**Authenticity Training :An Exercise for Therapists**

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**Abstract**

The exercise offers several possibilities for training in various aspects of authenticity. In a first step of 'creating space' participants learn to assess the multi-coloured palette making up their experience and more consciously setting their own personal concerns aside. In this way they heighten their chances of being more alert and functioning effectively in the therapeutic encounter without being burdened by the interference of their own problems. In a next step they are invited to identify the nonverbal communication they experience in contact with the other. After that they exchange and deepen their feedback. Thus they learn to distinguish their projections from a real felt sense of someone else. They also have the opportunity to experiment with being transparant in the interaction. Each participant discovers here on an experiential way that, on the one hand, people are vulnerable when giving and receiving feedback, but also that, on the other hand, they learn so much from this experience that intimacy is increased and that each therefore participates with a more energetic presence.

**1. Introduction**

The primordial importance of the therapist’s authenticity has been addressed in no uncertain terms in client-centered, experiential and existential literature (Rogers, 1951, 1961,1962, 1966, 1986; Gendlin, 1967, 1968; Bugental, 1981; Yalom, 1997 ). In other therapy orientations as well it is recognised that the actual presence of the therapist and the manner in which he or she expresses his or her own personality has a profound effect on the therapeutic work (Kottler, 1986; Lazarus, 1996). Referring to the manner in which attention can be given to the personal development of the therapist-to-be within the context of training, Lietaer remarked (1993, p.29): ‘We are not talking here about direct training in congruence, but about the slower and indirect ways of personal therapy and personalized supervision, in which the person of the therapist is as much focused on as the client’s process’.

Because I find it important that therapists can be confronted in an experiential manner with the advantages and disadvantages that are inherent to one’s fundamental attitudes, I have long sought —via other perspectives than those of personal therapy and supervision— to develop exercises in which it is possible to practice on authenticity. I should like to share this experience with colleagues who are interested in working on this position.

In line with the literature on this complex basic attitude I shall use the terms ‘authenticity’ and ‘genuineness’ as synonyms denoting one’s global attitude. Genuineness has two sides: an inner one (congruence) and on outer one (transparancy). Congruence, the inner side, refers to the degree to which the therapist has conscious access to, or is receptive to, all aspects of his or her own flow of experiencing. Transparency, the outer side, refers to the explicit communication by the therapist of his or her conscious perceptions, attitudes and feelings (Lietaer, 1993).

In this paper I shall attempt to present an exercise to be carried out in different stages; each step of the exercise will be given a framework of notions and concerns related to authenticity. Then I shall discuss what impact the exercise has on the participants. In conclusion, I shall formulate various considerations regarding the possibilities and limits of the exercise.

**I. 2. The exercise**

**2.1. Clearing space**

The most important 'instrument' that we as therapists have at our disposal is our own person. The consciousness of state of this instrument and its 'tuning' is then our first preoccupation before we can begin our work. If our instrument is not correctly tuned it will produce false tones. Rogers (1966, p.185) has strongly emphasised that ‘being genuine’ is first and foremost the difficult task of being acquainted with the flow of experiencing going on within oneself; self-awareness here means that the therapist's feelings are available to his or her consciousness. Rombauts (1984, p.170) explains how he prepared himself for a conversation by maintaining a fundamental openness for his own life-world that forms the substratum for contact with his clients, and at the same time by allowing his own concerns to fade into the background.

When one wishes to put these principles into practice, one can as a therapist employ the first phase of the exercises described below. A reader familiar with focusing (Gendlin, 1978) will recognise here the first step in that procedure, ‘Clearing space’. I have previously described the therapist’s side of this micro-process as ‘mental hygiene for the therapist’ (Leijs­sen, 1998, pp.134-135). The process supposes that people notice whatever concerns come up, at that moment, and that subsequently they can choose which problem or point of attention to set aside, even if only for a moment. The step of ‘creating space’ can occur in various ways, but concretely I use it as an introduction to a group exercise which I describe in the following.

