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New Ways of Processing Experience - How to Work with Structure-Bound Processes

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Introduction

It is obvious ... that a therapist, in order to be effective, *must* respond to the present experience of the patient and not to the structure-bound aspects of his behaviour.

(Pollio et al.1977, p.125)

No one is greatly changed by responses and analyses of how he does not function.

(Gendlin 1964, Section 20)

Our aim in this chapter is to demonstrate some ways in which the process of experiencing (or parts of it) can become structure-bound, so that we can no longer access its intricacy and work with it therapeutically. In order to move beyond these stopped places in ourselves, in our clients, and in the interactional field between us, we think that it is possible to identify patterns of structure-boundness and work with them directly as 'present experience'.

Addressing these stuck patterns can release life and energy that has previously been trapped in familiar yet often destructive ways of being.

For the past thirty years, Christiane Geiser and Ernst Juchli, founders of the GFK Institute in Zurich (www.gfk-institut.ch), have worked with colleagues to engage in a detailed and systematic consideration of personality difference, acknowledging the fact that we are all

limited by collective and individual ‘structure-bound’ patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving and embodiment.

A project to translate this work from its original German into English, so that it can be developed and presented further, is currently under way at the University of East Anglia (UEA), Norwich, with Judy Moore and a group of colleagues. This project arose through dialogue between Judy and Christiane over a number of years as Christiane brought insights from her experience to bear on their various discussions. Realising that the model was both insightful and potentially extremely useful both for personal understanding and therapeutic work, Judy invited Christiane to present her and her colleagues work to an invited group at UEA.

This was not only a matter of translation and presenting a ‘model’ to a new group. As the original model had been experientially co-created, it now needed to be re-experienced before it could be fully understood, developed further or even changed. Without an embodied felt sensing of lived examples the material could be mis-perceived as prescriptive rather than descriptive and process-oriented.

The co-writing of this chapter has involved a similar process of going backwards and forwards between finding the right words and experiencing. We hope that the reader will be able to continue this process by going back and forth between reading and experiencing to get something of the ‘feel’ of why this material has such potential.

Beginnings – Why a Model is Helpful

Although personal and cultural patterns are ubiquitous, in clinical practice we often meet some ‘always the same’ patterns which cause suffering. They impact heavily upon the therapeutic relationship so that we end up going round in circles together whenever we reach these stuck places. It was in recognition of this phenomenon that the GFK group developed a specific interest in the formation and recurrence of these so-called ‘structure-bound’ patterns (Gendlin, 1964) and tried to understand and describe them during professional reflection and supervision. This reflective process functioned both as a ‘carrying forward’ in itself and also served as the foundation for the next phase in the generation of what came to be an ever-evolving model. Generations of therapists have found this fluent, relational process knowledge extremely useful and many have also contributed to its further development.

This knowledge helps:

- To realize how our own patterns as therapists function and how they colour our working with clients and have an impact on it
- To look at similar patterns in clients and those that differ from our own
- To realise how we and our clients are interconnected
- To understand what happens in our relationship during therapy if we both get stuck

A ‘model’ in this sense is not an ontological one; it only ‘points’ to something. It is not in itself ‘true’, but the product of an ever-changing dynamic.

The Theoretical Background: Structure-bound Processes, Frozen Wholes, and Stopped Processes

I want to put forward the theory that those very processes that mark out psychopathologies which seem on the surface to be difficult, even bizarre, are also to be found in normal-range clients, not to mention normal-range therapists.

(Worsley 2009 p. 189)

Instead of using the term ‘psychopathology’ the GFK group chose instead Gendlin’s early term ‘structure-bound’. In difficult processes the *manner* of process changes. Gendlin observed,

...my experience is a ‘frozen whole’ and will not give up its structure... the structure is not modified by the present. Hence, it remains the same, it repeats itself in many situations without ever changing. ...structure-bound aspects are not in process.

(Gendlin 1964)

The term ‘structure-bound’ is a neutral one; it is about form rather than content. It says nothing about illness or disorder, but something about one-sidedness, about not being in process.

The great advantage of the GFK approach is that, rather than searching for external diagnoses, we can discover and name these life-preserving and life-preventing patterns and habits of thought, feelings and behaviour through precise and patient questioning and exploration *with* our clients.

In *A Process Model* (1997) Gendlin writes about ‘stopped processes’ and we could also look at our patterns in terms of this concept. Grindler-Katonah explains it in this way:

When the usual way a process that is carried forward is stopped, the organism remains sensitized, and has the potential to find new possibilities for carrying this forward that would not have been discovered if this particular process was not stopped. (Grindler-Katonah 2007, p. 107)

The term ‘sensitized’ is interesting. The GFK group in the early days chose a similar term to describe different versions of this ‘potential’, describing them as ‘sensitivities’ (in German: Sensibilitäten).

