

A Critical Reflection of a Skills Recording

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This essay will be a critical reflection of a skills recording taken on 27/11/2023 at 19:45 UTC in secure channel 'Skills Group 2'. For the purposes of this piece of work I will be referring to myself in first person and the person I am working with as the 'client'.

Throughout this essay I aim to explore and critically reflect upon my own foundational counselling skills, my process during a skills session, and evaluate my skills in practice. This will be achieved by focusing on different areas that are both present and lacking to me upon review of the skills session. Bringing focus on to foundational areas such as contracting, active listening skills, questioning, my ability to be empathetic and work with the core conditions, my ethical considerations and how I was able to bring a close to the session in a timely manner before bringing the essay itself to a close with an evaluation and conclusion.

The initial stage of sessions, especially in the first session, can be best utilised to begin what is known as contracting. Contracting is the stage in which both parties come to an agreement of commitment and boundaries in order to establish a working relationship within the correct scope to ensure the appropriate conditions for therapy to take place (Sills, 2006). This will be important when looking to establish a shared goal to work toward together. Some key elements that should be present when contracting to ensure a strong phase include 'boundaries' (looking at all relevant applications of the word from personal boundaries of contact, outside interactions when not in a therapeutic/private setting, to sessional boundaries such as time boundaries and the capabilities/limitations of the therapist and methodology), 'confidentiality' (it should be clearly defined what limits there are to confidentiality from the very start and what the therapist can and cannot keep confidential), 'cultural expectations and diversity', and 'ethical issues and guidelines' (Midwinter & Dickson, 2015). In my recording, this stage can be seen in the first 1 minute and 40 seconds. Some of the key

elements can be seen present in my own display of contracting, where, after welcoming the client, I begin to explain the main confidentiality limitations with that session, highlighting the observer in the room, the need for the session to be recorded and why, before asking if the client gives consent for us to proceed within these limitations. However, there are some missing elements to my contracting here that could be very crucial when working ethically. I failed to include how the video will be securely stored and accessed which I see as an important detail that a client should be informed of when giving consent. Despite this exclusion, the contracting continued into another key element of contracting, where I look to establish an understanding of general limitations to confidentiality, leading into the establishment of boundaries of the timing of that session and what would the client desire an interaction to be like, should we cross paths outside of the private setting, ensuring the client is allowed to answer the question as they please with no input from me to lead their answer through suggestion or expectation. Of the key elements, an explicit statement of the ethical that I would be required to follow are missing, this is an important element that could help build trust and would make it clear to the client that I am working within good practice frameworks and should they have any concerns of my conduct, they are able to check with the framework to see if my behaviour or conduct is not inline with guidelines. Another missed opportunity for a better contracting phase was the exclusion of a question to understand and establish and cultural differences that we should both be aware of in order for a proper working relationship to be established and adhered to. Baourda and Lakioti (2020) state that the contracting phase is not merely just for introductions, but a preview of the process in which the therapist will conduct themselves, their sessions, and what the expectations are of the client. This being a pivotal area so early on, it is clear to me to see where I can get better, ensuring that all bases are covered for a better understanding between the client and myself of not just what is expected of them, but also of me. That being said, I

feel as though I did a good job of establishing the limitations to confidentiality, setting good boundaries early and allowing the client to relax into the session with some empathetic check ins and wording some statements in a way that I feel reassured the client that we were there to work on what they would like to.

Establishing a working relationship takes more than just a short period of contracting and as alluded to in the latter stages of the preceding paragraph, there are other elements that form and progress the therapeutic relationship. Building a rapport and setting the climate are equally important in these initial stages of development (Midwinter & Dickson, 2015). A factor that is not just prevalent at the beginning but will constantly be important throughout is the foundational ability to actively listen. Egan (2014) introduces a framework for active listening that outlines physical gestures of actions under the acronym 'SOLER'. This stands for sitting 'Squarely' to face the client, having an 'Open' posture, 'Leaning' toward the other person to show interest when appropriate and possible, maintaining good levels of 'Eye contact' throughout, and being natural and 'Relaxed' in demeanour. Outside of some nervous fumbling with my thumbs, I feel I adhered very well to principles in SOLER to establish the visual and physical aspect of active listening. A relaxed posture and good levels of eye contact are maintained throughout in seating set up for me to face squarely and openly. There is a lack of leaning but this was due to my decision that to fit both people into frame, the seating needed to be a little closer than normal, therefore it could become uncomfortable for either of us to sit forward or lean. Utilising these details in unison allows me to appear engaged in what the client is saying through non-verbal communication alone and that gives the space for the client to talk freely without interruption whilst still feeling listened to.

