

Therapeutic Letters within an Unifying Experiential Intervention – a Way of Healing Through Creative Writing. Case study

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Abstract

Introduction: *Therapeutic Letter Writing is a largely used technique within psychotherapeutic processes, helping the client to know oneself better, but also to overcome some existential jams, to integrate some problems or even to work with trauma.*

Objectives: *The aim of this paper is to harness the way of intervention with therapeutic letters, a technique adapted to the specific of Unifying Experiential Psychotherapy (PEU), by presenting the case study of a participant within a therapeutic process in which we used, among others, the technique mentioned above.*

Methods: *In this case study, we used therapeutic letters, applied in an experiential way, but also combined with other creative-expressive and experiential techniques, in order to help the client overcome her traumas.*

Results: *One of the results we have seen is the fact that the participant from the case study made some important changes in her life as a sign that the intervention was successful. Thus, by using the therapeutic letters, the client became able to solve the problems she had in relation with her mother, and also helped her become more independent and improve the self-esteem.*

Conclusions: *Given the positive results of the therapeutic letters, we propose to continue the study, by using it in the Unifying Personal Development groups and highlighting its positive results both by means of qualitative and quantitative measures.*

Keywords: *psychotherapy, creative-expressive techniques, therapeutic stories, letters*

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I. Introduction

Nowadays, the concept of creative writing has become increasingly popular (Tan, Grigorenko, 2013). "Creative writing" is defined as a vital tool of modern society and refers to those activities of creating stories, of generating attractive content for others, using a person's creativity and expressiveness. Another role of creative writing is to relax and amuse, thus entering the field of entertainment: all writings of filmic nature, novel or poetry scenarios can be mentioned here, expanding the definition of creative writing. However, the scale taken by this technique did not leave uninterested the social sciences researchers, especially in psychology, who sought to observe the extent to which creative writing techniques can be validated by scientific studies, in order to ensure their truthfulness and applicability based on rigorous studies. Maley (2012, apud Kirkgoz, 2014), defines creative writing as an activity that is unique and specific for each person, with motivational, aesthetic and disciplinary valences, which has the role of developing a person's vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, oratorical quality, but also which evokes a personal message, decrypted from the perspective of the author's experience. The same author points out that creative writing contributes to the activation of the right hemisphere of the brain, a fact that will correlate with the development of creativity, emotional intelligence and even ensure a balance between the two hemispheres, that is, between the emotional and rational sides of a person.

Barbot and his colleagues pointed out that, depending on the field in which it is used, creative writing can lead to the acquisition of different skills (specific to the respective field), but that there are also common factors which can be developed by using creative writing, among which they mention in this context: imagination, the spirit of observation, or a higher intrinsic motivation (Barbot et. al, 2012).

In a 2011 study, the authors (Krom, Williams) outlined how they used creative writing and storytelling to capture students' attention at accounting courses, prior noting their poor ability to concentrate and understand because of the heavy content. Thus, using the creative writing of stories and characters in the stories, at the end of the research, the authors observed a progress regarding the interest of the students for the above-mentioned field.

Fair and his co-workers led a group therapy process and highlighted the effects of creative writing on HIV-positive adolescents (Fair et al., 2012). The seven adolescents included in the research experienced

improvements in the level of expression and creative writing skills. On the other hand, creative writing groups represented for them a secure framework in which they could talk about the medical condition, leading to a reduction in their tendency to isolate themselves, caused by HIV infection. In the same study, the authors highlighted the importance of creative writing, but also of other types of therapies that use writing as an intervention tool.

As stated above, creative writing has been and still is widely used in the corporate environment and in other areas of the labor market. A study conducted in this regard included final year students who participated in an intensive creative writing course in order to prepare them for professional integration (Lengelle et al., 2013). The authors' conclusion was that creative writing in the career context opens up future professional opportunities for employees and this tool can also be used as a career counseling method.

