

Rapport-Building With Resistant Children: Re-Conceptualizing Relational Dynamics

Joshua M. Gold

University of South Carolina

Abstract

This paper briefly reviews existing conceptualizations of resistance in counseling children. The author posits that resistance is an “expected” aspect of all counseling and offers an alternative orientation toward client resistance based on exploring the child’s “helping narratives.” Two case studies illustrate the implementation of this intervention and its integration within the rapport-building process of counseling with children.

Rapport-Building With Resistant Children: Re-Conceptualizing Relational Dynamics

The notion of client resistance coincides with the development of counseling itself. The evolution of the “talking cure” is paced by differing conceptualizations of resistance, the client’s unwillingness to participate in that process (Seibel & Dowd, 2001). Originating in Freudian analysis, resistance was thought to signal a particularly sensitive area of client history protected by layers of client defense mechanisms (Brems, 1999; Butler & Bird, 2000). Congruent with this notion, resistance then symbolizes individual client recollections of particularly painful events from which the clients are protecting themselves (Cowan & Presbury, 2000; Wolf, 1988). Since clients come to counseling with pain in some aspects of their lives, a counselor can acknowledge, or expect, evidence of resistance in clients’ entering behaviors.

The counselor must then consider how to conceptualize or “make sense of” the client’s resistance (Karon & Widener, 1995; Mahalik, 2002; Vernon, 2004). Attempting to attend to the “presenting problem” without attention to the presence and role of the resistance would defeat any therapeutic intent. In fact, lack of attention to client resistance and the attendant issues would create an impasse in therapy (Erickson, 1980). The counselor’s inattention to these issues may be viewed as a covert alliance with the client to protect both counselor and client from the explosive emotionality of past issues (Newman, 1994). This article will discuss existing definitions of resistance and then offer a conceptualization of resistance so that its exploration can be used for rapport-building purposes.

This expectation is relevant to all counselors, including school counselors. Baker & Gerler (2004) state that “reluctance and resistance are natural challenges – part of

the counseling process” (p. 144). Stone and Dahir (2006) advise school counselors to expect resistance on the part of children as a function of the child’s history and experiences. This reluctance to participate in counseling is especially valid for children who are referred to the counselor by a teacher or school official (Erford, 2003). Blair (1999) advocates primary attention be focused on the development of a facilitative counseling alliance, as a precursor to attending to the presenting issue. Baker (2000) summarizes the importance of this topic to school counselors by stating “...all clients exhibit resistance at some time” (p. 143).

Existing Definitions of Client Resistance

Post-psychoanalytic counseling models still consider issues of client resistance. From a client-centered perspective, Patterson and Hidore (1997) claim that client resistance is a manifestation of the client’s fear about negotiating the relationship with the therapist. Client resistance may represent a client’s attempt to impose a familiar style of interaction on the therapy relationship based on the client’s comfort level in dealing with imagined authority figures. For example, clients who both fear, yet expect, criticism from authority figures will endeavor to manipulate the therapeutic interaction so the counselor is seen as a replication of previous critical authority figures. That distortion then, in the client’s mind, legitimizes his/her responses of anger and disappointment, thereby validating a premature termination of counseling. From a cognitive perspective, resistance protects the structural determinism of the client’s ego; those parts of the client’s personality integral to the definition of self (Cowan & Presbury, 2000; Cramer, 2000; Newman, 1994). From a behavioral view, resistance can be seen from one of two perspectives. First, client resistance may be indicative of a lack of client

skill within the therapeutic context. For example, clients may be so unfamiliar with using “I” messages that their omission in counseling reflects a lack of practice. From a second perspective, resistance may indicate incongruence between the therapeutic messages the client receives in session and the messages that the client receives in his or her unique social context (Harris, 1996). Compared to the client’s long-standing familial and social networks, a fledgling therapeutic relationship may lack the reinforcement power of the client’s other social support systems (Brems, 1999). For example, approval from the counselor would seem inadequate compared to the approval of one’s parent. Between these two competing sources of client feedback, it seems predictable that the client will opt for the more familiar and more powerful reinforcement patterns of the non-counseling systems. For example, a school counselor may reinforce client disclosure in session through application of minimal encouragers and verbal praise. However, in the family context, a child’s attempts at self-disclosure are met by family scorn and emotional isolation. Within these tensions, the family’s reinforcement pattern will prove more powerful than that of the counselor; negating whatever progress the client attained in session.

