

BELIEF EXPLORATION

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this outline is to present, for the first time in writing, the model of casework intervention which I have been developing over the past five years. I have called this approach Belief Exploration for the time being simply because I cannot think of a better name to describe it.

This is an approach developed by a social worker for social workers and I have not come up against a problem to which it could not be applied. Its concepts are extremely simple and can be easily grasped in a couple of hours. Because the concepts are quite general, the approach can be adapted to any helper's individual personality. One can also stay within the framework and yet let their imagination run wild so that there is plenty of room for creativity.

This outline is only that - an outline! Much has been left out to keep it as short as possible and at the same time I feel that all of the main points have been covered so that it should prove to be a good stimulus to agreement, disagreement and general discussion.

I have no desire to "convert" those who have already developed their own approach and are satisfied with it. I simply want to reach those workers who are dissatisfied with the approach they are now using and especially those who do not have any approach at all. I offer these workers Belief Exploration for their consideration and I invite their feedback, both positive and negative. It is only with this feedback that I will be able to continue to develop this model. To those who may want to make my model "their model", I can only say that I sincerely hope that it will make

the practice of casework as exciting and challenging for them as it is for me.

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A PROBLEM SOLVING APPROACH

The Belief Exploration model of casework is a problem solving approach to helping people deal with their problems of living. It sees man as an information processing, goal directed organism and it defines a problem as any situation where a person is unable to reach a goal which he has chosen to pursue.

A person is unable to reach a goal for three basis reasons:

- 1) The goal itself is unreachable.**
- 2) The person lacks the "means" (i.e. the knowledge, the material means, etc.) to reach the goal.**
- 3) The person has certain mistaken beliefs about reality which prevent him from reaching the desired goal.**

THE HELPER1S TASK

It is the helper1s task to help his client (1) define his problem (i.e. the goal he is unable to reach), then (2) determine if the goal is reachable and if it is, (3) help him obtain the means to reach his goal, or (4) help him identify and correct any faulty belief which prevent him from reaching his goal. Let us now consider* each of these four tasks in more detail.

1) Definition of Problem.

Often the definition of the client1s problem is quite straightforward: "I want to improve my marriage"; "I want to get a better job"; "I want to be able to relate better to men", and so on.

At other times, however, all the client is aware of is an unpleasant feeling state such as fear, depression or anger, and it is the helper's task to connect that feeling state to some goal which is being frustrated.

This approach sees emotions as indications of goals being reached or of goals being frustrated. This simply means that when you have reached, or are in the process of reaching your goals, you feel "good" and when you are frustrated in your, attempts to reach your goals, you feel "bad". Therefore, in order to help someone feel "good", you have to help him reach his goals.

2) Is the Goal Reachable?

After helping the client define his goal (i.e. what he wants), "the next task is to help him decide if his goal is reachable. People are forever setting impossible tasks for themselves and then feeling miserable because they cannot accomplish these tasks. One such "impossible dream", which I have seen time and time again, is the goal of having everybody like you. This is impossible to achieve simply because people are different and have different likes and dislikes. It is the helper's task to help his client become aware of those goals he has set for himself which are unrealistic.

Another factor to be considered is whether or not the goal, if reachable, is worth the amount of effort the client will have to put into its realization. For example, a woman who in order to keep her husband (which is her goal) has to put up with a great deal of emotional and physical abuse may decide that her goal is simply not worth the pain she is going to have to suffer.

3) Obtaining Necessary Means.

When a client is unable to reach a goal, because he lacks the means to do so, it is the helper's task to help the client obtain these means. This could

be as simple as providing the client with information such as the address of the nearest Welfare Office. It could also, however, be as complicated as trying to teach the client parenting skills. When it becomes as involved as this, we are usually involved in more than simply providing information; at this point we are involved in a process of re-education and the client must be helped to identify his faulty beliefs before he can learn new ones. This leads us to what I consider to be the helper's main task (number four above) and this is to help the client identify and correct whatever faulty beliefs prevent him from reaching his goal.

