
Patterning Language Usage and Themes of Problem Formation/Resolution

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Abstract

This paper outlines a conceptualization and a preliminary exploration of phenomenal patterning, a counselling approach developed by the author, used here in a small group setting to examine how language expression, theme identification, and guided imagery can reveal the basic structure of a person's mindset or worldview. In the present study, patterning focuses specifically on the theme of problem formation/resolution as well as on three universal modelling processes of deletion, generalization, and distortion which were applied in examining linguistic patterns within written protocols. Participants wrote descriptions of their experience in real problem situations and were given a guided imagery exercise in order to amplify the text. Phenomenal patterning was used to identify relatively stable sets of processes — patterns, configurations, sequences of action/interaction — unrecognized structures carried forward from childhood into adult life.

Résumé

Cet article présente les grandes lignes d'une approche en counseling sur les formules phénoménales développée par l'auteur. Il s'agit d'une conceptualisation et d'une exploration préliminaire des formules phénoménales. Cette approche est utilisée, ici, à l'intérieur d'un petit groupe pour examiner comment les expressions verbales, les thèmes d'identification et la visualisation peuvent révéler la structure de base de la perception de l'individu ou encore sa perception du monde. Dans cette étude, l'approche focalise spécifiquement sur le thème de formation et de résolution de problème ainsi que sur les trois modèles universelles de processus de suppression, de généralisation et de distortion qui furent appliqués à l'examen de patrons linguistiques à l'intérieur de protocoles écrits. Les participants ont décrits leur expérience de résolutions de problèmes et cette description écrite était suivie d'un exercice de visualisation dans le but de paraphraser le texte. L'approche de formules phénoménales a été utilisée pour identifier les modèles relativement stables des processus — de formulations, de configurations, de séquences des actions et interactions — de structures non-renconnues transposées de l'enfance à la vie adulte.

Phenomenal patterning is an approach to counselling and learning which extends the work of Carl Rogers. Based in the philosophy of human science and in the descriptive methods of phenomenology, this approach focuses on identifying relatively stable sets of processes in our perceiving, thinking, and acting in an attempt to understand the habitual mechanisms which structure our experiences. A central postulate of patterning suggests that we do not operate on the world directly or immediately, but rather through our belief systems and internal maps (Korzybski, 1958). Often the source of our difficulties is not in the world itself, but rather, in how we represent the world which then becomes our personal map of reality (Grinder & Bandler, 1976). When we say, "I can't cope" or "Nobody loves me," we are using language to describe our internal belief systems or personal maps. Language patterns are, therefore, the surface structures which reflect a deeper reality.

The basic method of patterning is to witness and to reflect: “If we do not know what we are actually enacting then we cannot possibly do what we want” (Feldenkrais, 1981, p. xi). Very often our enacting is simply senseless repetitions of coping patterns learned in early childhood. The challenge for the counsellor is to attend to patterns of how we organize our thoughts, experience, or language expression, in order to identify the basic structure of our childhood conditioning. Recognition of such patterns creates choice and enables us to take responsibility for our behaviour (Giorgi, 1986). Finally, awareness of patterns may deepen our understanding of how we avoid change, and may also give a clear indication of how we can initiate and accelerate change in chosen directions.

The Meta Model

Linguistic components of Milton Erickson’s work have been studied in detail by Bandler and Grinder (1975b), who formulated the Meta Model — a set of linguistic tools to examine and challenge the language patterns whose interactions compose and maintain subjective reality. According to this perspective, people construct their cognitive maps or mindsets through three universal modelling processes. These processes, deletion, generalization and distortion (Bandler & Grinder, 1975a), describe ways in which the model we construct will differ from the thing which it models: the map is not the territory.

Deletion is the process whereby a person pays selective attention to certain aspects of experience and excludes others. The deletion may be a useful reduction or it may impoverish the model in such a way as to create pain for that person. Anger is commonly deleted from awareness; a common erroneous belief is that a loving person cannot have anger also. Deletions in one’s language expression, for example, may indicate avoidance of important experiences or sequences of interaction. The expression, “I can’t cope,” contains a deletion and brings the response, “With what?” The client’s assumptions that his/her linguistic representation is reality is challenged by the counsellor who facilitates direct contact with the experience in the context in which it originated. Reconnecting deletions with a specific experience within a particular context effects a measure of personal integration as clients confront avoidances and unfinished gestalts: “The achievement of a strong gestalt is itself . . . the creative integration of experience” (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951).

Generalization refers to the process whereby pieces or elements of a person’s model become detached from their original experience and come to represent the entire category of which the experience is only an example. A child with an abusive, alcoholic father, for example, may fear all men.