Resistance in Counseling Children

Children arrive in counseling with three distinct issues: (a) a presenting problem, (b) a set of “coping” skills, and, (c) a schema regarding how the child can accept adult help (Teyber, 2006; Orton, 1997). Within the interactional process implicit in the maturing process in a home, each family authors distinct covert rules about the legitimacy of seeking and receiving help (West & Bubenzer, 2002). Such rules may include admonitions around disclosure, admission of dysfunction, reluctance to

surrender old belief systems, or tests of an individual's loyalty to family history (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004). Even a rule as simple and protective for children as "don't talk to strangers" would impede the counseling process. Such rules may be gender-specific, age-specific, issue-specific, boundary-specific, or "characteristic of helper" specific. Gender-specific scripting would regulate what is, and what is not, shared with male or female authority figures and one's expectations of either support or punishment. Age-specific scripting may dictate expected levels of autonomy and competence, balanced by an admonition of the weakness evidenced through needing help. Issue-specific disclosure determines what topics can be broached with an adult and which cannot. Boundary-specific injunctions divide children's experiences into two categories: those kept within the family unit and those that can be shared with others. Last, identification of "characteristic of helper" narratives of children defines those adults who may be permitted to connect and inquire and those adults who are prevented from doing so. This scripting process is imbued in every child long before they meet the counselor yet are immediately vital components of the rapport-generating process.

Deacon (1999) refers to a "tendency that people have to repeat in every system in which they operate the patterns they learned in their original system" (p. 87). This tendency would then repeat itself in terms of the child's receptivity to counseling and the dynamics that comprise effective helping. Children and counselors may not be in accord on issues such as: (a) appropriate ownership of presenting relational problems, (b) a choice of stability over change (Simon, 2003), (c) openness to external assistance, (d) an investment in change process, (e) a willingness to consider alternative explanations of the presenting problem, and (f) a preference to focus on the actions and motivation of

others (Butler & Bird, 2000; Robbins, Alexander, Newell & Turner, 1996). Therefore, their in-session behaviors represent the enactment of family scripts around “being helped.” While the presenting issue itself may seem crucial and its resolution vital to the child’s in-school success, it is this scripting and its presence in counseling which is likely, by its primary nature, to defeat any attempt to resolve the “content” issue.

The proposed model illustrated in these case studies demonstrates the counselors’ uses of intergenerational and narrative conceptualizations to make sense of the child’s presenting resistance. These conceptualizations share a focus on past experience as a “blue-print” for present beliefs and actions. This orientation allows the counselor to explore with the child previous messages and beliefs that were learned about the helping process.

Case Studies

Juan is a nine-year old boy who was sent to the school counselor for acting out in class and refusing to follow teacher’s directions. Ms. Smith, his teacher, describes Juan as disrespectful and argumentative and says that eventually she feels worn down by his insistence. Juan was sent to the only counselor in his elementary school, a 40-something white male. The initial session between Juan and his counselor was characterized by Juan’s fidgeting, lack of eye contact and lack of disclosure. Every attempt the counselor made to understand Juan’s experiences in Ms. Smith’s class was either ignored or rebuffed. However, at the end of the first session, Juan did say that he liked the counselor and would meet with him again.

