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THE INTENTIONAL USE OF INDIRECT SUGGESTION IN COUNSELLING:
A RECONCEPTUALIZATION

BY

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ABSTRACT

Techniques incorporating indirect suggestion have been advanced as productive ways to facilitate client change. Milton Erickson, a well-respected therapist, considered these techniques to be of singular importance in his casework and largely responsible for his effectiveness. Research has failed to support the efficacy of indirect suggestion as operationalized by several researchers, particularly in the hypnotherapeutic domain. A case is made that if a broader definition of indirect suggestion is used, the effectiveness and generalizability of these techniques is enhanced. Suggestions are made for including a selection of indirect techniques in standard counsellor training, some inherent dangers are examined, and thoughts on ways to validate the model are explored.
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CHAPTER I

“...the belief that one’s own view of reality is the only reality is the most dangerous of all delusions. It becomes still more dangerous if it is coupled with a missionary zeal to enlighten the rest of the world, whether the rest of the world wishes to be enlightened or not.”

- Watzlawick

Introduction

In attempts to facilitate change, one overriding aspect seems to present itself; the need to bring about some form of difference in perspective. The majority of approaches to client change flow from this simple notion. Behaviour, for example, may be changed with the hope of altering attitudes (Ellis, 2001), or faulty thinking may be revealed and discussed to bring about the same ends (Beck, 1995). Moreover, attitudes themselves are often the point of ingress for counselling interventions (Hackney & Cormier, 2005). Most people would argue that this change in perspective is brought about quite logically. When told that one should not pump one’s brakes in vehicles with anti-lock braking systems, a wise listener will amend her ways, ways likely learned in previous times on less technologically sophisticated automobiles. Yet, as counsellors, we often see a different situation. Change often happens in response to a conversation we have with a client, yet we are unaware of what we said that was of such magnitude in their thinking. In a similar vein, we might remember the point of conversation, but recall it as of minor significance in the overall interview.

How does this happen? It would seem that we have missed something of importance that occurred for that listener at that time. Something which unbeknownst to us was just the piece of wisdom she required, the missing piece of the puzzle, which allowed her to pull together several of her own experiences and insights into a new and improved way of looking
at the world. Though unintentional, and often indirect, whatever was said, or perhaps how it was said, triggered something for that client. It would be of value to understand what had happened since it facilitated change for another person.

What we say, and how we say it then, can have an impact on a client in unanticipated ways. To illustrate, the very act of asking a new client what brings her to see us today, differs in concept from asking what her problem is. Donald Meichenbaum, recounts a story where this first question, when presented to a client, led to the very specific answer, “the bus” (Meichenbaum, 1995). Evidently, the meaning of questions lies in the mind of the beholder.

In this paper, the idea of facilitating change through the intentional use of such indirect methods will be explored. These methods have always been with us whether in the form of story or image or tone of voice. The double entendre is a familiar example of meaning one thing and saying quite another that capitalizes on multiple word meanings and innuendo, both semantic characteristics of our language. The listener very often picks up on the hidden or unstated meaning and uses that to expand their own thinking, rather than the explicit words themselves.

Much of the work done using indirect suggestion has occurred within the field of hypnotherapy, a field whose up and down popularity has been a characteristic since its inception as a recognized form of intervention in the last half of the 18th century (Forrest, 1999). Largely through the work of the American psychiatrist, Milton Erickson in the mid 1900’s, it gained considerable popularity and success which continues unabated today. Ericksonian conferences, training, and workshops attract thousands each year from psychology, psychiatry, family therapy, medicine, and other helping fields (Sparks, 2000). Unfortunately, the clinical wisdom that exists within this domain has remained largely
confined to this field, not moving into mainstream psychology or psychotherapy. Yet, many of the techniques Erickson used, lend themselves to use in non-hypnotic and broader forms of therapy. Moreover, they can be included with little difficulty in standard models of counselling.

