

An LBT Session with a Psychoanalyst Client

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Abstract: In this LBT practicum, psychologist Arthur Li helps his psychoanalyst client to discover the synergy between LBT and psychoanalysis in exploring her relationship with her mother.

For my practicum in LBT, I invited a colleague of mine who was my fellow classmate in my doctoral study and is now practicing as a clinical psychologist. I will refer to her here as Jane.

Jane is a Chinese female in her mid-40s, who has a twenty-year-old son. I began the session by explaining what philosophical counselling is and what Logic-based Therapy, in particular, could offer.

Jane then disclosed that she originally wanted to talk about a dream she had recently, but after knowing what LBT is about, she thought of a problem that had concerned her for many years, and for which she had gone through years of psychotherapy with different therapists. Accordingly, she wanted to know if LBT could offer further insights about this problem.

The problem was about Jane’s mother, whom she believed suffered from a personality disorder. She described a poor relationship with her mother, and she claimed that her mother brought great suffering upon her and her younger brother. Jane began to describe what her mother tended to do to ‘control’ her and her younger brother. Jane reported that her mother insisted upon knowing everything about the siblings; she would call or message them multiple times a day, and if they responded ‘carelessly’, then her mother would freak out and ‘make a mess’. On clarifying what she

meant, Jane explained that her mother had a very poor sense of security; for example, if her mother knew Jane had been talking with her younger brother without acknowledging their mother, her mother would keep questioning when they contacted each other, what they talked about behind her back, and so on. During such disclosure, Jane tried to explain her mother's behavior in terms of a theory of psychotherapy such as object relation theory or attachment theory, and Jane believed it was her mother's past experiences that led to her current annoying behaviors, which brought a lot of suffering to Jane and her younger brother. Jane kept on complaining how her mother annoyed her; and she added that she tended to be irritated easily, and would react with volatile emotions. She concluded that her mother had to have a personality disorder to act like this.

With considerable information from Jane's catharsis, I tried to clarify her feelings from these experiences. I reflected what I learned from her narratives, and asked "So it seems you feel annoyed by your mother. Do you mean the presence of your mother annoys you? Or does what she does annoy you?" Jane responded that it was not about her mother as a person, as she could understand the formation of her mother's personality through psychoanalytic theories.

She explained that one thing she cannot stand is when her mother she speaks badly about others. On clarification, Jane explained that her mother always speaks negatively about other people, including herself, and when she hears her mother speaking badly about others, she 'starts up'. I clarified "So when you notice your mother speaking badly about others, you 'start-up'?" It sounds like you are angry with her doing that?" At first, Jane thought for a bit and denied getting angry, but then she paused briefly and admitted that she gets angry. Jane further added that she realizes now that

she gets even angrier when her mother speaks negatively about her, especially when it is about how she acts, and even more so, about how she acts as a mother. I reflected, “You are saying that when your mother personally attacks you, especially in your role as a mother, you get the angriest.” Jane nodded and reported what I said reminded her of her own behavior.

Jane disclosed that when she hears her mother criticize her, she gets so angry that she talks back to her loudly and disparages her. Jane explained that she just wants her mother to stop being annoying, and that she has tried tolerating her mother in hopes that her mother would understand her annoyance; but, after so many years, the only thing Jane can do is to ‘shut her up’ by behaving in such a way. I asked if her behavior toward her mother is something she would like to maintain, as it does not seem to contribute to a healthy relationship between her and her mother; and Jane said she would like to change their interaction if she could, but her mother would not change.

Step 1: Identifying emotional reasoning

From the above dialogues, I attempted to identify Jane’s emotion using the formula, $E = O + R$ [Emotion = Intentional Object + Rating]. Jane’s intentional object was her mother’s behavior, and I tried to clarify Jane’s rating of this object:

Dr. Li: “So when your mother negatively evaluates your performance, you find yourself suffering and think it an awful thing for you.”

Jane: “Yes, it is an awful thing for me.”

Me: “Right, so on a scale of 1 to 10, how awful is that?”

Jane: “It would be an 8, even a 9.”

Dr. Li: “So you are angry when your mother evaluates your performance negatively, especially when she comments on how you should be as a mother, and that’s pretty awful for you.”

