The self-confrontation method: Theory, research, and practical utility

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Abstract
In recent years, the Self Confrontation Method has garnered significant attention as both a method of assessment and change in counseling. In this paper, the authors provide a review of the utility of the Self Confrontation Method as a practical tool for counselors. Toward this end, the conceptual and empirical foundations of the Self Confrontation Method are first examined followed by a focus on its practical application to counseling. Consistent with narrative and constructivist approaches to counseling, the Self Confrontation Method represents a viable procedure for contextualizing client problems, assessing the unique organization of client self-schemas and emotional patterning, and facilitating progressive client change and development.

Keywords: Self confrontation method, counseling, client change and development

Introduction
Paralleling the growth of narrative and constructivist themes in counseling and development (Mahoney, 2004; Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995; Sexton & Griffin, 1997; Steenberger, 1991), increasing attention has been paid to the assessment of clients’ personal construct systems and meanings (Carlsen, 1988; Mahoney & Lyddon, 1988; Neimeyer & Stewart, 2000). Constructivist approaches to assessment are based on the assumption that humans: (a) actively construe meaning about the world in which they live, and (b) are continuously developing and changing (Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1993). As a result, constructivist approaches to assessment often differ from standard approaches in a number of ways, including their intended effect, target of assessment, temporal orientation,
level of analysis, format, and criteria for adequacy (Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1993). For example, when compared to standard approaches, constructivist approaches are conceptualized as change generating (rather than neutral or non-“reactive”), focus on clients’ construct systems and personal narratives (as opposed to isolated thought units, self-statements, and beliefs), and often emphasize idiographic (rather than nomothetic) procedures in the context of an interactive interview (rather than utilizing self-administered questionnaires). In addition to employing standard quantitative psychometric criteria for adequacy, many constructivist assessment approaches are grounded in a hermeneutic orientation with an emphasis on the qualitative, linguistic, and dialogical features of clients’ narratives (Hoshmand, 1989; Taylor, 1990).

Lyddon and Alford (1993) pointed out that one central theme for constructivist counselors is the manner in which a client constructs or makes sense of his or her relational and developmental history. Consistent with their observation, many constructivist assessment strategies incorporate a developmental focus. Some of the more structured among these seek to: (a) identify core developmental issues or identity constructs, (b) reconcile conflicting meanings or behaviors, (c) follow implicational chains associated with distressing life events, and (d) illuminate networks of personal meanings and interpersonal relationships (Neimeyer, 1993). Other more open-ended methods aim to measure the process of construing over time by analyzing client written materials, stories, and narratives over the course of counseling. Because of their developmental and temporal focus, many constructivist assessment strategies are fundamentally linked to narrative theory and counseling (Neimeyer, 1993).

Narrative theory

The emergence of the “narrative turn” (Angus & McLeod, 2004) in psychology, philosophy, and the social sciences during the past decade reflects a growing trend of viewing the self in terms of an evolving story or narrative (Bruner, 1990, 2004; Lyddon & Alford, 2001; Polkinghorne, 2004). With a focus on language, internal dialogues, and the personally interpreted meanings that people attribute to the events in their lives, narrative thinking has also become an important feature of constructivist psychology and counseling (Lyddon, 1995; Neimeyer & Stewart, 2000). As Neimeyer (1999) pointed out, constructivist counselors tend to prefer interventions involving exploration of personal narratives and family constructs, promotion of meaning-making and personal development, and attention to core organizing themes and processes of the self.

Narrative approaches to counseling also attempt to situate the individual within his or her life contexts and offer the client a means for assimilating experiences, both positive and negative, into his or her core constructs. Narrative counselors also focus on how various components of a client’s narrative (i.e., personal experiences, cultural influences, and socially shared practices) combine to create a sense of self (Bamberg, 1997). Researchers have suggested that personal narratives can often be distinguished by their dominant themes such as the degree
to which there is an emphasis on: (a) self-enhancement and self-affirmation, and (b) contact and union with others (Hermans, 1988; Hermans & Van Gilst, 1991).

