
Patterns of interaction and psychotherapeutic change

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Today most psychotherapists and researchers agree that a "good" relationship between client and therapist contributes essentially to therapeutic change. But what are the distinctive characteristics of a good therapeutic relationship? What interactive behavior can enhance therapeutic change? This paper investigates the significance of psychotherapeutic interaction for psychotherapeutic work and change (1)

In former studies we have described interactive patterns that the client enacts with the therapist when talking about guilt feelings. We call these patterns *traps*. This name is meant to reflect the seductive power of these interactive patterns. The enactment of a trap is perceived by the therapist as a strong appeal to react in a specific way (the therapist thus "being trapped"). We were particularly interested in the functions of these traps for the client's affective regulation and for the therapeutic relationship (Bänninger-Huber, 1996; Bänninger-Huber & Widmer, 1995). Our actual research concentrates on the therapist's participation in these traps, and on psychotherapeutic change (Bänninger-Huber & Widmer, 1996b).

Our research approach integrates concepts, methods and knowledge from emotion psychology, psychoanalysis, interaction research, and cognitive science. While invaluable procedures for the systematic observation of interactive behavior have been developed in the fields of interaction and emotion research, psychoanalysis provides sophisticated models of intrapsychic processes and pertinent concepts of the therapeutic relationship.

Data and methods

Five successive sessions of a psychoanalytic psychotherapy with a young woman, Mrs. D., have been investigated, using a single case design. The client had sought therapeutic help because of depressive symptoms. Therapy sessions took place twice a week and the therapy lasted about one year and a half. The main topic of the therapy were the client's relationship problems, especially conflicts with her husband. During the sessions under scrutiny she repeatedly talked about her guilt feelings.

The videotapes of the therapy sessions were analyzed on different conceptual levels using different methods, focusing on verbal as well as nonverbal aspects of the material. The occurring narrative episodes, in which the client mentions experienced guilt feelings and reports the situations of her everyday life that led to this emotion, are extracted. They are analyzed by a so-called frame (2) (Lüthy & Widmer, 1992; Widmer, 1997). For the description of nonverbal aspects, especially the facial behavior of client and therapist, we developed a method for the microanalytic description of cognitive-affective processes in dyadic face-to-face interactions (Bänninger-Huber, Moser & Steiner, 1990; Bänninger-Huber, 1992; Bänninger-Huber & v. Salisch, 1994). This method is based on the Facial Action Coding System (FACS) by Ekman & Friesen (1978).

We understand interaction as a dyadic process, which is induced and influenced by both interactive partners. Therefore, the goal of the methods applied is to capture the behavior of both, client and therapist, and their interdependence. Whereas the investigated narrative episodes last up to several minutes, the nonverbal processes under scrutiny take only few seconds.

What are traps?

During the sessions examined, specific patterns of interaction could be observed, which repeatedly occur in the context of reported guilt feelings. As mentioned above, we call these patterns "traps" (e.g., Bänninger-Huber & Widmer, 1995; Widmer & Bänninger-Huber, 1996). Traps may be understood as follows (Bänninger-Huber & Widmer, 1996a):

The remembering and reporting of an episode which elicited guilt feelings reactivates this emotion in the client in the *hic et nunc* of the psychotherapeutic session. The feelings of guilt occur in the present situation either as an experienced or as an unconscious affect. In order to cope with his or her disturbance of affective regulation indicated by guilt feelings, the client shows specific interactive behavior that is likely to induce specific reactions in the therapist.

In the context of guilt feelings the client's offer of specific roles to the therapist is mostly the role of an authority figure that is asked to comment on the conflict presented by the client. The therapist may accept this role and react accordingly or not. (The interactive behavior shown by a client is characterized by specific patterns of verbal and nonverbal, especially facial behavior. As these processes take place very rapidly we assume that they mostly occur unconsciously. Such interactive patterns are perceived by the therapist, however, as an appeal to show a particular reaction.)

