"Good" Verses "Right:" Awareness of Self in Counsellor Training

Honoré France, Department of Educational Psychology,
University of Victoria
Carmen Rodriguez, Indigenous Education, University of Victoria

Abstract:

Training in the field of counselling is meant for sharpening the personal skills of therapists, but it is also there for the trainees' own self-empowerment. Counsellors are continuously exposed to other people's issues and problems, and these intense encounters often have an effect on the helper's own internal health. Therapeutic practitioners need to be aware of how the very issues their clients are struggling with can have an impact on themselves as caregivers. The article offers the example of the "Wounded Healer" to illustrate this dilemma. The case illustration is of a counselling student who has already experienced that her clients have had a romantic attraction to her.

Key Words: Counsellor training, self in therapy, "Wounded Healer" archetype

Virginia Satir wrote extensively about the power of the practitioner's "self" in therapy, and used the metaphor of the self as a musical instrument, in which "…its fine tuning and the ability, experience, sensitivity and creativity of the player will determine how the music will sound" (Satir, 1987, p. 23). While therapists are there to help others, they bring their own strengths and vulnerabilities with them, and these may either enhance their ability to conduct effective therapy or may detract from it.

The Therapeutic Use of Self

Virginia Satir has been quite clear that "...therapist(s) and patient(s) must inevitably impact each other as human beings (l987, p. 19). And she goes on to say that it doesn't matter what the problem is, or what theoretical approach the therapist uses, for the challenge is to ensure that patients are empowered. At the same time, the power they have invested in therapists should not create dependency. At the same time, there needs to be an ensuring that therapists do not vicariously absorb the pain of patients. Maintaining a healthy sense of self is paramount and Satir emphasized:

> "When I am in touch with myself, my feelings, my thoughts, with what I see and hear, I am growing toward becoming a more integrated self. I am more congruent, I am more "whole," and I am able to make greater contact with the other person" (Satir, 1987, p. 23).

What makes the Satir approach especially powerful for helpers is the sense of our intrinsic positive energy that creates a life force of immense personal power which "...pulls and pushes on us – physically, emotionally and spiritually-throughout life"

(Satir, 1987, p. 19). As helpers we learn to empathize and listen to others in an unconditional way that is accepting others as they are, but also a strong energy to help others.

Becoming More Authentic

We can examine the struggles of being authentic ourselves by exploring how we are pulled away from that very presence. Sometimes, we are pulled in two directions - having to choose being a "good person" by doing what society expects, or to follow a deeper call to be true to one's self, which we will refer to as feeling "right." When exploring this dynamic struggle within ourselves, we discover the persona of the "wounded healer." We learn how significant it is that we, as therapists, be trained in becoming more aware of using our "self" in therapy.

Tension of Acting "Good" verses Feeling "Right"

In our actions, decisions, and behaviour we are constantly seeking the age-old quest for love from our family, partners, friends, and in every aspect of our lives. As we seek out our quest for love the primary triad of self, other and context is the basis of our survival instinct. The challenge of being congruent and in touch with self is constant. However, therapists need to balance their professional life and their personal life, which might be summed in trying to act "good" while trying to feel "right." In other words, what is expected of one to do versus what one would like to do (being genuine). There is a cost for everything, either in terms of not fulfilling one's desires or following rules that restrict one's self. For the purpose here, "good" is defined as fulfilling the ideal objective of others (e.g. such as never getting angry because it is not a good thing or keeping everything organized because it is more efficient). "Right" on the other hand, is here defined as doing what one feels is the genuine thing to do to fulfill one's desire or goals (e.g. taking a risk by trying something new or being genuine about one feelings or thoughts – following the heart. By identifying the voices that reminds one of what is right and what is good, people are able to understand the tension of the internal debate and the costs to oneself. Remember that good and right are not necessarily opposites, but that they can be and thus create internal turmoil. In the spirit of Satir, being authentic also means understanding oneself, one's motives, dreams, desires, faults and strengths. In therapy, that means knowing that the therapist role is "…to concentrate on ways in which the use of self can be of positive value in treatment" (Satir, l987, p. 25).