One of the most important functions of narratives is the organizing role they play in human experience. For example, it has been suggested that personal narratives and stories help one construct a coherent sense of self over time as well as frame future life directions and aspirations (Neimeyer, 1999). Personal narratives may also aid the assimilation of chaotic, problematic experiences into self schemas, which can lead to significant health benefits (Goncalves & Machado, 1999; Stiles, Honos-Webb, & Lani, 1999). For example, research using a writing paradigm intervention suggests that the best health outcomes result when an individual’s narrative demonstrates greater coherence and structure, greater complexity, and increased meaning creation (Angus, Levitt, & Hardtke, 1999; Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Pennebaker, 1993, 1995; Russell & Wandrei, 1996).

Discussion of narrative theory would be incomplete without reference to the role of emotion in: (a) persons’ narratives and stories, and (b) the change process in counseling. A number of writers have underscored the crucial role that affect plays in the organization of persons’ self narratives (Angus, Lewin, Bouffard, & Rotondi-Trevisan, 2004; Greenberg & Angus, 2004) as well as the way in which persons are inclined to select and process experiences that have either a positive or negative affective quality (Hermans, 1999). Similarly, in counseling, emotional experience, emotional expression and emotional exploration are often important precursors to client self reorganization (Greenberg & Saffran, 1987). In this context emotionally focused interventions function to help clients access and restructure core maladaptive emotion schemes (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997). With its emphasis on the affective dimensions of clients’ narratives, the Self-Confrontation Method provides counselors with a unique strategy for assessment and change in counseling (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995).

**Valuation theory and the self confrontation method**

The Self-Confrontation Method is a means of self-investigation rooted in Valuation Theory (Hermans, 1999). Influenced by the works of James (1890) and Merleau-Ponty (1945,1962) as well as by the contemporary narrative perspectives of Bruner (1986) and Sarbin (1986), Hermans developed Valuation Theory as a framework for the study of personal experience, its organization into a narrative structure, and its temporal unfolding over time (Hermans, 1987, 1988, 1989). Within Valuation Theory the self is viewed as an “organized process of valuation” (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995, p. 14). The organizational feature of Valuation Theory emphasizes the unique way each person orders life experience into a meaningful and coherent self narrative. The process feature draws attention to the temporal and historical qualities of personal experience – that is, although people live in the present, they may orient to the past and the future from the unique position they occupy in the present (which is always changing).
Also central to Valuation Theory is the concept of *valuation* (Hermans, 1987, 1999; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995; Hermans & Oles, 1996). A valuation is anything a person views as significant when telling his/her life story. Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (1995) state, a valuation is “any unit of meaning that has a positive (pleasant), negative (unpleasant), or ambivalent (both pleasant and unpleasant) value in the eyes of the individual” (p. 248). Valuations can originate from a dear memory, a personal problem, a significant intimate relationship, an unattained goal, significant loss, and so forth. It is important to note that the construction of a valuation is not only a cognitive process but also an emotional one. Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (1995) note that each valuation implies a specific pattern of affect – when people value an experience, they always feel something in regard to that experience. The Self Confrontation Method was developed as a means to assess a person’s valuations at a particular point in time and to determine how those valuations relate to one’s feelings about one’s self and others and to the general dimensions of positive and negative affect.

**Self confrontation method administration and procedures**

There are three general phases associated with the administration of the Self Confrontation Method: (a) valuation elicitation, (b) affective rating, and (c) and evaluation and integration. The initial phase involves the counselor asking the client to produce valuations related to the client’s past, present, and future. The valuations are elicited by way of three sets of stimulus questions (see Table I). Each set of questions is read aloud to the client and is designed to elicit a brief narrative consisting of significant valuations related to the client’s past, present, and future. Most often the counselor will need to work with the client by reflecting and clarifying the client’s responses in order to produce a sentence that captures concisely a particular valuation. When client and counselor agree on the exact wording of the valuation, it is written down. Sample valuations are provided in Table II. When the valuation process is completed for the past, the counselor moves on to elicit valuations for the present and then the future.

