



Client Experience in Psychotherapy: What Heals and What Harms?

by Dr Trish Sherwood

The purpose of this paper is to examine what heals and harms the client in the psychotherapeutic encounter, from the client's perspective. The experience of eight clients was explicated using a model based on Giorgi and Schweitzer. The counselling experienced as healing by clients has at its core a vibrantly warm and honest relationship where the client feels held in the safety of the good heart space of the counsellor. The counsellor is experienced as providing an intense beingness for the client that embraces the client's suffering and provides solid ground created out of the crucible of the counsellor's own encounter with his or her shadow. The counsellor is emptied out of his/her own agenda and provides space for the client's experience. The counsellor can evoke the higher resources of the client. The counselling is experienced as renewing and reconnecting the clients to his/her sense of self, of other and the lifeworld.

The counselling relationship experienced as harming is described as being drained of human presence and transforming power. There is no alive human connection. The counsellor is experienced as insubstantial, and has no ability to hold traumatic experience. The counsellor's cold reception to the client's vulnerabilities has the power to shatter, fragment and splinter the client. The counsellor is full of self. This fullness may be ego that manifests as dry intellectualising or playing manipulative games as a substitute for human presence. This may lead the client to terror, sickness and anxiety. The counsellor may be full of their own fears and are experienced by the client as chaotic, avoidant and overwhelmed. Their unavailability leads clients to experience emotional depletion, exhaustion and frustration. The counsellor's self-righteousness, judgement and critical disengagement are experienced by clients as being belittled, condemned and diminished. The therapeutic encounter results in a weakening of the human potential for recovery. Both client and counsellor emerge as lesser human beings, with weakened relationships to self, others and the world.

Introduction

There is a need for more research in counselling and psychotherapy which pays greater attention to the experience, language and understanding of the clients (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Baillie & Corrie, 1990; Pinsof, 1989; Spinelli, 1994). The main approach of empirically based research into client experience, takes the form of multiple choice or Likert-type closed format questions (de Vauss, 1995). Research by Lewis, Epperson and

Foley (1989), Saltzman, Luetgert, Roth, Ceaser and Howard (1976), Scott and Freeman (1992), Strupp, Fox and Lessler (1969) and Warner (1996) also demonstrate this approach. The post-positivists attempt to avoid the use of predefined concepts of experience. Rennie (1990) uses grounded theory methodology to analyse dialogues of client experience. Ethnographers such as Kuehl, Newfield and Joanning (1990), O'Connor, Meakes and Pickering (1997), Sells,

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Smith and Moon (1996) and Smith, Yoshioka and Winton (1993) all use open format questions. Kuehl et al. (1990), Sells et al. (1996) and Smith et al. (1993) incorporate a form of content or discourse analysis to identify emergent themes and categories among the words people use to describe their counselling experiences.

The majority of research completed on client experience has used one of the aforementioned paradigms. Phenomenological approaches have been few and this is regretful given that phenomenology is particularly appropriate in explicating the depth and meaning of client experience. Phenomenology is an exploration of the essence of lived experience which Van Manen (1990:9) states, "is the study of the life-world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualise, categorise and reflect on it". Phenomenology has the potential to reveal client experience in its rich immediacy and vibrancy. Drier (1993) and Giorgi (1985) go further to state that the content of the phenomenological method is the data of experience, its meaning for the subject, and most importantly the essence of the experience. This approach views clients as experts in their own experiences, and the meanings they place upon those experiences (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Van Manen, 1990.) Moustakas (1994:60) notes that the applicability of the phenomenological method to such research is evident by "the wholeness of the approach which aims at examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved". The phenomenological approach is applied in this research to explicate the experience of the client in psychotherapy in terms of what heals and what harms.

METHODOLOGY

Participant Group Composition

Participants were resident in the South West of Western Australia and were selected on the basis of the following criteria. Participants had experience as clients of at least 5 counselling or psychotherapy sessions but were not currently in therapy. They were over 21 years of age. The counselling or psychotherapy attended must have been completed six months or more prior to the research. The group consisted of two males and six females, with an age range of 38 to 51 years, and a mean age of 42.75 years. Two participants had formal religious affiliation. Four described themselves as spiritual but not religious, the remaining two declined to comment on their belief system. The therapeutic services experienced by the participant group included a variety of different modalities. These were Humanistic, Gestalt, Cognitive/behavioural, body/mind based therapies of Rebirthing, Psychodrama and Philophonetics. Philophonetics was developed by Yehuda Tagar (2000) and is an innovative contemporary Australian modality of psychotherapy. There was no a priori selection around modality. The focus of the research was on the experience of the therapy.

