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Psychiatric Interviewing Techniques VI. Experimental Study: Eliciting Feelings

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Summary: Four experimental interview styles, designed to differ in the extent of their use of active fact-oriented and active feeling-oriented techniques, were compared in relation to their use in the initial diagnostic interviews with the mothers of children referred to a psychiatric clinic. All four styles proved to be effective in eliciting emotions and feelings, but the findings suggested that each was effective for different reasons. It appeared that emotional expression could be encouraged by the interviewer's response to emotional cues, by a reflective style with little factual cross-questioning, by the use of direct requests for self-disclosures, by the optimal (but not necessarily maximal) use of interpretations and expressions of sympathy, and by direct requests for feelings.

A wide variety of non-verbal and verbal techniques to elicit emotions and feelings have been suggested but sound evidence on their relative efficacy is lacking (Cox and Rutter, 1977). Our naturalistic study of diagnostic interviews by psychiatric trainees with the mothers of children referred to a psychiatric out-patient clinic suggested the importance of both active and inactive feeling-oriented techniques (Hopkinson *et al*, 1981). Thus, more emotions tended to be expressed in interviews where the psychiatrist was not unduly talkative and was restrained in his use of interventions and interruptions. But analyses of the sequences of interviewer actions and informant responses also showed that the interviewer's use of open questions, of direct requests for feelings, of interpretations and of expressions of sympathy, tended to be immediately followed by the informant's expression of feelings. The interpretation of these findings was uncertain however, in view of the fact that the investigation was non-experimental in design and that interviewers tended to be rather inconsistent in their use of feeling-oriented techniques. As a result, it was not possible to determine the direction of causal influence in an unambiguous fashion. An experimental design was required for that purpose; this paper reports such a study.

Methods

Four contrasting interview styles were compared. The styles were chosen on the basis of an earlier naturalistic study (Rutter and Cox, 1981) which had suggested the importance of four active techniques for obtaining detailed factual information (Cox *et al*, 1981), and five active techniques for eliciting emotional feelings (Hopkinson *et al*, 1981). The experimental styles derived from these findings consisted of the four permutations based on combinations of high and low usage of these two sets of active techniques.

The first, designated a sounding board style, approximated to a style based on a low usage of both sets of techniques and was nearest to the 'minimal' activity psychiatric interviewing methods advocated by Finesinger (1948). The second, designated an active psychotherapy style, involved a low use of active fact-oriented techniques and a high use of active feeling-oriented techniques. It was nearest to the diagnostic approach advocated by psychotherapists such as Balint (Balint and Balint, 1961) and Gill (Gill *et al*, 1954). The third, structured style, was based on a high use of active fact-oriented techniques and was closest to the present state examination developed by Wing and his colleagues (Wing *et al*, 1967; 1977). The fourth, systematic exploratory style, involved a high use of fact-oriented and feeling-oriented techniques. It was fairly close to a manner of interviewing which has many advocates but which may be exemplified by the techniques developed by Brown and Rutter (Brown and Rutter, 1966; Rutter and Brown, 1966; Quinton *et al*, 1976).

Using quantified measures of tested reliability (Rutter and Cox, 1981), these four experimental styles were compared and found to be markedly different in the manner required by their operational

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definition (Rutter *et al*, 1981). Moreover, not only were the styles designed to be similar to styles practiced and recommended by experts in the field, but also the two experienced clinicians who utilized all four styles found that it was readily possible to keep to the rules of the operational criteria and yet still feel and appear both natural and also interested and responsive to the informant.