This ‘potential’ in a stopped process is double-edged, as we will see later in this chapter. As long as the implying continues to stay there ‘the body carries the stoppage’: there can be fresh new possibilities, little repetitive trials (termed ‘leafings’ in *A Process Model*) or an immediately formed new occurrence, through the impact of an ‘intervening event’ (see Gendlin 1997, p. 76-79). But there can also be stereotypical patterns, where there is no carrying forward, and then the stopped process stays the same and will not be resumed. Gendlin has modified his observation more recently in a letter to the Japanese philosopher Yasuhiro Suetake,

I would argue today that each repetition *is* a little different but when we are structure-bound we do not move on from the little different. Instead, we go on from the same, and again from the same, and again from the same. So it may require interaction to stop the structure-bound repetition. (Gendlin 2008)

This is important. Within the therapeutic relationship there are many possibilities for such interactions, each of which can potentially bring about change.

The General Dynamic

The GFK model recognizes that there is a general dynamic to the frozen patterns of structure-bound repetition. First of all we will show what constitutes this dynamic?

We all have a tendency to respond to the world assuming that people around us respond in the same way that we do. We often do not realise the specific impact we have. We each have a tendency to foreground particular issues, topics, themes and ways of acting and feeling and thinking.

For example: when a close friend is late and we don't know where he is:

- Someone with a tendency to foreground issues of anxiety will immediately think that there has been a catastrophe – or, at the first pulsations of anxiety, she will immediately compensate with a soothing thought like ‘It'll all be fine...’.
- Someone with a tendency to foreground issues of rules and agreements will either be relieved because he himself is always late - or he will be outraged because he is on time and expects the same from other people.

When our lives become more stressful we are potentially up against life situations that are beyond our capacity to process effectively, whether through complexity in or around us or simply through overload or tiredness. Then our sensitive areas begin to ‘vibrate’: we are even more inclined to foreground them, and other issues go to the background or to the periphery of our awareness.

A narrowing process then begins: our overall feeling changes. Atmosphere, bodily sensations, feeling, thinking become more and more overtaken by the issues and questions of our

particular pattern. We look at the world through these lenses and lose the bigger picture; our movement inside ceases to be the back-and-forth process between implicit experiencing and explicit symbolising of that experiencing. It changes. Often it becomes a downward spiral or a circling around in a very narrow space, uncomfortable, sometimes very intense and painful, but something that we are nevertheless inexplicably drawn to.

Because all life is inherently interactional, people around us realise that there is something ‘in the air’. Typically their responses do not help to resume the process, to stop the pattern, which will be an interesting point to look at later on. We fall out of a meaningful shared field. We feel lonely and misunderstood and either withdraw or try to connect with others over and over again from our ‘stopped’ place. But this only makes things worse.

When there is no change in the interactional field around us or in us, our normal complexity breaks down. We enter the structure-bound pattern completely. Repetition and stereotypical reactions occur in many different areas. The stopped parts of us cannot respond to fresh and new inputs any more, symbols do not accurately cover the intricacy of the situation, and we are cut off from felt sensing and new meaning.

When this process continues, and the narrowing is complete, there is a tendency to splitting into two poles within our sensitivity pattern. The poles are both very simple and very extreme. Nothing falls in between: everything is either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘yes’ or ‘no’. We can end up ‘landing’ on one or other of these poles and stay there, stuck in a place where we might find ourselves having thoughts like ‘the whole world is against me’, ‘everything is always my fault’ or that ‘this will never end’.

Usually this stuck state loosens after some time, because we are exhausted or can go back to 'business as usual'. But then nothing has really changed: there has been no carrying forward of the process, and there is always a risk of falling into this familiar narrow place again. We are inclined to embed it into our private (and shared) narrative ('It is always like this and always will be') and so through this reinforcement it becomes even more frozen.

But *why* do we go to these places? If we sense into them carefully and slowly, we may perceive a kind of 'attractor', a pull or suck we can hardly resist. Something in us *wants to go* there, and another part knows that we should not. The advantage of this odd kind of 'home' is that we feel secure and stable, because it is so well-known ; there is no complexity, there is no need to change our view of the world. At the same time, the disadvantage is immense: we lose our flexibility. We feel bad, people around us feel bad; there seems no possibility of change and we lose the ability to take a larger perspective on 'all this' anymore. And normally we have no idea how to avoid falling into these traps again.

