

The empty chair - Part 3

In the Transactional Analysis Journal, 1976, Pp61 - 68, John McNeel wrote an article called "The Parent Interview". This is a 2 chair technique where the person places their Parent ego state in the empty chair and in essence 'interviews' it. Thus one is interviewing their birth parent (in one sense).

Interestingly John McNeel attributes the creation of 2 chair work to Fritz Perls in his book, "Gestalt Therapy Verbatim", (1969). At the end of his article John McNeel writes

"There are two situations in which the therapist should not, as a rule, use this technique. One is if the client is psychotic or potentially psychotic. This could trigger a psychosis. The other situation is if the therapist picks up enough information to lead him to believe that the mother, father, or whatever parental figure is being talked with was crazy. In that situation it is better not to invite the client into someone else's hell" (P68)



Someone else's hell

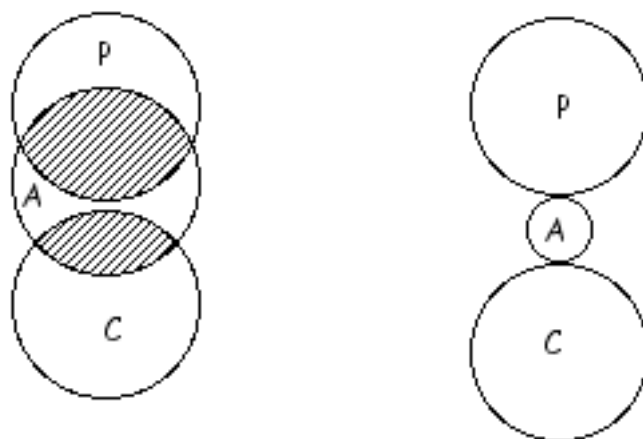
Whilst these comments of caution are obviously well intentioned I cannot agree with them. I have worked with many and at times very closely with a large number of psychotics and potentially psychotic people. I ran a respite program for a

number of years where I would live for 5 days at a time with about 7 chronically psychotic individuals. When one does that one learns a massive amount about how these very ill people function and live. In addition I came across many psychotics whilst working in the prison system.

About 20 years ago our government in its wisdom decided to greatly reduce the populations of our mental hospitals. It was believed that because the medications were improved psychotics could now be managed in the wider community and this of course also had great cost savings. Well what happened is they moved the people out of the hospitals and into the community. This was greatly under resourced and thus many of them ended up breaking the law in some way. So they moved from the government paying for them to be in hospital to the government paying for them to be in prison.

The most common psychotic categories are schizophrenia and bi-polar (or manic depression). These people are the ones who are seen as 'crazy' as they behave in ways that are very odd indeed. People think that the schizophrenic is like Dr Jeckl and Mr Hyde or the split personality. That fictional character was not schizophrenic but instead had a multiple personality disorder. That is he had two personalities that functioned at least reasonably effectively.

With a psychosis or schizophrenia the personality basically collapses in on itself so it cannot function effectively at all. In Transactional Analysis terms the Adult ego state ceases to function in any meaningful way.



The Adult can either be heavily contaminated by the Parent and/or Child ego states as in the first diagram. Alternatively the Adult ego state can simply be very ineffectual for some reason as in diagram 2. Either way this person will find it very difficult to solve even the most basic problems in day to day life. They will also have very strange beliefs and thoughts, usually display quite odd behaviour and hence they are seen as 'crazy'.

By saying something or doing something you cannot make a person go like the two ego state diagrams above show. Hence I disagree with John McNeel's statement that a two chair technique could trigger a psychosis. It can't. The only way a psychosis could rapidly evolve is if the person ingests some toxin or suffers some head injury.

Barring these the degeneration of the Adult and thus the rise in psychotic symptoms takes some considerable time to develop. The smallest minimum would be a couple of months and usually it is many months if not a few years. For instance the "chatter in one's head" (auditory hallucinations) usually takes many months to evolve.