In the second phase of the Self Confrontation Method administration a standard set of 16 affect terms is provided to the client (see Table III). [It is important to note that sets with a larger number of affect terms are used when the affective domain is explored in more detail (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995).] Using these affective terms, the client is asked to rate the extent he or she experiences each feeling in relation to each valuation using a 6 point scale (0 = not at all and 5 = very much). The 16 affect terms reflect four basic indices, each associated with four affective terms (see Table III):

1. Index S is the sum of the rating scores of the four affect terms relating to self-enhancement (self-esteem, strength, self-confidence, and pride).
2. Index O is the sum of the rating scores of the four affect terms that signify contact or union with others (caring, love, tenderness, and intimacy).
Table I. Stimulus questions for valuation elicitation: Past, present, and future.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introductory statement</th>
<th>Stimulus questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Past</strong></td>
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</table>
| These questions are intended to guide you in reviewing one or more aspects of your past life that may have been of great importance to you. | 1. Has there been anything of major significance in your past life that still continues to exert a strong influence on you?  
2. Was there in the past any person, experience, or circumstance that greatly influenced your life and that appreciably affects your present existence? |
| **Present**            |                    |
| This set consists of two questions referring to your present life that will lead you, after a certain amount of reflection, to formulate a response. | 1. Is there anything in your present existence that is of major importance to you or exerts a significant influence on you?  
2. Is there in your present existence any person or circumstance that exerts a significant influence on you? |
| **Future**             |                    |
| The following questions referring to your future should again guide you to a response. You are free to look as far ahead as you wish. | 1. Do you foresee anything that will be of great importance for or exert a major influence on your future life?  
2. Do you feel that a certain person or circumstance will exert a significant influence on your future life?  
3. Is there any future goal of object that you expect will play an important role in your life? |

Table II. Sample valuations for the past, present, and future.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Future</th>
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</table>
| 1. After my father died, I raised my little sister who frequently discussed her personal problems with me and asked for advice.  
2. My job as a university staff supervisor helped me discover how competent I could be in difficult and stressful situations.  
3. When I was 20 years old, the death of my best friend served as a wake-up call to live my life fully each day. | 1. My father is in the hospital again (for cancer), and I feel like I should put my life on hold and go see him, even though I just saw him a month ago.  
2. I’m embarrassed that my brother always seems to get into debt and does not manage his money well.  
3. The demands of keeping up a home and two cars overwhelm me right now. | 1. Traveling through China has been a dream of mine since I was young, and I hope to have the means to make it happen.  
2. I don’t want to worry so much about my health that I don’t take any risks for the rest of my adult life.  
3. I want to write a great piece of literature. |
Note: the S-O difference can be determined for each valuation (S > O, S < O, or S = O).

(3) Index P is the sum of the four positive affect terms (joy, happiness, enjoyment, and trust).

(4) Index N is the sum of the four negative affect terms (worry, unhappiness, despondency, and disappointment). Note: The P-N difference can be determined for each valuation indicating the well-being the subject experiences in relation to each valuation. Well-being is believed to be positive when P > N, negative when P < N, and ambivalent when P = N.

Two additional indices – a general feeling index and an ideal feeling index – may also be derived. To derive the general feeling index, the participant is asked to use the 16 affect terms (and the 6 point scale) to evaluate his/her response to the question: “How do you generally feel these days?” The extent of generalization of any particular valuation with the system (Generalization Index) is found by computing the product-moment correlation between the pattern of affect belonging to that valuation with the pattern of affect representing how the person generally feels. The more positive the correlation, the more that particular valuation is believed to generalize within the system. To measure the extent of idealization of any particular valuation (Idealization Index), the same procedure is followed above but in response to the question, “How would you like to feel?”

In terms of the evaluation and integration phase of the Self Confrontation Method Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (1995) provide instruction for generating a variety of matrices and indices that allow for a summary review of the self investigation and for relaying the results to the client. The most basic matrix involves listing each valuation with corresponding numerical totals for S, O, P, and N indices and the use of comparison ratios (see above). For example, the inclusion of both a P and N index allows the client to associate both positive and negative feelings with a person or event in his or her life, understand the ambivalence surrounding a certain events, and potentially work more directly with this conflict in the context of counseling (Lyddon & Alford, 2001).

The matrix of indices of the Self Confrontation Method is believed to represent a composite of a person’s system of valuations and provide the client and counselor with a kind of gestalt for how they contribute to the client’s temporally

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table III. Affective terms used to rate valuations.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Joy (P)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Self-esteem (S)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Happiness (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Worry (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Strength (S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Enjoyment (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Caring (O)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Love (O)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: S, self-enhancement; O, desire for contact with others; P, positive affect; and N, negative affect.
unfolding life narrative. A sample set of hypothetical valuations with corresponding numerical values for each index is provided in Table IV. Although the valuations are temporally ordered, the matrix of valuations also may provide the counselor and client with: (a) a means of assessing change in valuations across time over multiple administrations, (b) insight into the dominance of certain motives (self enhancement, contact with others, positive affect, or negative affect) within particular time periods, and (c) information about the generalization of particular indices across past, present, and future time dimensions.

