The Language of Change

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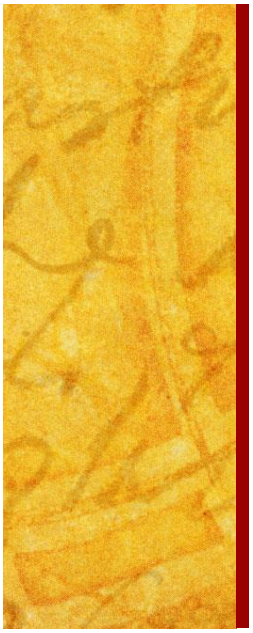
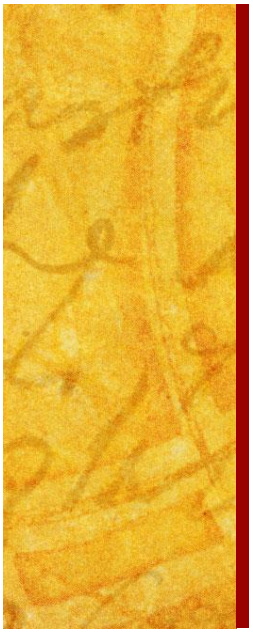


Why should we focus on the language of client?



People are usually more convinced by reasons they discovered themselves than by those found by others.

Pascal, 1600s

Giving voice to the reasons; How might therapy help?

- Facilitate the client's discovery and exploration of her wishes, desires, goals, values, hopes, and dreams for the future
- Provide an opportunity for the client to "talk themselves into change"
- Help the client build a good solid case for change
- Provide the opportunity to form intentions regarding what to change and how it should happen

Motivational Interviewing and the language of change

- Motivational interviewing is a collaborative, **goal-oriented style of communication with particular attention to the language of change. It is designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person's own reasons for change** within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion.

How is MI Person-centered ?

- The MI spirit includes:
  - Partnership
  - Acceptance
  - Affirming the person's strengths and efforts
  - Accurate empathy
  - Autonomy support
  - Absolute worth of the person
  - Compassion
  - Evoking of the person's motivation and resources

Person-Centered Therapy; was there a focus on language?

- Rogers' assertion that he was non-directional was challenged by his students.
- Truax and Carkhuff studied with Rogers, his work, and asserted that he was very selective in what he chose to reflect.
- What did he focus on?

The Self-Exploration Measure

- Truax and Carkhuff (1967)
- Measures the extent to which clients disclose or discuss Personally relevant material
- Originally on a 10 point scale
- Currently in the Motivational Interviewing Skill Code (MISC)

- 1. No personally relevant material is revealed or discussed by the client during the session. If the client brings up personally relevant material, the clinician dismisses it or responds only minimally
- 3. The client does volunteer or elaborate on some personally relevant material beyond that directly asked for by the counselor, but does not readily explore it further.
- 5. The client engages in active intrapersonal exploration, openly exploring values, problems, feelings, relationships, fears, turmoil, life-choices, and perceptions. Clients may experience a shift in self-perception.

Personally relevant material may include expression or exploration of the following:

- Personal problems
- Self-descriptions that reveal the self to the counselor, expressions of the internal world
- Personally private material which when revealed tends to make the client more vulnerable or could be personally damaging
- Personal values, life choices
- Expression of feelings
- Personal roles, perception of one's relationship to others
- Perception of self worth

Client Self-Exploration

- Developed as a tool for training therapists
- Found to be associated with the changes in personality and functioning that was the focus of early person-centered therapy

What does MI say about the language of change?

MI 1; **Self-motivational statements**

- Problem recognition (I know that my drinking has had an effect on my family)
- Optimism about change (I am sure that I can quit because I have done it before)
- Concerns about the status quo (I am worried about being mobile if I don't lose weight)
- Intention to change (I am going to do something about this!)

What does MI say about the language of change?

- **Change Talk (MISC 1.1)**

  Any language moving toward change or away from the target behavior

- **Counterchange Talk**

  Any language moving away from change or toward sustaining the target behavior

- **Target behavior**

  The language is defined in relation to a specific target behavior such as drinking or smoking

Current MI thinking; Change Talk and Sustain Talk

Opposite Sides of a Coin

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Important Client Language

Sustain Talk— Neutral Talk-- Change Talk—

Moves away from change

Moves towards change

What is the language of change?

