
Psychotherapy as a Post-modern Art Form

Charlotte Daellenbach

Abstract

As psychotherapists, we are expected to be familiar with a range of psychotherapeutic theories and techniques. The process of blending and integrating these different approaches brings richness to our work, while at the same time risking the loss of the truly unique culture which each therapy embodies. This paper will look at how we choose, in our moment-to-moment interactions, which therapeutic techniques we use, how we bring these techniques in line with our own intuition, and how, once a particular approach has been chosen, this choice influences the course of the therapy. How does a purist approach differ from an integrated approach – what are the advantages or possible pitfalls?

Introduction

How do we choose a topic for paper or presentation? There are probably two main pathways. The first is that we grab the opportunity to talk about something which we consider an area of special expertise. The second is to allow a theme to awaken some new questions in us which are attractive and exciting enough to lead us to venture into some new territory. This paper is the result of the second process, inspired by the theme of *Difference and Integration*. I am attracted to the concept of integration in psychotherapy, and am equally attracted to the concept of difference. I have from time to time felt uncomfortable by the efforts of some practitioners and theorists to fuse different schools of thought and attempt to make them the same. I see enormous value in comparing theories, noting the similarities and honouring the differences, while allowing them to coexist and to inform and complement each other.

Currently, in my own development as a psychotherapist, I am most strongly influenced by the teaching and writing of Richard Erskine and Stephen

Johnson, both therapists and authors who describe themselves as integrative psychotherapists. Although I was primarily trained in Transactional Analysis, I nevertheless also consider myself an integrative psychotherapist.

What does this mean, an integrative psychotherapist? In addition to my training in Transactional Analysis, I have had considerable training in psychodrama, more than superficial training in gestalt and bioenergetics, done extensive reading and study in object-relations and self psychology, in feminist therapy, in neuro-linguistic programming, trained as a relationship counsellor, and my personal analysis was Jungian, which in turn stimulated more Jungian reading. As an integrative psychotherapist, I use all of these resources. Integration accommodates diversity.

The title of this paper, *Psychotherapy as a post-modern art form*, is not original. It is the title of Stephen Johnson's introduction to his book *The Symbiotic Character* (1991). I am using it because it expresses the crucial points at issue, namely that psychotherapy is an art form — an art form which is moving from a purist, isolationist, conservative viewpoint to a much less rigid stance, allowing different schools of thought and techniques to be used in an integrative and flexible way. It is also a post-modern art form.

How is post-modernism contributing to our understanding of what is required in psychotherapy today? Post-modernism invites us, or maybe even forces us, to find room for differing and often even contradictory viewpoints. In this age of rapid development and change, people capable of living with ever increasing ambiguity and complexity have the best chances of success and survival. It becomes necessary and even essential for all of us to widen our understanding of the world continuously, to accommodate discrepancies and polarities, to be enriched, challenged and excited by the diversity.

Psychotherapy as an art form

Stephen Johnson describes psychotherapy as truly an improvisational, theatrical art form, and states that, whatever theories are used in its execution, they must stay well in the background for this moment-to-moment interpersonal interplay. As with any art form, psychotherapy then relies primarily on the particular disposition, talent and temperament of the artist. Johnson is of course not the only one to describe psychotherapy as an art form. Michael Franz Basch (1988) subtitles his book *Understanding Psychotherapy as the Science Behind the Art*, recognizing that the science is secondary to the art. James Bugental in his book entitled *Psychotherapy and Process: the Fundamentals of an Existential-*

Humanistic Approach, (1978) writes:

Just as an accomplished pianist (or any artist) is one who has thoroughly mastered the fundamentals of the craft in order to be free to be truly creative in expression, so the master therapist has incorporated the mechanics of the processes to the point that they are invisible. The pianist no longer “plays the piano” but only draws music forth from the instrument which has become integral to the artist. The therapist no longer “does therapy” but relates so authentically with the client because the skills are integrated completely into the professional’s way of being.

While this sounds lovely, it may be a somewhat romantic view of both the pianist and the psychotherapist. Barbara Stevens Sullivan (1989), in her book *Psychotherapy Grounded in the Feminine Principle*, writes in a chapter entitled ‘The Art of Psychotherapy’ that psychotherapy is both art and science. She says that as therapists we need to be transitional, moving somewhere between art and science, and that our great social contribution lies in that transitional status. She distinguishes between the being, the art, and the doing, the techniques based on the theory, the science. She is critical of attempts at treating psychotherapy and psychotherapeutic theory purely as science. Science, she says, needs to be codified, sorted, clarified, but the main object of psychotherapeutic inquiry, which is the unconscious, can be neither codified, sorted or clarified. The moment the unconscious reaches the light of day, it ceases to be unconscious.