4) Identification and Correction of Faulty Beliefs.

Before discussing this task, let us look for a moment at how a person "puts together" the many beliefs (both correct and faulty) he has in his belief system.

Every man builds a model of reality in his brain and we will refer to the basic unit of this model as a belief. We will define the concept belief, in its broadest sense, as simply an idea we have about the world. At this point we are going to list five basic characteristics of man's model of reality and these five characteristics represent the foundation upon which our whole framework is built. They are:

- 1) Everybody builds a model (i.e. a picture, an image, etc.) of reality in his brain.**
- 2) This model is a very personal one and different people see the world in different ways.**
- 3) When we relate to the world we relate to our own very personal model of reality and not to some objective reality "out there".**
- 4) Our model of reality is very resistant to change.**

5) It is important to us that the parts (i.e. our beliefs) of our model of reality are consistent with one another. (To give an example, we would feel uncomfortable if we believed that we were intelligent and, at the same time, believed that someone important to us felt that we were stupid.

Let us return now to what we have defined as the helper's main task: the identification and correction of those beliefs the client has which prevent him from reaching his goal. What we previously defined as the helper's second task - determining whether or not the goal is reachable and worth the effort - also involves identifying and correcting faulty beliefs (i.e. about the client's goals) and we have separated these two tasks mainly to emphasize the process which the helper and the client have to go through.

Identifying a faulty belief can be quite straightforward as when a client who has a M.A. in office management tells you that the reason he can't get a job as an office clerk is that he is not intelligent enough. This class of beliefs - those which the client is aware of and can articulate - we will call explicit beliefs.

We also have, however, a very large number of beliefs of which we are not aware but which affect our functioning on a daily basis. I am not speaking here of some mysterious phenomenon such as the "unconscious mind"; I am simply referring to ideas or knowledge we have about the world which we have not, for whatever reason, put into verbal form. These beliefs have to be implied from our behaviour and so we will call them implied beliefs. An example of an implied belief would be a client believing that she will not be loved by anybody if she shows negative feelings. She may very well not be aware of this belief and the helper may have to help her identify it.

I want to emphasize that when I speak of identifying implied beliefs I am not speaking of fancy interpretations based on some abstract theoretical

framework such as, "The reason you can't express negative feelings is that you believe that to do so would mean that you are unfaithful to the idealized image you have of your .mother". What I am referring to is a common sense, down to earth description of how a person "sees" the world. Even when you stay down to earth you have to proceed with a great deal of care as different people see the world in different ways. It is only by being able to empathize with the client that you are able to enter his world and have a chance of at least to some extent, seeing reality as he does. Every interpretation of an implied belief should be considered a hypothesis which the helper and the client test out and discover whether or not it "fits" the client's model of the world. If it doesn't fit then it has to be rejected.

THE HELPER'S TECHNIQUES

Once a faulty belief has been identified it is the helper's task to provide the client with evidence that this belief is incorrect. Evidence can be provided on both the verbal and non-verbal levels and usually both verbal and non-verbal techniques are used simultaneously.

Verbal Techniques

On the verbal level the helper can, by discussing the situation with the client, show him that:

- 1) His belief does not follow from the rules of deductive or inductive reasoning.**
- 2) His belief contradicts another belief in his belief system.**
- 3) His belief is no longer valid when the situation is defined in a different manner.**

The first two techniques rely on man's need to be rational and on the impossibility of making a rational decision to be irrational. Our framework, as far as these two techniques are concerned, is similar in many ways to the frameworks of Albert Ellis (Rational Emotive Psychotherapy), Victor Raimy (The Misconception Hypothesis), and Aaron Beck (Cognitive Therapy).

