

Identity and Differentiation

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As professionals have often risked getting caught up in unproductive discussions on differentiation when defining identity, I would like to introduce a meta-model to clarify identity.

Model: Sharp contours and hard cores

This model is based on a linguistic concept of the cultural scientist George Steiner (see: Babel). In this concept, definitions with sharp contours are differentiated from ones with a hard core . For scientific clarity, sharp-contoured definitions are ideal in which the emphasis is on the creation of frontiers between the scope of meaning of the terms to be distinguished from one another.

Training	Organisational Development
Therapy	Consultation

Figure 1: topographical presentation of sharp-contoured definitions (example)

For cultural use, “definitions” with a hard core are better because it is more important to understand the essential meanings than to differentiate them from what surrounds

them. It is culturally normal for the scope of meaning of terms to overlap and this need not be relinquished.

Applied to identity, this means that self-images are not gained by differentiation and certainly not by exclusion, but group themselves around a few characteristics of this identity and are formulated positively. It does not matter that other identities partially claim the same characteristics. For example, while regarding attempts to distinguish psychotherapy from consultation in a clear-cut manner, you may notice some peculiar criteria of exclusiveness such as “no transference in consultation” or “consultation deals with healthy people”. But in fact consultation clients may be more or less mentally disturbed, or relationship phenomena that can be described as transference may occur during consultation.

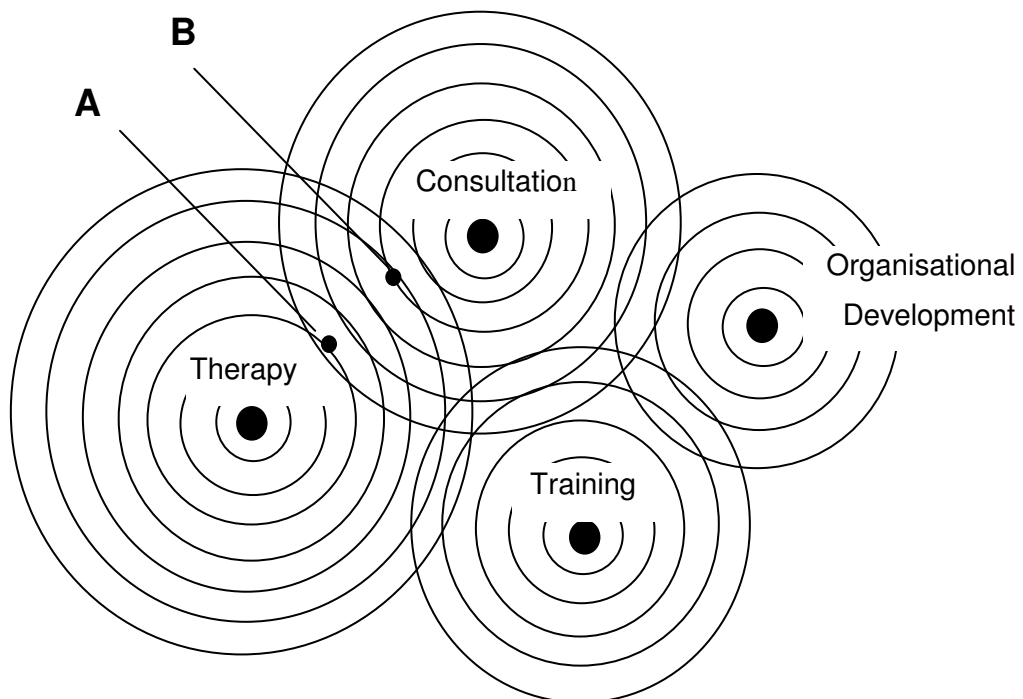


Figure 2: topographical presentation of overlapping hard core definitions (example) (A= transference in therapy; B= working with healthy people in consultation)

The root cause for the difference is not the thing itself, but the way it is dealt with, and stems from a respectively different understanding of therapy and consultation. In therapy, working with healthy people is peripheral. But if a therapist works with a healthy person, the person has to be declared ill. This is even more so if health insurances are to foot the bill. When therapists and consultants are not talking about

borderline cases but about typical aspects of their activities and their professional understanding of their effects, it is easy to gain an understanding of their respective identities. Overlapping does not irritate one's own identity and competence, but reveals opportunities for collaboration and acknowledgement of the concerns of the "neighbouring vocation".

The tradition of sharp-contoured thinking is also one of the factors responsible for excessive orientation on securing borders and areas of competence in organizations. Frequently we are not even aware of certain areas of competence until we are turned away at the border when attempting to look after seemingly "orphaned" areas of competence. Metaphorically speaking, too many resources are invested in "staking out and securing claims" instead of in cultivating the land and filling the space productively.

Another cultural habit sometimes makes it difficult to advocate identity individually and positively. We think we have to match ourselves against a complete, homogeneous and non-contradictory description of identity. As this "uniform" seldom fits properly and every deviation has to be justified, the result is ambiguity and uncertainty about our identity. Differentiating and sometimes polarising comparisons with other identities may be a welcome diversion in this case. We are uncertain about our own identity but try to feel out our own position by jostling with others.

If we depart from a homogeneously defined professional and occupational understanding and see identity as a mosaic which essentially has a recognizable and classifiable character but can appear in many variations, hard core professional identities with individual variations can be found which do not lay claim to exclusive colonialist characteristics. There is hardly anything we can claim solely for ourselves. If we think this is necessary in order to have an unmistakable identity, we are forced to deny others the quality we claim for ourselves. Here an alternative construction can help which allows distinctiveness to be recognized rather by the particular combination of characteristics than by the uniqueness of its components¹. It is the combination that makes a bouquet unique and not the claim that it consists of flowers not to be found in other bouquets.

¹ Transaktions-Analyse 1/88 p. 141-163