
An Analysis of Client Performance in the Two-Chair Method

Lisa A. Sicoli

York University

Ernest T. Hallberg

University of Western Ontario

Abstract

This study investigates novice client performance using the Gestalt two-chair technique. Ten "softening" and eight "non-softening" counselling dyads were compared on performance task completion and sequentiality to investigate Greenberg's (1984) Refined Client Performance model of intrapsychic conflict resolution.

Résumé

Cette recherche examine le comportement de clients débutants en se servant de la technique Gestalt des deux chaises. On a comparé dix dyades de counseling « adoucissantes » et huit dyades « non adoucissantes », en ce qui concerne l'exécution des tâches et la séquentialité afin d'étudier le modèle calculé du comportement des clients de Greenberg (1984) ayant trait à la résolution de conflit intrapsychique. Les résultats indiquent que les tâches ayant rapport aux « désirs et besoins » et aux « expériences résultantes » étaient plus nombreuses pendant les séances « adoucissantes », mais qu'il n'y avait pas de différences importantes entre les séances « adoucissantes » et les séances « non adoucissantes » pour les tâches ayant rapport aux « valeurs et normes ». Les résultats appuient en partie le modèle de Greenberg, ce qui implique que les expériences par la compréhension de soi et l'expression de désirs et de besoins sont des précurseurs de l'adoucissement.

The findings indicated that performance tasks of "wants and needs" and "emerging experience" occurred more frequently in "softening" sessions but the task of "values and standards" was not found to be significantly different between softening and non-softening sessions. Partial support for Greenberg's model was found suggesting that insight-oriented experiences and the expression of wants and needs are precursors to softening.

The use of the Gestalt two-chair intervention has been shown to be effective in facilitating intrapsychic conflict resolution (Clarke & Greenberg, 1986; Greenberg, 1983; Greenberg & Clarke, 1979; Greenberg & Dompierre, 1981; Greenberg & Rice, 1981; Greenberg & Webster, 1982). Intrapsychic conflict occurs when an individual experiences confusion surrounding an issue. The result is a polarization of the opposing parts of the self into dichotomous categories such as good-bad, lovable-unlovable and acceptable-unacceptable. To deal with the internal conflict, the individual forms an alliance with one part of the self and suppresses the needs and feelings of the other part. The task of the two-chair method is to separate the two parts of the self that are in opposition

to each other and facilitate a dialogue between the two parts. This helps the client focus on the internal struggle in order to bring unacknowledged information into awareness (Clarke & Greenberg, 1986; Greenberg, 1979). This contact between the two sides has the potential to facilitate conflict resolution and a change within the individual (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951).

The currently accepted model outlining the sequence of client performance using the two-chair technique is the Refined Performance Model of Conflict Resolution (Greenberg, 1984; Greenberg, Rice & Elliott, 1993) (See Figure 1). In this model, the critic part of the self (topdog) initially has most of the power in the conflict. Topdog expresses its harsh critical evaluations in general terms to the experiencing part (underdog). The criticisms expressed by the critic eventually become more specific which gives the connotation that change is demanded. The experiencer responds to the critic with an affective response and in a more fragmented manner until new insight into its experience is expressed. The experiencer, at this point, develops an awareness and expression of a need or want. This need or want is put into conflict with the values and standards of the critic. Once both sides of the conflict have been expressed, a new perspective involving the conflict may be realized which moves the client forward. In this situation, the critic often softens and merging occurs. The two parts negotiate, integrate, or both.

Previous research provides some support for the sequentiality of the performance tasks based on Greenberg's refined model (Greenberg, 1983; Greenberg, 1992; MacDonald, 1982; Taylor, 1981). These studies found that the three process components of "wants and needs" (hopes, wishes and desires), "values and standards" (internalized rules and expectations), and "softening" (understanding from critic) discriminated between resolution and nonresolution performances (Greenberg, 1992; MacDonald, 1982). Resolvers expressed "values and standards" statements as well as "felt wants" statements significantly more frequently compared to nonresolvers. The "softening" component also was shown to be an important part of the resolution dialogue. This finding verified that the completion of these three process components are necessary components for the resolution of conflicts.