Jane: “Yes, and I am at the point that even by knowing my mother is calling me, it triggers my anger, for example, when my phone is vibrating and when I see my mother’s name on the caller ID, I am already angry.”

Dr. Li: “How so?”

Jane: “Although I don’t know what she may say, I can guess she will be disparaging me about whatever I tell her.”

Then I tried to further key into Jane’s emotional reasoning that drove her anger. In addition to how she kept talking about how she becomes furious when her mother criticizes her performance as a mother, I noticed that this anger seemed more generally linked to Jane’s making her own choices. For instance, she recalled a moment in her teenage years when she got home from school after lunch, but her mother believed that she still had to eat. In order to prevent her mother from annoying her, Jane decided to finish the food prepared by her mother that caused her to throw up afterwards. Jane reported thinking that her mother was always critical of her choices; and the only way to stop her mother was through disparagement.

I tried to clarify the nature of Jane’s thinking about her mother’s disapproval. I explained that she might not really be looking for approval in terms of her mother explicitly acknowledging and appreciating her, but rather in terms of feeling accepted and approved when her mother ‘allowed’ her

to stick with her choice without commenting or criticizing. Jane halted and responded “I have never thought about it this way, and it feels so right. I never thought I was looking for her approval, but I feel that I am really doing this.” I further clarified “So when your mother is not agreeing with you by disparaging you, do you think that you are not being accepted or approved, and that this makes you a bad person?” Jane replied “Yes, I always have low self-confidence and feel like I’m not any good; I am better now because I have gone through years of therapy, but when it comes to my mother, I still feel like that.”

At this point, it seemed to me that one of the practical syllogisms behind Jane’s emotional reasoning could be understood in term of O + R:

(Rule) If my mother disagrees / rejects my idea / choice (O) then I must be no good (R).

(Report) My mother criticizes / comments negatively (disagrees and rejects) my ideas / choices (O).

(Conclusion) So I must be no good (R).

Adding Jane’s confirmation about her ‘repressed’ tendency to seek approval from her mother her syllogistic chain looked like this:

(Major Premise Rule 2) If I do not have the approval of my mother then I am no good.

(Bridging Premise) If my mother disagrees / rejects my idea / choices then I do not have the approval of my mother.

(Major Premise Rule 1) So, if my mother disagree / reject my idea / choice (O) then I must be no good (R).

(Minor Premise Report 1) My mother criticizes / comments negatively (disagrees and rejects) my ideas / choices (O).

(Conclusion) So I must be no good (R).

Having reflected back this hypothesized emotional reasoning to Jane, she confirmed that this is her reasoning that drives her anger, which had never occurred to her, even after all these years of therapy and self-reflection. Jane appeared to be inspired by the discovery of such suppressed

practical syllogisms, and she further offered an explanation of how such reasoning came to be, in terms of psychodynamic and behavioral theories (she explained her generalized angry reaction toward her mother's calling through the theory of conditioning).

Trying to redirect Jane's focus back to her emotional reasoning, I empathized and acknowledged how she must feel about her discovery, and I clarified with her whether this was something she would like to work on. I further explained that, while such reasoning appeared to be the primary reasoning underlying her anger, the way she responded towards her mother was also worth examining. Jane was curious about what I meant, and I tried to explain "You talked about your own behavior in response to your mother's 'annoyance', and you would like to change the way you relate to her." Jane nodded. I continued. "And from what I heard, you tried to stop your mother only through overpowering her, as you felt that you could never get her to be empathetic and considerate." Jane agreed and kept listening. "So, it sounds to me that when your mother criticizes you and you feel like you are no good, you have to fight back because you think there is no hope for your mother to be understanding. And you therefore think the only way to fight back is to disparage her or overpower her by talking louder than her or ridiculing her in front of everyone." Jane agreed with a smile "That's right, and now as I think of it, it seems that I am acting just like her. You know, I kept telling myself I must not be a mother who acts like my own mother." Acknowledging her use of 'must' and her perceived image of a mother, I focused back on her behavioral reasoning. Jane's behavioral reasoning seemed to look like this:

(Behavioral Rule) If I'm no good and there's no hope my mother will change, then I should fight back by acting like her— shutting her up by disparaging her or using other overpowering tactics.

(Justification) I'm no good. (That's why she rejects me!) and she'll never change.

(Conclusion) So, I should shut her up by disparaging her or using other overpowering tactics.

