Use of Validationgram in Counselling: Exploring Sources of Self-Validation and Impact of Personal Transition

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Abstract

An activity called "validationgram," derived from Ishiyama's (1989) model of self-validation, is described. Validationgram is a visual activity of mapping sources of validation in four domains (i.e., relationships, activities, things, and places). It is proposed that validationgram is useful in counselling for exploring the client's world of meanings, feelings and values, and for understanding the effects of significant life events and transitions on one's validation system. The activity's underlying assumptions, clinical value, optional modes of application, and potential utility as a research tool are also discussed.

Résumé

Un exercice tiré du modèle de validation de soi de Ishiyama (1989), le "validationgram" est décrit dans cet article. Cet exercice est une activité visuelle qui consiste à établir les différentes sources de validation dans quatre domaines (i.e. les rapports personnels, les activités, les objets et les lieux). Il est proposé que le "validationgram" est utile en relation d'aide pour explorer les perceptions, les émotions, et le système de valeurs du client. Le "validationgram" est aussi utile pour comprendre l'impact d'événements importants et des périodes de transition sur le système de validation du client. Aussi décrit dans cet article sont les hypothèses de base, l'importance clinique, les options d'application, et la possibilité éventuelle d'utilisation comme méthode de recherche.

Life is filled with change events with varying intensities and psychological impacts. Change involves a transition from one state of existence (being, living, and relating) to another, including a shift in self-identity (e.g., Adler, 1975; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Certain transitions may result in disorientation, stress, anxiety, grief, and self-doubt, and motivate individuals to seek counselling (Egan, 1994; Schlossberg, 1984). To be effective in helping, the counsellor needs to explore the personal meaning of a transition experience with the client and to recognize its impact on the client's life. In this light, phenomenologically oriented theorists (e.g., Giorgi, 1975; Kvale, 1983; Peavy, 1993; Rogers, 1951) have stressed the importance of understanding the lived experience from the client perspective and listening to their narrative. In this paper, an activity called "validationgram" is discussed as a useful method for exploring the client's world of meanings, values, and feelings and the nature and impact of transition-related changes. The objectives of this paper are: (a) to provide an overview of the self-validation model, (b) to illustrate the validationgram activity, and (c) to discuss its counselling applications.

THE SELF-VALIDATION MODEL

The validationgram activity is based on Ishiyama's model of self-validation (Ishiyama, 1987, 1989, 1995). The model provides a conceptual framework for understanding and helping individuals who are going through personal transitions. It has primarily been used as a model for working with clients with cross-cultural issues (Beck, 1993; Ishiyama & Westwood, 1992; Westwood & Ishiyama, 1990; Witzel, 1989), wherein the role of the counsellor as client-validator is emphasized. More recently, the model of self-validation has been found useful as a model for understanding and helping gay men (Fraser, 1994), victims of child sexual abuse (Ishiyama, 1994), and partners in a conjugal relationship (Stumpe, 1992).

The self-validation model has "three pillars" of submodels, which are: (a) a model of validation themes, (b) a model of the multidimensional self, and (c) a model of four domains of validation sources which can be identified and explored through the validationgram activity.

Validation themes. One of the model's basic premises is that people are motivated to seek self-validation, that is, the affirmation of one's sense of self and positive valuing of one's unique and meaningful personal existence. Ishiyama (1989) has postulated that self-validation is experienced in five interrelated thematic areas, accompanied by contrasting themes for self-invalidation; see Fig. 1. The theme of love, fulfillment, and meaning in life is considered to be central to human existence and to form the core component of self-validation. When a person explores the nature of personal significance of certain aspects of life, one or more of these validation themes are likely to surface.

For example, a man describes his wife and children as his primary source of validation, in that his needs for emotional support and perceptual stability (e.g., feeling at home) are fulfilled in the context of the family life. His home serves an irreplaceable setting for affirming his self-worth and self-identity, while he derives a sense of competence and successful mastery of trade in his work setting. He finds much meaning in life in relationships and activities with his wife and children, and experiences unconditional love for and from his family.

