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Psychotherapist is the expert –two opposite views

The school of cybernetics and system therapy in Rijeka –Croatia is a school where we don't just teach psychotherapy, we also make the school a context for learning and reasearch of the psychotherapy in order for psychotherapy to become efficient and scientific.

The cybernetics some define as the science of communication and control in the animal and the machine, or the communication within an observer and between the observer and his environment. We are interested in 2nd order cybernetics: the observer influence observed by observing it!

The psychotherapy cybernetics is a science of circularity and understanding our own epistemic habits, the habits of acquiring knowledge.

We will all agree that each of us is a **unique** person. I would like to share some quotes from eminent psychotherapists that support that idea.

„Therapists must convey to the patient that their paramount task is to build a relationship together that will itself become the agent of change.” Yalom

“ Each person is a unique entity. Therefore, the psychotherapy should be shaped to respond to the uniqueness of the each person and not to put a person into Procrustes's bed of hypothetic theory of human behaviour” Milton Erickson

„But epistemology is always and inevitably personal. The point of the probe is always in the heart of the explorer: What is my answer to the question of the nature of knowing?” Gregory Bateson

In his autobiography, Jung describes his appreciation of the uniqueness of each patient's inner world and language, a uniqueness that requires the therapist to invent a new therapy language for each patient.

It's a Procrustean effort that forces evidence into a theory when it doesn't fit, just as Procrustes violently adjusted his guests to fit their bed. The same is with

our patients` epistemologies. Each patient is unique and our job is to fit into his or her theory and epistemologies not a vice versa. If can agree on that then we can ask the question: **What is the psychotherapist expert for?**

I. The old paradigm , I would call it, „**I know the best psychotherapists**“ has 2 main characteristics:

1. the psychotherapist is the expert for patients in a way that he or she knows better a patient than he or she knows him or herself and the psychotherapist is the only one that **understands a patient properly!** He or she has the right answers and gives accurate explanations why somebody is acting or feeling as such. He is only entitled to understand what`s going on with a patient.

a) This is the case with all **grand theories** and psychotherapists that come to the psychotherapeutic encounter with the preknowledge about the patient.

Such a psychotherapist interprets his patient according to a theory he possesses if the theory is based on the assumptions that it can interpret any person . These are mostly the 20th century theories. They use their theories to shape their patients and their theories acts as prejudices. Prejudices consist in the thesis that there is an objective definition of the patient`s experience.

b) And these are also **all approaches** that propose solutions according to their world view (whatever it is). On the surface New age theories are opened to diversity but in the same time they usually propose their own pathologies which are to be cured (whatever they call it: disbalance of energies, negative energies etc.)

In this paradigm the psychotherapist is the expert in his or her theory as well as in understanding what`s going on with his or her patient better than the patient. It seems so appealing. Our patients expect that sometimes from us. They even ask: Please can you explain what is going on, or what does it mean and so on.

2. the interpretation of the patient is always according to some pathologies that are to be cured and again these pathologies acts as prejudices. Prejudices

consist in the thesis that there is an objective definition of the patient's experience.

- translating unconscious to conscious

Here is an example of a psychotherapist –client dialogue:

„ P: Tell me something about yourself?

K: I love animals. I own a dog that I found on the street ,it was abandoned and frightened. I also have a cat which I took when it was 2 months old after her mother was hit by a car. Found it on the street, starving.

P: Humm. So, you rescue abandoned animals?

K: Yes. I love animals.

P: Is it a true that your mother used to leave you as a little boy at her mother's house every week and picked you up on weekends ?

K: Yes, my mother says so, but I don't remember it as something special. When I started school I lived continuously with my parents. I have only pleasant memories of my childhood.

P: Of course you have, because you repressed traumatic experience of being abandoned by your mother . That's why you are trying to fulfill that emptiness by rescuing abandoned animals on the street. That is an expression of your unresolved pathology.“

This is not a fictional psychotherapeutic dialogue. This is a dialogue that a client retold me when desperately seeking a therapist who would cure him from the first therapy. This is an example of therapist's interpretations grounded in the theory of psychoanalysis. The patient took this interpretation seriously as a truth about himself. It changed his picture of himself. Characteristics he was proud of , suddenly, became his pathology . The relationship with mother that was described by him as good, he began to see as a source of the problem. His very self was something that he didn't know at all , and the foundation of his personality was shook thoroughly. He became depressed , with low self-confidence. All his life seemed to him as a lie.

- any kind of diagnosing ,

Diagnosing is also a procedure that takes away epistemic competence of a person diagnosed. A person with a psychopathological diagnosis is not anymore competent to describe herself, a patient is a victim of epistemic injustice and a therapist – patient relationship is not anymore a relationship of trust.

