

Opening Space for Client Reflection: A Postmodern Consideration

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Abstract:

It is suggested in this article that perhaps during those occasions in which some distance exists between ourselves and our problems in life, we might experience an opportunity for reflective thinking. It is also suggested that opportunities for reflective thinking might be of benefit to clients in counseling. This article reviews selected literature addressing reflective thinking and it reviews selected literature that would seem to provide a perspective on facilitating “space” for reflective thinking during family counseling.

Article:

Have you ever been confronted with a decision, then requested the evening to sleep on it and awoke the next morning with a clearer direction? Perhaps you have found yourself with a valued friend whose perspective on life seems to add clarity to your daily puzzling. What of those moments when a partner has just the right idea about stepping out of a conflict with a child and has also suggested a powerful way for reestablishing the parent-child relationship? Or how often, when involved in family counseling, has a supervisory comment or question appeared to open additional possibilities? It is our belief that in part, additive views such as those just mentioned come from one’s ability to be in a reflective position, that is, a position outside the immediate puzzling or struggling one may be experiencing. Moreover, it would seem that it is just this ability to enter a reflective position that holds promise for clients in family counseling as they try to create new and preferred meanings that also suggest alternative possibilities.

In commenting on reflection, Andersen (1991a) mentioned that the French “reflexion” is thought to have “the same meaning as the Norwegian ‘refleksjon,’” which denotes that “something heard is taken in and thought about before a response is given” (p. 12). For an individual to engage in reflective thinking it may be useful to be outside the immediate situation, and so it may be that sleeping on a decision can open “space” for reflection the next morning. Or it may be that a valued friend’s or partner’s or supervisor’s perspective that comes from outside one’s own immediate experience may have been generated in a space that allowed for reflective thinking. It would indeed appear that the counseling process might benefit from considering how to help family members become more reflective, thoughtful, or considered.

Reflective thinking may occur when a family member is encouraged to consider the impact of a problem on one’s life; for example, “How has anger made you feel about yourself?” “What has anger required of you?” and “If anger continues to gain control, what might it require of you in the future?” White and Epston (1990) referred to this objectifying and personifying of the problem as externalizing the problem, and White (1993) commented on the idea that as problems become externalized, a taken-for-granted notion that the client is the problem (an angry person) becomes deconstructed. With regard to externalizing the problem, White and Epston mentioned that “neither the person nor the relationship between persons is the problem. Rather, the problem becomes the problem, and then the person’s relationship with the problem becomes the problem” (p. 40). It would seem that placing the problem outside the client or outside the family members and placing some distance between them and the problem may allow space for reflective thinking. Zimmerman and Dickerson (1996) noted,

we see that the dominant culture takes up most of the space and pushes to the edges those experiences that lie outside its normalized standards and values.... Is there ever space for people to examine how they have just gone along with the status quo, and whether doing so is even what they want? ... In therapeutic interactions, we see that one way space can be opened for clients is by creating reflexive practices in the room. (p. 100)

Arranging for space between the family members and the presenting problem may allow for an opportunity to consider the subjugating aspects of taken-for-granted realities, for example, that someone is exclusively characterized as the angry member of the family, the depressed member, the anxious member, and so forth. In this article we review some of the literature that seems to be associated with an understanding of reflective thinking. We also review some of the literature that seems to comment on possibilities for opening space between a family member and the problem in order that reflective thinking might occur, not for the above-mentioned purpose of deconstruction but for the purpose of considering exceptions to old patterns of behavior (de Shazer, 1988) and for the purpose of considering unique outcomes to oppressive stories (White, 1989). Whereas the processes of constructing exceptions and unique outcomes may certainly have a deconstructive effect on an old pattern or story, they are more intentionally aimed at efforts to lift up possibilities for one's future. Both processes (the identification of exceptions and unique outcomes) seem to support the O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis (1989) comment as well as Haley's (1973) comment on Milton Erickson's work, that meaningful differences can come from small changes. With regard to the current conversation on reflective thinking, it would appear that reflective thinking may help generate exceptions and unique outcomes that facilitate small, yet meaningful differences. There are undoubtedly a number of components to reflective thinking and in the next section we would like to speak of five components interpreted from the literature.