In different therapies investigated by us, several types of traps with distinctive structures could be distinguished. One example of such an interactive pattern is the legitimization trap (3) In legitimization traps the therapist as an authority figure is encouraged to legitimize the client's reported behavior and reactions, that cause him or her guilt feelings. Mrs. D. mainly describes situations, in which she acted out her aggressive impulses such as provocative behavior or nasty remarks in connection with her attempts to undertake autonomous endeavors. Thus, legitimization traps basically serve the function to reduce a client's guilt feelings (at least for a short period of time). By that, a client may avoid to deal with his or her intrapsychic conflicts. From a psychoanalytical perspective traps may therefore be understood as a form of resistance acted out interactively.

According to their interactive course, i.e., the reaction of the therapist, *successful* and *unsuccessful traps* can be distinguished (4) In successful traps the therapist takes on the role of the authority figure and reacts verbally with a comment as wished by the client. In unsuccessful traps, however, she or he omits such a verbal reaction.

Prototypical Affective Microsequences (PAMs)

Traps usually last between 15 seconds and one or two minutes. So-called *prototypical affective microsequences* (= PAMs) are important elements of these traps; they last some seconds. PAMs are mainly expressed nonverbally and are characterized by frequent smiling and laughing of both, client and therapist (Bänninger-Huber, 1992, 1996; Bänninger-Huber, Moser & Steiner, 1990). They serve as a mean of relationship regulation and are a product of the regulatory activity of both persons involved in the interaction. PAMs are not specific for guilt feelings, but can be observed in the context of several negative emotions.

We differentiate between successful and unsuccessful PAMs. *Successful PAMs* are characterized by the fact that the client succeeds, by smiling or laughing, in establishing a resonant affective state with the therapist: He or she reciprocates the client's smile or laughter. This gives the client a sense of security that is a precondition for him or her to go on working on conflictive topics. In *unsuccessful PAMs*, however, the client does not succeed in establishing a resonant state with the therapist. Instead, the therapist may (for example) respond with a verbal intervention, in which he or she refers to the negative emotions mentioned previously by the client.

Presentation of a legitimization trap: "it's not as bad as that"

In the following, an example of a legitimization trap will be presented. In order to picture the phenomena investigated we restrict our description to the core elements of this sequence and try to describe the process in everyday language. This legitimization trap ("it's not as bad as that") takes place about 16 minutes after the beginning of the 38th therapy session and lasts approximately 7 seconds.

We start about one minute before the onset of the trap. After a narration, in which Mrs. D. explicitly talks about guilt feelings, the following narrative episode comes to her mind:

The client tells the therapist that she once more had a quarrel with her husband because she planned to miss one of two drawing lessons she regularly attended. These lessons were paid by her husband. Instead of attending the second lesson she was going to leave after the break and to go to a rock concert with a woman friend. She stresses that she regarded this as a good compromise - to visit at least one lesson before she was going to have fun. Her husband, however, had got mad at her when she had let him know her plans. Shortly after completing this story the client turns her head away and shrugs. Then, she turns towards the therapist again, commenting "but I don't think that's so bad, it's not as bad as that." This kind of appraising comment can be observed frequently in the context of the narrative episodes in which guilt feelings occur.

During this comment the client shows a particular facial expression: While smiling, she raises her eye-brows and simultaneously contracts them (AUs: 1+2+4+12y+25). With her tone of voice and her facial movements the client can be perceived as a person who seeks sympathy and support. At the same time, her performance leaves a slightly ironical impression. It is not clear whether the client's utterances are meant to be taken seriously or if she is just joking. It is up to the therapist to choose which meaning seems appropriate to her. Here, the client's expressive behavior provokes the therapist's laughter and the client joins in.

Additionally, the nonverbal behavior of the client is a request to the therapist to respond verbally to the client's comment. We suppose that the client would like the therapist to confirm the legitimacy of her action (the missing of the drawing lesson), saying something like "of course as a grown up woman it is up to you to decide whether you prefer to go drawing or to the concert." Here, the therapist merely laughs spontaneously and says "no", thus confirming the client's comment.

How can we understand productive therapeutic work in terms of traps and PAMs? With regard to the effectiveness of psychotherapeutic performance we now have to focus on the question, which reactions of a therapist to such traps can enhance therapeutic change.