Further aspects of active listening can also be found when I do engage with verbal communication also. When the relationship is developing and the session is truly underway,

verbal skills come in to play in the form of paraphrasing, reflecting, and summarising. These skills would allow me to contextualise, clarify, identify feelings, and further in the session, challenge and bring immediacy to the dialogue (Midwinter & Dickson, 2015). I feel these are skills that I exhibit well within my skills recording, I frequently use reflections and paraphrasing to make sure I am understanding what the client has said correctly whilst displaying that I am actively listening, taking interest in, and thinking about what the client has said. These also help me form the basis of my questioning which will be addressed later in this essay. At 3:35 into the recording, I begin my first summarisation of the initial dialogue from the client, outlining the main reason for wanting to talk to me on that day, identifying the core feelings, putting together the pieces to form a clearer picture in my mind and showing the client that I have understood what was said before using that to form my follow up question. Another example I feel really shows my ability to naturally mix in reflections and summarising within the dialogue is shown at 11:33 in the recording, where after being asked about a perfect world scenario, I used their answer to align with previous themes and feelings that have been present in the session thus far and asked if we could then explore deeper into those feelings. This, however, does highlight one of my self-critiques about the way I utilise these techniques, throughout the video, I am very often always following up a reflection or summarisation with a question, not allowing the dialogue to be tracked as well as it could be, but this will be covered in depth when I look specifically at my use of questions within this recording. These techniques may not always be detracted from when combined with other foundational skills, which can be shown as an example at 13:16 where following a reflective moment, I ask if the client is comfortable having a moment to be silent and to think over what was just said about their feelings and the fast pace of the start we have made so far. Levitt (2001) identifies not only the importance that utilising silences in a therapeutic setting has, but the different kinds of silences that may be utilised, following up

with some guidelines for practice that suggest a good follow up can be to check in afterwards on how the client is feeling following the pause and the time to dwell on their feelings.

Although my pause may have come across to me as having an awkward undertone to it in the moment, it allowed me to utilise reflection to a greater state, slow the pace down for a small break for both of us and then bring a feeling of the present moment into the session. The awkward undertone could have possibly been prevented had I established perhaps a time limit to it or stating that the client should break it when they feel ready to get back on with the dialogue. Perhaps the best example of how I use a reflection in this recording comes at 16:15, repeating back a feeling that was stated before checking in again to see how that reflection feels for the client. Reflections and paraphrasing can also be utilised as a way of reassuring or offering some positive regard to the client, which I believe is something I display very well at 17:07, where I repeat back what I was just told in a positive light to offer a small amount opposition to the way the client had presented the information to me, bring phenomenological noticing into my displayed skillset. As a whole, I feel this skill recording really displays a very solid foundation that I have developed when utilising skills that progress the therapeutic relationship. Although some level of continual practice is needed, as a core skill, this feels to me like one of my most well rounded at present.

The use of open and closed questions, leading and non-leading questions all have a use in their own right. As was previously mentioned, I tend to follow up a lot of summarisations and reflections with a question. Not each question is used the same way, however. Throughout the skills recording I follow up on my active listening skill by selecting choice words used by the client in order to provoke deeper thought and explanation of the themes represented by those words. This is evident from the very first exchange where following a summarisation, I follow with an exploratory question. The overuse of questions

may be to my detriment at times though, overstimulating the client with questions and not allowing them time to hear the reflections and summaries and think on it in their own time. Williams (2023) states that this is a common theme among trainee/novice therapists, who tend to begin with asking a lot of questions. Despite my use of many questions, I feel somewhat justified in my approach which is supported by Williams (2023), who suggests the clinical implications of their research should see more questions used when the client is reluctant to or not able to get their feelings across in order to explore them. This is encouraged to be done through the use of exploratory questions and open questions that give the client the time and space to truly contemplate what has been said, how they feel and what they would like to share from there on out. Questioning can even lead into the use of other skills as I mentioned before, but also when introducing things like metaphorical questioning and imagery. Malkomsen et al. (2021) explore the use of metaphor in therapy and concluded that it can be a valuable way for a therapist to allow a client to communicate nuances in their thoughts and feelings that they may not be able to otherwise. An example of this can be seen in the video when following a role reversal question at 9:55, I ask if I were able to gift a magic wand to the client in order to achieve a perfect world scenario at 10:26. Further use of the metaphor can be seen later in the recording at 20:25 where I begin to question if there is a visual in the clients mind that is present when discussing these feelings with me. As a skill, I believe I am still a little over reliant on the use of questions as Williams (2023) suggests in their research is common for trainees, but given the nature of how the discussion flowed, I feel I utilised questions to the best of my abilities, offering variance and keeping the questions open where possible to allow for exploration. Even using metaphorical questioning to elicit a deeper process into how the client was feeling and to give opportunity for a different method of expression.