Language

Each theory is an attempt to create a picture of the human psyche, a map. These theories are best viewed as metaphors for making sense of that which cannot be scientifically or systematically explored. And each of these metaphors brings with it a culture in which the personality and the particular thinking of its creator are reflected. Most obviously this culture is expressed through the language of the metaphor. We all know that we are profoundly influenced by the language of the particular school of thought we operate out of at any given time. There is not just spoken language, the words we use in our interactions with our clients, but also hidden language, the frame of reference which helps us to conceptualize the therapeutic process. Think, for instance, of how different your subjective experience is when you set out to create a ‘play space’ compared with the task of “working through” an issue. ‘Work’ is radically different from ‘play.’ Creating a “holding environment” calls forth quite different images from being a “container.” And just as our theoretical frame of

reference influences our being, it also guides our doing. As a transactional analyst, I am highly attuned to hearing early decisions, to spotting the introjects, and to noticing shifts in ego states. I am usually not consciously aware of looking for these points of reference, but my inquiry and my interventions are designed to elicit such information.

Language is, of course, a particularly powerful aspect of the kind of talking psychotherapy that most of us are engaged in. Freud apparently insisted on his patients speaking German although he was fluent in English, and only allowed a few of his special analysands to speak English (Roazen, 1995). Some of his patients are said to have experienced this as persecutory. I don't know what compelled him to do this, but I find it interesting. It made me reflect on the extent to which we force our clients into our frame of reference, and on how much flexibility we are willing to offer to accommodate the special needs of our clients. I am sometimes sought out by clients who choose me because they want to do therapy in their native tongue, and I actually enjoy meeting them in this way. However, I recently saw a young man from Switzerland who spoke the identical Swiss dialect to mine. In Switzerland you can virtually spot the village a person comes from just by hearing their particular dialect. It is rare for me now to meet people who speak like me. What I discovered in being with this man was an overwhelming urge in me to regress. Only in my childhood had I been around people who spoke this dialect. All my adult life I have lived in other parts of the world, speaking first French, then English. It was of course very helpful for me to recognize this invitation to regression, essential for the therapy, but also underlining my awareness of the power of language. Similarly, within a language, each metaphor, with its unique terminology, impacts differently on the therapeutic relationship. From this understanding, we consciously choose to mirror the words and expressions used by our clients to establish connection. At times, we will deliberately not reflect back the client's language to achieve a particular impact.

It is interesting to ask ourselves how we each chose the primary modality in which we trained when becoming psychotherapists. I am sure we all have quite different rationales. I, for instance, did not choose the particular theory, but the person teaching it. I have long known that I learn best from a teacher I respect and admire. So when the opportunity presented itself for me to train in Transactional Analysis, I decided to take it up because of the personality of the teacher who was somebody I could trust, respect, love, and therefore learn from. And yet, I am also convinced that the particular primary school of thought which we each follow in some important way must suit our personality.

And when it does not, a practitioner may change the theory to get a better fit. This may well be what leads to the creation of subschools, of a different stream within a theory. In Transactional Analysis I found a model which offers an elegant blend of a comprehensive theory with a respectful and highly effective methodology. This suits my need for supporting my intuitive responses to my clients with a clear thinking framework.

Choosing the frame

Assuming that we are thoroughly versed in at least one theory and have a good working knowledge of several others, including their techniques and methodologies, how do we choose, in our moment-to-moment interactions, which frame of reference we employ? Consider some of the polarities which offer choice points: we can be authentic/involved or neutral, directive or non-directive, strengthening defences or weakening defences, interpersonal focus or intrapsychic focus, current determinants or historical determinants, focus on cognition or focus on affect, prohibit transference or provoke and allow it, interpret a dream or just listen to it. We could think of many more.

I have been paying special attention to how I make these decisions, with a particular client, or in a particular moment. I have also asked some of my colleagues and supervisees. What I have discovered is that there are a number of different ways in which we make these choices. Some of the time we are truly the artist, as described by Bugental, intuitively and authentically being there in a particular way, not aware of any frame of reference, as one person connecting with another. At other times we make our choices quite self-consciously. We may deliberately tailor our intervention to the particular need, as perceived by us, of this other person, our client. Maybe not surprisingly most of us take our leads from our clients. The words our clients use to express their pain, concern or yearnings, will activate in us a particular frame of reference that resonates with them. For instance, a person telling me about her emptiness may evoke a Masterson (1985) model which will then influence the course of the therapy. Therefore, the more flexible we are in our repertoire or frames, the better able we will be to attune, to find the words and the context to respond from, which best matches the client's needs.

And that is not enough on its own. The repertoire or frame also needs to match the style and personality of the therapist. A few years ago, a man who had cancer came to me with the book by Lawrence LeShan *You Can Fight for Your Life* (1984), asking me to read it and to follow with him this particular therapy.