The "balance hypothesis"

In recent years psychoanalysts emphasize the importance of interactive processes for psychotherapeutic change (e.g., Sandler, 1976; Klüwer, 1983; Roughton, 1993; for an overview see *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 1996, Vol. 16). Interactive role offers by which the client unconsciously invites the therapist to show specific reactions are described. In the therapist's countertransference, these enactments are experienced as emotions, fantasies or action tendencies. Several authors stress the significance of the therapist's involvement in enactments for the understanding of a client's neurotic relationship patterns (e.g., Krause, 1997). Therefore, it is the therapist's task to recognize these role offers rather than to participate in their repetition or to omit them by a strict realization of abstinence. The interpretation of these neurotic patterns, however, requires a solid working alliance.

Basically, the therapist has to fulfill a double function: On the one side, he or she has to provide a reliable working alliance to give the client a basic sense of security. This enables the client to explore his or her experiences and behaviors and to accept and understand the therapist's interventions. On the other side, the therapist has to maintain a certain level of conflictive tension by not taking over the client's role offers repeatedly. The maintenance of the tension is a prerequisite for recognizing and working on the client's problems. Sullivan, for example, advises the therapist to keep up the level of tension which a client just can bear and which does not evoke destructive manifestations of resistance (Sullivan, 1954; Moser, 1964).

The therapist's observable reactions to traps: Theoretical considerations

Traps and PAMs can be described from a phenomenological and from a functional perspective. From a phenomenological point of view, different combinations of successful or unsuccessful traps with successful or unsuccessful PAMs may occur (see Table 1).

A successful PAM, for example, may be integrated in an unsuccessful trap: The therapist may show

no verbal reaction but specific nonverbal behavior as wished by the client (e.g., smiling, laughing). In another case (unsuccessful PAM, unsuccessful trap), the therapist may neither react with a smile or laughter nor give the desired verbal confirmation.

TRAP

PAM		unsuccessful	successful
		no smiling/laughing no verbalization	no smiling/laughing verbal confirmation
	unsuccessful		
	successful	smiling/laughing no verbalization	smiling/laughing verbal confirmation

Table 1. Prototypical combinations of the therapist's reactions in successful and unsuccessful traps and PAMs

According to their function, the following types of interaction may be distinguished (see Table 2). The combination of an unsuccessful trap with an unsuccessful PAM increases the conflictive tension and thus allows therapeutic work on the conflict and the related affects. At the same time, a temporary destabilization of the working alliance has to be accepted. This strategy follows the rules of *classical psychoanalytical abstinence*.

A successful trap combined with a successful PAM stabilizes the working alliance and a reduces the conflictive tension. Such an interactive pattern are characteristic for *interactions in everyday life*: The therapist reacts as wished by the client and tends to take over the roles offered by the client.

An unsuccessful trap in combination with a successful PAM results in an enhancement of the working alliance while the conflict remains activated. This attitude could be designated *friendly refusal*.

TRAP

		unsuccessful		successful	
		classical abstinence		reserved confirmation	
PAM	unsuccessful	conflict	activated	conflict	deactivated
		affect (guilt feelings)	occurrent	affect (guilt feelings)	absent
			insecure		insecure
		working alliance		working alliance	
		friendly refusal		every day interaction	
	successful	conflict	activated	conflict	deactivated
		affect (guilt feelings)	occurrent (experienced)	affect (guilt feelings)	absent
		working alliance	secure	working alliance	secure

Table 2. Functions of successful and unsuccessful trap/PAM combinations

Theoretically, a fourth combination, i.e., an unsuccessful PAM integrated in a successful trap, may occur. The current conflict is deactivated while the working alliance is experienced as insecure. We

have not found this combination, which we call *reserved confirmation*, in our data yet.

