Draper and Hannah

Relationally reflexive questions help us to gain an understanding of what it is we are producing, instead of assuming that we already know. They also help us to tease out the implications of our interventions and give us the opportunity to go beyond the therapeutic conversation into a new understanding. This, in turn, creates the potential for new possibilities that transcend the ordinary patterns of co-ordinated behaviors. It is what one could call “loose change,” in that reflexivity requires looseness, softness, and flexibility.

This type of inquiry enables the therapist to engage in a way of working that involves taking responsibility for the therapeutic process within moments when we explore the meanings being created and the impact these meanings have on the stem as a whole.

In every moment of crisis there are both danger and opportunity—opportunity to be free of fear and open to the turning points in every conversation, letting in ys of light.

REFERENCES


TURNING POINTS IN THERAPY: DISCURSIVE ANALYSES AND THERAPIST COMMENTS

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We summarize and analyze some key developments from the “Turning points in counselling” conference in Cochrane, Alberta. At this conference, three prominent Alberta therapists interviewed the same “client” who presented with the same issue. After the conference, the therapists were asked to select “turning points” from their videotaped interviews. For the purpose of this article, “turning points” are defined as times in the session when, from the therapist’s perspective, the client provides discursive evidence of new understandings. Transcript passages were analyzed using Conversation Analysis and Comprehensive Process Analysis to relate researcher and therapist accounts of those “turning point” dialogues. We close by sharing benefits we feel can be derived from reflecting upon and analyzing interactions in therapy that therapists or clients consider helpful.

Based on events from the Cochrane, Alberta “Turning points in counselling conference” September 2005.

Special thanks to the Calgary Health Region Rural North conference organizing committee, as well as Shari Couture, Don Zeman, and Nathan Pyke.

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INTRODUCTIONS

Therapy is where some things are talked into significance over others and this extends to turning points in conversations that clients find helpful. While we can’t decide what is helpful for clients, we try to talk in ways we think clients will find helpful. But, notions of what needs to be talked about, or what is helpful, are often furnished by our theories and sense of good practice. In this respect, we each borrow from conversationally focused therapists (e.g., Steve de Shazer, Michael White, Milton Erickson) to join clients in constructing or deconstructing some understandings and actions over others. Thus, each turn at therapeutic conversation offers choices as to what might beneficially be said or responded to. Some passages of therapeutic dialogue are more helpful than others.

Each of the therapists at the conference had a distinctive interview style. Frank’s dialogues draw from the clinical wisdom of Milton Erickson, Lance is a well known solution-focused therapist and trainer, and Nick draws from critical discourse analysts to engage clients in resourceful, response-based discussions. Those attending the conference (some 80 or so regional therapists) practiced a wide-range of theoretical orientations but many used solution-focused, cognitive, or narrative ideas in their approaches to therapy. Tom, Shari, and I bring a perspective from discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992), ethnography (Heritage, 1984) and conversation analysis (ten Have, 1999), seeing the talk of therapy as actions sustaining particular client (and therapist) understandings and action, or as actions that construct differences. “Kim” came from a local theatre troupe and was asked to play Frank’s, Lance’s, and Nick’s clients, as someone who has been in a relationship that concerned her. The client issue offered an opportunity to showcase how conversationally focused therapists address issues of gender and power in the “back and forth” of conversation to encourage change from the “inside-out.” This approach differs from therapists of theoretical persuasions that advocate for confronting such issues directly with the client.

Over two full days, conference attendees were oriented to the notion of “turning points” in therapy, first in an introductory talk by Tom and Shari, later in live interviews with “Kim” that were about 50 minutes in length, and in a general discussion about “turning points” at the end of the conference. After each interview, Tom and Shari provided some initial comments from their discursive perspective, and then drew attendees into lively discussions about the therapists, “Kim,” and themselves about perceived “turning points.” “Kim’s” interviews with Frank, Lance, and Nick were each videotaped, and each therapist was asked to pick a passage from their videotape that they saw as a turning point. They were asked to comment on these passages and the passages were then analyzed using broadly convergent analytic methods (Hutchby & Wooffit, 1998; ten Have, 1999) to identify conversational practices used and accomplishments occurring within the selected passages. We will now turn to the analyses and comments on these passages.

