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Graphology in Clinical Practice



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Iask the reader to remember that what is most obvious maybe the most worthy of analysis. Fertile vistas may open out when commonplace facts are examined from a fresh point of view.

L.L. Whyte (1965 as quoted in Koestler, 1967, p.45)

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Handwriting is the written trace of each individual's preferred rhythm, style and habitual manner of moving. The graphologist uses the remnant left by this habituated motor behavior to provide a window to personality structure. By examining all elements of handwriting and interpreting them separately and together the graphologist generates a thumbnail sketch of the writer's character traits, emotional disposition and social style.

Graphology has been purposefully investigated and utilized by European clinicians for decades and yet, in North America it has failed to attract the attention of the mainstream clinical community. Likely that disinterest relates to a popularized version of graphology which had been widely marketed by M. N. Bunker. Traditional European trained graphologists found Bunker's interpretive practices objectionable insofar as he advocated a simplistic formulation wherein each personality trait is tied to one graphic feature or sign (Anthony, 1967). This

"atomistic" approach runs contrary to mainstream graphology practice with its emphasis on the gestalt of handwriting (Wolff, 1948; Roman, 1952; Poizner, 2003).

Bunker launched a highly successful correspondence course and handwriting analysis, stripped of its academic mantle, was relegated to the status of party game. By contrast, the scholarly efforts and professionalism of European graphologists were well-respected overseas. It is their work which justifies the clinical use of graphology, to be explored here in order to introduce the clinical community to a most interesting clinical tool.

What is Graphology?

Graphology engages the practitioner in analyzing the structural graphic elements of a writer's handwriting, in order to derive information about the writer's personality. With the aid of graphological theory, graphologists identify the qualities, traits, attitudes, sentiments or postures that seem



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indicated in the handwriting; they further seek insight into how these aspects of selfhood may integrate together to constitute the dynamic organization that we recognize as the "personality" of that writer.

When performing an analysis, graphologists examine all facets of the writing's letter forms and spatial arrangements, while also attending to the quality of the writing's ink trail or ductus. Graphological techniques may additionally involve consideration of the linguistic content of the script to a greater or lesser degree. For example, Teller (personal communication, 1996) asks clients to write "the story of your day in detail" which serves as a projective task that allows for further diagnostic content analysis after the graphic analysis is completed. Beryl Gilbertson (1996, personal communication) notes that graphic elements should be analyzed in connection to the written content so that meaningful polygraphic changes which are manifested when certain words, names or ideas are penned, can be identified and interpreted. Though graphological techniques embrace aspects of analysis which extend beyond the structural assessment of the writing, in fact, the heart of the graphological endeavour actually does involve the latter, with its emphasis on form, spacing, shading, rhythm and other facets of graphic performance.

Theoretical Postulates of Graphology

The theoretical premises upon which graphology rests are congruent with those premises that underlie many schools of psychotherapy practice in general. For example, prominent psychologists Allport and Vernon (1933) noted that "continental psychologists see in graphic movement the quintessence of expression. It is a crystallized form of gesture, an intricate but accessible prism which reflects many, if not all, of the inner consistencies of personality" (p. 186). In this statement, when Allport and Vernon write of the "inner consistencies of personality," they are de facto assuming that there are such inner consistencies. This assumption rests centrally at the heart of graphological practice.

The second premise in the above Allport and Vernon quotation is an extension of the principle of continuity which has just been elaborated. Adler theorized about the existence of a "Law of Movement," which purports that prominent features of an individual's psychic life guided, and were therefore manifested in, all of the individual's expressive movements. Adler asserted that the non-verbal expressive movements were a "simile of the unconsciously posited and effective life plan," as compared with verbal communication which "failed to gain dominance and superiority beyond the limits of the ordinary" (Adler, 1912, as quoted in Adler, 1956, p. 221). Adler's Law of Movement was in accord with views demonstrated by Freud in his statement that "betrayal oozes out of [the individual] at every pore," and "If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips." (Freud, 1953, p. 77-78).

Thus, this principle posits a drive to exteriorize, in all aspects of human function, the inner consistency of personality described above.

Thirdly, graphologists assume that handwriting is in strong part a manifestation of expressive behaviour so that the expressive aspect of graphic behaviour makes handwriting a rich medium for personality projection. Therefore, they suggest that graphology constitutes a valuable projective technique. Frank, who laid the theoretical underpinnings for the projective psychology movement, delineated a range of groupings which represented the different types of projective tests. Victor (1989) notes that graphology finds a place in each type of projective technique that was documented by Frank.

Graphologists assume that the ways in which an individual's handwriting deviates from the copybook model he was initially taught is meaningful, often reflective of central aspects of that individual's disposition or personality. It is believed that, using graphological principles, handwriting can be interpreted in the same way as other projective tools, to generate hypotheses about an individual's personality and psychological function.

One last significant assumption underlies graphological theory. This has been labelled "the principle of recurrence" by Pittenger (1960, p. 235). It reflects an assumption that guides clinical practice in most psychotherapy contexts, which dictates that diagnostically crucial patterns of communication will be manifested repeatedly, though perhaps indirectly, within any one session.