Participants normally sit on a chair, or perhaps on the ground if they so choose; I discourage lying on the ground because one requires an ‘alert attitude’ for this exercise rather than a very ‘relaxed’ disposition. Everyone must have an empty sheet of paper and a pen or pencil available; these are momentarily laid down at some distance on the ground or table. If one wishes to close one’s eyes this may help to focus more attention inward and literally shut out the outside world. With one’s gaze directed inwardly one first gives attention to the sensations one may encounter in systematically moving through the body. Where the group is less experienced it is recommended that this activity be explicitly accompanied by calling out the various part so of the body (feet, legs, seat, lower body, middle torso, upper torso, shoulders, arms, hands, neck, face, head) and invite the participants to register carefully what they notice in their perceptions of the different places in the body. Whoever wishes may, after this body ‘screening’, quietly write some things down on the page before him or her.

The following questions are posed: ‘What are you up to in life at this moment?’ ‘What preoccupations do you carry around with you?’ ‘Are there things which genuinely interest you at the moment or cause you to worry?’ It should be explained at this point that these may be large or small matters, pleasant or unpleasant experiences, recent or long past events… Participants should note, uncensored, whatever occurs to their attention. In order to facilitate this process it is helpful to explain that participants will not be required to share any of these matters with the group in subsequent activities; the private life of each is respected. Then each is invited to write down a ‘key word’ on the sheet of paper and, with this movement, to recognise the topic and subsequently assign it a place on the paper. When it is observed that someone has difficulty in expressing something, the person is invited to make a commitment to him or herself —making a note of this on the sheet of paper— regarding how and when that particular issue can be given full attention. This phase comes to an end when one realises that one’s most important concerns have been acknowledged and have now received their own place; this usually results in a sense of relief that is physically felt.

This part of the exercise requires 10 to 15 minutes.

Following this step one’s life sphere should give the impression of having been ‘explored and tidied up’; one now disposes of a good point of departure for focussing attention on something more particular. Continuing with the metaphor of the instrument, one might decide that the instrument is now ‘tuned’ and one is ready —along with others if so desired— to begin work on a ‘piece of music’. The exercise can be terminated at this point, for example when one employs it by way of preparing oneself for receiving clients. Then the following steps might include tuning oneself in to the client one is expecting, reading through notes of previous sessions and so forth. Even more time can be dedicated to this part in a case where one has strong feelings. Other working methods can be utilised —for example, setting different topics down on separate sheets of paper that can be varied in size or laid down at varying distances from the person in function of what feels ‘right’. Or one might express the bodily experience in the form of a drawing, bringing in the diverse preoccupations by means of a sign that one places next to the bodily space with which that concern is primarily associated (Leijssen, 1992). When the exercise is used in the context of a training group for the purpose of exploring one’s authenticity, we can at this point introduce the following step.

**2.2. Identifying nonverbal communication**

In a survey of research results, Heppner & Claiborn (1989) conclude that nonverbal therapist responses exert a more powerful and consistent effect on clients' perceptions of therapist skills than verbal behavior or therapy content. Researchers estimate that from 65 to 85 of the communication in groups takes place through nonverbal communication and may play an especially important role in communicating reactions that are not consciously controlled or monitored. Voice tone, body posture, and proxemic presentations tend to 'leak' the undisclosed information (For a survey of this research, see: Beutler, Machado & Allstetter Neufeldt, 1994).