The experimental design involved the study of the initial interviews with the mothers of children referred to the Maudsley Hospital psychiatric outpatient department. Each mother was interviewed twice, a different style being employed on each occasion by a different interviewer. Six mothers received the structured style first and the sounding board second, six had the same interviews in the reverse order; six had the active psychotherapy style first and the systematic exploratory second; and six had the same two interviews in the reverse order. Mothers were randomly allocated to the four conditions. Two experienced interviewers were used and each did an equal number of first and second interviews, and an equal number of interviews with each style. For each pair of styles a three factor, repeated measures, analysis of variance was performed to test for differences between styles and between interviewers and for order-effects. Because the pairing was made on the basis of active fact-oriented techniques, the effects of active feeling-oriented techniques could be examined only by comparisons across groups. The statistical model is described in paper IV (Rutter *et al*, 1981).

All interviews were with the mother on her own and all were undertaken in the same room with facilities which allowed the interview to be video and audio-taped in full, with the mother's prior consent and approval. The two experimental interviews took place during the usual waiting period for a diagnostic appointment, with a gap of one to three weeks between interviews. Families were excluded where the parents were immigrant or where colloquial English was not the usual language spoken at home. In addition referrals made for a second opinion or to consider admission to hospital were excluded, as were cases in which psychosis, mental retardation or marked organic problems were suspected. All interviews were analysed in detail by someone other than either of the two interviewers using measures of tested reliability (Rutter and Cox, 1981).

Results

The first question with respect to the expression of feelings is whether the interviewer techniques which appeared effective in the naturalistic study, when an analysis was undertaken of the frequency with which expressions of feeling followed different interviewer actions, appeared similarly effective in the present experimental study. The findings are shown in Table I. In this analysis it was, of course, essential to control for the context of interviewer actions, in order to rule out the possibility that particular actions were often followed by expressed feelings simply because they were employed at a time when informants were already expressing feelings.

It is evident from Table I that all the interviewer techniques found to lead to the expression of feelings in the mother's next floorholding in the naturalist study also did so in the experimental interviews. The associations were both strong and also held up well after controlling for context. In other words the techniques were effective in eliciting feelings both

TABLE I

Sequential analysis: context of interviewer action and feelings expressed (Experimental study)

	Informant response	
	Preceded by own expression of feeling	Not preceded by own expression of feeling
	% with feelings	% with feelings
Request for feelings (n = 88)	93.1 (n = 58)***	70.0 (n = 30)***
Request for self-disclosures (n = 158)	72.7 (n = 99)***	67.8 (n = 59)***
Open questions (n = 516)	79.0 (n = 252)***	58.0 (n = 264)***
Sympathetic statements (n = 428)	81.3 (n = 358)***	65.7 (n = 70)***
Interpretations (n = 197)	90.2 (n = 163)***	79.4 (n = 34)***
Other closed questions (n = 738)	48.1 (n = 378)	35.8 (n = 360)

Comparison with closed questions
***χ^2; df 1; P < .001

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when the previous informant floorholding included some expression of feelings, and also when it did not. It should be noted, however, that the majority of specified feeling-oriented techniques were in fact used by the interviewers immediately *after* the informant had shown some expression of feelings. Thus, they were being used more to perpetuate than to initiate emotional expressions. The two exceptions to this tendency were open questions and requests for self-disclosures. Nevertheless, both were significantly effective in eliciting feelings. This is important because they cut across interview styles. The structured style included a high number of requests for self-disclosures and the sounding board had a high proportion (although not number) of open questions. Because of this, these two styles which were supposedly low on specific feeling-oriented techniques might be expected to elicit a relatively high amount of feelings in spite of the low rate of interpretations, expressions of sympathy and requests for feelings.

Differential effectiveness of feeling-oriented techniques according to style

The analysis of the frequency with which various interviewer actions were immediately followed by expressions of feeling examined only the immediate effects of specific techniques. These are important but also it is necessary to consider more enduring effects of different styles. Thus, the minimal intervention technique used in the sounding board style is thought to be effective because it encourages the informant to express freely her real concerns and feelings without the intrusion and possibly suppressive effect of specific probes, questions and cross-examination.

