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Transpersonal Presence in Therapy: A Case Study

I find that when I am the closest to my inner, intuitive self --when perhaps I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me--when perhaps I am in a slightly altered state of consciousness in the relationship, then whatever I do seems to be full of healing. Then simply my presence is releasing and helpful. At those moments, it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself, and has become part of something larger. Profound growth and healing are present - Carl Rogers (in Baldwin, 2000)

Abstract

Several studies have explored therapist presence as a therapeutic variable from the perspective of therapists. Fewer have explored therapist presence from the perspective of clients. This case study explores one client's experience of her therapist's presence. In addition to many of the same qualities of presence identified in the therapist studies, this study yielded a distinction between "regular presence" and "transpersonal presence", a category that included aspects of the experience that seemed to transcend the ordinary therapeutic relationship. Transpersonal presence has implications for the effectiveness of psychotherapy, and the training and professional development of psychotherapists. This suggests that further studies that operationalize, and empirically validate the effects of, transpersonal presence are warranted.

Methods

The primary participant was a female in her mid-thirties who was a student in a psychology Ph.D. program with a spiritual orientation, and who was previously known to the researcher to be a client in psychotherapy and interested in the topic of "presence as a therapeutic variable." She was selected for this study because she had previously identified her therapist as highly present; in response to the question "How present is your therapist?" she stated "10 on a scale of 1 to 10." The secondary participant was her therapist, a male licensed clinical psychologist who espouses a spiritual orientation.

Two one-hour interviews were conducted with the primary participant, pre- and post-therapy sessions, to explore the client's experience of her therapist's presence. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were reviewed and statements were sorted into the following categories: observations about her therapist's presence, inferences and interpretations about the meaning of her observations, and the effects on her of her therapist's presence. Her observations were sorted into those that pertained to the therapist himself (intrapersonal), those that pertained to the therapeutic relationship (interpersonal), and those that seemed to transcend both (transpersonal). A further distinction was made between "regular presence" and "transpersonal presence."

Analysis was conducted at four levels. The first level of analysis compared the client's reported perceptions of her therapist's presence to the factors identified in the researcher's previous review of studies of therapist presence (Granick, 2007b). The second level of analysis considered how her reflections on her therapist's presence in the first interview influenced her experience of his presence in the subsequent sessions, as revealed in the second interview. Similarly, a third level of analysis considers her

reflections on the implications of this inquiry for her own professional development as a student training to become a psychotherapist. A final level of analysis explored the client's reflections on the research process itself, the parallels between it and psychotherapy, and the nested implications these reflections hold for her own understanding of the significance of the experience of presence on multiple levels.

Table - Qualities of Presence (from Granick, 2007a)

"Regular Presence"	Intrapersonal level	Awareness: The therapist brings highly focused attention to the encounter.
		Immediacy: The therapist seems to be fully in the moment.
		Silence: The therapist is able to be silent whether the client is talking or not.
		Internal focus: The therapist uses his own internal experience as a referent.
		Internal locus: The therapist's awareness and energy is centered in his heart, rather than head.
	Interpersonal level	Attunement: The therapist is profoundly aware of the client's experience, including her state, pace, and felt sense.
Empathy: The therapist is deeply reflective of the client's experience.		
Responsiveness: The therapist allows himself to be affected and adapts his expression and behavior to the client's experience.		
		Non-verbal communication: The therapist engages the client in her experience at pre-conceptual levels.
"Transpersonal Presence"	Transpersonal level	Reverence: The therapist regards the client, the space, and the process of therapy as sacred.
		Embodiment: Through using his own physical experience as a referent a kinesthetic rapport is established with the client's felt sense.
		Resonance: There is an energetic connection that transcends the ordinary self-other boundary.
		Intuition: The therapist seems to perceive differently or receive information in non-ordinary ways.
		Field: Both therapist and client are accessing and participating in a realm of experience that is somehow greater than the dyad.
		Healing: The effects on the client go beyond reducing suffering or improving functioning, but include transformation of the whole person.

Findings

In relation to the generic question, "What is your experience of your therapist's presence?" the client observed him breathing deeply and closing his eyes, which communicated to her that his awareness was both temporally and spatially focused in an immediate way, that he was connected with her, while simultaneously processing internally, and that he was using his own physical experience as a referent for assimilating her experience. Corresponding factors of therapist-identified qualities of presence (Granick, 2007b) include inwardly focused attention, "here and now" focus, using self as instrument, receptivity to and connection with clients, kinesthetic presence.

She also noted certain interpersonal behaviors that her therapist manifested which communicated a sense of presence to her. His ability to allow her to finish expressing herself, to allow silence, and to respond experientially rather than interpreting suggest to her that he was not preoccupied by his own cognitions, and facilitated her to also be more immediately, experientially present. For the client, the distinction between being "in one's head" and being present in an embodied way was a recurring theme, as was the parallel between her therapist's presence and her own. While kinesthetic presence was identified as one of the qualities of therapist presence, for this client it is central and definitive of what makes presence transpersonal.

The client also introduced additional qualities of presence. While reiterating the somatic nature of the therapist's experience, she described operational aspects of that process like "centering", "dropping down", allowing non-verbal aspects of his experience of the client to "wash over" himself. These correspond to additional therapist-identified qualities of presence pertaining to the intention, effort, and direction of attention, the intensity of concentration, and the amplification of empathy, particularly on non-verbal levels.

