

Revisiting Andrew Salter: An old wine in a new bottle

URI WERNIK

Abstract

Andrew Salter's contribution to the current cognitive-behavioural therapies is reviewed. It is noticed that his notions regarding inhibition and dis-inhibition are supported by later research on temperament. His analysis in terms of the theory of evolution is also up to date. Salter's technique of 'feeling talk', besides the rhetorical element, lacks means of implementation. A case study of treating an inhibited client is presented where a card game of chance is used for this purpose. The promising results are understood in terms of playfulness, paradoxical interventions and chaos theory. It is suggested that the game can be applied to many other problems in living.

Key words: Andrew Salter, inhibition, feeling talk, chance, playfulness

One of the unrecognized forerunners of cognitive-behavioural therapies is Andrew Salter (1914-1996), the founder of Conditioned Reflex Therapy (1949). Salter introduced a method that emphasized conscious physical action, contradicting, opposing, and attacking beliefs as the way to combat ingrained negative behaviours. He was one of first nationally recognized opponents of psychoanalysis (ref: Andrew Salter: 2012). In this article, his "feeling talk" technique will be described and its theoretical background will be reviewed. A case study will be presented, describing the updated utilization of this technique.

Inhibition and Excitation

Salter explains all problems of living in simple terms of Pavlov's conditioned reflexes and quotes him saying that: "... all the highest nervous activity, as it manifests itself in the conditioned reflex, consists of a continual change of these three fundamental processes – *excitation*, *inhibition* and *disinhibition*" (1949, p. 14). Salter considers excitation and expression of emotion to be identical:

The basis of life is excitation. The creatures that survive in the jungle are those that slink and jump and kill. The polite and inhibited ones crouch behind a tree and are soon dead. The human species could never have survived if it were inhibited ... evolutionary speaking, we are merely stomachs that grew more complicated (p. 14f).

Some of Salter's ideas, regarding differences between the genders for example, are out of date, but the examination of behaviours from the perspective of evolution theory is very modern. Likewise, the emphasis on the excitation-inhibition dimension is on par with current knowledge. It is a well-established finding that the initial disposition to approach or to avoid new situations (inhibited and uninhibited to the unfamiliar) is the most stable temperamental characteristic of children, which is associated with physiological profiles that are probably under some genetic control.

The display of much or little motor activity and crying to unfamiliar stimuli in babies four months old, predicts their temperament at two years of age. Based on these early observations, it is possible to predict which of the children are likely to be fearless, sociable and emotionally spontaneous at age ten and which of them will probably be shy, timid and quiet (Kagan & Snidman, 1991).

Salter continues:

Excitation is a basic law of life, and neurosis is the result of inhibition of natural impulses ... When we pause to consider what we have done when we felt happiest, we will recognize that we spoke without thinking. We expressed our innermost feelings. We did not waste time and energy percolating. We acted in an excitatory fashion (p. 37).

Salter describes the excitatory personality and gives examples of freely used "I", expressing one's views and emotions openly and enthusiastically and being spontaneous and outgoing:

That is the basis of mental health. It is futile to speak of strength. Let us talk of freedom. My cases want logic to guide their emotions. I want free outgoing emotion to guide their logic. The happy person does not waste time thinking. *Self-control comes from no control at all*; the excitatory act, without thinking. The inhibitory think, without acting and delude themselves into believing that they are highly civilized types (p. 42).

Salter was quoted in some detail, to show how a therapist's clear convictions can turn him or her into powerful rhetorician. Aiming at disinhibition, Salter explains, confronts and even shocks. He tells his clients not to be like flypaper to which every feeling sticks. He tells them to be less agreeable, say what they think and want, without caring too much about politeness: "Live with the shades up. Get the steam out! Be an emotional broadcaster, not a receiver!" (p. 60).

