

CHANGES IN MEANINGS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY. A COMENTARY ON THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY, *CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CHANGE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the audiovisual essay *The Conceptualization of Change* from the perspective of psychotherapy. Psychotherapy aims to transform lives and alleviate people's suffering, making it a natural setting to observe and study how individuals undergo change (or remain unchanged). The essay explores the concept of innovative moments, which represent exceptions to the problems that led clients to seek psychotherapy. Defining an innovative moment requires identifying a problematic pattern beforehand, as these moments are defined as deviations from the established pattern. This identification process is not straightforward in psychotherapy and becomes even more challenging in social and political contexts due to the involvement of political and ethical considerations. The paper suggests that increasing complexity and fostering dialogue serve as overarching criteria for defining innovative moments in the wider socio-political contexts.

Keywords: Change ; Psychotherapy ; Innovative moments, Dialogue ; Dialogical processes

In this commentary on the essay “*Conceptualization of Change*” (Koprivova, Carpentier, & Doudaki, 2023), I use my research on change in psychotherapy as an analytical framework (Gonçalves et al., 2009, 2017), addressing the microscale of change at the level of the individual lives, mainly the individuals who live with psychological suffering. From this perspective, my aim is not only to dialogue with the theoretical-audiovisual essay but also to expand the reflection on this topic from the perspective of psychotherapy research.

We know, with a great deal of certainty, that people change in psychotherapy and that psychotherapy is effective for a considerable number of people with different kinds of conditions (e.g., anxiety, depression, life problems) (Barkham, Lutz, & Castonguay, 2021; Wampold & Imel, 2015). However, thus far, it is much less clear how people change and by what mechanisms and processes, and we have different models and theories proposing that improvement in psychotherapy takes place by very different routes. Moreover, despite its effectiveness, psychotherapy does not work with every person. Research suggests that approximately half of the clients in psychotherapy benefit from it, which may be related to the topic of control addressed in the essay. Thus, assuming that people want to change, they may be unable (or lack “control”) to do so at the specific time they seek help, as a diversity of constraints may block their ability to change (e.g., biological processes, lack of environmental resources, sociopolitical violence).

This change at a personal level often involves several modifications, from reductions in psychological suffering and symptoms of distress to changes in cognitions (e.g., remoralization, hope, meaning in life), emotions (e.g., decrease in negative emotions, increase in positive emotions), relationships (e.g., creating more meaningful and supportive relationships), and behaviours (e.g., reducing avoidance, improving coping). Thus, change in psychotherapy, when success is achieved, does not include just changes in the suffering of the person but involves other kinds of transformations.

In my own research, I developed a framework to analyse change in psychotherapy, more specifically changes in meanings. We identify at the onset of psychotherapy the different facets of the problematic status quo (i.e., the problematic “normativity”, to use the concept of the essay) and then we identify all the instances in the therapeutic conversation in which there is a deviation (no matter the significance or potential for change) from this former normativity. These deviations occur in the conversation and have a discursive format, as therapy is essentially a conversational activity (even when the aim is changing behaviour). Imagine that at the beginning of therapy, one dimension of this normativity is “I need to be absolutely certain that things will unfold as I imagine, as being in control is my most important aim”. When things go off this anticipated trajectory, anxiety results, which ironically increases the need to be in control. Interestingly, this situation involves a dynamic stability (or a dynamic normativity); given that as the person tries to increase control of events, the less control he or she feels, which leads to “more of the same” efforts

to increase control. This ironic pattern was described by Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974) as a game without end. They suggested that it features a diversity of problematic situations, at different levels, from the individual to the social domain.

A deviation from this *status quo* could be something as simple as, “The other day I did X (something unusual or unpredicted), and it felt really good and spontaneous”. In our research, we term these deviations innovative moments. We speculate that these innovations, as they occur in human beings, may not be just signs (or outputs) of ongoing changes, but they may be constitutive of further changes, as they stimulate new deviations that could lead to a new, more adjusted *status quo*. Humans are proactive systems that construct meanings in interaction with the world (Mahoney, 1991), and it is precisely this constructive nature that enables a change prompted by one event (or a series of events) to lead to a chain of new unpredictable events. Imagine that once event X occurs (e.g., in the above case, feeling spontaneity, without feeling in danger), this opens the door to similar events, to the recollection of past events with related meanings or emotional content, or to the imagination of similar meanings in the anticipated future. Thus, a new life is envisioned and starts to represent a new desired state. As this new desired state becomes clear, it may become easier for the person to organize his or her behaviour to achieve it. Thus, we propose that, considering the above example, innovations may create a disruption of the previous cyclical pattern (need to be in control — feeling lack of control — increasing control), and lead to a new pattern or *status quo* (enjoying spontaneity without needing to plan everything in advance and not feeling in danger).

