

Differential Effects of the Two-Chair Experiment and Empathic Reflections at a Conflict Marker

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The differential effects of a Gestalt counseling operation and empathic reflections of feeling on client depth of experiencing, change in awareness, and goal attainment were studied in a counseling analogue. Using four counselors and 16 subjects as their own controls, each of the operations was applied to each subject to facilitate resolution of personally meaningful conflicts. Results showed that depth of experiencing and change in awareness were significantly higher for the subjects following the Gestalt operation. There was no difference in the level of goal attainment following the two operations. The implications for counseling of the change in depth of experiencing and awareness for the subjects, characterized as focusers and normally self-actualized, are discussed.

The use of the Gestalt approach in counseling has been the subject of much interest and recent discussion (Corey, 1977; Covens, 1977; Dye & Hackney, 1975; Kempler, 1973; Passons, 1975). Gestalt counselors, long criticized for the absence of literature in their field, have begun to describe their methods, explaining how and why they believe them to be effective. Most retain Perls's (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951; Perls, 1969) original notion that "awareness per se—by and of itself—can be curative." Yontef (1976), in a review of Gestalt theory, suggests that change does not take place without awareness.

The process of change through awareness is based on Perls's concept of the self. He proposed that the self is a system of responses or contacts of the organism with the environment at any given moment. Dysfunction occurs when a person loses awareness of the self—loses the sense "that it is *I* who am feeling, thinking and doing this" (Perls et al., 1951, p. 235). This unawareness is maintained by restricting the organism's experiencing (Perls et al., 1951; Polster & Polster, 1973). The Gestalt approach aims at deepening a person's experiencing in order

to expand awareness. The task is to experience oneself and become fully aware "in the here and now." This deeper experience and fuller awareness will facilitate the natural processes of need discrimination and need fulfillment that lead to healthy functioning (Perls, 1969).

The two-chair experiment is a Gestalt method used by many counselors to deepen experience and increase awareness. It embodies most of the major principles of the Gestalt approach. The primary purpose of this counseling analogue study was to empirically investigate the effects of the two-chair experiment on clients' depth of experiencing and self-awareness. A complementary objective was to find out whether these changes in awareness and experiencing are related to subsequent behavior change.

Two studies have provided some empirical validation of the two-chair intervention. Bohart (1977) found that Gestalt two-chair role playing was more effective in reducing anger, hostile attitudes, and behavioral aggression than were intellectual analysis or emotional discharge techniques. Greenberg (1975, in press) specifically defined the principles of the two-chair experiment and the points where it is most applicable. These were called "splits." He found that the two-chair procedure at a split led repeatedly in three single cases to significantly deeper levels of experiencing than did empathic responses.

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It was the intention of this study to extend the comparison that was made in the three single cases to a group analogue design to see if the results would hold with a larger sample under more controlled conditions. This practice of a demonstration of effects in a few single-case investigations followed by a group analogue verification study to generalize these results under controlled conditions has been advocated as an important approach in psychological research (Shine, 1975).

It was essential in this study to compare the Gestalt treatment to an alternate treatment that could be expected to produce changes in the variables of interest. Empathic reflections of feeling were chosen as the comparison intervention because one of their purposes is to increase client awareness and experiencing. Empathic reflection of feeling might also be considered a baseline of facilitative counseling (Carkhuff, 1969). This study in no way purported to test the effectiveness of the Gestalt approach over a client-centered or "core conditions" approach. It was performed, rather, to test the suitability of a particular counseling intervention to a particular client problem state. The Gestalt treatment was therefore measured against this baseline to see whether it had a potency above and beyond a minimally facilitative intervention.