REFLECTIONS ON REFLECTIVE THINKING

Andersen (1995) suggested that reflective thinking can be facilitated in individual counseling as well as family counseling. Whatever the context, there would appear to be a number of thoughts from the literature that are deserving of consideration when contemplating the role of reflective thinking. For example, postmodern literature (Gergen, 1991, 1994, 1999; White & Epston, 1990) has suggested that each of our lives contains multiple realities, narratives, or stories about who we are as we interact with others. For example, an individual may have a story about himself or herself that is descriptive of a responsible adult, and yet at other times the individual may respond from a playful and childlike position. Clients may also have a story that is descriptive of their family relationships, for example, a story about being considerate of one another, about being committed to social justice, about being captured by criticism, or about being plagued by a lack of commitment and limited follow-through. It can certainly occur that one of these realities becomes a dominant reality and that this reality is supported by interactions with others (White & Epston). For instance, in a couple's relationship one may believe that she or he has to be the responsible adult because the other has become the playful partner. From here, a function of reflective thinking can be to help support an expansion of our ideas beyond the dominant story, which White and Epston have noted can at times become problem saturated. Regarding a problem-saturated story, it has been suggested that problems occur for people when the internalized conversations about oneself and one's relationships become restricted or too narrow (Adams-Westcott, Dafforn, & Sterne, 1993; White & Epston), and others have mentioned that these problem-laden stories result in limited perceptions about alternative choices (Tomm, 1989; White & Epston). It has also been indicated that stories or narratives influence our perceptions and directions in life (White & Epston), and although not all stories lead to preferred outcomes, it is indeed fortunate that a multiplicity of realities exist (exceptions and unique outcomes) from which alternative stories can be grounded (Epston, White, & Murray, 1992).

It would also seem important to remember that from the narrative or text metaphor, the meaning of an experience, comment, or question is in part determined by the person experiencing the event, hearing the comment, or receiving the question (White & Epston, 1990). Whether at work or in school, whether with one's family or at church, and so forth, the meaning of a comment or question resides in part within the individual hearing the remark or receiving the inquiry. This is no doubt a valuable point to keep in mind whether one is an administrator, teacher, minister, parent, partner, or counselor. Tomm (1987) noted that with regard to a reflexive

process, meanings associated with events are interactively influenced by each other, and we would see the interactive influencing of meanings as characteristic of reflective thinking. Tomm (1987) also noted that “the specific effects of the questions [perhaps asked by a counselor] are determined by the client or family, not by the therapist” (p. 172). This would indicate that although a counselor may help to open some space for reflection, family members certainly need to be honored as the coauthors of reflections.

Zimmerman and Dickerson (1996) spoke of reflexivity as a concept and suggested that this concept is more than reflecting, yet it would seem that their description of reflexivity has captured our understanding of reflective thinking:

a process in which ideas can bounce off other ideas; aspects of experience can come to the fore, so that persons can begin to notice and examine previously held assumptions. It is an in-between place—between persons, between representations and persons (e.g., letters from others), between experience and persons (e.g., music). (p. 101)

Indeed, reflective thinking would seem to occur within an individual as ideas bounce off other ideas so that a person can consider previously held assumptions. For the family member whose relationships appear to be permeated by a problem, reflective thinking is thought to occur in those moments where the in-between place includes some space between the problem and the person. It is this space that allows for step-ping outside of the dominant story, and it is here that thinking and rethinking about one’s own thinking takes place. Zimmerman and Dickerson (1996) seemed to describe this thinking about one’s own thinking as a part of a reflexive process (or what we are referring to as reflective thinking). Andersen (1993) referred to outer and inner dialogues and indicated that during an outer dialogue the individual is talking with others about concerns and preferred perspectives whereas during an inner dialogue the individual is talking with himself or herself about concerns and perspectives. Shotter (1993) also appeared to be speaking of something similar to reflective thinking when he noted that “people’s attempts to realize their thoughts ... in ways which make those thoughts socially *usable* ... must be *negotiated* in an inner back-and-forth process, in which they must attempt to understand and challenge their own proposed formulations as the others around them might” (p. 44). For example, when talking with oneself about the desire to step out of conflicts with a family member, one may wonder from the position of a respected friend whether ignoring critical comments is suggestive of a lack of assertiveness or symbolic of a preferred response or alternative narrative. This wondering from another’s position may allow for some space or distance from the presenting problem in order that ideas can bounce off each other and in order that previously held assumptions can be examined.

