

Workshop: Exploring the Client's Words in Therapy

Introduction

The client brings to therapy their entire being of thoughts behaviours, emotions, and body. Various therapies are offered that focus the work through a particular mode of being, for example, thought or behaviour or emotion or body. All such therapies incorporate attention to the entire being of the client to one degree or another and the interrelating is mostly through the medium of speech; talking, as in, talking therapies.

In this essay the focus is on the client's talking. The purpose is to expand the client's awareness of their talking, of their language, and move to speech that embodies the experience in the speech. Ordinarily, talking is at a habitual level and not often moves to talking that is between and with the other. Through the separation of this everyday speech, so often neurotic in structure, and a move to speech that is connected in heart and mind the client begins to experience meaningful dialogue and connectedness in the present moment.

In this particular workshop will explore a technique to promote the embodiment of the client's (your) experience. In doing so there will be the experience of how this exploration can enhance, deepen and opens us up to closer contact and authentic engagement.

One aspect of the workshop is experiential work that is designed to explore, or at least, awaken the move from verbalising and towards what I will call poetic expression. What has moved me from verbal expression to poetic expression is the experience and impact of my own work in therapy and the intimate depth in relationship that is a privilege to experience with my own clients.

psychotherapy seeks to discover insight and create meaning utilizing a language that resonates with the client... Poetry, like therapy, utilizes a unique language of symbols, metaphors, and images to deepen one's understanding... the unique style and use of language allows the poem to make it something more. Similarly, therapists and clients develop a unique way of communicating rooted in symbols, metaphors, and images emerging from the client's experience and way of conceiving the world. (Hoffman & Pate, 2014, p. 1)

The client's words tell you their story in their world; it is their narrative. To understand your client is to understand their language, their words.



The structure of the 'expanding thoughts'

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Words

I want to begin with going back to time when I experienced verbal abuse and insult. I did get upset, I did feel rejected and bullied and attacked. "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" my mother would get me to say. I was 10, at another new school, a different playground, a different class, a different teacher, the same words, the same attack, the same withdrawal, the same difference felt. Today there are still words and phrases that cause me to want to react the same as back then. There is power in the association of words and our experiences such that words that hurt then continue to hurt now; words that soothe then continue to soothe now; and words that reject then continue to reject now. As the experiences and memories sit with me now I write...

Speak To Me Words.

Words are hurtful; words are full;

Words are kind; words are empty;

Words are wounding; words are flattering;

Words are gentle; words are grating;

Words are words; words are labels.

Words label; words identify, and categorise

Words sort; words classify, and organise

Words arrange; words position, and orchestrate

Words compose, words devise, and formulate

Words convey, words express, and define

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What is it that some words cut to our heart? Words that can sometimes be loving and words that are sometimes hating; and what is it that sometimes words don't cut us at all, that the words are sometimes received with passiveness and blankness?

The Meaning We Give

The meaning we give to the words we use and hear provides the context for the interpretation of the words – of the language - we are using. Thus in any interaction there is both the spoken meaning and the heard



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meaning. Meaning is co-created between the participants; and this also applies to the non-verbal communication.

Sticks and stones can hurt, and break my bones and words can also hurt, and break my spirit, confidence, esteem; and did hurt. So, imagine those experiences being attached to those words as you grow and continue in life. Imagine that hurt being held and becomes, perhaps, an irritation or discomfort, with certain phrasings and situations. Also, there may well be words and phrases that evoke comfort and satisfaction; imagine, recall.

Language – Assigned Meaning

When we relate our experiences to others, or indeed to our self, it is the use of language that we mostly employ.

“... language is an abstraction. At best, oral or written language is an imperfect representation of human experience” (Langer & Furman, 2004, p. 1)

Through the creative use of language, we are able to communicate our feelings, thoughts, needs and experiences. However, in the verbal communication of our experience the language used has the facility to remove the experience itself, leaving only the labelling – the assigned meaning. “We lose something when assigning meaning too quickly, attempting to put the experience in a tidy labelled box” (Cyndi, 2009, p. an online conversation).

