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Emotion – focused Therapy and the Client-Centered and Focusing – oriented approach: Interview Les Greenberg

Interview by chat in August 2007; revised by Les Greenberg

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Feuerstein: To start - could you summarize the essentials of your approach

Greenberg: I would say it is an experiential approach that focuses on emotion in addition we have combined an emphasis on relationship and work or task, that results in a style that synthesizes guiding and following. We offer a marker-guided, task –focused approach to thinking about therapy. A guiding principle in the development of the Emotion-focused approach to therapy also was that it would be an empirically informed approach to the practice of psychotherapy grounded in contemporary psychological theories of functioning.

Change in emotional experience is placed at the center of the therapeutic approach. The role of emotion in the creation of meaning and the importance of the therapy relationship to the development of emotion awareness and regulation also are emphasized. A major premise of Emotion-focused therapy (EFT) is that emotion is foundational in the construction of the self and is a key determinant of self -organization. At the most basic level of functioning emotions are an adaptive form of information-processing and action readiness that orient people to their environment and promotes their wellbeing.

As well as having emotion we also live in a constant process of making sense of our emotions. We have proposed a dialectical-constructivist view of human functioning to explain this process. In this view personal meaning emerges by the self-organization and explication of one's own emotional experience and optimal adaptation involves an integration of reason and emotion. This integration is achieved by an ongoing circular process of *making sense of experience* by symbolizing bodily felt sensations in awareness and articulating them in language, thereby constructing new experience.

The basic idea behind EFT therapy is that emotions are basically adaptive and guide the growth tendency, but that emotions can become problematic because of past traumas or because we have been taught to ignore or dismiss them. Emotions most fundamentally tell us what is important to us in a situation, and thus act as a guide to what we need or want; this in turn helps us figure out what actions are appropriate. EFT focuses on helping people become aware of their emotions, learn to tolerate and regulate them, and reflect on them to make sense of them and transform them. Emotion-focused therapy systematically but flexibly helps clients become aware of and make productive use of their emotions. EFT also sees human beings as constituted by multiple parts or voices, and therapy as typically involving bringing different parts of the self into contact with each other. EFT therapists offer clients their expertise as process facilitators who have knowledge of how to help people arrive at and process what they feel at their core. To do this effectively, therapists need to be able to collaboratively establish a sufficiently supportive environment.

EFT works on the basic principle that to change, people cannot leave a place until they have arrived. Clients therefore need to reclaim disowned experience before they can be changed by it, or change it. In this process it is not that people simply discover things they did not *know* but rather that they experience in a bodily manner aspects of themselves they have not consciously felt or may have previously *disclaimed*. Clients are helped to experience what they are talking about so that they can become aware of their feelings and

the impact of events. In this way the message or significance of their feelings can be clearly and powerfully experienced, so that it can later be utilized, transformed or reflected on to create new meaning.

Feuerstein: yes, so there some concepts you mention which are also important for the Client-Centered Approach and the Focusing - oriented. Where do you agree, where are you different – let's start with the concept of "experiential " resp. "experiencing"?

Greenberg: We adopt the experiential response as our basic response mode. We refer to exploratory empathy as our major style and is focused on the leading edge of the client experience and aimed at making the implicit, explicit. We say that we are multi intentioned – our first intention, with Rogers, is to understand, our second intention, with Gendlin, is to deepen experience, and then we add more specific intentions dependent on the state a person is in. So we have many more intentions like at one moment to intensify a critic ,at another to focus on the statement of a need, at another to promote an enactment of a significant other to help arouse a feeling and these are all marker guided intentions

Feuerstein: Gendlin refers to experiencing as a basic psychological process - in your model, experiencing seems to have an other status in theory?

Greenberg: I see experiencing as a core process and it is basic phenomenologically but not fundamental at the level of basic psychological processes. I see emotion as a more fundamental process while experiencing is a higher level synthesis of emotion and cognition. It still is a referent but it is a phenomenological description and lacks a deeper explanatory base. The question for me was how is experiencing generated?

Feuerstein: In Gendlin's theory there are special concepts, the felt sense and felt shift - did you use these in your model?

Greenberg: We see focusing and the felt shift as one kind of process of change, not the only one. So we incorporate it as a change process among others. I think experiencing is more basic than the felt shift as you can have experiencing all the time without the felt shift and we see experiencing as a basic to all our tasks.

Feuerstein: how about the felt sense?

Greenberg: The felt sense is very important but again is not the only referent . So Gendlin refers to the "feeling about all of it" and in his writing "sheer emotion" was a bad thing. We see accessing primary emotion such as sadness or anger or shame as a goal and this is different from the felt sense and also I think from sheer emotion(which probably is secondary or maladaptive emotion). So both emotion and felt sense are important and we see emotion as more basic and often as more important to access in helping with disorder and felt sense more important in meaning creation.

For example in trauma accessing the fear and shame initially may be very important to reprocess it and help it transform by accessing adaptive anger at the perpetrator and sadness at the loss. Only later will the feeling of the impact of "all of it" be important to work on and symbolize

Feuerstein: so there is a fundamental difference, when Gendlin asserts that the felt sense as the implicit quality is prior to emotion - or feeling. Do you make a difference between emotion and feeling.

