

Notes on Self-presentation in Supervisory Sessions

Introduction. An important aspect of counsellor training is the supervisory session. These are occasions where the trainee and supervisor, and sometimes other co-trainees, discuss the performance of the trainee during counselling interviews. The purpose of such discussions is to provide the trainee with feedback on his or her use of counselling skill, to discuss the impact of the counselling on clients, and to generally guide the trainee in the direction of better use of counselling skill and validated identity as a competent counsellor.

Such discussions implicate the self-identities of trainees and bring forth many examples of self-presentation repair behavior. It is, of course, important for trainees that they be perceived as competent by others and by themselves as well. Needless to say, all behavior in training does not meet high standards of competency, so the self identities of trainees are often under threat. It is normal to use "repair" strategies when the self is in danger of being perceived in ways other than the self-presenter wishes to be viewed. How does this repairing proceed?

Self and audiences. Before going on to give an answer to the preceding question, it is valuable to realize that self-presentation (or self-identification) always involves one or more real or imagined audiences. The first audience is the self. Individuals have internalized values, self-knowledge, norms, and expectations which form the basis for self-evaluation and self-regulation. The internal dialogue of "I"- "Me" indicates the process of presenting self to self.

The second audience is the immediate others with whom one interacts--in the case under consideration, with supervisors and peers in training. This audience can influence one's self presentation when they are present (as in the supervisory session) or when future interactions are anticipated, or when when past interactions are contemplated and reviewed.

A third audience is reference others who have achieved a prominence in one's life. Examples of this audience include parents, best friends, spouses, admired mentors, and important reference group members.

The self-as-audience may be best thought of as a private audience although access to this audience can be gained through self-disclosure, journal writing, and deliberate description of private perceptions, thoughts, feelings and fantasies. The other two audiences are public. All three audience types can be construed as self-evaluation frameworks by means of which the individual can assess his or her self identification.

Positive and negative self identifications. If people perceive that their self-identifications are not meeting appropriate standards, they are likely to experience negative affect, feel bad about themselves, and anticipate negative evaluations or sanctions from audience members. Conversely, if one perceives that one's self-identifications meets or exceeds appropriate personal or social standards, the result is experience of positive affect, feeling good about self, and the anticipation of positive evaluations or sanctions from audience members. Positive experiences of self are directly attributable to three factors:

- 1 the importance of the standards which apply to this situation
- 2 the extent to which performance is judged to exceed the standards
- 3 the extent to which the actor attributes responsibility for the performance to the self as opposed to external conditions or luck.

As I stated above, in training situations, there is direct scrutiny of behaviors and expressed attitudes and perceptions which are relevant to the counselling performance. Sometimes the discussions focus on aspects of performance which do meet or exceed context-appropriate standards. At other times, trainee performances which do not appear to meet context-appropriate standards will be examined, discussed and evaluated. In any supervisory session there is always the potential for both positive and negative experience of self-identification.

Facework tactics. There are a number of well identified tactics which individuals may employ to defend or repair self-identifications. While such tactics do have a "coping" or self-survival function, they also can prevent the trainee from "taking in" and "learning from" the feedback comments of others. Some individuals seem to be able to receive both positive and negative feedback on performance without becoming self-defensive while other per-

sons are highly defended. Accounting for one's own performance and making repairs to one's self as presented is often called "doing facework". What follows are 12 facework tactics which may be used to bolster self-presentations:

- 1 Defensively changing the topic.

"I get your point, but what I'd really like to talk about is"

- 2 Excusing the performance.

"I havent been feeling well lately".

- 3 Making redeeming statements.

"I do much better than this most of the time".

- 4 Minimizing poor performance by derogating the task.

" Well, this is only role-play, it is so artificial".

- 5 Denying failure or poor performance.

"No one could have done this--I'd like to see you do it!"

- 6 Fishing for reassurance.

"I hope that you understand that I'm doing my best".

- 7 Scapegoating.

"Actually, you didn't give me clear instructions and I had such a bad client".

- 8 Claiming that behavior is misrepresented.

"It didn't really go that way--you are not seeing the real me"

- 9 Denying volition.

"I didn't want to do that, but I was misled by instructions."

- 10 Denying intention.

"I didn't mean to say that--it just popped out."

11 Denying agency.

"I don't know what got into me".

12 Denying others' credibility.

"I don't think you can make that judgment--you are not a doctor, are you?" "What I want to know, have you ever had any practical counselling experience?"

The purpose of facework tactics is to counteract or re-interpret unwanted information or evaluations so that they become more consonant with the self which is being presented in the particular situation.

Individuals frequently engage in such self-repair. For the most part they seem to remain unaware of their own face-work even though it appears quite obvious to others that they are engaged in face-work.

Facework is designed to maintain the self image and has obvious coping value. However, in learning situations where the objective is to make improvements in performance and to validate improvements in performance (and self-presentations) facework serves to defend or protect the "habitual" self identity and performance and thus to block avenues to change and performance modification. The "face-work specialist" is saying: "accept me the way I present myself to you for that is the way I really am and want to be perceived".

By bringing facework to the attention of trainees, it is my intention to assist trainees to recognize these tactics in their own and others' behavior. Such awareness can be used to increase one's own learning capacity and can be applied with benefit to certain counselling situations.

Perhaps the basic questions to ask of oneself in regard to facework during the supervisory session are:

Am I aware that I am presenting a self that I wish others to perceive and accept as appropriate for this context?

Am I aware of the specific expressions which I (and others) use to defend or repair self-identifications?

Is the self identification which I am presenting one which will allow me to remain open to information which indicates that I need to change my performance in order to improve my effectiveness as a counsellor?

Am I able to listen to both positive and negative comments about my performance and my self-identity and at the same time maintain a readiness to modify myself and my performance based on the information I hear?

I will close by adding the observation that supervisors and clients as well use facework tactics to make public self-presentations as well!

Three excellent sources for further study of self-presentation and facework are:

Baumeister, Roy. (1986). Public self and private self. New York: Springer-Verlag, Inc.

Friedlander, M.L., and Schwartz, G. (1985) Toward a theory of strategic self-presentation in counselling and psychotherapy. In Journal of Counseling Psychology, 32, 4, 483-501.

Semin, G.R., and Manstead, A.S.R. (1983). The accountability of conduct: A social psychological analysis. New York: Academic Press.

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