On the other hand, creative writing is beginning to be used in early education. Tok and Kandemir (2015) highlighted the effects of this tool on seventh grade students. Thus, a four weeks long study on 31 Turkish students showed the effects creative writing had on teaching English. At the end of the study, the authors noted that students had a greater ability to write in English. However, at the end of the study, the 31 subjects did not show a higher interest for English classes.

A technique derived from the concept of creative writing, used in psychotherapy, is that of therapeutic letters – Therapeutic Letter Writing (Davidson, Birmingham, 2001). In fact, the technique is outlined in the form of self-analytical essays, of letters that one person self-addresses or addresses to another, which will be subsequently analyzed, under the supervision of the therapist. The two authors mentioned above have used therapeutic letters to treat eating behavior problems, stating that they are extremely accessible to clients and can accompany them permanently, in the form of a journal, which helps someone structure their thoughts, enables them to become more aware of their emotions, and to work with themselves even outside the therapeutic setting.

With the help of therapeutic letters, problems can also be shared with family members or close ones, and the technique bears the great advantage of placing the client in the center of the process, thus giving them authority to take the matter in their own hands, to reflect on it and discover solutions to their problem (op. cit., 2001).

The present study aims to present a psychotherapeutic way of intervention, in which we used therapeutic letters technique, adapted to the PEU concept and to the four stages of the Unifying Experiential process. Unifying Therapy (UT) or Unifying Experiential Psychotherapy (PEU) is a method developed by prof. Iolanda Mitrofan, PhD, following several studies validating the intervention, performed on Romanian population in the last 20 years (Mitrofan, 2008). The PEU paradigm is based on the idea that, following the traumatic experiences which a person has gone through, there is an unconscious split between Ego and Self (the latter being defined as the resource space, the generator of creative energy and positive and authentic emotions). This split can lead to the inability of an individual to manifest their personality in an authentic and real manner. Being permanently driven by the blocks created by negative or traumatic experiences, a person will find it impossible or difficult to manifest their positive emotions and creative resources existing within the Self. Basically, there is a fragmentation of the Ego, which causes a strong internal conflict. Unifying Therapy aims to identify traumatic experiences, especially primary, matrix experiences (the framework from which all other maladaptive experiences of the individual start, through repetitions) and reconstitutes them in the therapeutic space, 'hic et nunc', in order to help the client understand and to give them another meaning (Mitrofan, 2004). Through such an expansion of consciousness, there will happen an integration of emotions such as fear, anger, aggression and their rearrangement in the psychic system of the individual, in the sense of their positivity, of sublimation, that is to say their use for constructive and transformative purposes.

Within the PEU intervention stages "unroll a sui-generis therapeutic process: 1) the challenge, 2) the reconstruction in the present time, 3) becoming aware, 4) re-signification, 5) acceptance, 6) restructuring, 7) verification by implementation in real life. The succession of unifying stages observe the principle of the self-constructing spiral; our U.T. practice has shown us that benefic effects take place only when the coherent succession of these stages is observed, as each one of them contains and puts into value the effects of the previous stage, thus allowing for the client's maturing leap and autonomy to take place. This methodological characteristic strongly limits not only resistances, but also therapeutic dependency." (Mitrofan, Voicu, 2009, p. 9-10).

The above steps may be approached as 4 main stages:

1. **Provocation** (launching the expressive-creative exercise);

2. **Clarifying self-analysis and reconstitution**, through which the awareness of the projections initiated during the exercises of the first stage takes place;

3. **Creative unlocking**, or **re-signification** of the negative experiences, and the awareness on one's own resources;

4. **Self-transformation** – the implementation of the insights obtained within the group in the life of the participants.