Furthermore, significant work that has come from the Milan School of Family Therapy suggests that what brings about these unanticipated changes is an unfreezing of old thought and behavioural patterns allowing a space where the individual can explore other ways of thinking and behaving. This process unfolds by way of what Palazzoli Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin and Prata (1980) refer to as a ‘perturbation’ in the family processes. This perturbation is at the heart of the observation that often clients take from interviews things which therapists only vaguely recall if at all. Something said in that interview triggered a new way of looking at a situation or relationship, a different take on an old problem or self-defeating pattern of behaviour. Whatever it was in particular that caused this change is of interest, and it is suggested that there is an increased likelihood of bringing about these occurrences through the use of indirect techniques, and further, that these techniques are relatively easy to use and learn. In fact we use them virtually all the time, unintentionally. Bringing them under intentional control would make them safer and more predictable for a counsellor to use.

There is considerable danger in being unaware of the unintentional aspects of indirect suggestion. Operating in ignorance can bring about outcomes or insights that are at least non-productive or worse, potentially harmful to the client. We might, for example, suggest inadvertently, that the client’s behaviour in a particular situation was ill-advised causing a reduction in self-esteem and perhaps behaviours outside of the session, which build on this
now new piece of (mis)information coming from a reliable source. Moreover, this situation may well be worse with certain particularly vulnerable clients such as children or the discouraged or depressed (Adler, 1927).

Thus, using indirect approaches in counselling requires attention and awareness on the part of the counsellor. Awareness of how indirect types of communications might affect an interview comes from a course of study that makes this aspect of counselling explicit, a stance of practice which encourages a reflective orientation, and adequate supervision to keep the concerns with actual phraseology, and technique in the forefront, particularly as experience is gained. Practice of the intentional use of indirect techniques makes them more automatic and more fluid while at the same time contributing to an increasing awareness of their strength as interventions (Erickson, Rossi, & Rossi, 1976).

It is in this domain that the academic training of counsellors plays a role. The model puts forward a simple integration of these indirect skills with a standard model used in current counsellor training. It suggests that within a overall approach to the working alliance, indirect techniques can be taught alongside questioning skills, and the other oral communications skills, the microskills, which form the key parts of counselling practice. They can be also be added to the curriculum as a module which allows more depth and practice, much as we see introductions to cognitive or solution-focus taught now in the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology Master’s Program.

Much research would be needed to take this model and make it ready for the incorporation and integration noted above. Indirect technique requires refinement, proper operationalization, and outcome studies to make it a viable approach. The model presented in this paper, is a beginning in the process of looking at the various indirect aspects of what
happens in a counselling interview, and making them explicit and thus open to appropriate investigation. It is hoped that this study will encourage others to undertake this research in what is an important area of counselling practice.

In this paper, the literature addressing indirect and direct suggestion, in particular in the hypnotherapeutic work of Milton Erickson, will be examined. This critical review, along with the themes of categorizing indirect techniques, dangers of unintentional use of these suggestions, and integrating these approaches with existing non-hypnotic process models of therapy will make up the bulk of Chapter II, In Chapter III, the procedures that were followed in performing this review and integrating the findings will be described and the general approach to arriving at the reconceptualized model of indirect suggestion explicated. The description and discussion of the model itself takes up chapter IV, and finally, in the last chapter, ideas as to how this model might be used, how it could be integrated with the current Campus Alberta model, and what is necessary for it to be tested are advanced. Clearly, before any efforts can be made to include an idea for therapy in a training program, its efficacy would have to be established and the techniques themselves refined and developed. The list of techniques included in this paper are only the most obvious and well-documented ones. As will be seen in the next chapter, several authors have outlined numerous techniques all falling under the broad rubric “indirect suggestion” and they are not without controversy.
CHAPTER II

What we call the beginning is often the end, and to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

-T. S. Eliot

Theoretical Foundations

This chapter reviews the literature informing the model presented in the paper from both a theoretical and critical viewpoint. It begins with a review of Milton Erickson’s contribution to the notion of indirect suggestion and its use in psychotherapy, a critical look at the empirical research on the topic, some models that would facilitate the integration of indirect techniques into conventional therapy, and some caveats in the use of such indirect methods. It ends with a brief summary of the key points in the findings in order to provide a basis for the conceptual model to be presented in Chapter IV. We will see that many threads of research have touched on aspects of this component in therapy, yet little has been said about its systematic use to bring about intentional outcomes while recognizing the importance of client empowerment and self-determination.