Teaching "feeling talk"

In order to achieve further dis-inhibition, Salter prescribed the technique of 'feeling talk' in which clients were trained to express themselves emotionally, in other words to behave excitably, thus becoming dis-inhibited. Rather than just stating facts, clients were taught to add colours or

qualifiers, that is, what, and to what degree, was felt about a fact (likes, dislikes, praise, relief, complaints, impatience, amazement, confidence, regret, surprise etc.).

In addition to words, clients were encouraged to use facial expressions to transmit feelings. Clients were instructed on contradicting freely and attacking others' opinions without simulating agreeability. Additional components of feeling-talk were: The deliberate use of the word 'I' – "I feel, and I think; I want, and I wish and hope"; Expressing agreement and appreciation, without belittling or denying, when praised; Improvisation and spontaneity–living for the moment, avoiding too much planning and taking chances.

The ideas presented by Salter are indeed convincing. 'Feeling-talk' consists of a list of behaviours that characterized outgoing persons. Yet, it is unclear how they are supposed to be internalized. Is it really enough to explain the idea to clients, or are role-playing sessions needed too? Salter does not say.

The didactic-authoritative tone is not suitable for all therapists. Clients on their part, instructed how to behave, are prone to reactance effects, in response to perceived threats to their behavioural freedom (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). The proverbial "homework assignments" given at cognitive-behavioural therapy sessions have the aura of a sombre burden. In short, Salter proposes a promising idea without any means of its implementation.

Revisiting 'feeling talk'

The client was the 43 year-old educational psychologist. She was married, had two children, and was professionally successful. Initially, she came with her husband for couples' therapy, feeling disappointed and lonely in their relationship. The two partners were busy with their respective careers, hardly saw each other, and rarely went out together. The two were very short on compliments, gestures and affectionate physical touching. The frequency and quality of their sexual contacts had declined a lot.

Becoming aware to the state of their marriage, together with some tips, was enough to awaken them and start on a program of change. Eventually they rediscovered their love for each other. During the couples' sessions, the woman client identified a problem of hers, of being inhibited emotionally. Although in the couples' sessions she had changed for the better, she was still very reserved in expressing her feelings with her dealings with other people around her. The client was interested in changing and wondered how this could be accomplished.

The therapist suggested that, first of all, her 'reserved' behaviour (or 'inhibited' in Salter's terms) was not under her voluntary control and that it was already an automatic and autonomic

response pattern. Secondly, Salter’s ‘feeling talk’ was presented with the suggestion that using a game of chance would enable a playful and easy application of the technique.

The idea of using chance for her benefit was presented as an experimental intervention and she granted informed consent. It was suggested that in order to overcome an ingrained pattern of behaviour, a more powerful force is needed, in this case, the power of luck and chance. She was willing to go along with the experiment.

Method and materials

A blank pack of cards with a distinctive design on their back was used. Usually stores that cater to kindergartens will carry such cards. It is always possible to “do it yourself” with cardboard, or with stickers glued to standard cards. Client and therapist sat down to write the first batch of cards, only including assignments that – according to her judgment – would be easy to carry out. Each card consisted of preset assignment to be carried out. One card was wild, enabling her to decide to do whatever she felt like doing. It was agreed that she would shuffle and pull out a card every evening before going to sleep, and the chosen card would determine what would take place during the next day. During the next few sessions, we added cards and modified some to arrive finally at the deck of 18 cards, shown at Table 1.

Be pessimistic and unenthusiastic in talking with your husband about the relationship.	Express enthusiastically positive feelings towards your husband	Express appreciation and compliment her students and assistants at work.
Express you feelings and sensations during sex, immediately afterwards and a day later.	Do not express any feelings during sex and complain later about it.	Express and show your love to your children in words and in body language.
Use ‘Feeling-talk’ in phone conversation with mother (‘I’ feelings, emphasizing).	Use ‘Feeling-talk’ with sister.	Use ‘Feeling-talk’ about food (what and how much do I like)
Use ‘Feeling-talk’ while describing to your husband the day’s events.	Use ‘Feeling-talk’ with a colleague at work.	Joker: ‘Feeling-talk’ With any one about any thing.
Talking with husband about the evils and hardships of life.	Choose a comedy videotape and laugh hysterically in an infantile manner.	Let your husband choose an assignment for tomorrow.
5 minutes of meditating and being aware of things I have been blessed with.	5 minutes of self criticism and dissatisfaction with self.	Accepting graciously husband’s five different compliments.

