

"Conversing with Characters within Oneself: A Form of Therapeutic Role-playing and an Aspect of Storytelling Therapy"

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This essay concerns one type of role-playing: *Conversing with characters within oneself*.

While the essay focuses on the therapeutic value of such role-playing, this activity can also be done for other objectives, such as personal self-discovery and growth, and developing one's creativity and imagination.

Role-playing is used in numerous therapeutic processes, including

- 1) "**Active Imagination**" (Carl Jung).
- 2) "**Psychodrama**" (Jacob Moreno), and various other forms of "**Drama Therapy**."
- 3) "**Gestalt Therapy**" (Fritz Perls).
- 4) "**Neuro-linguistic Programming**" (Richard Bandler and John Grinder).
- 5) "**Storytelling Therapy**" (*Conversing with characters within oneself* is Step 5 in the 7-step Storytelling Therapy method I am using and helping to develop).²

During therapeutic role-playing processes, the therapist always needs to monitor the client to be sure things are staying on the level of imagination, and are being done by the client with attitudes of play and pretend. If the client comes to feel the characters within the client are "real," this could be considered a hallucination, and could be a dangerous and/or unhealthy situation for the client.

The 7 steps of the *Conversing with characters within oneself* process that are explored in this essay are:

- 1) **Identifying characters within oneself: memories, personifications of personality traits, etc.**
- 2) **Speaking to the characters.**
- 3) **Speaking as the characters.**
- 4) **Thinking about the characters, including regarding where they are coming from.**
- 5) **Remembering real-life experiences related to the characters.**
- 6) **Catharsis (experiencing, expressing, releasing, and understanding emotion).**
- 7) **Going forward: Interacting with the characters over time.**

1) Identifying characters within oneself: memories, personifications of personality traits, etc.

A client's feelings, actions, and behaviours may sometimes seem to the client to be swirling, fleeting, confusing, ungraspable, and unmanageable. The client may feel the client is going around in circles and is not getting anywhere, and that the client's positive ideas and actions are not registering, accumulating, or building.

In such cases, it can be helpful for the client to become more aware of familiar "spirits," voices, attitudes, and feelings within the client, and for the client to consider, in the client's memories and daydreams, some of the figures that often pop up and confront, guide, advise, encourage and/or discourage the client's conscious self; the figures the client often consults; the members of the client's "internal team"; the animals, elements of nature, emotions, and inclinations (all of which can be personified), and memories of people, which often come to the client's conscious mind. The client could personify the client's personality traits, for example, as a way of getting a grasp on them. Getting a handle on them. Making a fleeting quality addressable, and thus possibly manageable.

Expressing inner thoughts and feelings in symbolic concrete forms can be a productive part of the therapeutic process. One can access and express certain aspects of one's unconscious through this kind of pretending, which could be considered a form of artistic play.

Even though a character may be a memory of an actual person, that memory has come to exist in the one's imagination. For that matter, all memory -- and all that one perceives -- can only be known to one through one's imagination.

A therapist could suggest to a client,

You might take stock, take inventory, of the characters of whom you often think, and with whom (in your imagination) you often communicate (with or without language). You might seek to get a more clear sense of your inner landscape, your inner cast of characters.

That is, in your imagination: With whom do you consult? With whom do you talk? Whom do you listen to? With whom do you share your life? Who is on your mind?

In addition to memories of people you know (or knew), what other entities tend to be on your mind?

Are there ghosts or spirits (whether or not one feels they are "real")?

What recurring emotions, thoughts, and dreams (or dream images) do you experience?

A client may experience 20 or so regularly-present internal characters. In the client's imagination, some of these characters may at times talk with each other.

One personality traits (kindness, stubbornness, impatience, etc), tendencies, inclinations, and emotions (immediate reactions to specific stimuli) can all be personified.

A client may benefit from seeking out and becoming "friends" with the numerous aspects of the client's personality. Once a voice/character/aspect of a client's self is discovered, once a relationship with it is established, the client's conscious ego might seek help from this aspect of the client's unconscious. Being able to access aspects of the client's unconscious can make a client a more resourceful person.

The client being able to access aspects of the client's unconscious is a central aspect of therapy. Only by accessing such aspects can a client begin to integrate the aspects of the client's self, to create a whole, unified self. Jung referred to this integration process as "Individuation".

A good way for a client to explore aspects of the client's unconscious is to produce images and voices, and thereby cause aspects of the client's soul to surface. Then the client could observe, interact with, incorporate, and utilise these hidden aspects of the client's personality.