Participants signed informed consent documents and were notified that involvement in the project was on a voluntary basis and that all data collected would be treated confidentially. If the interview process invoked any anxiety, follow-up professional counselling was offered to the participants. None of the participants requested follow-up counselling during or after the research process. The clients' responses have been coded under pseudonyms as follows: client 1 : Mary, client 2 : Rhonda, client 3: Julie, client 4: Rani, client 5: Bob, client 6: Paula, client 7: Victor, client 8: Tina.

Responses

The participant's description of their experience of counselling or psychotherapy was audio-taped

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and later transcribed. Each participant spent two sessions with the interviewing researcher. The first session was to establish rapport, outline the questions to the participant and commence the interview process. The second interview, conducted after a one-week interval, involved in depth conversation focused around the following questions:

1/ recount your experience of the counselling process,

2/ did the counsellor influence your experience of counselling? If so how?

3/ what aspects of the counselling process do you think were most beneficial to you and

which aspects least beneficial to you? and;

4/ is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of the counselling?

Explication of Responses

Ascribing to the phenomenological method applied by Giorgi (1975) and Schweitzer (1984), the meaning structures of the client's experience were explicated. The explication process involves six separate identifiable stages, moving from idiographic to nomothetic.

Stage 1. Intuitive/holistic understanding of the raw data

The first stage involved reading the transcribed interviews repeatedly if necessary, to achieve a holistic and intuitive understanding of the meanings attributed to the phenomena. From the outset of the research process, all preconceptions and judgements were bracketed. As both a researcher and psychotherapist this involved considerable reflexivity on the understandings that I already hold, which enabled me to bring a

high level of consciousness to the bracketing process.

Stage 2. Forming a constituent profile

This stage involved the construction of a constituent profile, which summarises the raw data from each participant. A set of natural meaning units, or NMUs, are extracted. NMUs are self-definable, discrete segments of expression of individual aspects of the participant's experience. The purpose expressed in each of the extracted NMUs is reduced to central themes. Central themes express the meaning concisely, whilst maintaining the original mode of expression. Central themes reduce the NMUs to recognisable sentences conveying a discrete expression of experience. Finally, central themes that are repeated are distilled to a single theme. Central themes are then re-ordered to provide greater coherence of the data. The subsequent reconstituted list of central themes provides a non-repetitive list of descriptive meaning statements for each participant, which is termed the constituent profile.

Stage 3. Forming a thematic index

Constituent profiles of each participant are used as a basis to construct a 'thematic index', which highlights major themes that have emerged. The 'thematic index' enables the data to be moved from an idiographic level to a nomothetic level. Additionally, the 'thematic index' establishes a referent system that allows any emergent themes to be easily accessed. The delineated meaning units of each constituent profile are combined and re-ordered into one list of emergent themes. Constituent profiles are searched for referents that are extracted and listed separately. Referents are specific words that highlight the meaning of the experience being researched. The thematic index establishes a non-repetitive, sequenced list of meaning statements and referents used to search for interpretative themes. The thematic

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index contains the constituent profile statements attributed to singular meanings of experience. In each case the referent that emphasises the meaning being portrayed is identified as a key for any subsequent searches. From this point on the data is examined collectively.

Stage 4. Searching the thematic index

This enables the comparison of referents, central themes and constituent profile to form a set of interpretative themes. Interpretative themes are statements that succinctly capture the meanings portrayed through the constituent profiles, and do not necessarily retain the original mode of expression. Using the referents as a key, the constituent profiles and central themes are searched to explicate interpretative themes, which enable the formation of the extended description. In this study a 'search' command, within word processing software, was used to find referents in sentences within the central themes and constituent profile. The sentences matching the referents are grouped under the relevant referents. The grouped referents and sentences are then individually explored and assigned to a developed interpretative theme. During the overlap search interpretative themes that have been identified are also examined for their relationship to each other within the context which they have been used in the constituent profiles and central themes.

Stage 5. Arriving at an extended description

Interpretative themes are used to rigorously explicate meaning attributed to the phenomena under investigation.

Stage 6. Synthesis of extended description

This is a summary of the interpretative themes to produce an in-depth picture of clients' experience of the counselling process.