Subjective and relational context of self-validation. Self-validation is a complex psychoecological process which represents both one's internal phenomenological world and one's transaction with the external world. Identities are formed and validation experienced in a relational context for human interaction and self-awareness (Giddens, 1991; McCall, 1987). While acknowledging the personal uniqueness of one's sources of validation, we may find that the content, process, and structure of self-validation are strongly influenced by the sociocultural environment which shapes one's values, worldviews, and self-identities. Thus, person-
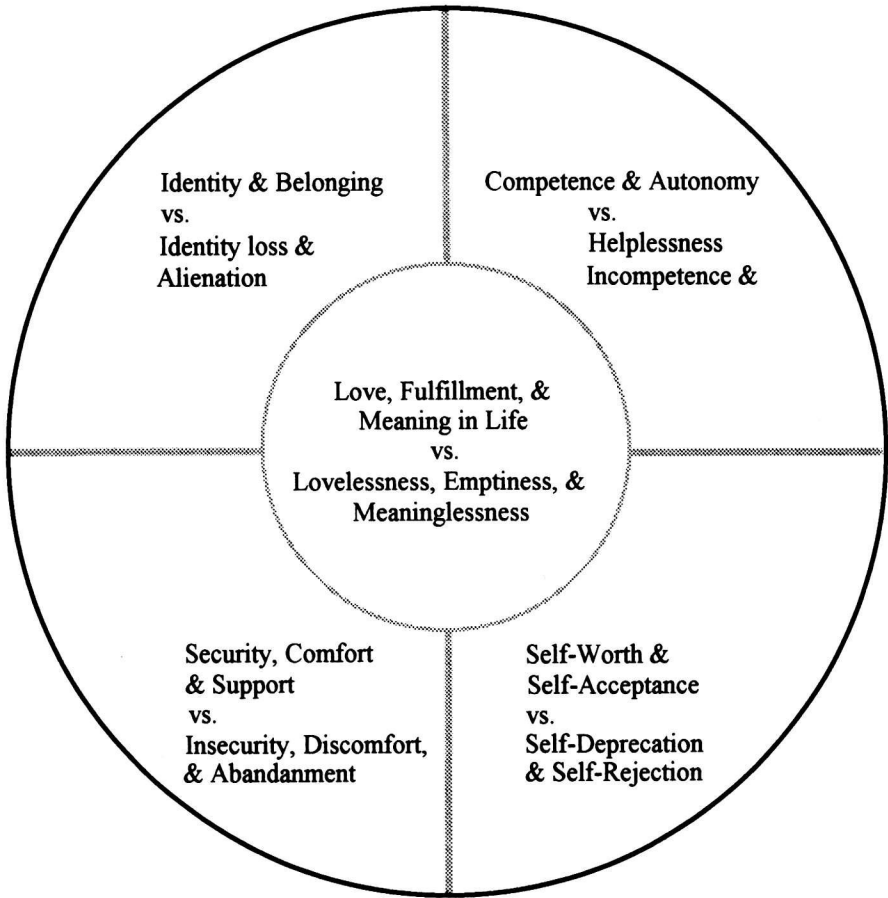
FIGURE 1
Thematic components of self-validation.

ally significant relationships, activities, and other aspects of life form a relational or ecological context of self-validation. This requires the counsellor to take a phenomenological researcher's stance in working with clients. Peavy (1993, p. 133) writes: "it is the counsellor's ability to construe and think about the client and the ability to assist the client to explicate the meaning structures of the client's lifeworld."

Validation network. Various sources of validation, comprised of significant relationships, activities, things, and places, form a "validation network," which is more than a social network. The validation network helps to maintain, restore, and expand one's sense of well-being, and also to protect one from experiencing existential annihilation and perceptual chaos. It is not rare that people validate each other and consider helping others self-validating. Also, some validation sources selectively affirm a

specific dimension of self (e.g., work setting as a validator of one's career identity).

It is further postulated that the loss of a significant validation source can cause grief and despondency and threaten one's emotional well-being. On the other hand, when one's validation sources are diversified, losing one validation source may not be so devastating as in the case of a person putting "all the eggs in one basket" (Ishiyama & Kitayama, 1994).

