

RESEARCH NOTES ON DECISION-COUNSELLING

Notes On Specific Counsellor Interventions For Executing
The Problem-Solving Phase¹ Of Employment Counselling

The term "phase" or "stage" seems to imply that decision-counselling must proceed in a neat, logical step-wise fashion. The use of these terms is for the purpose of rationally "outlining" or communicating certain concepts.

In actual counselling practice, an individual will frequently overlap his steps (for example, beginning to think of solutions before the problem is defined); he will backtrack to earlier stages or phases (for example, new information will often make it necessary to back-up and clarify some aspect of the problem or decision which has been overlooked); some stages may even be skipped altogether; and sometimes several stages may be accomplished simultaneously.

These notes are developed on two assumptions. First, I am here concerned primarily with phase 3 (that is, the problem-solving, decision-making phase of the employment counselling process. This phase may be accomplished within a single interview or may take place over several interviews. Second, while the interventions I am identifying are meant to be especially applicable to the 3rd phase, they may also apply, at times, to other phases; further they do not include all possible or even desirable interventions² which apply to the decision or problem-solving phase of counselling.

¹For the purpose of this exposition, I will define employment counselling as having four phases:

<u>Initial Phase:</u> establish working relationship by use of pre-counselling skills	<u>Assessment Phase:</u> mainly to determine job readiness and potential of client.	<u>Decision-Making, Problem-Solving Phase.</u>	<u>Implementation, Evaluation, Termination Phase.</u>
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²There are at least twenty-one models of decision-making/problem-solving models which can be identified as separate approaches even though there is considerable overlap between some of them. Further, I have counted over one-hundred different counselling interventions which are described as appropriate to counselling from a problem-solving/decision-making perspective. Therefore, I am selecting a short list of those interventions which seem to me to be crucial, especially for short-term counselling as is the case of employment counselling.

In order to provide some logic to the set of interventions which I am identifying, I will:

1. list those critical questions which I believe can be used as counselling guidelines during the problem-solving, decision-making phase of employment counselling;
2. state the counselling objective(s) for that point in the counselling process; and
3. suggest appropriate interventions.³

³Those interventions which are well known to most counsellors (for example, paraphrasing), I will simply list by name. Those which are less well-known, or more specialized, I will define, explain and give references for more details. Please bear in mind that I am assuming that all interventions should be useable in the employment counselling interview; and, that they should be at a sufficiently low level of conceptual and procedural complexity that they can be learned in a relatively short training period. Finally, certain interventions are likely to be useful in all phases of an interview, even in all types of interview (here I am thinking of prompting as an example) while other interventions are phase-specific (for example, contracting).

Seven Guiding Questions For The Counsellor

Question 1. Is the client ready for problem solving? "Ready" implies three mini-questions: 1) Has the necessary client appraisal information been obtained? Is the client emotionally ready to problem-solve? Is the client displaying an attitude of problem-solving motivation?

The counselling goals at this point are:

- a. To determine readiness for problem-solving/decision-making, and
- b. To initiate problem-solving/decision making

Interventions

1. Paraphrasing. Listening [paraphrasing] enables three things to occur which are important at this point:

- a. by paraphrasing, the counsellor is able to determine if the client is expressing an attitude of problem-solving;
- b. by listening, the counsellor enables an extinction of high affective arousal (emotion) to occur, thus placing the client in a better frame of mind for rational problem-solving, and
- c. through the listening paraphrase, the counsellor is able to confirm and demonstrate an understanding of the client's situation to the client, thus forming a basis for mutual participation in problem-solving. This intervention is crucial in all phases of problem-solving.

2. Prompting (and Fading). Prompts are statements which direct clients to the tasks at hand. ["Yes, Mr. Smith, I know its difficult for you to come all this way for an interview. Perhaps we can make the best use of counselling time by looking at your test scores]. Fading refers to gradually eliminating prompts or cues so that the client is responding to 'natural' clues in the counselling process and is encouraged to a higher degree of self-management. Research and practical reference:

Karoly, Paul. Operant Methods. In Kanfer, F. and Goldstein, A. Helping People Change (Eds.), New York: Pergamon Press, Inc, 1975, 210-212.

3. Reinforcing. Technically, a reinforcement stimulus [in employment counselling, usually a verbal statement] increases the likelihood that a behavior will occur again.

a. Specific reinforcers are directed at specific behaviors.

Examples:

- i. Thank you for waiting, I needed that five minutes to prepare the materials we will need.
- ii. That is a very complete list you made out, that should help a lot.
- iii. Your suggestion that we consider alternative two seems like a good one.

b. Global reinforcers are non-contingent - they do not (and should not) connect to any specific behaviors. They are best used outside of the focussed counselling process such as during the warming up period of counselling or after the tasks are finished.

