Indirect Suggestion in Counselling Practice: A Conceptual Model

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CAAP Final Project – Letter of Intent

March 14, 2006
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The Problem

Most counsellors would accept that their clinical conversations have unintended consequences. The scene is a counsellor’s office. As the client seats herself, the therapist starts the interview. “Good morning, Jane, and what is your problem today?” In a second counsellor’s office, a similar scene unfolds with a different client, and a different point of departure. “Good morning Sigrid. What would you like to speak with me about today?”

Each of these openings indirectly suggests different things. The first frames the discussion in terms of problems (Russo & Schoemaker, 1989), thus the discussion is likely to focus on problem definition and solution. In the second, the suggestion is simply that a conversation, initiated at the client’s request, is about to take place. There appears to be no implied power differential (Hill, Glaser, & Harden, 1995), and there is no emphasis on there being a problem.

The differences in these conversational openings are significant. Implicit in each is a suggestion about the nature, form, content, and the role each participant will play in the ensuing conversation, and their relative power. These suggestions are indirect. It is also the case that these suggestions are likely unintentional.

In this project, I propose a literature review examining indirect suggestion, with a particular focus on the work of Milton Erickson, for its possible inclusion, as an intervention, in the working alliance model taught within the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology Program (CAAP). Further, since the literature notes the potential for negative impacts of unintentional outcomes in counselling (Gilstrap, 2004), I will also touch on
some of these negative aspects associated with the use of indirect suggestion, and then discuss what research is needed to support its routine, responsible incorporation in counselling practice.

The Rationale

The nature of counselling requires that the interview is an intentional process informed by theory, using appropriately documented, outcome-focused techniques for the benefit of the client (Miller, Hubble, & Duncan, 1995). Many authors have noted the importance of the relationship within this interview process (Gelso & Carter, 1994; Glasser, 1975; Rogers, 1951). In the early 90’s, the American Psychological Association (APA) commissioned a comprehensive study, the purpose of which was to document what can and cannot change in therapy, and how (Seligman, 1993). Yet, many types of therapy, used daily in clinics and offices all over the world are both qualitatively effective, and fall outside the range of interventions suggested in the APA study (Norcross, 2002).

Some therapists are more successful than others in spite of age differences, experience differences, and orientation (Bachelor, 1995). What makes this so? It has been suggested that part of the answer lies in the nature of the working alliance; specifically, the quality of the relationship between the client and the therapist is central (Bordin, 1979). In such a relationship, suggestion may play a significant role in influencing the client in positive directions, and thus can be seen as a form of intervention. Yet, little has been done to formalize suggestion as a means of therapeutic intervention (Erickson, Rossi, & Rossi, 1976).

This is important at this time because there is much anecdotal support for the use of indirect suggestion as a way of enhancing client change in ways that allow clients to
“reach into their own associative matrix to uncover useful responses” (Erickson et al. 1976, p.194). This approach is consistent with current thinking about utilizing the client’s own models of change in the counselling enterprise (Miller et al. 1995).

Conceptual Foundations

The importance of the working alliance has been well documented (Bordin, 1979; Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Norcross, 2002), as have the factors that increase it’s efficacy in initiating and supporting client change (Horvath, 2000). Some therapists have more consistent success than others in spite of many shared factors such as age, experience, and education. Since ancient times, the nature of the relationship has been seen as critical to the healing process. It seems that with a strong relationship based on trust and openness, clients are more likely to prosper (Rogers, 1951). In these relationships, the intervention seems to flow naturally as part of the dialogue, and yet has marked effects on the client. This idea has support in the form of motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2002), interventive interviewing (Tomm, 1986), improvisational therapy (Keeney, 1991), and of course, the client-centered therapy of Rogers (1951).

To the degree that indirect suggestion is one of these approaches, it seems to be a potential skill worth integrating into the working alliance. Indirect suggestion has found its way formally into clinical practice (Erickson& Rossi, 1979). Milton Erickson explored the use of suggestion in both hypnotic and non-hypnotic clinical practice. He used upwards of two dozen indirect methods of inducing hypnosis, as well as effecting client change independent of the hypnotic state (Forrest, 1999).