Through reflective thinking new meanings may be created and new behaviors may be identified for the experiences in one’s life. This is congruent with the notion that we achieve understandings of ourselves and our relationships through being in conversations with others (Gergen, 1994, 1999) and through being in conversation with others as well as with our-selves (Andersen, 1991a, 1992, 1993, 1995). This is quite different from assuming that meanings reside within events (e.g., marriage or parenting); rather, as Gergen (1994) has suggested, as we engage in conversations with others about events, meanings are created rather than found. White (1993) and Freedman and Combs (1996) referred to Bruner’s (1986) concepts of a landscape of consciousness and a landscape of action. Freedman and Combs mentioned that “by ‘the landscape of consciousness’ we refer to that imaginary territory where people plot the meanings, desires, intentions, beliefs, commitments, motivations, values, and the like that relate to their experience” (p. 98). Likewise, Bruner (1986) noted that with regard to the landscape of action, its “constituents are the arguments of action” (p. 14). Freedman and Combs mentioned, “This is similar to the ‘who, what, when, and how’ of journalism. In the landscape of action, we plot sequences of events through time” (p. 97). To consider the landscape of action in reflective thinking, a counselor may choose to focus on the future and might, for example, wonder with a client how a valued friend or relative would recommend responding to parental criticisms. Here, the friend or relative’s view may come from outside the client’s perspective and so may facilitate reflective thinking. It is

thought, then, that reflective thinking may have a bearing on the meanings we create for life as well as a bearing on the behaviors we choose in life

The notion that multiple meanings exist in life and that meanings are associated with the conversations and interpretations of events and experiences does not deny the presence of physical realities. O'Hanlon (1993) stated that

Radical constructivists and quantum physicists suggest that what we call reality is constructed/fabricated by our beliefs and our neurology.... In this view, there is no such thing as reality (or truth either, which is another matter altogether and a compelling reason not to hire a radical constructivist to handle your cash). (pp. 5-6)

It was not too long ago that a friend of one of the authors (C. T. Jackson, personal communication, November 1999) referred to the idea that "it's hard to pick yourself up by your boot-straps if you don't have any boots." From his commentary, and probably from a number of other illustrations, we are perhaps faced with the notion that not all of life can be constructed from our beliefs. Yet, speaking of the social constructionists, O'Hanlon (1993) mentioned, "They ... hold that there is a physical reality out there but that our social reality, being influenced by language and interaction, is negotiable" (p. 6). It would seem, then, that it is our social realities, the meanings that we provide to events, to physical realities, and to relationships that can be influenced by reflective thinking.

In summary, a few ideas have been reviewed that appear to be associated with reflective thinking. Specifically, (a) the view that alternative realities are present for family members, and reflective thinking may help clients surface these realities; (b) the idea that meanings are determined in part by the individual experiencing an event, hearing a comment, or receiving a question, and so clients become coauthors of their own reflections; (c) the belief that reflective thinking occurs for individuals as ideas "bounce off" other ideas (thinking about thinking) so that a client can consider previously held assumptions; (d) the thought that reflective thinking may help clients consider alternative meanings for their experiences as well as new directions for their behavior; and (e) the realization that physical realities are not to be denied but that social realities are constructed through conversations with others as well as with oneself. Having said this, it would certainly appear that a counselor who is attempting to be thoughtful would want to consider the landscapes of consciousness (beliefs) that are in agreement with one's practice as well as the landscapes of action (behaviors) that are associated with one's beliefs. It is with the landscapes of action in mind that we now turn our attention to possibilities for opening space for reflective thinking.

