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ABSTRACT

A brief overview of the role of emotions in facilitating client change from a constructivist perspective is provided in this paper. With this background in place, several case studies will be discussed to illustrate the impact and role of emotions in facilitating change in counseling and career development. (Author)

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The Role of Emotions in Facilitating Client Change in Counselling and Career Development

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Many counsellors are not sure what to do when clients express a large amount of emotion. Some counsellors may become afraid of these emotions and attempt to shut the client down. Others may attempt to change the topic. Others may initiate some type of intervention designed to alleviate the emotions displayed by their clients. Finally, some counsellors may find them themselves engaged in strategies designed to search for solutions to these emotional concerns. There are times, however, when clients need to feel, be with, express, and experience their powerful emotions. In fact, counsellors who are aware of the power of strong emotions may utilize these times to promote and initiate deep and profound changes within the lives of their clients. To help counsellors to gain a better understanding of this, a brief overview of the role of emotions in facilitating client change from a constructivist perspective is provided in this paper. With this background in place, several case studies will be discussed to illustrate the impact and role of emotions in facilitating change in counselling and career development. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information in the case studies has been omitted and/or changed.

The Constructivist Perspective on Change and Emotions

Constructivist counsellors such as Lyddon (1990) begin this discussion by differentiating first order change from second order change. First order change is described as change that results from learning new skills. These new skills provide one with the information necessary to effect a change in one's life. To illustrate, an individual may learn progressive relaxation as a skill to alleviate the effects of stress. Another example may be that a parent learns some particular discipline strategies to alleviate some of the stressors of parenting. These newly acquired skills/knowledge may be very effective in reducing stress levels. In fact, these skills / knowledge may be all that clients need to reduce stress. In general, first order change attempts to provide some learning that is designed to alleviate negative emotions that both client and counsellor have agreed to target within the goals of counselling.

In contrast, second order change is very emotional. Typically the individual has encountered some difficult life circumstances and these challenging times have produced an uncomfortable phase of disequilibrium. The strong emotions that accompany these difficult times prompt the individual to ascribe meaning to one's experiences and make sense of the difficult events in order to achieve a sense of equilibrium in one's life again. This results in a reordering of constructs that promotes the recalibration of experiences, thoughts and feelings and implies a reordering of constructs wherein the client has the opportunity to ascribe new meaning to self and environment (Lyddon, 1990).

From a constructivist perspective, emotions are viewed as a powerful and primitive source of knowledge. They are seen as a critical part of the system's functioning and are not subordinate to cognition. Emotions are considered to be a catalyst or powerful agent in the disorganization of the client's system (Lyddon, 1990, Mahoney, 1991). Consequently, constructivists believe that counsellors may need to utilize strong emotions to initiate deep and profound client change as the client reorganizes one's constructs to accommodate changes that may be forced upon the client by difficult life circumstances. In other words, counsellors may need to encourage and stimulate the uncomfortable phase of disequilibrium in order for meaningful change to occur (Cochran, 1990, 1992). Therefore, in constructivist counselling and second order change, the goal is not to remove negative emotions, but to torque negative emotions. Counsellors torque negative emotions by staying within the affective domain and by reflecting the affect displayed at high levels of intensity. In other words, they do not change the topic or domain of counselling, nor are their reflections designed to decrease the level of affective intensity. This increases the degree of disequilibrium and, therefore, the likelihood that permanent and profound changes may be achieved.

To illustrate what this all means in the real world of counselling, the writer will now describe several case studies that exemplify the role of strong emotions in enhancing client change.

Case Study #1

In the first case study, a husband and wife came to counselling. The wife complained how about how she felt suffocated in the relationship. Specifically, she reported that her husband (believe it or not!!) was around too much, that he was too helpful, did too much for her and the kids and needed to back off and give his wife more space and more things to do. Unfortunately, the counsellor had more experience dealing with people who claimed their spouse was not around enough and did not help out enough!! Consequently, the counsellor became intrigued with this dilemma and inquired about the history of this problem. The couple reported that this had been a problem for about

the last 4-5 years. The counsellor then went on to complete a thorough history in order to explore the dynamics of this problem in detail. Upon deeper exploration the couple identified a significant event that led to the problem of the husband's over involvement.