The next phase of the exercise represents an attempt to sharpen one’s perception of someone’s nonverbal communication, and to learn how to distinguish this from one’s own projections. In order to do this I have the participants form groups of four to five (less than four allows for too little variety while more than five requires too much time). These subgroups all remain in the same room so that I can continue verbally to guide the whole process. One is not permitted to speak in the subgroup. Each has several sheets of paper at his or her disposal and writes the names of all the participants in the subgroup on separate sheets. The participants take turns in being the ‘centre’ of the group. I allow them to determine who first should be the ‘centre’ of the group by asking them to raise their hands; I shall call this person ‘participant A’. Each member of the group now takes his or her sheet of paper bearing the name of participant A. A says nothing while the other members of the subgroup attune themselves to him or her. Then I invite them each to identify which perceptions, ideas, impressions, sensations, associations and so on occur to them when they carefully attune themselves to participant A. After a few minutes I ask them to look for some key words, expressing their felt sense and writing these down on the sheet marked ‘A’. Then I invite them to take a second look at everything they have written and to ask themselves if they have doubts about whether one or another expression tells them something about A, or whether what they have written down actually reflects one of their own themes or an important personal sensitivity. When a participant suspects that his or her own projection overshadows the impressions given by a felt sense of A, a question mark is placed next to the expression. After five minutes the phase with A in the centre may be brought to an end. The participants fold closed their sheets on A and set them aside. One then allows A mentally to disappear from the centre and takes a moment (by moving around, for example) to ‘shake oneself loose from A’ and prepare for the following subject. At this point participant B goes to the centre of each subgroup and the same procedure is followed: B identifies him or herself by a raised hand; the other in the subgroup prepare a sheet marked with B’s name; without speaking, they attune themselves to B; each mentally notes what he or she perceives when attuned to B; each writes down several key words, placing question marks next to the expressions which raise doubts or say more about oneself than about B; the sheets are folded and set aside. After another five minutes participant C goes to the centre and the same procedure is followed; this is repeated with D. With four participants per subgroup this phase takes a little more than twenty minutes; for five participants one should add five minutes. Final responsibility for the timing and the various instructions belong to the group leader; participants need not concern themselves with these matters.

**2.3. Exchange of experiences**

Where in the previous phase only a beginning was made in the process of learning to identify one's own stream of thoughts, feelings and interactional felt meanings (congruence) and from there express something in the form of writing down key words, one now proceeds a step further in learning to exchange this information (transparency). By sharing this information with others one creates the opportunity of achieving greater authenticity.

This phase opens by handing over the sheets to the person concerned. This happens all at the same time — participants are always impatient to see the information on themselves— and one can spend approximately three minutes while each is reading the results (A receives and reads what B, C and D have written about him or her; B reads what A, C and D have noted, and so on).

Following this activity there is a thirty minute space for participants to talk freely within the subgroup; this allows them to share some of their tensions and make general remarks regarding the exercise. Where one is employing the exercise for the purpose of giving participants more insight into how they are perceived by others, then one might, when this phase —in which participants can speak with each other in a rather unstructured way and provide further explanations— is completed, conclude the exercise. For participants who need to learn to work in a professional manner with receiving and giving feedback, it is useful to achieve greater depth by means of the following phase. If one chooses to carry out phase four as well, one can then already announce that, after a pause that will give afford the participants fresh energy, one will continue to work in a more systematic and profound way with the feedback that they have given and received.

**2.4. Deepening the experiences**

According to the level of the group (a more advanced group possesses more skills that allow them to undertake this part of the exercise in a more meaningful manner) and the result that one intends for the exercise, the group leader can opt here to give it more or less structure.

