TEACHING NOTES · 1995

Two-Chair Work: Summary of Steps

By Michael Soth

An early (1995) summary of the steps involved in two-chair work — the original teaching document from which the later, more refined articulations developed. These notes provide the basic procedural framework for two-chair work, with attention to both the technical sequence and the relational stance required at each step.

KEY THEMES

— The procedural steps of two-chair work

— Setting up the chairs and the frame

— Moving between positions

— Tracking somatic process in each chair

— Integration of insights

Setting Up

Two-chair work begins before the client sits in either chair. The set-up is itself a relational act: the therapist is proposing an externalisation of the client's internal conflict, and the proposal itself carries meaning. The way the therapist sets up the chairs, names the poles, and invites the client to inhabit each position — all of this communicates something about the therapist's understanding of the client's conflict and their attitude towards it.

The fundamental frame: two chairs facing each other, one for each pole of the internal conflict. The therapist typically sits to the side, equidistant from both chairs — communicating through their physical position that they are not aligned with either pole. The naming of the chairs matters: language that is too precise risks reducing the complexity of the conflict; language that is too vague gives insufficient direction. The best labels are those which emerge from the client's own language in describing their experience.

Before the client moves to either chair, it is useful to spend some time simply noticing which chair feels more familiar — which one they are 'already in' — and which feels more foreign or uncomfortable. This gives immediate information about the habitual organisation of the conflict.

Moving and Tracking

Once in a chair, the instruction to the client is to inhabit the position fully — not to perform it, not to describe it from outside, but to speak as that part. This is harder than it sounds: the client's habitual ego tends to maintain a third-person perspective even when apparently speaking from one pole.

The therapist tracks somatic process in each chair: the quality of the client's breath, their posture, their vocal tone, the degree of aliveness or deadness in their body. These are often more reliable indicators of how fully the client is inhabiting a position than the content of what they say. A client who describes powerful feelings in an even, disconnected tone is not yet in the position — they are describing it from outside.

When to move: the movement from one chair to the other happens when the therapist senses that the current position has been sufficiently inhabited — when something has been said or felt from that pole which has weight and reality. Moving too soon keeps the work at the surface; staying too long risks entrenchment.

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Integration and Completion

Two-chair work does not aim for resolution of the conflict — it aims for a different relationship to it. A successful sequence of two-chair work is one in which both poles have been genuinely inhabited, and in which the client has some felt sense of both existing simultaneously rather than alternating.

This felt sense of both poles is itself the beginning of integration: not the elimination of either pole, but a capacity to hold them both in awareness. This may manifest as a recognition of what each pole is protecting, a softening of the absolute opposition between them, or simply a sense of having been in contact with an aspect of themselves which was previously exiled.

The completion of the work involves returning to the client's ordinary relational contact with the therapist, and reflecting on what has happened — not prematurely interpreting, but allowing the experience to settle. The therapist's own bodymind experience throughout the process — their somatic countertransference, their sense of which pole they were most drawn to, the moments of charge or deadness — is itself important clinical information to be held and, where appropriate, brought into the reflection.

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