It is possible that a person could enter counselling and be on the edge of moving into the florrid or actively 'crazy' stage of a psychosis. Doing 2 chair techniques would be very ill advised with such people. However the person would be obviously quite low functioning and would be battling to make even the most basic of contracts and so forth. So the consideration of doing some regressive technique would really not even arise. It would be obviously a waste of time for all concerned. So the main point is that a basically sane person can not become rapidly psychotic by a counsellor saying or doing something with the person.

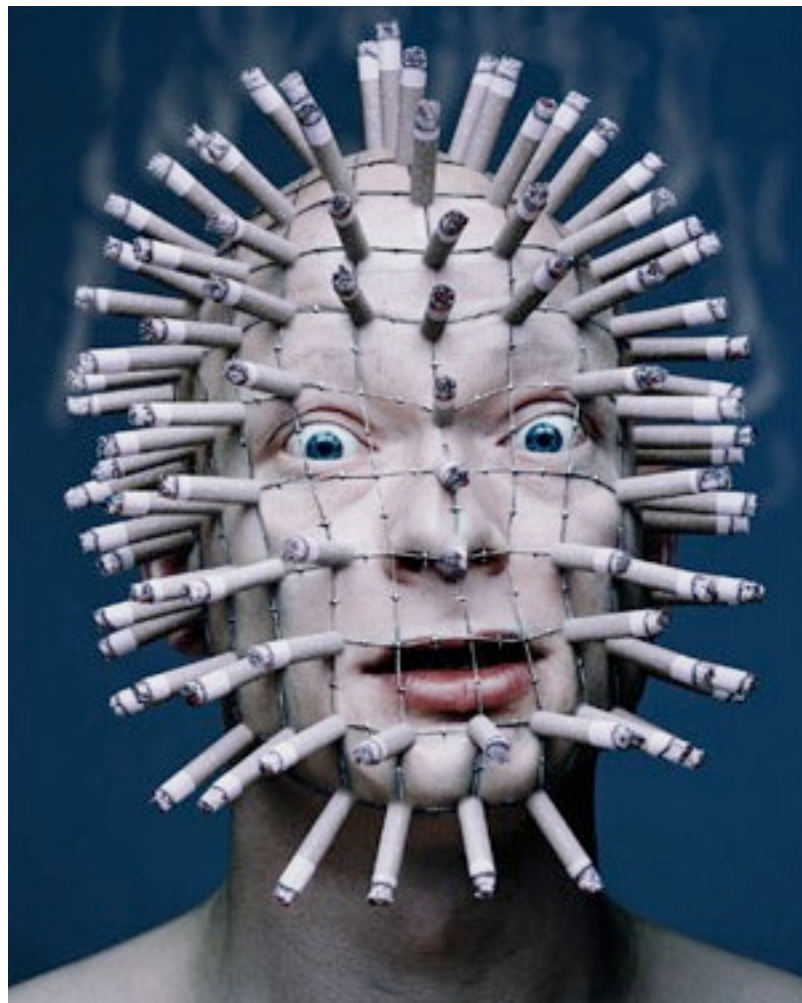
John McNeel also says that a 2 chair technique should not be used if it invites the client into another person's hell, such as craziness. Whilst I would agree with this the language is somewhat dramatic. "Hell" has very visual overtones.

What is being said here? Through two chair techniques one can begin to understand the pain that another person may have suffered in their life. One can understand it at a deeper Child level than if regressive techniques like two chair are not used. That of course can have significant therapeutic effects which is why it is done in the first place!

So with 2 chair one can get to see another person's 'hell' at a deeper level. There is nothing wrong with that. The important point is how does one react to that observation of another's 'hell' If it is very distressing then one would not go there all that much. If it is not too distressing then one can go there if there are therapeutic benefits from doing so. John McNeel's point seems to be that if the parent was crazy then that would be extra hellish. Firstly that is not so at all. A client's birth parent could have experienced a very hellish life and not be crazy at all.