Research has focused on the examination of the resolution phase in the two-chair technique but has failed to acknowledge the process in previous usages of the technique prior to resolution (Greenberg, 1983; Greenberg & Webster, 1982; MacDonald, 1982). Particularly neglected is the examination of sessions with novice clients using the two-chair technique for the first time. Therefore, in this study, sessions with novice clients using the two-chair method were explored with the goal of identi-

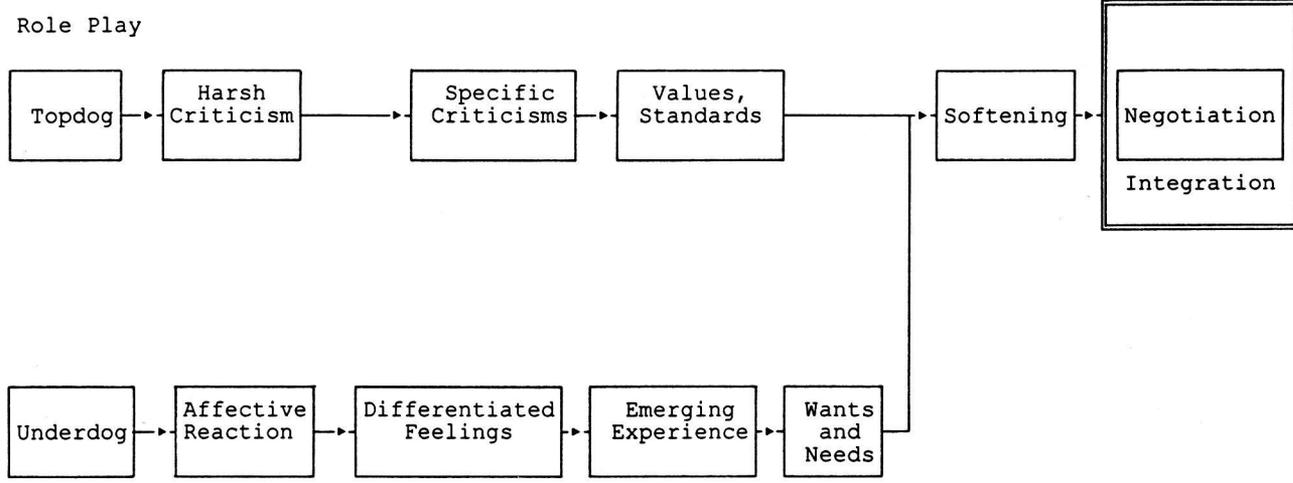


FIGURE 1
Refined performance model of conflict resolution (Greenberg, 1984).

fyng a pattern of performance for these clients and possibly expanding upon Greenberg's performance model.

The present study examined an earlier stage of the two-chair process prior to the resolution stage of integration in order to compare client performances with and without the process component of "softening." Softening is the process by which the critic part of the self begins to understand the experiencing part and expresses compassion and concern for the other part. Non-softening occurs when the critic continues to have rigid viewpoints and cannot move towards understanding or compassion (Greenberg, 1979). Non-softening and softening sessions were compared for the presence of the process components of "emerging experience," "values and standards," and "wants and needs" to determine if they were important components for the occurrence of the "softening" pattern. Failure to find significant differences between the softening and non-softening dyads on completion of the above process components may indicate that other process components are needed to mediate the process of softening. This may suggest that the performance model possesses an added complexity not yet delineated.

Another void in research on the two-chair technique is an examination of client exit from the technique. The present study described how novice clients exit from the two-chair dialogue and explored the phenomenon of impasse and early exit from the technique, providing an intuitive analysis as to the root of early exit and impasse for novice clients using the two-chair technique. Early exit occurs in clients who have a potential for further movement but, for various reasons, prematurely depart from the two-chair dialogue. Impasse occurs when the client is blocked from resolving the conflict. The conflict is understood yet this knowledge cannot be integrated within the self. This study attempts to describe this phenomenon.

METHOD

Participants

The clients were students enrolled in a Bachelor of Education program at the University of Western Ontario. There were four male clients and fourteen female clients ranging in age from 22 to 40 ($M = 26.56$; $SD = 4.37$) who voluntarily participated in the study. Data were obtained over a period from 1989-1992 as part of a continuing research project. Volunteers received eight sessions of short-term counselling. None of the clients in the current study had participated in the two-chair technique previously.

There were eleven novice counsellors having less than three years of counselling experience and four experienced counsellors having three or more years of counselling experience. There were twelve female and three male counsellors with ages ranging from 25 to 56 years ($M = 37.87$;

$SD = 7.61$). One experienced counsellor counselled three clients who participated in this study, and another experienced counsellor counselled two clients. In total, 18 two-chair dialogues were used from seven dyads with experienced counsellors and eleven dyads with novice counsellors. Novice counsellors had approximately 12 hours of theoretical and practical training in using the two-chair method as part of their academic training. Novice counsellors also had an opportunity to use the technique with a client with supervision prior to involvement in this research.

