

Commentary

How the common factors in different therapies lead to increased spirituality

Cicilia Chettiar

Assistant Professor and Head, Department of Psychology, Maniben Nanavati Women's College, Mumbai.

E-mail – ciciliachettiar@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Success in therapy is frequently attributed to the therapeutic technique applied. Saul Rosenzweig says that it is not the therapy technique that works. Rather there are a set of implicit common factors across all schools of therapy. This paper examines them. Those factors are also available outside the therapeutic relationship. If one's life is rooted in spirituality and openness to the Divine, one finds that interpersonal relationships take on a therapeutic mode. Individuals who are spiritual interact in a manner where the relationship has the same common factors. Therefore the growth in an individual is parallel to that in a therapeutic relationship. If even one participant in the relationship is spiritual, the progress of the other is assured. The Character Strengths according to the VIA classification are shown to be characteristics in spiritual individuals. The Indian culture recognizes the role of spirituality. Development of these character strengths will hence increase the spiritual quotient and can act as a consciousness increasing technique for the nation.

Key words: success, therapy, therapeutic relationship, strengths, character.

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INTRODUCTION

When you see the success of spiritual advisors, gurus, religious leaders, you are struck by the power they have over people to make them change. Individuals learn to let go of the past and look with hope towards the future. Past regrets, guilt and anxiety do not matter in the face of the calmness of their leaders. They are reconciled with their past sins, they are no longer fixated at a point and they start planning for the future with hope and optimism. How different is this from what a true therapist aims to achieve, irrespective of his theoretical orientation?

This paper attempts to look at the possibility that a successful therapeutic relationship is similar if not the same as a successful spiritual one. The benefits one obtains from a successful therapy are as good as the benefits one obtains with an increased sense of spirituality. Through a series of arguments, I propose to place before you the possibility that being part of a spiritual relationship is as beneficial as being part of a therapeutic one.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY & ITS CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

In the field of positive psychology, we have the concept of Virtues and Character Strengths. It is a systematic classification and measurement of widely valued positive traits. The classification is the result of a thorough study of the philosophies of the antiquities, the major world religions and the distinctions offered by historic and current social organizations. Twenty four specific strengths under six broad virtues consistently emerged across history and culture: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. The Virtue relevant to this paper is Transcendence. If we go by what Rosenzweig says,

it's not really the school of therapy that produces a successful outcome; rather it is a set of implicit common factors across the entire range of therapies. The relationship between these factors and Transcendence as a Virtue needs to be examined. For this let's get a better understanding of both Transcendence and the four common factors according to Rosenzweig.

In an interview with Barry Duncan, Rosenzweig has explained that the common factors

"...came out of my awareness that there was such a variety of methods trying to reach the mind and doing mental tricks of various kinds..."

COMMON FACTORS AND HEALING

What emerges is that Rosenzweig, through his historical analysis of psychotherapy, realized the common elements of all forms of influence and healing. This realization is the core of the present research inquiry.

He has identified these four factors as

- a) The operation of implicit, un verbalized factors such as catharsis and the as yet undefined effect of the personality of a good therapist
- b) The formal consistency of the therapeutic ideology as a basis for reintegration
- c) The alternative formulation of psychological events
- d) The interdependence of personality organization as concepts which reduce the effectual importance of mooted differences between one form of psychotherapy and another

The four factors can be generally explained as follows:

The operation of implicit, un verbalized factors such as catharsis and the as yet undefined effect of the personality of a good therapist

It is possible for the procedures consciously utilized by the therapist to have a largely negative value in distracting attention from certain unconscious processes by means of which the therapeutic effect is actually achieved. Thus it might be conceivably argued that psychoanalysis, for example, succeeds when it does, not so much because of the truth of the psychoanalytic doctrines about genetic development but rather because the analyst, in the practice of his method, quite unwittingly allows the patient to recondition certain inadequate social patterns in terms of the present situation—a phenomenon better explained by Pavlov's than by Freud's theories. Granting for the purpose of argument that this is the case, then the concepts of Freud are far less proved true by the successful analysis of a patient than are those of Pavlov—and the therapeutic result achieved cannot uncritically be used as a test of theory advanced! Besides this, the personality of the therapist, the client's faith in the therapist and the relationship they share, are all part of the un verbalized factors affecting outcome of therapy.

