



Frame of Reference

Definition

Tudor and Merry (2006, p. 58) define 'frame of reference' as 'the subjective and unique way in which someone understands the others and the world by "framing" (as in a window) their perceptions'. In their definition, meanwhile, Feltham and Dryden (1993, p. 70) highlight the multiplicity of factors that influence a person's frame of reference, describing 'frame of reference' as 'the typical way in which someone makes sense of his [sic] world, according to his own experience, values, culture, and so on'.

Originally a concept from the person-centred approach, frame of reference was described by Carl Rogers (1951, p. 191) as 'an organised pattern of perceptions of self and self-in-relationship to others and the environment'.

External and Internal Frames of Reference

Feltham and Dryden (1993, p. 70) note that that frame of reference may be internal or external: 'There is a further distinction between internal and external frames of reference: in the former, people have their own, well-defined means of construing events; in the latter, people have a tendency to refer to outside sources, particularly parents or parent-figures, for confirmation.'

An external frame of reference will contain introjected conditions of worth, and may develop when an individual's sense of self is threatened, leading to them paying attention to other people's views and judgements. In this way, they may turn away from their own (internal) frame of reference.

Frame of Reference in Counselling Practice

In their definition of 'frame of reference, Feltham and Dryden (1993, p. 70) write as follows about the importance of the concept of frame of reference in counselling practice:

In counselling it is considered highly important that counsellors are able to grasp, understand and accept the frame of reference of their clients and to work within it empathically. Each individual's frame of reference as it applies to each unit of experience is idiosyncratic, and the counsellor must be alert to this. 'Frame of reference' also implies typical linguistic nuances used by clients.

It is important in counselling not to respond from your own frame of reference, which is an external one to the client. Nelson-Jones (2009, p. 55) provides the following examples of responses that come from the client's (internal) frame of reference and responses that seek to impose an external (the therapist's) frame of reference on the client:

External frame of reference responses.

'I wouldn't have done that.'
 'You should have behaved ... [describes the behaviour].'
 'I think you should ignore [her/him].'
 'Stop letting yourself get depressed over small matters.'
 'Don't be afraid to show your anger.'

Internal frame of reference responses.

'You feel happy that you've passed the test.'
 'You feel sad that [she/he] has died.'
 'You're uncertain about whether you should have been so forthright.'
 'You're really in two minds as to whether you should invite [her/him] out.'
 'You feel glad that you've got a good job at last.'

Link with Skills

Rogers' 19 propositions (1951) present his theory of personality and behaviour, which emphasises the key role in person-centred counselling of the phenomenological field – i.e. all that the organism experiences, consciously and otherwise; this is inevitably subjective and therefore not a precise reflection of any objective reality.

For example, when – in the early 1930s – Rogers was working with disturbed children, the mother of one child client was able to tell her own story of their family life, this account was very different from her child's. Similarly, if a group of people witness the

same event, their views of it could vary greatly as they all would have experienced it differently. It is therefore important to 'monitor' clients in a range of ways (not just what they are actually saying) to pick up their feelings, frame of reference and underlying process.

It can be difficult to grasp the nuances of another person's experience, since 'our knowledge of the person's frame of reference depends primarily upon communication of one sort or another from the individual' (Rogers, 1951, p. 495). It follows that 'only in clouded fashion can we see the world of experience as it appears to the individual' (ibid.).

Close attending is therefore needed by the therapist to the client, along with clarifying where the client's intended meaning is unclear. Tudor and Merry (2006, p. 58) describe this as 'a disciplined form of empathic understanding'.

Importance of Counsellor Self-Awareness

The way we view the world (our frame of reference) is based on our own experiences, which are unique to us – hence the importance in counselling not only of being aware of difference and diversity, but also of not assuming sameness. For example, just because a client is going through an experience that sounds similar to the therapist's, this doesn't mean that they feel or act similarly.

However, as Feltham and Dryden (21993, p. 70) point out, 'the necessity of working within the client's frame of reference is sometimes wrongly understood or wrongly taught to mean that counsellors must never venture an opinion of their own or attempt an intervention which has not already been invited by the client'. Indeed, such challenges can be valuable, when delivered at an appropriate time and with empathy and non-judgement.

References

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