

First session hypnotic questioning

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Abstract

This work is related to the study of the developments that Giorgio Nardone have carried out in the these last years about a new and more efficient modality in leading the first therapeutic session. In particular, the article refers to the so-called “strategic questions”, questions with two closed alternatives, as the main tool to carry out the therapeutic investigation during the first session. This tool has been set up as a real “hypnotic” modality and it is organized in 6 questions with the subsequent reframings of the relative answers. This tool has been used by the author and his colleagues in more or less 300 sessions for different pathologies (depression, addiction disorders, psychotic disorders, chronic diseases) providing extremely significant and efficacy results that allow a better definition of the problem to solve and better indications for the patients towards the solution.

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This work follows my discovery, during a recent workshop of Giorgio Nardone, of his present manner of working and his impressive results, especially in some reputed to be difficult domains as anxious disorders (I mean panic attacks, phobias, and obsessive-compulsive disorders).

The main element of this evolution seemed to us the introduction of a new questioning strategy: the therapist asks to the client a brief succession of closed questions, with two proposals of possible answers (A or B), or at least, two polarities of answers (rather A or rather B)

The impression of powerful efficiency about this questioning strategy gave us the desire to use it in various problematic contexts as depression, addictive disorders, delusional troubles, chronic pain and others.

In fact, we used it quasi systematically with all our clients during one year (about 300 files). We also collected testimonies of some of our students who were interested in this approach. The conclusions we came to were that this experience seemed for us interesting, relevant, even surprising (we still continue it anyway).

Before relating the detail of these points of interest and motives of surprise, we will briefly present the tool as we used it.

We will finish with a “dive in the past” and will find streams of thinking and practice which concerned themselves about this question of differences and polarities. Dive in the past for better redirecting to the future.

The tool : 6 questions, reformulations and impressions

As we borrowed it from Giorgio Nardone and then modified it for our practice, we begin the session with a first open question: “What problem brings you to consult me ?” and of course we listen to the client’s answer with maximal attention.

We then ask a first closed question, i.e. a question with answer propositions (type “A or B ?”). We present A and B as answer polarities not only different but even rather opposite ones.

The therapist however looks like considering their distinctions as particularly important.

He will mark if necessary this difference with a gesture, a body attitude (for example a hand movement to the right and then to the left, or an alternative inclination of the body). Here again the therapist listens the answer with maximal attention, and then asks the second closed question.

After having asked the two questions, if he needs to (i.e. if he has some doubts about a good comprehension of the answer and/or if he strategically wants the client to reabsorb), the therapist reformulates the answers as he understood them and asks the client to correct them, or at least to precise or complete them if he finds necessary to do so.

We must precise here that, for better effectiveness, reformulation needs to use the therapist’s own words.

Some succession of reformulation may be necessary until a feeling of good understanding is obtained by the therapist (indicated by personal comfort by the therapist and within the relationship itself).

Then, a new pair of questions is asked, followed by possible reformulation sequences if necessary. And so on, without going beyond six polarity questions.

Why six ?

We take the number six to Giorgio Nardone's metaphor of the chessboard: six questions are sufficient for complete exploration of the sixty-six cases, even if G. Nardone sometimes asks more than six questions.

After these six questions comes for G. Nardone the time of task prescription, and stratagems are used for better observance.

In our own manner, we explain to the client that we are going to communicate our impressions, and we begin to observe inside ourselves.

Some particular cases are:

- When the client doesn't understand a question, we ask the same question again with the same words if he seemed not to have paid enough attention, but we ask the same question with other words if this is not the case.
- When the client doesn't manage to give an answer, we reformulate the same question with other words too.
- When the client speaks about other matters than our question, we first verify it's not an unexpected manner of giving an answer. And if it is not the case we apologize for interrupting him and we justify by pointing to the therapist *need* to get an answer (it is the case of euphoric or confused clients).

After the six questions are asked and their answers reformulated comes the time to give the client our conclusions. We explain to the client we will give him (her) our *impressions*. And we effectively observe what we feel about :

- first: the global situation of the client, in terms of movement: is he stuck, blocked or is he moving in his life ?
- second: his answers, especially the last one (sixth). Is it going in the direction of the 180 ° turning ?

