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One Size Won't Fit All

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> I think that if I were going back into individual therapy now, I would be far more flexible than I was at that time in regard to time. I don't know what I would do, but I would experiment with various things. I have always worked with a fifty minute hour and met once, twice, three times a week—but that was about it. I think I would try various things depending on the client and try and keep my own time as flexible as possible. I think I would try to have the client share with me the responsibility of determining how much time to spend. I don't know. I think there would be lots of things I would try to do.
>
> Carl Rogers in Kim C. Francis (1975), *Questions and Answers: Two Hours with Carl Rogers*, Department of Education Services Brooklyn College

That was 1975. Most counselling services still offer a fifty or sixty minute counselling hour. Most training programmes convey that going beyond this "boundary" is inappropriate.

Why? Was Carl misguided? Has it been shown that the fifty or sixty minute counselling hour is the most effective way to do therapy? (If rumour is correct, the standard counselling hour arose only because Sigmund Freud found that it fitted his schedule.)

I don't have *definitive* answers yet, but alongside colleagues and students, I am running a long-term experiment with session length.

Four Questions and a Challenge

My "experiments" began when I was a trainee. There was sometimes an hour or more between clients, and one day a client—call her Jean—wasn't ready to finish just because the big hand said twelve. We kept going, and Jean seemed to move a lot further and deeper in consequence of that extra half-an-hour. Next session, she confirmed that the extra time had really helped. Again, we worked for about an hour and a half, by which time it felt Jean had naturally reached a place where she wanted to stop.

We fitted in three more extended sessions before Jean's therapy ended. Each lasted an extra half-an-hour or so, and it seemed to us that Jean reached a natural stopping place.

Similar experiences with a second client impressed me greatly as did the negative response of some of the course trainers: why did *I* need to work longer sessions? *Because it seemed helpful to two of my clients?* I needed some answers.

1. Why did these clients seem to benefit from longer sessions?
2. What was this "natural stopping place" all about?
3. Why was I, a supposedly person-centred counsellor, even contemplating telling a client how long their session should be?
4. What would happen if I didn't establish session lengths for my clients, but encouraged them to determine what worked best for them?

These questions look pretty tame today—many of my own students would have ready and dismissive answers—but as my initial training ended it felt that I was planning to do something radical. That speaks volumes for the "normalizing" power of the counselling-hour paradigm.

An Experiment in the Marketplace

Two circumstances helped. First, the supervisor who had accompanied me through training and knew my empirical ways agreed to continue. Second, nobody wanted to give me a place in an agency wedding me to the "Standard Counselling Hour". I began work at a private practice where I had sufficient freedom.

Or maybe that bit about freedom isn't quit accurate. I was in the marketplace selling my services. I had to provide what people would pay for and speak well of. I *had* to be client, i.e. *customer*, led. I disavowed fixed-length sessions and discussed session length and payment as early in each counselling relationship as possible. I charged like a taxi, for time actually spent, based upon a negotiated hourly rate. And I learned to schedule a two hour slot for first sessions because the only people who wanted a standard hour were those who had received significant counselling elsewhere. Even some of the experienced clients changed their preference over time. (One new client was adamant that she wanted one hour sessions. Our first session lasted ninety minutes, the second lasted one hundred and twenty, and so we continued.)

Over the next decade, this experiment became a central feature of the way I work and of the counselling practice I had by now inherited. What I found, and am still finding after thousands of hours, is that very few clients favour the fifty minute or sixty minute session. (This finding was recently corroborated in Bates 2006.) I've had clients who prefer roughly forty-five minute sessions, a handful of experienced clients who stick with sixty minute sessions, and the large majority whose preferred session length is between seventy five and a hundred and fifty minutes. The modal session length is ninety minutes. Session length varies initially, but after a few sessions, clients establish their own length and largely stick to it. Colleagues working in practice with me report similar findings, and so do counselling trainees in placements where flexibility is possible.

In sum, and referring back to the list of four questions, the answer to "three" is that I stopped trying to tell my clients how long their counselling sessions should be when I completed training, and I don't ever want to do that again. I work with clients to figure out what suits them. When I do that—and this is the short answer to "four"—clients establish a pattern of time usage.

A Natural Process Length?

Question "two" asks why counselling sessions seem to have a natural end-point. Subsequent experience raises the related question why clients quickly establish a *consistent* session length.

For some clients, money affects session length, but this is not true of all clients, and I try to negotiate hourly rates which allow for each client's needs. (You won't get rich, but you can stay in business.) Therefore, a non-financial explanation is needed. The obvious is that some *consistent and natural process determines the length of sessions*. My hunch is that each of us—or at least each counselling relationship—involves a process which defines optimal session length.

Experience with experiential focusing supports this hypothesis. In a focusing session which isn't curtailed, there is always an ending or rest point. One either reaches a place of inner stillness and tranquility or a place where it is recognised there is nothing more to be done right now. This usually takes around twenty minutes. I am thinking that counselling sessions have similar natural endings when not curtailed but that the time required varies more than when focusing. (In recent years and publications, I have begun to explore what this may be about.)

Some Reasons Why

The remaining question on my list is the first, and it has probably exercised me most because seeing that something works is not the same as understanding *why* or *how* it works. Here are some reasons why encouraging clients to determine their own session length might facilitate therapeutic process. The quotations are from clients.