OUR METHOD

As practitioner-researchers, we are interested in what clients’ and therapists’ use of talk does in the therapy session. More specifically, we wanted to find out how turning points are accomplished in the talk of therapy. Although a client-actor afforded generous boundaries around confidentiality considerations, it created challenges for us in defining “turning points.” Being sensitive to issues concerning privileging therapist discourse over client discourse, we seriously deliberated over whether we should ask “Kim” to define what a turning point is and to determine which therapeutic events fit that description. However, we reasoned that we were on a different mission than studies investigating client reflection. Our purpose was to look closely at the conversational work of therapists who purposefully and constructively use their half of the therapeutic medium to foster collaborative and generative therapeutic dialogue. In effect, we wanted to create a situation where an observer could
“see what the therapist is seeing” by giving the observer a “passenger’s eye view.” As a result of our deliberating, “turning points” became defined as times in the session when, from the therapist’s perspective, the client provides discursive evidence of new understandings. In addition, these “turning points” would be seen as a recursive loop in their impact on the therapist’s use of language.

The method we chose is a synthesis of two qualitative analysis methods, Comprehensive Process Analysis and Conversation Analysis. Comprehensive Process Analysis (CPA) is a systematic discovery-oriented research procedure which has been used effectively to discover and analyze significant events in the counseling session (Elliott, 1989). Consistent with a focus on language, we modified the original CPA model to obtain a greater level of detail in the counselors’ use of language than previous studies investigating significant events. In this study, we used CPA to focus on three broad categories of investigation:

1. Microanalysis: What discursive aspects of the event were helpful in signaling that this event was a turning point in the session?
2. Context Analysis: What led up to the turning point occurring? What factors help explain why these discursive events happened?
3. Process Analysis: What was the impact of the discursive event? What evidence suggests there was an impact?

While ideas from Comprehensive Process Analysis helped guide our investigation, we primarily used Conversation Analysis (CA) methods since they afford detailed analysis of talk in interaction. CA focuses on how an interaction is produced, seeing context not as “a bucket, but a performance: we accomplish our goals in the interaction” (Kogan & Gale, 1997, p. 104). The speaker’s utterances are therefore both “context-shaped” and “context-renewing” (Heritage, 1984, p. 242). By “discursive” we are referring to not only the language used in therapeutic dialogue, but how that language is used (e.g., with emphases, gestures, etc.).

The aim of CA, as described by its originator, Harvey Sacks (1984) is,

To see how finely the details of actual, naturally occurring conversation can be subjected to analysis that will yield the technology of conversation...the idea is to take singular sequences of conversation and tear them apart in such a way as to find rules, techniques, procedures, methods, maxims (a collection of terms that more or less relate to each other and that I use somewhat interchangeably) that can be used to generate the orderly features we find in the conversations we examine. The point is, then, to come back to the singular things we observe in a singular sequence, with some rules that handle those singular features, and also, necessarily, handle lots of other events. (p. 411)

The “technology of conversation” is revealed in how a CA researcher looks at how participants in interaction use talk to create meaning (ten Have, 1999). CA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.()</td>
<td>A pause which is noticeable but too short to measure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.5)</td>
<td>A pause timed in tenths of a second.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>There is no discernible pause between the end of a speaker’s utterance and the start of the next utterance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:</td>
<td>One or more colons indicate an extension of the preceding vowel sound.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under</td>
<td>Underlining indicates words that were uttered with added emphasis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAPITAL</td>
<td>Words in capitals are uttered louder than the surrounding talk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.hhh)</td>
<td>Exhale of breath.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(hhh)</td>
<td>Inhale of breath.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>()</td>
<td>Indicates a back channel comment or sound from previous speaker that does not interrupt the present turn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>Overlap of talk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(())</td>
<td>Double parentheses indicate clarification information, e.g., ((laughter)).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>Indicates a rising inflection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>!</td>
<td>Indicates an animated tone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.</td>
<td>Indicates a stopping fall in tone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* *</td>
<td>Talk between * * is quieter than surrounding talk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; &lt;</td>
<td>Talk between &gt; &lt; is spoken more quickly than surrounding talk.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from Kogan and Gale (1997).

analyzes all of the features of talk including utterances, pauses, breaths, and sequences (see Table 1). Through a CA, it is hoped that “the seen but unnoticed practices” in counseling will be illuminated (e.g., Gale & Newfield, 1992; Kogan & Brown, 1998; Kogan & Gale, 1997).

THE RESULTS

Out of several “turning point” passages, each therapist chose the one believed to highlight the most positive change in their respective session. Each passage was analyzed using conversation analysis (e.g., ten Have, 1999) and was complemented by therapist comments relating to the passage. The “turning point” selections are presented in table form, followed by my (Gene) and the therapist’s observations of important dialogical contributions to the “turning point”. Our analyses begin with Lance’s (Table 1) passage.