Similarly, the systematic exploratory style aims to start with an extended period of open questions, minimal probing, and a ready response to emotional cues because it is thought that this will create an appropriate set towards the expression of feelings and attitudes. It might be expected that this set would continue to have an effect later in the interview even when much more systematic questioning and probing was required.

These notions were examined in two different ways. First, the system of pairing interview styles which was used allowed examination of the possible emotion-suppressive effects of active fact-oriented techniques (see Table II). Within the pair of interviews which made extensive use of active feeling-oriented techniques (interpretations, requests for feelings, etc), the amount of factual probing had no significant effect on the number of feelings expressed, although there were more feelings in the style with few probes and little cross-questioning (89.9 *vs* 105.6). Within the pair of styles which made little use of active feeling-oriented techniques, the amount of factual probing made no difference to the expression of feelings (84.1 *vs* 84.2).

It seems that systematic questioning on factual matters has no overall substantial suppressive effect on the expression of emotions. However, this largely negative finding could be an artefact due to the effectiveness of certain fact-oriented techniques (such as requests for self-disclosures) in eliciting feelings (see Table I).

The active fact-oriented techniques could well have been successful in eliciting emotions just because they included extensive use of requests for self-disclosures (Rutter *et al*, 1981). However, it was also important to determine whether active probing altered the informants' responses to the specific feeling-oriented techniques other than the requests for self-disclosures. This could be done by comparing the mothers' immediate responses to specific techniques in the different interview styles. The responses to active feeling-oriented technqiues are shown in Table III. Irrespective of style, interpretations, requests for feelings and sympathetic statements were followed by the mothers' expression of feelings in about four-fifths of her next floorholdings. As required, the absolute number of these techniques varied very greatly by style, but their effects were similar whenever they were used. Thus, 88 per cent of the 120 interpretations in

TABLE II

Effects of active probing on expression of feelings

		Amount of factual probing				
		High	Low	Significance		
		Mean no. feelings expr. (S.D.)	Mean no. feelings expr. (S.D.)	Paired t	df	P
Active feeling-oriented techniques	High	89.9 (19.0)	105.6 (32.0)	1.79	11	N.S.
	Low	84.1 (25.6)	84.2 (23.4)	0.01	11	N.S.

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the active psychotherapy style were followed by the expression of feelings, as were 88 per cent of the 17 used in the sounding board style.

There was some difference, however, in the effects of open questions in that rather fewer elicited feelings in the two techniques with a high amount of factual questioning (63 *vs* 74; $\chi^2 = 5.91$; df 1; $P < 0.02$). The difference is even more striking for the remainder of interviewer actions (i.e. actions which were not open questions, requests for feelings, requests for self-disclosures, interpretations or expressions of sympathy (see Table IV)). In the two techniques with very little factual cross-questionings, 57 per cent were followed by the expression of feelings. In contrast this occurred in only 34 per cent in the other two techniques.

Exactly the same pattern of findings is evident with self-disclosures. The active techniques are comparably effective in all four interview styles. On the other hand, the effect of non-specific interventions is different (see Table V). In the structured and systematic exploratory styles only 3 to 4 per cent led to self-disclosures, whereas in the active psychotherapy and sounding board styles 9 to 10 per cent did so ($\chi^2 = 22.09$; df 1; $P < .001$).

It may be concluded that the overall interview style probably creates a set which influences how much feeling is expressed in response to neutral questions. Feelings are more likely to be expressed in styles which do *not* have a great deal of factual probing and cross-examinations. On the other hand, the active feeling-oriented techniques work in much the same

TABLE III

Response to active feeling oriented techniques according to interview style

	Interview styles			
	A Structured	B Systematic expl.	C Act. psychoth.	D Sounding bd.
	% responses with feeling (n)	% responses with feeling (n)	% responses with feeling (n)	% responses with feeling (n)
Interpretations	86.7 (15)	87.0 (46)	88.3 (120)	88.2 (17)
Requests for feelings	80.0 (5)	80.8 (26)	86.5 (52)	100.0 (5)
Sympathetic statements	69.4 (36)	80.8 (94)	81.8 (132)	75.0 (36)
Open questions	60.8 (166)	65.2 (138)	73.3 (101)	73.6 (110)

Open questions A *vs* D: $\chi^2 = 4.27$; df 1; $P < 0.05$.
Other differences non-significant.