The Wounded Healer Paradigm

A component of understanding one's self is accepting one's faults or areas in which therapists are dealing with their own challenges in everyday life. Yalom (l980) speaks of the therapeutic role in which techniques play an important part, but without being in one's the authentic self, using techniques have little consequence and may even be harmful. Therefore, maintaining one's authentic self is an important ingredient in practicing effective therapy. A unique and expressive way of understanding the use of

self in therapy is looking at the "wounded healer paradigm." It speaks of an internal archetype:

> "... a healer-patient archetype exists and is activated each time a person becomes ill. In their view patients have an inner healer. However, when the intra-psychic or inner healer does not act to heal the patient, the sick person may seek an external healer. Not only does the patient have a hidden inner healer, but also the healer has a hidden inner patient, and the healer and patient frequently cast mutual projections upon each other based on their hidden parts (Miller and Baldwin, l987, pp. 141-142).

The beauty in incorporating the idea of the wounded healer in counsellor training is that every action and every life event has the potential of helping people become more accepting of life's challenges. While therapists are people with a calling to help, they become more enriched when they are accepting of their own faults and can see mistakes as an opportunity to be better human beings. This positive view is in keeping with Satir's idea of authenticity, personal growth and our mutual striving to be better human beings. Thus, "…to be authentic is to be in control or to be the master of self, which brings about a sense of accomplishment" (France, 2002, pp. 55).

Person-Practice Model

The Person-Practice Model developed at the Family Institute of Virginia is a process in clinical training that allows individuals an opportunity to examine themselves:

> "...and teaches them vulnerability, discipline, and freedom within the relationship…[by integrating] intensely personal work on the self with clinical practice" (Aponte, l994, p. 3).

Thus, while trainees learn more about their processes, they also learn more about therapeutic boundaries between clients and therapists. The component of the Person-Practice Model explores: role structure, motivation, courage, awareness, identification, vantage point, vicarious change, and special relationships. According to Aponte and Winter "…the Person-Practice model calls for skillful selection of the context for intervention (Aponte and Winter, 1987, p. 99)."

A number of methods were developed that are used in the Model, which include:

- Discussion of Personal or clinical issues:
- Videotape or audiotape of a clinical session or training presentation:
- Role Play of a clinical issue:
- Live session with patient family or own family

The Making of an Effective Therapist

The motivation to be helpful to other people as a therapist should compel us to become more in touch with our true-ist self. How did we become less than aware of our

true feelings and what made us take on incongruent coping styles? Virginia Satir believed "...we are divine in our origins" (Satir, 1988, p. 338), then used examples of how children learn to become less than they are. As children mature, they grow to fear others, especially other's comments or actions, and these fears not only affect childhood behaviours, but even the way we carry our bodies, even as adults. If a child is berated by his or her parent, the feelings that result in the child carry a bodily action, such as the way the child will physically express hurt or pain, with the hanging of the head or tenseness in the shoulders. After many of these encounters, the child will have this physical expression engrained in the way he or she carries their body.

As therapists, what helps us to overcome these difficult traumas to become helpers of others? According to Shallcross (2012) the recipe for being a good therapist is to never stop asking what it is to be a good therapist. In a wide ranging summary of prominent leaders in the field of counselling psychology, a number of specific attributes were recorded with the following interesting examples:

1. Effective listening is based on sensitivity because if the helper is "...truly a wounded healer, he or she may well go beyond what would be considered exemplary practice because of increased sensitivity and understanding of what it feels like to be hurt and what it takes to heal" (Shallcross, 2012, p. 26);
2. A sense of social consciousness in which one "...makes positive social justice change in their communities" (Shallcross, 2012, p. 27);
3. When a therapist are able to walk their talk, then they are living what they teach others;
4. When a therapist makes a real connection with their clients then "...they can begin to see the potential impact they can have on a person's life" (Shallcross, 2012, p. 29);
5. Therapists who are patient have "...the ability to match the pace of the session to the client and not pre-diagnose or rush to assist in a decision or move it in a specific direction before the client is ready" (Shallcross, 2012, p. 31);
6. Therapy is presented as based on scientific principles from our long history of psychology, but the essence of good therapy is more an art because "...as therapists we are the inheritors and guardians of a timeless wisdom" (Shallcross, 2012, p. 32).