The formal consistency of the therapeutic ideology as a basis for reintegration

If it is true that mental disorder represents a conflict of disintegrated personality constituents, then the unification of these constituents by some systematic ideology, regardless of what the ideology may be, would seem to be *sine qua non* for a successful therapeutic result. Whether the therapist talks in terms of psychoanalysis or Christian Science is from this point of view relatively unimportant as compared with the *formal consistency* with which the doctrine employed is adhered to, for by virtue of this consistency the patient receives a schema for achieving some sort and degree of personality organization. The very one-sidedness of an ardently espoused therapeutic doctrine might on these grounds have a favorable effect. Having in common this possibility of providing a systematic basis for reintegration, diverse forms of psychotherapy should tend to be equally successful.

The alternative formulation of psychological events

Psychological events are so complex and many-sided in nature that they may be *alternatively formulated* with considerable justification for each alternative. Under these circumstances any interpretation is apt to have a certain amount of truth in it, applying at least from one standpoint or to one aspect of the complex phenomenon being examined. Hence it is often difficult to decide between various interpretations of the

same psychological event; they are all relevant, though perhaps to a greater or less degree, and are all therefore worthy of some consideration.

The interdependence of personality organization as concepts which reduce the effectual importance of mooted differences between one form of psychotherapy and another

Personality seems to consist in an independent organization of various factors, all of them dynamically related. It is impossible to change any significant factor or aspect of this organization without affecting the whole of it for it is all of a piece. Any given method of psychotherapy needs to have merely enough relevance to impress the personality organization at some significant point and so begin the work of rehabilitation. The interdependence of the personality system will communicate this initial effect to the totality.

SPIRITUALITY AND HEALING

The understanding of therapeutic success across different schools of therapy leads to the second part of the inquiry, the role of spirituality in healing. What is spirituality? Peterson and Seligman (2004) observed that spirituality is universal: "Although the specific content of spiritual beliefs varies, all cultures have a concept of an ultimate, transcendent, sacred, and divine force" (p. 601). India's vastly diverse culture is home to various faiths. Different religions co-exist as do atheism, and agnosticism, polytheism or monotheism, all are represented in the Indian religious landscape. The terms religious and spiritual are frequently used interchangeably, although they are not always the same thing. The Oxford dictionary describes religion as *the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods*. Spirituality is explained as *relating to or affecting the human spirit as opposed to material or physical things*. We are taught that religious people are highly spiritual although this may not always be true. Religion can be defined in its classic sense as a broad individual and institutional domain that serves a variety of purposes, secular as well as sacred. Spirituality represents the key and unique function of religion. People can take a virtually limitless number of pathways in their attempts to discover and conserve the sacred. Pathways involve systems of belief that include those of traditional organized religions (e.g., Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim), newer spirituality movements (e.g., feminist, goddess, ecological, spiritualities) and more individualized worldviews.

For purposes of this inquiry we look at both meanings. Now if we attempt to understand Rosenzweig's common factors as describing a spiritual or religious relationship, we can explain them thus:

The operation of implicit, unverbilized factors such as catharsis and the as yet undefined effect of the personality of a good therapist

The belief that it is the person of the healer and not his conceptual system or his particular techniques that is of decisive importance for the healing process is an unquestioned article of faith for most Indian patients. [3] This again points out that charismatic individuals can bring change irrespective of which school they follow. Buddha, Krishna, Jesus or Prophet Mohammed, each has been divinely ordained, depending which religion you follow. If you do not follow any religion in particular then Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Osho and many other spiritual gurus are there to guide you in your quest for greater peace and happiness. Whether it is Christ asking you to be a doer of good deeds rather than a preacher or whether it is Krishna exhorting you to do your '*karma*', the result is the same. Focus on actions. Many other religious and spiritual traditions lay down methods and strategies for living your life in complete harmony, yet all resonate with the same quality.

The formal consistency of the therapeutic ideology as a basis for reintegration

The leader you may decide to follow would have a consistent coherent ideology and the precepts provided within that tradition allows one to reintegrate the scattered parts of one's life. The system of beliefs has been laid down and followed over the years with the same clarity. Since there is no fickle-mindedness in these leaders, the tradition has been retained across many years, sometimes through centuries leading to a

consistent ideology. A solid pillar which one can lean on in times of trouble and a foundation on which one can build and rebuild their lives any number of times. The constancy of these beliefs provides a welcome embrace to those returning home from a life devoid of the benefits of such beliefs.