Previous studies have shown the efficiency of creative writing in a Unifying Experiential context, by spontaneously writing therapeutic stories (Constantin et al, 2014). The creative improvisation through literature (Constantin, Mitrofan, 2018) is a technique developed within the Unifying Therapy and the Unifying Personal Development group, whose purpose is to provoke the client to spontaneously write a story, on a predetermined topic, which will later be used as a tool for analysis and re-signification. The authors who developed this technique observed the efficiency of this way of intervention on decreasing anxiety (Constantin, 2016), and improving self-esteem and emotional intelligence (Constantin, Mitrofan, 2015), but also in awareness and assuming identity roles (Constantin, 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to reveal the process of working through therapeutic letters in PEU, applied to a case that I worked with for 4 months. The client's identification data, as well as other information that may have exposed her, have been modified. The working manner and the problems she has faced are the real ones, in order to highlight the effects of using this technique.

II. Method

Initial description of the case

At the time, Sara was 28 years old and worked as a travel agent for an agency in France. Thus, she would spend two weeks in Paris and the next two weeks in Romania. She had been living alone for six years, until recently. A few weeks before we met for therapy, she moved again to her parents' house, as she began to renovate her apartment, a renovation which, she expected, would take about three or four months. When Sara came to therapy, she said there were several things that she wanted to understand about herself, starting with the relationship with her parents, the relation with herself and the dynamics with some potential partners. She described herself as a lazy person, who, when was not at work, did absolutely nothing, thought about

herself as not being intelligent enough and she did not like to upset others. For that reason, in all her relationships, Sara tried to please others, so that they did not reject her or disappear from her life.

Symptomatically, she first came to the office with complaints of lack of energy, high anxiety and anger. There were no other physiological or psychological symptoms.

From an existential point of view, she said she wanted more in her life, she was not satisfied with what she was doing at that time, she would like to get involved in humanitarian actions and help those in need. She felt lonely, but did not think of her being able of having a healthy relationship with a man. Throughout her life, she had had three significant relationships, but all ended as she wanted more closeness and security from her partners, while they were not emotionally available to provide it.

Regarding the transgenerational plan, Sara described the relationship with her parents as totally dysfunctional. Ever since she was little, her parents behaved in a cold and distant manner with her, offered her no affection and were not available to listen to her. On the contrary, Sara recounted several episodes in which both parents beat her for various reasons: either for getting a lower grade in school, or not allowing her to go out with her friends. For those reasons she began to hate them and truly desire to leave their house. Immediately after graduating college she received a job offer that allowed her to get a bank loan for a home of her own. She did not have close relationships with either of the grandparents, who were living outside the city. Also, she had no brothers or sisters.

The goals she set in therapy were to re-balance the relationship with her parents, gain more self-confidence and become emotionally available for a functional couple relationship. In this context, the established therapeutic strategy focused on building a secure therapeutic relationship and consequently on helping her become aware of the blockages which appeared in relation to her parents and to herself. When initially in therapy, the client showed signs of an existential blockage: low self-confidence, lack of contact with her emotions and thoughts, various negative overwhelming states of mind. Also, another important aspect to mention was her emotional unavailability, which permanently caused her to enter relationships with equally emotionally unavailable men. Although she had great need for affection, the fear of abandonment experienced in relationship with her parents, made her unconsciously choose partners who in

turn abandoned her emotionally, that if she was not the first to abandon them, from the urge to protect herself from suffering. Professionally, although the client had a stable job with many benefits, she had the impression that she was not good at all, that she was not appreciated and that she was exploited by her superior, who sometimes asked her to perform many tasks not linked to her position. Basically, Sara rewrote, in the professional sphere the abuse experienced in relationship with her parents, accepting everything that came to her, from fear of getting worse. In other words, on all her existential axes, Sara was in the role of the child-victim, the helpless kid, abused and unconfirmed, whose growth depended on lacking factors such as: love, emotional and behavioral validation, assertiveness. Given the life context and the fact that she was away from the country for a long time, we established that we will meet twice a week when she was free. In addition, Sara also assumed the performance of individual therapeutic tasks, in the periods when she was away, that would facilitate the work in the subsequent therapeutic intervention.