Erickson and his Work

Milton Erickson, an American psychiatrist, died in March, 1980. During his professional career, spanning over 40 years, he used a combination of psychotherapy and hypnotherapy, often without distinguishing between them (Rosen, 1982), to facilitate change in his clients. “We now believe that the utilization approach and the indirect forms of suggestion are the essence of the senior author’s therapeutic innovations over the past 50 years and account for much of his unique skill as a hypnotherapist” (Erickson & Rossi, 1979, p. xiv). Erickson’s work was viewed with considerable interest at the time, spawning as it
did, many emulators and much critical acclaim. Since the mid 1980’s, it has experienced a significant revival with many hypnotism training courses including at least one Ericksonian component in their curriculum (Sparks, 2000).

Indirect suggestions. The dictionary defines suggestion as “the process by which one thought leads to another”, or “a process of influencing attitudes and behavior” (Mish, 1991). Erickson took a broader stance. Coming, as he did from a psychodynamic orientation, suggestion was that which, “makes an appeal to the conscious mind and succeeds in initiating behaviour when we are in agreement with the suggestion, and have the capacity actually to carry it out in a voluntary manner” (Erickson & Rossi, p. 18). He differentiates this direct form of suggestion from the indirect, which for his purposes meant a form of suggestion which operates on the unconscious mind (p. 18); thus, “when it is found that consciousness is unable to carry out a suggestion, we may then make a therapeutic effort to initiate an unconscious search for a solution by indirect suggestion” (p. 19). He goes on to formally define indirect forms of suggestion as “semantic environments that facilitate the experience of new response possibilities” (p. 19). Thus, according to this perspective, conscious processing can dilute or impair the effects of both direct and indirect suggestions in a number of ways (Fourie, 1997).

Until the publication in 1976 of his first text *Hypnotic Realities* (Erickson, Rossi & Rossi, 1976), Erickson had written little about his techniques, but in this text and its companion published three years later (Erickson & Rossi, 1979), he outlined 11 different techniques of indirect suggestion. These included the interspersal approach, which along with non-repetition Erickson himself considered his most important contributions, truisms, not knowing-not doing, open-ended suggestions, covering all aspects of a class of responses,
questions that facilitate new response possibilities, compound suggestions, implication and
the implied directive, binds and double binds, and multiple levels of meaning and
communications including jokes, puns, metaphors and symbols. Even without examining
these concepts in detail it can be noted how broad a spectrum of interpersonal interactions are
covered. These topics permit the greatest scope for interventions, which create ways for
clients to reframe their current realities, or examine possible futures. It is precisely this
breadth, however, which has engendered both criticism and research challenges (Lynn,
Neufeld, & Mare, 1993).

Following Erickson’s lead more recent therapists have continued the use of indirect
suggestion as a routine part of their work. In their use of hypnosis in medical and dental
work, Heap and Aravind (2002), in discussing indirect suggestion note, “the hypnotist
presents the idea of the response in an implicit or covert manner” (p. 108); thus, “I wonder
which arm is feeling lighter – the left…or the right?” or perhaps, “will your arm start to feel
lighter now…or later.” As these authors point out, this is in contrast to a more direct
approach such as “imagine a helium-filled balloon that is pulling your wrist upward.” These
illustrations point out both the nature and the difficulty of the concept of indirect suggestion.
In the first example, the intention is to have a client apparently involuntarily raise her arm in
response to the proffered suggestion. Regardless of the manner in which the suggestion is
advanced, the meaning of the suggestion is quite clear – raise your arm. This focuses
attention then on whether the ‘indirect’ suggestion is indeed any different in meaning from
one that is more direct or directive. Other authors have taken a similar approach. Matthews,
Lankton, and Lankton (1993) defined indirect suggestion as “those suggestions that have a
degree of ambiguity and allow for increased latitude in responding on the part of the subject
as compared to direct suggestion that is a clear request for a particular response by the hypnotist to the subject” (p. 23). Yet, as noted above, this ambiguity is rather limited much like an assumed close used by an adept salesperson. “Would you like A or B?” The intention is clear – you will buy something.