OPENING SPACE FOR CLIENT REFLECTION

The question becomes how to help clients move from those patterns of behavior or narratives that are restricting and limiting to a position that offers alternatives and possibilities. A reflecting team may be one vehicle for opening space to facilitate thinking about one's life (Andersen, 1991c) and, as a result, it may offer an opportunity to create new understandings about one's relationships. Reflecting teams have been discussed by Andersen and others (Andersen, 1991c; Friedman, 1995), and in part they can be described as comprising a small group of individuals who function as an audience and listen to a family therapy session. At a certain point, the audience shares their reflections with each other, and by doing so, it is hoped they help to open space for the family and counselor to move to a listening position and to reflect on alternative possibilities for understanding a presenting problem, or perhaps for enriching a new pattern or narrative. In this section we review possibilities from the literature for opening space for reflective thinking as the counselor works with one or more family members without the benefit of a reflecting team. The literature mentioned in this section either directly refers to facilitating reflective thinking without the benefit of a reflecting team or appears to have implications for this practice.

Reducing Pressure to Respond in an Effort to Open Space for Reflection

Zimmerman and Dickerson (1996) noted that at times, discussion of the presenting problem may become so dominant that it interferes with the clinician and clients generating other understandings of the problem and it may even interfere with efforts to consider other possibilities for responding to the problem. They mentioned that when a client is in the position of a respondent,

there is an overwhelming pull to give some kind of answer or response. This inclination leaves little room for them to reflect or consider the possibilities available.... If, however, clients feel no need to respond... they may find several more ways to think about their thinking and their lives. (p. 103)

Zimmerman and Dickerson suggested that the counselor may divert his or her eyes from clients by looking to the floor, to the ceiling, or out the window to help them feel less pressure to respond. Wangberg (1991) mentioned the use of such a procedure while working with clients, and as he attempts to become reflective, "I will then lean back to create a bigger distance, I will either look at the ceiling or out the window, and talk *about* them rather than to them" (p. 19). Moreover, Andersen (1991b) noted the appropriateness of being somewhat tentative when one speaks (e.g., "I'm wondering about..." or "I'd be curious whether...") as well as viewing situations and concerns from a both-and position rather than an either-or position to encourage reflective thinking. For example, while looking out a window the counselor might wonder, "In addition to experiencing criticalness as not helpful, what might happen if it was viewed as a type of concern, perhaps a parental concern for one's daughter and perhaps a daughter's concern for additional levels of independence?"

Presupposing Change and Avoiding Negative Connotations to Open Space for Reflection

O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis (1989) suggested that looking for exceptions to problem behaviors can be facilitated with presuppositional questioning: "A basic rule of thumb in constructing presuppositional questions is to keep them open-ended, avoiding questions to which a 'yes' or 'no' response would be possible" (p. 80). A yes or no response to a question might be encouraged as follows: "I can understand your desire to reduce the conflict in your family. In responding to criticisms, have you ever found yourself controlling your anger and sidestepping an argument?" This question can obviously be answered with a yes or no response. A presuppositional question might ask, "In responding to criticisms, when have you noticed yourself making an effort to step out of a conflict?" Here the presupposition is that exceptions to the problem exist (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989), and the open-ended nature of the question will, it is hoped, provide some space for the client to think about or reflect on exceptions to the problem. O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis (1989) noted, "Reflection upon these questions helps clients to consider their situations from new perspectives" (p. 80).

Many of the examples that follow in the remainder of this article have borrowed from the idea of including a presuppositional quality to the questions asked of clients. Moreover, Andersen (1992) has suggested that the client may find it easier to enter a reflective position if the counselor can refrain from offering a negative connotation to the client's experiences and thoughts. A negative connotation might, for example, be embedded in statements or questions such as, "It's certainly not uncommon to encounter conflict while trying to become more independent. Do you see yourself as having a short fuse?" Instead, and as previously mentioned, the counselor might direct his or her eyes away from a client or a family, perhaps while playing with a piece of lint, and become curious about the situation: "I was struck by your interest in reducing criticism and conflict. When have you noticed your-self making an effort to step out of an argument?" and "What did you find yourself doing at these times?" Questions such as these reflect de Shazer's (1988) desire to locate exceptions to patterns of behavior and White's (1989) interest in considering unique outcomes to oppressive stories, and if they are offered from a position of curiosity, it is hoped they will be less likely to be heard as embedded with a negative connotation.