Once again one will be working by turn in the same subgroups in order to give each person adequate time and benefit. In the subgroup, Person A (or someone else who wishes to begin) gives a synthesis of what he or she has been given and attempts to identify what he or she shares in common with the group in the feedback provided by others, while trying to determine the extent to which this information is either already known or surprising. Person A also indicates which of the feedback he or she does not recognise or finds unpleasant. If the same feedback has been provided by several of the group members yet is unacceptable to the person concerned, it is useful to give the person some space in which to ‘defend him or herself’; this often implies that he or she will identify what elements in the feedback are not felt to be appropriate or if the subject does not wish to take responsibility for them. In the case that the specific reaction has come from only one person, the subgroup will attempt to find out why this might be so. A participant that has given feedback which has not been accepted, or has been accepted but only after encountering considerable resistance, should consider the possibility of his or her own interest or some specifically personal sensitivity having played a role in raising one or another theme. One might here seek out or experiment as to how such a reaction can be put into words —through interaction with others— in a way that the person’s own input can be recognised and at the same make it easier for the subject of the feedback to reconcile him or herself with the information. Here especially can the exercise in transparency go deeper inasmuch as the participants make explicit exactly what it is that they sense in themselves, to which particular aspects of the other they react, and which of their own sensitivities are involved. Participants also describe in more detail exactly how they perceive and react to such feedback. Care should be taken that all feelings are heard and recognised; one needs to make sure here that all that one has understood from the other has first been expressed vocally and only then to add one’s own appreciation.

At this point I admit that this is an exercise in which participants learn on a personal level how to deal with the ‘give and take’ of feedback; it is nonetheless neither a ‘group therapy’ session nor an ‘individual therapy’ for one or another participant. I ensure this distinction is respected by saying that if strong emotions are raised or if intriguing feedback is given that cannot be adequately placed (in the context of the exercise), such aspects will not be explored in depth. Where necessary, I direct participants to the group therapy session we offer in our training programme, or to the personal therapy that many of them follow on a voluntary basis. I try to make sure that I myself am available to receive certain cases where the subgroups do not achieve satisfactory results, but in practice such solutions of last resort are seldom necessary.

For this deepening phase I calculate approximately twenty minutes per participant in a subgroup.

**3. The impact of the exercise**

**3.1. The impact of ‘clearing space’**

Insofar as the step ‘clearing space’ is concerned, participants often report differing effects. After this phase the majority often have an experience of ‘being more clearly present’, alongside gaining a sense of having achieved a greater measure of ‘rest with oneself’. One person explained: ‘I began the day with the well-known feeling that “this is not my day”. After the exercise I felt more clear-headed and had greater interest in being here.’ Another participant declared: ‘I left the house in chaos this morning and became even more stressed in the rush hour traffic. Taking time to stand still did me much good.’ Regarding the recognition of one’s own interests, most participants are surprised how much they bring with them. In this context people often discover that certain bodily sensations (a sensitive throat area, a tight stomach, or faster heart rate, for example) point to problematic areas of which one was not immediately aware, or one detects that some topics provoke deeper emotions than one would have suspected. For some, such ‘confrontations’ have a liberating effect, in the sense that they find it relieving to recognise their concerns. The invitation to give a place, on a ready-to-hand sheet of paper, to every concern that arises has a clarifying effect and fulfils a ‘containment’ function. People who in the course of the exercise have been touched by something or have difficulties in putting a specific topic down on paper usually decide here to take up these issues in the context of therapy. For some this is a warning that they are carrying with them ‘explosive material’ and that it is high time to do something about it.

**3.2. Nonverbal communication**

In the beginning the participants find it uncomfortable to be involved in a process based on the perception of solely the nonverbal aspects of another. This is usually expressed in some giggling at the start of the exercise. But once they have overcome an initial feeling of uneasiness they are all amazed at how much is brought to the surface. Later they state that they have become aware that, ‘without this assignment’, they have been able to perceive this sort of thing —a sensation of someone having a ‘sexy aura’ or a ‘tired facial expression’, for example— but they seldom pause to reflect or consciously act on that awareness. When they are asked to assess which of their associations say more about themselves than about the other, most discover that it is precisely the list of their own concerns that they had drawn up earlier brought clarity to those aspects about which they had doubts. One example might be someone receiving an image of a ‘lonely boy’ when tuning into a colleague; on further reflection the person doubts that this was a pure perception; later she recalls one of her concerns, identified in the phase ‘clearing space’, and the feeling of a lump in her throat confronting her with how she had dropped her young son off at the before-school care when no other children had yet arrived.

