

Speaking Like a Therapist: Conversational Moves, Control and Accountability in Therapeutic Interaction

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This paper examines six conversational strategies that the therapist employs during session interaction to exert the necessary control to perform the therapeutic relationship. These are: metalinguistic speech acts: third-person positioning; speaking through the client; speaking for the client; re-authoring emotions, and invoking the notion of communication as a skill or technology. I use conversational data (from session exchanges and interviews with therapists and clients) alongside textual evidence (from training manual and a therapy handbook) to contextualize the strategies in terms of a presupposition different accountability of therapist and client, that allows the therapist to conversationally claim, and forces the client to grant, control. My aim is to generate a relationally grounded theory of authority as a conversational process in which both client and therapist participate -- with different access, different vocabularies and different conversational outcomes. By examining the accountability dynamics involved in the conversational moves, I examine psychotherapy as an example of an asymmetrical relationship that works by authorizing the accounts and ways of accounting of the expert, and invalidate those of the clients.

Key terms: therapeutic interaction, conversational dynamics, accountability, therapeutic authority