Findings

The themes of psychotherapy reported as being healing will be clustered under the following embracing interpretative themes:

1. Clients desire the counsellor to facilitate with safety the opening up of deep layers of the clients' experience
2. Clients desire to experience an honest and authentic encounter with the counsellor
3. Clients require focus of session to be on their agenda so that they feel empowered and fully respected by the counsellor
4. Clients need to experience the therapeutic encounter as contributing to their ongoing personal development.

The four corresponding interpretative themes of psychotherapy experienced as harming are:

1. Clients experience counsellor as abandoning them in threatening experiences
2. Clients experience counsellor as acting inauthentically.
3. Clients feel that they are "hijacked" by the counsellor's personal agenda
4. Clients experience the therapeutic encounter as undermining their esteem and weakening their coping skills.

The Client's Experience of Healing in the Psychotherapeutic Encounter

1. Clients desire the counsellor to facilitate with safety the opening up of deep layers of the client's experience

This interpretative theme includes the cluster of themes of providing a supportive, comfortable atmosphere, and experiencing an accepting counsellor who makes them feel valued. It

includes experiencing a relationship with a counsellor who is fully present and thus experiencing being seen, heard and fully understood by the counsellor. It involves experiencing the counsellor as promoting a self affirming relationship with one's self and one's experience.

Clients feel safe when they can expose the deep layers of their suffering and feel held by the counsellor. Rani described this as: "I felt held in her heart". In the holding there is an inner comforting that is experienced as soothing touching:

she would sit there, slightly leaning forward and just gaze upon me with a light touch, a light, deep, whole touch. And it was like everything else would just disappear except the sound of my story and the sound of my suffering, and her incredible receptivity and patience. (Rani)

The sense of light being present in the safe space provided by the counsellor and touching the client is acknowledged as most helpful. Mary describes it as :

a place of light. Even though it was only one person there was some help there. I had this sense of lightness, being there and of light being present so there was a sense of hope.

In the space of the client exposing deep layers of pain, clients want to experience the space as a completely sealed place free from intrusions. The space is created and sustained by the counsellor through complete attention and focus on the client. It is a place without leaky windows or holes in the walls, an inner room sustained by the counsellor and totally consecrated to providing an accepting and undisturbed focus for the client's deepest pain. For clients there is the quality of an "impenetrable space" where one can expose ones most vulnerable self without the demands and pressures of daily "normal" life. Mary describes this quality:

I could go into this timeless space. And I remember actually having feelings of wanting to stay there because it was like a little unit and we had our counselling session in one room ..and it is as if I could have just stayed there forever and not gone back to my life.

Clients also describe this space as a "heart space" and the space of intimate profoundly concentrated listening on behalf of the counsellor. Rani explains it as:

incredible deep active listening at what felt like a spiritual dimension to me. Wonderful beholding. I sensed that she beheld me at a very deep layer and saw beyond my jargon and terminology into the heart of my suffering.

This quality of presence and of intense beingness, of concentrated energetic availability to client is the gesture clients describe when they say "I want to be supported to open up". The gesture of counsellor safety is of a companion who walks with you protectively. Rani describes this:

it was like a companion would be present. As I think about it I feel like crying. So beautiful. I would feel the sense of a companion who was with me, not ahead of me, not behind me, with me.

Facilitating safely for the client is the gesture of intuitive timing. It requires meeting the client at each place of exposure of the pain with a response that "touches the spot" . Renewed insight provides a sense of healing. Rani describes this as:

What I do remember as being powerful from her was usually at the end (of my speaking) she would just say something in the most simple sincere unaffected humility but it always met me. And it would always be perfect... And I would feel this relief.

Aligned with the experience of the counsellor walking beside, is the clients' needs for the counsellor to provide stability. Stability is

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represented as solid ground they can stand on in the midst of the chaos and turbulence of their deep emotions and fears. Bob describes this quality of the safe relationship:

She was very strong...It was just wonderful having the consistency of her to be there...and it didn't matter how long you took she would be there solidly... you need to know you can rely upon your counsellor.

Clients describe the strong solid reliable experience of a counsellor as the counsellor not being overwhelmed by the clients deep feelings and traumas. The counsellor holds the space in a calm and peaceful way and provides focused listening. Tina captures the essence of the experience of this connection between the safe space and deep inner issues:

The most important thing is to have somebody who is available and holds a safe space...somewhere I feel comfortable enough to explore my issues...someone who listens, someone who is there 100%, They listen with their whole body and soul, with their spirit and their intent and just create with that a place that is safe. .. one feels held and supported. It is a sacred place when somebody can hold a place for you that you can be totally yourself and trust in the process enough that you'll get through...sometimes when you go to counselling into deep issues there's a fear that I actually won't get through it. So to have that sort of safe space is really important.

