TEACHING NOTES · 2019

Two-Chair Work — Key Points and Invitation

Michael Soth

Key points and framing for Michael Soth's approach to two-chair work — a method for externalising and working with the client's internal conflict by embodying the two poles of that conflict in different chairs. These notes articulate the theoretical underpinnings, practical approach, and the relational stance required to make the work genuinely transformative rather than intellectually enacted.

KEY THEMES

— Two-chair work as externalisation of internal conflict

— The relational stance within the technique

— Working with the client's resistance to switching chairs

— When two-chair work becomes transformative

— Integration with the five parallel relationships model

The Rationale for Two-Chair Work

Two-chair work offers a way of making the client's internal conflict visible and workable. Instead of describing the conflict from the inside — where both poles can collapse into each other, or where one pole drowns out the other — the client can physically embody each pole in turn, sitting in different chairs, and experience the conflict from both perspectives.

The theoretical foundation is the parallel relationships model: the client's internal conflict (conflicted ego in conflict with a spontaneous conflict) is the same conflict as the original wounding, replayed internally. When we externalise it into two chairs, we are creating a spatial representation of what the character structure holds together: the two poles of the internalised wounding relationship.

This makes the conflict available for something which the character structure normally prevents: the possibility of a genuine encounter between the poles, rather than the habitual oscillation between them or the freezing of one pole while the other dominates.

The Relational Stance

The relational stance required for two-chair work is precisely the same as for all good relational therapy: genuine curiosity about both poles, without taking sides. The therapist is not trying to help the client's 'real self' defeat their 'false self', or their 'spontaneous process' overcome their 'ego defences'. Both poles have validity; both carry something of the person's history and aliveness.

This means resisting the anti-ego-therapy trap: not taking sides with the 'emergency chair' against the 'habitual mode chair'. The client's defences are there for good reasons, and the character position they occupy is as real a part of them as the spontaneous impulse pressing for expression.

The therapist holds the space between the chairs — maintaining contact with both poles, staying curious about what each carries, and inviting the client to inhabit each position more fully rather than performing it.

When the Work Becomes Transformative

The two-chair work becomes genuinely transformative — rather than intellectually enacted — when the client can begin to feel the reality of each position in their body, not just describe it. When the 'child chair' carries actual bodymind memory, not just a

narrative about the past. When the 'critic chair' carries the actual embodied weight of the internalised wounding object.

At that point, the work begins to resemble the spontaneous emergence of parallel process: the client is not performing both roles — they are being moved by the bodymind reality of each pole, which begins to have its own spontaneous life in the room. The therapist's job then is to hold the space with sufficient groundedness that neither pole overwhelms the other, and the conflict can move towards — not resolution — but a different relationship between the poles.

Integration with the parallel relationships model means attending to how the two-chair conflict echoes the original wounding, and potentially allowing the work to move between the intrapsychic (the chairs) and the interpersonal (how the conflict manifests in the therapeutic relationship itself).

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