

The Google Factor: Therapists' Self-Disclosure In The Age Of The Internet

Discover what your clients can find out about you with a click of the mouse

— Ofer Zur

Psychotherapists are accustomed to viewing self-disclosure as something personal they intentionally and verbally reveal to their clients, often not realizing that self-disclosure encompasses a vast deal more. Therapists' self-disclosure can be deliberate, unintentional, or accidental, it can be verbal or non-verbal and, most relevant to this paper, it can be available to the client without the therapist's knowledge or approval. In the Internet era, the concept of disclosure of information about therapists has become even broader and more complex. Search engines, such as Google, and specialized for-fee background checks, have completely changed the way clients can obtain information about their therapists, what kinds of information are available to clients with the click of a mouse and, correspondingly, what therapists may inadvertently disclose online.

At its most basic, a therapist's self-disclosure may be defined as the revelation to the client of personal rather than professional information (Farber, 2006; Zur, 2007). Generally, when therapist disclosure goes beyond the standard professional disclosure of name, credentials, office address, fees, emergency contacts, cancellation policies, etc., it is considered self-disclosure (Stricker & Fisher, 1990). This paper discusses the various kinds of self-disclosure mentioned above, i.e., intentional and unintentional, witting and unwitting. All can be gathered under the umbrella of "therapist self-disclosure", as all disclose information about the "self" of the therapist regardless of how the information came to light. Similar to the issue of what one may call "forced transparency" – for instance, self-disclosure in small communities where therapists' lives are unavoidably quite transparent (Knox, Hess, Petersen, & Hill, 1997, Zur, 2006) - self-disclosure on the Internet creates an equivalent transparency. The only difference is the size of the "actual village" in comparison to the "global village."

Five Types of Self-Disclosure

There are five different types of self-disclosure: deliberate, unavoidable, accidental, inappropriate and client-initiated. Following are brief descriptions of these types, followed by a more detailed description of the last category, i.e. clients' search for information about their therapists.

The first type is deliberate self-disclosure, which refers to therapists' intentional disclosure of personal information. This might be verbal and also could be other deliberate actions, such as placing a certain family photo in the office, the choice of office décor or an empathic gesture, such as a touch or a sigh (Barnett, 1988; Farber, 2006; Zur, 2007). There are two types of deliberate self-disclosure. The first one is self-revealing, which is the disclosure of information by therapists about themselves. The second type has been called self-involving, which has to do with therapists' personal reactions to clients and to occurrences that take place during sessions (Knox, et al., 1997). Appropriate and clinically driven self-disclosures are carried out for the clinical benefit of the clients. Humanistic (Jourard, 1971), feminist (Greenspan, 1985) cognitive and group therapists, and those who work with children and minorities have generally embraced self-disclosure more readily than psychoanalytically oriented therapists (Williams, 1997).

The second type is unavoidable self-disclosure, which includes a wide range of possibilities, such as a therapist's gender, age and distinctive physical attributes, such as pregnancy, visible tattoos, obesity, some forms of disability, etc. (Stricker & Fisher, 1990). Therapists reveal themselves also by their manner of dress, hairstyle, use of make-up, jewelry, perfume or aftershave, facial hair, wedding rings, or the wearing of a cross, Star of David or any other symbol (Barnett, 1998). Non-verbal cues or body language (e.g., a raised eyebrow, a frown) are also sources of self-disclosure that are not always under the therapist's full control. A therapist's announcement of an upcoming vacation, or other time to be spent away from the office, also constitutes unavoidable self-disclosure. The home office setup, when the therapy office is located at the therapist's home, always involves extensive self disclosures, such as economic status, information about the family and pets, sometimes information about hobbies, habits and much more. Therapists who practice in small or rural communities, on remote military bases or aircraft carriers, or those who work in intimate and interconnected spiritual, ethnic, underprivileged, disabled or college communities, must all contend with extensive self-disclosure and significant transparency of their personal lives simply because many aspects are often displayed in clear view of their clients by virtue of the setting. In many of these small community situations, a thera-