

CONCRETENESS (SPECIFICITY) IN THERAPY

C. H. Patterson

Concreteness, (42) or specificity, involves the use of specific and concrete terminology, rather than general or abstract terminology, in the discussion of feelings, experiences, and behavior. It avoids vagueness and ambiguity. It leads to differentiation of feelings and experiences rather than generalization. Concreteness or specificity is not necessarily the same as practicality, nor is it objectivity. It does not apply to impersonal material--it is personally relevant concreteness. It is "the fluent, direct and complete expression of specific feelings and experiences, regardless of their emotional content."(43)

Specificity is the opposite of much of the verbalization of many counselors, who attempt to generalize, categorize, and classify with broad general labels the feelings and experiences of the client. Many interpretations are generalizations, abstractions, or higher-level labeling (or the inclusion of a specific experience under a higher-level category). Concreteness is the opposite of such labeling. It suggests that such interpretation is not useful but harmful. In addition to being threatening, abstract interpretations cut off client exploration. Rather than permitting an analysis of a problem into its specific aspects, labeling leads to the feeling that the problem is solved and the issue closed. A simple, though perhaps extreme, example would be applying the label Oedipus complex to a male client's description of his feelings and attitudes regarding his father and mother. The client might well feel that this solves his problem, that he has insight, and that nothing further can be done or need be done.

Concreteness serves three important functions: (1) it keeps the therapist's response close to the client's feelings and experiences; (2) it fosters accurateness of understanding in the therapist, allowing for early client corrections of misunderstanding; and (3) it encourages the client to attend to specific problem areas. (44)

By responding in specific and concrete terms to long, general, vague ramblings of the client, the therapist helps the client to sift out the personally significant aspects from the irrelevant aspects. Although it might appear that questions of the who, what, when, where, and how type would be useful, Carkhuff believes that

such questions should serve the function of entry and follow-through in an area only when the helpee cannot himself implement entry and follow-through in that area. In no way should questions and probing dominate helping because of the stimulus response contingencies that it develops (45)

In other words, questions should perhaps be limited to situations where the therapist doesn't understand or cannot follow the client and must ask for clarification.

It is possible that the level of concreteness should vary during different phases of the therapy process. It should be high in the early stages, but later, when the client moves into deeper and more complex material, a high level may be undesirable or even impossible until confused and mixed feelings and emotions are expressed and become clearer. Later, in the ending phases when the client is planning and engaging **in** action, high levels would again be desirable. In the early stages, concreteness can contribute to empathic understanding.

Measuring Concreteness

Carkhuff's revision of the scale for measuring concreteness or specificity of expression in interpersonal processes (46) follows.

Level 1

The first person leads or allows all discussion with the second person(s) to deal only with vague and anonymous generalities.

EXAMPLE: The first person and the second person discuss everything on strictly an abstract and highly intellectual level.

In summary, the first person makes no attempt to lead the discussion into the realm of personally relevant specific situations and feelings.

Level 2

The first person frequently leads or allows even discussions of material personally relevant to the second person(s) to be dealt with on a vague and abstract level.

EXAMPLE: The first person and the second person may discuss the "real" feelings but they do so at an abstract, intellectualized level.

In summary, the first person does not elicit discussion of most personally relevant feelings and experiences in specific and concrete terms.

Level 3

The first person at times enables the second person(s) to discuss personally relevant material in specific and concrete terminology.

EXAMPLE: The first person will make it possible for the discussion with the second person(s) to center directly around most things that are personally important to the second person(s), although there will continue to be areas not dealt with concretely and areas in which the second person does not develop fully in specificity.

In summary, the first person sometimes guides the discussions into consideration of

personally relevant specific and concrete instances, but these are not always fully developed. Level 3 constitutes the minimal level of facilitative functioning.

Level 4

The facilitator is frequently helpful in enabling the second person(s) to fully develop in concrete and specific terms almost all instances of concern.

EXAMPLE: The facilitator is able on many occasions to guide the discussion to specific feelings and experiences of personally meaningful material.

In summary, the facilitator is very helpful in enabling the discussion to center around specific and concrete instances of most important and personally relevant feelings and experiences.

Level 5

The facilitator is always helpful in guiding the discussion, so that the second person(s) may discuss fluently, directly and completely specific feelings and experiences.

EXAMPLE: The first person involves the second person in discussion of specific feelings, situations, and events, regardless of their emotional content.

In summary, the facilitator facilitates a direct expression of all personally relevant feelings and experiences in concrete and specific terms.

Examples of Concreteness

The first example is of a general, abstract response that clearly will not help the client to focus upon the specifics of the problem:

CLIENT: I don't know just what the problem is. I don't get along with my parents. It's not that I don't like them, or that they don't like me. But we seem to disagree on so many things. Maybe they're small and unimportant, but . . . I don't know, we never have been close ... there has never, as far as I can remember, been a time when they gave me any spontaneous affection. I just don't know what's wrong.

THERAPIST: It seems that your present situation is really of long standing and goes back to a long series of difficulties in your developmental process.

Compare this with the following concrete response to the same client statement:

THERAPIST: Although you say you don't know what's wrong, and although you say your parents like you, they never seem to have given any specific evidence of love or affection.

REFERENCES

42. Truax, E. B. & Carkhuff, R. R. (1964). Concreteness: A neglected variable in the psychotherapeutic process. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 20, 264-267.
43. Carkhuff, R. R. & Berenson, B. G. (1967). *Beyond counseling and therapy*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. P. 29.
44. Ibid. P. 30.
45. Carkhuff R. R. (1969). *Helping and human relations. Vol. I. Selection and training*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. P. 207.
46. Carkhuff, R. R. (1969). *Helping and human relations. Vol. II. Practice and research*. . New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. Pp. 323-324.