Cyberwork

Diversity
Sarah Worley-James

When we meet a client in person for the first time, diversity issues such as race, ethnicity or disability may be apparent immediately. However, the invisibility of the online client can potentially lead to these issues being overlooked, affecting the relationship, our understanding of the client's worldview and the client's capacity to make the most of the counselling.

Online disinhibition may help the client feel more comfortable explicitly sharing and exploring these differences. Using email and instant messaging (IM), the client can meet the counsellor in ways that *they* choose; as opposed to knowing that areas of difference will be involuntarily disclosed in a first face-to-face encounter.

'I seek clues about my client's diversity in the ways that they express themselves in writing'

Working together online, I find it helpful to check with the client whether there are difficulties that need addressing in order for them to gain the most from online sessions, such as shortening the sessions, knowing what to do if communication abruptly ceases for non-technical reasons, or simply being aware that it may take longer for the client to express themselves in an IM session. For example, some physical disabilities may mean the client is uncomfortable sitting in one position for the length of a session, or they have a condition where they can become unwell suddenly, or perhaps they utilise speech recognition software that may affect the speed at which they communicate.

Other physical attributes, such as accent, style of clothing and any adornments are clearly visible to the face-to-face counsellor, and they combine to give clues about the client's background, religion, gender, sexuality, race and education level. Being aware that these differences influence how the client communicates and engages with therapy, I am sensitive in how I ask about and acknowledge diversity when meeting the client in cyberspace. It can be easy to make suppositions about someone's race, religion, sexuality, gender or socio-economic background from their name, which may be erroneous and, potentially, patronising and disrespectful.

Clients tend to write their full official name on forms, and it is especially important when working online to check out what name and pronoun the client prefers to be called by. What we call someone has a huge impact on how comfortable and respected they feel, and therefore how open they are to connecting to the therapeutic process. The counsellor's cultural background may lead them to automatically abbreviate names or always use the full version, and without visual clues or the client saying something, they may unwittingly be causing the client to cringe every time this abbreviation is used, hindering the development of the relationship.

One of my interests (some would say obsessions!), is how we use words, and the effect one word can have on the meaning and feelings triggered by that phrase or sentence. The choice of words used by the counsellor can unwittingly create a barrier, or quickly engender trust. I learnt a great lesson in my early career when I used the word 'girlfriend' when referring to my client's, as yet unnamed, partner; only to be informed their partner was also male. I have never forgotten my embarrassment at such a simple error, and I always use the non-gender specific word 'partner' until I know what gender to refer to.

As well as paying attention to what my style of writing might tell the client about me, I seek clues about my client's diversity in the ways that they express themselves in writing. Their choice and use of language, grammar and style creates a sense of who they are, in explicit and implicit ways. It may be apparent from the client's name and the way they use English that this is not their first language. This alerts me to consider more carefully the words and phrasing I use, without altering their experience of who I am. This also applies to clients who are on the autistic spectrum, as I need to be mindful that metaphors and analogies could be confusing, and to be prepared for potentially more direct language from the client.

As we all know, text-based communication can be fraught with misunderstandings – directness can be read as abruptness, anger, frustration or hurt, whereas this may simply be how the client expresses themselves. It may not have been appropriate or felt relevant for them to disclose that they are on the autistic spectrum, so the first indication may be in their style of communicating. The counsellor needs to have their internal supervisor switched on, check whether this is the natural writing and communication style of that client, and how they can 'meet' the client openly and meaningfully.

Writing this column, I'm struck by how varied the indications of diversity are when we work with clients online. The online counsellor needs to be alert to new ways of picking up on issues of diversity, while remaining as open, interested and enquiring in how they work with the client as any face-to-face counsellor would be.

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