

Abstract: How Should We Understand 'The Shoulds'?: Contemporary Psychotherapy and Normative Judgements

As part of its therapeutic intervention, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) targets certain patterns of thoughts that are supposedly associated with particular mental illnesses, as well as mental distress and maladaptive behaviour more broadly. Referred to variously as "cognitive distortions", "thought distortions" or "negative automatic thoughts", it is claimed that these thoughts have various epistemic shortcomings that are in turn associated with negative feelings and unfruitful behaviour.

I consider a particular category of distorted thoughts, referred to as "the shoulds" and argue that they do not fit CBT's broader account of thought distortions as their epistemic issues are not as apparent. "The shoulds" are identified by virtue of particular normative language — such as "should", "ought", "must", "good" — and concern normative judgements such as "I should visit my ill relatives" or "One ought not lie". In addition to CBT being one of the major schools of contemporary psychotherapy, CBT's account of the shoulds can be found in many other schools of therapy; examining the shoulds reveals how contemporary psychotherapy approaches normative judgements and normativity more generally.

Whilst the other distortions identified by CBT appear to involve familiar epistemic failings such as unwarranted patterns of inference, it is difficult to see how normative judgements fail in this manner. I suggest the shoulds are instead best understood as a metacognitive intervention, along the lines of the thought defusion or mindfulness exercises found in the most recent 'third wave' of cognitive therapy. Metacognitive interventions alter the relationship between an individual and their thoughts, rather than challenging the thoughts directly as CBT does on epistemic grounds.