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SCHEMA AS SELF-PREJUDICE

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In the workshops I conduct on cognitive therapy with personality disorders, therapists frequently ask when schema change work should begin and how this shift in focus can be presented to the client. While as therapists we may be working on schemas from the initial sessions (e.g., by focusing on automatic thoughts and behaviors that we believe are most closely linked to core schemas), I do believe there is a shift that occurs when schema work becomes central to the therapy.

In my opinion, this schema work will be most beneficial to the client when certain therapy tasks have already been achieved. I suggest direct schema change methods be introduced after the client can identify feelings, automatic thoughts, behaviors, environmental stressors and physiological changes. In addition, the client should already be able to test out a dysfunctional negative thought and generate an alternative, "more balanced" thought with some shift in emotion when this is done. Depending upon the client, other skills building tasks also may need to be done before schema change becomes central (e.g., developing basic social skills, attaining a working level of trust with the therapist).

Schema work will be more beneficial once these other tasks have been accomplished because: (a) these early therapy tasks help the client become more familiar with the links between thoughts, feelings, and other aspects of their experience (lending new importance to awareness and self-observation); (b) testing out and changing automatic thoughts involves meta learning (e.g., the client learns not all beliefs are true and that there is a payoff for trying out the observational, writing and experimental assignments devised in therapy; and (c) this early work builds skills that can help the client cope with the intense emotions often stirred up by deep schema work; these skills help the client feel safer entering the vulnerable realm reactivated by deep schema memories. Thus, cli-

ent and therapist are better prepared as a team to work on schemas once they have successfully explored feelings and automatic thoughts in a systematic way.

By the time these basics skills have been achieved, the schemas will probably be clear to both therapist and client. For example, the same theme may appear over and over again in thought records, automatic thoughts during the session, and in reactions to day to day events. At this point, therapist and client can collaboratively identify one or more key schemas as core to the client's difficulties.

When this is done, I propose to the client that we begin focusing primarily on this/these belief(s) in the next session. I suggest that we will shift our therapy work, building on skills already attained yet adding new methods as well. Clients are often intrigued and curious about this proposition.

In the next session, after making sure it is still agreeable to the client to talk about things other than that week's events, we begin the schema work. I like to preface this work by explaining schemas to the client (often using a phrase like "core belief") and also by explaining the information processing theory about how schemas are maintained in the face of contradictory evidence. Since this could be a pretty dry topic if not told colorfully, I use one of several metaphors to teach these ideas to the client.

One of my favorite metaphors to teach clients about schemas and information processing theory is to talk with them about prejudice. This metaphor works well with most clients because everyone seems to be familiar with the concept. Rather than just presenting the metaphor, it seems particularly helpful to spend 10 to 30 minutes help-

ing the client develop the metaphor through Socratic questioning:

"Would it be OK with you if we talked for a little while about something other than the topics we've been exploring these last few weeks? ... I'd like to talk with you about prejudice. Do you know what prejudice is? Can you think of someone in your life who has a particular

(Continued on page 2)

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(Continued from page 1)

prejudice against some sort of person where you can see that their prejudice is wrong?" [Note: it is important to pick a prejudice with which the client disagrees; otherwise, the client will not be able to flexibly analyze the distortions engendered by prejudice.]

Once the client has picked a friend/relative and a prejudice, the Socratic questioning proceeds. Suppose a client has picked a friend, Sigmund, with a prejudice that women are inferior to men. The therapist might then say: "Alright, now when Sigmund sees a woman and she is not doing as well as a man at a task, what does he say?" (Client responds in a number of ways -- e.g., "Sigmund points out how women are always deficient.")

Therapist proceeds, "Now, what does Sigmund say when a woman is doing something as well or even better than men -- has this ever happened when you were around Sigmund?" The client is encouraged through a series of Socratic questions to recall specific instances of Sigmund's responses to information discrepant with his belief. If the client is not aware of any examples from real life, therapist and client will speculate on what Sigmund would say.

The questioning about Sigmund should not stop until the client has presented several processes used (in the information processing model) to distort information contrary to an active schema. The most important processes to uncover are distortion, discounting, calling the observation an exception (to the rule) and not noticing (Kathleen Mooney, personal communication, March 6, 1990).

If the client is highly engaged in the process, the therapist can ask next how the client would go about trying to change Sigmund's prejudice. Again, this discussion can be lengthy if client interest in the discussion is high. The more specific the suggestions, the better.

Some clients will point out the necessity of drawing contradictory information to Sigmund's attention. The therapist can make this more specific by asking, "How would you get Sigmund to keep track of this?" Often the idea of a data journal will be proposed by the client. Some clients even consider presenting Sigmund with a continuum idea. Usually client suggestions to change Sigmund's beliefs anticipate schema change methods that will be used in therapy.

After this discussion, the therapist will say, "Why do you think I've been talking with you about prejudice in the week after we discussed your core beliefs?" At this point, most clients have the realization that the therapist may think their core beliefs are a sort of prejudice.

The final task in using this metaphor is to explore with the client if their belief does act like a prejudice. Therapist and client can review examples from the prior

months of therapy when the client distorted, discounted, talked about data as an "exception," or didn't notice relevant information in and outside of the therapy session.

By this time, the therapist has developed enough information with the client that many of the common reactions to schema work can be put into context. If the client says, "Yes, but my belief is true!" the therapist can respond, "Well, that is what Sigmund would say, too. The only way we can find out is to try some of those methods you proposed to test out a prejudice such as keeping a record of the exceptions to your rule."

There also may be discussions of the feelings the client and therapist will have if the belief proves true or false. It is helpful to remind the client that if the belief proves true, the therapist will collaborate to help problem solve this problem in their life just as was done when negative automatic thoughts proved true. Yet if the negative core belief proves not completely true, it may help unburden the client of hopelessness.

This metaphor is only one of many that can be used to teach a client about schemas and the processes that help maintain them. The advantage of using a rich metaphor instead of simple didactic teaching in therapy is that clients may learn and remember what they have learned through this process of active engagement. These types of "collaborative metaphors" are an extension of the process of Socratic questioning and can help clients construct their own learning and change.

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