Intervention through Unifying Experiential Psychotherapy

Thus, the first sessions were centered on a reconnection with herself. In other words, the therapeutic approach was focused on raising awareness and unlocking her own internal resources and using them in a healthy way in Sara's life. I chose this type of approach because, during the first sessions, Sara presented the symptoms of a disorganized personality, without a contact with her resources. As such, in order to be able to explore the primary trauma, which meant to reconstruct her life scenario, it was first necessary for the client to gain stability in her own personality structure at present. In the first stage of the therapeutic process, Sara activated her resistances and the attitude about herself was a rather negative one, of self-cancellation. Most likely because of the scenario in which she lived her childhood, where the parents, by criticizing her, involuntarily conveyed to her that she was good for nothing and that she did not deserve to exist. Therefore, in the first sessions she stated she had no resources, she was not good at anything (discourse taken from her parents) and that she would not achieve anything good in life. That was a natural behavior in such a stage, in which I chose to deeply explore her emotions regarding those thoughts. Sara became aware that she felt sad, that she was afraid to assume new attitudes and even became more aware of the anger that

was permanently burning within her. But every time she felt angry, she would rather repress her feeling because she did not know how to react to it and she felt afraid she might act aggressively, as her parents did with her when she was young.

An important point in gaining positivity of her self-image took place in the 5th session. She had just returned from France and felt extremely angry because of some misunderstandings she had with her manager there. Sara tended to blame herself and believed that she could not express herself clearly and could not demand her rights. Thus, although the mature part of her was aware of these things, the child self tended to come to the surface and interfere with the present scenario, not letting her manifest her potential. In that context, it was the first time I introduced the technique of therapeutic letter in the process. The letter technique was adapted to the specific of PEU, as it follows: in the provocation stage, the client began to write a letter to herself, from Sara to Sara. In the self-analysis and reconstruction stage we explored together the details presented in the letter, in the re-signification stage we continued the exploratory approach in the idea of what she learned from the experience, while in the implementation stage, I invited her to express how she intended to make the most of this experience in her daily life.

After Sara completed the letter, I asked if she agreed I read it aloud, moment during which she would only listen to me, so as to facilitate the witness status. Sara agreed, so I started reading the letter. Among the significant expressions that she wrote in the spontaneous way, we discovered: *"I am angry with you because you are a lazy person. At school you never had good grades, you could try harder"*; *"I am angry with you because you have entered into toxic and dysfunctional relationships with jealous, possessive and unavailable men"*; *"I'm angry with you because you only had narcissistic friends who used you"*; *"I don't like you because you allow people behave badly towards you"*.

As I was reading these lines, Sara, with tears in her eyes, was more and more attentive to the words uttered. In Unifying Therapy, any provocative exercise contributes to the activation of the witness status, as though the client, even if it is about them and is directly involved emotionally in their story, also manages to see things in a detached manner, which helps them to observe themselves more openly and activate less resistance. The end of the letter was a relevant one for the process, as it helped the entry into the second stage, namely the reconstruction and self-analysis. Thus, the last sentence Sara wrote in her letter sounded like this:

"You have so much potential to do great things. And yet you waste yourself in dysfunctional relationships. Please, I need you. Change something. Find out who you are and be yourself!".

