



**SIGNIFICANT RELATIONAL EVENTS
IN EMOTION-FOCUSED AND
PERSON-CENTRED THERAPY FOR
SOCIAL ANXIETY:
A COMPREHENSIVE PROCESS
ANALYSIS STUDY**

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Concepts & Assumptions of Significant Therapy Events Research

- 1. There are important or meaningful moments in therapy in which some kind of change occurs.
- 2. These events (and the changes that go with them) come in different sizes: big or small, tectonic or incremental.
- 3. There are different kinds of significant events, most readily classified on the basis of the kind of change (immediate therapeutic impact) they involve.
- 4. Significant events can be helpful or hindering, based on their impacts (sometimes at the same time).
- 5. There are several ways to identify significant therapy events, but asking the client can be particularly useful.
- 6. In most therapy sessions there are one or two moments that stand out in the client's immediate postsession memory.

Significant Relational Events

- Large amount of measurement and process-outcome research on relational processes in psychotherapy
- However: Not aware of previously significant events studies on relational events
- Identified from a corpus of post-session significant event descriptions (HAT Form data)
 - *Strathclyde Social Anxiety Project data set*
 - *Person-Centred vs. Emotion-Focused Therapies*
- Used Alliance-Strengthening category from HELPFUL ASPECTS OF EXPERIENTIAL THERAPY CONTENT ANALYSIS SYSTEM:
 - *Client reported feeling (a) understood, (b) supported/encouraged/reassured, (c) more involved/invested in therapy, or (d) closer to/better about therapist*

Identifying Significant Relational Events

- Members of the research team scanned through HAT Descriptions:
 - *Identified 20 events from 9 clients with recordings and the needed client permissions*
 - *Pairs of researchers then listened to 11 of these sessions to see if they could identify the significant event referred to on the HAT Form (dropped first & last sessions, used client postsession ratings to select the most promising)*
 - *Consensus on 8 of the events*
 - *The six CPA researchers each selected one event that they had identified*
- RE and JS served as auditors

Example: Client S011, Session 3

HAT Description

- Most helpful event: *I feel that the therapist expressed (after I had told him about my relationship with my mother during childhood and then with my dad) that it was understandable that I may have ‘issues’.*
- What made it helpful: *I feel that he really heard me describing how I experienced childhood and I’m probably glad that he has heard a reason for my social anxieties that were not ‘self-inflicted.*
- Helpfulness: 8 (=greatly helpful)
 - *[No information given about location and length]*
 - *[Event selected based on (a) relational impact by consensus of 2 researchers; (b) good outcome; (c) high event helpfulness rating.*

Results: Overview

- Will focus here on two sets of results:
 - *(1) Analysis of salient relational processes in HAT descriptions*
 - *(2) Analysis of key client and therapist speaking turns*

Results, Part 1: Salient relational processes in **HAT Descriptions: Clients**

- **Core Concept:** Client opens self up to Therapist (T)/allows self-vulnerability to be seen by T
- 1. Makes eye contact with T in a vulnerable state (immaturity, panic) [SA266, SA424]
- 2. Shares/discloses risky experiences with T about key defective self aspect (something I don't usually tell others: fear my problems aren't genuine /I'm ugly /I'm stupid for not leaving abusive partner /I don't have a right to be in therapy) [SA011, SA60, SA213, SA284]

Results, Part 1: Salient relational processes in **HAT Descriptions: Therapists**

- **Core Concept:** Therapist offers presence/psychological contact leading clients to feel validated/pleasant mood
- **1. Offers presence/psychological contact:** [SA011, SA213, SA266, SA424]
 - a. Eye contact [SA266, SA424]
 - b. T understanding of C (traumatic experiences [SA011])
 - c. T self disclosure of perception of C [SA011, SA213]
- **2. => C feels validated:** [SA011, SA213, SA266, SA284]
 - a. Validation of difficulties: My problems are genuine/I have a right to be here (in therapy). [SA284]; or not self-inflicted [SA011]
 - b. resources/value as a person [SA213, SA266]
- **3. => Pleasant mood:** [all]
 - a. Calm/relief [SA284, SA424]
 - b. Glad/good [SA011, SA060, SA213]
 - d. Alive/confident [SA266]
 - e. Hope [SA424]