Change Talk

- Preparatory talk
  - Desire to change
  - Ability to change
  - Reasons to change
  - Need to change
- Mobilizing talk
  - Commitment language
  - Activating language
  - Taking steps

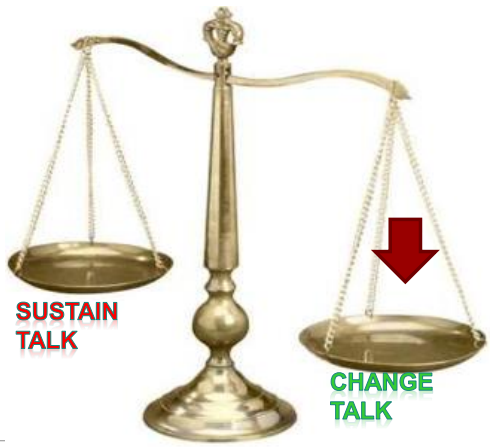
Sustain Talk

- Preparatory talk
  - Desire not to change
  - Inability to change
  - Reasons not to change
  - Need to keep status quo
- Mobilizing talk
  - Commitment to status quo
  - Activating language
  - Taking steps to remain

Why would client language during treatment sessions facilitate change?

- Facilitates awareness and insight (Engle & Arkowitz)
- Enhances emotional salience (Wagner & Ingersoll)
- Persuades speaker of what they believe when ambivalence is prominent – self persuasion theory (Miller & Rollnick)
- Obligates listener through public commitment (Amrhein)
- Public declaration of intent and plan to protect (Gollwitzer)

Changing the Balance of Ambivalence



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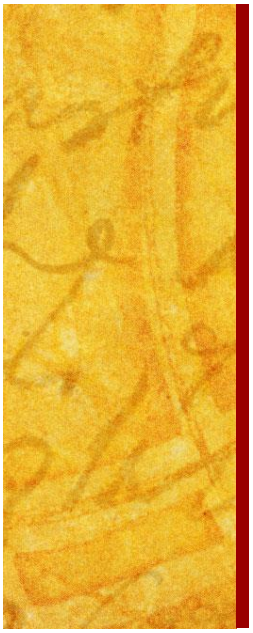
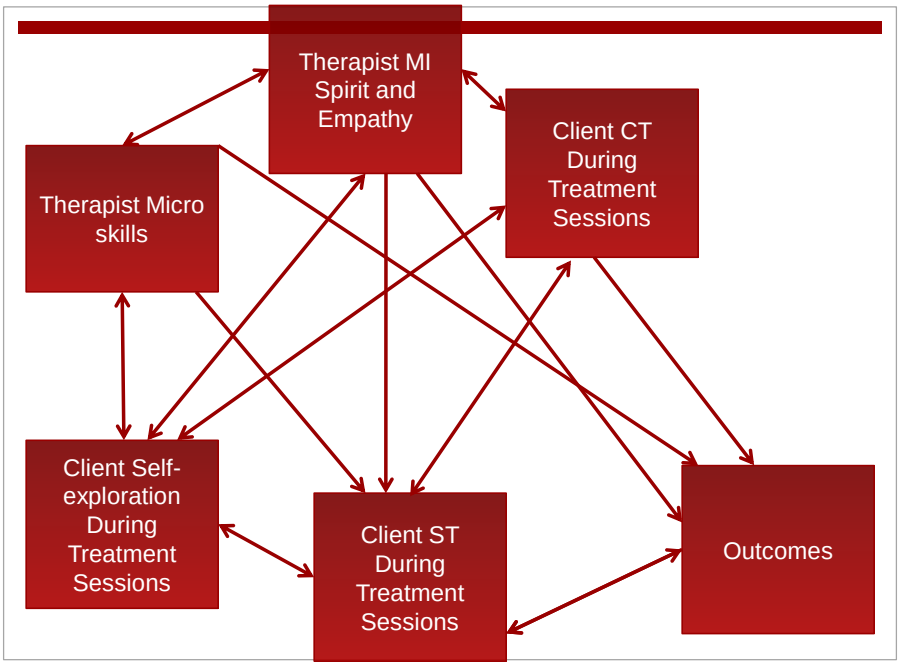


Is Client Language and /or Client Self-Exploration a Mechanism of Action in Motivational Interviewing?



Growing evidence that

- Client language within sessions is associated with and can often predict outcomes such that
  - Sometimes increasing change talk leads to better outcomes; sometimes not
  - More consistently, more sustain talk leads to poorer outcomes.

Growing evidence

- High levels of empathy in combination with more complex reflections can lead to reduced sustain talk and thus, better outcomes (Gaume, et al. 2015)
- Low levels of empathy render the micro-skills less effective and may even be toxic

What of the evidence?

- Apodaca, et. al.(2014) found that higher client self-exploration was predictive of better drinking outcomes at 3 and 12 months
- Borsari, et. al.(2014) found that higher client self-exploration predicted lower weekly drinking rates and also mediated the relationship between MI Spirit and the drinking outcome. Increased MI Spirit predicted higher levels of self-exploration.

Conclusions and Implications

- Client language is relevant and important for helping client's change
- Most evidence for the effect of reducing sustain talk
- Clinicians can and do influence the client's language using good person-centered skills to facilitate client self-exploration and reduce sustain talk

References

- Truax, C. B. & Carkhuff, R. R. (1967). *Toward effective counseling and psychotherapy: Training and practice. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.*
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