But through extensive self-scrutiny we can begin to understand more about these dynamics. We come to realise that each of us has patterns of behaviour that permit us to disengage from a 'shared' reality. These interior, familiar places of comfort and suffering are not places of process. It is incumbent on us to monitor our own 'stuck' patterns and see how they might impede us not only in our professional helping role but in all of our relationships.

The Specific Patterns

The general dynamic described above applies to *all* specific sensitivities listed below. To date the sensitivities identified relate to the foregrounding of:

- Anxiety (see Table 1)
- Rules and agreements (see Table 1)
- Worth (see Table 2)
- Trust
- Control, planning
- Awareness of symptoms
- Intensity
- Attention
- Shame
- Guilt

To learn more about the dynamic of each pattern we have to become aware of the *specific* ways in which the narrowing process takes place. The generating of a structure-bound pattern is, in part, an *activity*, even if it doesn't feel like this. Much detective work is needed to find out all the little signs with which any specific pattern starts to form. You might ask yourself where the beginning and the ending of your own inner spirals are, whether there is a place where you might be able to stop or deal with a particular spiral if it begins to take you over. On which poles do you tend to land, and what do you say to yourself and others when you are there? What would be helpful? Can you notice not only the shortcomings of your pattern and the impact on others, but also the strength and even the gift that is a part of it?

It is possible to capture a shorthand version of all of these sensitivities in diagrammatic form. The danger with a diagram, however, is that the sense of process gets lost and only the summaries, the 'little boxes', are visible. In supervision or self-reflection with colleagues we might speak in shorthand about 'anxiety people' or 'rule patterns', as if these were

pathologies. But we have to remember that symbols have to retain a living quality in order to have metaphoric resonance, in order to accurately point towards process.

In the ‘waiting’ example given above we outlined two possible responses and in Table 1 we present a snapshot of some of the characteristics observed in these patterns.

Table 1. Sensitivities of ‘Anxiety’ and ‘Rules and Agreements’

As response to the world, a tendency to foreground:	The Two Poles:	Shortcomings (if unbalanced):	Strengths (if balanced):	Impact on Others:	What helps:
Feelings of anxiety	A disaster is about to happen, everything feeds the anxiety <i>or</i> everything is fine, all is idyllic, no fear at all.	From nought to sixty catastrophic thinking, high bodily arousal <i>or</i> immediate soothing, glossing over, sometimes foolhardy risk-taking.	Antennae for frightening situations, making provision against emergencies <i>or</i> boldness, zest for life.	‘Infected’ by the anxiety or denying it <i>or</i> slightly suspicious of the idyllic touch or the assumed fearlessness.	Recognizing when danger is real and then acting appropriately. Learning to recognize and name different arousals of energy.
Handling of rules and agreements	Deliberate or compulsive rule-breaking <i>or</i> inflexible conformity, anticipatory obedience.	Not abiding by the rules (and inventing own rules) in a subversive or rebellious way <i>or</i> unthinking obedience, not regulating their own life.	Questioning of meaningless conventions, fighting for freedom <i>or</i> Will keep with rules and commitments that are thoroughly considered together.	Others might experience embarrassment, frustration, anger <i>or</i> admire them because they sometimes live an unconventional lifestyle.	Sharing the field with others and thinking about rules collectively. Learning about the balance between maintaining agreements and expanding freedom.

Implications for Therapy – the ‘me with you’

It goes without saying that our work with clients is lighter and sometimes easier if we can go directly with the fresh air, with the life-forward energy. It helps when we can rely on a stable and fluid interaction between us and when both of us can easily refer to our felt sensing of the whole situation.

But sometimes there is no fresh air at all. Yet the GFK group has found that it is possible and even desirable to work with clients directly from their – and our own! – stuck places, to identify them and proceed from there.

The intersubjective element in the creation and removal of stoppages is important.

All of these patterns are about relationship, about our mutual being-with, about interaction.

We are never literally ‘individuals’. We happen together, we share an experiential space. All that is ‘in us’ is always part of a relational situation and always has been. Even if we are not aware that we are in a narrowing process, the other person reacts to us in a specific way and can draw our attention to the narrowing that is taking place.

In the therapy session we live in a kind of ‘shared body’, in a ‘new us’ (Preston 2005).

Sometimes a therapeutic relationship, like any other, can go around in circles, becoming frozen so that there is no carrying forward any more. But this ‘new us’ also has the capacity to move in a new way, and carry the whole intricacy of the process forward. Our clients, struggling with painfully stuck states, urgently need an experiential response instead of structure-bound answers in order not to repeat their well-known patterns. Gendlin asks: ‘If this newly different interaction process won’t happen here and now – where and when will it?’ (1968).

