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WHY THERAPIES FAIL: A DIRECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Supplementary material for Integrating counselling and psychotherapy: Directionality, synergy, and social change (Sage, 2019).

Research indicates that a substantial proportion of clients do not improve through therapy (Lambert, 2013). From a directional perspective, this means that they do not find a means of actualising their higher-order directions. Why might that happen?

A first possibility is that there may not be any 'levers' for therapeutic change. That is, the client is already acting in the most synergetic and effective ways possible to achieve what they want in their context. The problem here, then, is not within the person but within their world. For instance, a homeless young woman is depressed because she feels unsafe on the streets, marginalised, and drawn into drug dependency. She wants physical security, self-worth, and some sense of purpose; and she is doing everything she can within her context to actualise this. Here, then, there may be nothing that therapy can help her reconfigure. Rather, what she needs is social, housing, or employment support to help her back onto her path, or wider socio-political change.

From an existential perspective, as discussed in Chapter 12 (this volume), we may all be fundamentally limited in our leverage. That is, there is a 'cold', 'hard' reality that is not just about the world we live in, but intrinsic to the very fabric of human being. For instance, our longings for life, to achieve all the things we want, to have meaning, to stay connected to others, are all, ultimately, doomed to fail. And yet, as argued in this book, it may be in the very nature of human being to strive for these things. From this perspective, then, as philosophers like Schopenhauer (1969) have argued, we may be condemned to fail: to experience hopelessness, futility, and despair. Here, therapies don't work because people, ultimately, fail in their projects: and no amount of talking about it or striving to reconfigure can ever save us from that existential reality.

Another possibility is that levers for change are possible, but that the client and therapist cannot – or do not – find them. A client, for instance, might have the potential to achieve greater relatedness by improving his communication skills, but the therapist focuses instead on 'unearthing' childhood traumas, or on trying to correct dysfunctional thoughts. This is why assessment and formulation may be such an important part of the therapeutic process, and to be conducted in a relatively 'open', non-'schoolist' way. Through this, therapist and client may be more able to see where the client's problems lie and the points of therapeutic leverage, and then to either try to address them, or to refer the client on to someone who may be better able to do so.

It is also possible that the levers for positive change are there, but that the client's directions away from them are just too great. Mostly, that means that the short-term emotional pain that they fear they will experience outweighs their directions towards longer term benefit. This may include the anxiety of facing the unknown and doing things differently, the burden of taking responsibility for one's life, or the guilt of not having made changes sooner (see, Ellenhorn, 2005). As we have seen in Chapter 5 (this volume), short-term directions – proximal, salient, and viscerally-felt – can have a much greater pull than long-term, inevitably amorphous, future possibilities. It is

like a powerful magnet, close by, that constantly pulls the client back into established ways of doing things: overpowering the effects of more distant, albeit more positive, attractors.

When assessing or working with clients, then, the question of whether there actually are, levers to therapeutic change should always be kept in mind. Does therapy have the potential to help this person? And, if it does, what might draw a client away from 'pulling' those levers? As with motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2012), acknowledging the power of the forces against change may be an important step in helping it to happen.

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