She further introduced the idea of intuition and the notion of "perceiving information differently." Intuition and heightened perception are both frequently identified in studies of therapists' perceptions of presence (Granick, 2007b). It was this aspect that led to her distinguishing between "transpersonal presence" and "regular presence" in response to the researcher's question "How are these things that you're mentioning...different, if they are, from what any good therapist does?"

This opened a deeper exploration of the effects of transpersonal presence on her where she describes a level of mutual energetic connection that is fluid and transcendent of the self-other boundary. This is richly described in the therapist presence studies and often referred to as resonance. She attributed this to the therapist's intention, another of the therapist-identified qualities.

The sense of mutual participation in "something bigger" is yet another of the frequently identified qualities of presence in the therapist studies. In comparing a previous therapist, whom she stated had "regular presence", to her current therapist, as an exemplar of "transpersonal presence", she noted that the difference was between "fixing" and "healing." When asked to compare these, she responded that her previous therapist "had the ability to help on a psychological level...becoming more functional in life, or even healing wounds", whereas her current therapist "works at integrating...and...wholeness..." and facilitates "transformation" and "different ways of being" with herself, with others, with the world, and with spirit. She described this as the difference between "healing my mind" and "healing my soul." Healing is also a prominent therapist-identified quality of presence, however, the client described the quality of her therapist that facilitated this healing as "reverence," a term that had not shown up in the therapist study literature.

Transpersonal Presence

Reverence: "There is something in his reactions...it's a greater reverence...for the person who's sitting across from him"

Intuition: "You sort of let the person's... energy ...wave over you, wash over you where you open yourself up to perceiving the information differently"

Energetic Connection: that's a really powerful moment...where you really feel like you are inviting something transpersonal and...you're connectedyou sort of flow into each other and start swirling around somewhere in the middle..."

Something greater: "That closing of the eyes feels like a bubble around [us]...that is more encompassing...bigger"

Between the first and second interviews, the client had two therapy sessions. In the initial interview she had commented that when her therapist said goodbye, he broke eye-contact in a way that she experienced as complex, on the one hand leaving her feeling "kind of lonely, shaken," but on the other "like an individual," stating "there's something in that separation that actually makes you feel safe...and held...he let's me leave...being me." She brought this up in therapy and noticed that he adapted his way of separating in a way that she experienced as more attuned. Reporting this in the second interview, she stated "And so, one of the things I also would add to being important in terms of presence is responsiveness." Responsiveness is not one of the factors that the studied therapists themselves had identified as a quality of presence.

The client stated at several points in both interviews that the process of reflecting on her experience as a client was increasing her awareness of what she needs to learn in order to become a good therapist. She described this both in terms of, for example, how the therapist modeled boundaries, and the implications for her experience of being contained, and how he accessed the states she described as representing presence.

This became particularly acute when she described her hypotheses about her therapist's internal experience in accessing presence. In order to do so, she modeled the behaviors she described as evidencing presence, e.g., closing her eyes, breathing deeply, and developing an internal focus of awareness, particularly using somatic cues as referents for her inferences about her therapist's state. In so doing, she accessed the sense of resonance between them. In a certain sense, she was simultaneously accessing her recall of being the recipient of her therapist's experienced presence, and "feeling into" her imagination of his experience. In so doing, she was modeling the process as a way of inquiry and, as such, evoking the mutually self-other reflective aspect of presence that seems to be characteristic of its essence. It seems to be precisely this parallel process that facilitates transcendence of the self-other boundary.

This points to another aspect of presence that was not explicitly identified in the therapist studies - the way that presence can be an implicit induction. In other words, in order to make inferences about her therapist's presence, she modeled the behaviors that she associated with it, which also associated her to the state she experienced as the recipient of his presence, which she inferred mirrored his state, and which she experienced as transcending the self-other boundary. Still more interesting was that the researcher simultaneously experienced being induced into this resonant state in the interview.

Discussion

In summary, the client's experience of her therapist's presence confirms many of the therapist-identified qualities and adds to them some significant factors. Her perceptions of her therapist's inward attention, immediacy, and receptivity, and the consequent sense of enhanced connectedness at energetic levels that seem to transcend ordinary relational boundaries, all reiterate the therapist presence literature.

Particularly, her emphasis on the somatic aspects of presence makes a strong contribution to the conversation. For her, being embodied represents grounded-ness, capacity for in-the-moment experiencing, a way of perceiving, and a way of contacting another energetically. It is uncertain whether this is uniquely her experience, or whether it might generalize to others. This would be an interesting direction for further research. It is also uncertain whether her therapist's ability to flexibly adapt to her feedback, while certainly a desirable trait in a therapist, constitutes a transpersonal dimension, but it clearly constitutes an aspect of presence. Most affecting is her perception of her therapist's ability to communicate reverence, not something noted in the literature, but clearly apropos.

Of all the qualities of presence that the client has contributed to this inquiry, the one that most dramatically focuses understanding on the nature of the phenomenon is its mutually inducing effect. This feature integrates the therapeutic aspect of presence with its research power, revealing nested parallel processes that could serve to both catalyze and explore simultaneous intra/inter/trans-personal inquiry in the first, second, and third person voices. This is very promising for potential future research and allows for the possibility of multiple levels of inquiry. Such research could facilitate a deepened understanding of the transpersonal-experiential aspects of psychotherapy process.

References

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