**3.3. Exchange**

Participants find it especially exciting to hear from others what they perceive about themselves. What is remarkable is that there are always several perceptions that correspond; often one recognises this correspondence him or herself, but the confirmation remains just as interesting and sometimes can be perceived as confronting. That one communicates nonverbal ‘sadness’ or ‘uncertainty’, for example, is normally not strange to someone who gets this sort of feedback, yet the fact that others can ‘see’ it is somehow confronting.

In this part of the exercise participants learn that their fellows —with or without verbal explanation— take in information and thus often allow these felt senses to guide their reactions without really being conscious that the nonverbal communication serves to orientate them. Participants are also often surprised that they can know so much about another without there having been any verbal communication. Most usually do not trust their intuition or their sensitivity to nonverbal signals, while they now discover that these felt senses can convey a lot of truth. They all experience the fact that they have previously drawn up a list of their ‘concerns’ as helpful because this step appears to be surprisingly clarifying when they must reflect on where they have perhaps ‘projected’.

**3.4. Deepening**

For the aspirant therapist, the deepening phase is an opportunity to discover in a real-life situation how self-knowledge can be increased with an exchange of feedback. One not only receives new information about oneself but also learns how, through interaction with others, to select and purify information in and to bring it up in a way that makes it useful for the other.

Each participant discovers here on an experiential way that, on the one hand, people are vulnerable when giving and receiving feedback, but also that, on the other hand, they learn so much from this experience that intimacy is increased and that each therefore participates with a more energetic presence. After the exercise everyone is convinced that transparency is exceptionally effective in enhancing the interest of the participants and the liveliness of the interaction.

**4. Conclusion**

That the exercise offers many possibilities for bringing therapists into contact with various aspects of the fundamental attitude of authenticity can be directly deduced from the reactions of the participants, as related in the previous paragraph. In the longer term therapists state that they make a habit of pausing —especially at the beginning of a day on which they do not feel so good— to assess the multi-coloured palette making up their experience and more consciously setting their own personal concerns aside before they see their clients. In this way they heighten their chances of being more alert and functioning effectively in the therapeutic encounter without being burdened by the interference of their own problems. Many find it useful as well to admit that there are periods when one can be very enthusiastic about something particular; yet these things can easily slip into one’s practice in the form of advice or subtle hints regarding what the client should attempt to do or focus his or her attention on. Even one’s enthusiasm with the exercise can have repercussions on subsequent sessions with clients. The threshold at which one is prepared to take initiative on the basis of one’s own felt sense is perceptibly lowered after one has discovered that there is a considerable amount of meaningful information hidden in one’s felt sense, and when one has been able to try out how feedback can be brought over to the individual. The experience that Rogers (1970, p.53) only in later life was able to express, namely that he gradually learned to trust more in a deeper layer of intuitive feelings, can be discovered and purified by young therapists at an ever earlier stage. Because participants in the exercise have also experienced being in a vulnerable position, they can cautiously move on to bringing out the subjective impressions. For many this is above all an enhancement of the liveliness, intensity and intimacy of the interaction and a deepened self-knowledge, reason enough to allow more ‘risky’ interventions more place in therapy.

This sort of exercise also has its limits; it can never serve as a substitute for the necessary learning process that therapists undergo in their personal therapy and supervision. The deeper layers of the personality are reached in such an exercise, but they do not receive enough attention in this context. The exercise reveals both strong and weak aspects of the personality, points out where further work is necessary or ‘lays bare’ particular problematic points.

I do not recommend such an exercise for a group in which the ambience is not sufficiently secure for one to make oneself vulnerable or risk oneself personally, or where there are many unspoken conflicts lurking beneath the surface. This kind of exercise demands a certain measure of interpersonal security. When these conditions are fulfilled, such exercises lend themselves to diverse educational and training contexts in which one opts for more active challenges in order to confront each other, carefully, with certain characteristics and once more to learn and develop the instrument that is oneself.

**5. Literature**

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