If a second self-investigation is performed after a period of time, a client and counselor can look for changes in the system of valuations over time as new experiences are assimilated and old ones are reorganized. A variation on the re-administration of the Self Confrontation Method – that does not involve the elicitation of new valuations – invites the client to re-evaluate the valuations generated during a previous administration. Significant changes in the S, O, P, or N indices associated with a particular valuation suggests changes in the meaning of that valuation for the client. In recent years an important variation of the Self-Confrontation Method involves clients performing self-investigations from a variety of “internal” and “external” self positions that exemplify a particular dialogical interchanges, conflicts, or struggles (see Hermans, this issue). In sum, when used in the context of counseling, the Self Confrontation Method provides the counselor and client with a window into the current configuration of the client’s system of valuations – that is, the composite of significant and meaningful aspects of their life narratives which are continually reorganized to accommodate the flow of positive and negative life events (Hermans, 1987, 1989, 1999; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). Occasionally, traumatic life events, such as loss of a loved one, are not well integrated into the client’s valuation system (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995;

Table IV. Past, present, and future valuations and affective indices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valuation theme</th>
<th>Self (S)</th>
<th>Other (O)</th>
<th>Positive (P)</th>
<th>Negative (N)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Past</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Responsibility for young sister</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Job as staff supervisor</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Death of best friend</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Present</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Father in hospital</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Brother’s financial problems</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Maintaining home and cars</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Future</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Traveling to China</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Personal health</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Write a work of literature</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>25</td>
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</table>
Hermans & Oles, 1996). Through the strategic use of the Self Confrontation Method in counseling, the counselor may help the client better integrate the event into the fabric of his/her life narrative.

It is important to note that Dale and Wagner (2003) have developed a version of the Self Confrontation Method that can be used with children between the ages of 9 and 12. The revised Self Confrontation Method for Children consists of two primary modifications. The first involved making changes to 11 of the 16 affect terms in order to make them more developmentally appropriate for children. The second modification involved a change in the format used for rating the valuations. To make the rating method more developmentally appropriate for children, Dale and Wagner adopted Harter’s (1982) “structure alternative format”. In this method the rating for each valuation is derived from the child’s answer to two forced-choice questions. First, the child is asked to select one of two responses related to each feeling term. For example, for the feeling, “happy,” the child must decide whether he/she feels either “happy” or “not so happy” based on which is most descriptive of him or her. Second, the child is asked to indicate whether that feeling is either “sort of true for me” or “very true for me”. This two-step questioning process permits each valuation to be rated on a 4-point scale for each affective dimension: happy (very true = 4), happy (sort of true = 3), not so happy (sort of true = 2), and not so happy (very true = 1). Dale and Wagner provide data showing: (a) partial support for the construct validity of the Self Confrontation Method for Children, and (b) adequate to very good internal consistency for seven of the eight indices associated with the method.