2. Clients desire to experience an honest authentic encounter with the counsellor

The following cluster of themes are recurrent in the clients' interviews. Firstly, the therapist being experienced for who they really are and not hiding behind qualifications or artificial intellectual power. Secondly, the therapist not acting or playing games with the client. Thirdly, the therapist having insight into his/her own

limitations and own baggage, and maintaining confidentiality. Finally, the therapist not using subtle emotional, sexual, mental or spiritual suggestions in a manipulative way to seduce clients.

Clients speak about wanting to relate to a real person not a "phoney". The experience of realness comes from sensing that the counsellor is also human, understands pain, knows human frailties but in the counselling session can combine that quality of knowing pain and human frailties with stability, centredness and inspiration. Rani describes this experience:

When I'm there, whatever limitations she might have as a human being out in the world, and I've seen her lose the plot a number of times in the association we are both in... but in the counselling session it is like we both still are really human but it is like we are taken onto the higher human level ... its like the divine in me says hello to the divine in her but we're still really human.

Authenticity in the counsellor is the experience of the person being energetically present to the relationship with the client. Rhonda expresses this gesture as:

I would have benefited from someone a bit more dynamic, more personable who was actually taking some responsibility for a therapeutic relationship rather than a faceless tool type of thing... she was like an unknown quality.

Clients describe authenticity as the experience of the counsellor acknowledging his/her essential humanity and the client's "essence" or who they are as an unique human being.

The quality of authenticity includes the experience for clients of expecting confidentiality in the sense of sharing their experiences with a person who is holding them respectfully. It is about trusting the counsellor to uphold the safety

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and secretness of the clients' revelations. At the heart of the gesture of honouring authentically the counselling contract is the client experiencing respect from the counsellor. It's about not gossiping to others or to themselves about the clients' frailties or experiences. Rani aptly captures this place:

even in her (the counsellors) own head I know she's not going "oh God what a load of shit"...she's not gossiping about me even in her own head. I know from my own sickness of gossip and thinking bad about people it is a toxicity. Confidentiality has to do with toxicity for me and I can sense it in a counsellor. It is an inner knowing that the counsellor is upholding the sacred place of non-judgement for the client.

Rani captures the dynamic tension in the authentic encounter between the counsellor being fully present to the client's uniqueness and appropriately drawing on the knowledge of the client's strengths and weaknesses to meet the client needs in a genuine and warm way:

I don't want counsellors to be neutral...I want them to have ethics, values. I don't want them to be blank walls while I sit there and counsel myself...I want them to be fully alive and present to their gifts, genius, personal creativity but I want it to be on the back burner...It's waiting for me to do something, say something...then they take a risk and offer me a picture, a gift, an intervention.

This is the gesture of the counsellor being present to their own knowledge but without the drive of ego to demonstrate what he/she knows. It is a dance of givingness choreographed by the client's needs. It is the wisdom of apprehending what will strengthen the client combined with the humility of accepting that all of one's counselling skills are only relevant in so far as they support the client's relationship with his/her experiences.

3. Clients want the focus of the relationship to be on their agenda so that they feel empowered and fully respected by the counsellor.

The clients experience of directing the pace of the counselling session, of not being pushed by the counsellor, of their own agenda not the counsellors running the session are encompassed by this interpretative theme.

The experience of being held by the counsellor by the client is one which the counsellor builds on something emerging from the client and is the nature of a "joining". The counsellor comes to "to meet" the client without any of his/her own baggage. It is a clear space where the client experiences the counsellor as seeing the client without preconceived worldviews. The counsellor's response brings about flourishing and healing in the clients' experiences because it is experienced as nurturing. Rani describes this meeting as:

a question that came out of what I said...it was never like the questions came out of space. It was not like she had some agenda like she wanted to steer me or expose something I was hiding. It was always a question that would arise like it was the next sentence anyway. It was like offering a gift to me.