What I am meaning by this is sometimes our words are disconnected from the experience and it is almost like we are paying lip service to the experience, not engaging with it, and instead concentrate on the speaking, a verbal exercise of recitation without connecting to any experience. This, then, is neurotic verbalising (Perls, et al., 1994, p. 100).

Neurotic verbalising is speaking that is disconnected and distant from the present-moment experience and is distinct from speaking that connects the present-moment experience, the situation, and the embodiment of the speaker. This is “contactful speech and poetry” (Perls, et al., 1994, p. 100).

” ... the contrary of neurotic verbalizing is various and creative speech; it is neither scientific semantics nor silence; it is poetry” (p. 321)

Here Perls et al (1994) are emphasising the power of contactful speech and, perhaps in some ways obviously,

“language is potentially one of the most powerful agents for contactfulness” (Polster & Polster, 1974, p. 152)

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Of course one aspect of language is specifically to assign common meaning to enhance our communication proficiency and efficiency. Within specific industries and commercial worlds there is a common understanding that goes with particular words and phrases. Therapy equally has this and in Gestalt therapy words such as Field and Contact and Here-and-Now are frequently thrown about.

Yet, might these also become 'sound bites'? The irony of describing verbalised speech with a 'verbalised label (sound bite) is not lost on me!

How much have we moved into labelled speech in which we go with the 'sound bites' of an action, or political position, or behaviour? There is too much of a movement away from genuine and heartfelt use of language.

I recall attending one of my regular Erskine¹ workshops and as I sat in Bilbao waiting for transportation I wondered whether a certain person would be attending. This person would have to come from the west coast of USA, so I doubted their attendance. As I looked out the window of the café I saw this person crossing the road. I was excited and happy and went out to say hello and, in perhaps a typical British fashion, merely uttered a 'so lovely to see you', whilst my heart was much more excited and deeply pleased.

Where was my spontaneity and embodied expression for our meeting? Well that came a few days later in the workshop when I faced and opened myself to risking shame and rejection by enacting a fresh and properly heartfelt greeting. This was a much more satisfying and releasing experience than the restricted retroflected action of the first greeting.

Verbalising or Speech

Continuing with the example of my greeting...

The first greeting was inhibited, subjected to introjects and retroflective acts that screamed at me to be contained, reserved; to not make a spectacle of myself. The second greeting was full of creative and spontaneous action meeting the Gestalt requirements of Contact where I was aware (of my own being, feelings etc.) in the situation and behaved in response to this.

With this latter greeting I was using Speech and in the former I was Verbalising. In my greeting at the café in Bilbao I was holding on my habitual, and enduring way of being. This way of being is described and defined, in Gestalt, as personality; the aspects from the past that we carry forward into the now-situation.

¹ Richard Erskine Relational and Integrative Psychotherapy 5-day Experiential Workshop:
<http://www.integrativetherapy.com/en/training.php?id=295>