To determine if the two-chair technique resulted in deeper levels of experiencing, clients' in-session performances were rated according to the Experiencing Scale (Klein, Mathieu, Gendlin, & Kiesler, 1969). This scale is an operational statement of the construct "depth of experiencing," which refers to

the quality of an individual's experiencing of himself, the extent to which his ongoing, bodily, felt flow of experiencing is the basic datum of his awareness and communications about himself, and the extent to which this inner datum is integral to action and thought. (Klein et al., 1969, p. 1)

Depth of experiencing is regarded as important for all types of therapy that seek to alter the client's level of expressiveness, self-awareness, self-understanding, or self-attitude (Klein et al., 1969). It has consistently been shown to be related to outcome

(Kiesler, 1971; Klein et al., 1969; Orlinsky & Howard, in press).

To examine the effects of the two-chair operation on self-awareness, clients were asked on a postsession questionnaire to report and describe any shifts in awareness that had occurred during the session. This questionnaire was open-ended and subjective in order to explore any changes that might have occurred. The Goal Attainment Scale (Kiresuk & Sherman, 1968) was used to measure self-reported change of behavior. It allows the client to state, before the counseling session, what particular change he or she would like to see in his or her overt and covert behavior during a set period of time.

The following hypotheses were tested in this study:

1. When applied at a split, the two-chair experiment will lead to deeper experiencing than will empathic reflection of feeling.
2. When applied at a split, the two-chair experiment will result in more shifts in awareness than will empathic reflection of feeling.
3. When applied at a split, the two-chair experiment will result in greater reported behavioral change than will empathic reflection of feeling.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were counseling psychology students enrolled in the first year of a master's degree program in a faculty of education. The training program adopted the Carkhuff-Egan model of training (Egan, 1975), and there was no explicit training in Gestalt methods. The subjects were in their 12th week of training and had participated in a peer counseling relationship conducted along the lines of the responsive phase of the Carkhuff-Egan model. They ranged in age from 24 to 50 years, with a mean age of 31 years. All were judged "focusers" or "probable focusers" according to Gendlin's (Gendlin et al., 1968) Focusing Questionnaire. The subjects could be characterized according to the Personal Orientation Inventory as normally self-actualized. No subject showed an unusual profile on this test.

Counselors

Four counselors, three women and one man, with a range of 2-6 years experience, were used in the study. They had all received approximately 50 hours of in-

tensive training in the two-chair technique. Since each counselor had extensive but varied training in empathic responding, one training session was held to establish common criteria of empathic responding. Three of the counselors characterized themselves as predominantly adherents of the Carkhuff approach, while the fourth characterized herself as having a Gestalt orientation.

Measures

The instruments used in this study served four purposes: to describe the subjects, and to measure changes in clients' depth of experiencing, awareness, and post-treatment behavior.

Personal Orientation Inventory (POI). The POI is an inventory for the measurement of self-actualization (Shostrum, 1966). It has grown out of Maslow's conception of the self-actualizing person—a person who functions more fully and lives a more enriched life than does the average person. The POI attempts to measure the values and behavior seen to be of importance in the development of the self-actualizing person.

Focusing Questionnaire. The Focusing Questionnaire (Gendlin et al., 1968), used to characterize the subjects, consists of a set of instructions read to a person directing him or her to carry out various cognitive and affective tasks. This is the focusing experience. A questionnaire is then administered to obtain a subjective description of the experience. Two judges then inspect the postfocusing questionnaire and report that the person focused, probably focused, probably did not focus, or did not focus.

Experiencing Scale. The Experiencing Scale (Klein et al., 1969) evaluates "the quality of a patient's self-involvement in psychotherapy directly from tape-recordings or typewritten of the therapy session" (Klein et al., 1969, p. 1). The scale is a 7-point annotated and anchored rating device.

Various features of the scale make it appropriate for use in this study. The Experiencing Scale is sensitive to shifts in patient involvement, even within a single interview session, making it useful for microscopic process studies (Kiesler, 1973). The literature shows that the Experiencing Scale assesses the quality of the patient's verbal expression independently of the formal characteristics of the therapy interaction (Klein et al., 1969).