Taking a Break to Open Space for Reflection

Zimmerman and Dickerson (1996) also suggested that it may be helpful for the counselor and client to take a break and leave the room when it appears that the discussion of the problem has interfered with what they refer to as reflexivity and what we are calling reflective thinking. A counselor, for example, might ask, "Would it be

all right to take a break, where you might stretch and catch a drink of water and I'll also step out of the office for a moment?" and "Could we use this as an opportunity for each of you to be alone and to think about times when you didn't allow criticalness and arguing to completely drag you down; that is, times when you made an effort to not let this pattern be quite so influential?" When the counselor and family members return to the office in about 10 minutes the counselor might ask, "What has occurred to you that's somehow different; that is, when were some times that you remember being less vulnerable to criticism and arguing? And at those moments, what did you find yourself thinking or doing?" From another theoretical context, Minuchin and Fishman (1981) suggested that physical distance might become associated with psychological distance. With their comment in mind, one could wonder whether taking a break might facilitate enough distance from a discussion of the problem that additional perspectives might be considered.

Walter and Peller (2000) suggested asking a family member to move "a little way out of the conversational space" in order to facilitate the individual's ability to reflect on a conversation between the consultant (counselor) and another member of the family (p. 140). As part of this process, the counselor asks the individual to pay attention to how one's thinking changes as a result of being in a listening position. The counselor asks the family member to pull her or his chair back while the counselor and another individual from the family talk about how she or he would like to experience the relationship with the person who is now in the listening position. The individual in the listening position is eventually asked to share reflections on the difference that has occurred in their thinking after hearing another describe the desired relationship as well as the possible insecurities that might accompany movement toward this desired relationship. Again, we might wonder whether pulling a bit out of the conversational space could help to open some psychological distance that in turn might facilitate reflecting on additional perspectives.

Using Indirect Questions to Open Space for Reflection

White (1989) has discussed the use of indirect questions in therapy, and he has provided illustrations of the procedure and mentioned that "these questions encourage family members to speculate on the perceptions of others, including the therapist and colleagues" (p. 41). Walter and Peller (1992) also considered questions that are directed toward another's perceptions. Their comments differed in some ways from White's (1989) remarks, yet they suggested that these questions invite the client to respond from the position of another and encourage her or him to suspend his [the client's] way of thinking for the moment" and for a moment these questions might encourage the client to place himself or herself in the position of the other "or at least think of what she [the other] might say if she were responding to the question" (p. 175). Asking the client to speculate on the perceptions of others may open some distance from the family member's view of the presenting problem and in so doing may allow the client to think about her or his thinking regarding the presenting problem. For example, the counselor might ask, "Who would be someone who would know that there have been times for you when criticalness was less influential?" "When would this person have seen you not letting another's criticalness upset you and what would they have noticed?" and "What would this person suggest as a helpful way to respond to future criticalness in the family?"

Some authors (Andersen, 1991c; Freedman & Combs, 1996; McLean, 1995) have noted the use of teams in counseling. Freedman and Combs suggested that teams may comprise a group of people that are actually not even present during the counseling session but include persons the family member holds in her or his thoughts. These team members may be called on for assistance as a family member considers alternative meanings for experiences or as a member considers alternative ways of responding to a problem. Freedman and Combs provided illustrations of using teams, and they noted that although the team members need not actually attend the counseling session, they may function as a community of significant voices within the client's thoughts, and they may or may not even be people the client knows. For example, they may include a living or deceased grandparent as well as a significant friend, or they may include a noteworthy person in history or a significant figure from current events. To call on the team for assistance, the counselor might ask one or more family members, "Who would you imagine, from your current or past life, supporting this new direction you are taking? Or, is there a famous person who you believe has stood up well in the face of criticism?" After identifying this individual, the counselor might ask, "What would this person have noticed about your efforts to

keep criticisms from pulling you into conflict?” and “Who else would have noticed your efforts to not let criticism draw you into conflict?” The counselor might wonder with a family member, “What would any one of these team members suggest as a next step to keep in mind in order to prevent criticisms from pulling you into an argument?” and “What do you think of their suggestions?” As noted in the previous paragraph, the effort to speculate on the perceptions of others may open some distance from the common view of the problem, and it may be that in this space that the family member can think about his or her thinking. With the assistance of a team, the counselor can ask questions (indirect questions) of a team comprising four, five, or six significant others who are held in the client’s thoughts. The team can be referred to again in future sessions as counseling continues.