Research

Over the past two decades the Self Confrontation Method has gained support for its value as a research tool (Eknes & Bardgard, 1996; Hermans, 1987, 1992; Hermans & Oles, 1994, 1999; Van Geel & De Mey, 2004; Van Geel, De Mey, Thissen-Pennings, & Benermacher, 2000). Researchers have employed the method as a research strategy for the study of a range of topics and issues, including research on fugit amor (the loving orientation to another unreachable person) (Hermans, Hermans-Jansen, & Van Gilst, 1987), valuation and coping styles (Rim, 1989), counseling process (Hermans, Fiddelaers, de Groot, & Nauta, 1990), affective organization of self in value crisis (Hermans & Oles, 1996), the relationship between self esteem and psychological well-being (Hermans, 1992), midlife crisis (Hermans & Oles, 1999), the affective organization of depressed and non-depressed women (Baillio & Lyddon, 2000), and attachment style and working models of emotion (Alford, Lyddon, & Schrieber, this issue). Case study research has also provided support for the utility of the Self Confrontation Method as an idiographic means of assessing patterns of change in clients’ self narratives over time (Hermans, 1987, 1996, 1997; Hermans & Oles, 1996; Lyddon & Alford, 2001).
Initial research pertaining to the Self Confrontation Method was related to its psychometric properties. In particular, this research focused on data bearing on: (a) the internal consistencies and inter correlations of the S (self enhancement), O (contact and union with others), P (positive affect), and N (negative affect) indices, and (b) the discriminant validity of the method. For example, Hermans, Hermans-Jansen, and Van Gilst (1987) analyzed the S, O, P, and N indices of the Self Confrontation Method using two samples: a group of 43 college students (20 men, 23 women) and a group of clients (20 men, 20 women). Reliabilities (coefficient alphas) of the S, O, P, and N indices were computed for both groups. In the student group the reliability coefficients were 0.83, 0.86, 0.90, and 0.88, respectively. The correlation between the S and O indices was 0.27, while the correlation between P and N indices was −0.80. Reliability coefficients for the client group were 0.83, 0.89, 0.95, and 0.91, respectively. The correlation between S and O indices was 0.64 and the correlation between P and N indices was −0.67. Overall, when compared to the college student sample, the client sample scored significantly lower on the S index (p < 0.0001), O index (p < 0.001), P index (p < 0.001) and significantly higher on the N index (p < 0.0001). The differences in patterning of the indices between the valuation systems of the college student sample and the client sample provided evidence for the discriminant validity of the Self Confrontation Method.

Because of its focus on the affective qualities of personal meaning, the Self Confrontation Method has shown particular promise as a research strategy for understanding emotional patterns and themes associated with adaptations to life challenges. For example, Hermans and Oles (1996) provided support for the usefulness of the Self Confrontation Method for differentiating different levels of disorganization in persons’ valuation systems, defined in terms of different levels of “value crisis”. Using the Value Crisis Questionnaire (VCQ; Oles, 1991) to distinguish high, medium, and low crisis groups, Hermans and Oles found that those in the high crisis group elicited a higher number of negative and a lower number of positive valuations compared to the low and medium crisis groups. The most generalized indices of the high crisis group were the N (negative) indices, while the most generalized indices of the low crisis group were the P (positive) indices. Additionally, many of the most generalized valuations associated with those in the high crisis group were concerned with an expressed need for clarity or certainty, a theme not found in the low crisis group.

In a similar study, Hermans and Oles (1999) used the Self Confrontation Method to compare the affective organization of personal meanings in middle age men experiencing different levels of midlife crises. In their study, midlife crisis was defined as a process of intensive self-transition characterized by: (a) the replacement of a “time since birth” perspective with a “time left to live” orientation, (b) a reevaluation of life values and goals, (c) a focus on one’s mortality, and (d) the development of a plan for the second half of life. Using the Midlife Crisis Scale (MCS; Oles, 1999) participants were divided into high,
medium, and low midlife crisis groups. As expected, when compared to the low and medium crisis groups, the high crisis group exhibited lower self-enhancement, positive affect, and higher negative affect. Contrary to the researchers’ expectations, the high midlife crisis group was not different from the other groups on the O index (contact and union with others). Results also indicated time orientation differences – the high crisis group exhibited more negative affect for valuations related to the future than to the past or present, whereas low and medium crisis groups were consistently positive on all three temporal orientations. The authors concluded that men experiencing a midlife crisis may not be able to envision a potential for positive gain that can come from personal transformation.

Baillio and Lyddon (2000) used the Self Confrontation Method to compare the affective organization of the valuations of depressed and non-depressed women, previously screened for depression using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961). Women in the depressed group demonstrated significantly higher levels of negative affect (N) and significantly lower levels of positive affect (P), self enhancement (S), and contact and union toward others (O) when compared to their non-depressed counterparts. These researchers also stressed the value of the Self Confrontation Method as a tool for better understanding a person’s unique experience of depression and the personal meaning of the depression in the context of her life experiences.