The data were rated and analyzed by the two authors. The two raters engaged in 16 hours of training to categorize client performance using the guide "Rating Client Performance using the Two-Chair Technique" (Sicoli, 1994). It must be noted that having the authors act as raters is a noticeable weakness as bias may have been introduced unintentionally into the rating procedure.

Measures

Rating Client Performance using the Two-Chair Technique. Counselling sessions involving the use of the two-chair technique were rated using a scoring manual for rating client performance grounded in Greenberg's theory and categorization of client performance tasks (Sicoli, 1994). The manual outlines operational definitions and clinical examples for each of the ten client performance tasks: harsh criticism (general global statements of criticism); specific criticism (more concrete instances of criticism); affective reaction (display of emotion); differentiated feelings (description of feelings and reactions); emerging experience (new insight into one's feelings or experiences); values and standards (reflection of internalized ideals, expectations and rules); wants and needs (expression of hopes, needs and desires); softening (critic begins to understand other part); negotiation (parts bargain for needs and wants); and integration (an agreement or compromise is reached where conflict is resolved). Judges rated each block of client dialogue for level of performance present in that block for each task. Client performance tasks were rated on a 3-point scale: 0 = no evidence; 1 = moderate to weak evidence; and 2 = strong and clear evidence.

Interrater agreement was calculated for the ratings. The percentage of exact agreement between the two judges was 85% (Tinsley & Weiss, 1975). Interrater reliability was calculated for each client performance task using Spearman's rank order correlations. Correlations for client performance were: harsh criticism .73, specific criticism .75, affective reaction .64, differentiated feelings .83, emerging experience .82, values and standards .82, wants and needs .77, softening .78, negotiation .85, and integration .47, $p < .001$. The lower correlation for integration ($r_s = .47$) may be due to its limited frequency of occurrence.

Procedure

All counselling sessions lasted 50 minutes and were audiotaped. Sessions using the two-chair technique were identified by examining the counsellors' session notes. Only sessions in which clients participated in the two-chair technique for the first time were examined. The two-chair technique occurred most often around the fifth sessions ($M = 5.00$; $SD = 1.92$).

Using typed transcripts, the beginning and end of the two-chair discussion were identified and segmented into two equal blocks of dialogue (Block 1 and Block 2), with a minimum of two pages of dialogue per block. Raters indicated in the margins when a category of performance occurred. Raters briefly explained any unclear or confusing ratings, any "new" or different client actions that were not described in the scoring guide and recorded their ideas about what they thought happened in that block. Raters identified the type of client exit from the technique and clinically evaluated the possible reasons for the occurrence of an early exit or an impasse in the form of a clinical summary. Lastly, as part of the clinical summary, clinicians briefly explained the overall performance or change of the client in the session.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses: Counsellor Experience

Fischer's Exact tests for probability (Siegel & Castellan, 1988) were calculated to determine if there were any between-group effects of level of counsellor experience. Results of between-group comparisons of novice and experienced counsellors in executing advanced level operations in the two-chair technique did not show a significant between-group effect at $p = .10$. Thus, there was no significant difference between novice and experienced counsellors in executing the two-chair technique.

Client Performance Tasks

Results of Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney tests (Siegel & Castellan, 1988) comparing mean ranks of "softening" and "non-softening" sessions with all blocks of events combined were examined; see Table 1. The presence of "emerging experience" was found to be significantly greater overall for sessions with softening compared to sessions with no softening ($z = 2.14$, $p = .02$). Also, the presence of the pattern of "emerging experience" was found to be significantly greater for "softening" sessions than for "non-softening" sessions in block one ($z = 2.14$, $p = .02$) and in block two ($z = 2.83$, $p = .00$).

The presence of "wants and needs" was also found to be significantly greater overall for sessions with softening compared to sessions with no softening ($z = 2.44$, $p = .02$). For the task of "wants and needs," no

TABLE 1

Probability Results of Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney Tests on Client Performance Task Completion Comparing Softening and Non-Softening Sessions by Block

<i>Performance Task</i>	<i>All Blocks</i> <i>n</i> <i>(n=18)</i>	<i>Block 1^a</i> <i>n</i> <i>(n=18)</i>	<i>Block 2^b</i> <i>n</i> <i>(n=13)</i>
Emerging Experience	.02†	.02†	.00‡
Values and Standards	.36	.48	.09
Wants and Needs	.01‡	.15	.02†

† $p < .05$. ‡ $p < .01$.