Client report. A client report form was administered to each subject after each experimental interview. This was used to gain subjective information on the client's perception of the session. To obtain information on change in awareness, clients were asked, "Did something shift for you in the hour? Perhaps you saw something differently, experienced something freshly, made some discovery." They then marked a 4-point scale: no, uncertain, yes, very definitely. This was followed by, "If so, could you please attempt to point to what you felt happened in whatever way you can." In addition, the client form of the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory was filled out by the client immediately after each session (Barrett-Lennard, 1962). This form was used to measure *client received empathy*, the degree to which the client experiences the therapist as

"knowing" his or her experience. A single score for the average received empathy over the hour is obtained.

Goal Attainment Scale. The Goal Attainment Scale (Kiresuk & Sherman, 1968) was used to measure changes in clients' posttreatment behavior. The client was asked by the experimenter before the session to write down the split he or she wished to work on in that session. Clients were then asked to think of specific covert or overt behaviors that would reflect for them resolution of their split. These behaviors were then ranged on a 5-point scale from 1 (much better than expected) to 5 (much worse than expected). Before the interview and 1 week later the client marked his or her position on the scale.

Treatments

The two-chair experiment is defined as a series of suggestions and observations made by a therapist or facilitator to clearly separate two aspects or partial tendencies of the self process and to facilitate direct communication between these. The purpose of the experiment is to maintain a process of separation and contact between these parts. The following underlying principles are presented as conveying the essential structure of the operation (Greenberg, in press). These principles serve as guides to the counselor's behavior in this operation. The five principles are as follows: (a) *maintenance of a contact boundary*—maintaining clear separation and contact between the partial aspects of the self; (b) *responsibility*—directing clients to use their abilities to respond in accordance with the true nature of their experience; (c) *attending*—directing clients' attention to particular aspects of their present functioning; (d) *heightening*—highlighting aspects of experience by increasing the level of arousal; (e) *expressing*—making actual and specific that which is intellectual or abstract. The alternative treatment was an interview in which the counselor accurately reflected the client's feelings. Accurate empathy of this nature has been described as occurring at five levels (Carkhuff, 1969). In this study counselors were instructed to respond at Level 3 or above. This is considered facilitative, whereas Level 1 and Level 2 responses are considered detrimental.

To increase control in comparing these two treatments, subjects were asked to present a personally significant intrapersonal conflict or "split" at the beginning of each interview. The split has been identified as a marker in the stream of client behavior to which Gestalt counselors often respond by initiating the two-chair procedure. An example of such a split is, "On the one hand I want to be with her, but I'm torn because I know I should stay away from her." The split is formally defined as having four features: part one of the self, part two of the self, a contradiction indicator (e.g., but, yet), and a struggle indicator (e.g., can't, should) (Greenberg, 1975, in press).

Procedure

Subjects were told that the study would be generally focused on the counseling process. They were not

aware of any of the hypotheses or variables under consideration. The subjects were, in addition, not aware of the counselors' orientations, and the authors were not counselors in the study.

In a group setting the focusing exercise and Focusing Questionnaire (Gendlin et al., 1968) were administered to all 21 volunteers. Following this, all volunteers were trained in split presentation. This training consisted of a simple description of the conflict split and the playing of three recorded samples of conflict splits. The subjects were instructed to come to the experimental sessions with a personally meaningful split. They were told that these splits could be different for each session, or two related splits could be used.

From the pool of 21 volunteers, 16 subjects were randomly selected and randomly assigned to counselors. Counselors were assigned a treatment sequence for each of their clients. Each counselor used empathic reflections in the first interview and a two-chair experiment in the second interview with two subjects and reversed the order of presentation for the other two subjects.

Before each counseling session the clients constructed a Goal Attainment Scale suitable for the split they wished to work on in that session. At that time they marked where they were on the scale. The counselor-client pair then proceeded with the first interview. The client presented his or her split, and the counselor began the assigned intervention. Each interview proceeded until the counselor and/or client stopped it. The empathic reflection sessions ranged from 16 to 56 minutes, and the average session was 35 minutes. The two-chair sessions ranged from 10 to 40 minutes, and the average session was 29 minutes. The interviews were tape recorded. Immediately after the interview the client responded to the client report. One week after the first interview, the client marked his or her current position on the Goal Attainment Scale. The entire procedure was then repeated, using the alternative treatment.

