

THE CHEMBONGO IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

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In my psychotherapy practice, a small wooden object rests on a little table between two armchairs. Waiting to be discovered, it sits next to a box of paper tissues, a water carafe and two drinking glasses. Once it enters the client's consciousness, this unobtrusive object opens up a world of associations with existentially essential matters, bringing them into focus in the therapeutic process.

The use of objects as psychotherapeutic instruments falls into the general category of impact treatment methods. An interactive encounter with a special object can have a powerful and lasting effect on the client's psyche. By getting the client involved in a (mildly) alarming experiment, it may be possible to spark off perceptions, expose the subject to new ideas or generate images. These can strongly impact the consciousness, and will not be easily forgotten (cp. D. Beaulieu, 2013).

And this brings us back to the small item awaiting clients in my practice: the object is a Chembongo, made of African Blackwood. It is an aesthetically appealing and extremely puzzling toy, seemingly with a mind and free will of its own. Crafted elegantly in a shape reminiscent of a long and narrow boat, the Chembongo wobbles at the touch, balanced on its center of gravity. When spun clockwise it behaves as expected and continues to spin. But spun counterclockwise it reveals its uncanny character: after one or two revolutions, the Chembongo begins to wobble in impatient resistance. It then changes direction, returning to a smooth clockwise rotation, entirely of its own accord.

The Chembongo has proven to be an effective and practical tool that complements my work as a behavioral therapist, based on and related to my training in gestalt and systemic therapy. I find it exciting to employ and observe as it uncovers and brings attention to existentially vital issues.

General awareness, experiential openness and curiosity

The strange and aesthetic object on the table is absolutely new to most people, including my clients. It lies there during every visit, within immediate reach, an unrecognizable thing, right before their eyes.

But remarkably, most clients ignore it. They come for five to 10 sessions or even more, yet they never touch it. Nor do they voluntarily inquire or ask questions about it. However, when kids come to my office, they immediately notice the unusual and interesting object and begin to play and experiment with it straightaway.

This difference in response or lack thereof is poignantly significant. Lacking or deficient experiential openness is characteristic, indeed central, in a number of mental and emotional disorders, such as compulsive personality disorder, social anxiety and avoidance behavior syndrome, as well as in depressive disorders. Limited experiential openness and avoidance behavior are typical among people whose lives "get stuck" in narrow and repetitive patterns, with hardly anything new taking place, deprived of excitement and gratification. In this known phenomenon, life crises arise out of a lack of life events.

At some point I go ahead and ask many of my patients if they have noticed the enigmatic object. Everyone confirms that they have. The next thing I ask is whether they know what it is. So far, no one does.

This brings us to an important consideration, directly related to the significance of curiosity, of what the essential experience of not knowing means to us and our basic attitude to anything new in our lives. The difficulties many sociophobic individuals have with small talk, for example, are closely related to their inhibitions in general, but especially to their inability to express themselves and establish communication with others. It has to do not only with fear (of the unknown), but also with a lack of curiosity about the unknown and unexpected. This raises the question of what causes that stifling of healthy curiosity regarding the unknown and unexpected.

If we pursue this line of inquiry, we discover a diffuse and hidden, mostly ignored, yet fundamentally present fear that keeps so many people from turning to the new and welcoming it. It seems easier to accept boredom than to risk a confrontation with that fear, even in relative safety of the psychotherapist's office – in good hands, so to speak, with no perceptible threat. A curious, challenging object lies within easy reach, yet a crippling fear keeps the individual from touching, playing and experimenting with the unknown, mysterious thing.

Eventually I proceed to say, “This little piece of wood harbors a surprising secret. Would you like to try to find out what it is?”

And this leads to the second central theme: what it means and what it takes to enter into a relationship.

Entering into a relationship

In many people, the hint “there is a secret to be discovered” triggers a competitive urge. Assuming that other patients were probably asked the same question, the client tries to solve the riddle and prove himself.

Patients examine the Chembongo in all kinds of ways, shaking it, holding it up to the light, even trying to open or bend it (I sometimes worry that it might get damaged). Usually, the various attempts to enter into a relationship with the strange and mysterious object are aimed at dominating it in a manner that can generally be described as rough or insensitive. Rather than leading to comprehension, these attempts actually prevent it, in the same way that it is not possible to grasp the essence of a rose by plucking away its petals. Similarly, it is impossible to perceive, to experience and feel the nature or the essence of a person or a thing we are confronted with by grabbing and holding it tightly.

As in many situations in life, the Chembongo requires us to let go first, allow it space to exist. By giving it a positive energetic impulse, we enable it to manifest its unique quality. Following this analogy, in a relationship, we may give impulses, question or provoke, tease, challenge or even nudge. All such actions cause individual reactions and lead to contact or confrontation and foster relationship.

However, if we remain entirely passive, whether toward a person or the Chembongo, not much is going to happen. Or, regarding life in general, we will remain passive “onlookers”, mute witnesses of a boring spectacle, a sad story, which we call our life. If we dare to enter into a relationship – let go, release, generate energetic impulses, become playful – chances are we will then be rewarded by enriching experiences. In the case of the Chembongo, we have a chance of discovering the secret, its essence and magic.