^a refers to the first half of the two-chair dialogue

^b refers to the last half of the two-chair dialogue

significant difference was found in block one ($z = 1.09$, $p = .15$). But, in block two, the “wants and needs pattern was significantly greater for “softening“ sessions than “non-softening“ sessions ($z = 2.03$, $p = .02$).

A significant difference was not found between softening and non-softening sessions for the presence of values and standards overall ($z = .31$, $p = .36$), in block one ($z = 0$, $p = .48$) or, in block two ($z = 1.31$, $p = .09$).

“Wants and needs” were expressed significantly more by clients from “softening” sessions only in block two while an “emerging experience” was expressed significantly more by clients who engaged in softening in block one as well as in block two. This finding loosely suggests a progression of task performance needed for “softening” to occur where the “emerging experience” pattern is experienced followed by the “values and standards” and “wants and needs” pattern.

Descriptive Statistics: Client Exit

Another goal of the study was to describe client exit from the two-chair technique and identify possible contributing factors for the occurrence of impasse or early exit from the technique. Clinical summaries consisting of analyses addressing this research question were examined. Clustering sessions with similar exit patterns using a rational approach grounded in clinical experience and judgement revealed four types of client exit from the two-chair technique: premature exit, early exit at resolution, impasse at resolution, and natural exit. Engaging in a premature exit were 8 of the 8 (100%) non-softening dyads and 1 of the 10 (10%) softening dyads. A “premature exit” occurred early in the dialogue when the client was unable to clarify the conflict in the early stages of the dialogue, and as a result, was unable to move beyond the initial performance tasks (i.e., harsh and specific criticism, affective reaction, differentiated feelings). Six of the 10 softening dyads (60%) experienced

an early exit at resolution. "Early exit at resolution" occurred when a client had the potential for resolution and was moving towards resolution tasks but for some reason, ceased to continue in the two-chair dialogue. The third type of exit, impasse at resolution, was experienced by one of the softening dyads. "Impasse at resolution" involved clients who had a clear understanding of the conflict and expressed values and standards as well as wants and needs. But, they were unable to integrate this knowledge, getting stuck in the final stages of resolution. The final type of exit witnessed was the natural exit which was experienced by two of the softening dyads (20%). A "natural exit" occurred when the client moved successfully through the stages of the performance tasks and adequately reached resolution of the conflict.

DISCUSSION

Task Performance

Past research has explored the differences between resolution and non-resolution sessions providing support for the sequentiality of the client performance tasks in the two-chair technique (Greenberg, 1992; MacDonald, 1982; Taylor, 1981). The present study provides partial evidence for this model in that the performance tasks of "emerging experience" and "wants and needs" occur more frequently prior to softening. However, this study fails to support the importance of "values and standards" in distinguishing between softening and non-softening sessions. These results point to the possibility that the process of exploring one's internalized values and standards may not be sufficient or necessary to achieve softening.

Although most clients engaged in the values and standards pattern, it alone did not discriminate between softening and non-softening clients. This suggests that the process components of "wants and needs" and "emerging experience" may be more important in facilitating client movement towards conflict resolution. Having mobilized and explored one's internalized values does not seem to have a significant impact on softening unless it is combined with the expression of an emerging experience and wants and needs. In particular, this highlights the importance of guiding the client towards clarifying their needs as well as facilitating the exploration of insight-oriented goals as a means of achieving conflict resolution.

However, the latter comments are made with trepidation due to the weakness of the current design. Any conclusions drawn from this study are limited due to the lack of validity information on the rating scale of client performance markers. As well, although significant differences between novice and experienced counsellors were not found, treatment integrity was not explored, thus also limiting interpretation of the data. It may be that some of the results seen are due to therapist error rather than

being a reflection of novice client performance using the two-chair method.

Client Exit

Descriptions of client exit from the two-chair technique give insight about the type of exit in which clients engage as well as some factors that may contribute to an early exit or impasse. Gestalt theory identifies impasse as the point at which the weaker part of the self gains enough power to confront the stronger part of the self. The result may be a resistance towards choosing to support or make demands of the self; thus, the conflict ends in a stalemate (Polster & Polster, 1973). Polster and Polster (1973) state that a client can overcome impasse by having a "climactic experience" or, what Greenberg calls an "emerging experience," where the client discovers something about the conflict that unveils a new understanding. However, the experience of gaining new insight may not always be sufficient for movement as was reflected by the client in this study. One can speculate that for some clients, a revelation or new awareness is too threatening; thus, it is rejected and impasse occurs. The clinician must allow the process to unfold gently for a novice client, yet be aware of these barriers to resolution and challenge the client to explore them.