One way for a client to work and play with material from the client's unconscious is to personify it -- that is, to pretend the aspect has human-type personality and language ability. Such a personification is a metaphor for a part of the client's self.

Examples of inner characters -- In the process of my work as a Psychological Counsellor, I have invited clients to converse with

1) The client's angry self, and short temper --
 What can be done with this "Short Temper"? What triggers it? Should he/she/it be locked up in a jail, a room, a container of some sort? Should "Short Temper" be exiled? What has caused "Short Temper" to grow?

2) The client's "Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder" (ADHD) self --
 This is an aspect of the client's self that
 A) Gets distracted and distracts,
 B) Doesn't want to do anything and doesn't want the rest of one to do anything either.
 C) Wants to escape reality.
 D) Feels very incomplete, unsatisfied, anxious, and agitated.
 E) Can't start anything, and can't finish anything.

What might this character look like? In what ways might this character move?

The client might tell this character that the character is an interesting character, but that it would not be healthy for the client to listen to, or talk with, this character too much. That is, the client may seek to set limits regarding how much attention the client might like to give to this character. No need for the client to offend the character, but the client might (in the client's imagination) seek to be firm, self-protective, and practical in relation to this character.

I have also suggested that my clients might communicate with these characters:

3) A younger version of the client's self -- a child who feels emotionally-neglected, injured, and/or not-fully-nurtured. It may be helpful for the client to promise to take care of the client's injured-child self.

4) A younger version of the client's self -- a joyful child.

And also with this archetypal character --

5) A Guide (Mentor, Senior Advisor, Guru, Teacher).
 Walk in a forest. See a senior man or woman standing in front of a tree. Walk up to this figure and ask, "Are you my guide?" If the figure answers, "Yes", the client could then start talking with this Guide about a matter at hand.

My experience has been that clients who are comfortable creating imaginary personifications of characters and conversing with them have this in common: An adult read or told stories to the client when the client was young. This listening experience seems to tend to create a receptive and active imagination, and a familiarity with and fondness for metaphor, symbol, and fantasy. If a person did not have this listening, sharing, and imaginative experience as a child, the person is less likely to have an interest in creating and interacting with imaginary characters.

A note regarding characters based on people, personality traits, etc, in one's own life, as opposed to archetypes: Figures from one's memory of actual people may also be colored by social-cultural stereotypes, and thus may also be expressions of archetypes (universal things, feelings, situations, and characters). In the instance of what seems to be one's memory of each major "real-life" character one carries within one, there is a place where one's memory of the actual person, and one's imagination of an archetypal figure, meet. That is, the character who lives on in one's imagination is a combination of the person who was/is, and one's imagination of an archetype.

Archetypes can be defined as: mental images 1) inherited from the earliest human ancestors, 2) shared by all humans, and 3) present in the collective unconscious

2) Speaking to the characters.

The client might greet the character, and thank the character for appearing, for visiting the client's consciousness.

The client could tell something to the character, giving some information, expressing some emotion, etc.

The client could also ask questions of the character, such as,

- 1) "Might you want anything?" If yes, "What?"
- 2) "Do you want to tell me, or ask me, anything?" If yes, "What?"
- 3) "Do you know why are you presently so prominent in my thoughts?" If yes, "Why?"

If a character might seem angry or insistent, one could point this out to the character, and ask if the character indeed feels this way. If the character might answer yes, one could ask the character, "Why?"

3) Speaking as the characters.

After the client might address a character, the client could then reverse roles and reply as the character.

After all, who would know better than the client what the character might be thinking and feeling, and what the character might say? By playing both roles, the client could increase the client's understanding of, and empathy and compassion for. all concerned.

The therapist could also invite the client to speak the thoughts of various aspects of a character, such as the character's optimistic side and/or pessimistic side. (This is a widely-used method in Psychodrama, where it is called, "Doubling.")

If the client might give permission, the therapist could also participate in the role-playing.

4) Thinking about the characters, including regarding where they are coming from.

After a role-playing process, the therapist could invite the client to think and talk and/or write about how and why the character came into existence, and why this character is so prominent in the client's thoughts at this point in the client's life.

Especially if a character is recurring in the client's conscious mind, it might be helpful for the client to investigate the client's unconscious mind regarding this character.

A client might seek to remember or create a "creation story" of characters within the client. A creation story might explain how this character has come to be, and why it has such a prominent place in the client's consciousness.

A creation story could be realistic (based on the client's memory of childhood experiences). It could also be fantasy, using symbols and metaphors that may represent the client's real-life experiences.