TABLE IV

Proportion of non-specific interventions followed by expression of feelings according to interview style*

		Amount of factual probing				
		High	Low	Significance		
		% non-specific interventions* followed by feelings (n)	% non-specific interventions* followed by feelings (n)	χ^2	df	P
Active feeling-oriented techniques	High	36.6 (n = 489)	58.6 (n = 251)	31.8	1	P < .001
	Low	31.7 (n = 665)	55.8 (n = 344)	53.8	1	P < .001
	Total	33.8 (n = 1154)	57.0 (n = 595)	85.8	1	P < .001

*(i.e. Interviewer actions which were *not* open questions, requests for feelings, requests for self-disclosures, interpretations or expressions of sympathy. Many were factual closed questions).

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way regardless of the overall interview style. Moreover, one supposedly fact-oriented technique (requests for self-disclosures) was also very effective in eliciting feelings.

Amount of feelings expressed in different styles

Taken altogether, the four interview styles did not differ significantly in the number of feelings expressed by mothers (see Table II). However, this analysis is complicated by the differences between the two interviewers: Interviewer A not only used more active feeling-oriented techniques (see above) but also obtained a higher number of expressed feelings. Because of this difference, it was necessary to analyse the results separately for each interviewer (see Table VI). There was still no significant difference between styles in the number of feelings expressed. With both interviewers, more feelings were expressed in the two styles using many active feeling-oriented techniques (Interviewer A: mean of 103.3 *vs* 93.2; Interviewer B: 91.2 *vs* 75.1), but within-style variation was high and the differences between styles fell short of statistical significance.

However, it should be appreciated that these were not comparisons within pairs. Because the pairing was made on the basis of active fact-oriented techniques, these analyses necessarily refer to comparisons between different informants as well as different styles. The consequence is that the within-style (i.e. between informant) variation makes the chance of finding significant between-style differences less than with the comparable analysis on gathering factual information.

Further, these analyses have assumed that the intended experimental interview styles were in fact carried out precisely in the manner specified; the results showed that this was indeed usually the case (Rutter *et al*, 1981). However, some interviews by both interviewers fell short of what was required; in particular, there was a tendency for systematic exploratory interviews to have too few active feeling-oriented techniques and for the sounding board style to have too many. Table VII repeats the style comparisons after excluding these aberrant interviews.

High use of active feeling-oriented techniques was operationally defined in terms of a level of inter-

TABLE V

Proportion of non-specific interventions followed by self-disclosures according to interview style*

		Amount of factual probing				
		High	Low	Significance		
		% followed by self-disclosure (n)	% followed by self-disclosure (n)	χ^2	df	P
Active feeling-oriented techniques	High	4.3 (n = 491)	10.7 (n = 253)	10.28	1	< .01
	Low	3.1 (n = 670)	8.0 (n = 350)	10.86	1	< .001
	Total	3.6 (n = 1161)	9.1 (n = 603)	22.09	1	< .001

(*i.e. Interviewer actions which were *not* open questions, requests for feelings, requests for self-disclosures, interpretations or expressions of sympathy. Many were factual closed questions).

