

# Entering chair work in psychotherapy: An interactional structure for getting emotion-focused talk underway



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## Abstract

This paper examines the interactional accomplishment of *chair work*, which is one type of therapeutic intervention for exploring client emotions in Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT). During this intervention, therapists guide clients to speak with either a conflicted aspect of self (*two-chair work*) or with a non-present significant other to address unresolved feelings or 'unfinished business' (*empty-chair work*). Using the methods of conversation analysis, we examine ten video-taped EFT sessions that incorporate chair work. It was found that chair work entry is regularly accomplished through four distinct interlocking interactional phases: 1) *Formulating the client's trouble*; 2) *Recruiting participation in chair work*; 3) *Readjusting the participation frame*; 4) *Making contact*. We will show how each phase orients to specific interactional concerns that often pertain to managing epistemic and/or deontic authority and also to accommodating the participants into entering a new participation frame. Although gaining client confirmation and compliance was at times promptly achieved within these phases, clients also regularly delayed their affiliative uptake of the therapist's prior action. We will show, in these cases, how therapists perform additional interactional work to get chair work entry back on track.

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## 1. Introduction

Person-centred therapies underscore the importance of being attuned to the clients' ownership of personal knowledge and experience. Such therapies are inclined to be *non-directive* as they tend to follow the clients' lead and offer validation and support to their emotional distress. Certain therapies within the person-centred paradigm such as Emotion-focused Therapy (EFT), however, make systematic use of different interactional styles (Greenberg, 2010). In the non-directive style, EFT therapists *follow* clients' internal experiences by heightening awareness of and validating their emotions; they also make use of a more directive style, hence *leading* clients, by selecting and facilitating particular process-guiding interventions targeted to resolving an identified emotional processing difficulty in adaptive ways (Elliott and Greenberg, 2007; Goldman et al., 2006; Greenberg, 2014). One task that makes consistent use of these interventions within EFT is called *chair work* (Greenberg, 2002) and more recently *chair task intervention* (Angus and Greenberg, 2011). Here, therapists guide clients through a range of directive turns to speak with either a conflicted aspect of self or with a non-present significant other to address unresolved feelings or 'unfinished business'. While chair task interventions are documented as having successful outcomes (Clarke and Greenberg, 1986; Elliott et al., 2004; Greenberg and Webster, 1982), there is scant research to date on the interactional intricacies of how chair work unfolds (see however Sutherland et al., 2014; Lepper and Mergenthaler, 2008).

In this paper, we examine how clients and therapists enter chair work during EFT. Using the methods of conversation analysis, our examination reveals that chair work is regularly accomplished through four distinct interlocking interactional

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phases. Our analyses of these phases show how therapists and clients come to identify an emotional experience that is suitable for chair work, how clients may be mobilized to enter chair work through therapist directives and how the participants are able to negotiate a new participation frame involving a third, 'non-present' participant. We also demonstrate how mobilizing clients to speak with a personified vacant chair is an embodied activity that relies strongly on co-ordinated bodily actions for its achievement and on intersubjective understandings pertaining to what is being done now or what will follow next sequentially. Difficulties in achieving prompt recruitment to participate in a dialogue with a personified chair were often found to delay chair work entry over multiple turns. Further, we show how the practices of both following and guiding the client during the distinct phases of chair work make it incumbent on EFT therapists to appropriately navigate two central domains of interaction. The first refers to *epistemic rights and responsibilities* (Heritage, 2013) and the second to *deontic entitlements* (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2012; Stevanovic and Svennevig, 2015). Whereas the former involves the degree of authority participants have with respect to rights and access to knowledge and personal experience, the latter concerns a speaker's authority to guide or direct others to do things. Thus, by following their clients, therapists are often attuned to clients' epistemic entitlements and their primary rights and access to *own* their experiences. In contrast, guiding clients orients more to deontic concerns of getting clients to engage in emotion-focused therapeutic tasks.

## 2. Emotion-focused Therapy (EFT) and chair work

The foundation of EFT's therapeutic effectiveness is emotional support inside therapy following three person-centred emotion processing principles: increasing awareness of, enhancing regulation of, and transforming emotion (Greenberg, 2004). Greenberg (2010) outlines the three stages of treatment within EFT. Stage one is developing a therapeutic bond, understanding the client's story and building emotional awareness; stage two is evoking and discovering core maladaptive emotion schemes; and the final transformative stage is constructing alternative emotional experiences and new narrative meaning making. In-session activation of maladaptive emotion schemes are evidenced by indicators of emotional processing difficulties that prompt process-guiding therapist responses, as well as signal the client's possible in-the-moment readiness to work on a specific problem (Greenberg, 2010; Greenberg, 2014). Chair task intervention, which draws from techniques and principles rooted in Gestalt therapy and psychodrama (Perls et al., 1951; Yablonsky, 1976), is one type of therapeutic intervention that plays a central part in doing Emotion-focused Therapy (EFT). Chair work has been adapted and developed within EFT to provide a framework within which clients can "activate and experience the affective base of their self-organizations in conflict" (Pos and Greenberg, 2012:89); reduce indecision, self and marital conflicts, and interpersonal difficulty (Wagner-Moore, 2004); and uncover and tap into negative or unresolved emotions with regard to self or a significant other (Goldman et al., 2006). Importantly, chair task interventions help clients to access healthy primary adaptive emotions, needs and action tendencies leading to emotional transformation. Two forms of chair task interventions are *two-chair* work and *empty-chair* work.

### 2.1. Type 1: two-chair task intervention for self-criticism or self-interruption

Two-chair work targets aspects of the client's relationship with self. Described as two parts of self in an internal struggle (Clarke and Greenberg, 1988; Greenberg, 2010; Wagner-Moore, 2004), these conflicts stand in the way of "the full expression of a more adaptive and fundamental aspect of self" (Elliott et al., 2004:220). Two types of in-session emotional conflicts may prompt two-chair work: (1) events involving self-criticism that reveal an inner critic who denigrates or bullies another part of the self, referred to as the 'experiencing self' (Pos and Greenberg, 2007); and (2) events involving self-interruption that reveal one part of self interrupting, restricting emotional expression, or disowning parts of self (Pos and Greenberg, 2007; Mackay, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Once such emotional conflicts are identified, the client is guided to alternatively assume and keep separate the two parts of self engaged in this inner turmoil. One self is assigned to the experiencing chair from which he/she expresses needs, wants, and deep-seated instinctual emotions, along with expressing how it feels to be criticized. The other self is assigned to the inner critic chair from which he/she speaks from a critical perspective, often using 'should' language and negative self, parental or societal evaluations (Greenberg, 2010; Wagner-Moore, 2004).

### 2.2. Type 2: empty-chair work for unfinished business

Empty-chair work for unfinished business is implemented when the client attunes to longstanding or unresolved feelings or unmet needs towards a 'significant other', and is generally used for two categories of emotions: one relating to neglect or abandonment; and a second relating to abuse or trauma (Paivio and Pascual-Leone, 2010). As with two-chair work, the therapist empathically follows the client's experience and guides by facilitating a dialogue between self and other, who is brought into the session in an imaginary sense, channelled through an empty chair. To maintain a necessary division between self and other, the client switches chairs, alternating between presenting his/her own perspective and that of the significant other. Guided by the therapist, the client dialogically processes experiences and emotions and

<sup>1</sup> In EFT terminology, these would be referred to as specific *problem markers* (Greenberg et al., 1993; Angus and Greenberg, 2011), which work to guide process-directive interventions, such as chair work.

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