Greenberg: First I think feeling is a complex word which refers to two different things . The feeling of the velvet cloth is a sensation like when I say “I feel a tightness in my stomach”, then there is a complex feeling which is the feeling/ emotion/ cognition synthesis like “I feel over the hill”, “on top of the world” or like a motherless child. Along with Damasio I see emotion as more basic and these feelings as more socially and cognitively laden. I also, along with Damasio, however think there is a body in situation reaction which is fundamental and this is maybe more like what Gendlin refers to as what is prior to emotion. This is a complex issue. I see a felt sense as maybe being used in two ways. Sometimes to refer to a body sense but sometimes as referring to a complex felt meaning. So I am not clear on what a felt sense refers to in a disciplined or theoretical manner by Gendlin but my sense is that it is used in both ways in practice

Feuerstein: in your model the bodily level is basic - but it seems more in his physical or physiological aspects. Is there also a place for the "felt" body or organismic valuing (Rogers)? Which relevance does the physiological, which does the felt body have in your assumptions about change?

Greenberg: First I see emotion as providing the solution to what is the organismic valuing process. Emotion is defined as the process by which the organism evaluates what is good or bad for it. This was always the mystery in Rogers theory . What is the Org valuing process - it is emotion which evaluates the significance of the situation to my well being. So when I refer to the body I do not only mean sensation, which Gestalt therapy was quite focused on, but I do believe there is a complex synthesis in the body and a source of internal complexity that carries the meaning of the situation so I am never just sad but sad about this and wish for that etc. So emotion in the body is not just sensation but sometimes it emerges from this sense of internal complexity and I sense my loss and I cry then I am sad and it is good to be sad and often I feel sad before I can articulate in words what I feel sad about. So emotions often come unbidden, they happen and then we make sense of them. I am not sure I am answering the question here but I do think you feel different in your body when you change and this is not just a different sensation but a different way of being in your body in the world. The answer may lie in action tendencies; emotions are not just sensation , or physiology but include action tendencies which are fundamental orientations toward the environment, openness, closedness, a pulling back , thrusting forward , but they are just tendencies not actual behavior and we need to sense them because they have already happened.

Feuerstein: You make a difference between different levels of emotion - primary and secondary - is this connected somehow to the concept of (in-)congruence in PCA?

Greenberg: Yes secondary emotion would be incongruent. However I also say primary emotions, which are the authentic responses, or the most basic, can be either adaptive or maladaptive, so health does not simply lie in being congruent. Although congruence can be the only step to good functioning, especially for higher functioning people but for more distressed people it is only a step on the path . Sometimes what may be congruent is a maladaptive feeling of feeling the shame of worthlessness or attachment insecurity and this needs to not only to be in awareness but also to transform or be changed . So one needs to arrive at the primary emotion but this may not be enough, although with some people at sometimes it may be sufficient

Feuerstein: This relates to the question, in which way Rogers is / was important to you? And which role does Gestalt and Fritz Perls still play in your work?

Greenberg: I was first trained by Laura Rice, a student of Rogers and saw Rogers as my guide. In Laura's class I was introduced theoretically to Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman and saw them as grappling with similar issues. Also their techniques were in line with Laura's ideas of evoking lived experience. I trained with Harvey Friedman, one of Perl's protégées in a very disciplined form of gestalt which emphasized awareness but also used chairwork and I saw it as powerful. But I saw Gestalt as lacking a theory of relationship and as not appreciating the importance of empathy. I see my work as integrating both of these traditions at the level of practice, the empathic base and the notions of the experiment and chair work from Gestalt and awareness from both. The primacy of the relationship comes from Rogers and the importance of stimulation and active experimentation from Perls.

Feuerstein: Let us turn to the role of cognition in therapy - the cognitive therapies are by now ruling research and concepts of mainstream psychotherapy. In which relation do you see cognition and emotion - "which comes first?" is one of the favorite questions. In which way do you go along with, in which aspects do you not with the cognitive approach?

Greenberg: I see emotion as coming first. I do not agree with the cognitive approach to the relationship or to cognitive modification, or change in reasoning as leading to enduring change. In my view we need to use emotion to change emotion. I see beliefs as the tip of the iceberg of human experiential process, as a way of articulating experience in language and not as producing experience and I do not believe you can change amygdala based primary emotion with reason or with evidence. I actually see that cognitive therapy is about teaching coping skills and sometimes with more coping skills people have corrective emotional experiences in the world and then change their core way of being in the world or character. I am from the start aiming at change in the fundamental organizing processes in the personality. It the basic mode of processing, the first response to a situation, which sets up whether or not you begin to process for threat, for attack for shame or for humiliation. This is the basic mode of emotional processing. Only later come thought and then beliefs are formed. Ultimately in adult life emotion and cognition are highly integrated and we seldom feel without also having thoughts. But fundamentally emotion comes first in many situations

Feuerstein: Finally, which future developments are you working on? Is there a vision you have?

Greenberg: We are working on the application of EFT to eating disorders and anxiety disorders and I am currently working on understanding the process of forgiveness in both couples and individuals. As to the future, it is open. I am hoping to do more training because it is seeing the live process so that therapists may see what we are talking about more than reading it only in books. It always is hard to catch the process in writing. So more dissemination is my hope for the future so that ultimately the experiential therapies will be seen for what they have to offer. I also hope that work with emotion ultimately will be combined into an integrative emotion-focused-motivational- cognitive-behavioral- interactional therapy

Feuerstein: Thank you very much, Les.