

Aligning with Clients' Sensitivities: Parts Work and Use of Self

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Theoretical Framework

- Internal Family Systems: Richard Schwartz
- Interpersonal/Psychodynamic: Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan, Joseph Weiss (Control-Mastery theory)
- Michael Eigen

“Those who work day in and day out with the intimate lives of people discover fields of experience largely unknown or neglected in ordinary daily life. A hazard of this strangely fulfilling work is becoming increasingly set apart, different, so that normal social intercourse becomes difficult, unsatisfying. A beauty is the sense of contact with mysterious areas of experience that make one feel compellingly close to deeper and truer realities, where emotional meaning holds sway. In truth, someone like me was on the different side to begin with, and finding the consulting room as a way of life, or an important part of it, was a godsend. It enabled me to breathe, to find health, that is, my own way of being healthy” (M. Eigen, p. 80, Emotional Storm).

Defining Sensitivities

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- wounding, trauma, lack of trust, longing, anxiety, needs, child or exiled parts (many people feel embarrassed by it), raw, alive...
- protection, filters, defenses, compensatory strategies, discernment
- antenna, perceptive, intuitive, inner knowing, old soul, artistic/creative, compassion...
- resiliency: striving to heal, resolve, grow, disconfirm pathogenic beliefs, be more authentic and less afraid and less rigid, health impulse, repetition compulsion
- I think of sensitivities encompassing all of this: all parts welcome
- “Turning away from our emotional sensitivity can put in danger our very sense of what it feels like to be alive” (M. Eigen, p. 19, Emotional Storm)

Sensitivities: Etiology and Impact

- Life: birth, early wounding, trauma, invalidation, less than “good enough parenting” and/or life circumstances, oppression, and the impacts of being alive
- No one is immune from “basic anxiety” (Horney) and existential anxiety
- Trauma not only magnifies sensitivities but can damage our filters, our ability to digest the impacts of life
- “Emotional storms” occur at the point of impact where our sensitivities meet reality, especially at the point where one person’s sensitivities meet another’s (including between client and counselor)

“The impact of reality is far greater than our ability to process it. We can’t take too much reality. Our equipment simply is not up to it. If we are lucky, persistent, patient, hungry enough for the real, our equipment grows into the job, building more capacity to work with what is. Nevertheless, we are always behind the impact of moment, at best able to process crumbs broken off from the whole. But those crumbs can be rich indeed!” (M. Eigen, p. 8, *The Sensitive Self*).

Attempts to Filter and Digest Impacts

“We learn that we can adjust our sensitivity, turn it up or down, so as to modulate wounds. Some of us prefer it up high, some turn it down low, with the result that communication between people with different sensitivity levels becomes difficult. Habitual unconscious sensitivity preferences govern who feels real to us and who doesn’t” (M. Eigen, p. 52, Emotional Storm).

- Rhythm of open and closed; engage/vulnerable and protect/avoid/restrict/master
- Life Structures and Processes (some are healthier and more sustainable than others)
 - Relationships
 - Work
 - Activities: exercise, entertainment, creative expression, etc.
 - Counseling and related practices
 - Philosophical/Practical paradigms
 - Religious/spiritual practices
 - Short and long-term goals: focus and discipline
 - Distractions and compulsions/addictions: shopping, affairs, alcohol and drugs, computer/smart phone, etc.
 - Restriction/avoidance: don’t feed sin; rise above the messiness of emotions
 - Expansion/Mastery
 - Beliefs that define us (ego) and make sense of life: big in first ½ of life

“Our culture is phobic about helplessness. Helplessness is bad, associated with being a victim... One should be proactive, fix things, work to make things better, redress injury and wrong, be an active agent of choice and desire. Emphasis on control spins out of control... Mastery is not always the best model when it comes to emotional meaning and transformational chances” (M. Eigen, pgs. 73 & 81, Emotional Storm).

- How do we know if the processes and structures are helping or if we are avoiding our sensitivities?
- Are they helping us digest and increase capacity or are they keeping us closed-off from experience (inner and external)?