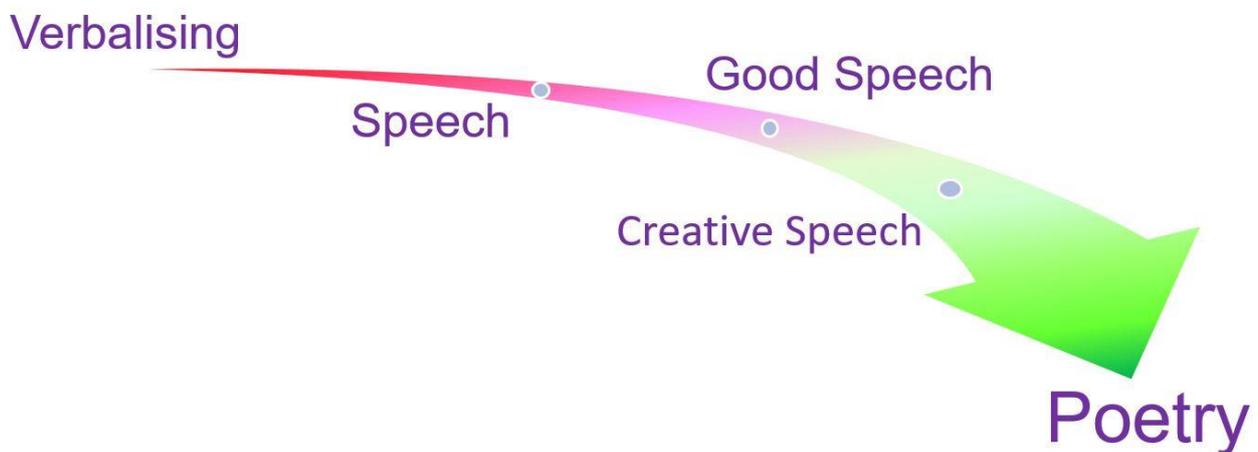
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(Perls, et al., 1994)². So this habitual, predefined, pre-referenced speaking out can be thought as our verbalising personality.

Whilst “speech is itself a profound spontaneous activity” (Perls, et al., 1994, p. 100) where there a disturbance – an interruption, a resistance to the growth of the original interpersonal relations standards, there is formed a “ ‘verbalizing’ personality” (Perls, et al., 1994, p. 100).

Progression of Speech

“...(Gestalt) therapy may be thought of as a long journey towards poetry.” (Sichera, 2003, p. 99)



Verbalising, neurotic verbalising in Perls' terminology, is disconnected speech. It is talking from our predefined positioning into the current situation. In a strict sense it is neurotic, though, I want to move away from this terminology to a more compassionate stance in line with us each being the best we can in the circumstances we have endured. To bring our rehearsed speaking to the present situation serves the protective function in the absence of any other possibility. Actually it is the situation that may be termed neurotic in that the person does not have situational and relational support to be encouraged to risk being any different.

Poetic Speech

The distinction between verbalising speech and poetry, essentially, comes down to the depth of contact of the speech.

² See page 160

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“Poetry is speech... as an organic problem-solving activity, it is a form of concentration...” (Perls et al., 1951, p323)

Poetry is the creating and making with words that which expresses most accurately the thoughts, feelings and experiences you have.

Labelling expressions as poetic, or as poetry, can lead to resistance. Resistance in accepting a description; resistance in imagining a meaning. Resistance through being instructed in school as to what poetry is – something deified, intellectualised.

The label of poetry indicates the books in school, in English lessons, exploring the poetry of W H Auden, Walter de la Mare, Siegfried Sassoon, D H Lawrence, and the likes. Also, the label poetry has connotations of intellectualism, of learned men; and also of memorising and reciting.

Opening myself to explore the word poetry leads me to my introject of limitation, of unskilled; that I am limited in my expressions. So I avoid the word, and instead speak of poetic expression.

My verbalised 'poetry'

At this moment in writing for the workshop in 2016 it came to me the importance to live this experience of 'the client's words'. What, for me, was behind this label 'poetry'? Could I speak of what this word has held over me. So, as you will have the opportunity in the workshop, I allowed myself to respond spontaneously and without edit my responses to uttering the word poetry. Below, is my honest written response, my most authentic response in this moment³ of what heartfelt thoughts came up for me ...

NEXT PAGE ...

³ What helped here was to take from my bookshelf the book of poems from my school days where my sister has written study notes for me that included 'the gradually lengthening stanzas, repeated sentence structure and the internal rhymes give the feeling of increasing insistence in the unborn child's prayer'



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POETRY

Sitting, isolated, muffled by the sounds
Bodies fidgeting, footsteps closing
I don't understand what is wanted of me

I'm told of the gradually lengthening stanzas,
What the ~~fuck~~ ^{HECK} does that mean!
So I'm angry or at least frustrated

My heart skips not with joy
Not with anyone, only through fear
Frustration, not anger, is my fearing

I don't know, I don't know
There's a repeated ~~hecking~~ ^{HECK} sentence
Not acceptable, stupid boy!