Both graphologists and clinicians are faced with the quandary of how to determine which expressive behaviours are meaningful and which are not. The principle of recurrence directs that attention be centered on the themes which prove recurrent in a presentation. Handwritings, like clinical encounters, will manifest some pronounced patterns that focus the graphologist's attention while others fail to merit special consideration. It is the most pronounced graphic themes that are assumed to carry the most interpretive significance for the graphologist.

What Graphology Measures

Perhaps the best available conceptualization regarding what graphology "measures" is contained in Adler's theory of the "life style" (Adler, 1968). Shulman and Mosak (1988) define the life style of any given individual as "a singular pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting that [is] unique to that individual and [represents] the context in which all specific manifestations [have] to be considered" (p. 1). They see life style as "a unifying principle (of personality) which organizes all drives, strivings, tendencies, and aspirations into a unified pattern that could be apprehended by a trained observer" (p. 2). In trying to grasp the client's "life style," Adler was searching for that

individual's *modus operandi*; for his/her convictions about the self, the world, and life in general and for other beliefs, values, or goals which guided that individual in pursuing various life choices.

These factors contribute to the life style, representing a sort of personal law or private logic to which a person adheres throughout his or her life. The life style, as a blueprint for living, would dictate any number of behaviours or life choices for that individual, who would interpret any given situation or context through the lens of his or her specific life style. This life style would then provide the individual with directives about how to respond to these situations or contexts. For example, if a belief that people are not to be trusted permeated an individual's life style, then there would be a trend to perceive the actions of others with a strong tinge of suspicion, and that individual's tendency might be to respond to the actions of others with distrust and doubt.

All of this suggests that graphology cannot be used to measure one given personality dimension or trait, such as "emotional responsiveness." Instead, graphology can identify individualized themes, personality tendencies or areas of difficulty that appear in a given script. The clinician who examines handwriting can thus develop tentative hypotheses about the client's life style, and can explore these further within the clinical situation.

Graphology Use

The uses of graphology in vocational assessment are better known than its clinical uses. According to one source dating back to 1988, 50% of European firms had used graphology at one time or another for the purpose of employee selection. This source noted that standard psychological tests are viewed with distrust in Europe, as they are considered unreliable (Daw, 1988).

In North America, graphology applications have been documented in contexts that include personnel selection (Klimoski & Rafaeli, 1983; Daw, 1988), jury selection (Santiago, 1987), and forensic applications (Teltscher, 1971). One marketing research firm has innovated an approach whereby handwriting analysis is used to classify focus group participants into market segments reflecting attitudinal differences and correspondingly, different buying behaviours (J. Gondar, personal communication, 1992).

Clinical Use of Graphology

Despite the wide range of documented clinical applications, the literature has rarely considered the effects of using graphology in psychotherapy, so that the dynamics born out of this use have remained mostly unacknowledged and unexplored. One exception is the recent qualitative investigation (Poizner, 2003) which explored the perceptions of clients and their therapists when graphology was introduced into psychotherapy sessions. Highlights of the themes that emerged from this pilot study included clients'

positive perceptions of the accuracy of their profiles and the value of an external perspective. According to the therapists' feedback, the graphology helpfully confirmed therapeutic directions and provided meaningful feedback to clients and themselves.

Graphology as a Therapeutic Tool

Graphology cannot be considered an assessment tool, since it lacks the empirical support to justify such use. Yet graphology does generate tentative hypotheses which can then be either checked out with the client or held in abeyance awaiting further evidence for confirmation or rejection. Graphological cues can thus be considered in the same light as nonverbal expressive behaviours such as gait, mannerisms, posture, and intonation. All these expressive behaviours do inform the assessment process, constituting a sort of "soft" data for the clinician's consideration. Often the clinician will meta-comment on a client's gesture or mannerism, suggesting an interpretation tentatively, and opening the door for further exploration of a theme (Pittenger, 1960). Advocates of handwriting analysis suggest that graphology can and should be used in a manner similar to this; for this reason they consider graphology a therapeutic tool (M. Teller, personal communication, 1996; Poizner, 1995).

The therapeutic application of graphology becomes clearer upon reviewing the protocol for using graphology in work with psychotherapy clients. The graphologist/clinician generates a profile, on the basis of the graphological assessment, which describes specific psychological patterns that seem indicated in the writing. These findings are shared with the client in a manner that is both collaborative and transactional. Thus, a graphological assessment is always followed by a dialogue between therapist and client. The therapist shares tentative hypotheses based on the graphological analysis. The client is asked for feedback (positive or negative) in order to foster insight and learning for both client and therapist. The handwriting evaluation provides a basis for discussion of the client's personality and life style. In this informal manner of assessment, the client is a collaborator, a co-assessor, and a colleague, and is invited to make sense of the findings (or even to dismiss them) in tandem with the therapist (M. Teller, personal communication, 1996).