What this Means in a Practical Way for Client Work

It is important to understand in a bodily way two inner movements. The first of these is a forward direction and a real carrying forward that offers a 'felt shift', which changes the situation. You cannot 'make' this movement: a felt shift 'comes', and it is only in retrospect that you may recognize what it 'was' (Gendlin 1997, p.251).

The other inner movement is a structure-bound 'wanting', a 'hunger' for a response, an occurring which seems to carry something forward, but, in reality, doesn't. It remains in the same well-known spiral, the 'wanting' is always for the same response in the other. But this response doesn't really satisfy, does not resume the stopped process. The movement *seems* to be right; it is so appealing, and the emotions seem to be so clear and compelling that it is not easy to realise that you should not follow this pull. This applies to both, client and therapist—and for the shared 'body' of the therapeutic relationship.

So, during therapy sessions the therapist has to listen and look, to find a bodily resonance in relation to the client. The therapist may realize: *something is going on here*. There is a 'something more', but the resonance differs from a 'something more' which comes out of a focusing process. Something is in the air: maybe a background feeling, a subtext. It is important to stay with this felt sensing. Then, over time, other signs might manifest: sentences or feelings of the client become repetitive, the tone of voice, the breathing, the body language changes or stays the same in a frozen way. The danger is that the therapist's responses will make the narrowing more complete. Then the process cannot be challenged or questioned any more. There will be no more distance, no more self-reflexion, no more meta-level.

When the therapist also starts to react with a particular bodily resonance, she has to sense into herself. She might well lose the ability to step back, to access the felt sense, to empathise. She is likely to react out of her own narrow place, her own structure-bound spiral. It is important for her to realise what is going on and to recognize the process.

Case Example

A client has for many weeks been lamenting his past, present and future life. At first his therapist was full of empathy. Such a difficult life, indeed. So many problems to manage. But over time the therapist starts to get impatient, even angry. In her own world (in her structure-bound pattern) there is no helplessness, no lamenting, but only doing and planning and bringing tasks to an end without thinking about all the consequences. After a long time of exploring and empathic reflections she starts to give advice ('couldn't you try this? Or that? This would be a good strategy') only to realise that her client will immediately answer with new problematic ways of thinking and analysing. All this makes the mutually frozen situation worse.

This example shows the encounter between a structure-bound pattern of dwelling on problems and foregrounding difficulties 'in' the client with a pattern of controlling, foregrounding strategies and plans for each and every situation 'in' the therapist— very different styles of thinking and living. If they trigger each other it can become a really stuck place. It is incumbent on the therapist to recognize her pattern first, to work out what is happening and find the way back to a full-bodied listening from where she can allow a felt sensing of the whole situation to emerge again.

So, in our interactional dynamic we have to learn that:

- A narrow place is pulling at a narrow place in the other person and vice versa. We have to be aware of it and step out of the spiral.
- There is also a tendency to pull into the opposite pole if someone is stuck in one pole (e.g. saying ‘But there is nothing to be anxious about!’ when someone is frozen with anxiety). Do not try to work ‘against’ the spiral. This tendency takes us away from person-centred working and does not meet the client where he/she is.

When these patterns are very strong it is important to remember what *not* to do:

- Do not work on major issues or try to decide something important during this time.
- Do not believe that the intense feelings that are surfacing in the session are the ones you should follow.
- Do not decide something important from this place.
- Do not follow the spiralling thought patterns of your client for too long.
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Instead: Stay there. Hold on, even if the narrowing is complete and you really have to struggle to stay upright and focused yourself. Stay accepting and empathic and slow down. Try to get back to your own felt sensing of ‘all this’. What is going on here? In which way exactly *is* the whole of your ‘being together’ stopped right now?

How to get back into process

Returning to acceptance and empathy is *always* the first step. There is no way of leaving it out. When you as therapist *really* are able to accept a pattern, however tedious and wearisome it may be, when you are able to find the way back to real empathy, this will make considerable difference. This ‘ah, I see, *this* is how it is for you’, the contrasting experience of having a well-trodden pattern interrupted by acceptance and understanding is often groundbreaking for the relationship and both client and therapist can start from a new place again.

When and how to address a structure-bound pattern between you depends on how long you have been working together, on the ‘maturity’ of the client (and therapist?), on his ability to self-reflect and on the quality of your relationship.