I asked Sara how she felt when she heard those lines. She told me that she was feeling sad and perceived she was too critical towards herself. I asked her if 'Sara – the Critic' would say something better about her and what would that be. In order to reconstruct and restructure the annihilating scenario, I introduced the empty chair technique, this way challenging her to come in contact with the two parts of herself: the critical one (the critical parent) and the soft one (the child). After that, a dialogue followed between the two parts, in which Sara confessed that she needed more confidence, she needed to stop verbally attacking herself and, instead of losing her time with those things, she would like to act, to do something. The end of the session came with a symbolic hug that the client offered to herself. Asked what she understood from that specific therapeutic labor, she said that she became more aware of the critical voice in her mind that continued to accompany her since she was a child, turning into her own voice. Asked how she felt at that moment, she answered that she felt compassion. Basically, the anger and pity she felt about her gained another image, a more positive one. Thus, step 3 of intervention in the PEU, re-signification, was activated. Asked what she further intended to do, she replied she wanted to treat herself gentler, to understand herself better and to have more patience, in order to achieve the professional and personal goals she wanted. Moreover, Sara said that she would like to talk more with her mother, because she was deeply aware that adjusting their relationship would determine her own wellbeing, but that she did not feel ready to take that step yet. I asked her to write a letter for her mother, Sara accepted and we agreed that at the next session she will bring the letter with her.

The next session came after two weeks, as the client went back to work in France. Her return to the therapy office also marked a first positive change. She confessed that she finally dared to ask her manager for a raise (she started to take on adult behavior). Moreover, her manager agreed to give her the raise, although she did not expect it. Asked what made her decide to talk to her superior, Sara replied that she realized that, after almost 5 years at that job, she knew she had gained a lot of experience and that she had skills that helped the respective travel agency to develop. Among them, she listed: intuition, social skills, persuasion and creative spirit. Thus, after the previous session, in which the

technique of therapeutic letter was used, she began to become more self-aware, to assume some positive traits and to criticize herself less. At the same time, Sara also assumed a mature attitude towards the others and took the initiative to demand her rights. After I strengthened these things, the client confessed to me that she could not write the letter for her mother, because she did not have time. Although I perceived that as resistance, I encouraged her and gave her the space and time she needed to do it. So, in the next sessions I explored her inner resources and put less emphasis on the relationship with the mother. A few weeks later, in session 11, she came in very angry, confessing that she had a tense discussion with her mother the night before. The quarrel started in relation to how Sara wanted to decorate her apartment, in a way her mother disagreed, telling her that she always made the wrong choices. The client got very angry and even yelled at her mother and went into her room, where she cried all night. Moreover, stimulated by this discussion, she chose to write the letter that she postponed until that moment. I proposed to proceed as in one of the previous sessions, that I read her letter aloud. Sara agreed and started listening. In the first part of the letter, she addressed to her mother in a passive-aggressive and full of resentment manner: *“Mother, I am angry at you because when I was little, you made me feel guilty about everything. Whatever I did, it was not good, I was not perfect, as you wished”; “Many times I felt like a burden to you, especially when you told me it was a mistake to be born”.*

However, in her letter, there were also phrases with re-signification value which denote empathy for her mother: *“A part of me knows that you loved me and you are still loving me; I am grateful to you for all the summers you took me with you and dad on holidays; I know you both made significant efforts, and I am grateful to you for that”.*

I placed the letter on the chair in front of her, as if it was a symbolic representation of her mother and I invited Sara to tell her everything she felt about her. Deeply affected and crying like a child, Sara confessed to her symbolic mother how much she needed her and her childhood love, how much she longed even now after her affection, which she did not know how to get. Positioning herself in the mother’s seat, on the other chair, she stated that she did not know how to give affection, that she was always afraid and did not know how to manage that, but that she loved her enormously and wanted everything that was good for her. Returning to her chair, bursting into tears, Sara said that she loved her immensely, but she did not know how to tell her that

because she was afraid she would be rejected again. At the end of the session, Sara said that although she realized that she needed to forgive her mother, she did not feel ready yet. I interpreted her resistance as a reason for a deeper analysis of the relationship between the two of them. At the next meeting, however, Sara came in with a positive attitude and confessed to me that she had a discussion with her mother. As she was about to move back into her home, she wanted to take with her some childhood pictures, which she asked her mother for. From that, they began to discuss about that period of time. Her mother told her that she was busy earning money to raise her and that she felt she had been away for a long time. She also said she felt guilty because, at just 19, the age she had when Sara was born, she did not know how to offer maternal affection. For Sara, the discussion was a liberating one, as she herself said. She mentioned that she needed to hear those things from her mother in order to forgive her. Now she felt calmer and that the relationship with her mother was starting to take a positive trajectory. They even started doing certain things together, they both decorated Sara’s apartment and the client decided to take her parents on a vacation in France, when they would also have spare time from their jobs.