Table 1

Results

The client used the pack of cards for four weeks, drew a card each evening, and carried the instructions through most of the days. A few times she had to be reminded by her husband to do so. She reported that the card game helped her be more expressive in many ways. She started showing and expressing love in her marital relationship. She felt, and her husband confirmed that she had behaved more lovingly, but also with less hesitation about setting limits with her children and her family of origin. A colleague at work had also remarked on her warmth and openness. It must be said though, that the change could also be attributed to her upbeat mood, resulting from the improved couple relationship. In addition, the client was not extremely emotionally inhibited, and was not deficient in assertiveness and social interaction. It is impossible to extrapolate how the cards would fare with a much more inhibited person.

As the cards are designed individually, it would be almost impossible to run a controlled experiment on their use. However, in an earlier publication (Wernik, 2010), I offer some accumulative validation, demonstrating successful use of similar chance and action techniques to solve habitual problems of over-eating, posture, overuse of erotic explicit media, obsessive-compulsive behaviours, smoking, and panic attacks.

The results can be explained in terms of playfulness, which consists of creativity, curiosity, sense of humour, pleasure and spontaneity (Guitard et al., 2005). With playfulness, difficult situations can turn into challenges, occasions for learning and growing.

Related to playfulness would be a paradoxical intervention or negative practice (Dunlap, 1932). Chaos theory posits the emergence of change from small pieces of affirmative action, thus it can be said that the game of chance, as described, with its built-in unpredictability, invites the therapeutic condition of chaos (Taleb, 2001).

As can be seen here, the same results could also be explained from varied theoretical perspectives and the list is not exhausted. This, by itself, means that the suggested game of chance might have a rational behind it. All these explanations, however, are given post-hoc and therefore can only serve as hypotheses in need of further study. In any case, this contribution is aimed to demonstrate that reclaiming an old technique, with the addition of newer modes of delivery, can enrich the arsenal of therapeutic options and that similar games of chance could be applied therapeutically to many other problems in living.

Author

Dr. Uri Wernik is a Clinical Psychologist and certified Sex Therapist, living in Israel. His personal website can be found at www.therapy.co.il. He is a founding member and former chairman of The Israeli Association of Sex Therapy. He is also on the board of directors of www.trastherapy.org. He has published in professional journals articles on sexuality, psychology of religion, and creativity.

E-mail: wernik@gmail.com

References

- ANDREW SALTER. (2012, November 24). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved, December 2, 2012, from http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Andrew_Salter&oldid=524677154
- BREHM, S.S. & BREHM, J.W. (1981). *Psychological reactance: A theory of freedom and control*. New York: Academic Press
- DUNLAP, K. (1932). *Habits: Their making and unmaking*. New York: Liveright Publishing Company.
- GUITARD, P., FERLAND, F. & DUTI, E. (2005). Toward a better understanding of playfulness in adults. *Occupation, Participation, and Health*, 25 (1), pp. 9-14.
- KAGAN, J. & SNIDMAN, N. (1991). Temperamental factors in human development. *American Psychologist*, 46 (8), pp. 856-862.
- SALTER, A. (1949). *Conditioned reflex therapy*. New York: Capricorn Books.
- TALEB, N.N. (2001). *Foiled by Randomness: The hidden role of chance in life and in the markets*. New York: Texere LLC.
- WERNIK, U. (2010). *Chance action therapy: The playful way of changing*. New York: Nova Science Publisher.