When the counselor met with his supervisor, it was suggested that the next session shift from the issue of classroom behavior solely to the development of a

positive working relationship between the child and counselor. The counselor devised a list of questions to explore with Juan integrating the intergenerational and narrative perspectives: (a) What is Juan's experience seeking and receiving help from males? (b) What is Juan's experience with majority-culture males? (c) What did Juan learn about his expected level of autonomy and being a 9-year old boy?

The counselor decided to utilize a genogram exercise (Halevy, 1998) to integrate a visual learning experience into counseling but wanted to focus solely on the legacy of "helping" within Juan's family experience. In brief, the counselor learned that Juan's male influence had been an abusive father who responded to any request for help with verbal denigration and physical violence. Juan's father told him repeatedly that, as a boy, he could "do it on his own" and that only a "girl asks for help." Juan's father also warned him against majority-culture males, such as his employer, who "look down on us" and "don't respect us." Juan also learned never to admit a limitation or need to a majority-culture male because it was expected that he would be ridiculed. If confronted about an action, it was permissible to deny responsibility or to tell a lie to confound the situation.

Learning these "narratives" around being helped directed the counselor to maintain a non-anxious presence in the session and to expect reluctance and discomfort as Juan expressed his view of his experiences with Ms. Smith. The counselor recognized that telling the child that he was different from his father was less effective than having the child experience him as a different male figure. The counselor utilized a strength-focused model to offset Juan's views of being helped as a sign of weakness or incompetence; reframing counseling as a way to recognize one's

capacities and abilities, to learn how to “borrow” wisdom from others, and as a “coach” for new situations.

Based on those re-authored views of counseling, the sessions could then proceed to the presenting issue. In supervision, the counselor consistently monitored his adherence to his preferred interpersonal style with Juan. He found great direction in analyzing instances when the session proceeded in a positive manner or seemed to regress. He found more success in serving as a consultant to Juan rather than a therapist; consistently acknowledging the child’s capacities and abilities and focusing on “fine-tuning” rather than “changing.” The counselor was very careful not to use confrontational techniques; as such interventions may be reminiscent of his father’s style of trying to promote Juan’s competencies.

Sarah was a very quiet second-grader presenting a depressed mood, whom the school counselor was asked to observe. When asked a question, Sarah usually answered in a meek voice “I don’t know” even though her assignments indicated her mastery of that content. The teacher expressed her frustration that she seemed incapable of reaching Sarah in any way. The counselor, a 25 year old Asian woman, tried to engage Sarah and received an echo of the responses the teacher had reported. The counselor then observed Sarah in differing school contexts and recognized that only in music class did she participate. One of the differences noticed was that the music teacher was male, while the rest of Sarah’s teachers were women. Based on that observation, the counselor introduced the “helping” genogram exercise with Sarah to explore Sarah’s experiences with being helped as a function of the gender of the adult figure. The counselor quickly learned that Sarah’s father was encouraging her to

develop independence and initiative, while her mother was protective and assured Sarah that “she [mother] always knew what was best for her.”

This insight helped the counselor to better understand the relationships between Sarah and her female teachers as a replication of Sarah’s experiences with her mother. In consulting with the teachers, the counselor advocated a strength-focused model and ongoing recognition of both Sarah’s efforts and achievements. During individual counseling sessions, the counselor utilized Sarah’s assistance as a peer mentor in the kindergarten class, asking for her input on how to help new children feel part of the class and on how to help the teacher support each child. Once again, the intervention used was strength-focused, with both teacher and counselor acknowledging Sarah’s contributions. Within three weeks, the classroom teacher reported a positive change in Sarah’s presenting mood, responsiveness and initiating behaviors in class.

Conclusion

The concept of “helping narratives” and their impact on the counseling process is application of the concepts presented by Teyber (2006) and reflective of guided and anecdotally-validated experimentation with this intervention modality within the school setting. Therefore, there are multiple opportunities for elaboration on this approach; for the specification of techniques to foster this exploration and to empirically confirm its efficacy on the counseling relationship and process. As an adaptation from narrative counseling, interested counselors would be referred to the original works by David Epston and Michael White, who have pioneered narrative therapy.