The essence and getting at the essential

Once the client discovers the Chembongo’s unique and extraordinary property, with or without my help, I then ask whether he or she sees any relevance to the therapy process or any possible meaning that the puzzling and surprising Chembongo phenomenon may have in relation to his or her life situation. The Chembongo turns easily and smoothly in the direction it likes. This often leads directly to thoughts on the patient’s inner nature or inherent identity. Questions arise: What is my inner drive? What is right for me? What feels good to me? What feels bad or wrong, against my nature, causes resistance, makes me shiver, buck or stall?

The little piece of wood demonstrates exactly that which many find so difficult, indeed nearly impossible, to do: to resist and to buck, not to yield or succumb, but to get back to one’s own inner nature and find true guidance. So many people strive in their lives again and again to turn against their very nature, betraying their true being, ending up sick or depressed in consequence.

It is so terribly strenuous, so utterly counterproductive and ultimately futile and destructive to go against our inner nature. The analogy is so clear, so simple and impressively convincing. It can be easily brought up in the therapeutic process again and again, posing the central question: “Is this really you, does it fit you?” However, the Chembongo makes it tangibly apparent and teaches us lessons about energy conservation, flexibility as well as the deep meaning and the ultimate significance of crises in our lives.

Energy conservation, flexibility and the meaning and profitability of crises

If we always turned the Chembongo in the direction it likes, we would never come to realize its unique property and meaning. It would soon lose its fascination and our interest. Similarly, we need counter forces and friction to experience ourselves. We need challenges to grow and develop. At times we even need a crisis to be brought to our senses and ask, “Who am I, what matters to me?” Just as the physical organism needs outer forces to develop and to stimulate healthy immunity, so are counter forces vital for our mental and emotional health, strength and resilience.

Evolution “invented” depression to (forcibly) lead us to reflect and stop dysfunctional behavior, come ostensibly to a standstill, only to make a fresh start in the right direction. A depressed person makes an outward impression of being blocked, no longer in motion, while internally trembling with tension. The blocked energy accumulates, piling up within, to be eventually released in the form of a constructive movement. Looking at depression from a systemic perspective, the act of reframing is of primary importance. It generates a sense of meaningfulness, creates confidence and a perspective for positive action (termed a “salutogenic perspective” by Antonovsky).

Reframing also offers legitimacy, helping the subject to plausibly explain his or her new attitudes and actions. "My old attitudes of passive expectation made me sick ... I simply cannot go on playing that old game anymore. Take me as I am or look for someone else ..."

One of my many favorite maxims related to chronic psychic disorders is that chronicity results from a lack of crises. People tend to avoid the necessary changes and transformations that would end or ease their sufferings (see: the new approaches of the acceptance and commitment therapy according to Hayes, 2014, among others).

Being faced with a person who acts against his or her own interests and vital needs, we could propose they try to accomplish this impossible feat: to impose their will on the innocent Chembongo, to violate its nature, to undermine its will by intimidation, coercing it to turn against its own direction by relentlessly, repeatedly and stubbornly spinning it the other way. Or by verbal persuasion, abuse and threats, insults and humiliation. Again, the analogy is clear enough: This venture can never lead to fulfillment and happiness, but only to endless frustration and sorrow instead. Such an exercise will help the client to better understand the essence of the Chembongo as well as his or her own.

This may also be seen as an analogy of the way our children are treated, with parents so often trying to form them insistently, to make them act and behave according to their will, instead of supporting youngsters in the discovery of their own true being. This brings us directly to the central theme of psychotherapy: fostering of loving self-acceptance. The Chembongo is wonderful as it is, just as you are. The role of the therapist should be to help the client to live life aligned with his or her real purpose – although the client's expectations are all too often very different ("Please help me endure my miserable existence, alleviate my suffering as much as possible, but for God's sake, don't imply or expect that I should change"). The Chembongo can facilitate bringing up and focusing on all these issues in a playful yet very effective and impressive manner.

Uses in practice

In therapy, the Chembongo can be used to talk about various conditions, including depression, anxiety disorder, psychosomatic illness, compulsions, obsessions and addictions. "The Chembongo is trembling. And what happens to you, when you are supposed to turn against your nature?" The analogy is concrete and vivid enough to point to various possible methods of intervention.

The good thing about using the Chembongo in a therapeutic process is that it has a simple, constant, unobtrusive yet immediately felt presence. Having entered into a relationship with it once, just giving it a slight tap or a turn, is sufficient to remind us of its central message: There will be times in your life – not just once or twice – when others will try to turn or push you in a direction they want, persuading you that they know what's good and right for you. What will you do? Will you take up the challenge and, remembering the little Chembongo, stick to your guns? Will you manage to transform your own energy, go through the crisis and be better for it, emerging healthy and strong? In this respect, the remarkable toy can also reinforce efforts to foster self-sufficiency in the therapeutic process, such as the ability to free oneself from negative

influences and toxic relationships or dismantle structures detrimental to one's wellbeing.

This little "philosophical toy" called Chembongo is a wonderful therapeutic tool, an instrument that can be effectively employed in psychotherapy, independent of any particular orientation or school of thought. Many different psychotherapy patients can benefit from touching and observing it to bring up issues or concepts. The possibilities for interactive and holistic experiments involving the senses, emotions and intellect are endless.