Clients want the counsellor's personal life to be contained "to be put on the backburner" so the counsellor can be fully present to create a meeting with the client that transcends the counsellor's own limited ego. The counsellor intimately dances with the client's inner life and needs, always in response to the needs of the client. Rani describes it:

(the counsellor) is full of spiritual attitude. Their cleverness, their genius, their creativity, their individuation is there and it is present, and it is alive but it is waiting. It is waiting for me to do something, to say something, to express

something. Then they take a risk...the risk is they offer me a gift...

When that is absent then the dance of relationship is lost and the counsellor is experienced as disconnected from the client, alone, running their own "content agenda". All the female clients in this sample describe the ideal counsellor as "emptied out" of their own agenda and use images of the gesture of a chalice... "able to receive me" "space to hold me", " to embrace my pain". Rani described the counsellor stance as:

free from personal agenda as ..the only personality I want in the room with me when I'm counselling is the inspired and intuitive personality, and warm and loving spiritual personality.

The focus is on responsiveness to the client's story that is the choreography of the dance in the counselling relationship. Clients speak of this as the space of "being respected". It is the place where the client does not feel pushed, led, or judged and where the focus is on the clients' needs.

The counsellor widens perspectives on the presenting problem. The client is offered insights, possibilities and pathways. Tina describes it as :

He focused on my background...the problem became mine to deal with rather than being told how to deal with it.. by looking at my background first I trusted him and I opened up... He guided me instead of saying you've got to do this or that.

A client described the encounter in spiritual terms " a higher presence of myself is called into being...because they put their own life on the back burner and say yes I can see you". The higher presences are described as a spiritual power, a force like God or Buddha.

4. Clients need to experience the therapeutic encounter as relieving their presenting distress and contributing to their ongoing personal development.

The cluster of themes includes experiencing the counsellor as promoting a self affirming relationship with ones experience, experiencing catharsis or down loading of deep emotions, experiencing the counsellor as providing skills for ongoing use, and experiencing the counselling processes providing benefits beyond the therapeutic relationship.

That quality of safe holding by the counsellor of the client's experience facilitates the carthartic experience. Rani describes the value of the counselling relationship that can provide the space for catharsis: " I need to be held safely to sink into deeper layers of experience ...to have revelation, release, catharsis." This carthartic experience has the aspect of uncovering, bringing into the light of knowledge, that which was previously unseen or unknown and the release of dead emotional weight which was burdening the client. Clients refer to this dimension of the carthartic experience as "lifting the weight of the world off their shoulders". It is the process of "unloading excess baggage". This is experienced as reduction in size of the problem. That which loomed huge and overpowering in their lives now feels substantially smaller. Tina describes the experience: "I walked out feeling that the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders. I walked out feeling yeah I'm on the right track".

Clients experience a self affirming relationship when what they conceived of as failure, or suffering in their life, is transformed through the counselling process to produce new insight and awareness into their potential strength. Julie captures the essence of this counselling encounter as: "a living experience to grow.. I was touching a higher sense of myself...it's like a seed". This transformative process empowers clients and profoundly releases their inner life so they no

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longer experience being blocked or "stuck". Paula describes becoming "unstuck" as being able "to breathe". Tina commented: "It was such a relief to see that I had the freedom to feel whatever I wanted". Paula states: "I would leave feeling relieved" Relief includes the following bodily sensations: being able to breathe freely, more deeply, less quickly, feeling comfortable and of feeling lightness and energy in the body.

Clients also want to develop strategies and feel inner changes to cope with their problem. Clients want to accept their experience and their selves in relation to the experience. Paula comments:

I felt the counsellors inner artistry like a real honouring of thing in my life ... (she helped me) see my terrible trauma being given meaning by me and supporting that new meaning with me.

Essentially all clients experience higher levels of self-acceptance and self-esteem at the conclusion of a successful counselling encounter. A consequent valued outcome is increased confidence to deal with the situation both in the present and the future.

As a culmination of the counselling experience clients want personal change and growth in themselves and their lives. Julie describes this:

I was able to get in touch with my anger. Probably in a very real way and get a bit more real. Just in terms of not hiding behind my façade of clowning.

They want increased capacity to deal with their relationship to self, experience, to others and to their relationship to the life-world. Clients want greater insight and abilities to act effectively. Counselling results in personal development when the client experiences support to explore the depths of his/her experiences. Clients value support and effective tools for moving through the trauma and confusion to a place of

perspective and clarity. Paula captures this experience:

(counselling) was very much a growing experience. I then can become responsible for the ongoing-development of whatever help I got... for instance if somebody close to me died again and the counsellor wasn't there to hold my hand, I would be able to cope now.