While every theory of therapy offers a distinct view of client resistance, the counselor must determine how best to utilize that dynamic in counseling. This paper has

offered a view of resistance as a natural and expected component of school counseling, one whose presence can be integrated into the rapport-building process and may direct the counselor to better connect and serve each child.

References

- Baker, S. B. (2000). *School counseling for the twenty-first century*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Baker, S. B., & Gerler, E. R., Jr. (2004). *School counseling for the twenty-first century (4th ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Blair, K. D. (1999). The influence of the school milieu on the counselor-client working relationship and alliance. *Professional School Counseling, 2*, 1096-1104.
- Brems, C. (1999). *Psychotherapy: Processes and techniques*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Butler, M. H., & Bird, M. H. (2000). Narrative and interactional process for preventing harmful struggle in therapy: An integrative empirical model. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 26*, 123-142.
- Cowan, E. W., & Presbury, J. H. (2000). Meeting client resistance with reverence. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 78*, 411-419.
- Cramer, P. (2000). Defense mechanisms in psychology today. *American Psychologist, 55*, 637-646.
- Deacon, S. A. (1999). Explore your family: An experiential family-of-origin workshop. *Family Therapy, 26*, 87-10.
- Erford, B. T. (2003). *Transforming the school counseling profession*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Erickson, M. (1980). The varieties of double binds. In E. L. Rossi (Ed.). *The collected papers of Milton Erickson (vol. 1)*. New York: Irvington.
- Halevy, J. (1998). A genogram with an attitude. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 24*, 233-242.

- Harris, G. A. (1996). Dealing with difficult clients. In *Hatherleigh guide to psychotherapy* (pp. 47-62). New York: Hatherleigh.
- Karon, B. P., & Widener, A. J. (1995). Psychodynamic therapies in historical perspective. In B. Bongar & L. E. Beutler (Eds.). *Comprehensive textbook of psychotherapy: Theory and practice* (pp. 24-47). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mahalik, J. R. (2002). Understanding client resistance in therapy. In G. S. Tryon (Ed.). *Counseling based on process research: Applying what we know* (pp. 66-80). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Newman, C. F. (1994). Understanding client resistance: Methods for enhancing motivation to change. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 1*, 47-69.
- Nichols, M. P., & Schwartz, R. C. (2004). *Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods* (6th ed.). Allyn and Bacon, Boston.
- Orton, G. L. (1997). *Strategies for counseling with children and their parents*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Patterson, C. H., & Hidore, S. (1997). The primary prevention of psychological disorders. *The Person-Centered Journal, 4*, 8-17.
- Robbins, M. S., Alexander, J. F., Newell, R. M., & Turner, C. W. (1996). The immediate effect of reframing on client attitude in family therapy. *Journal of Family Psychology, 10*, 28-34.
- Seibel, C. A., & Dowd, E. T. (2001). Personality characteristics associated with psychological reactance. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 57*, 963-969.

- Simon, G. M. (2003). *Beyond technique in family therapy: Finding your therapeutic voice*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Stone, C. B., & Dahir, C. A. (2006). *The transformed school counselor*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Teyber, E. (2006). *Interpersonal process in therapy: An integrative model. (5th ed.)*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Vernon, A. (2004). *Counseling children & adolescents (3rd ed.)*. Denver, CO: Love Publishing.
- West, J. D., & Bubenzer, D. L. (2002). Narrative family therapy. in J. Carlson & D. Kjos (Eds.). *Theories and strategies of family therapy* (pp. 353-382). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Wolf, E. S. (1988). *Treating the self: Elements of clinical self-psychology*. New York: Guilford.

Biographical Statement

Joshua M. Gold, Ph.D., NCC is an Associate Professor and Program Coordinator of the Counselor Education Program at the University of South Carolina. He writes “practice” articles on working effectively with children from narrative orientations.