*Difficulties in definition.* The difficulty with the breadth of these techniques is that they encompass virtually all interventions. One might say that any form of question or comment is indirect using some of these notions. If, for example, a counsellors asks, “are you well today” at the outset of a session, the client might infer that they look unwell, that the counsellor thinks they are unwell, or perhaps that they are usually unwell, and the counsellor is asking whether today is any different. Thus, what is implied is determined through the client’s meaning-making process.

Much of the criticism leveled at indirect suggestion is a result of this lack of clarity. Lynn, Neufeld, & Mare (1993), for example, note in their meta-analytic review of 29 empirical studies of the use of indirect suggestion in hypnotic relief of pain that “a major problem in evaluating studies using ‘Ericksonian’ suggestions is that they represent a mixed bag of communications that are not related to one another on any theoretical or structural dimension other than their purported ‘indirectness’ (p. 136). They conclude in spite of this difficulty that “suggestion style appears to have little effect on objective responding to hypnotic items found on standardized scales” (p. 137). Their review provides no support for the hypothesis that indirect suggestions diminish resistance to hypnotic suggestion, and goes on to report that the very “complexity of the hypnotist’s communication transcends the direct-indirect distinction. In is important to note that in large measure their conclusion rests on definitional difficulties. Individual studies included within the meta-analysis did find
positive correlations between indirect forms of suggestion and measured outcome but meta-analytic comparisons were challenging (Lynn, Neufeld, & Mare, 1993). Two suggestions relevant to the present paper come from this study. The first of these is that there needs to be clarity in just what constitutes indirect versus direct questions. This lack of clear definition has plagued empirical effectiveness research. Second, the suggestion is made that in spite of these troubles, the studies undertaken go to the core of the “personal and interpersonal variables and processes that mediate hypnotic responding” (p. 141). It might be suggested that this could be broadened to include all responding as it occurs in counselling contexts.

Taking a more systemic perspective, Ferrier (1986), suggests that all influence on human systems is necessarily indirect and that the dichotomy between “indirect” and “direct” suggestion is mere convention. Fourie (1997), from a similar perspective, notes that a system cannot be directly influenced from outside; outside occurrences can “perturb” a system, but its reaction to the perturbation is determined by itself (Fourie, 1997). He takes this indirect-direct dichotomy further to task when he argues that there are both operational and theoretical challenges to the notion. He suggests theoretical difficulties on the basis that the model requires an unconscious which flies in the face of many current empirical orientations. Operationally, he notes the definitional challenges noted earlier. In his conclusions Fourie avers that the “concept of ‘indirect’ suggestion is theoretically unsound” and “...operationally unhelpful in that it places the emphasis on suggestion type rather than on doing what fits with the particular situation” (p. 1264).

Other approaches. An interesting perspective on indirect suggestion comes from the studies of language use particularly in multicultural settings. Steil and Hillman (1993) found that there is a generalized preference for direct forms of influence in Western cultures as
contrasted with Eastern cultures (Japanese and Korean in this study), and that in Western cultures, users of direct forms are seen as more powerful (p. 457). Indirect forms are also associated with concerns for politeness or desires to save face (p. 458). Most noteworthy in this study is the breadth of technique considered ‘indirect’. Such approaches as evasion (linguistically), lack of precision, acquiescence, and using an advocate (a go-between) were included in the concept of indirect influence. We note here, then the broadening to an even greater degree of the definitions. We also note the variety of meanings associated with the use of the indirect.