Alford, Lyddon, and Schreiber (this issue), examined the relationship between individual differences in attachment style and responses to the Self Confrontation Method. Using the Bartholomew attachment framework which organizes attachment styles based on the intersection of two dimensions of working models of attachment (Dimension 1: positive and negative working models of self; Dimension 2: positive and negative working models of other) participants (N = 143) were divided into four attachment groups based on their responses to the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991): Secure (positive working model of self; positive working model of others), Fearful (negative working model of self; negative working model of other), Preoccupied (negative working model of self; positive working model of other), and Dismissing (positive working model of self; negative working model of others). Participants exhibited theoretically consistent differences on the indices of the Self Confrontation Method as a function of attachment style. The Alford et al. findings showed that securely attached adults reported significantly more positive affect and less negative affect than insecurely attached adults. Also, secure and dismissing participants (positive self working models) reported more affect directed toward self enhancement than fearfully attached participants. When compared to secure and fearfully attached participants, dismissing participants (negative other working models) reported significantly less affect directed toward social connection. Also consistent with expectations, fearfully attached persons reported less positive affect, more negative affect, and more difficulty directing affect toward self-enhancement and social connection.
Because persons’ self-narratives are inevitably linked to social values and societal/cultural influences (McCabe, 1997; Neimeyer, 1999), some researchers have used the Self Confrontation Method as a means to assess values and related affect. For example, Hermans and Oles (1994) used the Self Confrontation Method to examine the value commitments of 53 college psychology students. Participants were asked sets of questions, designed to elicit valuations, corresponding to six categories of values: social, religious, aesthetic, theoretical, economic, and political. They found certain classes of values to be more strongly associated with certain affect scores. In particular, valuations corresponding to aesthetic, theoretical, social, and religious areas evoked more positive affect whereas negative affect was more characteristic of economic and political valuations. Political and theoretical valuations exhibited higher levels of self-enhancement than contact and union with others.

Cases study research

Because of its idiographic focus, the Self Confrontation Method is well suited to the context of individual counseling. Research involving case studies suggests that the Self Confrontation Method can be used in counseling settings for understanding developmental themes in clients’ lives, assessing personal meanings, and facilitating change in clients’ cognitive and affective schemas (Hermans, 1997, 1999; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995; Lyddon & Alford, 2001).

Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (1995) used case studies to illustrate the role of the Self Confrontation Method as a useful measure of client changes over the course of counseling. In one case, for example, a client completed the Self Confrontation Method prior to participating in six months of biweekly counseling. After the six-month period, a second self-investigation was administered. The second procedure revealed some valuations almost identical, some slightly modified, and still some that were dramatically different from those in the first investigation. In another case, a client underwent three self-investigations interspersed over the course of counseling. Ongoing client issues were discussed in relation to changes in the client’s valuation system over time. In terms of this client, Hermans and Hermans-Jansen reported that the most generalizing valuations in the first investigation exhibited more negative (N) than positive (P) affect terms and were lower in self-enhancement (S) and in contact with the other (O). The second investigation, completed twelve months later, showed highly generalized valuations associated with increased levels of S affect and a dominance of N affect over P affect, which suggested an attitude of opposition or protest (Hermans, 1987). The third investigation, conducted 5 months following the second, contained generalizing valuations associated with high levels of S and P affect and an absence of N affect. According to Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (1995), these case study investigations provide support for understanding client change as a continual process of cognitive and affective reorganization over time.
Case study data also illustrate ways in which the Self Confrontation Method may be applicable to clients of different age groups and diagnosed with various psychological problems. For example, Hermans (1999) describes the case of a 40-year-old woman who was having difficulty in the school where she taught due to the fact that she frequently found herself as the “in-between” person in conflicts involving the school administrators (who happened to be her personal friends) and her work colleagues. She was administered two self-investigations nine months apart from one another. Her first set of valuations was dominated by a general low level of self-enhancement for most of her valuations. Based on the initial set of valuations this client and her counselor devised homework to help her focus on activities to increase her self-enhancement. Results from the second Self Confrontation Method administration revealed changes in the client’s valuations associated with a higher level of self-enhancement and more positive affect. A second case example reported by Hermans (1999) involved an 18-year-old woman with exceptional artistic abilities who was struggling with identity issues and a preoccupation with death. Her initial set of valuations involved thoughts of her dead grandmother, low self-enhancement, high contact with others, and high negative affect. According to Hermans, this structure was hypothesized to represent a common pattern of loving orientation to a person or object that is unreachable. After subsequent counseling and homework assignments designed to facilitate her expressive abilities, a second Self Confrontation Method was administered two years later. Changes in her valuations revealed an increase in self-enhancement and contact and union with others.