Shame, failing, again, not right
Wrong, again, to be punished
P P P Poetry is P P P Punishing

Ultimately, for me, poetry meant failure. Failure to understand the poet; the expectation of the teacher. So, to follow my own exploration I am meeting the introjects that tell me I am not good enough for poetry; I don't have the intelligence, the ability, the capacity for poetry.

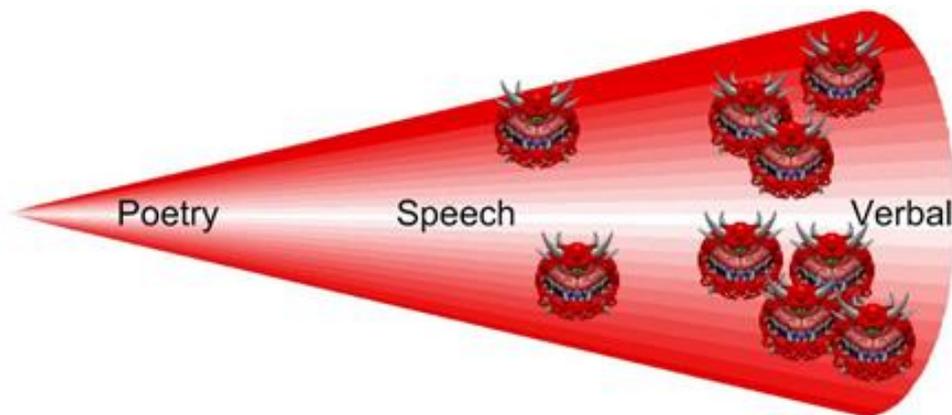
Shame (Kaufman, 1992) is powerful in this moment and is carried and bound with the use of the word 'poetry'. Uncovering what lies beneath allows for the therapeutic exploration to undo the knots that have entangled a word that is supposed to represent creating and making.

Through the exploration of the what the word 'poetry' held for me I am a released prisoner taking tentative steps and free.

"...(Gestalt) therapy may be thought of as a long journey towards poetry." (Sichera, 2003, p. 99)

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A long journey to poetry



At our core is Poetry, that may sometimes be Speech, yet most often is Verbal

The diagram shows how our spontaneous utterance (poetry) is subjected to introjected thoughts to a greater and greater extent from speech to verbalisation; firmer and more rigid introjection and greater retroflection.

In the context of working with the client's words we have the opportunity to move towards poetic expression where we have a dynamic in the relationship that points to the client's growth in contacting; the client is more poetic, speech is more ... poetry.

Intervening to create poetry

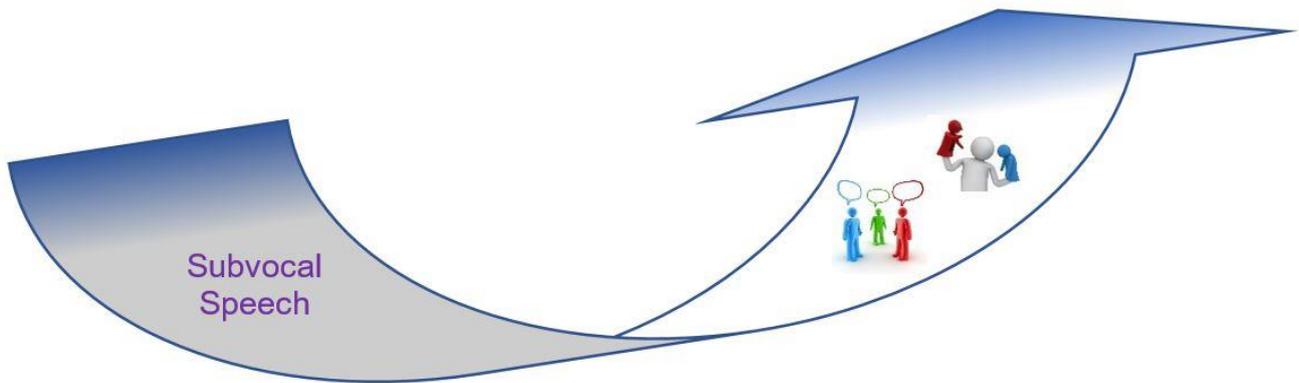
How might we support and encourage our client to move to language that is accurate for the present situation and that reduces the verbal personality of the client? As therapist, we are able to listen and hold the client to the moment so that the words might be understood in their situational significance. This process will uncover the verbalised talking with which together can be moved to greater sense of heartfelt meaning. We have the client listen not to the verbal, not to the speech, but to what comes before. To the thoughts and images and feelings created at the subvocal level that is their poetry.