Multidimensional self. In the model of self-validation, the experience of self is regarded as potentially holistic and multidimensional. The multidimensional self is conceptualized as having five aspects as follows: (a) physical self, (b) familiar self, (c) social-cultural self, (d) transcultural-existential self, and (e) transpersonal (spiritual or ego-transcending) self. However, the experience of self is holistic and fluid; these dimensions should not be regarded as compartmentalized and distinct or mutually exclusive categories.

Two of these aspects are given further illustration here. The social-cultural self is the aspect of self that is related to prescriptive roles and memberships (other than family membership). This aspect of self is subjected to the external forces of socialization and acculturation, and often monitored by the internalized norms of society or a particular reference group. This point has been widely discussed by many role identity theorists (e.g., Gergen, 1987; Harre, 1987; McCall, 1987). The social-cultural self includes, among other things: occupational, academic, gender, ethnic, national, and group identities. The transcultural-existential self refers to the aspect of self that is capable of being a unique individual and relating to others authentically, without being restricted by roles, fear of contravening social norms, or externally imposed values. It corresponds to Buber's (1957) concept of interhuman encounter, Rogers' (1951) congruent self, and Morita's authentic "as-is" self (Ishiyama, 1986).

Self-identity in a validation network. Self is experienced and identity formed in various relational contexts of human existence (e.g., relationships with the family, friends, pets, co-workers, local community, institution, society, nature, god, and universe). For example, one's identity is intricately related to changes in one's relationship with the social environment (Gergen, 1987; McCall, 1987). Significant changes in self-other relationships can precipitate a major identity crisis and shifts in values and attitudes (Bridges, 1980; Erikson, 1968).

As portrayed in the earlier example, one's validation sources may be found primarily in the familial context, rendering validation of the familial self as a central life theme. Also, various activities, places, and objects in one's life are intricately involved in the experience of self-validation and reinforcement of one's preferred identity. In this regard, it

is likely that one's validation sources reflect the most salient aspect(s) of one's identity, and that a loss of a cluster of related validation sources parallels one's threatened self-identity. For example, a woman's identity and self-worth may be much rooted in her athletic competence, achievement and social contacts with other athletes. However, her validation network gets irreversibly disturbed when she becomes physically disabled due to a car accident and is forced to retire from this career.

Thus, there is much information and insight to be gained from: (a) exploring the client's sources of validation, (b) identifying how such sources contribute to client experience of validation, (c) recognizing changes in the client's validation network after a major life event, and (d) exploring ways in which the client can experience more validation by self and others in order to enhance higher quality of life and personal well-being.

RATIONALE FOR VALIDATIONGRAM

Validationgram is a semi-structured activity designed to help clients articulate the world of meanings and values and explore associated feelings. This is done by identifying and describing their personally unique and significant sources of self-validation. Clients are invited to tell their stories as fully and in-depth as they wish to share with the counsellor. Validationgram provides opportunities for exploring threats to their validation network and their loss-and-grief issues associated with a transition or a critical event in life. Further, the counsellor and client can collaboratively explore ways of restoring the lost or underutilized sources of validation and cultivating new activities and relationships to enhance self-validation. Thus, the client can acquire agency and empowerment to make active changes toward increased self-validation.

The uniqueness of validationgram lies in its holistic and integrative nature. Instead of focussing on one aspect of life (e.g., relationships), this activity can facilitate appreciation of interrelatedness among various aspects of the client life as a whole. Further, validationgram is different from sociogram. It promotes a more complete self-description and a client narrative and a dialectical and generative exploration. On the other hand, sociogram treats indivduals as social atoms, and is used primarily for assessing interpersonal proximity to understand a group structure and dynamics (Kuethe, 1975; Vander-May, 1975).

THE VALIDATIONGRAM ACTIVITY

The following two steps of the validationgram activity are described here: (a) mapping of validation sources (i.e., validation mapping), and (b) validationgram processing. Alternative modes of application are also presented.