Mackiewicz (2005), in a study concerning advice-giving by writing tutors to engineering students, brings to light a useful distinction in considering indirect use of language. She notes that underlying all suggestions is a directive. Thus, making a suggestion is directive in nature, and involves inserting oneself into the listener’s process, which may well invoke defensiveness. Here again we see the idea that by being indirect we are avoiding resistance, in this case without reference to conscious versus unconscious minds. In reference to reviewing a student paper, she illustrates a direct suggestion as ‘include a table here. This can be made indirect by saying ‘tables help readers comprehend large data sets. One can feel the difference in tone these two suggestions create. She calls this latter form of suggestion a conventionally indirect suggestion, and significantly goes on to note a non-conventionally indirect suggestion as one which goes one step further in lengthening the inferential process. Extending the previous example, one might say, ‘this section has a lot of numerical data in the text’ thus, permitting the listener more options. Not only might the listener include a table, she might also delete some numerical data, or the data might be moved to an appendix or, finally, take no action at all. This notion of non-conventional indirect suggestion
approaches the Ericksonian concept of those suggestions which “are most useful for exploring potentialities and facilitating a patient’s natural response tendencies rather than imposing control over behavior (Erickson & Rossi, 1979, p. 19).

Utilization. Erickson’s other major contribution, perhaps even more significant than indirect suggestion, is utilization. This concept follows from the understanding Erickson had of the therapeutic process as one whereby, “we help people utilize their own mental associations, memories, and life potentials to achieve their own therapeutic goals” (Erickson & Rossi, 1979, p. 1). He goes on to note that suggestions can facilitate this utilization of abilities and potentials that already exist in a person but that remain unused or underdeveloped. Thus, the therapeutic process Erickson advocated was to explore in detail the client’s individuality to get a sense for what resources he or she brought to process, and then to help the client use these resources in achieving therapeutic goals. It is interesting to note that a key aspect of implementing this process is what Erickson termed “depotentiating habitual frameworks and belief systems” (p. 3), by which he meant loosening learned limitations so that they can become open and available for new means of experiencing and learning, through the use of confusion, doubt, dissociation, and disequilibrium (p. 5). This has much in common with the Milan school interventions and their extensions by Karl Tomm.

The Milan School and Karl Tomm

Other forms of indirect suggestion can be found in a broader psychological literature. In a seminal 1980 paper, Palazzoli Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin, and Prata, the founders of the Milan school of family therapy, suggested that by the overt use of hypothesis formation and sharing, neutrality and circularity, the therapist “introduces the powerful input of the
unexpected and improbable into the family system” (p. 2). This introduction perturbs the system allowing for reframing and exploring new patterns of interaction and thus change. Tomm added to these three key steps a fourth, strategizing which entailed the tracking of this whole process by the therapist and the planful use of each element to bring about particular outcomes (Tomm, 1988).

One way of bringing about these perturbations is through the use of reflexive questions, a particularly useful type of indirect suggestion. Characteristics of reflexive questions are they are not defined by their semantic content or syntactic structure (Tomm, 1988), rather by the nature of the therapist’s intentions in employing them (p. 6). There are several reflexive question types that Tomm suggests. These include future-oriented, observer-perspective, embedded suggestions and questions introducing hypotheses, as examples. For instance, one might ask an underachieving girl, “what plans do you have for a career?...What else have you considered?...How much formal education do you think you would need?...What sort of work experience would be useful in getting that sort of job? These questions indirectly imply that having a career, and a plan to achieve it, is a beneficial thing, and that it will require certain preliminaries such as school, experience and so forth (p. 7). Further, there is an implication that there is choice as to what one does, that the girl can assess her own needs and she has the resources to solve her own challenges. Other questions might suggest that she can explore possible outcomes or hypothetical situations: What is the worst thing that comes to mind? ...What about in five years from now?...What terrible things do they (your family) expect might happen that keeps them awake at night? These questions imply movement forward for the young girl, that there are likely to be further challenges, and that her behaviours have an effect on others, and perhaps that she has the ability to consider
all of this in the present and plan for it. These are all indirect suggestions based in the simple act of questioning. More explicitly, Tomm offers the following example of an indirect suggestion embedded in a question: embedded apology: When the time came that she was ready to forgive you, would she do so silently or would she be explicit about it?...To what extent would you be able to forgive yourself? Note that in both cases the implication is that forgiveness is an option though no direct suggestion to forgive, or to expect forgiveness, is made. Thus, questioning, and the use of reflexive questions in particular is another form of indirect suggestion. At this point, it is worth recalling however, that in previous psychodynamic work, questions were excluded precisely because of their potential to influence (Bishop & Fish, 1999). These authors go on to note that “little empirical work has addressed how questions in psychotherapy are perceived” (p. 116).