Apparently, prior to the last 4-5 years, the husband was a workaholic, overly dedicated to his employing organization and never home. He was perceived to be an 'all-star' at work and most certainly deemed to be the most promising candidate for promotion within the organization. With great success came friendly colleagues who attempted to align themselves with this person to ensure they would benefit from their alignment with an 'all-star'. Just when it looked like things could not get any better at work, the 'all-star' was falsely accused of sexual assault. The husband was devastated at such accusations and fought vigorously to successfully defend himself. Even more devastating to him than the false allegations, was the harsh reality that many of the people who had aligned with him during his 'glory days' attempted to use this time to elevate their own status by spreading and exacerbating the details of rumors designed to further depreciate the client and therefore elevate their own profile.

The client was devastated by those he had perceived to be his 'friends'. Ultimately, the client learned who his true friends were and reexamined his priorities. This extremely difficult time put this client into a very emotional state of disequilibrium wherein he attempted to ascribe meaning to his experience and make sense of this significant event. Specifically, the client asked himself " How could I have spent so much time with things and people who meant so little?" A reordering of constructs occurred wherein the client had the opportunity to ascribe new meaning to himself and his environment. This ultimately led him to rebalance his life/work roles and spend more time with those who really mattered – his wife and children.

What is most interesting is that this case study clearly depicted the powerful effect that life circumstances and strong emotions can have in producing profound, permanent and life altering changes. This was done without the aid of a counsellor. As noted in the introduction, many counsellors who hear such alarming stories attempt to take the emotional pain of such events away. Without the aid of a counsellor, this client remained with his intense feelings. The writer believes it was staying with these intense feelings that created a reconstruction of his life's priorities, in fact too much so from the perspective of his wife!!

Now obviously, the wife's original complaints warrant attention and rebalancing so she did not feel smothered by his overly helpful and devoted manner. The relationship counselling proceeded to do this.

Case Study #2

In the second case study, a wife came to counselling complaining that she was not spending enough time with her husband. Specifically, she stated that she felt ignored by her husband and wanted to spend more time with him. She went on to describe some ways she had tried to 'wake him up' to the marriage. For example, she had talked to him about how they should spend more time together, do more things together, she wrote him notes to further explain what they could do together, she made sexual advances towards him by sitting on him without any clothes on while he ignored her and continued to watch television, she told him she had a boyfriend when she did not, she told him she was having an affair when she was not. In sum, this woman was very detailed in her attempts to 'wake him up'.

She came to counselling as one more step on her plan to 'try everything'. She documented her efforts and asked the counsellor to meet with her husband. Her husband came to one appointment and insisted that all was well in the marriage and refused to engage in counselling as it was 'not needed' at this point. Feeling one more unsuccessful attempt, the wife continued (on her own) to find ways to 'wake him up'. Her next step was to find someone she did not overly care about to have an affair with. Her husband found out about her affair via cell phone bills. Finally, she had 'waken up' her husband. He was devastated. He reported severe trouble concentrating at work and had become extremely emotional. He promptly engaged fully in counselling wherein the counsellor was careful to torque and not take away his strong emotions. Again, it was this life circumstance along with strong emotions that led to a profound, permanent and life altering change. The husband had to make sense of his intense emotions, in doing so he stated: " Nothing worked, I needed a bat to the knees, I will walk with a limp for the rest of my life." ..."I need the limp, forever, as a reminder to attend to my relationship."

The client had this advice for counsellors: " You can confront in session, fake the bat or have another client tell their story to hope people will learn, but sometimes people just need a big bat to the knees in order to change." ..."Sometimes life circumstances and strong emotions have to come in, in order for people to make changes."

The client's statements resonate powerfully with the role of strong emotions in facilitating client change and parallel the constructivist thoughts on second order change. Both the husband and wife went on to describe that he had, in fact, 'waken up' and that their relationship had never been so good, even on follow-up over 1 year later.