Some commonalities between sessions with early exit and impasse were also observed. In some of these sessions, the counsellor's actions seemed to contribute, or in some cases, were the clear cause of an early exit or impasse. Weiner (1982) states that impasse can be the result of a therapist using an inappropriate treatment approach, or by therapist error. Some counsellors literally stopped the dialogue prematurely, while others seem to have contributed to an early exit by making other processing errors such as using inappropriate questioning, or reflecting inaccurate empathy of the client's immediate experiencing. Suggestions for the clinician include recognizing the profound importance of empathy, encouraging clients to be more specific in their responses and also to be more active in the dialogue by increasing the immediacy of their experiencing (i.e., "Stand on the chair and be condescending towards the weak side").

Some clients with premature exits and early exits at resolution experienced a fear reaction which immobilized clients from further movement in the conflict resolution task. Greenberg and Safran (1987) state that some clients experience feelings of emotional difficulty because they are avoiding certain emotional memories and feelings and the tendency is to continue to avoid these feelings and escape them. The client may be overwhelmed by the surfacing feelings because of the power of the two-chair technique, thus provoking the need to escape.

Greenberg and Rhodes' (1991) description of avoidance patterns in relation to emotional expression may provide some insight into the observed behaviours in the current study. One pattern described is an interpersonal aspect of avoidance. The client escapes from emerging feelings because of feelings of shame which originate from anxiety about overwhelming the therapist or fear of being rejected by the therapist as a result of being vulnerable. The second pattern that surfaced in their research was a phenomenological aspect of avoidance. Here, clients fear losing control, losing their sense of who they are, and that this aroused emotion will overpower them and change them. The third pattern found was a motivational aspect of avoidance characterized by a fear of the implications to action that the feeling may elicit. If a client allows feelings to surface, needs also begin to surface which leads to a decisional point for or against change. An awareness of these avoidance tendencies and possible origins is useful information in facilitating deeper exploration to uncover the root of, and work through this avoidance reaction. But, although these patterns may offer some explanation for the fear reactions witnessed in the clients in the present study, the reason for engaging in such as escape from one's feelings was not explored in the current study thus, rendering this explanation as purely speculative.

Summary

This study highlights the importance of task completion, especially tasks of "wants and needs" and "emerging experience," in achieving a sense of softening in the resolution process as well as providing some insight into conceptualizing client exit in the two-chair technique. Practitioners need to be cognizant of the sequential nature of this therapeutic process and the necessity of helping the client fully complete these tasks. This seems particularly pertinent to novice clinicians who, possibly lacking the experience needed to avoid processing errors such as lack of empathy and improper questioning, may impede or arrest the resolution process. Understanding the importance of process task completion may be especially helpful to the over-zealous novice clinician who may expedite the therapeutic process and prematurely "push" clients through the technique.

Future research is needed to operationalize the observational modes of client exit, perhaps using a task analysis approach (Greenberg, 1992). A more rigorous exploration of the relationship between Greenberg and Rhodes (1991) avoidance patterns and client exit from the two-chair technique is also recommended which may include an exploration of the internal processes of both clients and therapists and their subjective experience of the exit process. This may be accomplished using interpersonal process recall followed by a grounded theory approach of analysis (Rennie, 1992). This would help to identify those therapist behaviours

which are more facilitative in achieving natural exits and discern some of the ways that clients become immobilized in using this technique.

Other suggestions that would strengthen the current research design include using raters who are blind to the goals of the study and cross-validating the rating measure to the already established Degree of Resolution Rating Scale (Greenberg, Rice, & Elliott, 1993). As well, future studies should test treatment integrity and ensure that clinicians have followed the treatment protocol. Despite the limitations, this research explores some possible ways of conceptualizing clients who experience early exit or impasse providing insight into understanding this phenomenon.

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About the Authors

Lisa A. Sicoli, B.A., M.Ed., Ph.D. (in process) is currently a doctoral candidate in Clinical Psychology at York University. Her current interests include psychotherapy process research with a particular emphasis on examining the change process in process-experiential approaches to psychotherapy.

Ernest T. Hallberg, B.A., M.A., Ed.D. (Associate Professor, The University of Western Ontario) has been a counsellor educator for over 25 years. His research focus is on the teaching and learning of individual and small group counselling concepts and skills.

Address correspondence to: Lisa A. Sicoli, Department of Psychology, York University, North York, ON, (416) 736-5290.