Examples:

- i. Well, Mr. Jones, you are looking well today.
- ii. I'm really impressed by your attitude.

c. Non-verbal reinforcers are subtle counsellor-behaviors which increase the client's attention and persistence to the task. Examples include looking at the client, smiling, nodding head, using inclusive gestures, leaning toward the client, etc.

Question 2. Can the client define or recognize the problem as one of decision (choice)?

The counselling goal at this point is to confirm that the client perceives:

- a. that the problem is (at least partly) one of personal decision or choice, and
- b. the need for personal ownership of responsibility to work for solution/decision.

Interventions

1. Paraphrasing.
2. Socratic dialoging. This intervention consists of asking a person to state how he or she feels, believes and behaves with regard to a particular

topic, in this instance making a decision. The procedure is designed to cause individuals to display more consistency in their beliefs, to determine whether they are willing to assume responsibility for making an effort rather than impute responsibility for their predicament to "society", or "bad luck", etc. The procedure includes asking questions, using paraphrasing, using mild challenge, and requesting clarification. The reference for this intervention is:

McGuire, W. J. Cognitive consistency and attitude change. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 1960, 60, 345-353.

Question 3. Have all alternatives known to both client and counsellor been identified?

The counselling goal is to assist client in identifying all possible alternatives, decisions or solutions for the problem at hand.

Interventions

So far as I know, there are numerous suggestions on how to stimulate clients to generate alternatives but no well-researched, clearly superior intervention. I offer the following counsellor checklist for guiding client and counsellor in generating alternatives.

- | A 10-STEP CHECKLIST FOR GENERATING ALTERNATIVES
IN THE COUNSELLING INTERVIEW - PEAVY/1979 | |
|--|---|
| 1. | Re-inforce motivation to generate alternatives by stressing that the client has the potential to identify alternatives. |
| 2. | Rule out criticism of initial alternatives, concentrate on building a list first, then evaluate. |
| 3. | Reinforce both alternatives suggested by client and <u>efforts</u> to produce alternatives. |
| 4. | Quantity of suggestions is sought, even far-fetched alternatives. |
| 5. | Use personal analogy. This involves a) imaging oneself to be the problem object [i.e., "I am my 'stubbornness'"] and then asking "What would cause me to change?" |
| 6. | Identify external sources of alternatives beyond the counsellor-client dyad and coach the client to consult them and report findings. [Peers, postings, books, films, newspapers, classes, family, etc.]. |
| 7. | Model alternative-generating behavior; the counsellor should always make it clear that what he or she is modeling is how it <u>might</u> be done - not how <u>it must</u> be done. The modeling can take the form of a role-play. |
| 8. | Suggest alternatives from own experience or from knowledge of what other clients have done. Again it is essential that this procedure be carefully presented as what <u>might</u> be done not what should or must be done. |
| 9. | <u>Diagram</u> the problem and alternatives. Certain clients are stimulated in their thinking and motivated to "figure-out" solutions when they are encouraged to draw a diagram of their problem-situation (or when the counsellor works out a diagram), (or when they jointly produce a diagram). |
| 10. | <u>Explore</u> the consequences of <u>not</u> finding alternatives. |

Question 4. Have the pros and cons of each alternative been identified and listed?

The counselling goal is to evaluate alternative solutions or decisions.

Interventions

One intervention which, in modified form, is potentially useful for evaluating alternatives in the employment counselling interview is the Balance Sheet Method proposed by Janis and Mann, Decision-Making: A Psychological analyses of Conflict Choice and Commitment. New York: MacMillan Free Press, 1977. A suggested modification of their procedure follows:

GUIDE TO EVALUATING ALTERNATIVES (Balance Sheetting)						
ANTICIPATED CONSEQUENCES	ALTERNATIVE 1		ALTERNATIVE 2		ALTERNATIVE 3	
	+	-	+	-	+	-
A. <u>Utility gains/losses for myself.</u> 1. Income 2. Interest value of work 3. Convenience to home 4. etc.						
B. <u>Utility gains/losses for others close to me.</u> 1. Wife could reduce work 2. Son could continue going to school 3. etc.						
C. <u>Self-esteem</u> 1. See myself as good provider 2. Able to do "important" work 3. Self-image as team worker 4. etc.						
D. <u>Social approval</u> 1. From spouse 2. From friends 3. From peers 4. From employer 5. etc.						
TOTAL						

This "guide" can be used to evaluate alternatives, to determine possible sources of negative feedback, and generally to stimulate a client to think about consequences of specific plans of actions. It can be administered by the counsellor, filled-out by the client or simply used as a guide in discussing alternatives.