Validation Mapping

Worksheet. The validationgram worksheet (8.5″ × 11″) has a large circle divided into four domains (i.e., relationships, activities, things, and places), as shown in Fig. 2. A larger worksheet may be used when the client is visually impaired, or when explanatory or process comments need to be written directly on the sheet. The external circle (7-inch diameter) contains three inner circles with "self" placed in the centre, so that the relative importance of each item can be reflected. That is, the closer it is to the centre, the more personal significance it has. A completed validationgram (i.e., "validation map") represents the client's network of validation sources.
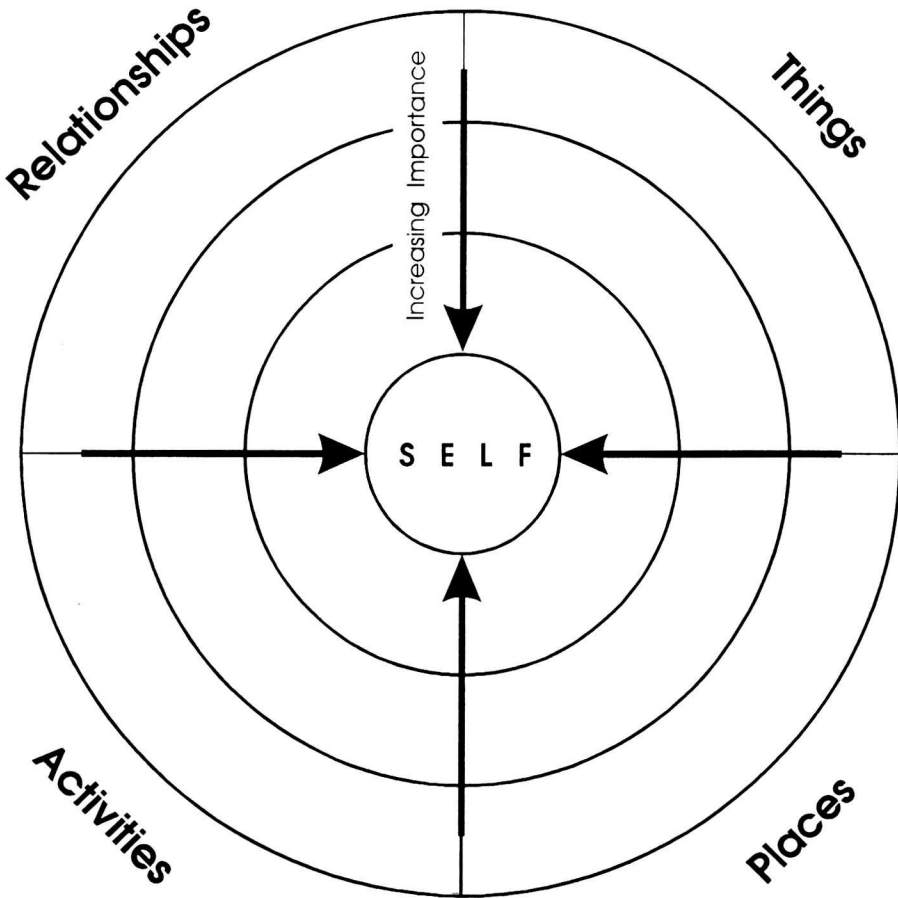

FIGURE 2
Validationgram: Four domains of validation sources.

Instructions. The following instructions may be given at the beginning of the exercise:

1. *Introduction.* Certain people, activities, things, and places are important to us for various reasons. Please indicate on this sheet what are personally important to *you*, in these four areas: (a) relationships (e.g., persons and pets, alive or dead), (b) activities, (c) things (e.g., material and symbolic items and personal possessions), and (d) places or locations. Please put extremely important items in the innermost circle.

2. *Client freedom.* You can start anywhere. You are welcome to move back and forth among these four areas if you wish. If you prefer not to mention a specific name, you are welcome to use a symbol or an initial so that only you understand what it means. You can list as many items as you like, use the space outside the large circle, and make changes and add more items later.

Time. The time required for the mapping activity varies from client to client. So does the degree of details. It generally takes 10 to 20 minutes for a client to do the first round of rough mapping of validation sources, although more items can be added and changes made in subsequent sessions.