These patterns are unknown at first and it is painful and often even shameful to learn about them. So it takes time and trust and, over and over again, empathy and acceptance. It is good to question these patterns at times when both your client and yourself (and your relationship) are relatively free from being narrowed. If your client can stand back and acknowledge that this pattern exists in his life, realize how it has an impact on his relationships and how it, together with the therapist’s own patterns, colours your being-together, he can, over time, learn that he has a choice.

Case Example: Lorraine

Lorraine, a 50-year-old woman, and a very experienced secretary, has worked for 25 years in a business company and came to talk about her difficulties at work. Whenever we explored them, we ended up in a stuck place. Lorraine thought about leaving her workplace, but on the other hand she liked it, and at that point we ended up in a ‘running around in a circle’

place. I started becoming detached and losing our relationship, because I had the feeling that nothing reached her.

Then, one day, she said a little sentence, ‘Why do I still have this uneasy feeling, after all these years?’ – and suddenly I realised the undertone. This was not a ‘real’ question, one asked with curiosity and a wanting to know. There was a sense of self-blame in it, and she looked at me as if I would blame her, criticise her too.

It took me some time not to automatically work against the spiral (‘But you are so experienced and you are so much appreciated by your colleagues and your boss!’). And it took her some time to come to a place where she could believe that I really did not blame her. She realised, with much sadness, the place in herself where she always, automatically, evaluated and devalued herself and others. Accepting that this was true she began to conduct a kind of detective work, noticing that, for example, every morning after waking up, she would register all the things that she had to do, thinking that others would do them better and so she would be devalued.

We agreed that in future I would be permitted to intervene every time when this typical silence occurred, this look on her face or in her eyes, or when this typical little resonance in my body appeared, indicating a subtext, a background feeling.

I could then say: ‘Now it is happening again. Did you realize it? What exactly is going on in your private world? What do you expect me to think, to do? Am I allowed to tell you what it does to me? Can I tell you about my resonance? Could you believe me? Can we (both) accept ‘all this’ and feel empathy towards it?’

Over time, Lorraine could have a glimpse of a world where comparing herself to others is not the most important mode of living. And we could even have a look at the strengths and gifts of her sensitivity, which she had not been aware of until now.

Table 2 gives some aspects of the foregrounding of issues of value and worth.

Table 2. Sensitivity of ‘worth’

As response to the world, a tendency to foreground :	The Two Poles:	Shortcomings (if unbalanced):	Strengths (if balanced):	Impact on Others:	What helps:
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Issues of Worth and Values	Feeling completely worthless as a person, unrealistic overrating of others <i>or</i> devaluing others and overrating themselves.	Always making comparisons: who is better, who is worse? Feeling completely negated by criticism, easily hurt <i>or</i> Criticizing others openly or clandestinely.	Experts on the worth of something or someone. Putting themselves forward can be easy <i>or</i> holding back, encouraging others to come to the foreground.	Others feel devalued or overestimated, which creates the same uneasy feeling. It becomes difficult to discuss things, because issues of worth always get in the way.	Learning to leave the comparing mode. Learning that something is different, not better or worse!
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When we have explored a pattern long enough and then it appears in the therapeutic relationship again, we can sometimes say ‘No. Don’t go there’. Suetake (2010) calls this a

‘therapeutic stoppage’ (p.125). It is a ‘saying no’ to this kind of processing, to this vicious circle, but not to the person herself.

When we say ‘no’ in this way we can create room for a pause, an opportunity to look at what is happening, to change direction, to say ‘yes’ to something different. It can be frightening to leave a familiar place without a sense of where to go next and so it needs some exploring and the discovery of a new ‘movement’, a different and more life-enhancing way forward that will need to be ‘trained’ by trying it out over and over again before it feels like a real alternative.

Over time, within the therapeutic relationship, it becomes increasingly possible to stay in places without frozenness or repeating circles and clients find themselves, even on their own, in a different mode of relating to themselves.

Conclusion

It can be extremely helpful to use an experiential model such as the one outlined here, for our work with clients and for our self-reflection in supervision. Needless to say, the map is not the territory. But the ability to name patterns as patterns, as well as an understanding of how to work with those patterns, can be helpful in carrying forward the process of change.

There is, even in a structure-bound pattern, a felt potential for development, a possibility of something new and different to come. Compassionate awareness of these patterns - our own and our clients’ - seems to be the key to unlocking our stuckness and the gifts it might contain. We have a choice. This choice can be accessed through a clear experiencing of the pattern itself, which can lead to new understanding and ultimately to a significant feeling of freedom and to different qualities of relationship.

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