How do we help ourselves and our clients? Openness, Protectors, and the Real Self

- Sustainable meaning is a process not an outcome
- Process goal: Increase our capacity to stay open to experience and the exquisiteness of the moment rather than retreat to rigid beliefs and defensive positions: use digestive mechanisms to stay open to as much as we can tolerate; build capacity to tolerate more
- Increase capacity to visit and build relationship with our sensitivities

“There’s a moment of helplessness that stops our breath, a quick shock, before we jump into action. I propose that we do more tasting of that moment, sifting it, letting our faith muscle grow, as building tolerance for the fleeting shock begins to transform us” (M. Eigen, p. 77, Emotional Storm).

- Have “faith” in experience as a teacher.

“Faith is an open attitude that lets things register. It is not the closed faith of a particular religious dogma, ready to do violence to what is outside it. The faith Bion has in mind is part of the need sensitivity has to taste life, to feel impacts and digest them in ways that lead to more life. If taken seriously, one possible result of this kind of faith is increased ability to wait on each other, wait for each other – a sensitivity to emotional smell, spirit, affective attitude, a desire to taste each other and our mutual impacts. Waiting, patience, a certain passivity are important in order to let impacts build and unfold: sensitivity grows around them and they stimulate growth of sensitivity. It is a faith that comes back for more, that keeps opening and opening in the face of trauma waves, that registers impacts and learns to work with them. One may need to pull back from sensitivity for a time, keep things down. But sooner or later sensitivity drives past the manageable, seeks heightened impacts, raw aliveness, fresh air. It needs to taste and shatter and stretch.” (M. Eigen, p. 9-10, *The Sensitive Self*).

- Learn from experience (all of it): Develop “psychic taste buds.”
- Tolerate and learn from sensitivity (all parts welcome): What is it saying?
- “Health impulse” (R. Johnson, 2009 & 2013)
- Counselors need to align with clients’ sensitivities and have “faith” in counseling as a mechanism to help clients process impacts, build resiliency, and increase capacity to be open to experience, including their ability to tolerate and utilize their sensitivities: wounds (exiles), filters/digestion/protectors (managers and firefighters), and wisdom/intuition (Real Self).
- Counselors need to be practicing this type of faith in their own lives.

Therapeutic Relationship

“If a relationship has decent enough elements, it helps us weather difficulties it gives rise to. Often we do not notice that a relationship absorbs feeling states a person alone can’t handle. If things go well enough, we help each other just by being together, even if being together is part of the difficulty” (M. Eigen, p. 94, Emotional Storm).

- Be energetically prepared for client: Head and heart
- Intentional participation in the emotional storm: where the counselor’s sensitivities meet the client’s
- Notice the point of impact for both: Rhythm of open-closed; openness-defense: vulnerability-protect; Do you or client retreat from the intensity of the encounter?
- Use of Self as a therapeutic tool: energetic exchange that matches client’s sensitivities
- “Evenly hovering attention,” “oceanic experience,” mindful presence, open-hearted encounter, I-Thou

Internal Family Systems

- Move from diffuse sense of sensitivities to “unblending” of and visiting parts
- Help clients **connect with “Real Self”**: (Karen Horney; Jung; Schwartz)
 - Natural and grounded Self; Inner wisdom: who we would be under relatively optimal family and life circumstances.
 - Transcendent Self as opposed to ego (story of self; identity markers)
- Characteristics (two general categories):
 - Spiritual/philosophical wisdom/perspective (Wise mind): clarity and courage
 - Open-heartedness and compassion (Unencumbered; freely-given)

- **Engage Protectors** (managers and firefighters): Gatekeepers
 - Validate reasons for protection
 - Unblend from protectors
 - Have Real Self partner with protectors: find effective ways to filter and digest

- **Engage Exiles**

- Partner with client's Real Self to notice and regard (don't rush to fix or console)
- Listen and learn from their voices
- Ask how they feel about your presence
- Promise to visit again, and visit regularly
- Over time, the client's Real Self will partner with the exiles
- Partner with the health impulse.

Experiential Activity (visiting parts; aligning with sensitivities)

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