The Clients' Experience of Harm in the Psychotherapeutic Encounter

1. Clients experience the counsellor as abandoning them in threatening experiences

Here the clients describe the counsellor as cold, detached and disconnected from their suffering: "a colourless person", "a faceless tool type thing", "an unknown quality". The counselling relationship is experienced as inhuman, a relationship characterised by a technique not a person: "the technique was basically who she was" said Mary. She went on to add that "it didn't really touch the spot". Rhonda explained the sense of being unknown by a counsellor with fixed processes: "he was cold and trying to fix me with preconceived ideas of who I am and what my spirit is like but he really did not have a clue who I was." There was "no two way glow" said Julie to mean no light, no warmth, "nothing coming back from the counsellor." All clients experienced this lack of joining and absence of a human presence, as leaving them feeling disconnected and without "warmth". Tina describes this experience of absence of the counsellor's presence as the counsellor as being a room where "the lights are on but nobody is home". There is a body present but no "inner presence to reach to create relationship." Several clients describe this space as "frustrating", like a "lack of real connection" to another person.

Clients experience the counsellor as insubstantial, and unable to provide solid holding for the client during trauma. Mary describes her experience:

I think (the counsellor) lacked reality... a counsellor should be a little more down to earth such that real stuff can emerge...in the end I was left with the overload of everything.

Rani describes the terror arising from the absence of the solid anchored counselling presence:

I have a horrific memory of a session with one of the most obese women I have seen in my life. The minute we mentioned we were in recovery programs for addiction from alcohol and compulsive eating and drugs ...we felt she actually split off. It was a nightmare...the session was just chaotic to the point that if our relationship had not been on the rocks it soon would have been by the end of the session. I am convinced we must have triggered her own stuff... and she just disappeared from the encounter.

Clients experience of a threatening counselling situation is one in which they are "overwhelmed by the pain with no support". Rhonda describes how this affected her physical body: "diarrhoea and nausea every time I went to a session and vomiting on the way home". Overexposure to inner trauma without being given adequate skills or supports by the counsellor is a frequent complaint of the clients who felt harmed by the counsellor. Rhonda describes the terror that led to a nervous breakdown:

When I was at my most fragile...they said they were going off to India for a holiday for 4-5 weeks and couldn't be contacted. I was left vulnerable, fragile, suicidal and absolutely petrified. I felt deserted right in the midst of my problem

Clients experience the counsellors' lack of connected responsiveness to their pain and fragility as abandonment, which is often a trigger for many other traumas. Tina describes how she revealed a whole vulnerable part of her life and the counsellor responded with "we've no time

left" and sent her out. She was in such trauma she could not drive home. Exposing vulnerability without a supportive counsellor relationship is experienced as being harmful to the client.

2. Clients experience counsellor as acting inauthentically

Clients describe their longing for acknowledgment of their feelings not "some phoney, glib intellectual response" or "smart games". Rhonda describes a destructive encounter with a counsellor and his partner who used games to "set her and her husband up":

I felt belittled. I would rather they said to me without the games and the hoo ha. Because my husband was interested in other women, they would say things like "oh there's our daughter outside, you go spend time with her" and they would look at me wanting a response...these were always set up. I never felt that they really knew me. Not the essence of me." The set up games were experienced by the client as "phoney" like being told to bang a stick until I got angry but I didn't feel any better after that ..I just felt really sick.

The client describes the game playing as "unnerving". It made her body shake and tremble with fear and she had to keep going to the toilet because of diarrhoea. She felt fractured and splintered by their mocking of her. She expressed her feeling of "shattering" during the intellectual questions they gave her like "what is the difference between a gate being closed and a gate being open"?. She experienced the game playing as "emotionally exhausting", "totally depleting", "energetically consuming". She experienced this physically as being unable to get out of bed, to dress herself or to eat and she lost weight. The client had a nervous breakdown during the counselling process.

3. Clients feel that they are hijacked by the counsellor's personal agenda

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There were three aspects to being pushed. The first was the clients' sense of the counsellor failing to facilitate the clients' experience of empowerment or control over their problem. "He was pompous...had a massive ego.. I never felt in charge of my own treatment...he was totally in charge". Clients experienced as harmful being told how to solve the problem rather than being led to their own insight through the counselling process. Victor describes his experience as "being directed", "being told to change" "I had no say in the matter". He felt unseen as a person, his views not heard and forced into a corner by the counsellor. He struck back and "fed her a load of shit".