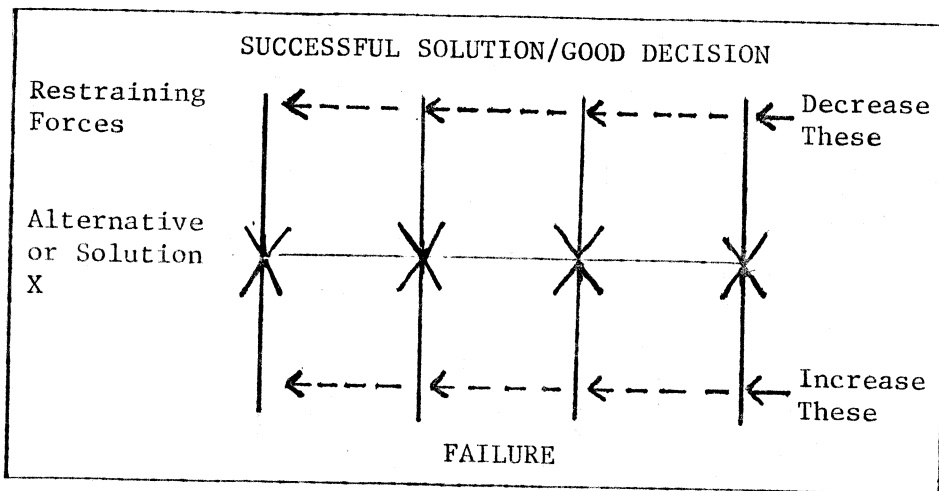
Question 5. Has the client chosen the most promising alternative, and have the advantages and disadvantages of this alternative been clearly identified?

The counselling goal is to assist the client to:

- a. identify a probable "best" solution/decision, and
- b. review the pros and cons for that decision.

Interventions

- a. Balance sheet described previously.
- b. Another intervention to assist the client the most promising alternative is the Force-Field analyses, a procedure which can be diagrammed as follows.



- c. Confrontation. It is very important that a client be coaxed to critically examine and evaluate whatever options have been identified. To encourage a realistic appraisal, it is often necessary to [gently] confront the client with discrepancies in his or her appraisal.

A three-stage model of confrontation follows:

1. Reflection. Step one is a paraphrase of the client's perception (opinion, thought, etc.), to show that you accurately understand his or her position.
2. Experiential Statement. Step two requires that the counsellor take the initiative away from the client by telling the client how he/she (the counsellor) perceives the client's opinions, behaviors, etc., to appear discrepant.
3. Open-ended Questions. In the third step, the counsellor gives the initiative back to the client, who can accept or reject the confrontation. The open-ended question is designed to elicit a problem-solving attitude from the client.

Example:

Counsellor: Mr. Smith, if I understand you correctly, you say that you absolutely must get a new job which pays you more? [paraphrases]

Mr. Smith: That's right. [confirms]

Counsellor: Well Mr. Smith, on the one hand you say you must get a higher-paying job and at the same time you've stressed that you are not interested in upgrading yourself in order to get a better job. It seems to me that your goal and your basic position contradict each other. [States the discrepancy]. What do you think about what I've just said? [Asks open-ended question, giving initiative back to client and prompting a problem-solving attitude].

Sources for confrontation include:

- Berenson, B. G. and Mitefill, D. Confrontation: For Better or Worse! Amburst, Mass., Human Resources Development Press, Inc., 1974.
- Garner, H. The Confrontation Problem-Solving Technique: Applicability to Adlerian Psychotherapy. Journal of Individual Psychology, 1972, 28, 248-259.
- Peavy, R. V. Adults Helping Adults. University of Victoria, 1977, 48-52.

Question 6. Has the client developed a plan (with contingencies for both success and failure) for translating the decision into action?

The counselling goal at this point is to assist the client in developing a plan for acting on decision or implementing a solution.

Interventions

1. Paraphrasing (to clarify)
2. Re-inforcing (to motivate)
3. Confronting (to test commitment)
4. Formulating a contract. Within the context of counselling, contracts generally emphasize the positive results of achieving a goal. Contracts are used to:

- a. initiate client action,
- b. establish criteria for success,
- c. establish reciprocal commitment between counsellor and client,
- d. clarify the consequences, both positive and negative of working toward, and achieving, a goal,
- e. provide a record of agreement, and
- f. provide guidelines for carrying out a plan.

Contracts can be as simple as a verbal agreement or as complicated as a several-page written contract which stipulates the details of positive reinforcers, contingencies, criteria, increments, etc. One source of contracting is: Kanfer, F. Self-management methods. In Kanfer, F. and A. Goldstein. Helping People Change. New York: Pergamon Press, 1975, 320-326.