Key Relational Processes in the HAT Form Descriptions: Plain English Summary

- These are client-initiated events:
- 1. The client opens self up to their therapist, allowing their vulnerability to be seen.
 - *They typically do this by making a risky self-disclosure about a key defective self-aspect, but in some cases they make eye contact with the therapist.*
- 2. The therapist responds to the client's openness by offering psychological contact or presence in the form of eye contact, self-disclosure, or empathy.
- 3. As a result the client typically feels validated, either that their difficulties are genuine or not their fault, or that they have resources or value as a person.
- 4. The upshot is that they experience a pleasant mood: calm, happy, alive or hopeful.

Results, Part 2: Process Analysis: Micro-analysis of key/peak speaking turns

■ Framework/Domain Structure:

■ A. Client

- *1. Content*
- *2. Action (Tasks & Response Modes)*
- *3. Style/State (linguistic/paralinguistic; mood/state; interpersonal manner)*
- *4. Quality (level and manner of client working)*

■ B. Therapist

- *1. Content*
- *2. Action (Tasks & Response Modes)*
- *3. Style/State (linguistic/paralinguistic; mood/state; interpersonal manner)*
- *4. Quality (level and manner of therapist skilfulness)*

Client Key Speaking Turns: Content (What did the client talk about?): Typical Categories

■ **A1.1 Negative view of self (4 out of 6 events = typical category)**

- SA011: Critical voice/self-hatred
- SA011: Shame [description of?]
- SA060: Negative body-image/defectiveness
- SA060: Negative self-related feelings (shame, self-hatred, self-pity, lonely sadness)
- SA213: Negative person scheme/view of self in abusive relationship
- SA284: C self-critical view

■ **A1.2 Relational/Meta-communication/meta-perception of other (4)**

- SA213: Meta-perception
- SA213: Interpersonal fear of judgement
- SA266: Meta-communication: here & now interaction with T
- SA284: C's relief in response to hearing T's view of C's problems
- SA424: meta-communication (how they've talked to T)

■ **A1.3 Avoided/unwanted experience (3 = typical)**

- SA060: Delicate, avoided content
- SA284: C's partial denial of problems
- SA424: New self-concept/unwanted part of

Client Key Speaking Turns: Action (Response Modes & Tasks): Typical/**General** Categories

■ Response Modes:

■ **B1b.1 Self-disclosure (5 = general)**

- SA011: Self-disclosure (description of feeling)
- SA060: Self-disclosure
- SA213: Self-disclosure
- SA284: Self-disclosure
- SA424: Self-Disclosure
- SA266: Self-disclosure

■ **B1b.2 Self-formulation (4)**

- SA011: Self-formulation
- SA060: Insight/self-interpretation/formulation
- SA213: Insight self-formulation
- SA424: Self-Characterisation with Insight

■ **B1b.3 Agreement (4)**

- SA213: Agreement
- SA266: Agreement
- SA284: Agreement
- SA424: (Strong) Agreement

■ Response Tasks:

■ **B1a.1 Explore/understand self (4)**

- SA011: Introduce task: Exploring negative feelings toward self
- SA060: Explore negative feelings toward self more deeply
- SA266: Make sense of unexpected emotion/reaction (smiling, laughing)
- SA266: Consider formulation of reaction given by T: playfulness
- SA424: Develop self-understanding/insight: Connect process and feelings

■ **B1a.2 Invite T expertise (3)**

- SA213: Seek reassurance
- SA213: Check out accuracy of self-perception
- SA266: Defer to therapist, turn focus back onto therapist following interruption
- SA284: Invite exploration of T's views of C's problems