Distortion is the process whereby people can make shifts in their experiences of sensory data (Bandler & Grinder, 1975a). Nominalization is a common distortion where a verb-form experience is represented as a noun-form static event, such as referring to the process of deciding as a decision. Then, when things go wrong, it's the decision that needs fixing, not the processes of deciding. The fact that language nominalizes interpersonal processes which operate below the level of everyday consciousness may account for the increased scrutiny of linguistic communication in counselling and in human interaction generally. Recognizing our own nominalizations illuminates the impasse, an essential first step toward change and reconnecting with ongoing dynamic processes of living.

METHOD

Patterning focused specifically on language usage, remembered images, and on constructed images generated through a guided fantasy exercise. This study is based on our belief that the configurations identified in these areas of expression can be useful for understanding the patterns of how individuals behave in problem situations and how they form and maintain relationships.

Participants

Participants were ten third- and fourth-year undergraduates enrolled in a seminar on interpersonal communication. They ranged in age from 21 to 51 ($M = 26.2$; 6 female, 4 male). These were members of one of eight small discussion groups that had been formed through random assignment. This particular group was led by the author, a male, 50, veteran teacher and group leader. Participants had provided informed consent.

PROCEDURE

The course consisted of a large lecture and a small group seminar, each meeting for 1 hour 20 minutes per week for 12 weeks. Opportunities were provided for students to explore their relationship patterns through self-reflection and family of origin focus. Class time was used to obtain written responses to questions pertaining to students' personal experiences and their experiences during the guided fantasy exercise. These written responses (protocols) were collected in the seminar groups, "analyzed" by the instructor using a patterning procedure to identify and describe relatively stable sets of processes, and then returned with instructor comments. Finally, group time was provided for discussion and individual expression, and focused on further exploration and feedback regarding unrecognized patterns, preferences, compulsions and sequences of action/interaction.

Self-Reflection (Remembered Images)

During the second class period, participants were asked to write their responses to specific questions regarding their experiences:

1. Describe a situation wherein you were faced with a particular problem which you then proceeded to solve.
2. Describe your particular style or pattern of confronting problems and how you go about dealing with problem situations.

Guided Fantasy (Constructed Images)

During the third class period, a guided fantasy was introduced which was designed to provide some structure and yet yield experiences vague enough for participants to project their own cognitive/perceptual maps of reality. For example, the imaginary task of entering a cave which had a blocked entrance was employed to elicit self-created, imagined behaviour in a potential problem situation.

General “search” language was used in the guided fantasy following the premise that people will project their personal models into a generalized or ambiguous situation or context (Kastenbaum, 1959). Consideration was given in the guided fantasy, also, to creating an appropriate mindset as well as a comfortable physical/emotional setting for internal processing (Erickson, Rossi & Rossi, 1979). The specific guided fantasy exercise we used follows:

Sit comfortably, feet flat on the floor, in a position where breathing is easy; take a few deep, relaxing breaths, and allow your eyes to close as you orient toward internal imagination... (10 sec.)

Imagine yourself in the middle of nowhere... (10 sec.)

A cave is nearby... (10 sec.)

With a blocked entrance... (30 sec.)

You somehow get into the cave... (30 sec.)

Descriptions of client fantasy experiences were elicited first in general paragraph form: “Begin writing a paragraph or two, describing your experiences in the guided fantasy.” Descriptions were elicited also in response to more specific questions: “What was blocking you from entering the cave? Describe *how* you got into the cave.”

Students examined their descriptions before and after they were briefed by the instructor: “Activating theme-oriented mental imagery reveals a variety of patterned ways to frame and solve problems. Do people move easily into and through the problem situation or is it hard work? Notice how you got into the cave. Did you construct large barriers demanding hard work, such as clawing through a huge pile of rocks, sticks and mud? Or was it easy because of plenty of space to slip between the big rocks? However large or small the problem you created for yourself, what kind of problem resolution did you put in place in order to

deal with the situation? Effective or not? Elaborate or simple? Enjoyable or hard work? Creative or repetitive? Did you use trickery, logic, humour, patience, wisdom, sexiness, knowledge or awareness to get what you wanted? Identify a pattern of behaviour and notice if the sequence is repeated in different situations, different contexts.”

Patterns were identified in the fantasy material and these were compared with patterns extracted from descriptions written a week earlier. (For an elaboration of this methodology see Koziey & Andersen, 1989.)

Protocols

Protocols, the written responses, were patterned by the instructor for theme-related problem/solution experiences. Review of the protocols focused on these themes, and on the universal model-making processes of deletion, generalization and distortion.