Arrival and Departure

♦ When an incongruent or defended way of being is necessitated by their environment, clients need time to 'arrive' or 'land'. Initially, this can take the better part of a standard counselling hour:

> My experience of my early counselling was that it took me at least an hour to actually find myself. The person I was when I arrived was a version of me I'd adapted and been to survive my environment outside counselling. An hour session, or fifty minutes wouldn't have been enough for me to become aware of those defences I'd built.

♦ Before returning to a less acceptant, more threatening environment clients need time to gird their loins and prepare:

> The transition from where I was when I arrived to the undefended me was way too long to be given a fifty minute time limit. I would probably have chosen not to go there because the transition to and back from this place under the pressure of a time limit would have been too frightening. I wouldn't have felt safe. Formatted time would have left emotions I was scared of unexplored because of my fear of where I'd be at the end of my allotted time.

Power and Relationship

♦ Making the session-length decision a mutual one puts power in the client's hands and emphasises their personal worth and uniqueness:

> Time limits seem to me to be the opposite of what this kind of therapy is offering. They seem to devalue the person's experiencing. I've experienced these kind of counselling relationships as devaluing of me because I immediately assume that the person I'm with is the authority figure who I'm paying because they're skilled enough to fix me. Maybe the most empowering part of my counselling now has been the 'choice' I've been given as to when I am ready to end. That choice has told me that I am important and valued, and I'm the one who's responsible for me, not the person in front of me.

♦ This also helps to de-professionalize the relationship; visiting one's therapist becomes a little more like visiting a friend and a little less like an appointment with authority. Is that a good thing? Clients think so:

> Relationships are scary to me. If I'm going to have a relationship with my therapist as a friend/person/human being, fifty minutes a week just isn't enough. I don't think I could see them as a human being.

♦ Some clients start out asking for relatively short sessions. As they experience acceptance, relationship, and opportunity to be themselves, they begin to experience themselves and their needs. They need more of this good stuff and seek longer, or longer and more frequent sessions. Refusal jeopardises their developing sense of worth and power.

♦ Those who offer client/person-centred counselling provide what can be conceived of as a therapy of acceptance or sometimes love. Clients would find it contradictory to ration them in a way that makes no reference to their own needs and wishes:

> Being someone who has found it hard to value my own experiencing, I know that timed sessions wouldn't have worked for me. I would have found it hard to begin to value and listen to my experiencing if it had been given a time limit, especially as it's been hard to even be with it at times.

♦ If it is broadly accepted that relationship as perceived by the client is an essential ingredient in effective therapy, why would the counsellor dole out that relationship in rigid fifty or sixty minute parcels?

Fragile and Difficult Process

♦ Because it is essential to follow the client's moves towards or away from depth, or here and now experiencing, and allow time for slow and halting process, what Margaret Warner has identified as "fragile process" (e.g. Warner 2000) requires a flexible use of therapeutic time:

> I feel that if it had been a one hour session initially, at the beginning of my therapy, I could control my relationship with Clive. I wanted to see it as a client/therapist relationship. Part of the control is me talking, me setting the agenda. After an hour and a half I run out of 'agenda setting material' and then at that point I'd be confronted by feelings of the moment. I think that in a fifty minute session I would very rarely get to that point, if at all. In some ways that's almost the point of acceptance; that I don't have to set the agenda and I can just sit there with him.

There may be several movements during a session. It is important not to end in what for the client is the middle of things and block their process.

- At least in the early stages of therapy, some clients don't process between sessions; they only process in the safety of their therapist's presence. Other clients find that their therapist's office is the only place they can experience their authentic selves and find relationship. Both kinds are probably going to need more than a standard counselling hour.

- Clients who cannot or are afraid to make decisions are encouraged and held while they make at least one decision, namely how long and how often, and this seems to help get their ball rolling. They begin to reconceive themselves.

- Clients who have learned to use a fifty or sixty minute time limit to avoid material may find that taking responsibility for the length of the sessions helps them to acknowledge that there *are* things they need to avoid and to do so in full awareness.

Relationship Work

- Couples and small groups like families need longer sessions because of the multiple processes involved.

Perhaps Most Importantly…

- Those of us influenced by Gene Gendlin's development of experiential focusing share his insight that therapy is most effective when clients engage in an almost physical way with their here and now experiencing. (E.g. Gendlin 1981.) A few moments of focusing can promote large and beneficial changes. However, achieving this kind of relationship with one's experiencing can be slow and difficult. It may be necessary to spend 90 minutes or more with a client in order for focusing-type experiencing to occur. In other words, short sessions may preclude focusing-type experiences.

Why Not?

If I tried to respond to all the possible objections I can imagine being raised I would need a book. Here are some concluding thoughts.

First, colleagues and I have seen some very fast process, and it may be that overall counselling time is reduced by longer sessions. I think I see an overall time reduction achieved by very wounded clients, but it is measured in years rather than weeks.

Second, an agency or institutional service could move towards accommodating longer or—when needed—shorter sessions by planning around the modal ninety minute session and splitting it in

two for short sessions. If longer sessions make for more effective therapy and faster process, then time spent will be recouped later.

Third, it has been said that while there *may* be something to my claims, it wouldn't be right for trainees to "try it". Those of my trainees who *have* offered longer sessions, and who have encouraged clients to determine the length of their own sessions, are delighted with its effect upon the therapeutic relationship.

Fourth, I am often asked if long sessions aren't particularly hard on the counsellor. My answer is that *counselling* is hard on the counsellor. I do find it easier to see four clients in a day and offer, say, eight hours of counselling in total than see eight clients for fifty minutes. Because there is room for relationship to evolve, and sufficient space for process, I find the longer sessions more satisfying.

References

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