Self-Complexity Dialogues

The self-complexity dialogue (Chadwick, 2003) is designed to address core beliefs. The method has two aims: 1). to counter the fixed and global perceptions of the self arising from negative core beliefs, and 2). to identify positive experiences to elaborate positive core beliefs. This intervention is used in both cognitive therapy and schema therapy.

Process of dialogue:

1). The facilitator introduces two chairs which are placed side-by-side: seat A, which represents the individual's negative self-belief, and seat B, which represents an alternative view of the self.

Facilitator: "Let's imagine these seats represent the ways you experience your self [facilitator introduces two chairs]. Please move to the first seat."

2). The facilitator invites the individual to describe their experience of their negative self-belief(s) in seat A, including its social, emotional, and motivational dimensions.

Facilitator: "When this negative core belief is activated in you, how do you experience your self? How do experience other people? How do you view your future? How do you feel? What do you want to do? What other effects does this belief have on you and your life?"

3). The facilitator invites the individual to decentre from their negative core belief by moving to seat B.

Facilitator: "I'd like you to move to the second chair. As you do that, do your best to leave this negative experience of your self in the first chair."

4). The facilitator invites the individual to identify and elaborate positive experiences of the self, no matter how small or fleeting these are.

Facilitator: "Have there ever been any times where you have experienced your self as something other than [negative core belief], even if it was for just a moment?"

5). The facilitator prompts the individual to elaborate their positive self-experience.

Facilitator: "Tell me more about your experience of being [positive core belief] in that moment. How did you see your self? How did you experience the people around you? How did you see your future? How did you feel? What did you want to do?"

6). [Optional]. Using the affective bridge, the individual is asked to identify other memories linked to their emerging positive self-belief.

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> *Facilitator*: "I'd like you to close your eyes and focus on that feeling of being [positive core belief]. As you do that, allow any other memories come to mind in which you experienced your self as [positive core belief].

6). The individual is asked to stand and, from a decentred (witness) I-position, reflect on how both of these experiences of the self are valid and grounded in lived experience.

Facilitation notes:

- It is important that the chairs are placed side-by-side in this dialogue, rather than facing one another. This ensures that horizontal dialogues between the negative self-belief (seat A) and positive self-belief (seat B) do not take place, as the former is likely to overpower any positive experiences of the self.

- It is not unusual for negative experiences of the self to intrude upon the identification and elaboration of the positive self-belief. If this occurs, the facilitator invites the client to 'set aside' this perspective and re-focus their attention on exploring positive experiences of the self (Facilitator: "Try to leave that sense of [negative core belief] in the other chair and gently bring your attention back to other experiences of your self").

- Inviting the client to imagine which individuals would stand behind each chair provides information about the source of negative self-beliefs, as well as individuals and events which support the positive core belief.

- Evidence supporting each self-belief can be written on post-it notes and stuck to each chair. Evidence supporting the negative core belief is then refuted from an objective (i.e. standing witness) I-position and discarded.

Further Reading:

Chadwick, P. (2003). Two chairs, self-schemata and a person based approach to psychosis. *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, *31*, 439-449.

Pugh, M. (2019). *Cognitive behavioural chairwork: Distinctive features*. Oxon, UK: Routledge.

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