Two protocols were not used because they were largely interpretive rather than descriptive statements. One protocol was composed largely of lists of loosely-related thoughts. Of the remaining seven protocols, four were selected for their rich and varied descriptions of a broad range of possible configurations, and for providing useful data for practical application in counselling and education. The final test of validity is whether participants find their own experiences reflected accurately in the final thematic descriptions (Wertz, 1986).

Protocol One: (male)

Wood was blocking the cave for me and I had a great deal of difficulty in removing it before I was able to enter the cave. . . . In extrapolating this experience to real life situations, I find first that I seem to have great difficulty in accomplishing things. I seem to struggle with things. Everything is approached in the negative sense of “this is difficult and it will take me a long time to solve it.” The situations in my life right now that I can readily relate to this is that of school work . . . the wood in the cave, it was a great obstacle for me to overcome. I found myself struggling with it just like some of the assignments put forth to me. It seems as though I make them more difficult than they actually are. It’s a basic struggle with myself, of feeling this is so difficult how will I ever be able to finish it successfully in time.

The problem formation in Protocol One seems to be the unconscious insistence on the difficulty of removing the wood blocking the entrance to the cave. To identify this basic pattern in experience, the client can be invited to act out, through role playing, details of the sequences presented in imagery material. The existential statement “This is how I struggle” can be repeated by the client at appropriate times in the role playing to access a deeper awareness of the experience. When a client recognizes a pattern, the counsellor may ask, “Is this familiar, this pattern and these feelings?” Such questioning may be useful for accessing and exploring situations where the pattern manifests in daily life, and for

recognizing pattern consistency throughout one's personal history. To determine the validity of generalizing the patterns to everyday experience, one can ask: Is this behaviour situational and responsive, or habitual and patterned?

In examining Protocol One, a counsellor could usefully focus on linguistic *deletion*: "What are you struggling for or against?" "What is blocking you?" "How are you blocking yourself?" Identifying specifically *what* and *who* is the opposition in this struggle illuminated a choice point: To confront and destroy, to avoid, or to join and utilize. These three control possibilities can be systematically and experientially explored as personal ways-of-being in the world: What is one's manner of seeing things? Does one see the opposing as useless or useful, as a hostile enemy or as a complementary opposite part?

The *generalization* in Protocol One, "Everything is approached in the negative sense," could be explored for more detail. When identifying a pattern such as "struggling," it may be useful to ask: What creates the struggle for you? How do you struggle? This could be followed by an exploration of the nature of the difficulties presented in examples from lived experience and the fantasy material. It is important also to access exceptions to this "rule" so the individual knows it is within his/her personal repertoire to behave differently.

Protocol Two: (female)

Rather than me moving the obstacle from the cave entrance, it suddenly disappeared leaving an opening to walk through. And I didn't walk into the cave, I suddenly found myself inside it, in the dark. . . . In real life I am one who tends to find myself in situations without being sure of exactly how I got there. E.g., I married my friend on three days' notice and sent my parents a telegram — and woke up the next morning after the wedding wondering if I had dreamed it. My relationship got off to a shakey start.

Deletion is obvious in Protocol Two. Not seeing and hearing what there is to see and hear can be a negative hallucination, which may result from not hearing and seeing information that conflicts with what one believes. It seems this individual is not responding to important cues in the environment and needs practise in separating seeing and sensing from imaging. Through the practice of attending to dimensions of what is specifically seen, heard, tasted, smelled and touched in a particular context, the counsellor can explore with the client details of just "how" the obstacle got moved from the cave entrance, and "how" the person got into the cave. Using real life examples provided by the client, a counsellor can usefully explore decision-making processes for patterns and themes of avoidance. The challenge is to work on developing presence, to identify, describe and understand patterns of when and how this individual disconnects herself from present reality.

A nominalization, the word “relationship” is a noun-form *distortion* of the verb “relating,” which describes ongoing, changing processes of interacting.

Protocol Three: (male)

The most powerful pattern of my behaviour which was emphasized in the guided fantasy was the way I approached problems in life. For example, the rock at the cave’s entrance looked so formidable to me from the distance. I spent a lot of time from the distance wondering how I would get by the rock. However, when I decided to lift the rock, I threw it away easily. It was so light that I could easily throw it far away. . . . Then I considered the waste of time in thinking about how I was possibly going to lift the rock. For me to hesitate in moving into action is so unnecessary.