Most likely, we have deviations that fall short of producing any meaningful change and others that allow a new pattern to emerge. Moreover, facing the possibility of change, anxiety with the possibility of unpredictable transformations may arise (again, the Essay addressed this topic), blocking further changes. This anxiety about a possible new status is seen in psychological approaches (Mahoney, 1991; Neimeyer, 2009), to some extent, as protective of the coherency of the person. Thus, in some situations, we may observe deviations emerging, and suddenly, a quick return to the *status quo* occurs, thus blocking any possibility of meaningful change. In psychotherapy, this is also seen as a sign of ambivalence towards change (see Gonçalves et al., 2011). Other times, as described above, the emergence of innovative moments creates a disruption in the previous status, leading the way to a new transformed status, making a return to the former problematic functioning very unlikely.

This rationale has been used to describe and analyse other sorts of psychological changes, such as changes in groups (Esposito, Cutolo, Passeggia, Formentin, & Gonçalves, 2022), changes in vocational counselling (Cardoso, Silva, Gonçalves, & Duarte, 2014), or even the changes that occur in deradicalization processes (Da Silva, Fernández-Navarro, Gonçalves, Rosa, & Silva, 2020). The rationale used is always the same: a pattern is identified or defined, and then all the occurrences that constitute exceptions to this pattern are identified as innovative

moments. Then, we observe how innovative moments may lead to the consolidation of a new, more adjusted pattern (i.e., a new normativity).

At this point, we should pause and ask ourselves: what is the possible virtue of this rationale for wider changes, for instance, for changes that occur in societies?

When we define a pattern as problematic in psychotherapy, we assume that a particular status is undesirable, and we see deviations from this state of affairs as desirable. However, what about wider changes, at the socio-political level? How may we define a state of affairs as desirable or undesirable? What would be problematic or innovative? What would be the parameters for deciding this complex ethical and political issue?

In the above example of change occurring in psychotherapy, we may see the presence of two positions, one in favour of control “no matter what”, which was dominant at the onset, and another in favour of spontaneity, which was constructed by the emergence of innovative moments. We may also suggest that, with change, the person has become more dialogical (see Konopka, Gonçalves, & Hermans, 2018), as these two positions may now have space to assert themselves collaboratively. Most likely, “being in control” did not disappear from the person’s life, but it is now softened by the discovery of spontaneity and may even be used as a tool. In a working environment, being in control could be useful, but most likely very disturbing on vacation or at a dinner with friends. We may even speculate that the increased flexibility of “being in control” allowed other positions of the self to emerge, let us imagine as a friend, partner, parent, and so on. Therefore, other positions, not very relevant before, gained the possibility of expressing themselves, allowing the self to become more flexible. Perhaps one possibility of defining what is “good” innovation in social realities could be innovations that allow an increase in dialogue and flexibility (and thus, in complexity).

Recently, Cooper (2023) suggested that there is a striking similarity between change in people (in psychotherapy) and changes in society: “You see why progressive principles such as *cooperation and respecting difference and diversity are so beneficial*: because they are not just specific to a socioeconomic context, but are general, system-wide principles for how “better” can be brought about” (p. 23, italics added)

Perhaps dialogue (see also Hermans, 2018), instead of monologue, could be a definition of healthy development at the different levels of human affairs, and we should strive to increase dialogue between confronting parts of human beings, intraindividually and interindividually. When one side affirms (often violently) its position and defines, implicitly or explicitly, other positions as nonsensical, illogical or evil, we are moving from dialogue to monologue, and we are becoming less rich and complex as individuals and as societies. Moreover, in a world that is facing so many different challenges and perils (e.g., climate crises, refugees, war), acknowledging the other as human is not only an ethical imperative but also the smartest thing we can do as a species in an endangered world.

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