By the way: A metaphor is a thing that represents some other thing. A symbol is a thing that represents an idea.

In some instances, it may also be essential to investigate why a particular personality trait -- now playfully personified as an inner character -- exists, and why it is so prominent and powerful at this point in the client's life.

Conversing with inner characters is generally not an endpoint or solution. A conversation with a character can be a gateway to discovering any underlying distress the client may be experiencing. This underlying distress, unresolved conflict, feeling of having been abused or neglected, etc, may have contributed to a client having developed defense mechanisms and other systems of thought and behaviour which may have limiting and/or negative sides to them. In such cases, the underlying distress has to be dealt with, processed with feeling and thought, and worked through.

5) Remembering real-life experiences related to the characters.

The client could be invited to re-visit in the client's memory (that is, imagination), experiences that relate to this character. This re-visiting may bring the client to the source of the matter, helping the client to understand what happened and how the client responded.

For example, a client could seek to remember life experiences that relate to short-tempered-ness (of the client, the client's parents, etc).

6) "Abreaction", also known as "Catharsis" (experiencing, expressing, releasing, and understanding emotions).

It is essential that a client also experiences the feelings involved, such as pain, anger, and perhaps eventually forgiveness of the people involved, if the client feels the client has been harmed.

Abreaction (also known as Catharsis) is the process of releasing strong or repressed emotions through a particular activity or experience, such as writing or even just talking.

It is a basic premise of psychotherapy that clients may benefit from discovering the emotions and experiences that helped to create the client's personality.

This process of experiencing and releasing emotions, 1) helps the client to understand those emotions, and 2) provides relief from the emotions. Abreaction is a key concept in psychoanalytic theory and practice.

7) Going forward: Interacting with the characters over time.

Once a client has gone through the above-described processes, the client could go forward in life accompanied by a team of inner allies.

The client should be very cautious about permitting the client's conscious ego to judge negatively any inner "voice". Mutual respect between the client's consciousness and the elements of the client's inner world is usually called for. Each has its contributions to make to a healthy personality. The client should not seek to fully control or erase certain inner emotions and inclinations.

Regarding some destructive inner voices (characters, that is, aspects of oneself), which Jung referred to as "Shadow" characters: once their root causes have been fully investigated, and catharsis has to some degree occurred -- should be acknowledged and left "wild", untamed, as long as they do not disturb the client's consciousness too much. Such aspects could be permitted, imaginatively speaking, to roam in a forest, and be told they can not visit human habitations.

If a client attempts to suppress or repress aspects of the client's self, among the things that can happen are: 1) the "dead" might come back to life, to "haunt" the client (things might just "pop out", "erupt"), 2) the client might come to feel disorientated, dissociated (lack of connection between aspects of the client's self), discombobulated (awkwardly uncoordinated), and out-of-sync with the client's self; and experience irritability, depression, and/or loss of vitality.

Suppressing or repressing a "demon" is a temporary solution. It is usually better to seek to give voice to, understand, if possible sublimate (transform into a positive element), and contain, whatever challenging material might be coming up.

Mental health involves achieving a balance between being controlled by one's consciousness and one's unconscious. The client can compensate for limited consciousness by accessing the subterranean riches, the buried treasures, in the client's unconscious. The client's consciousness may be enlivened by the client's unconscious. This may lead to feeling renewed, revitalised, and revived; to feeling alive; and to enjoying being alive. Material from the unconscious may also help a person to choose to proceed in a new direction.

The unconscious, and the collective unconscious, may have positive transforming influences on one's consciousness.

The entire self -- not just the conscious ego -- contains one's vitality. The conscious ego is like a rider of a horse. Results tend to be best when the rider and the horse work and play together, in partnership, with mutual respect for, and understanding of, each other.

The process of individuation involves becoming more conscious of and overcoming blockages and unresolved conflicts within oneself, and along the way becoming one's entire, whole, and mature self. The process of inner development and growth, of becoming increasingly aware of who one is, involves developing towards understanding and fulfilling one's potential, of blooming (to use a metaphor). Two aspects of the individuation process are: 1) one integrating the aspects of oneself, and 2) one integrating oneself with society and the universe.

Getting in communication with one's unconscious, by speaking with characters within oneself, may involve achieving a feeling of increased "relatedness" with aspects of one's self, and with aspects of one's environment.

Notes

1) Storytelling Therapy Association of India,
<https://tinyurl.com/storytelling-therapy-india> .

2) A 7-step Storytelling Therapy method is detailed at
<http://storytellinginstitute.org/216.html> .

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