Ensuring client initiative and control. To ensure client initiative, it is recommended that the counsellor avoid interference during the mapping activity and not suggest items to be included or their locations on the map. The client should be given as much freedom and control as possible. However, if the client feels stuck, confused and disoriented about the activity, the counsellor may try to reduce task ambiguity by explaining the concepts and, if necessary, providing examples. If the client has a more urgent issue to discuss and has difficulty concentrating on this task, the mapping activity may be postponed.

Adding more details. Clients are encouraged to make their validation-grams as personally meaningful as possible, by adding details and dynamic elasticity to their validation mapping. The following instructions may be given to enhance such a quality:

(a) You may indicate the items that are not presently available or accessible by putting them in parentheses ( ).

(b) You can show that certain items are significant to you in both positive and negative ways, by using a sign like +/-.

(c) If there are items which you wish will one day be closer to the centre, use an arrow sign → to show new locations.

(d) Feel free to come up with your own symbols to describe what the items mean to you.

Optional non-visual exercise. Prior to, or instead of, the visual mapping exercise, the counsellor may introduce a more linear and verbal activity instead. In this, clients are asked to mention three important items in each of the four domains. In addition, they may be invited to give a brief explanation for how such items are of personal significance.

Alternative Modes of Application

The alternative usage of validationgram is discussed here in terms of: (a) coverage of the four domains, (b) timing, and (c) need for thematic focus in counselling.

Domain coverage. Instead of covering the four domains in one session, clients may focus on one domain at a time, and explore relevant issues in a given session. As mentioned earlier, it may require multiple sessions to complete the whole validationgram sheet. Clients may be invited to add new items as their self-awareness expands and as new life circumstances require alterations on the previously completed validationgram.

Timing. Validation mapping can be introduced at different points in time, and in any of the following formats: (a) self-reflective homework, (b) a pre-session solitary activity, (c) a within-session activity, (d) an activity for an intake interview, and (e) an on-going project over a number of sessions.

Thematic focus. While validationgram is discussed here as an open-ended self-exploration, "thematic validationgram" may also be a useful activity at a certain point in counselling. Clients may be invited to use validationgram to explore questions, such as: "What do I miss about my home culture?" "What do I value about my work?" and "What has changed after the divorce?" Also, one of the five thematic components may be explored with questions such as: "What and who help me feel good about myself?" and "Where do I find meaning in life?"

Post-Mapping Processing

In addition to the informative and heuristic nature of the activity itself, the subsequent counsellor-client dialogue is extremely important. Having completed the validationgram sheet, clients should be invited to reflect on the nature of the personal meaning of each item, as well as exploring their feelings and thoughts generated during the mapping activity.

Post-mapping processing may prove to be productive and instrumental in articulating and deeply understanding client problems. Also, clients may explore with the counsellor what changes have taken place in their validation network after a certain incident. When appropriate, validationgram processing may be used as a lead to a more focussed

discussion on a certain topic for the remainder of the counselling session.

Clients might remember additional items to be included or corrections to be made on their validationgrams. Such additions and changes to the previously produced validationgram should be welcomed, and be seen as a new avenue for client self-disclosure and a dialectical exploration of their world.

Constructing and examining a validationgram can generate a powerful insight in clients with certain emotional impact. For example, clients might realize the significance of a certain hobby or activity that they have forgotten about for years, and decide to revive it. For those who take pride in being self-sufficient, the activity may bring forth a realization as to how much they need validation from others (i.e., social validation).

This process also has an objectifying effect. A concrete, visual and holistic representation of one's validation network offers some objective distance for reflecting on what is meaningful and essential to one's existence and what is missing from present life. In this process, one engages in reassessment of one's life and exploration of future possibilities.

A client, for example, realized the importance of her friends in Japan and her cultural traditions upon recognizing how socially and culturally uprooted she felt while living in Canada; she subsequently chose to return to Japan. A boy from a native Indian reserve passionately talked about hunting activities and the sacred nature of the forests and animals. He discussed how important it was for him to become a good hunter like his father and serve his tribe. Another native woman talked about her struggles with her experience of abusive relationships and about her subsequent spiritual journey. She emphasized how fulfilling it was to teach young children their native language and cultural traditions. Having placed all his family members close to the outer circle, a man talked about his pain and grief about being scapegoated by his family of origin. A mentally handicapped woman described to an interviewer what her two dolls meant to her. She considered them as her children with names and personalities because she had been advised not to get pregnant due to her genetic deficits. These dolls gave her consolation over her lost motherhood. She kept them hidden from others, because "My social worker would think I'm crazy and send me to an institution."