I read the book, was very much excited by it, and proceeded, as best as I could, to work in the way of LeShan. The result was that I was anxious, unsure of what I was doing, and undoubtedly not helpful to the man. Fortunately, I rapidly became aware of the source of my anxiety, stopped trying to be who I was not, and started a new and much more effective psychotherapy.

Michael Franz Basch (1987:368) said in an article in *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* that the repeated splintering of our field into various schools was, and is, unnecessary and counterproductive. He states that we are today in a good position to establish a unitary theory of psychotherapy. I will admit that on the face of it I find this an attractive idea. There is in me, like in most people, a yearning to make things simple, uniform, shared, commonly held. But then I come back to my understanding of the post-modernist contribution, and remember that making things simple and uniform is far from being the best or most appropriate way to cope with the complexities, paradoxes and ambiguities of today's world.

I am reminded here of the words of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, who in a public talk spoke of the importance of spiritual pursuits, but was clear about the value of having many choices and different pathways. There is no one true way. Each person needs to find his or her own. He likened the multiplicity of pathways to the fingers on a hand. If you want to push something, he said, the thumb does a fine job, but for other purposes (like scratching in your ear) the little finger is far superior. To take this analogy further, we could say that the palm of the hand, which holds all the fingers together, represents in psychotherapy that intuitive way of being which is capable of making contact with another human being at a deep and authentic level, and which surely is common to all psychotherapeutic pathways, the hallmark of the true artist, as in Bugental's description of the artist.

In the editorial to the February 1997 edition of the journal *Psychotherapy in Australia*, under the title "I have my model and I am happy with it!" Liz Green writes:

From where I sit, as one of the editors of this journal, I am amazed at the different and opposing truths held on what is "right and proper" in psychotherapy — all coming at me from a wide range of well qualified, intelligent, even likable, people. The problem with this field is that there is no agreed body of knowledge. . . . And yet, is this such a problem? Perhaps it is a delight? Diversity and colour, different racial identities, personalities, cultures, languages, beliefs, species, landscapes, and climates all give the

world interest, fascination and life. Who would argue for homogeneity? ... For me, the problems arise when I encounter narrow minded, closed, blind dogma, when groups malign one another without any basis, when groups become elitist and self-interested and begin to believe their own propaganda. How miserable life would be if we all believed that we had found out the truth about the human condition.

Like Liz Green, I favour diversity. However, in the context of diversity, let me make a plea for purism. In particular, I ask you to not lose sight of the culture of each modality. A psychodramatist who asks a protagonist to reverse roles with an auxiliary is not doing the same thing as a gestaltist who uses an empty chair, or a transactional analyst who lets his client externalize the introject or parental message in order to resolve the impasse. Superficially, these methods may look the same, but their specific intentions are different. Equally, it is important to know why a psychoanalyst chooses neutrality rather than involvement, and if we follow such a style of working, we need to do it with that clarity and commitment.

I grew up speaking German. I recently had the opportunity to see and hear a performance of Mozart's *Magic Flute* at the Sydney Opera House. Mozart wrote that opera, called *Die Zauberflöte* based on a libretto written in German. Yet the performance in Sydney was in English. It was a very impressive performance, while being profoundly different from the German version I had grown up with, not better or worse, but quite different in its emotional evocations. My point is that when you speak (or sing) German, do it as purely as you know how, true to its cultural heritage, and when you speak (or sing) English, you do the same.

Yet cultures change, languages develop, natural blending occurs. And we all form and reform our own idiosyncratic styles, much as we each have our own distinct accents. The importance is to be thoughtful in our blending, and to remain respectful of the cultures. As psychotherapists, we need to continually widen and deepen our repertoire of theories and techniques, and while developing our own ever-changing individual ways of working, we also need to remain alert to our particular professional identity.

References

- Basch, M F. *Understanding psychotherapy*. New York, Basic Books, 1988.
- Bugental, J F T. *Psychotherapy and process*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1978.
- Erskine, R G & R L Trautmann. Methods of integrative psychotherapy. *Transactional Analysis Journal* v 26 no 4, 1996.
- Green, L. "I have my model and I am happy with it!" *Psychotherapy in Australia* v 3 no 2, 1997, p 3.
- Johnson, S M. *The symbiotic character*. New York, W W Norton & Company, 1991.
- Le Shan, L. *You can fight for your life*. Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, Thorsons Publishers, 1984.
- Masterson, J. *Psychotherapy of the borderline adult*. New York, Brunner/Mazel, 1976.
- Roazen, P. *How Freud worked*. Northvale, New Jersey, Jason Aronson, 1995.
- Stevens, B. *Psychotherapy grounded in the feminine principle*. Wilmette, Illinois, Chiron Publications, 1989.