Question 7. Is there a procedure for report-back and for trying to maintain client commitment even in the face of stress and negative feedback?

The counselling goals at this point are:

- a. establishing a follow-up procedure so that action can be reported, evaluated, supported, or modified, and
 - b. identifying reinforcers for maintaining section.
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Interventions

- a. Contracting. (Explained on previous page).
- b. Telephone prompts, checking on status of client through telephone call.
- c. Counter-acting defective coping patterns.
A skilled counsellor is usually able to assess the client's expectations about the risks in the decision under consideration as well as estimating the level of client enthusiasm or commitment to the decision. In other words the counsellor should be able to make a respectable guess about the client's dominant coping pattern with reference to the decision (solution) as well as the plan of action. This appraisal allows the counsellor to make one of four prescriptive hypotheses and execute interventions designed to counteract defective decision-making behavior patterns.⁶

1. If the counsellor's assessment is that the client perceives no serious risks in staying with the status quo and surmises that this perception is detrimental for the client, then the counsellor can attempt to prevent this unconflicted adherence to the status quo.

The counsellor can ask questions about the potential significance of any negative feedback the client has already received. The counsellor can present further objective evidence and can encourage the client to check with other expert advice.

2. On the other hand, if the counsellor assesses that the client too quickly and unconcernedly adopts an alternative course of action (or decides) and concludes that this quick and unexamined change is unrealistic, then the counsellor can attempt to intervene and prevent unconflicted change. Again the counsellor can question the client about the possible losses which could result from this plan of action, induce the client to get more information, and suggest the need for finding yet other courses of action.

⁶For discussion of these procedures, see Janis, I., and Mann, L. Decision-Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice and Commitment. New York: Free Press, 1977, (especially pp. 344-404).

3. If the counsellor hypothesizes that the client is in a state of unreconciled conflict and is likely, therefore, to use defensive avoidance (such as rationalizations, excuses, counter-arguments, ploys for pity, etc.); then the counsellor can intervene in an effort to reduce the use of defensive avoidance by such tactics as:

- a. encourage the client to talk the situation over with respected peers,
- b. suggest new and useful information such as pamphlets, books, or other resources,
- c. use role-playing to explore the conflict in an imaginary scenario,
- d. reinforcing all reasons which will support the client's hope,
- e. provide additional counselling time to clarify and reinforce the positive elements of the best alternative plan,
- f. directly countering rationalizations which the client may present. This can be done by use of confrontation (described earlier) of the client with counsellor perceived rationalizations or by developing a list of the rationalizations used by the client and then systematically presenting them to him or her in a careful listening and deliberate examination mode. The counsellor can also describe other rationalizations which other clients have used in similar situations and ask the client such questions as:
 - i. Have you ever used this excuse?
 - ii. Has this excuse ever occurred to you?
 - iii. Do you think, deep down, you might possibly be inclined to use this as a valid reason or argument for not _____?
?
 - iiii. Have you ever heard anyone else use this excuse?

Of course, such a procedure as the one outlined above can only be done effectively when the counsellor has established a relationship of respect with the client, so that the counsellor is sure to be acting out of genuine care for the client. The over-all purpose of this procedure is to reduce the client's tendency to bolster avoidance behaviors. If the client does not perceive the counsellor as having his genuine best interest at heart, then any confrontation procedure is likely to harden the client's defensiveness. All tactics which the counsellor uses to help the client maintain a plan of action can be guided

by these principles:

- a. Call the client's attention to not only the positive consequences of a particular course of action but also to potential losses or risks. A client will frequently discount or forget negative considerations in order to bolster his chosen course of action. The counsellor should firmly but gently present his own views about risks and provide whatever objective information which is available.
- b. Encourage the client to work out ways of gaining emotional support and realistic reassurance in the face of negative feedback. The counsellor can remind and reinforce the client's personal assets, and remind the client of potential supporting resources such as spouse, peers, priest, etc.
- c. Supplement the client's attempts to arrive at support and reassurance by supplying him with supplementary information and suggestions about how setbacks and negative feedback can be effectively met or their effects at least mitigated (for example letting the client know that emergency counselling is available if needed; or other expert opinion can be sought if that becomes necessary).

The procedures outlined above are all designed to present the client with a blueprint of the stresses, possible set-backs and risks (as well as the positive elements) which result from taking a particular course of action as well as the coping tactics available to the client; the information which can be used - all of which constitutes a preparatory message to help the client build a basic attitude of hope and specific beliefs together with information which will have a supportive and motivating effect during times of stress during the action implementation stage of problem solving and decision making.