Workshop: A Structured Exercise to Explore Therapists’ Reactions, Emotions and Inner Voices during Family Therapy Sessions.

Presented by Ben Ong and Margaret Goldfinch (with contributions from Kristof Mikes-Liu and Chloe MacDonald). AAFP Conference, Cairns, 20 October 2016.


We are very interested in hearing about how others may use and adapt this presentation. Please let me know about any experiences you have or any changes you have made: benjamin.ong@health.nsw.gov.au

When we engage in dialogue with others we listen and we respond.

We tend to experience our responses as coming from our own voice, one voice that is our self. Sometimes, when we stop and observe, we notice that we respond in many ways to what we hear. Often these responses reflect the different roles and identities we have in our lives – our professional role, our stage of life, our gender and sex, our cultural background, the degree to which we feel a part of or separate from our communities, our spiritual identity, our belief system, our political affiliation.

As well as these personal roles and identities, we also respond with the voices of others who have had an impact on us. This can involve the others that are physically present with us in the room but also those from our lives

Our experience of others – real people, but also, perhaps important fictional or historical characters - becomes a part of ourselves. We might hear the voice of these internalised others when we hear something, or encounter a particular situation, especially if there is some resonance between our experience with that other and the situation in which we find ourselves. Sometimes the voices of others might surprise us with how strong they are. Sometimes, we might have to listen hard for them. Sometimes, they might be resources we can draw upon – What would they do or say in this situation? Sometimes, they might present a threatening or contradictory or humorous perspective. Sometimes these voices might seem one dimensional, and at others, they might be experienced as complex and multifaceted.

We respond to the world from different perspectives simultaneously. Another way of saying this is that we respond with different inner voices.

This exercise aims to draw attention to the idea of our inner voices by bringing about an experience of it. The exercise may feel a little artificial. It is not as though we can really draw out and categorise all of our inner voices, and characterise them definitively.

A second aspect of this workshop is to access the voices which arise for us in situations of complexity, ambiguity and stress; or of values conflict. We aim to give an experience of reflection which may help with reflecting –in-action as is often needed in a therapy session.
PART ONE – A HOST OF INNER VOICES

There are many parts of yourself that can be categorised. These different categories can be different perspectives on how to view the world.

Think about the perspectives from which you may see the world.

[gender]
[age]
[profession]
[work setting]
[nationality]
[cultural identity]
[sexual identity]
[religious identity]
[political affiliation]
[relationship status]
[sibling/only child]
[parent/non-parent]
[someone who has had a particular kind of experience]

Are there other parts of yourself or your role that you think are important?

Category

[____________________]
[____________________]
[____________________]
[____________________]
[____________________]
[____________________]

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Now think about persons or characters who have had an impact on your life. These may be over a long time or brief, through your experience sharing time with them or your knowledge and understanding of them. Their impact may be experienced as positive or negative, wise or practical or amusing or frustrating. They may be people you admire or people you loathe. They may be people whose impact on you is hard to categorise.

Ask yourself: Who had the biggest impact on me when I was growing up? At home? At school? Which character from history or literature or film do I most admire? Most detest? Who influenced my development as a young adult? As a person? As a professional? Whose advice do I respect when I'm not sure what to do?

Write down the names or identities of persons or characters who have had an impact on your life – perhaps positive, perhaps not so helpful, and include a brief description of their role in relation to your life (eg parent, teacher, fictional character):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person/Character</th>
<th>Role</th>
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The above lists might start to represent aspects of your inner dialogue.

Take some time to think about how each part of yourself, or each person or character in your life, might influence how you see the world. Are there some perspectives that are more similar, and others that seem more different?

From the first list (parts of yourself) choose two or three aspects of yourself that you think might guide or influence you in different ways. Please write them down:

1
2
3

From the list of persons or characters choose two or three persons who you think would have quite different views. Please write them down:

1
2
3

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PART TWO – A POLYPHONIC RESPONSE

Here we invite you to reflect on a situation where there are no clear answers; and we invite you to think about how you as an individual might respond to these situations, but then also how different internal voices might respond to them. For the purposes of this exercise, you might choose the internal voice perspectives randomly and/or because you are curious about how a response from that particular perspective might look. There are no right or wrong ways of responding – it can just be helpful to notice how different or similar the responses we generate might be.

Situation one
You see one of your clients, a 15 year old boy, who tells you that he feels very depressed because he is gay. He says his parents will reject him because of their religious beliefs and that he sees no option but to kill himself. He asks you not to let his parents know about his sexuality. His parents are very worried about him and they know that he has been cutting himself recently. They want you to tell them what is wrong with them.

"My" response:

_____________________________________________________

Perspective of __________________________. Response:

_____________________________________________________

Perspective of __________________________. Response:

_____________________________________________________

Perspective of __________________________. Response:

_____________________________________________________

Perspective of __________________________. Response:

_____________________________________________________

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PART THREE – NOTICING

In groups of 2 or 3 discuss your experience of this exercise and your response to it. The questions below may aid your discussion.

- How does your initial response compare to the responses of some of your internal voices?
- Were there any responses that surprised you? How?
- Were there any responses that troubled you? How?
- Were there any aspects of your internal dialogue that provided new insights or ideas after you paid some attention to them?
- To what extent was your internal polyphony a resource?
- To what extent was your vertical polyphony a hindrance or a problem?
- Is there any new understanding you have noticed during this exercise?
PART FOUR – INNER DIALOGUE IN THE MOMENT

In this part of the workshop we want to apply some of the understandings about vertical polyphony and apply it to a clinical situation “in the moment” when a response is required with limited time for reflection. In this exercise we will present a brief clinical scenario, at the end we want you to think of what your immediate default response is: what would you actually say?

Situation 2,
You are in a session with a mother and her two children. One of the children is a 12 year old girl who is your client, she has been referred for suicidal thoughts and self-harming while at school. The mother has spoken about a number of stressors in the family and also how she feels frustrated with the children and lack of support.

Abruptly she says “I wish I never had kids, life would be so much easier!”

What do you say in response? (5 seconds)

__________________________

What inner voices may have informed this response?

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________

With more reflective space what other inner voices do you become aware of? Maybe you can draw on some of the voices outlined above.

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________

Imaginate client’s reaction to your first (default) response. What may she say?

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________

Having accessed a range of inner voices how would you respond to the mother’s comment? Are there any differences?

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________

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Situation 3.

You have been seeing a 15 year old girl Hannah with depression and family stress for couple of months. You have had some joint sessions with Hannah and her mother. On the day before a scheduled session you receive a phone call from her mother. She tells you that she read in Hannah’s diary that she cut herself the night before, and is wondering whether she would rather die than go on struggling. She has not talked with Hannah about this, and doesn’t want her to know that she read the diary.

What do you say in response? (5 seconds)

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

What inner voices may have informed this response?

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

With more reflective space what other inner voices do you become aware of? Maybe you can draw on some of the voices outlined above.

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

Imagine client’s reaction to your first (default) response.

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

Having accessed a range of inner voices how would you respond to the mother’s comment? Are there any differences?

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