A person-centred approach is typically underpinned by three core conditions. Kirschenbaum and Jourdan (2005) look at the prevalence of these core conditions in the 2000's, many years after their introduction and found that all three of Empathy, Unconditional Positive Regard, and Congruence are still as important to the delivery of person-centred therapy. I believe I manage to exhibit all these throughout the session, showing empathy and positive regard, for example 17:07, I offer some empathetic reassurance after previously stating that we are there for the client to have the space to talk about what they desire (as can be seen in my contracting phase). Congruence can be something up to interpretation by both the client and me, however, I feel I was able to be genuine and present and I feel the results over the course of the session could suggest the client felt comfortable enough with me that this was also the case for them, that would however, just be a projection. In general, this is one of the more difficult areas for me to evidence as it involves a lot of subjectivity and may not be present in an obvious way, but I really feel I was able to provide empathy and stick to these underpinning conditions.

Another framework that should underpin every approach is the ethical framework that informs all that we do. Providing empathy, being respectful, working with integrity are just a few of the ethical principles present in the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions (2018). I believe that although I was not directly challenged with any ethical issue, I did my very best to adhere to this framework throughout the session and I believe the best example of this comes at 25:12 within the recording where I encourage the client to only share what they feel comfortable sharing with me having previously stated they were a private person. This is also presented well at the end of my conclusion when thanking the client for trusting in me to share what they have. One mishap that could be critiqued in the omission of disclosure over

how the video will be stored when gaining consent for the session to be recorded. Overall, another difficult area to directly evidence but I truly feel I was able to work well within the framework given there were no ethical dilemmas present throughout.

In my initial paragraphs, I introduce the idea of setting boundaries as an important part of the contracting phase, time being one of the main elements to that. At 27:44 I respect the time boundaries of this 30-minute session by highlighting how long we have left before drawing a close to the session with a conclusion phase. During this phase I provide a clear summary of the session's main points, its themes, preview what may be possible to discuss in future sessions should the client wish to do so, ask if they feel something important was missed during my recap before checking in with the client to see how they are feeling and thanking them for their participation. As an end to this session, I think I provided a very comprehensive close out with active listening skills, empathy, good boundaries and some unconditional positive regard being displayed.

As sessions come to an end, so must this essay, and before concluding fully, I would like to offer an overall evaluation of how the session went for me. Despite a fast pace being set from the off and a few unclear or complex questions being asked, I was really able to display a wide array of foundational skills and a clear process. I feel the client opened up well and appeared comfortable throughout. To aid with the pacing, some more breaks could be introduced to halt the fast talking of both the client and me.

To round out this essay, I would like to bring back to frame the initial focus in the main body, looking at the importance of the contracting phase, drawing on literature by Baourda and Lakioti (2020) and Midwinter and Dickson (2015). I identified areas both present and not in my own skills recording, such as confidentiality and setting boundaries. The essay then focused on my display of active listening skills, looking at a variety of utilised

skills such as, paraphrasing, reflecting, and Egan's (2014) 'SOLER' framework. I even began to explore how silences can be utilised to emphasise the impact of these other skills with supporting research from Levitt (2001). I also identified an area I need to improve on, with too many of these previous skills being followed by a question, sometimes having the possibility to detract from the skill. Delving into my use of questions I looked at research from Malkomsen et al. (2021) and Williams (2023) to highlight how my use of questions and metaphorical questioning actually became a beneficial tool for me to expand on the client's thoughts and feelings. I was then able to briefly look at some of the underpinning frameworks with Kirschenbaum and Jourdan (2005) providing research on a more modern application of the core conditions that inform person-centred therapy and the BABCP Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions (2018), informing how all therapy should be delivered with ethical integrity. This allowed me to identify possible areas that show how I was able to adhere to and use these frameworks in my skills session. Drawing the session to a close, I explored how I was able to close the session out and give my opinion on the skills I believe I was able to showcase before giving an overall evaluation on the session as a whole, which I feel went very well.

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