The second dimension was the sense that the counsellor filled the therapeutic space with his or her own needs and projections, rather than maintaining a clear space for the client's work. Victor experienced this as "her own problems filling the space and biasing the session". The counsellor is seen as full of herself, unavailable to the client's experience.

Clients also want to take responsibility for their own pacing in the session. They are critical of counsellors who pushed them in relation to time and pace. Those counsellors who force them to open up too much too quickly, and those counsellors who terminate sessions too quickly when too much was still open and unresolved are experienced as harmful by clients. Clients describe the experience as "damaging" their bodies and their hearts, overexposing, shocking, painful and disorienting. The worst experiences clients describe as "terrifying". Clients describing this terror, experience it in the body as a panic attack, or as an energetic collapse so that simple tasks like driving a vehicle are impossible.

4. Clients experience the therapeutic encounter as undermining their esteem and weakening their coping skills.

Clients mention that feeling judged by the counsellor interferes with their capacity to deal productively with their problems. Judgement was associated with three experiences in relationship to the counsellor. The first was feeling devalued in the sense of feeling dismissed, as though they were unimportant and irrelevant to the counsellor. One client spoke of a "useless" counselling session because right from the start he felt she thought "well you're not worth working with. I was made the bogeyman". The client experiences the judgement as reinforcing his belief that counsellors are "no bloody good". The second experience is of being belittled and is associated with the client feeling like they are being treated like a child instead of an adult. The third experience clients report is being perceived as a failure which intensifies the clients' feelings of inadequacy to cope with problems. Victor describes this as "I was made to feel as if I was bailing out and not wanting to try and save my marriage...I was made into the problem alone and I felt worse". Bob reports the experience of "diminishing" in the sense of feeling "a lesser human being". Rani has the experience of the counsellor "freaking out" at the darkness she presented in the session "the addict in me freaked out the addict in her and it became positively nasty." The experience of the "freaking out" was seeing amid her own chaos and fear, the counsellor as "out of control", "chaotic" and "overwhelmed". The real work of the session was avoided as was the real human encounter. As a consequence the client saw herself as: "dark, shadowy and a failure".

Synthesis: Extended Description

1. Counselling and psychotherapy that heals

The counselling experience most valued by clients is a vibrantly warm and honest relationship where the client feels held in the safety of the good heart space of the counsellor. The counsellor provides an intense beingness and companionship for the client that embraces his/her suffering and provides solid ground on

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which to stand among the emotional maelstrom. This substantial ground is created out of the crucible of the counsellor's own life where he/she has encountered shadows and light and can face without fear or judgement the human demons. The counsellor has transformed these encounters into wisdom. The counsellor is emptied of his/her own agenda and provides a crucible for the client's experience. The counsellor has the feeling space to be fully present to the client and can fully join the client's experience to understand it from the inside. The counsellor is part of the dance of givingness that is choreographed by the client's needs. The counsellor's words and actions are gifts to the client, jewels of new meaning. The counsellor can evoke the higher resources of the client, call forth the strength and new power from the client and plant seeds of new awareness. Out of this I-thou encounter with the counsellor, a third force arises, greater than either person. This force births that which is highest in the client, and it is the midwife of healing. Its child is wisdom. It is a renewal and reconnection to the client's sense of self, of other and the life-world in a way that promises more insightful, richer and flourishing experiences.

2. Counselling and psychotherapy that harms.

A harmful counselling relationship is drained of human presence and transforming power. There is no alive human connection, no two way glow. The counsellor is experienced as insubstantial, with no solidity, no ability to hold traumatic experience or pain. The client meets a cold reception from exposing himself/herself to the counsellor that has the power to shatter, fragment and splinter the client. The counsellor is full of self-concerns and has no space for the client. This fullness may be ego that manifests as dry intellectualising or playing manipulative games as a substitute for human presence in the counsellor. In the client this may lead to terror, and physical symptoms of sickness and anxiety. The counsellor may be full of their own fears and are experienced by the client as unbalanced,

chaotic, avoidant and overwhelmed. Both states in counsellors' unavailability to clients results in clients experiencing emotional depletion, exhaustion and frustration. The counsellor's self-righteousness, judgement and critical disengagement from the clients problems, are experienced by clients as being belittled, condemned and diminished. There is a weak human connection and the therapeutic encounter results in a weakening of the human potential for recovery. Both client and counsellor emerge as lesser human beings, with weakened relationships to self, others and the world.