TABLE VI

Total number of feelings expressed in different interview styles (Experimental interviews as specified)

	Interview styles				Significance (A+D *vs* B+C)		
Interviewer	A Structured Mean no. feelings (S.D.)	B Systematic expl. Mean no. feelings (S.D.)	C Act. psychoth. Mean no. feelings (S.D.)	D Sounding bd. Mean no. feelings (S.D.)	t	df	P
A	96.7 (28.8)	89.7 (21.1)	117.0 (18.7)	89.7 (20.1)	1.04	46	NS
B	71.5 (15.2)	88.2 (18.5)	94.2 (39.8)	78.7 (26.9)	1.53	46	NS

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pretations/expressions of sympathy/requests for feelings above the median and high use of active fact-oriented techniques in terms of a rate of closed questions above the median. Eight structured, four systematic exploratory, 10 active psychotherapy and 7 sounding board interviews were performed correctly according to these post hoc criteria. The differences between styles in number of feelings expressed is now considerably strengthened. The finding supports the hypothesis that a high use of active feeling-oriented techniques increases the number of feelings expressed. However, the result must be treated with considerable caution because the analysis departs from the strict experimental design.

Experimental and naturalistic interviews compared

Lastly, the experimental and naturalistic interviews may be compared in order to assess the importance of interviewing skills and experience in eliciting the informants' feelings. Table VIII shows that all four experimental styles elicited far more feelings than did the naturalistic interviews. This suggests that skills in interviewing as well as styles and techniques may be important. Table IX compares the feeling-oriented techniques used in the two parts of the study. It is evident that the naturalistic interviews were closely comparable to the structured and sounding board styles in their low usage of feeling-oriented techniques. However, this does not explain the superiority of these two experimental styles in the elicitation of feelings, although it may go some way to explaining the superiority of the other two. Other findings suggest two likely explanations. First, in all four experimental styles the interviewers responded to a far higher proportion of emotional cues than did the psychiatric trainees in the naturalistic study. This generally greater responsiveness probably did much to encourage the expression of feelings and emotions. Secondly, as shown in Table X, there was a better response to the active feeling-oriented techniques in the experimental interviews. This suggests that the techniques were better timed or more skillfully employed in some way by the experienced interviewers. As with the gathering of factual information,

TABLE VII

Total number of feeling expressed in different interview styles (Experimental interviews fulfilling criteria)

	Interview styles				Significance (A+D *vs* B+C)		
	Structured (n = 8) Mean (S.D.)	Systematic expl. (n = 4) Mean (S.D.)	Act. psychoth. (n = 10) Mean (S.D.)	Sounding bd. (n = 7) Mean (S.D.)	t	df	P
No. of feelings expressed	73.1 (17.0)	95.3 (13.6)	109.4 (25.1)	71.0 (14.4)	4.67	27	.001

TABLE VIII

Feelings expressed in experimental and naturalistic styles

	Naturalistic		Interview Styles: Experimental			
	Mothers jt. Mean (S.D.)	Mothers indiv. Mean (S.D.)	Structured Mean (S.D.)	Systematic expl. Mean (S.D.)	Act. psychoth. Mean (S.D.)	Sounding bd. Mean (S.D.)
No. feelings expressed (first 30 mins)	24.5 (13.0)	25.7 (13.5)	40.4 (14.3)	45.0 (9.9)	52.8 (17.3)	40.8 (13.4)
	All naturalistic (mothers only) Mean (S.D.) 24.8 (12.9)			All experimental Mean (S.D.) 44.8 (14.4)		
	(t = 6.56; df 80; P < .001)					

All differences between naturalistic and experimental interviews statistically significant

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TABLE IX

Feeling-oriented techniques in experimental and naturalistic styles

Interviewer techniques	Naturalistic		Experimental		
	Joint Mean (S.D.)	Individual Mean (S.D.)	Total Mean (S.D.)	Systematic expl. +act. psychoth. Mean (S.D.)	Structured+ sounding bd. Mean (S.D.)
Mean no. interpretations/ sympathy/requests for feelings	6.0 (4.5)	7.4 (4.2)	11.9 (9.6)[1]	17.6 (9.9)[2]	6.2 (4.7)
% feeling cues responded to	10.4 (15.0)	7.2 (5.0)	37.0 (22.0)[3]	50.1 (18.2)[4]	23.9 (17.3)[5]

