kashdan et al., 2020; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). However, studies exploring its psychometric properties suggest that the

AAQ-II is capturing negative affect, psychological distress, or neuroticism, so is measuring the outcome of PI, not the process of values-consistent behaviour in the presence of uncomfortable internal experiences (Rochefort et al., 2018; Tyndall et al., 2019; Wolgast, 2014). Including additional PF measures will allow future studies to gather evidence regarding the validity of the AAQ-II as a measure of PF and help inform interpretation of existing evidence regarding the relationship between PF and CF.

5. Conclusions

The need for an increased understanding of the nature of the relationship between psychological and cognitive flexibility and potential implications for clinical practice have previously been highlighted (Whiting et al., 2017). The study provides evidence for an association between PI, measured using the AAQ-II, and self-report CF, measured using the CFS, with RGB suggested as a possible explanation forming the basis to the association. The lack of association reported between AAQ-II or CFS scores and the WCST supports the assertion that self-report and neuropsychological task-based measures may capture different aspects of CF, leading to different outcomes in studies depending on the approach to measurement. This issue also needs to be explored in relation to PF, with study designs including both self-report and behavioural measures.

From a clinical perspective, findings imply that considering impairments in self-report CF may be valuable in cases of treatment interventions such as ACT, where increased PF is a goal, warranting further investigation.

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Table 1

Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

Sociodemographic Characteristics (*N* = 246)	n	%
Gender		
Female	167	67.9
Male	79	32.1
Ethnicity		
White	194	78.9
Asian/Asian British	31	12.6
Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Groups	11	4.5
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	3	1.2
Arab	3	1.2
Hispanic/Latino	2	0.8
Middle Eastern	1	0.4
Indian	1	0.4
Education Level		
Degree level and above	221	89.8
2+ A-Levels or Equivalent (e.g., NVQ Level 3)	12	4.9
5+ GCSE's or Equivalent (e.g., NVQ Level 2)	6	2.4
1-4 GCSE's or Equivalent (e.g., NVQ Level 1)	3	1.2
Apprenticeship	2	0.8
No Qualifications	3	1.2

Note. N = 246. Participant age range was 18 to 67 years (*M* = 30.18, *SD* = 8.42).

Table 2

Description of WCST Error Scoring Indices

Error Type	Description
Total Errors	Errors made throughout all blocks were scored and summed
Total Perseverative Errors	A participant continued to sort according to the previously correct rule after receiving feedback that the rule had now changed
Perseverative Errors Before Correct Sort	A participant continues to sort according to the previously correct rule after receiving feedback that the rule had now changed, before identifying the new sorting rule
Perseverative Errors After Correct Sort	A participant reverts back to sort according to the previously correct rule after correctly switching to the new rule
Efficient Error	A participant receives negative feedback following a rule change and subsequently switches to the correct rule on the following trial, reflecting optimal shifting behaviour

Table 3

Bivariate correlation coefficients for psychological flexibility and cognitive flexibility for total sample

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age								
2. Education	-.10							
	[-.25, .05]							
3. AAQ-II	-.12	-.08						
	[-.24, .01]	[-.25, .09]						
4. CFS	.26**	.12	-.49**					
	[.15, .36]	[-.03, .26]	[-.58, -.38]					
5. Total Errors	-.14	-.12	.07	-.17*				
	[-.24, .04]	[-.28, .04]	[-.05, .20]	[-.30, -.05]				
6. Total PE	-.15	-.10	.11	-.22*	.86**			
	[-.25, -.04]	[-.27, .05]	[-.01, .23]	[-.33, -.09]	[.83, .89]			
7. PE BCS	-.11	.10	.10	-.18*	.72**	.91**		
	[-.21, .01]	[-.28, .06]	[-.02, .22]	[-.30, -.06]	[.66, .79]	[.86, .94]		
8. PE ACS	-.12	-.04	.04	-.13	.55**	.50**	.09	
	[-.21, -.02]	[-.18, .07]	[-.10, .21]	[-.25, .004]	[.46, .63]	[.37, .62]	[.02, .21]	
9. Efficient errors	.11	.07	-.06	.12	-.82**	-.81**	-.75**	-.38**
	[.01, .23]	[-.05, .19]	[-.18, .06]	[.002, .26]	[-.86, -.77]	[-.84, -.82]	[-.80, -.70]	[-.47, -.30]

Note. Correlation coefficients (2-tailed) are presented for the total sample (*N* = 246). 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals (BCa, 2000 samples) are presented in square brackets. PE = Perseverative error; BCS = Before correct sort; ACS = After correct sort
*Correlations significant at the .01 level, survived controlling the false discovery rate (FDR) at 5%.
**Correlations *p* < .001, survived controlling the false discovery rate (FDR) at 5%

Table 4

Bivariate correlation coefficients for psychological flexibility and cognitive flexibility for 60% WCST accuracy subset

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age								
2. Education	-.19							
	[-.36, .01]							
3. AAQ-II	-.09	.02						
	[-.25, .09]	[-.12, .18]						
4. CFS	.23*	.02	-.41**					
	[.08, .36]	[-.14, .14]	[-.54, -.27]					
5. Total	.15	.05	-.04	.03				
Errors	[.02, .29]	[-.04, .12]	[-.23, .15]	[-.19, .13]				
6. Total PE	.12	.04	.13	-.16	.79**			
	[-.04, .28]	[-.03, .10]	[-.08, .31]	[-.32, .01]	[.73, .85]			
7. PE BCS	.12	.03	.06	-.07	.72**	.90**		
	[-.05, .31]	[-.05, .10]	[-.12, .24]	[-.23, .09]	[.63, .79]	[.84, .93]		
8. PE ACS	.03	.05	.16	-.21*	.40**	.53**	.10	
	[-.11, .18]	[-.06, .14]	[-.02, .33]	[-.36, .05]	[.27, .52]	[.38, .66]	[-.10, 30]	
9. Efficient	-.10	-.04	.03	.02	-.67**	-.74**	-.81**	-.20
errors	[-.24, .05]	[-.12, .05]	[-.12, .18]	[-.14, .18]	[-.76, -.58]	[-.81, -.66]	[-.87, -.74]	[-.29, .05]

Note. Correlation coefficients (2-tailed) are presented for participants who achieved at least 60% accuracy on the WCST (n = 149). 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals (BCa, 2000 samples) are presented in square brackets. PE = Perseverative error; BCS = Before correct sort; ACS = After correct sort
*Correlations significant at the .01 level, survived controlling the false discovery rate (FDR) at 5%.
**Correlations $p < .001$, survived controlling the false discovery rate (FDR) at 5%

Table 5

Reliability of WCST errors types reported for the total study sample

| | Median | 95% HDI | |
		Low	High
Total Errors	.92	.87	.95
Traditional PE	.86	.80	.90
PE (Before Correct Sort)	.87	.80	.91
PE (After Correct Sort)	.73	.63	.80
Efficient Errors	.47	.20	.70

Note. WCST = Wisconsin Card Sorting Task; PE = Perseverative Error; HDI = Highest Density Interval (low = lower limit at 95% credibility; high = higher limit at 95% credibility). Median and HDI of Angoff-Feldt coefficients from 10,000 iterations are reported. Scores from the total sample are reported (N = 246)