Discussion

These findings of the centrality of the quality of the client-therapist relationship in determining whether therapy harms or heals have been strongly supported by Spinelli (1994) and Hubble, Duncan and Miller (1999). Spinelli argues that the experience of being is co-constituted between the client and therapist. The therapeutic encounter creates a space where client and therapist are potentially deeply exposed to their own humanity and to each other and to the world.

Four focal points of relationship are identified in this research. These are:

1. clients' experience of self in the relationship,
2. clients' experience of the therapist (the other) in the relationship,
3. clients' experience of self being in relationship with the other being; and
4. clients' experience of relation to the life world, especially in terms of life after therapy

These relationship foci coincide with Dinnage's research (1988) where informants are asked to talk about their experiences of psychotherapy.

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Firstly, clients experience of self in the relationship, centres on the transformation from confusion, self-repression, disempowerment and self-devaluation to clarity, self-empowerment and self-valuing. This research demonstrates that individuals are very conscious of the change in themselves and their relationship with their selves as a result of the therapeutic encounter. They regard an effective encounter as one that promotes their own self-awareness, self-empowerment and consequent self-development. Such findings strongly support Kohlberg's view of counselling cited in Hayes (1991). He argues that counselling can stimulate cognitive and personal development through exploring a progression of ideas in conversation. He maintains that individuals are producers of their own development, but an environment of dialogue and supported problem solving promotes their development.

Secondly, clients' experience of the therapist centres on the need for the therapist to be fully present to the client and empty of their own needs and fears. Research demonstrates that when clients were asked the most helpful aspects of therapy they stated the therapists' respect for their experiences and listening abilities together with their non-judgemental approach were experienced as healing (O'Connor et al 1997).

The experience of being in relation with the being of the therapist was experienced by clients as profoundly transforming and evoking in them their highest human potential for transformation and healing. Clients noted a higher power which resulted from such a deep encounter which made both therapist and client able to transcend limitations and glimpse the highest human potential. Some clients named this power "God."

Finally, clients' insist that the therapeutic encounter must strengthen their ability to relate to their worlds outside of the immediate therapeutic encounter. As a consequence of helpful psychotherapy clients have tools, skills,

insights that lead to ongoing personal development. Clients want responsibility for themselves in the therapeutic process, so that they can better manage their lives. This contrasts with Dreier's (1991) view that many clients give the therapist the responsibility for their therapy and fail to enter into a therapeutic relationship.

There has been little research on client experiences of psychotherapy that harms so the findings presented herein act as indicators of areas to explore. These effects include the disconnection between therapist and client and the shattering impact on the client of the unsupported exposure of his/her vulnerability and trauma. The impact of ego and/or unresolved fears of the counsellor on the client's need for uncluttered emotional holding and the corrosive undermining effects on client esteem of the failed therapeutic encounter call for further research and exploration.

Recommendations

On the basis of this research into the client's experience of psychotherapy that harms and heals the following recommendations for psychotherapeutic practice are made:

1. That counsellors and psychotherapists become aware that the client experiences the absence of an empathetic connected relationship with the therapist as harmful and that therapists prioritise being-in-relationship with the client.
2. That counsellors and psychotherapists provide a relationship and therapeutic process that provides the client with ongoing tools and enhanced skills for encountering being-in-the-world.
3. That counsellors and psychotherapists develop awareness of the shattering effects on the client's sense of self and esteem as a consequence of the client's experience of lack of support from the therapist while exposing serious trauma and vulnerability.

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4. That counsellors and psychotherapists work to process their own issues and to learn to create an uncluttered emotional holding place for the client during the therapeutic encounter so that the client experiences the therapist as available for support rather than traumatised by, or blocking the client's revelations.

About the Author

Dr Trish Sherwood is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Regional Professional Studies at Edith Cowan University's South West Campus in Bunbury, Western Australia.

Dr Sherwood has published in area of health and education using broadly-based qualitative research methodologies. She chairs the Phenomenological Research Group at the South West Campus (Bunbury) of Edith Cowan University. Dr Sherwood has a particular interest in the client's experience of counseling and the Westerner's experience of Buddhism. She has an active clinical practice in psychotherapy.

Her areas of research interest include psychology, social science, Indigenous studies and counseling and psychotherapy.

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