Application of the Person Practice Model: "Good verses Right"

In the counsellor training program at the University of Victoria, exploring the dimensions of self in therapy with a Satir Model is exploring the tension between "good" versus "right" (France, 2012). Using one of the activities of the Person Practice Model , ten counsellor trainees were asked to role-play an issue in their lives that they observed had an impact on how they perform as counsellor-trainees, during class time during the spring and summer of 2012. They used a self dialogue, in which they had to cope with a particular "good verses right" dilemma. For example, an activity or task in which one voice states what is good (that which meets societal-role needs) and then the other voice states what is right (that which meets personal needs). In this process, counsellor trainees were:

- Ask to identify a personal dilemma with the "good verses right" perspective and be prepared to bring it to the group the next week to share it;
- Share a ten minute period about the dilemma, using the soliloquy method, which is similar to the two chair method, but without the dialogue between the two perspectives;
- The group would then share (for 20 minutes) their observations without interpretation. They could focus on any aspect, including body language, nuances, language, and themes in each soliloquy;
- After each trainee shared their soliloquy, the following questions were handed out and participants were asked to bring their written answers to the next training session. The process questions consisted of the following:

    1. Was it easy or difficult to identify these internal discussions of "good versus right"?
    2. Do you find that you either listen to the part we have identified as "right", or the part we have identified as "good"?
    3. Did you notice a pattern in what you do?
    4. In considering the cost of maintaining an inauthentic pattern, what would it take to change the pattern?
    5. In the example that you wrote down on your paper, did you come up with alternative patterns that you could use in your daily life that would be more authentic than the one you have?
    6. When are you going to change the pattern?

- Personally examine how the Good Verses Right dichotomy drives their lives and influences the way they do therapy. Each participant wrote his or her answers to this question in the form of a crucial incident for the trainer (counsellor educator's) feedback. It is stressed to the participants that being authentic is not just following their internal or external drives, but being aware of how these two different processes affect the way they behave and how it might affect their counselling practice.

Case Study: Karen

Karen is a 32-year-old counselling student who presented the issue on personal boundaries in therapy. In her soliloquy presentation, she first presented her good self, that of wanting to build a positive relationship with her clients. However, she was feeling that some of her male clients became romantically attached to her. Thus, she was wondering if she unconsciously did things in her interactions that appeared seductive, thus creating interactional and transference problems. She also shared that in her personal life, both men and women routinely were flirtingly with her in one way or another.

While this way of presenting herself demonstrates her positive characteristics of connecting and being attractive, these same positive characteristics, she wondered, might

be contributing to the transference issues with her male clients. She then role-played this clinical issue, as described in the Practice Training Model, as a way to offer her the opportunity to work through a boundary issue that others in her group could relate too as well. The heart of the "Good Verses Right" approach is a personal examination, with sharing and feedback, on what the trainees tell themselves is the good thing to do. They look for markers such as words like "should" or "ought" that maybe external in origin. Karen shared that her mother had always told her to look her best and act in a positive and friendly way, because that is how you get ahead in life (e.g. "I should always look my best, ensure that people like me, and think well of me as a woman."). Her experience was that her looks counted and in fact, her popularity was enhanced by her attractiveness. In contrast, when self disclosing what she said to herself was the more right thing to do, she said: "I want to be effective, warm, professional and not a shallow person relying on my appearance. So as a therapist, I want to be perceived positively, but also get that wonderful feeling from empowering others."

The group noticed that this statement was preceded with the words "want" or "desire," which is something that is internal in origin. For example, how does the tension manifest itself when you feel the good thing to do is to be liked and be attractive, (which is what is expected of most women in modern society), versus the right thing to do, which is to be warm and professional? For example, "I feel guilt within myself and resentment towards those that comment or seem to be affected by the way I look, even though, I like it too, but this is only a superficial aspect of who I am." In examining how the tension manifests itself when she felt the right thing to do was to be more concrete about her boundaries versus the good thing to do which was to be liked, act in the way her parents taught her and meet the expectations of what it is to be a modern professional woman (e.g. competent and attractive).