An hypnotic questioning set

We can now begin to call our manner an hypnotic way of using the six questions tool, by reference to François Roustang's work.

- If our impression is the client is moving, even for a short time, we will present our task as giving him (her) some help for moving faster, for gaining time if possible, that is if more solution-generating behaviours are possible. In this case we are sometimes sure that we understand the solutions and so we can prescribe new ones. And we are sometimes less certain of having a good understanding and we make our best to be allusive. And it is not rare that the client explains to us the solutions he found, as patients of ancient magnetizers like Puysegur!

In these favourable cases, the therapist however will precise, if he feels like, his feelings that it could not be possible, at least for the moment, for the client to speed up his changing process. Sometimes he will precise his feelings of danger about possible acceleration of the process and give counsel of prudence. The main strategic element seems here to make the client believe there is already a dynamic of change. Because, as Roustang

said, after Milton Erickson, a client who believe he gets better engages in behaviours which make him feel better.

-If our impression is the client is stuck, we use the powerful effectiveness of the six questions tool for finding the 180° turning. We confirm the great usefulness of this tool, and we give prescription with stratagems or with hypnotic techniques. We must point that sometimes, not rarely, the client stops our thinking process and informs us he is really feeling better and even has new ideas about possible solutions.

Observations

This tool is quite simple if the therapist pays a lot of attention.

The problem orientation often creates a saturation effect and a spontaneous solution orientation.

Moreover, we thought about why this procedure is so effective:

- *exploration dimension*: this manner is a sort of game. The patient is placed in the expert position. The therapist has to take the time to stop, and to examine what the patient brings to the therapy.

- *working with difference*: creation of information. Not to be drowned under the data. This works makes movement possible: first degree of creativity.

- *opening choices*: mental destabilisation, new images, new ways of seeing things and the world. Provocative questioning may be sometimes necessary, asked in a gentle and neutral (“scientific”) manner. Or surprising question (“Would you prefer to relax on your inspiration or ... on your expiration ?”). Second degree of creativity.

- *Making body moving*: like an oscillation, like in the old times an hypnotyser’s pendulum. The client seems to “try” mentally, and de facto bodily, new choices, and to experiment them. A new positioning is created, personal, intermediate. The patient leaves the cliché attitudes. Third degree of creativity.

- *Departitioning, fusion of the opposites*: Opposites ways of viewing are melting in a personal creation. No more polarities. But a new space which allows a previously impossible movement, an unknown comfort. “I don’t have this pain anymore” says some chronic pain patients who discover they can suffer in other ways than *only* in their bodies. Fourth degree of creativity

- *Bodywork of the therapist*: the therapist works with his body as, and perhaps more than, with his head. Yes, we think the six questions tool can have an hypnotic induction effect: at least for the therapist. But we know that the therapist is often in trance ... The focalisation of attention needed by the six questions is very intense. All the analogue messages of suggestion of confidence, faith in the future seem to be unconsciously accepted by the client. Full creativity is achieved.

A dive in the past for better redirecting to the future

We have here a thought for Milton H. Erickson and his confusion techniques (“Is your pain in your right side or in the left one ?”.... But deeper, we go back to the Greek philosopher Heraclites: “What is cut in contrary sense can be assembled; from difference harmony is born; and discord produces all things”. Then we swim up to Paracelsus (1530) and then the French magnetizers like Puysegur who invented that clients could be expert of their problems and began to question them about how to cure them.

After the rejection of the “Animal Magnetism” by the scientism of the Charcot school, the French Psychists (with the eminent philosopher Henri Bergson among them) and the English Metapsychists (William Bateson, Gregory’s father, met them frequently) went on with this approach until the 1930ies.

And now ! The future dialogue between Orient and Occident which - we hope - will create mutual enrichment.

So we will finish with an almost oriental quote of Blaise Pascal:

“Two similar faces, none of them particularly funny, but put together, their similarity makes one laugh”.

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