Scoring

Scoring occurred in two stages: a check on the intervention, and ratings of the dependent variables.

To ensure that the assigned operation occurred, the tape recordings of the interviews were submitted to raters. Interviews in which empathic reflections were used were rated on the Carkhuff scale (Carkhuff, 1969). Two blind raters listened to three 5-minute segments from each empathic interview, the first 5 minutes, the middle 5 minutes, and the last 5 minutes. Each segment contained one or more counselor responses. The raters gave each segment a rating between 1 and 5 according to the criteria of the Carkhuff scale. The interrater reliability expressed as a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient across the 48 pairs of ratings was .81. The raters agreed absolutely on 46% of the ratings and within a half step of the scale on 98% of the ratings. The three intrasession ratings were then averaged to obtain, for each rater, a mean empathy rating for each session. The two judges' mean ratings were then averaged to obtain a mean empathy rating for each session.

By Carkhuff's (1969) criterion of a facilitative response being a Level 3 or above, it was concluded that

all empathic reflection interviews were at least minimally facilitative. The mean empathy score on all the samples was 3.9. The two-chair technique was rated as occurring or not occurring by two raters trained in the operation. This decision was based on whether or not the counselor intervention satisfied the definition of the procedure. If the assigned operation did not occur, the same operation was applied in a subsequent interview. This repetition of an operation occurred for 2 of the 32 sessions.

Depth of Experiencing Rating

The interviews were broken into 2-minute segments and randomly placed on rating tapes. Two trained raters, blind to the experimental hypothesis, rated the randomized 2-minute segments, assigning each segment a rating from 1 to 7, indicating the client's depth of experiencing as defined by the Experiencing Scale. For each interview the proportion of segments assigned a rating equal to or greater than 5 was calculated.

Level 5 represents a client's presentation and exploration of a personal problem, and Levels 6 and 7 indicate resolution of personally significant issues. These levels were, therefore, selected as criteria for "deeper experiencing" comparisons.

There were 210 segments of two-chair client process, and each rater rated two thirds of the segments. The overlapping third of the segments was used to determine interrater reliability. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was .90; the raters agreed on 50% of the segments, and disagreement was never greater than 1 interval of the scale.

There were 285 segments of client process from the empathic reflection sessions, and each rater rated two thirds of these segments. The overlapping third of the segments was again used to determine interrater reliability. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient for the two raters' ratings of these segments was .83. The raters agreed on 51% of the ratings, and

Table 1
Proportion of Segments With Peak Experiencing ≥ 5

Counselor	Subject	Empathy	Two-chair
1	1	.00	.24
	2	.22	.18
	3	.01	.32
2	4	.45	1.00
	1	.06	.35
	2	.33	.31
3	3	.13	.07
	4	.00	.29
	1	.88	.83
4	2	.16	.17
	3	.00	.25
	4	.23	.20
4	1	.06	.52
	2	.00	.00
	3	.00	.20
	4	.25	.56

there was never a discrepancy of more than 1 interval of the scale.

Results

The proportion of segments with peak depth of experiencing greater than or equal to 5 are presented in Table 1. These proportion scores were passed through an arc sin transformation (Kirk, 1968) to make them appropriate for analysis of variance.

The data were analyzed in a three-way mixed model analysis of variance considering counselor as a random factor, order of counseling presentation as a fixed factor, and counseling intervention as a fixed, repeated factor (Winer, 1971). The means and standard deviations appear in Table 2. Table 3 presents a summary of the analysis of variance for the proportion of segments with peak depth of experiencing greater than or equal to 5.