Case Study #3

In the third case study a man in his fifties urgently came to counselling with the symptoms of a Major Depression. Upon further exploration this man also revealed a history of obsessive-compulsive personality traits. Specifically, he described telling himself throughout his life how he needed to work hard, be efficient, stay focused and be productive at all times. He described being so 'busy' that he would start work at 7:00, not take breaks, not stop of lunch and not be home for dinner until 6:00. He would quickly eat and then get back to work until 12:00 when he would go to bed. He described not taking vacations, not doing anything pleasurable and not doing any exercise. Such productivity made him financially very successful.

Unfortunately, over time, he became more and more tired until he fell into a Major Depression. The intense feelings of the Major Depression were foreign and very uncomfortable for him. The counsellor torqued these negative emotions in counselling and had the client do some analogue recording of self-referenced thoughts for homework in order to get the client to 'discover' the relationship between his intensely negative feelings and his hard driving, productive and efficient personality traits. As the client became increasingly uncomfortable with the strong negative emotions and as he began to see the link between his harsh thinking and his negative feelings, he became very motivated to change. Observing the link between his harsh thinking and his negative feelings provided the mechanism for permanent change in behavior, thoughts and feelings. In other words, this client needed to be with, experience and make sense of his strong negative emotions in order for him to be uncomfortable enough to discover the link between his personality traits and his Major Depression. Much like the clients in the previous case studies, this client needed to engage in the uncomfortable stage of disequilibrium in order for meaningful change to occur.

Ultimately, this client recovered from his Major Depression. He slowed down, learned to take breaks throughout the day and he even began to take both summer and winter vacations. He changed his workday to start at 8:00 and end at 5:00, he began to exercise and engage in pleasurable activities on his own and with his family when he was not working. Overall, this client put much less pressure on himself to be productive and efficient with every moment of his day.

So what does this all have to do with career counselling? Do the ideas of the constructivists and the role of emotions have anything to do with producing change within career counselling? To answer these questions, two brief career counselling examples are provided to illustrate the role of emotions in facilitating client change in career development.

A Negative Career Counselling Example

Most career development practitioners will be familiar with this example as it is has become fairly common, as organizations have attempted to restructure and downsize. The organization asks a practitioner to conduct career development workshops so that employees will be encouraged to 'take responsibility' for their careers as, as the organization knows it will be engaging in layoffs/downsizing/restructuring. Many people at the workshops engage well and do learn to take responsibility for their own careers. Yet there are always some who ignore the workshop and do not see it's relevance, as they believe the organization will continue to 'look after them' as it has in the past. Unfortunately, the employee who did not see the need to take responsibility for one's career is became laid off. Devastated, shocked, and very emotional, the employee is now eager to learn how to take responsibility for one's career. In making sense of one's experience, and displaying evidence of change, the laid off employee states: "I will never be in that position again."

A Positive Career Counselling Example

We have all heard of or read about the individual who because of a strong vision (emotions, passion, dream, fuel, energy) has achieved the 'impossible'. These people frequently explain that they achieved the 'impossible' because strong emotions led them to believe they would not/could not fail. These emotions essentially acted as the fuel or energy for kicking down the barriers to achieving their dreams. This is just one more example (this time a positive example) of how strong emotions can result in profound, permanent and life altering change within counselling and career development.

Summary

This paper has introduced readers to the role of emotions in client change in counselling and career development. A constructivist perspective was used to differentiate first order from second order change. Finally, several cases studies were used to illustrate the reality of these concepts. Each case study showed different manifestations of these principles to exemplify how profound, permanent and life altering change may be achieved across a variety of personal and career related contexts.

Sometimes people change by learning new skills (e.g., progressive relaxation to deal with stress). However, sometimes people require significant life circumstances and strong emotions for them to consider changing. It was suggested that counsellors need to understand the significance of strong emotions so that these emotions may be appropriately torqued to help people to make meaningful changes. A wise client reminded counsellors to remember " you can confront in session, fake the bat or have another client tell their story to hope people will learn, but sometimes people need a big bat to the knees in order to change."

The counsellor's role is to ensure the bat (strong emotions) are not taken away too soon as they/it may be needed to ensure profound, permanent and life altering change has occurred. One of the biggest mistakes we can make is to take the 'pain' of strong emotions away too quickly. Learning how to modulate this is important learning for counsellors.

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