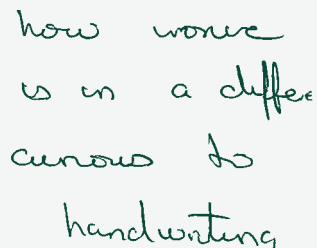
Teller (personal communication, 1996) suggests that this use of graphology promotes the establishment of a strong therapeutic alliance, and increases rapport between client and therapist. Introduction of an egalitarian framework where their ideas about themselves are accorded high status in the search for confirmation or rejection of graphological findings, empowers clients and promotes further enthusiastic collaboration. As well, the client often responds with enhanced confidence in the therapeutic process, to the degree that the findings are perceived as accurate and/or meaningful. This can be expected to strengthen the client's motivation to participate actively in therapy, while also conceivably prompting freer self-disclosure.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "M. Begin". The letters are slanted and connected, with a prominent downward slope on the final 'g'.

The late Menachem Begin, former Prime Minister of Israel, struggled with depression, a fact commonly known but also strongly indicated by his sloping signature.

The phrase "Of course" written in a cursive, musical style. The 'O' is a large, flowing loop, and the letters are connected in a way that resembles musical notation.

Symbolism in handwriting: the handwriting of writers who are musically inclined often contains letters that resemble musical notes, as is seen here.

The text "how worse is in a difference curious to handwriting" written in a cursive, musical style. The letters are elongated and connected, with a focus on the flow and rhythm of the writing.

As children, we are taught to leave the equivalent of one letter space between words. Some writers elongate the separation thereby delaying the work of writing the next word. The graphologist considers this graphic behavior to be a form of procrastination, and accordingly assigns that interpretation.

The text "Today I had parents I was -" written in cursive. The first 'I' is a large, circular loop, while the second 'I' is a smaller, more vertical stroke, illustrating different forms of the personal pronoun 'I'.

The writer who uses different forms of the personal pronoun "I" instead of being consistent may be reflecting a lack of a well-defined identity. Other facets of the writing and signature will help determine whether this is likely the case.

Two handwritten signatures. The first signature starts with a large, bold capital letter 'K', and the second signature starts with a large, bold capital letter 'S'. Both signatures are written in a cursive style with exaggerated initial letters.

Large showy capitals in a signature betray a writer's inflated sense of pride. The exaggerated capital letters at the beginning of words indicates an overemphasis on "first impressions" and, more specifically, a tendency to be highly image conscious.

The graphological assessment experience also carries the potential to be a powerfully therapeutic encounter. On various occasions, I've witnessed a client gaining insight into one facet of his or her behaviour as a result of a graphological evaluation, and respond by making immediate behavioural changes. When this occurs, the graphological assessment process actually serves as single-session psychotherapy.

In other cases, the therapeutic dialogue which constitutes part of the graphology assessment process, promotes reflection on personal themes and/or patterns. This in turn leads to a deeper understanding of self, which is the therapeutic goal of many reflective therapies. Using graphology can identify some of the influences upon the individual's day-to-day functioning, and provide a forum for exploration and reflection about the implications of these influences.

Graphology in Practice

Graphology can be used in different capacities in clinical practice. At times, it can inform therapy without being used in a formal manner. To give an example: a couple sought therapy to help resolve a pattern of frequent heated fights. In our first meeting, they explained their areas of disagreement. My eye, though, had fallen on a feature of the wife's handwriting. She had filled out her contact information on the face sheet and I noted that the handwriting indicated a woman with strong pride, a great need for independence and a corollary weakness in her ability to be receptive and allow others to give to her. I conjectured that Grace had real needs that she wouldn't allow Steve to fill, and then would resent him when he withdrew energy from the relationship. As the meeting continued, I found further evidence to support my conjecture so I delicately gave the couple feedback on this matter. In response, Grace expressed self-recognition - much akin to the classic "Ah-ha" moment in therapy. She agreed to attend the next session alone and then followed through on a course of individual therapy. In this case, the graphology helped get to the crux of the issue, reoriented the client away from blaming her husband and engaged her in a productive therapeutic process.

Using graphology can help accelerate psychotherapy by bringing central issues into focus. Despite the ways this tool can be clinically useful, graphology remains an untapped resource in the Canadian social service sector at a time when sweeping cutbacks are forcing clinicians to demonstrate competence in brief psychotherapy, a central issue that fueled the presenting problem but had remained undetected by all individuals involved. In my experience, graphology accelerates the pace of treatment by promoting the client's keen interest in the therapeutic endeavor, by advancing the assessment process, and by helping to quickly establish strong client-therapist rapport. Further research is necessary to document whether in fact the clinical use of graphology has the potential to hasten the pace of treatment, while accruing other positive outcomes. In the

meantime, the tool merits further consideration by therapists who wish to learn new ways to understand their clients' expressive behaviors.

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Annette Poizner, MSSW, Ed.D., is a Registered Social Worker and sits on the Board of Directors of the Milton H. Erickson Institute of Toronto. She routinely uses graphology and other projective assessment tools in her brief therapy practice. She recently completed a doctoral dissertation at the University of Toronto which explored clients' and therapists' perceptions of graphology use within psychotherapy. She teaches a five-week seminar series on 'The Psychology of Handwriting', which provides graphological training to clinicians and consultants. She can be reached at (416) 280-6442, for more information.

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