■ **B1a.3 Express/Disclose/ Describe (3)**

- SA060: Express self-related feelings
- SA284: Disclose feelings of worry in relation to therapy
- SA060: Describe main issue

Client Key Speaking Turns: Style/State: Typical/**General** Categories

■ Linguistic/Paralinguistic

■ **C1a.1 Active/fast/energetic (5)**

- SA011: Interactive
- SA060: Active, fast (at beginning)
- SA213: Quite fast
- SA266: also moments of enthusiasm
- SA266: Spontaneous interruption [from audio].
- SA284: Fast

■ **C1a.2 Nonfluencies (filled pauses, unfilled pauses, false starts, repeats) (4)**

- SA060: Repeats, pauses, false starts
- SA266: Filled pauses
- SA284: Non-fluencies, false-starts
- SA424: intermittent pausing

■ **C1a.3 Breathy laughing (3)**

- SA213: Breathy
- SA213: Laughing
- SA266: Laugh-talking
- SA266: Smiling [specified in audio], laughing [from HAT form and audio]
- SA284: Laughter [from audio]

■ **C1a.4 Slow/low energy (3)**

- SA060: tentative (soft, trembly voice)
- SA060: Slow (in the end)
- SA266: Slightly passive, some flatness in register,
- SA284: Also: occasional long pauses

■ State/Mood

■ **C1b.1 Focused/involved/thoughtful (5)**

- SA011: Effortful
- SA266: Involved [from HAT]
- SA213: Focused, introspective
- SA424: Thoughtful: Considered, reflective
- SA284: Introspective [from audio]

■ **C1b.2 Distressing emotions (hurt, sad, vulnerable, ashamed, resentful) (4)**

- SA011: Distressed
- SA060: Distressed, hurt, painful, vulnerable
- SA060: Emotional: sad
- SA213: Vulnerable
- SA060: Shame
- SA266: Self-disparaging
- SA060: Resentment
- SA060: Sense of unfairness

■ **C1b.3 Pleasant emotions: Happy/relieved/interested/hopeful (3)**

- SA266: Happy, fun (possibly, momentarily)
- SA266: Playful (possibly), amused, alive, at ease, enjoyment
- SA284: Relieved
- SA424: Relieved

■ Interpersonal Manner

■ **C1c.1 Trusting/accepting (4)**

- SA011: Trusting, open
- SA213: Trusting
- SA284: Respectful, thankful [implied from reaction to T disclosure]
- SA424: Accepting

■ **C1c.2 Collaborative/cooperative (3)**

- SA011: Collaborative
- SA060: Cooperative
- SA213: Collaborative
- **C1c.3 Assertive/agentive (3)**
- SA011: Assertive
- SA213: Agentive, active
- SA424: Assertive

Client Key Speaking Turns: Quality (How well were they working?): Typical Categories

■ **D1a.1 Working very well (4)**

- SA011: 8
- SA060: 8
- SA213: 8.5
- SA424: 8

■ **D1b.1 Active/agentive (4)**

- SA011: *Persists on own track, asserts personal agency*
- SA213: *Agentive in attending to therapeutic relationship, preventing the unspoken relationship from becoming a boundary to good working.*
- SA266: *Active, working*
- SA424: *Actively engaging and processing therapeutic tasks*

■ **D1b.2 Deeply exploratory/reflective/insightful (3)**

- SA060: *Deep exploration*
- SA213: *Explores different aspects of her experience thoughtfully and deeply*
- SA213: *Offers insight into her process*
- SA266: *Reflective; in-dwelling*
- SA266: *Explores edge of awareness*

■ **D1b.3 Articulately open/disclosing (3)**

- SA011: *Expresses a clear articulation of own awareness*
- SA266: *Offers articulate reflection on own process*
- SA284: *Brave self-disclosure*

CPA Process Micro-Analysis: Clients: Plain English Summary

- Unsurprisingly, the micro-analysis of key speaking turns reveals much more detail and complexity but is broadly comparable to the HAT analysis.
- [Content:] Typically, clients present a *negative view of self* or an avoided, unwanted experience but in the context of the *therapy relation* and their perception of how the therapist might be *perceiving* them.
- [Action:] This takes the form of *self-disclosure* or *self-formulation* in the service of *exploring or understanding self* and *inviting therapist expert views* of them.
- [Style:] In doing this their manner is typically at times *active or fast* and marked by *nonfluencies* (pauses and false starts) or *breathy laughter*, while at other times it may *slow down* or become *tentative*.
- [State:] Clients generally came across as *involved* or *thoughtful* but typically also expressed either *distressing* or *pleasant emotions*.
- Their *interpersonal manner* was typically *trusting/accepting* or *collaborative/cooperative*.
- [Quality:] Thus, the researchers typically judged clients to be *working very well*: exercising *personal agency* in the session by being *articulately open and disclosing* and by engaging in *deeply exploratory or reflective work*.

Therapist Key Speaking Turns: Content (What did the therapist talk about?): Typical Categories

■ A2.1 Relational/(Meta-)communication (4)

- SA213: *T's experience of client*
- SA266: *Meta-communication: here & now interaction with C*
- SA284: *T's experience of C and C's situation*
- SA284: *Potential relational difficulty between C and T/research project*
- SA424: *Meta-communication: Client-therapist here-and-now interaction, including possible C embarrassment*
- SA424: *Visual/nonverbal communication channel*

■ A2.2 Emotion (3)

- SA011: *C negative self concept/self-shaming configuration/critical voice*
- SA011: *Core pain*
- SA011: *Childhood trauma/abuse/mistreatment*
- SA266: *Client's puzzling emotional reaction (laughter)*
- SA424: *C emotions (fear)*
- SA424: *C emotion regulation*

Therapist Key Speaking Turns: Action (Response Modes & Task): Typical Categories

■ Response Modes:

■ B2b.1 Empathic exploration (3)

- SA011: Empathic formulation
- SA284: Empathic formulation – Alluding to the problem as SA in T4
- SA011: Evocative reflection
- SA011: Fit questions to check formulation
- SA266: Question (incomplete, exploratory & fill-in)
- SA266: Empathic conjecture

■ B2b.2 Process Guiding (3)

- SA266: Process suggestion
- SA284: Experiential teaching: information about SA and research project
- SA424: Process advisement with reassurance

■ Response-level Tasks:

■ B2a.1 Encourage/validate/support C (4)

- SA284: Provide C with useful information about ‘realness’ of their problems
- SA266: Encourage C to express thoughts that they are hesitant to share
- SA424: Communicate understanding/ empathy of C emotion fragility
- SA213: Provide support & praise
- SA284: Reassure C that his reasons for being in therapy are valid

■ B2a.2 Understand/accept C (3)

- SA011: Follow client understanding of main issue
- SA213: Position self as non-expert
- SA213: Convey delicate nature of subject matter
- SA284: Convey acceptance, and belief, of C’s problems by way of congruence
- SA284: Convey empathy for C through reflecting the difficulty of SA

Therapist Key Speaking Turns: Style/State: Typical Categories

■ Linguistic/Paralinguistic

- C2a. Nonfluencies/tentative (4)
 - SA213: Slow, hesitant, filled pauses, within-turn pausing, repeats
 - SA213: Tentative
 - SA266: Soft, slow, tentative, drawn-out words, pauses, nonfluencies, false starts, repeats [from audio]
 - SA284: false starts [from audio]
 - SA424: tentative/pausing: false starts
- C2a. Soft/prizing voice (3)
 - SA011: Soft, empathic prizing voice
 - SA213: Prizing voice
 - SA424: softly spoken

■ State/Mood

■ C2b.1 Calm/relaxed/gentle (4)

- SA266: Informal, gentle
- SA284: Relaxed, informal
- SA266: Relaxed
- SA213: Gentle
- SA284: Calm [from audio]
- SA424: Calm
- SA266: calm

■ C2b.2 Confident/firm/forthright/persistent (4)

- SA011: Confident
- SA213: Forthright
- SA284: Firm, persistent [from audio]
- SA424: Pronounced/Measured

■ Interpersonal Manner

■ C2c.1 Supportive/caring/respectful/gentle (4)

- SA011: Understanding
- SA011: Supportive/caring
- SA213: Respectful
- SA213: Gentle
- SA266: Gentle [from audio]
- SA266: Empathic [from audio]
- SA266: Encouraging, accepting [from audio]
- SA284: Compassionate, sympathetic, soft, supportive, reassuring [from HAT form & audio]
- SA424: Sensitive, gentle

■ C2c.2 Protective/concerned/cautious (3)

- SA011: Protective
- SA213: Concerned
- SA424: Cautious

Therapist Key Speaking Turns: Quality (How well were they working?): Typical Categories

■ **D2a.1 Very Skilful (4)**

- SA011: 8
- SA213: 8
- SA266: 8
- SA424: 8

■ **D2b.1 Responsive to client (4)**

- SA011: Facilitates C to feel painful feeling carefully
- SA011: Builds on client self-understanding
- SA213: Attends to potential rupture with delicacy
- SA266: Adapts smoothly to unexpected reaction
- SA266: Clarifying, makes question more explicit
- SA284: Remains empathic with every retreat by C

■ **D2b.2 Empathic skill (3)**

- SA011: Skillful in empathic responding
- SA011: Skillful in empathic formulation of shared understanding
- SA011: Accurate/Accurate summing up
- SA284: Remains empathic with every retreat by C
- SA424: Empathic to client's immediate response

■ **D2b.3 Careful balance of exploratory and relational processes (3)**

- SA011: Balances exploration with understanding/not judging
- SA213: In meeting C question, balances tentative congruence with prizing of C
- SA266: Leaves space for client but remains engaged with minimal encouragers

CPA Process Micro-Analysis: Therapists: Plain English Summary

- Therapist key speaking turns mirrored key client speaking turns in many ways:
- The *content* was typically *relational* or *meta-communicative* and referred to *client emotion*.
- [*Action:*] Therapists typically offered *empathic exploration* (empathic formulation) or *process guiding* (process suggestion) responses, in order to either *encourage/validate* the client or to provide *empathy and acceptance*.
- [*Style:*] Therapists typically communicated in a *tentative, nonfluent* fashion, accompanied by a *soft, prizing voice*.
- Therapist *mood/state* was typically at times *calm and relaxed* while at other times it was *confident or forthright*.
- *Interpersonally*, they came across as *supportive and gentle* but also as *protective or concerned*.
- [*Quality:*] Thus, researchers typically judged therapists as *very skilful: empathic and responsive* to the client's immediate process or managing a *careful balance* between *exploratory and relational* processes.

Implications

- The relational events we have documented appear to be especially relevant to the clients' presenting difficulty of social anxiety
 - *Consistent with person-centred and EFT theories of social anxiety as involving conditions of worth or primary maladaptive shame connected with an emotion scheme of self as deeply defective*
- Our analysis points to the active role of the client in significantly helpful relational events, and the importance of the therapist being able meet and hold their client's openness.
- We have also documented the richness and complexity of the intertwining client and therapist processes in relational events, revealing considerable interpersonal/therapeutic skill on the part of both clients and therapists.
- The next step will be to dig further into our analyses by looking at:
 - *The immediate and later effects of these events (= CPA Effects Analysis)*
 - *Analyses of their contexts (= CPA Context Analysis: episode, session, pre-session and pre-therapy background)*
 - *Next year!*

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