A final case example involved the use of the Self Confrontation Method with a 54-year-old woman, suffering from neck and head pain (Hermans, 1999). Following the first administration, the counselor attended more closely to the valuations correlating strongly with the somatic complaint. However, following a second administration eight months later, the woman was invited to explore the common meaning between her psychosomatic complaints and the highest correlating valuations. Through this process she was able to see a link between her pain and problems in her marriage. Thus the Self Confrontation Method was helpful in identifying key underlying affective components of her somatic complaints related to broader relational issues in her life. Other case study research has similarly shown the Self Confrontation Method to be a useful procedure for facilitating client insight, initiating productive client changes, and helping clients assimilate conflicting emotions into their self-narratives (Hermans, 1997; Hermans & Oles, 1996; Lyddon & Alford, 2001). For example, Lyddon and Alford (2001) used a case study to illustrate the utility of using the Self Confrontation Method with older clients in the process of life review (Butler, 1963).

Concluding remarks

The Self Confrontation Method has been shown to be a very useful procedure for practitioners in a wide variety of counseling settings (Hermans, 1999).
Because of its idiographic orientation it holds the potential to benefit clients across age groups, ethnicities, and presenting problems (Dale & Wagner, 2003; Sandfort, 1984). Because of its multiple temporal foci, Hermans (1999) notes that the self investigation can offer clients and counselors a number of temporal comparisons, such as comparing the client’s view of his/her past to the present and/or contrasting the client’s present with his/her visions and goals for the future. Self investigations can also be used as a life review strategy to aid older adults in understanding significant life themes, affective patterns, and unfinished business from past interpersonal relationships (Lyddon & Alford, 2001).

Because the Self Confrontation Method is fundamentally a collaborative process between the client and counselor, it can help counselors build rapport and develop productive working alliances with their clients. For example, Hermans (1999) points out that because the method enlists the client as a co-investigator in the therapeutic relationship, the client is challenged and potentially empowered to be an expert in his or her own life and experience.

As narrative and constructivist approaches have gained support in the past decade, there has been increasing emphasis on understanding clients’ problems within the context of their developmental life experiences and the unique way in which they make meaning of those experiences (Lyddon & Alford, 1993). When clients participate in a self investigation they engage in a type of narrative process that requires them to order and reorder events and experiences that they consider to be meaningful in their own lives (Hermans, 1997). By reviewing the client’s valuations in the context of his/her life narrative, the counselor and client gain an understanding of the role that developmental experiences play in the organization of the client’s current pattern of emotional and interpersonal difficulties (Hermans, 1999).

Because the Self Confrontation Method combines a focus on client cognitive schema with a focus on underlying emotional and motivational structures (Hermans, 1999), the counselor can also gain a sense of the client’s internal working models of self and others (Bowlby, 1982) as well as a sense of what emotions may be linked to these models. Many researchers have proposed that a focus on client emotion is essential for any therapy to produce long-term client change (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997; Lyddon, 1990). For example, Clarke (1989) considers the creation of meaning as a crucial change event in counseling and proposes that working with emotions is central to this process. With its focus on the affective patterning of the client’s valuations, the Self Confrontation Method can aid the client and counselor in understanding the types and patterns of affect associated with different people and experiences in the client’s life.

It has been suggested that to create lasting change or significant client change, the counselor must facilitate client awareness of deep structure meanings and patterns (Lyddon, 1990). Other researchers suggest that change progresses through stages involving insight and contemplation of one’s problems (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992). For clients with a low level of insight, the Self Confrontation Method may provide a means of gaining greater awareness of underlying motivations and emotions, core self schemas, and various
life patterns and themes. Increased pattern awareness may, in turn, function as a precursor to significant (or second-order) change (Lyddon, 1990).

The Self Confrontation Method is gaining support as an effective approach to assessment in both case study research and in empirical studies involving larger samples (Eknes & Bardgard, 1996; Hermans, 1987, 1999; Hermans & Oles, 1994, 1996, 1999), though the latter are not as common. In counseling contexts, the method has been used effectively to understand client problems in a temporal context of personal valuations and meanings (Hermans, 1997, 1999; Lyddon & Alford, 2001). Because the method is grounded in narrative and constructivist theory, its focus on clients’ self-generated narratives and meanings makes it applicable across different age groups, cultural groups, and presenting problems (Hermans, 1999; Lyddon & Alford, 2001; Sandfort, 1984). Although the Self Confrontation Method has garnered promising qualitative and quantitative research support, research using the method with larger samples is warranted.

References