LANCE’S TURNING POINT

1. Lance: So um (8) you and John some how=I sort of have to ask you to speak a bit
2. for him because he’s not here so someone has to ((smiles)) [laughter] (.5) but how
3. did you and John two weeks ago manage to have (1.2) ah (.5) things work in such a
used specific action-oriented language that Kim subsequently adopted. For instance, doing words such as “manage” (line 4), “do” (line 5), “react” (line 11), and “got out” (line 18) found in Lance’s solution-focused questions became evident in Kim’s responses which grew less tentative (e.g., from “trying” to “doing”) as they talked. But, he also invites particular co-constructions of memory (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992) by offering a candidate account for Kim’s actions (“little explanation, then out of there,” line 18) to which she favorably responds on line 15. By line 21 Lance proposes a further agentive evaluation for Kim’s action characterized “hopes for the good” as connoting a decision she made with respect to her “explanation”—an agentive purpose for her actions she then articulates. Lance’s comments and questions, in other words, helped to open up new areas of inquiry and invite a particular kind of re-membering. Important to these analyses is how both demonstrably arrive at “common ground” (Clark, 1996) through talking their way to a shared vocabulary describing Kim’s agency in this exception.

Lance’s Observations

This is a point in the conversation where the client identified something she did that actually worked . . . (giving her reasons for going out briefly and then leaving fairly quickly). . . we identified both her positive intentions and key behavioral details that she could remember and use again. I used two overlapping conversational techniques during this turning point . . . a “layering technique” in order to build my questions (in line 9 I used Kim’s exact phrase “put-upon” . . . to build my subsequent question inquiring into her own effective responses). I also interjected “overlapping affirmations” such as “yeah,” “right,” and “uhuh” while the client discussed these effective actions. These affirmations reinforce productive behaviors. With the phrase “That seems wise . . .” (line 20) I give Kim credit for a fait accompli, for the wisdom involved and for figuring this solution out by herself (Taylor, 2005).

FRANK’S TURNING POINT

1 Frank: So (1) how come he’s not here? Is he out on the rigs this [week]
2 Kim: [Ah] yeah (.8) he’s (.5) yeah he’s away he doesn’t know I’m here
3 Frank: He doesn’t know
4 Kim: Yeah
5 Frank: I see (.5) umm (.2) How would how would you’re (.3) how would
6 things be different if he did know you were going to come to this
7 consultation today?
8 Kim: (huh) Umm I don’t I don’t know actually I’m kind of scared to tell I’m not
9 sure how he’d take it
10 Frank: Yeah
11 Kim: Cause I mean like he already (.2) he doesn’t like outsiders (.1) like
Turning Points

Frank: (hmm) how do you think he’d feel? (1.5)
Kim: I don’t know (2) hmm (2) it might make him feel more secure (1.5)
Frank: (nods) Well I’m pretty sure that if I was trying to make a move on you and
you start to talk about your kids your boyfriend and he’s a big bully [laughing] guy
holy smoke (2) think I would really really back peddle put on the brakes [laughing]
and do something you know [laughing]
Kim: (laughing) yeah (.5)
Frank: you know
Kim: I mean I don’t invite it in the first place you know like I’m not (1.5) I don’t
care about guys hitting on me or what not it’s just that (laughing) [well] he always
assumes that (2)
Frank: But you know he loves you he’s attracted to you John is and you know
you’re an attractive woman so I would guess his automatic assumption is that you’re
going to get some guys hitting on you even if you don’t cue them up by eye contact
or anything like that=
Kim: hmm=
Frank: It’s just because you’re an attractive woman and they’re gonna see what they
can do
Kim: hmm
Frank: So it’s not like you invite it=
Kim: I never thought of it that way actually (2)
Frank: But imagine how he would feel if you had that as part of your armor to
defend the marriage [hmm hmm] against [that might help] external threat
Kim: That might help (3)
Frank: Well, it’s just an idea
Kim: hmm hmm

Conversation Analyst’s Observations

Frank’s turning point shows three major conversational themes. The first, in lines 1 through 23, is a sequence of turns focusing on assessing the couple dynamics between Kim and her boyfriend. In line 1, Frank asks a systemic question about why Kim’s boyfriend is not present in the session with her. In line 2, Kim observably pauses before taking up this question. Not feeling dialogically complete with her answer, Frank follows up with a “question of difference” in lines 5 through 7 which Kim takes up, sharing a great deal of detail about the dynamics of her relationship in lines 11 through 15. Also noteworthy, in lines 16 and 17, Frank asks a confrontational question but with a tentative tone. Kim takes up this question without contest, suggesting no disruption in rapport given how the question was put to Kim. Taken together, this subsection demonstrates a successful assessment sequence, despite discussion of topics that could have been considered confrontational.