Jane agreed on my clarification of her behavioral reasoning upon reflection, and I also noticed that there could be other premises underlying her emotions and behaviors, for example, Jane's hopelessness. But considering the limited time for the practicum session, I felt that more time would be needed to process Jane's emotional premise, and possibly to unearth even more higher-order suppressed premises. For the sake of trying to go through the whole process of LBT, I decided to first focus on her behavioral premise as it seemed to be more manageable for Jane considering this is only a one-time practicum session.

I explained to Jane that the two premises (emotional one and behavioral one) seemed to go along with each other, and her behavioral premise got activated as a defense when her emotional premise was activated by her intentional object and her rating. Jane agreed on my summarization and asked if there was anything she could do. I expressed that while it would be most beneficial to start with her emotional premise, we might only have time to tap on her behavioral premise at this time. Jane agreed and expressed that she would also like to know how she could better relate to her mother without being so reactive and explosive.

Step 2: Check for fallacies in the premises

Focusing on Jane's series of syllogism behind her behavioral reactions towards her mother, I discussed with Jane whether the above Behavioral Rule made practical sense. I explained that it seemed like Jane was responding to her mother in a black-or-white manner where she could only either hope for acceptance or fight back, and the way of fighting back was through even more forceful manipulation towards her mother. So, Jane was oversimplifying her choices in response to the perceived deeds of her mother, and she was trying to achieve what she wanted from her mother (to stop annoying her) through manipulation.

Other than these two fallacies, Jane appeared to be demanding approval from her mother, which, again, appeared to be the core, higher-order premise worth exploring.

Step 3: Refute any fallacy

Having gone through the possible fallacies with Jane, she could easily grasp the idea of such fallacies when she tried to relate them in Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT) terms, and she offered a refutation of her tendency to manipulate her mother with her own self-expectation. Jane mentioned that she did not want to become like her mother, but when she perceived her mother as being manipulative and coercive, she also noticed herself behaving in similar ways when I pointed it out; so Jane immediately understood how illogical it was for her to contradict her own goal.

In response to her oversimplification about how to address her mother's 'annoyance', Jane argued that she really tried to be patient and wait for her mother's 'awakening' to be more accepting, but there was just no hope for that. So, I raised the question:

Dr. Li: “You went through years of therapy to try to have a better understanding of your anger towards your mother, and you expect your mother would ‘awake’ just by being patient and waiting?”

Jane: “I see what you are trying to say, but I really do not know how to give her the message; I tried but she just could not understand.”

Dr. Li: “Well, maybe she could not understand, but from what I see, you are limiting yourself either by being extremely passive (waiting for acceptance), or by being overly aggressive (coercive manipulation). Are there other ways of doing this?”

Jane: “I suppose there are, but what more can I do or how much less can I do? I really do not know how to relate to my mother.”

Step 4: Identify the guiding virtue for each fallacy

Dr. Li: “So instead of limiting yourself with only two options, we can try to see things not in all-or-nothing terms. I believe there are other possibilities to relate to your mother that allow you to be less passive or aggressive.

Jane: “Well that reminds me of a friend of mine who also had a poor relationship with her mother, and she told me she just disregards her mother’s criticisms and talks about other things.”

Dr. Li: “Okay, that’s a start; so you will not hope for full acceptance, but just allow her to criticize you without taking it personally. And that is part of looking for a mean between two extremes.”

Jane: “Well, yes, and I think of how my son is able to distract my mother when she begins

to criticize others without being too reactive, and my mother also appears to be okay after being distracted.

Dr. Li: “Right, so that is another possibility between the two extremes.”

Jane: “Yes, but I really do not know how to start.”

Step 5: Find a philosophy for the guiding virtue

With my understanding of Jane’s background, I knew that she has always been interested in Buddhism. So, I reminded her about Buddhism and asked her how the teachings in Buddhism could help on this. Jane said she was not really familiar with Buddhism, but she said “You suddenly reminded me something I read on Buddhism, which asked me to see suffering as a chance of learning.” I appreciated her sharing and asked what she could learn from this situation. Jane paused and responded “I suddenly think of learning more about being a mother and a daughter.” When asked to clarify, she continued “I feel like I may have grasped the role of a ‘mother’ and a ‘daughter’ in a restricted manner, and I feel that I have limited myself with such cultural concepts.” At this moment I thought Jane’s insights seemed more related to her Rule 1, and I sensed that there could be other premises behind such ideas. While congratulating her on her insight, I redirected her back to how she could respond in a less extreme manner towards her mother.

