

Psychotherapy Guidebook

FISCHER- HOFFMAN PROCESS

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Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

Fischer-Hoffman Process

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DEFINITION

Fischer-Hoffman Process is a highly structured, time-limited, intensive psychotherapy designed to alter the early childhood identifications on which the client's current psychological distress is based. Its core assumption is that the client's stated problems are a result of character traits and behaviors adopted in childhood (before the age of thirteen) in an attempt to win parental love, and that any lasting therapeutic intervention must modify this conditioning to allow for genuine choices. It is a psychoanalytically based model that utilizes contemporary techniques to mobilize the relevant feelings and produce behavior change. There is a strong emphasis on the development of the spiritual aspect of the self, both as a resource during the therapy and for future problem solving.

HISTORY

Robert Hoffman, founder and director of the Quadrinity Center in San Francisco where the process is now based, reports that he received the process psychically from his dead friend Sigfried Fischer in 1967. Fischer was

an orthodox psychoanalyst and neurologist who had died six months earlier. Hoffman, at the time a businessman in Oakland, California, had a long-standing interest in psychic phenomena. He began teaching the process to his psychic development groups, and by 1969 began to receive serious attention from local psychiatrists and psychologists for whom he increasingly served as a consultant. Many of them were sufficiently impressed with their own experiences in going through the process that they sought training as teachers.

The staff of teachers at the Quadrinity Center has been and continues to be composed of both professionals and clinically experienced but non-credentialed personnel. Because of its high training standards, which include many hours of individual supervision even for highly experienced professional clinicians, the process is not easily mass-produced. Hence its visibility is less than that of other contemporary approaches. The Quadrinity Center staff is identified with both spiritual and educational traditions, and views its work as an alternative to psychotherapy.

TECHNIQUE

The process is currently taught in groups of about thirty, using a combination of weekly group meetings of three to five hours, sessions with the client's individual teacher, and extensive writing assignments. Teachers

make lengthy taped responses to the client's written homework, and these tapes are listened to by the client at the beginning of each weekly group session. Individual sessions occur around specific tasks, or when blocks arise. The client may easily spend twenty hours a week for the thirteen weeks required to complete the process. Most of this work can be done on weekends, as the structure is designed to be as compatible as possible with the conventional work schedule. Motivation is the most crucial selection factor; even highly disturbed clients have successfully completed the process if they are capable of doing the assignments (see Smith, 1975).

In all its aspects, the design of the process includes the most powerful existing techniques for mobilizing relevant emotional experiences, in combination with a focus on cognitive integration of these experiences. In this it differs from several contemporary approaches in which expression of mood or emotion, body work, or powerful spiritual experiences are felt to be enough in themselves. At each stage, written responses on an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual level are elicited from the client, thus allowing the teacher to continuously monitor what the client is experiencing. This also provides a permanent record for the client, termed the "book of life."

One can describe the process in four stages:

- 1. The groundwork stage.** In this crucial orientation stage, two events occur simultaneously. The first is a grounding in

certain spiritual concepts and experiences designed to mobilize positive internal resources, not only for completing the process but also for use when it is over. Many clients have had experiences with institutionalized religion that have alienated them from their own spirituality. The teachers are highly skilled at working with these resistances and enabling each person to connect with the spiritual part of himself. Contact with the “spiritual guide” (external to the self) and the “spiritual self” (an aspect of the self) is begun immediately, as they must be developed in sufficient strength to replace the teacher. This is usually accomplished by the time the client completes the process.

The second task can be referred to as character analysis, or an identification of the negative traits and behavior that are creating difficulties for the client. Often the behavior and traits are something the client takes for granted. It is the teacher’s job to call them into question by continuous confrontation, either in person or in the weekly taped responses. For the client, this usually creates an experience of frustration and confusion about his current identity, as previously automatic patterns are repeatedly challenged. The client is encouraged to utilize the spiritual resources as an anchor at this stage.

2. The repudiation stage (prosecution of mother/father). In this stage, the negative traits of the client are then redefined as not being truly the client’s, but rather as traits adopted to please the parents and buy their love. At this point, the client focuses exclusively on his mother, and after completing stage

three, repeats the sequence with the focus on his father. With the aid of specific techniques to facilitate recall, the client describes those scenes from early childhood that led to the development of traits or coping patterns that proved later to be dysfunctional, and which were essentially an imitation of, or rebellion from, parental traits and behavior. Repeatedly, the client is required to connect these patterns with current difficulties. In the group sessions, experiential techniques are used to help the client reexperience the pain of not receiving the love he so deeply needed and vent the rage at the parents for fostering the adoption of the destructive traits. This stage culminates in the “bitch session” in which the client repudiates the traits and expresses fury at the parents, from the standpoint of the unloved child who failed to receive the love that was both needed and deserved.

3. Forgiveness and compassion (defense of mother/father). After a major catharsis of the rage and pain is affected, the group moves on. Clients are not permitted to hang onto the rage, even though this is the point at which major improvements begin to occur in the client’s self-image. During this stage, the client re-creates each parent’s childhood experiences, from the standpoint of the parent as an unloved child. The client thus comes to a genuine understanding, and forgiveness, of the parental behavior. Fischer-Hoffman Process differs from other therapies in that this aspect of the process is systematically approached and carefully monitored by the teacher. Reaching true compassion is not viewed as possible until after the pain and rage have been

expressed.

4. Consolidation and relearning. One of the features that distinguishes Fischer-Hoffman Process from many of its predecessors is the degree of conscious and explicit attention given to relearning new patterns once the deprogramming has been accomplished. A primary tool for this task is called “recycling,” in which the client transforms the negative behavior pattern into its positive opposite by a conscious, symbolic act. Clients are instructed to continue recycling after finishing the process, to promote assimilation and also as a tool for future problem solving. Most clients are highly enthusiastic about its usefulness, both during and after the process.

Other facets of the consolidation process include restructuring the relationship between the emotions and the intellect so that neither is sacrificed or overvalued. In the final stages, attention is also given to the client’s capacity to tolerate positive experiences, to offset the exclusive problem focus that can itself become a source of difficulty for clients who may already be inclined to selectively attend to negative experiences.

The process ends with a final “closure ritual” in which the highlights of the process are summarized prior to a ceremony that affirms the changes the client has experienced. Clients are strongly urged to continue to use the tools for problem solving, and there are reunions and social events periodically. However, the center deliberately avoids promoting post-process workshops,

seminars, or activities that would perpetuate the therapeutic dependency.

APPLICATIONS

As currently taught, Fischer-Hoffman Process provides an intensive therapeutic experience for those whose difficulties do not yield to interventions that approach problems mainly in their here-and-now manifestations. A high level of motivation and the capacity to complete the rigorous assignments are the major selection factors.

There is currently a need for trained teachers to begin exploring how much the process can be simplified and still be effective. This would permit its application in a wider variety of settings. There is also a need for additional systematic research on the process itself, and particularly follow-up studies.