

Psychological Interviewing

The goal of psychological interviewing is to understand the client in order to analyze his or her situation. The content of the interview depends heavily on the approach that the psychologist takes on the clients. For example, a behavioral psychologist would focus on the external factors that explain why a person keeps smoking while a psychodynamic psychologist would approach the interview to learn about the patterns that the person has lived through in the past to obtain insight that would help the client realize the reasons for smoking, which might help him or her quit smoking. What the different types of interviewing have in common is that the psychologist will try to read what the client is saying, thinking, and feeling, and continually check with him or her about how precise these assumptions are. Nonetheless, some psychologists rely more heavily than others on the unconscious material that the client discusses and thus, it is more difficult to check the correctness of the assumptions through the client. Assuming that the psychological interview is a model, it can be analyzed to detect what are the axioms, undefined terms, and logical rules are followed. With this, we can determine the strengths and limitations of the psychological interview as well as understand its underlying structure.

Confrontation occurs when the therapist lets the client know that there is a possible contradiction. According to Jacquelyn Small,

there are three cases in which confrontation can occur: when there is a discrepancy between what the client says and the therapist's perception of what the client experiences, between what the client says and what he or she said earlier, and between what the client says and his or her experiences in everyday life. The purpose of confrontation is to facilitate awareness of reality in the client's experience (1990).

When analyzing the goal of confrontation, an assumption appears. There exists the belief that when the client is in a situation of contradiction and the therapist makes the client see the contradiction, that the client will become aware of it and change his or her reality. The therapist can test if there is a contradiction by assuming that there are only three different paths the situation can take. A case can illustrate this idea. For example, a client named Joe just experienced a death of a family member that made him experience a lot of stress. When talking about this death, the therapist notices that Joe smiles while he says that he is sad about losing his family member. This might mean different things to Joe, such as repressed relief.

In order to get to the "true" reality, the therapist can point out that there is a smile in Joe's face. If Joe says that he smiles when he is unhappy, then the psychologist can test if what Joe said is true by creating situations in which Joe will express unhappiness and see if he smiles. If he does not smile, then the psychologist cannot be sure

about the validity of what Joe said. The second case is when Joe denies that he smiled. In this situation, the psychologist would assume that Joe cannot deal with the idea of feeling happy about the death of a family member. The psychologist would then try to provide Joe with a safe environment in which he would feel safe about talking with respect to the feelings of happiness. The third option would be that Joe recognizes that he has mixed feelings about his family member dying.

The underlying structure that enables the psychologist to determine what the client's reality is like in comparison to the "true" reality is similar to the mathematical structure for attaining knowledge. For example, when trying to decide if two triangles are congruent and one of the sides is not known to be congruent to a side in the other triangle, then the mathematical structure tells us that either the first side is smaller than, bigger than, or congruent to the other side. There is a proof that the true relationship between the segments is one of those options. By that same reasoning, what the meaning is for what the client says can be divided into different categories and that what the "true" reality is fits one of those categories.

The axioms, however, change depending the school of psychology that the therapist uses. Behaviorists, believe that the behaviors of a person are entirely related to conditioning and that the behaviors can be changed without looking into cognitions or feelings.

Naming the beliefs as axioms, there are many “propositions” that arise from them. The interpretations that model the underlying axiom structure differ between the different schools inside behaviorism. For example, for classical conditioning, which deals with the pairing of stimuli with responses, the interpretation uses the terms: paired, neutral, conditioned, unconditioned, stimulus, and response. With this, the propositions are built. One proposition is that an unconditioned stimulus, which produces an unconditioned response, can be paired with a neutral stimulus that will later produce that unconditioned response (which is called a conditioned response). The most common example is the dog that is presented with food (unconditioned stimulus) that produces salivation (unconditioned response). The food is then paired up with a bell (neutral stimulus, later converted into conditioned stimulus), which will end up producing salivation (conditioned response). In the case of Joe, the psychologist would investigate in which circumstances he talks about the death of the family member. A situation in which classical conditioning would explain his behavior is that whenever he talks about the death, someone makes him smile. In this case, the unconditioned stimulus of other people making him feel better is paired up with the neutral stimulus of talking about the death. After enough pairings, the neutral stimulus would then be enough to cause Joe to smile.

For operant conditioning, the interpretation is different. It includes the terms: response, reinforcer, and punishment. One axiom

is that a behavior will be modified by the stimuli that appear after it. If a response is followed by a reinforcer, then it will appear more frequently than before. If a response is followed by a punishment, then it will appear less frequently than before. For example, if a dog is given a treat (reinforcer) after it sits (response), then the dog will sit more frequently. If a cat is sprayed with water (punishment) after it climbs on the counter (response), then it will climb on the counter less frequently.

Using operant conditioning, the way in which confrontation is understood is explained through the reinforcers and punishers that are presented after the contradiction that the person has experienced. For example, in the case of Joe, having thoughts about happiness or relief after the death of a family member might have caused him to feel guilt. In this case, the thoughts of happiness are the responses and the accompanying guilt is the punisher. In a similar way, when Joe ignored his feelings of happiness when thinking about the death of a family member, he would feel less anxiety about the guilt mentioned before. Thus, both cases lead Joe not to think about the happiness he experiences.

For psychoanalysis, the approach for curing the client is completely different. The axioms are that people are greatly influenced by their early experiences; that there exists an unconscious; that the structure of the mind is composed of the id, ego, and superego; that there are life and death instincts; that people

can be cured by bringing the repressed into the conscious; and that dream interpretation and free association are ways in which the unconscious can be reached. The interpretation includes terms like repression and resistance. Using this axiomatic system, many propositions arise. For example, the defense mechanisms that help people cope with reality are based on the assumption that the unconscious can be too difficult to manage and that the superego will keep the unconscious memories of early experiences repressed while the id will try to bring it to the consciousness. The id would be driven by the death instinct, which would bring thoughts that the person would not want to deal with. Thus, the defense mechanism would help the person keep the unconscious as it is.

The use of confrontation is more complex in psychoanalysis. The contradiction is explained using a defense mechanism. For example, Joe might use denial in order to deal with the unbearable feelings of guilt that come from knowing that he feels happy for the death of a family member. The superego would be the one responsible for making him feel bad about being happy. The id would be the one that is happy for the death, and would be driven by the death instinct. Confrontation in this situation means bringing the unconscious to the consciousness, telling Joe that he feels happy about that death (as well as sad) but that there is guilt following that feeling. The role of the psychologist is to give the patient new ways of dealing with the feelings of happiness so that Joe does not feel guilty about that death.

The approaches a psychologist can take differ in the techniques they use. These approaches, behavioral and psychoanalytical, have completely different views on what it is that cures the patient.

Propositions are built upon these different views or axioms.

Psychologists can modify the behavior of the patient using these different propositions. Assuming that these different schools of psychology can indeed cure the patients, the axioms as they are show that they do not hold the unique truth. Instead, a psychologist can use techniques of both schools, since they both work.

Bibliography

- Small, J. (1990). *Becoming naturally therapeutic*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.