I brought up the general idea of Buddhism that we should try to generate good Karma through our actions, and one way of doing that was to act according to the Eightfold Path, to perceive and to act appropriately, for example. Jane responded that she should be able to do that and at the same time to learn something more about being a mother and a daughter.

Step 6: Apply the philosophy

I agreed with Jane and explored what exactly she could do. Jane gladly responded that she could observe more about how her son relates to her mother. She believed she could learn something from her son on this matter, and she admitted that she never bothered to understand how they interact before. So, she planned to observe and learn how her son relates to her mother in a less extreme way. I appreciated her insight on applying her understanding of Buddhism along with the idea to observe appropriately without intentionally ignoring the possible alternative ways to interpersonally interact with her mother.

I also suggested that she examine her reaction when she received her mother's calls. I suggested that she remind herself about her overreaction when her mother called, and to pick up the call when she was more able to regulate her emotions instead of picking it up right away and react explosively. Jane expressed that she could try it next time.

What I learned from this experience

I have several reflections about this experience. First, it is really difficult to conduct a counselling session with a counselling professional! With Jane's expertise in the psychodynamic approaches, she kept having insights from the psychodynamic perspectives. While it was encouraging that she was inspired by the session, she kept discussing her issues in terms of the psychodynamic approach, and her sudden bursts of insight led to a lot of information that required organization, clarification, and summarization to better capture her reasoning behind all the shared information. With my insufficiently internalized knowledge of LBT, I found myself sometimes

searching for how LBT could be applied to Jane's narratives, which led to more clarification, and ending up with spending most of the session time exploring Jane's subjective experiences. This, in turn, led to my reflection that I was too rushed. Part of the reason was my intention to 'test out' the whole process of LBT in going through all the steps in just one session; so the session could have turned out much differently if I stuck to the flow of Jane's consciousness, which I will talk more about in the next part.

I also found that psychological and philosophical counselling may not be that distinctive in practice. I found myself weaving in some psychological perspectives along with identifying and examining Jane's practical syllogisms; and, like Jane, I was able to offer alternative insights even if she had gone through years of therapy.

One shortcoming I could see in this experience is my insufficient ability in conducting logical analysis. First, probably due to lack of proper training in logic or philosophy, I had difficulty in clearly laying out the practical syllogisms in session, which again, led to spending a lot of time helping Jane make sense of her faulty reasoning. And, second, when I was writing this paper, while I was able to grasp Jane's reasoning in the abstract, it was challenging to formally express them.

What, if anything, I would do differently next time

If I had to do this session again, I would not have relied solely on Jane's behavioral reasoning and then rushed through the six steps in the session (which ended up taking 2 hours from start to finish). I would have instead stuck to Jane's flow of consciousness that revolved around her emotional reasoning, especially her demand for approval, which seemed to interest Jane most. This

emphasis would have allowed deeper exploration and discussion. Refutation of such higher order premises might have led to the client's better self-understanding; or application of philosophical antidotes that proved more effective in enhancing the client's well-being.

What, if anything, did the client learn?

The feedback from Jane was promising. She was amazed by the insight she could get from a single session of LBT, which offered her a perspective that she had never considered before, namely, her tendency to demand approval from her mother. The application of philosophical theory also helped Jane to guide her future behavior. While Jane already believed that Buddhism could be helpful, she had no idea how to apply such knowledge to her own case in a helpful way.

This highlights the benefits of LBT as a philosophical approach. Speaking from a psychological perspective, LBT is, in a sense, atheoretical (although it obviously resembles REBT), but because of its emphasis on reasoning instead of causation, it can be integrated into other psychological approaches without much conflict. Based on this experience, I believe that LBT could work with a psychodynamic approach inasmuch as the examination of practical syllogisms can help to uncover some 'repressed' materials through the discovery of *suppressed* reasoning.¹

¹ For extended discussion of this claim, see Elliot D. Cohen, "The Psychoanalysis of Perfectionism: Integrating Freud's Psychodynamic Theory into Logic-Based Therapy" in this issue of IJPP [Editor's Note].