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Talk as therapy: an Integrative Psychotherapy perspective

Interaction transpiring between psychotherapist and client has been – since the time of Breuer and Freud (1895/1957) – referred to as the ‘talking cure’ as talk, in this context, functions as the essential tool in improving the mental health of the client. Discourse itself then, is not only central to psychotherapy but in fact constitutes the very practice. What still remains underachieved, however, is fully identifying which specific language features and interactional strategies contribute to the therapeutic effect by enabling clients to shift their self-perception to open new relational possibilities that make behavioral change possible.

In this presentation, which constitutes a post-doctoral project report, three discourse norms indispensable for a social interaction to be qualified as psychotherapy will be proposed. Then, drawing on methods and insights from discourse analysis, conversation analysis and interactional sociolinguistics, it will be demonstrated how these norms are operationalized – i.e., linguistically achieved and contextually realized – by specific verbal and non-verbal practices in actual psychotherapy sessions. Data taken from a corpus of audio recordings of therapy sessions conducted in August and October of 2004 document the practical application of a Relational Psychotherapy approach based on such techniques as, among others, inquiry, attunement, and involvement (Erskine et al. 1999).

Interestingly, and perhaps contrary to popular opinion, psychotherapeutic talk draws on the mundane, quite unsensational and recognizable practices whose transformational value consists in disclosing one’s (typically) dysphoric experiences, clarifying and exploring them in the interactional here-and-now as well as focusing on their emotional aspects in the safety of the relationship with the therapist, a facilitator of the therapeutic endeavor.

References

- Breuer, Josef – Sigmund Freud. 1957. *Studies on Hysteria*. New York: Basic Books.
Erskine, Richard – Janet Moursund – Rebecca Trautmann. 1999. *Beyond Empathy: A Therapy of Contact in Relationship*. Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel.