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Chair Work with the Empathic Other: Providing Basic Need Support for Resolving Unfinished Business

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Abstract

In this case study we present an example of a modification of the chair work technique, called ‘chair work with the empathic other’, and examine the process of emotional change of the participant. We find that talking directly to the empathic other supports the participant’s emotional engagement with the task and guides her emotional processing through the four necessary components of successful empty chair work, specified in previous research: experiential access and intense expression of primary adaptive emotion, expression of thwarted need, and a shift in the representation of self and the other. Drawing on self-determination theory, we conceptualize the trainer’s person-centered communication as a basic need-supporting therapeutic action. Throughout the chair work process, the need-supporting positioning of the ‘empathic other’, provided by the trainer, consistently engages the participant in the emotional processing of unfinished business: it deepens and widens her emotional exploration, leads her to express thwarted need, and finally, to change representation of self and other. We discuss the findings within the framework of self-determination theory and in relation to research on emotional change and therapeutic practice. Previous research has pointed out the difficulties many clients face with engaging in chair work. Introducing need-supportive communication, drawing on self-determination theory, we suggest that the modified technique is a possible intervention to facilitate engagement in chair work and emotional change.

Keywords Basic Need Support · Client Engagement · Self-determination Theory · Unfinished Business · Psychotherapy Process Research

Introduction

As a therapeutic intervention, the purpose of empty chair work is to help clients to work through a specific type of painful emotion scheme called in the literature *unfinished business* (Pascual-Leone & Baher, 2023). Unfinished business is a complex affective experience of resentment and pain, resulting from a longstanding intrapsychic process of

closing out of awareness painful emotions and needs towards a significant other (Greenberg & Foerster, 1996). The empty chair technique has in emotion-focused therapy been found therapeutically effective for various interpersonal problems and childhood maltreatment resulting in unfinished business (Carpenter et al., 2016). Research even suggests that chair work can be an effective standalone intervention (Pugh et al., 2023).

Notwithstanding the therapeutic effectiveness of empty-chair work, research reveals that it is not always an easy task for clients to engage in (Muntigl et al., 2020). Besides those clients who engage wholeheartedly, there are also clients who are reluctant to engage in chair work for various reasons. There are also those who do engage but do it without the necessary emotional involvement (Greenberg & Malcolm, 2002), compromising deep-seated emotional change. The appropriate therapeutic action to tackle this inner obstacle to engage with chair work is so far not fully understood. In this article we argue that self-determination theory

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provides theoretical insight for helping clients engage emotionally to resolve unfinished business.

To explore the facilitation of engagement, we examine a variation of chair work, developed as part of a need-supportive communication training, nonviolent communication. Nonviolent communication is a communication process developed on person-centered and experiential principles (Rosenberg & Chopra, 2015), extending on Roger's later work on the applicability of person-centered principles outside the therapy room (Rogers, 1995). Grounded in experiential principles, nonviolent communication includes chair work into its training. This chair work, however, differs from conventional empty chair work in an important way: the participant talks to the imagined, significant other, played by a facilitator (nonviolent communication trainer, or another participant), who exemplifies the 'empathic other'. In this present study we will call this version of chair work '*chair work with the empathic other*'. Building on insights from self-determination theory, and its concept of basic need support for integrative emotion regulation (Roth et al., 2019), we expect that a direct dialogue with the empathic other, will facilitate the emotional engagement and the resolution of unfinished business of the participant. This we can also observe in our process analysis of a case example, with a participant going successfully through the emotional processing that is necessary for the successful resolution of unfinished business (Greenberg & Foerster, 1996), facilitated by the basic need support of the empathic other.

Theoretical Background

Empty chair work originated in psychodrama and was further developed in Gestalt therapy (Perls et al., 1951). Today, its most thorough elaboration as a therapeutic task is found in emotion-focused therapy (Greenberg & Foerster, 1996). The therapeutic target of empty chair work is unfinished business. Unfinished business is the intrapsychic result of a relationship with an attachment figure in which the client reacted to overwhelming and painful experiences by holding back not only the expression, but even the awareness of primary adaptive emotions and thwarted underlying needs (Narkiss-Guez et al., 2015). In emotion-focused therapy, empty-chair work is designed to activate in clients with unfinished business the relevant maladaptive emotion scheme, and to help them to express to the imagined other the previously unexpressed primary adaptive emotions and needs, leading to a change in the representation of both the self and the other, followed by a significant decrease of psychic tension (Greenberg & Malcolm, 2002). The therapist's role is to engage the client in the task of imagining the other

sitting in an empty chair and support her emotional expression towards this other from an outside position.

Research has revealed the outstanding effect of chair work to support clients in accessing painful primary emotions and thwarted needs, necessary to working through distress, and ultimately leading to better therapy outcome. Chair work was found to have the potential for activating unresolved inner conflicts (Pascual-Leone & Baher, 2023), self-referential negative feelings (Nardone et al., 2022), and attachment related sadness (Narkiss-Guez et al., 2015), followed by positive emotional change outside session, and better outcome.

Greenberg and Foerster (1996) have identified four characteristic components of empty-chair work, that discriminate successful from unsuccessful change processes: experiential access and intense expression of primary adaptive emotions, expression of thwarted need, self-validation, and a shift in the representation of the other, either by holding the other accountable or by reaching a more nuanced understanding of the other. Greenberg and Malcolm (2002) have extended these findings by relating the attainment of these necessary elements to therapeutic outcomes. Their findings reveal a significant variation between clients regarding emotional engagement and the presence of the active ingredients of the experiential process of empty chair work: some of them engage fully, others partially and yet others only minimally, with corresponding positive correlation between level of engagement and treatment outcome. Greenberg and Malcolm (2002) do not discuss the factors determining client's limited task engagement but given the significant difference between resolvers and non-resolvers in terms of experiencing primary emotions during chair work, they point to the possibility, that client's limited activation of emotional arousal during the empty-chair dialogue might explain these findings.

What then, if anything, is there that a therapist can do to facilitate clients' deeper emotional engagement in chair work? One possibility could be, depending on the unfinished business and wishes of the clients, to modify the chair work protocol in a way that makes it easier for clients to engage. To do this, we need theoretical understanding of the process of emotional engagement and its facilitation. Self-determination theory is a theory of human motivation and regulation, that has gained solid empirical evidence over the last forty years across various domains of mainstream psychology, but less in psychotherapy research (Ryan et al., 2021). Self-determination theory is a relational theory that conceptualizes human motivation and engagement as the result of relational processes, resulting in qualitatively different types of motivation (Roth et al., 2019). One tenet of self-determination theory is that engagement in a task is facilitated by support of three basic psychological

needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). To the extent that these basic needs are supported by others, people's autonomous engagement increases, leading to healthy emotional processing and integrative regulation. A growing number of self-determination theory research has supported the paramount importance of the clinician's basic need support in the context of health interventions, facilitating clients' engagement (e.g., Zuroff & Koestner, 2023). In particular, and relevant for the data of this study, self-determination theory research has revealed that high-quality listening, especially when the other expresses affect-laden or potentially threatening messages to self, is autonomy and relatedness supportive and enhances disclosure and integrative emotion regulation (Weinstein et al., 2022). Furthermore, validating responses, in the form of empathic conjectures and a tentative way of confirming the interlocutor's emotional expression, support the latter's basic needs, leading to healthy emotional processing and integrative emotion regulation (Roth et al., 2019). These findings clearly indicate the possibility that talking directly to a significant empathic other in chair work may bear additional benefits for engagement as compared to support from the outside.

Variations of technique in chair work, motivated by theory, has its precedents. In two chair self-soothing dialogue, clients can enact themselves an idealized parental figure that responds empathically to the part of the self, also played by the client, that needs soothing (Goldman & Greenberg, 2013). In this study, we suggest a further variation of chair work, to be used with clients struggling to emotionally engage in the task and experience the necessary elements for successful resolution (Nardone et al., 2022). We motivate this modification by self-determination theory, arguing, that clients' emotional engagement and integrative emotion regulation are facilitated by the interlocutor's basic need support of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Roth et al., 2019). Our research is seeking answer to the following question: Does talking directly to the empathic other, who communicates through basic need support, facilitate the emotional processing and successful resolution of unfinished business?

Data and Method

Data Collection and Recruiting of Participants

The collection of the videorecording was part of the study design that has been submitted to and approved by the Human Sciences Ethics Committee of the university. The videorecording was recorded during a nonviolent communication advanced training course. The trainer participant of

the study was a certified nonviolent communication trainer, with over twenty years of experience. Nonviolent communication trainer certification requires 3–5 years of training as well as 2 years of nonviolent communication teaching experience. Exact criteria for nonviolent communication trainer certification can be found at the webpage of the Center for Nonviolent Communication (www.cnvc.org).

Participants were recruited for the study as follows: Individuals who have enrolled in the nonviolent communication training received a letter, enquiring interest of participation in the research. This included a description of the aims and participation in the research. The study was designed to specifically focus on the observed emotional processing of healthy participants in a communication training, both verbal and nonverbal. Accordingly, the study did not include self-report information, other than participants' age and gender. For those interested in participating, a comprehensive information package about participation, the research, as well as the consent form was sent. Participants were instructed to bring with them the signed consent form when arriving to the training. The trainer was also a participant of the research, and not otherwise involved in the research process. Participants had the option to withdraw from participation in the research at any time during the nonviolent communication training without any consequences.

Participation Procedures and Case Selection

During the communication training, the videorecorded interactions involved the nonviolent communication trainer and the training participant. Participants and the trainer decided together when to videorecord their interactions. The trainer made the videorecording that she subsequently securely transferred directly to the researcher. The case example was chosen because it demonstrated immediate and clear consequences of the basic need support of the trainer on the emotional processing of the participant. The observed effects raised the interest of the researcher to explore what is going on in the case example, leading to the process analysis of emotional engagement and resolution of unfinished business. The conceptualization of the case example as a modification of chair work followed the selection of the case and the exploration of what was going on.

Nonviolent Communication Chair Work with the Empathic other

In nonviolent communication, in accordance with person-centered theory, all human behavior and experience can be conceptualized in terms of emotions and underlying needs. Conflict resolution and emotional change is conceptualized as the result of emotional connection created when people

can communicate their experiences to the important other in the language of emotions and needs, and they experience that the significant other *expresses* that he or she has heard these emotions and needs (Rosenberg & Chopra, 2015). Accordingly, training aims at practicing the awareness and verbal expression of, as well as the empathic listening to emotions and underlying needs, employing different experiential techniques. The facilitator playing the other starts out with listening empathically to the participant's feelings and needs, following person-centered principles. Once the participant has expressed primary emotions and underlying needs, the facilitator inquires the participant whether she or he is interested in hearing the significant other's feelings and needs. It is important to emphasize that if the participant is not ready or open to this, the facilitator respects this decision, thus providing support for the participant's need for autonomy (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Subsequently, the facilitator moves sensitively and attentively between listening empathically and expressing empathically, providing support for the participant's basic needs of autonomy to decide whether she is ready to hear the important other's side (Weinstein et al., 2022). The participant's ambivalence for and against connection is respected, which is a fundamental autonomy-supportive therapeutic action, enhancing engagement. While listening empathically is considered the most important part of the exercise, the empathic expression is also considered an important element in the process of change. It potentially intensifies the participant's feelings, guiding her processing through the experience of primary emotions, moving towards, and facilitating the restructuring of painful emotional schemes (Nardone et al., 2022). Apart of helping the participant to imagine the other and gain access to the pertinent emotion scheme, chair work with an empathic other also intensifies the emotional experience and engagement, an element for successful resolution (Greenberg & Malcolm, 2002).

Method of Analysis

The selected video recording was transcribed and process-analyzed, relying on psychotherapy process research (Krause, 2023). Along with verbal exchange, nonverbal elements were also analyzed, including the participant's movements and facial expressions, providing additional information about the activation, presence, length and change of important emotions during the experiential exercise. As common practice in this type of process research, we analyze the transcript at a micro-level to compare it to a research based, expected sequence of emotional processing. Successful chair work for unfinished business contains four necessary elements: (1) the presence of experiential access of primary emotions, (2) expression of thwarted need, (3)

change in the representation of self, and (4) change in the representation of the other (Greenberg & Foerster, 1996). Primary emotions, like sadness, anger and fear are universal human states, with adaptive value for action. They arise when attachment needs for safety, integrity, acceptance, and belonging are thwarted. Awareness of and experiencing of these states and needs are required for adaptive shifts in the representation of self and other (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997).

The relationship between the participant's emotional processing and the trainer's basic need supportive communication is made explicit by presenting the transcript of the chair work in its entirety. Although the authors' subjectivity cannot be eliminated, the specification of the necessary elements makes the analysis of the relationship between necessary elements and provision of basic need support transparent and replicable. The analysis is structured according the three core stages of the empty chair technique: the arousal stage, the expression stage, and the completion stage. The expression stage is divided in four parts, each describing a certain topic and the corresponding emotional processing of *June*, a pseudo name given to the 46-year-old female participant of the chosen example.

The focus of our analysis was on shedding light on the emotional processing of *June* during the three stages of a chair work process that differs from the conventional technique in one important way. The facilitator, instead of taking on an outsider neutral 'third' position vis-à-vis the chair work dyad, takes on the role of the other but does this in a special way: communicates with *June* according to person-centered principles, explicitly focusing on her feelings and underlying needs. Our first interest relates to the effects that talking directly to this 'empathic other' has on the participant's emotional processing. This is examined by analyzing the participant's reactions, both verbal and nonverbal, to the empathic other's explicitly basic need-supportive utterances. Additionally, the analysis pays particular attention to the presence or absence in the participant's speech of the key above mentioned components of a successful chair work process, leading to resolution. Drawing on psychotherapy process research and examining the manifestation of both basic need support, as specified by self-determination theory, and the presence of above-mentioned elements of successful emotional processing, we refer to relevant literature while presenting our results.

Results of Process Analysis

Below we present the 'chair work with the empathic other'. T stands for nonviolent communication trainer, while P stands for participant. During the analysis, on the other hand, we call the participant *June*, the pseudo name of the participant of our study. Those times the trainer is in the trainer's role;

we call her the trainer. Those times when the trainer is in *June's* father's role, we refer to him as the *facilitator/father* and correspondingly use for him the male pronoun *he*, corresponding his gender identity in the chair work.

Arousal Stage

The transcript starts out with the trainer, introducing the task. *June* seems quite tense from the beginning, as visible from her uneasy laughing, her avoiding eye contact, and her fixing of her leggings with her fingers. Observing *June's* nervous body language and helping her to engage with the task, the trainer, taking on the role of the *facilitator/father*, expresses four empathic conjectures regarding *June's* feelings (T4, T6, T8, T9), trying to build emotional contact with her in the here and now.

T1: *June*, thank you very much for this opportunity. So, we agreed that we would send this recording to (name of author), and I'm your daddy with 'giraffe ears'. I can even be when you are 2 years old or... you (2) or as you feel now. (2) How are you doing, my little girl?

P2: Oh... [*June* laughs uneasily, avoids looking at T., starts fixing nervously her leggings with fingers, sighs deep and looks in another direction. At the end she looks at T.]

T3: And we have about 10 min.

T4: (7) Is it difficult? (6) Are you scared?... is it painful?

P5: Well, yes [laughs nervously while looking at T.]. You never ask me how I am. You've never been and never are curious about what I answer [voice trembling]. I don't even think you notice how I am. So, this is a very strange question [looks straight at T.], yes, it's -.

T6: I see, so very, very often... (2) so, you don't remember that I have ever asked how you are?

P7: Hm. [looking straight at T., trembling voice]

T8: Actually, it seems to be a confusing question?

P9: Yes, because you always told me how things should be or what is the program, or what we should do... [making vivid gestures].

T10: (6) So, I have told you what to do, how to be, but asking with an open heart how you are...this a completely new question for you?

P11: Yep. [looking straight at T.'s eyes, corner of mouth starts trembling]

Empathic conjectures are highly relatedness-supportive actions, while tentative probing are prominent examples of competence-supportive therapeutic actions (Ryan et al., 2021). The effect of empathizing is immediate for *June*: she quickly gets into touch with her resentment towards her father and is able to express her genuine surprise at the *facilitator/father's* empathic reflections. The *facilitator/father's* empathic conjecture opens *June's* exploration of own experience and evokes childhood memories. The transcript

shows how speaking directly to an empathic *facilitator/father* helps *June* in the process of experiential access to primary emotions, manifesting the first important necessary element of successful resolution as specified by Greenberg and Foerster (1996).

Expression Stage

The first part of the expression stage starts out with the trainer/father's explicit inquiring of *June's* experience, supporting her need for competence, and relatedness (Weinstein et al., 2022). This section revolves around *June's* hurt of not being seen as a little girl with wishes on her own, as well as her feelings and thoughts that her father did not respect her need for privacy.

T12: (8) And is there anything you would like to tell me?

P13: I want a pink dress. (3) A really big one. (2) And I don't want you to look into my closet. (2) Because that's my closet. It's nice that you made it, (3) but I would have been happy if you had asked me what color I wanted. I don't want that damn white. (2) It looks like a hospital closet. [laughs nervously]

T14: (5) So we could also say that you're grateful that I made the closet because it turned out nice. (2) The color... (2) you would have preferred pink instead?

P15: Well, some girly color, right? [looking straight at T. eyes]

T16: Well, a more girly color, because white is more hospital-like. (2) And it's true that I made the closet, but I shouldn't look into your closet because that's your life. [*June* nods as a sign of agreement]

P17: Hm. Just because you made it doesn't mean it's yours! You made me too, but I am still not yours! [looks straight into T. eyes, her voice getting irritated]

T18: I see. You want me to acknowledge that you're an independent being. And not (1) my possession.

P19: Yes. [nods, looks straight into T. eyes]

P20: Long silence (25) [*June's* tears are slowly welling up].

T21: Does this hurt a lot? [*June* cannot keep back tears anymore, starts crying] You really wanted me to notice you more often, as a soul, as a person, didn't you? [*June* looks straight at T., eyes filled with tears, corner of mouth trembling]

The empathic validation of by the *facilitator/father* of the emotional pain has an immediate effect on *June* helping her to get deeper in the exploration of her experience, visible from her statement 'You made me too, but I'm still not yours!' made with the nonverbal emphasis of irritation and affirmation. In the transcript we witness the effect on emotional engagement of the *facilitator/father's* verbalization of *June's* unfulfilled need for being seen as a unique person

on her own, supporting June's basic need of autonomy and relatedness (Roth et al., 2019). The validation breaks *June's* defensive emotions of anger, providing access to primary emotions of loss and sadness.

The second part of the expression stage revolves around June's feelings of hopelessness about being seen by her father as she is, with her own unique subjective preferences and wishes. The consistent focus on trying to understand *June's* experience, not only supported *June's* need for competence, but indirectly also her needs for autonomy and relatedness, facilitating emotional engagement and integrative emotion processing (Roth et al., 2019). The *facilitator/father's* empathic conjecture (T26) helps *June* to maintain focus on her feelings, and to search further and find the right expression of her problems. The *facilitator/father's* empathic reflections from T28 to T32 are explicitly autonomy-supportive (Roth et al., 2019), and help *June* in her journey of emotional exploration to the point that she puts into words (P36) her angry fantasy of sending her father to an imaginary place, where he would be forced to learn to see the world from a different perspective.

P22: Silence (15).

T23: Is there anything else you'd like to tell me, my little girl? [June drops eye contact, looks up, out of the window, starts looking for handkerchief in her pocket, sighs a deep one, blows and wipes her nose. She turns back looking out of the window, apparently focusing inside, reflecting on the question]

P24: Silence (12).

P25: That I am also someone and not everything needs to be criticized. [looks straight to T. again, voice irritated and hurt]

T26: Hm. (4) Are you tired of the fact that the only way I can relate to you is by telling you what's wrong with you, what you did wrong?

P27: No, but you do it in a way that makes it seem like you care, but you actually don't pay attention to how I am or who I am. You give me food, I have a room, and all that. But who I am doesn't interest you at all. You always give me shit-brown clothes, and you even sew the swimwear too. (2) You control everything completely. (2) I'm not like you! [Raised, self-affirming voice] I don't like it when even my socks are ironed and neatly stacked. [looking straight at T., voice explaining, irritated, imitates father's actions with gestures]

T28: (4) On the surface it seems like I really take care of you....

P29: That's right, everything was described in the textbook like that. Yes, I believe it. [agreeing serious voice, at the same time expressing irony]

T30: So, what can be done in the material, like sorting socks by color, even sewing your swimwear, making the closet, so it seems like my life is all about... you.

P31: That's correct. [wipes nose]

T32: The only thing missing is to see you, 'to be seen', [June look straight at T. and keeps nodding] to ask you what you want, how you want it, to help you connect with yourself and make sure that even that what you want happens. And not always... as if you were only a prop for me to take care of someone?

P33: Yes! [looks upwards, nods agreeingly, then looks back again to T. eyes]

P34: Silence (18).

T35: Is there anything else you would like to say?

P36: I would like to send you to a place where everyone is obligated to love each other, where everyone wears stupid clothes and paints themselves with weird colors, where they do whatever they want, and you would have to stay there for a long time. [explains this punishment fantasy vividly, irritated] And you would realize that there are more important things than 'how much this is on my mind, who I greet, who I don't, or how polite I am. [very exaggerated ironic mimicking of father's voice and body language] Or (.) I really don't give a fucking damn! [angrily] And you should go to a place like that, seriously, to see that things can be done differently. [voice less angry, calmer and more cooperative]

T37: (4) You would like me to hear that parenting is not just about how you hold your body, how you greet, how you keep your mind organized, [June looks straight at T., eyes filling up with tears, wipes nose] but also about the fact that you have a soul, and you would like me to try to connect with your soul as well, and even ask you what you would like, what is it that you think?

P38: Yes. [looking straight in T. eyes]

In the attempts of being the perfect parent, the *facilitator/father* recognizes he was blind to her actual feelings and needs. *June's* explicit acknowledgment of the thwarted need to be seen manifests the second necessary element of successful resolution (Greenberg & Foerster, 1996).

The third part of the expression stage starts again with an explicit inquiry of emotional experience, supporting *June's* need for competence and relatedness (Weinstein et al., 2022), and further deepens *June's* feelings of primary anger, sadness, and loss. Maybe because of the previous exploration of her feelings and her growing trust in being heard empathically, she feels safe to express here very difficult feelings, starting with the expression of her heavy thought about her father not loving her. Her difficulties of verbalizing these feelings are clearly visible in her body language: during P40, she looks down at her hands every time she shares a part of her experience, as if being unsure whether it is allowed or even possible to say out loud the

unbearable thoughts and associated feelings of never having been wanted and loved by him. The primary unbearable emotions of sadness and loss seem very difficult for *June* to stay with, so she moves back to a blaming, angry position.

T39: (5) Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

P40: Actually, [June looks down to her fingers, then looks up again to T. eyes] I don't even think you really love me. (5) [looks down again to her hands then looks back to T. eyes]. Because Mom was more important to you (.), than me. (3) And you were angry [looks down at her hands again and looks back at T. eyes] when you found out that I was going to be born because you were more worried about Mom getting hurt no matter what, rather than me being born. (3) You didn't even want me and whatever [voice raised looks down at her hands, then looks back at T. eyes again], and now you come with that textbook crap, that 'you're parenting your children perfectly' [exaggerated very ironic mimicking]. Bullshit! I think [looks down at her hands again then back to T. eyes] it would have been just as good for you if we hadn't been there. [looks straight at T. first. When T. looks down, June also looks down]

T41: Silence (9).

T42: Are you interested about how I am in this situation?

P43: (6) [looks up on the side, grimaces with mouth, the looks out of the window, then back at T.] No! [very defying voice starts looking at T. straight in the eye again, with tears in her eyes]

T44: So, you're fed up with me loving you in a textbook way, [June wipes nose] and maybe (3) I might not really know how to love at all?

P45: Hm [in an agreeing intonation]. Sorry, but this question is coming a bit too late, so after forty-six years you ask: 'Oh, and how are you? [Exaggerated, very sarcastic mimicking] Well, how the hell should I be doing? You didn't give a damn about how I am. How would I be doing? [leans toward T., looks straight in T. eyes, tears in her eyes, voice hurt].

T46: Hm.

P47: And then I should be empathetic and understanding, and then, [escalating anger] now should I throw myself and say, 'Oh, how nice that you're asking!?' [Exaggerated very ironic mimicking]. Oh, and weather I can connect... I don't want to connect with you! [Leans forward, looks straight into T. eyes] Go somewhere, get a treatment to yourself, then come back, redo these forty-six years, and then we'll meet! [looks defying straight in T. eyes, then wipes nose]

T48: (4) If at that time when you needed this connection, when it would have really supported you as a child if I had paid attention to how you were, what was happening to you... not just constantly pushing what needs to be done....

P49: ...what way it is right [June helping T. expressing herself with a calm voice].

T50: ...that the right solution is not just raising you, but trying to get to know you, to see your humanity. Well, if I didn't do that when it was supposed to happen, then... as for now, well... you say, 'thank you very much, but I don't want it anymore'.

P51: Well, it's a bit strange, yes. [with a calm voice, looking straight at T]

T52: (6) Is there anything else you would like to say?

P53: That I missed you. (4) That it was shitty being alone. [starts crying]

T54: It would have been so important if I could have been there for you not only physically but emotionally as well.

P55: Yes. [crying, corner of mouth trembling]

June's anger gives energy to her expression and supports her to mimic and enact sarcastically her father's voice as remembered, allowing her to fully experience her anger. The extremely emotionally laden combination of her primary feelings of sadness about never having been wanted and loved with her anew escalating secondary anger is reaching here a point, where for the *facilitator/father* it seems impossible to move further by empathic listening alone. Instead, after a very long pause of 9 s, the *facilitator/father* in T42 asks *June* whether she is interested in knowing how he is feeling in this situation. *June* hears and seem to reflect on this question seriously, as can be deduced from her looking up, out of the window, with tears in her eyes for 6 s, after which she looks back to him and answers with a very clear "No!". The *facilitator/father* acknowledges immediately *June's* reluctance to consider his perspective, and in T44 goes back taking the emphatic listening position, supporting the basic needs of competence and relatedness (Weinstein et al., 2022), saying "You're fed up with me loving you in a textbook way, and maybe I might not really know how to love at all?". In P45 and P47 *June's* anger is escalating further, and as she explores and verbalizes this experience it becomes clear to both her and the *facilitator/father*, that the very idea of taking his perspective in this situation infuriates her.

When the *facilitator/father* empathically reflects to June his understanding of her experience in T49, *June* suddenly takes over the *facilitator/father's* speech and with a calm, collaborative voice continues his sentence. In T50 the *facilitator/father's* empathic, validating expression of understanding of June's experience, that it is too late to forgive and to connect, with the associated feelings of loss not only in the past, but also in the present and the future, is a remarkable turning point in the chair work, and manifests the integrative effect of an autonomy-supportive response of a highly intensive emotional experience (Roth et al., 2019; Weinstein et al., 2022) as well as the presence of the necessary elements of successful resolution: experiential awareness of and expression of both primary emotions

and thwarted need (Greenberg & Foerster, 1996). In P53, after being asked whether she has anything else to say, June verbalizes her feelings of loss to her father, her unbearable loneliness during all these years, and she starts crying.

The fourth and last part of the expression stage focuses on limit setting and the process of arriving to the position of keeping her father accountable of past happenings. *June* is still angry and expresses more clearly that she is not interested in considering his explanations for what has happened in the past. Yet, the *facilitator/father's* consistent calming responses from T57-T73 helps her attain a position where she feels calmer and more relaxed and accepting with her reluctance for connection.

T56: Silence (20).

T57: I missed you too.

P58: I don't believe [looks at T. eyes straight, crying more].

T59: I didn't know how to connect.

P60: That's nonsense. [looks away a second, then looks back at T., crying, wiping her nose]

T61: If I had been able to, I would have experienced the joy of getting closer to your soul.

P62: Well, judging by your mother, you couldn't do that, [looks away, leans down to search more handkerchief], so don't feel sorry for that. [wipes nose]

T63: Maybe it wasn't just my mother who influenced my life?

P64: I don't know who influenced your life, but you could have had a better impact on mine, that's for sure. [wipes nose then looks T. in eyes]

T65: I deeply regret not being able to give what I truly wanted. Back then, that's all I could give. Is it possible that I was filled with fear and anxiety, trying to raise a perfect child and be a perfect parent?

P66: Maybe, but that's your own business! [looking straight at T.'s eyes]

T67: I agree with that. There's one thing I would like from you, though. Please don't think that I intentionally hurt you to make you suffer.

P68: But it did hurt! I don't care if it was intentional or not! [angry voice]

T69: I hear that it hurt. I sincerely apologize for not being able to give what I wanted.

P70: Do you even know what you wanted in the first place? [looking straight in T.'s eyes]

T71: (4) No, because I wasn't in touch with my own feelings.

P72: So now should I feel sorry for you? In the end, it seems like I should feel sorry for you as a parent whose duty was to lovingly care for their child. It might even turn out that I'll say, 'Oh, sorry, Dad, that it was so terrible for you.'

[angry, ironic mimicking voice. leans forward and looks straight into T.'s eyes] Go see a psychologist or something!

T73: I'm sorry for not being able to provide the emotional support that would have benefited you. As a result, I was also emotionally alone. (9) [June is looking straight at T.'s eyes] Is there anything else you would like to say?

P74: No. [calm voice]

T75: Is it possible that I'm now happy and deeply grateful that you showed yourself to me in this way?

P76: You can indeed be, yes. [with a calm and affirming voice]

June keeps her father accountable for what has (not) happened between them during those formative years, and clearly sets her limits regarding any external expectations for opening up to connection and closeness in their future relationship. When in T75 the *facilitator/father* tentatively asks, again supporting June's need for competence and autonomy, whether it is possible that he is feeling grateful that *June* has showed herself to him to this extent, *June's* voice is calm and affirming, when she answers "Yes". This part of the transcript manifests two further necessary experiential processes for successful resolution: self-validation and change in the representation of the other (Greenberg & Foerster, 1996).

Completion Stage

In the completion stage the *facilitator/father* once more expresses tentatively that it feels painful for him to understand that he and his daughter has missed important opportunities to connect to each other when he, as a parent had the possibility to do it. *June* calms down, and nods at his father's acknowledgement of their - now commonly shared - pain and loss. The *facilitator/father* inquiring June how she is feeling now, and *June's* question whether it is asked by the *facilitator/father* or by the trainer makes it clear, that the chair work is approaching its end.

T77: I genuinely thank you! On the one hand, I'm grateful, but on the other hand, can it be, that it feels very painful that we didn't experience these moments when they should have happened?

P78: Hm. [calm, but crying voice, looks straight into T.'s eyes]

T79: (5) How are you doing now, *June*?

P80: [Sighing deep and laughing] Who's asking?

T81: Who should ask?

P82: Rather (name of the trainer) [laughs more relaxed, while wiping tears from her eyes].

T83: Then I, as (name of the trainer), ask, how are you doing now?

P84: (5) [June crying, laughing, looks out of the window] Well, at least a rainbow appeared in the sky. [looks down, closes her eyes, and touches her eyelids with tum and index

finger] Well, it reduced my tension. [sighs deeply]. It's good to see, how I perceive it in this way, but at the same time, there may be something else [laughing] on the other side, which I am consciously aware of... I've been dealing with this topic a lot, but somehow it hasn't arrived... to me on an emotional level. [wipes nose and looks at T.]

T85: Hm. So, we can say it's a drop in the ocean. Has it helped you in some way?

P86: Well, I was just thinking that maybe I should also write to him, [laughing] (.) concerning these.

T87: Write something to him something concerning these?

P88: Yes.

T89: We can leave it at that, then I'll stop the recording, thank you.

During the completion phase *June* is considerably less tense, which finds expression both metaphorically, by her noticing and commenting on a rainbow in the sky, and literally, by her stating in a calm voice accompanied by a deep sigh, that her tension has decreased. At the end, she is indicating, that even though during the chair work she was not willing to consider her father's perspective, now, after the process is done, she is. Here we witness once more a clear change in the representation of the other, the fourth significant necessary element of successful resolution (Greenberg & Foerster, 1996). The transcript ends by *June* contemplating the possibility of writing a letter to her father.

Discussion

This study presented and described a modified version of chair work, called 'chair work with the empathic other', taking place within the framework of an advanced nonviolent communication training. The justification for closely exploring the participant's emotional processing in this variation of chair work for unfinished business is the recurrent research finding that many clients find engagement with chair work difficult, even unsurmountable, compromising the depth of emotional change (Muntigl et al., 2020). Previous research has pointed to the compatibility and applicability of nonviolent communication in emotion-focused therapeutic settings (Holmström, 2023). In this current study, drawing on insights on basic need support for motivation and psychological change (Roth et al., 2019), we show through a case example that talking directly to a need-supporting, empathic other helps to emotionally engage the participant, and guides her through the four necessary components of a successful chair work, leading to resolution. While the conventional chair-work technique, where the therapist takes an empathic stance and supports the process from an outsider position is need supportive, talking *directly* to the empathic other provides the participant with additional

communicational and relational experiences that cannot be provided from an outsider position: being actively listened to and experiencing one's own perspective empathically conjectured and validated by the significant other. Previous research has found these elements essential to integrative emotion regulation and autonomous motivation (Weinstein et al. 2020; Roth et al., 2019). Psychodynamic theory, that conceptualizes the human mind as the result of internalization of significant attachment relationships, also supports the therapeutic significance of a new experience directly from the significant other (Slade & Holmes, 2019).

The analysis of the transcript shows how chair work where the facilitator takes on the role of the 'empathic other', who communicates according to basic need-supporting principles, guides the participant through the experiential components to successful resolution of unfinished business. The necessary factors for successful resolution of unfinished business specified by Greenberg and Foerster (1996) were all present in the transcript: experiential access and intense expression of primary adaptive emotions, expression of thwarted need, and a shift in the representation of the other. Receiving empathic listening and understanding *directly* from the significant other facilitated the participant's exploration of emotional experience, supported the evocation of relevant childhood memories, and intensified the expression of emotions during chair work. The transcript shows how direct conversation with the empathic other facilitated emotional engagement in the task as well as the associated activation and expression of the participant's needs behind these emotions (Nardone et al., 2022).

Limitations and Further Research

The presented study examines one participant's experiential process during a modified version of empty-chair work in a person-centered communication training. We acknowledge the exploratory nature of the study, not claiming generalization. A communication training setting is different from counselling and psychotherapy settings. Also, characteristics of both the client and the therapeutic relationship can influence the feasibility of the technique, as well as its effectiveness and outcome. Future research could repeat this study in counselling and therapeutic settings with participants of varying backgrounds, both as a single intervention, and as part of experientially oriented integrative therapies.

The therapeutic effect of the empathic other introducing his or her feelings and needs, while keeping the communication strictly within a person-centered framework also deserves further studies. In our study, this had beneficial effects on the participant's emotional engagement in chair work. Our findings point to the possibility that also in therapeutic settings, when used judiciously and carefully, it can have beneficial effects. However, there is a need to

be cautious about the situations this approach is applicable. Certainly, there are also situations, where it can be counter therapeutic, like when the significant other was so traumatizing, that even imagining an encounter with him or her requires specific therapeutic preparations (Leal et al., 2021).

Given the substantial number of clients facing unsurmountable difficulties with engaging in chair work or engaging with the necessary emotional intensity, future research is needed to shed light on the requirements and potentials of possible modifications in technique to support these clients experientially.

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Declarations

Ethical Approval The collection of video-recordings was part of the study design that has been submitted to and approved by the Human Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Jyväskylä, approval number 1487/13.00.04.00/2022. This committee works in accordance with the guidelines for research involving human participants, issued by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity in 2019.

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