She shared a further example, "I feel anger within myself for smiling and acting the way I have been taught and about being successful and I think I have been…but, also I understand that some of these problems I have been experiencing – transference – is the cost." Thus, in looking at her behaviour, she discovered that there was a pattern of making her wishes secondary to others. Is the feedback-sharing part of the Good Verses Right process, she learned that the price for doing what is right was not worth the anger and resentment she felt towards herself after dealing with her clients' transference issues. Thus, her "aha" experience was that this unconscious way of carrying herself was detrimental and she wanted to change the pattern.

In her self analysis, as a result of the feedback and sharing from the group, she considered a number of alternatives, including the following: By smiling less, holding her body in a less provocative manner, using words that were not seductive, and always creating strong boundaries of her role as a therapist, she established a new pattern of being responsible for doing what was right for her, rather than having the guilt and resentment build up that resulted in transference issues and her self esteem as a therapist.

Case Study Application

> "If the therapist can influence therapeutic results negatively through their use of self, then it must be possible to use the self for positive results. The therapist has that power by virtue of her role and status and person. We know that this power can be misused and misdirected. However, the therapist also has the choice to use her power for empower. Because the patient is vulnerable, the therapist can use her power to empower patients towards their own growth" (Satir, l987).

In the case of Karen, her skills and manner of engaging people could be seen as a positive attribute, but it also brought her some problems in dealing with male clients – transference – because of how she had been taught as a women. Her physical attractiveness was an asset, she recognized it, which also the research backs up – physically attractive people are given more recognition and are better liked than those who are not thought of as being attractive - "People judge you on how you look, whether we like it or not" (Tahmincioglu, p. 1, 2007). Karen recognized that the way she presented herself was a positive and a strength, because people naturally liked her, yet this same aspect of her being also interfered in her therapeutic practice. By understanding that her powers as a therapist was a bit flawed, thus, understanding it in terms of the wounded healer paradigm helped her put her dilemma into perspective. Once she was able to utilize the ideas behind Person Practice Model with the Good Verses Right dilemma, she allowed herself to be vulnerable, share the issue, get feedback, and work through her boundary issues.

The group she presented her issue to provide valuable feedback and helped her see how her behaviours, positive and negative, contributed to the way she was perceived. Now, with new information, greater insight, and a better idea of what it means to be authentic, she became a different person, with a more congruent personal pattern and a better sense of her boundaries.

Summary

As Satir has pointed out, as therapists we need to understand our powers in therapy, and by being authentic and constantly working through how we present ourselves, we also possess this internal power of healing ourselves. Thus, the use of self is a potent tool in the therapist's arsenal for empowering others, and the wounds that therapists suffer are also areas for developing strengths that can further the therapy process. The Satir approach is based "…on the notion that we have an inner striving towards fulfillment and that we have the resources to reach our full potential" (Corey, 2013, p. 410).

References

Aponte, H. (l994). How personal can training get? *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 20(1), 1-15.

Aponte, H. & Winter, J. (1987). The person and practice of the therapist: Treatment and training, In M. Baldwin & V. Satir (Editors), *The Use of Self inTherapy,* NY: Haworth Press, pp. 85-111.

Corey, G. (2013). *Theory and Practice of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 9th edition, Belmont, CA: Woodsworth, Brooks-Cole.

France, M.H. (2002). *Nexus: Transpersonal Approach to Groups*, Calgary, AB: Detsilig Enterprises.

France, H. (2012). Conversations with a group of graduate students at the University of Victoria.

Miller, G. & Baldwin, D. (1987). Implications of the wounded-healer paradigm for the use of the self in therapy, In M. Baldwin & V. Satir (Editors), *The Use of Self in Therapy*, NY: Haworth Press, pp. 139-151.

Satir, V. (1987). The therapist Story, in M. Baldwin & V. Satir (Editors), *The Use of Self in Therapy*, NY: Haworth Press, pp. 17-25.

Satir, V. (1988). *New Peoplemaking*, NY: Science and Behavior Books.

Tahmincioglu, E. (2007). "Power of attraction still rules in workplace," March 8, SNBC.

Yalom, I.D. (l980). *Existential psychotherapy*, New York: Basic Books, Inc.