III. Results

Shortly after this specific session, we stopped the therapeutic process because Sara was promoted to the company where she worked; consequently, she had to spend more time in France. It seemed that the manager appreciated her qualities more and more and decided to promote her on a management position. But I interpreted the promotion as an unlocking of her own resources, which helped her take the initiative and grow even more. Probably the analysis within the therapeutic framework, both in terms of relationship with the mother, but also of relationship with herself, contributed to her success in the professional environment.

Other indicators of success of the therapeutic process were related to the improved relationship with the mother, but also the contact with a man with whom she started dating. Although at the time we completed the process, their relationship was in its infancy, it was still an indicator of the unlocking and implementation of creative solutions in one’s own existence. Thus, although there may have been other directions for intervention (such as her relationship with the father, which I have not explored enough), the fact that she had reached balance and she was satisfied with what she had achieved up to then was a positive aspect of psychotherapy.

IV. Discussion

In Unifying Therapy, the metaphor is considered a “reparative and reconciling tool”, or “a vehicle of human reconnection with the Self”, also an instrument, perhaps the most powerful, acting through multiple symbolic focus (Mitrofan, 2004). In the vision of the author of the P.E.U method, metaphor is a way of “catalysis, self-acceptance and unification, of spiritual expansion and maturation, through its revealing and re-significant valences. It is an analogical way of knowing, emotionally and energetically sustained in a risk-free optimum that simultaneously maintains safety and incitement” (op. cit., 2004, p. 44-45). In the PEU paradigm, the metaphor can be represented by any type of expressive-creative exercise and any technique of artistic type, which facilitates the therapeutic process.

As we can see from the above, the use of the therapeutic letter technique – as a form of metaphor in the PEU context – can have positive effects on the client’s life. This technique, if it follows the four stages of Unifying Therapy, i.e. the challenge, the reconstitution, the re-signification and the implementation, facilitates the client’s access to the Self, his capacity of insight, but also eases the creative restructuring of some blocking scenarios from the past, by re-signifying the events. Just as writing has the role of stimulating creativity, so does the therapeutic letter in stimulating the client, in a creative way, to find solutions to the problems they face and to assume their implementation in their own life. In the case of Sara, the two sessions in which we used this technique facilitated the improvement of the relationship with the mother. Within two sessions, following the challenge through the therapeutic letters, the client allowed herself to access extremely deep emotions and thoughts, such as anger, sadness, fear of abandonment, the thought that she was not loved enough. Exploring all these, however, she had the chance to give a new sense to the relationship with her mother and, thus, to emotionally grow and assume, in a more authentic way, the role of an adult. As evidence, some of the effects of this work were seen right at the end of the therapeutic process.

V. Conclusions

As stated above, both in the previously mentioned research, but also through the present study, we observe a high efficiency of the expressive-creative techniques in the Unifying Experiential therapeutic intervention. In particular, handwriting becomes a productive tool in this context and, in the same time, facilitates the unlocking of resources and the process of

emotional healing. Whether used in the form of stories or other creative writing methods, this technique catalyzes the therapeutic intervention and helps the client overcome certain blockages.

Following the information presented above, we can note the usefulness of the therapeutic letter technique used in a unifying manner, when working with certain patients. Obviously, this type of exercise should be used in a certain context, depending on the client’s life experience and only if the technique is appropriate in a certain type of intervention. In future studies, we aim to investigate on a larger scale, on a larger number of participants, the types of problems in which the therapeutic letter can be used, aiming to identify the long-term measurable effects of such an intervention.

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