In examining the nature of problem formation, it is obvious that this individual makes large barriers and hard work of it as in Protocol One. But here, insight into the problem pattern — the needless hesitation in initiating action — followed spontaneously from the activity of pattern identification. The common, first-level counselling intervention — “Do you notice any similarities or differences in specific experiences? Do you notice a particular pattern?” was not required nor was any interpretation or analysis needed to assist this individual in arriving at a personally relevant understanding, which is the point of the completed gestalt.

This person has *deleted* a close look at present reality, and might benefit from taking a step back to create some interpersonal distance to enable the exploration of personal space and proximity, contact and withdrawal. “Keeping a distance” may be a productive theme to explore, examining how this is accomplished, and what the payoffs might be. Also, this person could usefully explore interpersonal preferences of midpoint and intimacy positions in roleplay or trance situations. Clients could be asked to act out the approach to problems they outlined in fantasy in order to identify patterns in personal experiencing. In addition, self-exploration stem questions such as “I avoid life’s problems by . . .” and “When I keep a distance I . . .” may initiate exploration of specific habitually patterned ways-of-being in the world and produce insights into their utilization.

To generate data, a counsellor may suggest other experiences, such as having people become their images, become the rock, talk to the rock; or express things which reverberate and have life. To create a working atmosphere of appreciation and to provide a sense of balance to the problem-pattern orientation of everyday life, a wise counsellor will not forget to acknowledge the beautiful things in one’s experiencing. In examining Protocol Three, for example, a counsellor may be moved to an expression of appreciation which focuses on the client’s ability to lift and throw with ease; the demonstration of patience in the waiting; the ability to observe one’s own behaviour and to move into purposeful

action; and the final intuitive understanding creatively generalized into one's life.

Protocol Four: (female)

I pictured a large fence of cedar pylons which intermeshed and barricaded the cave entrance. I jumped over the fence with some glee and proceeded along my way...

What we call problems are often self-created blocks or barriers to natural functioning. In this protocol, the individual avoided creating any obstacles to block entry and moved easily through the potential problem situation. The orientation of just not making a problem of a particular situation is also reflected in the fantasy of another client who had a black bear blocking the cave entrance conveniently walk away when it was time to enter the cave. The style of movement through the potential problem situation, the ease and smoothness of process evident in Protocol Four, can be contrasted with the theme of habitual struggling obvious in Protocol One.

We need to recognize also the reality of some existing problems which cannot be so easily "jumped over."

RESULTS

Self-reflection, along with guided fantasy, generates data in the form of simple self-descriptions, a text filled with themes, patterns and reflections. Phenomenal patterning provides a method for identifying and understanding childhood patterns which are carried forward unrecognized. In understanding these structures we take away their power to rule our lives.

Participants are considered to be co-researchers or co-counsellors in exploring their own reality. This study illustrates how self-reflection, guided imagery and language expression can generate useful data for research and counselling, how data analysis can assist in identifying patterns in human behaviour and how counsellors and researchers can share data with participants.

DISCUSSION

The existence of presuppositions can lead people to attend to certain things and not to others. The patterning approach identifies these unconscious preferences and expectations and holds people responsible for clearing and tuning their perceptual/cognitive functions to become more sensitive, responsive, conscious instruments of human interacting. The intention of the patterning process is to delineate how individuals shape their experience. The awareness of such basic configurations allows an individual to choose either to enact the pattern or to respond in an alternative way, thus becoming more response-able.

In order to understand people, a counsellor needs to attend to the patterns of how individual experiences are organized, including language, behaviour, perception and thinking. In order to establish a pattern, examine two experiences in different contexts for similarities, then compare these to a third experience. What do people choose to talk about? What do they remember? What is it that makes a difference in their experience? Patterns may be observed directly in one's personal style of everyday being and doing. The patterning process may identify how a person interacts with the external environment at any particular moment, or may identify ways of internal information processing. Through the process of identifying and describing unrecognized preferences and expectations, it is possible to begin to understand the nature of the elements which comprise one's model of the world.

The achievement of a strong sense of the dimensions of one's personal model of the world is a long first step toward self-knowing. To enhance this sense we used imagery and self-reflection. In extrapolating identified patterns, the counsellor may notice coherent subjective patterning in theme-related real life situations. Does the individual interact with similar processes at the office, in a school classroom, in sports, in the family, in the world generally? The counsellor can assist in identifying basic patterns both in imagery and in the lived-experience of the client.

Pattern explication and catharsis in counselling can be facilitated through repetition, enacting the polarity, exaggeration of the pattern, through energizing the system, or through interpersonal role playing. Such expression is often followed by a new awareness of *how* the individual participates in the construction of personal reality. If we attend to how we do things, the likelihood of finding alternative ways of doing these things is enhanced, along with free choice and human dignity.

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