The second theme, in lines 24 to 67, is an interesting dialogic exchange regarding pictures. In lines 26 and 32 Frank inquires as to whether Kim carries a picture of her boyfriend and children. In lines 39 and 40 Frank makes a normative dis-
Turning Points

I focus on this turning point because it was the first to noticeably shift Kim out of helplessness in a victim role. She began to be curious about her potential efficacy in moving her stuck situation into a zone of making a difference in her life, her emotions, and even shifting the center of the relationship. Throughout this passage I was “kinda” mirroring Kim’s verbal language forms, and using analogical marking with eye gaze and eyebrow lifts to emphasize messages intended to be encoded in their discourse. The use of humor and body lean also helped to punctuate the process of pacing and leading out of old paradigms into potential solution patterns. At several points Kim’s giggle indicated her shift out of a helpless role to have a meta-position perspective on her situation. (For more information on Frank’s approach, see his website at http://members.shaw.ca/frankdyoung/index.htm.)

NICK’S TURNING POINT

1. Nick: Okay so an=anything you can do to increase your sense of freedom (hhh) (1)
2. you’ve (.5) kind of (.5) hang on to that and even maybe not being married gives you
3. a few more options than if you were=
4. Kim: Yeah that’s true (1) [hmm] I mean there’s got to be more I can do=I just=I
5. don’t know what to do=
6. Nick: Hmnm okay (3) So you’ve wanted (.5) something better for yourself early on
7. (hhh) (.5) and you’ve been able to build that for yourself
8. Kim: A little bit yeah (1)
9. Nick: But not enough there’s there’s
10. Kim: Not enough I guess it’s it’s (.1) ah I’m scared and my life is is (.5) is starting to
11. look like my (.5) my parents’ life and (2) you know my
12. daughter she looks so much like me (hhh) (1) it’s it scares me cause it reminds
13. me of what it was like when I was little (6)
14. Nick: Okay (nods) so you want things to be better yet for her [yeah]
15. yeah=how do you think it’s going for her
16. Kim: (hhh) Well I mean she’s pretty little she’s only she’s only 18 months umm (3)
17. but um (1) it’s going okay [good] (2) I think (hhh) (2) um (2)
18. Nick: Like how would it be better than when you were 18 months as
19. much as you would know about that
20. Kim: (hhh) Well there’s not as much yelling in the house (.5) or breaking of plates
21. (1) um so there’s that much I mean it’s a little calmer atmosphere I mean I’ve
Turning Points

69 Nick: What have you learned from that? (2)
70 Kim: Umm (2) well (hhh) I’ll never never ever let any man hit me ever I mean if I
71 John ever hit me that would be it I mean (hhh) I’d live on the street before I’d let
72 him hit me that’s there’s no way that’s ever going to happen and (1) um (2) I
73 mean I (hhh) I won’t let him (3) ah (1) I mean I do let him tell me what to do to a
74 certain extent but (5) (shakes head slowly) (where’s) but
75 Nick: Where’s your line on that (5) what’s the extent=
76 Kim: Well its (hhh) because I mean like I do still (1) go out with my
77 girlfriend’s >1 mean not as often (hhh) ah (.5) but (.5) I still do (2) um (4)
78 sometimes I just >you know (hhh) do it take the guilt I guess (.5) but um but I just
79 don’t accept what he says to me like my mom did (3) she was always (3) she would
80 always “yeah you’re right yeah you’re right yeah you’re right” and I’m like no you’re
81 not right (.1) I might not want to yell about it but (3) that’s not okay (2.5)
82 Nick: (nods) (hhh) So you’ve learned how to be kind of quietly insistent [yeah]
83 when it’s time to fight that violent [yeah] (nods) (6) okay (.5) so the the trap
84 you’re living in is (1) (hhh) to the extent you’ve been able to control things much
85 more (hhh) ah to your specifications than the ones you grew up with [hmm hmmm]
86 that was kind of imposed on you [yeah] this one you negotiated where some of the
87 boundaries are [right]

Conversation Analyst’s Observations

Nick’s turning point involves two themes. The first focuses on the difference between Kim’s experience at home as a young child and the current experience of her own child. In lines 10 through 13, Kim verbalizes her fear that she is repeating unhealthy generational patterns. In lines 14 to 15, and 18 to 19, Nick introduces a “comparison question” inviting Kim to explore the experiential difference between her as an 18-month-old and her own child. Kim responds in lines 20 to 24 with a number of positive differences showing that she takes up this comparison. In acknowledging positive differences between these experiences, Kim’s wishes drift toward more materialistic measures (e.g., more clothes, line 24) rather than emotional measures of well-being. This dialogue of difference indicates self-healing or reflexive (Tomm, 1987) discourse since it allowed Kim to let go of some anxiety about repeating unhealthy generational behavior through positive self-appraisal.