As a follow-up and summary activity, clients may be asked to look at the model of five validation themes (as shown in Fig. 1) and enter validation sources for each theme. For example, a foreign student entered "passport" as an important reminder of who she was (i.e., identity) and "English dictionary" as a symbol for her progress (i.e., competence) in learning English. This can provide an opportunity for further sharing and self-exploration. Also, when exploring the theme of competency and

autonomy, clients may be helped to acknowledge their internal locus of validation along with the external sources, in the forms of personal qualities, competencies, spirituality, good memories, personal values and beliefs, among other things.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT VALIDATIONGRAM AND RESEARCH ISSUES

As an extension of the theoretical premises of the model of self-validation (Ishiyama, 1989, 1995; Ishiyama & Westwood, 1992), the following assumptions are made about validationgram:

1. A map of validation sources reflects one's inner world of meanings, values, and feelings.

2. The significance of the validationgram contents (i.e., why they are important) corresponds to the five thematic components of Ishiyama's (1989) self-validation model.

3. One's inner resources, strengths, and past accomplishments are revealed on one's validationgram as well as the available external sources of support.

4. Validationgram reflects salient aspects of one's self-identity. For example, if one's occupation is used as the primary source of identity, career-related items will form a constellation in one's validationgram.

5. One's validation network is fluid, and goes through changes over time. The present validationgram, when compared to the old one, may reflect certain changes events such as: personal and developmental transition, identity crisis, and loss of important relationships.

6. Validationgram is unique to each person; there is no identical validationgram for two or more persons. It reflects his/her unique way of constructing personal reality and experiencing validation.

7. There is a central tendency (i.e., constellation) in one's validation sources and themes, and one's value structure will emerge in the process of exploring one's validationgram.

8. Validationgram provides complex information as to what is, what used to be, and what can be validating to the client, and leads to client exploration of how the items on the validationgram contributes to one's well-being.

9. Validationgram is a communication and relationship enhancer; it enhances a dialectical communication process between the counsellor and client, facilitates client self-disclosure, and promotes trust in the helping or interview relationship.

10. Validationgram generates new insights into self and helps to artic-
    ulate the effects of certain critical incidents in life. Also, one is
    likely to experience the validationgram activity itself to be validat-
    ing and therapeutic.

Beck (1993) recently interviewed ten international students, and in-
vestigated how they benefited from discussing their cross-cultural
adjustment issues using the validationgram activity. They considered
the activity to be personally meaningful and effective in the following
ways: (a) expressing personal losses accompanying cultural relocation,
(b) recognizing major changes in the family and country of origin,
(c) exploring future career plans, (d) articulating unfinished business,
and (e) identifying new sources of validation. In addition, Beck reported
that the activity itself helped the students gain a sense of empowerment.

Research is needed to test these assumptions. The content and process
facilitated by the validationgram activity may provide a fertile ground for
research. Effects of the activity on interviewer-client interaction and
client self-perceptions are currently investigated by the author. Re-
searchers may consider using validationgram as a method of inquiry for
phenomenological studies and articulating critical incidents. Clinicians
may explore meaningful ways of using it as an intake activity and a clinical
assessment tool.

CONCLUSIONS

In the present paper, the model of self-validation and its derivative
activity called "validationgram" have been discussed and its underlying
assumptions articulated. Its major premises are that people are moti-
vated to self-validate, and that self-validation is essentially a personal (i.e.,
phenomenological) experience which reflects one's psychoecological
context of living and one's cultural and personal symbolism. The pro-
posed validationgram activity may effectively complement a conven-
tional talking and problem-focussed method of counselling, and may
provide a wealth of information and insights. Validationgram, when
incorporated into a dialectical and client-validating counselling process,
can therefore be highly therapeutic and relationship-enhancing. It is
hoped that both counsellors and researchers will further explore the
merit as well as limitations of the validationgram activity.

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