Starting out from our clinical considerations on the balance between conflictive tension and working alliance we formulate the following hypotheses:

Comparing the functions of the four different trap/PAM combinations we can assume that "the friendly refusal" is optimal for maintaining the balance proposed. By this reaction the therapist keeps up a reliable working alliance and at the same time maintains the necessary conflictive tension. This is true if we try to evaluate just the effect of a single event. No analyst, however, will always react to traps in the same way. Therefore, the productivity of a therapist's interventions have to be assessed with regard to the process of the therapy. From this perspective we make the following assumption: The balance between conflictive tension and a secure working alliance can not only be maintained by one optimal type of reaction but rather by the variability of the therapist's reactions over time.

The significance of traps for psychotherapeutic change: Empirical data

In order to study a therapist's reactions to traps and their effect on the psychotherapeutic process, we now are investigating a productive sequence of the same 38th therapy session. During this sequence, relevant change took place according to a defined criterion. The criterion is the observable increase of self-reflection on the side of the client (see Thomä & Kächele, 1989). This increase is operationalized by the structure of the narrative episodes occurring in this session. These episodes are systematically represented by means of the frame method: While in the beginning of the session the client concentrates on external events ("my husband came and made reproaches to me") she begins to focus more and more on intrapsychic processes ("I made him jealous on purpose, because my husband neglected me") in the last third of the session. For the first step of our current research we selected the 15 minutes of psychotherapeutic interaction that precede the observable increase in self-reflection. The analysis of a non-productive segment will be tackled in the near future.

In the following, we will concentrate on five minutes of the material investigated up to now. This sequence lasts from minute 15 up to minute 20 of the session and includes the legitimization trap presented before ("it's not as bad as that").

Figure 1 gives an overview over the sequence analyzed and has the following features: A temporal scale divided into units of minutes; bars represent the occurrence of the corresponding narrative episodes (38-3 and 38-4), the sequences of verbal interaction, traps, PAMs, and episodes of simultaneous smiles, respectively.

Clinical description

From a clinical perspective, the sequence investigated can be described as follows: The sequence begins with a comment Mrs. D. makes about her husband. According to her, he was afraid to lose control over her now that she had become more autonomous. Next, she reports that she had had another argument with her husband because she planned to go to a rock concert with a woman friend. Doing this she would miss a drawing lesson paid by her husband. This narrative episode is repeatedly interrupted by short comments in which Mrs. D. either presents her husband as intolerant and impulsive or judges her own behavior as "not as bad as that" (cf. the legitimization trap "it's not as bad as that" presented above). The therapist refrains from taking a position. The client finishes her story by telling that she had proposed to her angry husband to pick her up after the concert if he wanted to be sure that she would be home in time. Here, the therapist asks her how she had said that. The client changes the topic and explains that, according to her, the lack of own money was the reason of all these problems. We suppose that this change of topic is related to an increase of resistance. The therapist challenges the client's interpretation and asks: "but is it really always because of the money? If you go out for a drink, for example," With this intervention the therapist insists on the conflictive theme. The client interrupts her: "that's legitimate, isn't it?!" The therapist continues her intervention and asks if it was not something else that annoyed her husband. "Oh I see", the client replies with surprise and turns her head away.

Finally, client and therapist agree that having fun with friends and spending her own money could also be positive for the client. Both are smiling and laughing. Suddenly, Mrs. D. says seriously "I

think I know quite well what annoys my husband." In the following narrative episode she confesses that she had provoked her husband's jealousy by telling him about her flirts with other (often older) men.

Description in terms of traps and PAMs

As shown in Figure 1, in this sequence we could identify eight traps, namely four legitimization traps and four chicken traps. We categorize seven of these eight traps as unsuccessful: According to our balance hypothesis the conflict as well as the corresponding affect - guilt feelings - remain activated during the entire sequence.

The only successful trap ("it's not as bad as that"; 16.53-17.00) is a special case. By saying "no" the therapist indeed gives the desired confirmation. The meaning of this verbal reaction, however, is qualified by her simultaneous laughter giving it the sense of "no, of course it's not as bad as that. But that's not the point. Why are you telling me this?" By that, in this sequence also, the intrapsychic conflict remains activated.

