

Metaperceptions: A group training exercise

Supplementary material for Cooper, M. (2015) *Existential Therapies: Contributions to a pluralistic practice* (Sage, 2014), Chapter 7.

Background

This exercise needs to be done as part of a group, for instance on a counselling training course. It takes some setting up, and can last for up to 90 minutes, but is generally experienced as very worthwhile.

A more individually-oriented version of this exercise is described in Cooper, M. (2013). Experiencing relational depth: Self-development exercises and reflections. In R. Knox, D. Murphy, S. Wiggins & M. Cooper (Eds.), *Relational depth: New perspectives and developments* (pp. 137-152). Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Aim

To find out how accurate your metaperceptions are, and how others really see you.

The exercise

Form into groups of four. As far as possible, try to go into groups with people that you have had some prior interaction with, but not people you know incredibly well.

On a piece of A4 paper (landscape orientation), create a three by four grid (i.e., draw two horizontal lines, and four vertical lines, equally spaced apart, see example sheet below). In the top row of the second to fourth column, write the name of each of the other group members. In the left hand column of the second row, write: 'How I experience...'; and in the left hand column of the third row, write: 'How... experiences me.'

Now, working separately for about 10 minutes, each member of the group should complete the grid: so write down how you experience each person in the group, and how you imagine they experience you.

It is very important that what you try and write down is your *experiences/perception* of this person (see Chapter 3), and not some attempt to describe or diagnose who they 'really' are.

Try to find a good balance between being honest and being sensitive. You will be asked to share these perceptions with the other person (although, of course, you don't have to), so it is important that you express your experiences and perceptions in a caring, non-judgmental and thoughtful way. At the same time, honest feedback is most likely to be informative and helpful for the other people in your group.

Now, pair up with one of the other group members. You have 20 minutes together, divided into two ten minute parts. In the first ten minutes, one partner should read out how they think the other experiences them, should then hear that other's actual experiences of them, and then use the remainder of the ten minutes to talk that through. Once the ten minutes is up, swap over, and the second partner should now share their metaperception, hear the other's actual perception, and have time to discuss it.

Once the twenty minutes with that partner is complete, move on to someone else in the group, and repeat the step above. Then again for the final partner.

Finally, in a large or small group, discuss the exercise (30 minutes or so). How accurate were your metaperceptions? What did you learn about yourself?

Comment

People can be quite nervous about doing this exercise, as there may be the fear of hearing--or giving--very negative feedback from others. However, given the tendency for people to underestimate the esteem they are held in by others (see above), they are generally pleasantly surprised to discover how others actually experience them. It is also important, though, that participants are encouraged to feed back to others with sensitivity and care; and to remain phenomenological throughout. So it is not a *judgement* of the other, but a *perception* of them, and one that might be entirely otherwise for another person. (Having said that, when I once ran this exercise in Greece, a woman said to me, 'But what if I want to tell my partner he is an idiot'? Having explained, very carefully, the importance of expressing things phenomenologically, she then responded, 'Oh, ok, I get it, so I should say "I *feel* he's an idiot!"')

This exercise usually needs a well-organised facilitator/coordinator who can tell everyone when to change partners, to keep all the pairs synchronised.

Of course, the way in which our clients experience us may be very different from our peers, but this exercise invites us to begin exploring this interface between perceptions and metaperceptions. In this respect, it can free us up from fixed metaperceptual assumptions, and help us to think more flexibly about what other people may see when they see us.

Variation

If there are not the right numbers for everyone to be in a group of four, groups of three or even two are fine--but the grid and timings will need to be modified accordingly.

If you want to do this exercise on your own, think of a few people in your life who you could ask for honest feedback from. Then have a go at writing down how you imagine they experience you. Now, if it feels appropriate, find out from them how accurate those metaperceptions are.

[Name 1]

[Name 2]

[Name 3]

How I experience....

**How
experiences me**