Differences from naturalistic individual:	t	df	P
[1]	2.41	37	< .05
[2]	4.77	33	< .001
[3]	8.48	37	< .001
[4]	10.70	33	< .001
[5]	4.35	33	< .001

TABLE X

Efficiency of feeling-oriented techniques in experimental and naturalistic interviews

	Actions followed by expression of feelings	
	Naturalistic %	Experimental %
Interpretations	44.0	87.9
Expressions of sympathy	47.0	79.2
Requests for feelings	58.0	85.2

χ^2 df 1: all differences between experimental and naturalistic significant at 1% level.

the techniques used are important but so also are the skills with which they are employed.

Discussion and Conclusions

Analyses of interviewer action-informant response sequences in both naturalistic and experimental studies strongly indicated the value of various specific feeling-oriented techniques as a means of getting informants to express feelings in their next response. A study of the context of these interventions indicated that they were effective in both initiating and perpetuating the expression of feelings although the techniques differed among themselves as to where they did best. The techniques included direct requests for feelings and direct requests for self-disclosures; the use of interpretations and of expressions of sympathy; and the utilization of open rather than closed questions. The two types of direct requests were much less dependent on context for their efficacy.

As with active fact gathering techniques (Cox *et al*, 1981), these feeling-oriented interventions were found to be considerably more effective in the experimental interviews. Skills and experience appeared to be important. The timing and choice of interventions was probably as important as the frequency with which they were used. However, the experienced interviewers also differed in being more responsive to the mothers' emotional cues and it seems likely that this also played an important part in their greater success in eliciting feelings.

A third finding with respect to feelings is that these were more likely to follow closed questions in the two styles which made a low usage of active factual probing and questioning methods. It may be that the overall style has a pervasive effect quite apart from the immediate consequences of active feeling-oriented techniques.

Fourthly, the gathering of good factual information is entirely compatible with the successful eliciting of emotions and feelings. The two aims require rather different methods but they are readily combined and need not interfere with one another to any substantial extent.

The findings from comparisons between different experimental styles were compatible with the suggestion that a greater use of interpretations, expressions of sympathy and other active feeling-oriented techniques leads to a greater expression of feelings.

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However, although the differences were in the expected direction, they fell short of statistical significance in the main comparison. There may be several explanations for this. First, unlike the situation with fact gathering techniques, the comparisons had to be made *across* informants rather than within pairs of interviews with the same mother. This greatly reduced the power of the comparison and allowed the differences between informants to have a relatively greater effect. Secondly, the comparisons were complicated by unintended between-interviewer differences, and by some interviews which failed to fulfil the experimental style criteria. These may have played a part in concealing real differences. Thirdly, it is clear that some informants express a great deal of feelings regardless of how they are interviewed. It may be that the specific feeling-oriented techniques only make a great difference with the more reticent informants. Fourthly, the effective techniques as indicated by the analysis of interviewer action-informant response sequences cut across designed contrasts in styles in so far as one of them (direct requests for self-disclosures) is concerned. This technique was more commonly employed in the active fact-oriented styles than in the active feeling-oriented styles, because its efficacy in eliciting feelings was not evident at the time the experimental study was designed. Fifthly, quite apart from the specific techniques, a lack of undue probing and questioning seems to facilitate the expression of emotions.

We may conclude that probably there are a variety of rather diverse ways by which the expression of emotions may be encouraged. The evidence suggests that these include: (a) a response to emotional cues; (b) a reflective style with little factual cross-questioning; (c) the use of direct requests for self-disclosures; (d) the optimal (not necessarily maximal) use of interpretations and expressions of sympathy; and (e) direct requests for feelings. However, the rigorous testing of these suggestions requires a further experimental study with the pattern of pairing such that these techniques can be compared within pairs of interviews with the same informant. Such a study is now being undertaken.

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