The working alliance model, as advanced within the CAAP Program, uses three broad categories of skills to meet therapeutic goals. These skills of engagement,
structuring, and reacting/reflection provide a convenient way to integrate indirect suggestion into the working alliance (Hiebert & Jerry, 2002).

There are potential drawbacks to consider. The use of unintentional suggestions has been implicated as a source of danger in counselling. This includes using leading questions in clinical interviews (Gilstrap, 2004) and implanting false memories (Loftus, 1997). Moreover, unintended consequences have been attributed to a simple lack of awareness of a counsellor’s own biases and assumptions, particularly in dealing with unfamiliar clients (Hall, 1997; Sue & Sue, 1990).

Methodology

This project will consist of a literature review of previous research (Mertens, 1998) focusing in particular on the indirect suggestions of Erickson, their strengths and weaknesses, and the effects of the client – therapist relationship on the working alliance and clinical outcomes.

The identification of a set of potential articles and books relevant to these topics will involve searching the electronic databases of PsycInfo, PsycLit, PsycARTICLES, and Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection. All publications in English from 1950 to present, using the following key words and phrases: “indirect suggestion”, “Milton Erickson”, “therapeutic relationship”, “implanted memories”, “working alliance”, and “unintentional outcomes” will be included. This search will be augmented by reviewing the reference sections of each article and book obtained from the database search. The review will consider both qualitative and quantitative research, as the subject lends itself to qualitative and clinical observations in addition to outcome studies.
To be considered relevant to this review, the articles and books will have to include one or more of the following criteria: That indirect suggestion is specifically mentioned in connection with an intervention, that the use of indirect suggestion is intentional or obvious, that the efficacy of indirect suggestion relates to the therapeutic relationship, and that the intervention was deemed to be successful or unsuccessful. The final selection requires that I read each article and book to ensure that they meet these criteria.

This review will likely result in a list of techniques of indirect suggestion and their corresponding uses. These will be described and clustered in an effort to build a conceptual model that can be included within the framework of the working alliance model. It is also likely that the literature search will result in several examples of the adverse effects of unintentional uses of suggestion. These will be summarized and included in a set of recommendations concerning the value of the use of indirect suggestion in non-hypnotic counselling, and their possible inclusion in future counsellor education.

In the event that the search results in an absence of support for the use of indirect suggestion in non-hypnotic situations, or the integration with the working alliance model proves impossible, the project is still of potential value. Unintentional suggestion, as noted earlier has potentially significant effects in counselling. A study that provides an extensive review of the literature on indirect effects will provide a useful overview of the subject, and if nothing else, may make counsellors more aware of the role of unintentional processes in counselling (Langer, 1997).

*Implications*
Incorporating intentional use of indirect suggestion into the working alliance benefits three particular groups of stakeholders in the counselling enterprise. First, it puts the relationship at the heart of the counselling enterprise, a place it seems to be moving away from in current program guide approaches. The counselling profession has suffered from ineffectiveness and bad publicity in its handling of many clients (Hall, 1997), and in its treatment of certain groups of clients in particular (Arredondo, 1985). Drawing on an intervention, which in its conceptual underpinnings utilizes the client’s own strengths and understandings, can only help improve this reputation (Erickson & Rossi, 1979; Miller et al. 1995).

The second group to benefit is the counsellors themselves. People in the profession, by and large, believe themselves to be honourable and effective in their use of techniques. To do unwitting harm goes against various codes of ethics underlying the profession (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2003), and is an affront to the counsellors who are genuinely trying to engage with their clients. Moreover, the subject of unintentional effects in counselling has been dealt with in many separate areas of psychology. Any efforts at consolidating aspects of unintentional effect might be seen as useful.

Finally, changes within the mental health industry, including a recognition of the diversity of the client base, are making the process of counselling increasingly time and funding sensitive (Arthur & Collins, 2005). Thus, any intervention, which potentially increases effectiveness, would be of interest. While the model developed in this project requires testing as to its utility and effectiveness, it makes sense that asking little more of counsellors than that they become more mindful of the impact of their words on their
clients (Langer, 1997), can only have positive outcomes. The potential of this approach alone warrants continued exploration and development.
References


*Psychotherapy in Practice, 56*(2), 163 – 173.