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Subvocal speech

Creative thought is reliant on our sub-vocal speech (Perls, et al., 1994). Reliant, that is, on listening to our subvocal speech and responding.



“The verbal mind has a strong attachment to speech. We listen to our thoughts, consciously and subconsciously” (Spring, 2014)

What you are looking for is catching what the mind is editing out as the person speaks. Strictly speaking this is not the subvocal voice; it is post subvocal. I'm avoiding being pedantic as the importance here is to recognise that moment I am sure we all experience of 'biting back' a thought, an utterance, and revise the utterance. So often this is to ensure what is voiced is acceptable for the speaker and/or the audience.

In this process there is an adjustment, or an in-the-moment actualisation, that has a purpose of safety for the individual. So this is a defence from the possibility of attack. This would be, at least, an attack of historical origin so can be considered a creative adjustment (Perls, et al., 1994); or script belief (Berne, 1969); or an external locus of evaluation (Rogers, 1951).

Therefore, in pursuing a connection to what has been edited, and not uttered, it is necessary to be mindful to press with interest and not push through or break the defence.

Your interest will be to hear the unfinished sentence; the words that are halted and substituted with another. To be curious about the shift in words or sentence; to be curious about what halted the words being spoken.

This is the intervention in the therapy work. The moment when you might give attention to the words used by your client. The impetus might come from your own sense of there being something deeper, or simply

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different, that is wanting to be expressed. Alternatively, you might at this moment be finding the client is, as described by Perls (1994), verbalising and not in touch with any felt, or bodily, or even cognitive sense of being. Sometimes as therapist there is a sense that the client is going nowhere, that you, the work, is not moving; maybe stagnant, maybe stuck.

The encouragement to be creative

Everything in this writing is about attending to experiences. And all experiences are different so there is no prescriptive position or script; what you do in this cannot be manualised. This is about an attitude of exploration and focus into the client's world. So we are talking about empathic engagement (Rogers, 1951), at least, and practicing inclusion (Hycner & Jacobs, 1995).

The greater your attunement (Erskine, et al., 1999) with your client the greater the opportunity for appropriate guidance in this exploration.

Contradictory to this is to provide guidelines for this exploration; an exploration that mirrors your therapeutic interventions of your work. What is important is to hold onto the process and principles of the exploration and not to obsessively prescribe to these guiding points.

- With this word/phrase/expression what gets stirred in you; are there images, colours, shapes, feelings?
- What other words help to portray all of this?
- Unedited, what words come to mind;
- Ignore the reactive voice to your words;
- Hear and hold what pops up, uninhibited by explanation.
- Gather these words/phrases together, here, in front of us
- Write this down – without editing or explaining;
- Explore how these fit to describe the experience you are having.
- How are these linking together?
- Order these words and phrases to your own meaningful sense
- Order, re-order, edit, change, amend to fit the deepest feeling part of you

In the therapy room you give yourself and your client permission to dig around and unearth the archaeology of the experience. Thank you for reading



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