In the sequence investigated the following trap/PAM combinations can be observed: Five out of the eight occurring PAMs are integrated in a trap. One of them is successful and two are unsuccessful PAMs. Two further PAMs belong to a third category, the so-called participation smile. This category has been developed during our data analysis. In such PAMs the therapist only weakly reciprocates the client's smile. The establishment of the affective resonance as wished by the client though does not succeed. The client's disturbance in his or her self-regulation remains activated and is not overcome with the help of the therapist. The smile, however, serves the function to show the therapist's participation. Thus, the occurring trap/PAM combinations can be classified mainly as "classical psychoanalytical abstinence" or "friendly refusal".

Interestingly enough, all three successful PAMs do not occur simultaneously with traps. This is also true for five of the six sequences of shared smiling of therapist and client which can not be classified as PAMs according to our definition.

These observations may lead to the following interpretations: The therapist reacts especially reserved and abstinent whenever the client seeks her approval, and by this, relief from her guilt feelings. The therapist tends to accept the relationship offers more easily, however, when these offers occur independently from conflictive contents. In these moments the maintenance of the working alliance (and not an interactive establishment of resistance) has priority.

Taking a look at the course of the sequence, we can see that seven out of eight traps occur during the discussion of the conflict which elicits guilt feelings. As the traps remain unsuccessful again and again we suppose that the conflictive tension increases over time. In order to cope with this increase the client takes up another topic (at time marker 18.00). She explains her difficulties by an external reason - the lack of money. This coping strategy seems to be effective as no more traps occur. Only when the therapist insists on the intrapsychic conflict and tries to understand the client's participation Mrs. D. produces one more trap (she interrupts the therapist's intervention at time marker 18.55-19.03).

The two successful PAMs occurring at the end of the sequence (time markers 19.50-19.54 and 20.06-20.11) lead to an increase of the affective relatedness between client and therapist. This gives the client a sense of security, a precondition for her to be able to explore her own part in the confrontations with her husband. This effect can in fact be observed in the progress of the therapy session.

Conclusion

In this productive sequence it seems to be important that the therapist does not "fall into the traps". By her abstinence and by her interventions she does not support the client's resistance interactively. Rather, she continues to explore the client's guilt feelings eliciting conflict. The therapist's nonverbal reactions to PAMs, however, show more variety. We suppose that in this difficult sequence in which the therapist continuously refuses to take over the client's role offers the confirmation of the

working alliance by successful PAMs is crucial.

The sequence we have presented seems to confirm the clinical concept of abstinence as a means of productive psychotherapeutic work. We assume, however, that from a more long-term perspective to be trapped from time to time is important for the psychotherapeutic process. We are convinced that the experience of falling into a client's specific traps is a fundamental source of information for the therapist on which interpretations may be based.

As our investigations point out, the therapeutic relationship differs from everyday interactions by specific professional behavior. In psychoanalytic therapies, this professional behavior is not so much the mastery of an optimized technique (e.g., "never give a verbal confirmation but keep a friendly smile on your face"), but rather an attitude of self-reflection which effects the therapist's interactive involvement with his or her client.

Our work combines two methodological approaches: Firstly, we aim at a systematic and objective description of the observable phenomena. Secondly, models of the function of the observable processes in terms of cognitive affective regulation are developed. These models take into consideration theories and empirical knowledge from psychoanalysis and emotion research. The integration of these two approaches allow a more explicit "translation" between the abstract clinical terms such as working alliance, abstinence or countertransference and the concrete psychotherapeutic material observable in psychotherapeutic interaction. Thus, our approach helps us to examine the question, as to which processes on the level of direct affective interaction facilitate psychotherapeutic change.

Footnotes

(1) This research project is supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Project No. 11-43408.95).

(2) The frame concept was originally introduced by Minsky (1975). In psychotherapy research it is mainly known through the work of Dahl and his colleagues (e.g. Dahl, 1988).

(3) Other types of traps are the chicken trap or the self-accusation trap (Bänninger-Huber & Widmer, 1995; Widmer & Bänninger-Huber, 1996).

(4) This categorization is oriented at the client's perspective. Whether a trap is productive from a clinical point of view is another question that will be discussed in the last section of this paper.

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