The point from all this is that in any two chair technique the distress that a client is experiencing is constantly assessed by the counsellor. There is nothing special about a 'crazy' parent being put into the empty chair. Dialoguing with a

non-crazy parent can lead to much more distress in the client than a crazy parent might.



Hallucination

Also one must remember that in two chair work the empty chair is actually empty. There is not the biological parent sitting there. So you are not delving into any biological parent's craziness, you are delving into the client's Parent ego state which may have some crazy beliefs.

Two chair work and integration

I mentioned in the previous comment about 2 chair work (20. Two chair technique) that one of the problems with 2 chair work can be with those who are dissociated. People who are dissociated feel like they are a collection of bits and lack a sense of integration. They may feel that they have a adult thinking part, a scared child part and so on. What they lack is a sense of all these parts forming one big 'whole'. By projection parts of yourself out onto a chair one is

encouraging this process of dissociation.

It thus seems ironic that 2 chair work is actually about the opposite of dissociation. It is about integration. That is making all the bits join to form one whole unit. Fritz Perls and Gestalt therapy highlighted this with the use of 2 chair work. They say the healthy functioning human is the integrated human. So one does not use two chair to rid self of bad internal objects, it does the exact opposite. The two chair is used to firstly become aware of the internal parts and then to accept them and integrate them into the overall personality. Any productive 2 chair work must involve both parts.

Humans are so good at being blind to parts of themselves. We are experts at it. When we have a feeling or thought that the Parent ego state does not like that thought or feeling can be quickly dispatched to the unconscious. The father who notices his teenage daughter and has a sexual response to her. For some that type of feeling would be quickly shut out of mind.

Or the mother who does not ask for what she wants. And she has a daughter who is assertive and does get her needs met. The mother can then feel anger and dislike for the daughter. Her Parent ego state says that mothers should love their daughters unconditionally, so the dislike and anger are shut out of her awareness.



(Humans are experts at staying unaware of parts of their personality. How many men would accept the woman in them!!!!)

In a therapy group when this woman is talking about her family the therapist notices that she is using one finger to pick at the nail on her thumb. The therapist asks the woman to be the picking finger or put it in the chair and speak as it. With a bit of skill from the therapist the woman finally says of her daughter, "I was never allowed to get my needs met. I was never even allowed to ask for what I wanted. I just had to shut up. She asks for and gets what she wants and I am jealous of her and don't like her".

The two chair has facilitated the awareness of the blind spot (out of awareness feelings of dislike and anger) which was shown by the unconscious agitated movement of her fingers. This is the first half of the 2 chair work. The next step is to accept and integrate those feelings into the woman's overall personality again by using techniques such as two chair. For instance, the mother begins to accept her needs and become comfortable asking for what she wants. If this happened then her anger at her daughter reduces and her agitated finger picking goes away.

Another way of achieving integration is by using two chair to create what the gestaltist's call the Differentiation and the Dialectic of Polarities. All people have polarities in their personalities. In every pacifist there is a war monger, in every person who has hate there is love, in every person who is conforming there is a rebel.



(Humans are a catalogue of polar opposites).

So the therapist identifies the strong personality features in the client and

then can use two chair to differentiate the opposite pole of that feature. So the conforming person would sit in the other chair and be the rebel. Once achieved then one facilitates the interaction between the two polar opposites and this is called the dialectical process. By doing this process integration is achieved and the personality begins to function in a healthier way. For example the person is then in a position to feel and manage both of their feelings.

If one is consumed with hate and anger then they have pushed their loving, affectionate side away. The more they accept that side then the less they will be consumed by anger and hatred. They become much more flexible and have much more choice in how they feel in a particular situation.

The 2 chair technique is without a doubt a very powerful mode of psychotherapy. One which I have used on many, many occasions and I am sure will continue to use regularly.

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