The second theme evolves from discussing Kim’s father’s violent behavior to Kim’s constructing boundaries in her current relationship. Lines 30 to 52 explore the extent of Kim’s father’s violent behavior. In lines 53 to 54 Nick asks a “distinction-clarification question,” used by family therapists when “causal attributions are not clear” (Tomm, 1987, p. 178), to determine why Kim’s mother behaved as she did. Kim responds that her mother was not afraid of her father “enough,” an evaluation which enables Kim to agentively position herself differently from her mother, with respect to relational violence.

Building on the above, in line 68, Nick “utilizes” (Erickson, 1955, 1965) Kim’s passing phrase “I should be able to learn from that crap” and asks a poignant ques-
tion, “What have you learned from that?” by extending Kim’s discourse. Kim answers by formulating boundaries on acceptable and unacceptable levels of violence. Nick helps her thicken and bolster these formulations through elicited answers to follow-up questions such as “Where’s your line on that?” (line 74). In line 81, Nick packages Kim’s successful relational posture with her partner as “quietly insistent” and in lines 82 to 86, reinforces how she has designed her marriage to her own “specifications” rather than those that generational habits dictated. Overall, this passage shows Nick packaging interventions using “recipient-design” (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), working within Kim’s discourse and thereby facilitating her ability to take up the interventions.

**Nick’s Observations**

I chose this passage because it is one in which I seek details to confirm a reformulation I am working on, namely that the client may feel that she is “trapped” but she has also been active in customizing the trap to make it more livable. By contrasting how things were for her growing up versus now in her own family as an adult, I am hoping to build toward a larger reformulation which constructs the feeling of being trapped as a directional response to both her partner’s controlling behavior and abuse she saw growing up as a child. This intervention is based on the assumption that people are not just affected by violence but respond to it and will always resist mistreatment in some way. Reconnecting people with their histories of such resistance can be an important source of therapeutic impetus (Coates, Todd, & Wade, 2003; Todd & Wade, 2004; Wade, 1997, 2000, 2007). I am hoping to propose, at least implicitly, that Kim continues to the present day to respond to what she saw as a child by attempting to build a better marriage and family life for herself than what she saw growing up. To make this construction more compelling, I attempt to map out all that Kim has been doing to ensure that her relationship is better than her parents’ was. Against this background, it is possible to see the feeling of being trapped as an intelligible response that is itself a potential solution to her present problems in that it indicates her ongoing awareness that she has not yet achieved all that she would like to in terms of creating the right kind of relationship for herself and her children. Kim initially tempers my reformulation by remarking “there’s got to be more I can do” (lines 4 to 5) and that the improvement is only “a little bit” (line 8). I respond by reflecting that the change is “not enough” (line 10). This allows the client to articulate a strong sense of directionality by articulating her preference that her life not turn out “like my parents’ life” (line 11), and in particular that her daughter not have to experience the same level of disruption and violence that she did. I then ask two questions about how Kim thinks things are from her daughter’s perspective (lines 14/15 and 18/19 respectively). This appears to allow the client to grant that the differences between how her life is going and how her parents’ went are indeed probably significant, at least from the perspective of her daughter.

**CONCLUSION**

The “Turning Points” conference presented its participants with a rare opportunity to see three well-known Calgary area therapists demonstrate their slightly different
versions of therapy with the same client and same presenting issue. Such a conference format was not entirely new (see Chasin, Grunebaum, & Herzig, 1990) but we feel revisiting the actual therapeutic dialogues from the conference, along with the discursive analyses presented, offers something new to readers. In this article, we set out to investigate what seasoned, linguistically focused therapists identify as useful “turning points” that can be demonstrated in the actual words of both client and therapist. Guided by the idea of therapy as conversation (Anderson, 1997) it makes sense to us to focus on the language uses of both clients and therapists as “sign posts” of progress in therapy. CA sees such use, and what develops from it, as relational “accomplishments” (ten Have, 1999). That is, the spoken words in the client/therapist dialogue may be seen as evidence of progress, or lack thereof. Although the use of a client-actor limits the application of results to real-world clinical practice, this type of study may have particular merit for student therapists who are learning their craft as well as experienced therapists who are in the process of refining their use of language in the therapeutic process. As well, the success of this experiment lends credence to future studies using similar discursive methodology with real clients to strengthen the application to real-world clinical practice.

REFERENCES