The alternative formulation of psychological events

Traumatic events can be repackaged depending on one's religious orientation. A painful relationship can be understood as a debt from a past life. A major business loss can be redefined as punishment for sins. Any negative event can be reinterpreted as part of a cosmic plan and not as a random roll of the dice. The logical explanation provided by the healer or spiritual leader makes the person understand the 'whys' of his present state and also provides the strength and courage to deal with it. Even a passive acceptance is a sign of fatalistic beliefs which are inherent in most faiths.

The interdependence of personality organization as concepts which reduce the effectual importance of mooted differences between one form of psychotherapy and another

The personality disintegration that frequently accompanies a stressor can be overcome with faith in a higher power. That faith allows one to pick up the pieces of their lives slowly, one at a time. By reorganizing even one life situation, an individual experiences a sense of control and mastery over his life, giving him the confidence to put his life back on track again. Irrespective of the religious or spiritual leader one follows, the idea that one can reclaim their life by just putting one piece back at a time, motivates an individual to leap past the barrier of a breakdown and overcome personal distress. The restructuring of even one life situation creates a ripple effect benefitting the individual's whole life. Any given spiritual method needs to have merely enough relevance to impress the personality organization at some significant point and so begin the work of rehabilitation.

RELATION BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Jerome Frank is one of the best known advocates of a common factors model, and proposed four features that are shared by all effective treatments, whether psychotherapies or religious/magical forms of healing:

- 'An emotionally charged, confiding relationship with a helping person'
- 'A healing setting'
- 'A rational, conceptual scheme, or myth that provides a plausible explanation for the patient's symptoms and prescribes a ritual or procedure for resolving them'
- 'A ritual or procedure that requires the active participation of both patient and therapist and that is believed by both to be the means of restoring the patient's health.'

As we go through the above discussion, we find that healing is not restricted either to medical, psychological or spiritual field only. It occurs in all three spheres and brings personal growth along with its soothing relief.

The relation between the common factors and spiritual life is very obvious and therefore we can conclude that the results obtained from a therapeutic relationship are as enriching as those obtained from a spiritual one. Just as a therapeutic setting includes one giver and another receiver, so also a spiritual relationship includes one giver and one receiver. The roles may interchange over time and across situations. Sometimes both may bring significant learning to the situation. Similarly in a therapeutic relationship a patient could also be bringing greater success by his efforts and interactions with the therapist.

The importance of Spirituality as a Character Strength is emphasised in the VIA Classification. It is described as 'having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme.'

Listed below are some of the benefits of religion reviewed in the Peterson and Seligman Handbook (2005).

1. Among young people in particular, being religious is associated with reduced smoking, drug, and alcohol use. Young people who engage in religious practices (like going to church) are also more likely to have better grades and delay having sex.
2. Being religious has positive benefits for relationships. People who actively participate in religious activities and who view religion as important are less likely to experience conflict in their marriage

and more likely to perceive their spouses as supportive. Religious parents are also more likely to parent consistently and less likely to have highly conflictual relationships with their teenagers.

3. Religious beliefs and practices are predictive of other virtues such as altruism, volunteerism, kindness, and forgiveness. Similarly, churches that actively promote displays of these values (especially volunteerism and philanthropy) are associated with community well-being.
4. Finally, religious beliefs are broadly associated with the ability to cope with stressful life events. Prayer and the social support from a religious community play a strong role in positive coping.

CONCLUSIONS

A spiritual life aids in developing a more resilient and tolerant personality. The same result can be achieved through a therapeutic relationship. Such individuals as nation builders can impact positive change and development in the nation. Developing such strengths in the individual should therefore be as much our focus as imparting of skills and techniques in educational institutes and other organizations. The presence of counselors in every school is now a requirement by law. Well trained counselors and therapists irrespective of their theoretical orientation can facilitate the creation of a stable personality early in life. Just like a spiritual *guru* who can also facilitate the holistic development of an individual. Both therapy and spirituality can function as catalysts in the creation of a nation of individuals who are successful at being happy and not just struggling to be happy with their success.

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