The analysis of variance revealed that the Counselor \times Counseling Intervention interaction was not significant at the relaxed alpha level ($p = .20$). This interaction was, therefore, combined with the residual term, Counseling Intervention \times Subjects Within Groups (Winer, 1971, pp. 378-384). Using this pooled residual term, counseling intervention was the only significant source of variance ($p < .05$). Inspection of the means reveals that the two-chair procedure led to greater depth of experiencing than did empathic reflections.

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Proportion of Segments ≥ 5 for Empathy and Two-Chair Interventions

Counselor	Order ^a	Empathy		Two-chair	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	1	.335	.163	.590	.580
	2	.005	.007	.280	.057
2	1	.030	.042	.320	.042
	2	.230	.141	.190	.170
3	1	.080	.080	.210	.057
	2	.555	.460	.515	.445
4	1	.030	.368	.260	.042
	2	.125	.255	.380	.177
<i>M</i>		.174		.343	

^a Order 1 = empathy followed by two-chair intervention; Order 2 = two-chair followed by empathy intervention.

Table 3
Analysis of Variance for the Proportion of Segments With Peak Experiencing ≥ 5

Source	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>
Between subjects		15		
Counselor (A)	5.6860	3	.3794	.82
Order (B)	1.1380	1	.2047	.44
A \times B	.2047	3	.2145	.46
Subjects within groups	3.6998	8	.4625	
Within subjects	11.3009	16		
Intervention (C)	2.4090	1	2.4090	5.8048*
B \times C	.1524	1	.1524	.30
A \times B \times C	4.1740	3	1.3914	2.77
C \times Subjects within groups ^a	4.5655	11	.415	

^a Formed by pooling the A \times C Interaction ($F = .36, p < .20$).
* $p < .05$.

The subjective client reports made by all subjects after each interview suggest that the clients felt equally involved in the two-chair and empathic reflection sessions. They all reported feeling "understood" by their counselors and experienced the counselor to be equally empathic in both sessions according to the Client Received Empathy scores on the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory. They stated that the interviews were all "satisfactory" or "very satisfactory." The difference in the sessions, however, lay in the number of reported shifts in awareness. In 12 of the two-chair sessions, clients reported that they "very definitely" had felt a shift in awareness during the session. Only twice was this reported for the empathic reflection sessions.

Using a *t* test for correlated measures (Glass & Stanley, 1970), the difference in the shifts in awareness scores between the two groups was significant at the .01 level. The majority of clients in both treatments reported movement in the direction of "expected" or "much better than expected" results on goal attainment. A *t* test for correlated measures, however, revealed no significant difference between the levels of goal attainment for the two groups.

Discussion

The results support the hypothesis that the two-chair experiment is more effective

than empathic reflection in deepening experiencing and bringing about changes in awareness when the client is working on a split. The two-chair experiment and empathic reflection did not, however, result in significantly different goal attainment 1 week after the session. The effects of the two-chair technique in these sessions are in accord with the position that this Gestalt method leads to deepening of experiencing and increased awareness.

From an inspection of the experiencing scale levels and the tapes of the sessions it appears that clients confronted, directly experienced, and resolved the split more often in the Gestalt hours than in the empathic reflection hours. For a segment to be rated 5 on the Experiencing Scale,

there are two necessary components. First, the speaker must pose or define a problem or proposition about himself (herself) explicitly in terms of feelings . . . Second, he (she) must explore or work with the problem in a personal way . . . Both components, the problem and the elaboration must be present. (Klein et al., 1969, p. 60)

For a segment to be rated 6 on the Experiencing Scale the content must be

a synthesis of readily accessible, newly recognized or more fully realized feelings and experiences to produce personally meaningful structures or to resolve issues. (Klein et al., 1969, p. 61)

Segments with peaks of Levels 5 and 6 occurred more frequently in the Gestalt sessions. Although the Gestalt sessions did not all produce resolutions of the conflict, there was in these hours a higher demand for directly experiencing and confronting the split. This led to a deepening of experiencing and to exploration directed toward resolution.