A client told me a story of his encounter with a therapist after tempted a suicide. He was born with a condition called partial sinedactilia , which means in his case , that he had 4 fingers without fingertips. Nevertheless he was very musically gifted and persistent and got a degree at a university as a pianist. After sharing that with the therapist he was diagnosed as psychotic and as much as he tried to explain and convince the therapist that it was true, these explanations were only to testify his psychosis. He was administrated antipsychotic drugs which made his recovery more difficult.

„I know the best“ view makes myths of the therapists. They are the authorities in the field of psychotherapeutic theory , or they are gurus of a kind or they are talented and born with therapeutic qualities. They have their followers and oponents.

They use language to explain.

II. The psychotherapists in the new key – „**The virtous psychotherapist**“

These are the therapists that turn the traditional view upside down. They are not anymore the experts in the theories . They don`t teach their patient something new , they learn from their patients by sharing ideas , by participating in disccussions, by reflecting on their own ideas and acts in the psychotherapeutic encounter.

They understand the **language as a metaphor** and use it to create a mutual understanding with patient. They have no theories that propose explanations and don`t have the answers. They ask and are curious to get the answers.

They are the experts in setting the context for the conversation to unfold new meanings, both for the patient and for the therapist, „**reauthoring**” **conversation**” (in narrative practice).

In epistemic justice- The patient is equally competent to interpret herself or we could say, the patient is equally epistemically competent (has an ability to gain knowledge, to know). It is a prerequisite for practice of psychotherapy !

They try to find out the unique way for the each patient.

It can be taught!

The virtues:

1. Ongoing critical reflection

Any psychotherapeutic theory acts as a preknowledge of some kind and could become a prejudice toward a patient and therefore could have a negative impact on a patient and on efficiency of psychotherapeutic process. There are very obvious cases of prejudice toward patient and those less obvious.

We should think of ideal psychotherapist as someone for whom correcting for familiar prejudices has become second nature, while the requisite alertness to the influence of less familiar prejudices remains a matter of ongoing active critical reflection. If one succeeds in that, then one has got the virtue of epistemic justice.

The virtuous psychotherapist neutralizes the impact of any kind of prejudice in judgment of his or her patient. The patient is equally competent to interpret herself or we could say, the patient is equally epistemically competent. It means that patient`s meaning making is the input for the therapist to make his or her understandings. The therapists does not correct his patient`s utterances, just take them as they are.

2. Psychotherapists need to be trained in sensibility

The sensibility is an idea of a spontaneous critical sensitivity that is permanently in training and continuously adapting according to individual and

collective experience . The sensible psychotherapists perceive his 'patient' in a way that is open to the word of others.

3. Hermeneutical justice

The primary harm of hermeneutical injustice consists in a situated hermeneutical inequality. The primary harm concerns exclusion from the pooling of knowledge owing prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource. Imaginative social coordination is sharing concepts of social identities which determine the meaning of sex, race, gender, age,... The first prejudicial exclusion is made in relation to the patient, the second in relation to what she is trying to say and/or how she is saying it.

Hermeneutical injustice not only brings secondary practical disadvantages, it also brings secondary epistemic disadvantages and they **stem from subject`s loss of epistemic confidence. The loss of epistemic confidence can cause literal loss of knowledge, prevents one from gaining new knowledge and stops one gaining epistemic virtues such as intellectual courage. The primary harm can mean that someone is socially constituted as, and perhaps even caused to be, something they are not. They can be prevented from becoming who they are.**

Hermeneutical injustice most typically manifest itself in the patient's unsuccessful attempts to make herself intelligible and epistemically competent in a conversational exchange.

The role of psychotherapist (in resolving the hermeneutical injustice) is to create a **new understanding for the patient`s** interpretations of herself as well as to create together the new and unique approach to the patient's distress.

The psychotherapist`s judgment is perhaps best described not simply in terms of **an assessment of patient`s utterance being true, but rather in terms of an assessment of the understanding** of the interpretation offered.

This re-description simply allows for the fact that in hermeneutical contexts the orientation to „**accurate**“ **understanding needs to be replaced by the understanding of the 'patient's' experience.**

The virtuous psychotherapist will achieve an understanding that reflects the degree to which the interpretation the 'patient' is struggling to articulate would make good sense if the attempt to articulate it were being made in a more inclusive hermeneutical context - one without any prejudice.

In psychotherapeutic context the virtuous psychotherapists may effectively be able to help generate a more inclusive hermeneutical micro-climate through the appropriate kind of dialogue with the 'patient'. The scope is to generate new meanings to fill in the offending hermeneutical gaps, and it is thereby conducive to reducing the effects of hermeneutical marginalization.

4. Conversation theory is a cybernetic and dialectic framework that offers a scientific theory to explain how interactions lead to "construction of knowledge", or "knowing".

Through recursive interactions called "conversation" their differences may be reduced until agreement—that is, agreement up to a point which Pask called "agreement over an understanding"—may be reached. A residue of the interaction may be captured as an "entailment mesh", an organized and publicly available collection of resultant knowledge, less formalized and non-experimentally based "representations of knowledge".