The third technique, however, goes beyond the above frameworks and is quite similar to the work of Paul Watzlawick and his group. These authors call this technique "reframing" and we will quote at some length from their book "Change, Principles of Problem. Formation and Problem Resolution11:

"To reframe, then, means to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the "facts" of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning. The mechanism involved here is not immediately obvious, especially if we bear in mind that there is change while the situation itself may remain quite unchanged and, indeed even unchangeable. What turns out to be changed as a result of reframing is the meaning attributed to the situation, and therefore its consequences, but not its concrete facts - or, as the philosopher Epictetus expressed it as early as the first century A.D., "It is not the things themselves which trouble us, but the opinions that we have about these things."

These authors go on to say:

"... classes are exhaustive collections of entities (the members) which have specific characteristics common to all of them. But membership in a given class is very rarely exclusive. One and the same entity can usually be conceived as a member of different classes0 Since classes are not

themselves tangible objects, but concepts and therefore constructs of our minds, the assignment of an object to a given class is learned or is the outcome of choice, and is by no means an ultimate, immutable truth. Truth, as Saint-Exupery remarked, is not what we discover, but what we create. A red wooden cube can be seen as a member of the class of all red objects, of the class of cubes, of the class of wooden objects, of the class of children's toys, etc. Moreover, in Epictetus's sense, further class memberships of any object are determined by the "opinions" that we have about it, i.e., the meaning and value which we have attributed to it. Which of these membership attributions is considered, overlooked, preferred, feared, etc., is very much the outcome of choice and circumstance, but once something is seen as having a particular meaning or value, it is very difficult to see that same something in terms of its membership in another, equally valid class. For instance, most people detest horsemeat, but some like it. In either case it is the same thing, horsemeat, but its meaning and value, its class membership is very different for the two types of people. Only as the result of drastically changed circumstances (war, famine, etc.) may horsemeat change its metareality and become a delicacy also for those who under normal circumstances shuddered at the thought of eating it."

To put it very simply, to reframe means to change the meaning of a situation. An actual example from my work will, hopefully, make this concept clear.

Mary, a 28 year old young woman, states that she is unable to keep a job because she is unable to accept the criticism that is made of her work from time to time. (There is nothing wrong with her work, she, like the rest of us, simply makes mistakes once in a while).

There are many faulty beliefs here which could be attacked but instead of going after these I redefined the situation as one where if Mary doesn't

start working soon then she is going to run out of money and therefore "lose" her apartment. I, of course, know that Mary has worked very hard for her apartment and that it is very important to her. The next day Mary goes and gets herself a job and over the next couple of months we are able to work on and correct the faulty beliefs she has about being criticized, etc.

When you are redefining a situation in this manner it is important to take into account the client's priorities. If keeping her apartment was not high on Mary's list of priorities then redefining the situation as I did would not have brought about the desired change; that is avoiding criticism would have been more important to Mary than keeping her apartment.

Non-Verbal Techniques

Any manoeuvre on the part of the helper which places the client in a situation where he experiences evidence which contradicts a belief which he holds can be considered a non-verbal technique.

The client-helper relationship is used daily as a non-verbal technique as it "shows" the client that at least one person can respect and accept him as a person of worth. Many, if not most of our clients, believe that they are worthless individuals whom nobody in their right mind would accept and respect. Within the helping relationship they are provided with evidence that these beliefs are faulty and they, in some manner, have to deal with these contradictions. I believe that it is very possible that most of the changes our clients are able to accomplish are related mainly to this very special nature of the helping relationship.

To put it simply, non-verbal techniques "show" the client rather than "tell" him that his beliefs are faulty and their use is limited only by the limitations of the helper's imagination. Role Playing, Role Reversal, and many of the behaviour therapy techniques can be classified as non-verbal

techniques as they are used to "show" the client that his image of the world is in some way distorted.

SUMMARY

In summary, Belief Exploration is a problem solving, goal directed approach to casework where the emphasis is placed on changing whatever faulty beliefs the client has which prevents him from reaching his goals. The helper must use his skills to understand the client's model of reality so that he can help his client develop, clarify and modify this model in such a manner that it becomes more conducive to him in his attempts to reach his goals.