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Questionnaire for an Autobiographical Portrait of a Practicing Therapist and Researcher

by
Ronald J. Chenail *

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The following questions serve as a "character development" exercise for therapists. This self-examination is intended as an on-going process through which you can come into greater awareness of who you are, especially when you act as a therapist or researcher. In both practices, who you are is a very important matter. In therapy, the self of the clinician is a central notion in a number of clinical arts--psychoanalysis, narrative therapies, co-constructionist therapies, and language systems approaches. Likewise, in research genres such as qualitative inquiry, action research, and feminist research, the self of the researcher is an important ingredient of the formula for effective and ethical practice.

The idea for this exercise, as well as some of the questions, has been adapted from *The Writing Habit* by [David Huddle \(1991\)](#). In his book, Huddle presented an exercise for helping writers to create well-rounded characters for their novels and short stories. I felt the notion of asking questions as a way to create an other would be an interesting experience for therapists to learn more about themselves as they were about to undertake the process of becoming researchers.

I have always been taught in my literature classes that a well-developed character can be "removed" from his or her own native story and be "re-settled" in a new literary surrounding. In this migration, we should be able to have some ideas as to how this well-formed character would act, think, and feel in his or her new narrative home.

To me, the migration from the land of therapy to the domain of research can be a rather de-familiarizing experience for the neophyte researcher nee therapist. This can be even more the case if the trip is one marked by a degree of to and fro-ness, that is, as the researcher researches his or her own clinical work in an on-going attempt to refine his or her own counseling practice.

This potentially dizzying effect of wearing one hat and then another can be mitigated if therapists take stock of themselves so as to become their own well-developed character. To know thyself is an old bit of advice, and I think it still is a useful one to heed. To researcher and therapist alike--all good inquiry starts with a good and thorough self-examination. Be it in the cause of avoiding counter-transference in therapy (or research for that matter) or developing the self-as-an-instrument in research (or ditto for therapy), getting to oneself is a rather useful enterprise. Good luck with this exercise. Self-referential curiosity can be rather awkward at first, but it is well worth the work (and play) in the long run for one to become a more self-aware researcher and therapist.

The Autobiography Questionnaire

1. Describe yourself physically. What are your most pleasing physical attributes? What do you find most displeasing of your physical attributes?
2. Describe yourself in terms of your race, ethnicity, gender, and spirituality. Which of these characteristics do you find most dominant in your life and which do find least dominant?
3. Satchel Page once asked, "How old would you be if you didn't know how old you was?" Try answering that question for yourself.
4. What are your professional practice habits? What patterns are there in your life as a practitioner?
5. Describe your place of practice. Give details of its interior and exterior. Include sensory impressions of your workplace. Describe how you live and work in this setting.
6. Describe your behavior when you are not working at your profession. What are the differences and similarities between when you are at work and when you are at play?
7. What are your tastes in movies, books, food, furniture, painting, sports, beverages, magazines, music, politics, and houses? What things are you passionate about?
8. Describe the places in which you grew up and spent the most of your time. Be particular about geography, buildings, and settings. What, if any, are the ways in which these living environments have shaped you as a practitioner?
9. Describe your parents. How did they influence you in your professional choices and practices? Relate three important conversations you had with them.
10. Describe your siblings. How did they influence you in your professional choices and practices? Relate three important conversations you had with them.
11. Describe your grandparents. How did they influence you in your professional choices and practices? Relate three important conversations you had with them.
12. Describe the places in which you trained and educated to be a practitioner. What did you "take" from these places in your process of becoming a practitioner?
13. Describe the people who taught and trained you to be a practitioner. Describe the people who made up the populations with whom you worked during you training and educational experiences.
14. What were the three most important events of your training and educational experience? Give details of these moments and tell how they helped to shape you as a practitioner.

15. Who were the three most important clients, patients, or students with whom you worked during these training and educational days? Describe these people and relate the details of your encounters with them. How did they help to make you the practitioner you are today?
16. What was the last event which helped to change the way you practice in your profession? Describe it and tell what about you was different after having this experience.
17. Describe the three clients, patients, and/or students you will never forget. Delate the details of your unforgettable encounters with them.
18. What are three things about you as a person which have not changed over the years? What are three things about you as a professional which have also not changed over the years?
19. What has been your most embarrassing moment as a practitioner? The funniest? The most dramatic? The most tragic? The most discouraging?
20. What has been the toughest ethical choice you have had to make as a practitioner? What were the details of the situation? Describe how you came to make the decision which you made.
21. What troubles you most about your profession and your fellow professionals?
22. Describe the most mundane aspects of your day as a practitioner. Describe the most interesting aspects of your day as a practitioner. Describe the most challenging aspects of your day as a practitioner.
23. Describe your significant other. What do you enjoy the most from this relationship? How does this person influence you in your practice? What, if any, are the difficulties which arise from balancing a work life with a home life?
24. How have your relationships with your parents and siblings changed over the last five years? What you think they would say is different about you now from when you were ten years younger?
25. If you have children, describe them. How are they similar to you? How are they different from you? What have been your three biggest joys of being parent?
26. What are the toughest problems you face as a practitioner? What do you do when faced with one of these challenges?
27. What will your life as a professional be like in five years? In ten years? In fifteen years?
- 28.

- If you weren't doing what you are doing now as a practitioner, what would you be doing professionally?
29. What have been the five professional books or papers which have had the most influence on you as a practitioner? When did you first read these works and what about them has been important to you?
30. What would you say that your clients would say about you as a therapist? As a person?
31. What would you say that your supervisors would say about you as a therapist? As a person?
32. What would you say that your colleagues would say about you as a therapist? As a person?
33. What would you say were your strengths as a therapist when it comes to being a researcher?
34. What would you say were your strengths as a person when it comes to being a researcher?
35. Did you identify different strengths in answering Questions 31 and 32?
36. What would you say would be things you would need to do in order to improve these strengths?
37. What would you say were your weaknesses when it comes to being a researcher?
38. What would you say would be things you would need to do in order to overcome these weaknesses?
39. What things are there about being a therapist which can hinder you becoming a researcher?
40. What things are there about being a researcher which can hinder your being a therapist?
41. Name three ways in which therapy and research seem alike to you.
42. Name three ways in which therapy and research seem different to you.
43. Do you think research can be therapeutic process? If your answer is "No," then explain why not? If your answer is "Yes," then explain how?
44. Do you think therapy can be reflective process? If your answer is "No," then explain why not? If your answer is "Yes," then explain how?
- 45.

- Do you think research methodology can be used to practice therapy? If your answer is "No," then explain why not? If your answer is "Yes," then explain how?
46. Do you think therapy models can be used to conduct research? If your answer is "No," then explain why not? If your answer is "Yes," then explain how?
47. What sorts of things do say with any regularity in your therapy sessions? From where did the words, phrases, and sentences come?
48. What would be the most remarkable thing you ever said in a therapy session?
49. What would be the most remarkable thing you ever heard in a therapy session?
50. Have you ever been in therapy as a client? If yes, describe what that experience was like for you. If no, explain why you have never been.

If you would like to add any questions of your own to the list, please e-mail them to me, ron@nsu.acast.nova.edu, and I will update this questionnaire with your contribution duly noted.

Reference

Huddle, D. (1991). *The writing habit*. Hanover, NH: University of Vermont.

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