Stepping Into the Future to Open Space for Reflection

Various authors (de Shazer, 1988; Lipchik, 1988; Lipchik & de Shazer, 1986; O’Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Walter & Peller, 1992; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996) have written about helping the client consider a problem from a new temporal perspective, that is, a perspective sometime in the future. In talking about therapeutic questions that focus on a future perspective and that might invite client reflection, Lipchik and de Shazer (1986) noted, “These are future oriented questions, worded in a manner which assumes positive change, and phrased as to encourage the client to think of solutions other than those he or she has already tried.” (p.90). Speaking of the procedure referred to as a “miracle questions” (de Shazer, 1988), Walter and Peller (1992) noted that

This was an adaptation of Erickson’s crystal ball technique... The idea behind the technique was to have the client create a representation while in a trance of a future with the problem solved or without the problem. The idea was to have the client look backward from the future toward the present and identify how she/he reached a solution. (pp. 77-78).

Similarly, Zimmerman and Dickerson talked of a future-looking-back question that could be asked something like this: “Think about your relationship with your parents 2 years up the road from now when criticisms are less likely to pull you into an argument. Now, looking back over the 2 years, what steps do you see yourself taking to arrive at this new position?” In helping a client consider a problem from a future-oriented perspective, Walter and Peller noted, “This new framing invites them [clients] to suspend their reality of the moment and enter a hypothetical reality” (p. 73). Zimmerman and Dickerson assess, “This is a reflexive process, which creates the space for noticing possibilities that have been outside the client’s usual view” (p. 103). It would seem that these questions open a possibility for the client to place himself or herself in the future, beyond the present reality, and create some space from the problem in which the client can think about alternative possibilities.

CONCLUSION

Although life would appear to be multistoried, we support the notion that not all of these stories have preferred endings (Epston, et. Al., 1992) and so, as suggested by Freedman and Combs (1996), we would view counseling as an intentional process where “We hope to engage people in deconstructing problematic stories, identifying preferred directions, and developing alternative stories that support these preferred directions” (p. 118). Realizing that counseling is an intentional effort (e.g., helping the client identify preferred directions in life), and realizing that the client is a coparticipant in making meaning out of the counseling experience suggests a healthy tension that exists within the counseling relationship. That is, although the counselor wants to enter counseling with some ideas about how to be helpful, she or he also needs to remember that the client is actively involved in judging what will be viewed as meaningful. A consideration of the appropriate place for reflective thinking in counseling needs to honor the realization that the client is an interpreter of interactions with the counselor. To paraphrase Littrell (1998) and de Shazer (1985), the client is of course more important than the counseling procedure, and if efforts to be helpful through the use of reflective thinking are not fruitful, listen to the client and consider doing something different.

With the above having been said, the intent of this article was to introduce the idea of participating in reflective thinking during counseling. This limited review of literature has not been an effort to restrict the discussion of reflective thinking, nor has it been an effort to prescribe a list of procedures that leads to reflective thinking. Moreover, we cannot help but wonder if the counselor's ability to open space for another's reflection might not be associated with her or his own willingness to enter reflective moments during a variety of encounters, for example, when interacting with one's own family as well as when responding to opportunities at work. Using reflective thinking as a technique in which one tries to help the client become reflective at a specific moment through the use of a particular procedure would seem less likely to be helpful than viewing it as a common, although not exclusive, part of the counseling and as a regular, although not exclusive, part of the counselor's more private life. One's life can certainly benefit from a multiplicity of responses in addition to reflection, for example, a willingness to receive and provide directives as well as a willingness to function according to routines. Nevertheless, getting outside of one's dominant perspective on a problem to consider alternative positions would seem to have important implications for growth during counseling sessions, learning activities, research endeavors, and life in general. Perhaps it is our willingness to listen to voices that are in addition to the dominant discourse that moves us into the landscape of possibilities. We hope that comments in this article encourage the reader to consider the place of reflective thinking in counseling, education, and research, and to then share his or her own experiences and thoughts with colleagues in order that a discussion of reflective thinking might continue.

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