Depth of experiencing has been repeatedly shown to correlate with varied measures of successful outcome (Orlinsky & Howard, 1978). If counselors can succeed in producing this important process, high-level experiencing, then they are, in effect, bringing about a change that enables clients to engage in counseling in ways that are known to correlate with successful outcome.

A question to be raised at this point is, Do clients only deepen their experience of con-

flict by this method without enhancing their ability to cope with the conflict? This does not appear to be the case with the clients in this analogue. First, depth of experiencing has been shown to be productive process correlating significantly with outcome. Second, the results of this study indicate that the Gestalt sessions led to definite changes in awareness. The changes in awareness that clients reported immediately after the session were often vivid and appeared highly significant to them. For example, in a split about feeling trapped in a relationship, one client stated at the end of the session, "I realize I have the right to get more of what I want from this relationship." This awareness prompted the client to initiate a discussion with her fiancé to express her feelings and to establish a more satisfactory role for herself in her relationship. The conflict in this case, as in many others, seemed to be adequately coped with. Third, the goal scaling procedure often led to reported expected or better than expected results on goal attainment showing that after a week, clients reported positive change related to the conflict.

The lack of difference in goal attainment resulting from the two treatments could be attributed to the effects of the goal attainment measure as an additional treatment. Having clients, particularly high-functioning ones as used in this study, set goals is a definite step toward goal attainment (Smith, 1976). The results in this study showed that 24 out of a possible 32 sessions led to better than expected goal attainment. It appears, therefore, that clients set goals and attained them regardless of what treatment went on in the session and regardless of what amount of change in awareness was reported at the end of the session. All or part of this improvement on the goal scale could be attributed to the use of the goal setting procedure itself rather than to the particular treatments used or to the combination of goal setting plus a treatment focused on the problematic issue. This possible effect of the goal setting procedure coupled with the observation that the changes in awareness reported for both treatments were much more subtle and differentiated than the stated goals suggest that goal attainment

scaling may not have been the most appropriate instrument for investigating differential outcome for awareness approaches. From this study, the Gestalt intervention can be regarded as leading to greater depth of experience and change in awareness than the empathy intervention and to equivalent positive steps toward goal attainment as empathy when both treatments are coupled with this goal setting measurement procedure.

A consideration in generalizing the results of this study is that the sample consisted of people who were relatively self-actualized, were focusers, and were in a supportive, peer-counseling relationship as part of their training. They could thus be considered as good prognosis clients who were able to quickly establish a working alliance (Luborsky, Chandler, Auerbach, Cohen, & Bachrach, 1971) with the counselor in order to focus on the exploration of the split. This population was chosen for the analogue study because they could readily engage in an exploratory counseling process without the counselor having to pay too much attention to the preliminary stages of establishing trust and rapport (Egan, 1975). The clients had not previously experienced the two-chair method, but their initiation into the client role in their peer counseling enabled the majority to make rapid use of the more active method of exploration encouraged by the two-chair experiment. In most sessions clients explored their issues at a level on the Experiencing Scale indicating they were describing feelings and personal experiences. In addition, each client, according to the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory and the client report form, experienced the counselor as empathic and understanding. The findings of this study may therefore be generalized to high-functioning clients who are able to establish a working relationship with their counselors and who perceive their counselors as empathic and understanding.

Although this was an analogue procedure, the clients were fully involved in an exploration process and so results should hold for people engaged in affective problem solving. The preparation of a before-the-session split and the possibly obtrusive nature of the goal

attainment instrument are both factors that might change the results in a live counseling situation. This, however, is considered unlikely. A client, although often not formally required to prepare a particular issue to work on in counseling, is often implicitly or explicitly trained to do so and often prepares himself or herself in advance. Further, counselors do not usually treat target conflicts without dealing with some of the non-specific factors of treatment such as client hopes, goals, and expectations. In any real counseling interaction there is likely to be some goal setting. This analogue can, therefore, be regarded as not too dissimilar from the actual counseling situation, and its results can be regarded as having bearing on the practice of counseling.

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