Metaphors as Forms of Indirect Suggestion

Erickson was well known for his use of metaphors in his therapy. Lankton (1980) subsumes several techniques into one. “He (Erickson) is a master in the use of anecdotes, puns, analogies, and stories. For our purposes I have lumped them into the one category of metaphor” (p. 156). In this paper, this conflation is maintained. Metaphor refers to the use of a term for one thing to describe another because of some similarity between them or between their relations to other things. Metaphor has long been used to drive a point home and make it memorable. Aesop’s fables are good examples of couching the perceived workings of the world in tales easily understood and passed on orally to an audience. They have clearly stood the test of time, when even today, ‘crying wolf’ evokes the entire story of the shepherd boy who too many times teased his village with false alarms resulting in no help coming when it was truly needed. Teaching tales of this nature have found their way into popular self-help
literature too. Often the journey through counselling is portrayed as a quest of which the client is the hero. Various adventures and challenges await and must be overcome before the endpoint of the journey is reached (Catford & Ray, 1991).

Lynn and Hallquist (2004) argue persuasively that at the root of metaphor is the notion of priming. Priming refers to the “activation of change in accessibility of a concept by an earlier presentation of the same or a closely related concept” (p. 68). Thus Erickson might refer, during the pre-hypnotic or assessment phase of therapy, to relaxing experiences the clients had had. This primed them to think of relaxing episodes during the hypnotic or therapeutic phase of the session (Lynn & Hallquist, 2004).

Many of Erickson’s metaphors, which he referred to as teaching tales, have been collected (Rosen, 1982), and these tales run the gamut from those intended to motivate to those intended to help reframe an experience. This same purpose can be served by shorter anecdotes and personal disclosures (Ellis, 2001). Lankton (1980) notes that “metaphors organize experience; that all metaphors are stories designed to help expand the client’s own story” (p. 161). Although beyond the scope of this paper, this idea suggests the underlying principles of narrative therapy and its focus on co-creating a client story, enabling a change of ending or an attribution and externalizing of a particular aspect or problem (Sween, 1998).

Since the meanings of a metaphor are highly subjective, it is hard to predict just what a client will take from it, and therein lies a danger. Much like the Meichenbaum anecdote in a previous section, the literally minded person gets potentially little other than confusion from the intervention. Once more we are faced with decisions about ensuring the right fit of client, context and intervention.
Assumptions and Environments

Though rarely expressed directly in his works, it is clear from reading through them that Erickson had many assumptions about the nature of people, the process of change and the process of hypnotherapy in particular. The utilization principle noted earlier is an example of a set of assumptions about how change occurs (loosening rigid patterns of thought, and using existing resources to effect change), as is his lack of concern as to whether a person was ‘hypnotized’ or not. His assumption was it did not matter. Moreover, assumptions act at an implicit level to affect explicit behaviour (Beck, 1995). If a counsellor holds a view that she is an expert and the client is the recipient of that expertise, the tone of the interview will differ from that of say a feminist counsellor who deeply espouses the notion of equality of therapist and client, and strives for an equal power footing (Collins, 2002). These assumptions function as non-conventional indirect suggestions.

Similarly, the layout and decoration of the counselling office contains implicit suggestions as to what is going to happen there. Entering a brightly coloured office, differs in tone from entering an institutional green one (Hall, 1966). This difference is more than just one’s experience with similar offices. For example if a client has had many negative experiences in an office or room of a particular colour, that experience may affect her mood and responsiveness to counselling in a similar space. Moreover, Hall (1966) suggests that the actual layout and colour of the room affects mood even in the absence of previous similar experience. Layout, creates warmth or distance as well. Sitting across a desk from a client feels different from sitting beside him, or in a chair looking down at him (Gallagher, 1993).
Interviewer Behaviour

Interviewer behaviour is a key in many models of the effects of suggestion (Bandler & Grinder, 1979; Gilstrap, 2004). Gilstrap (2004) notes, “…certain factors such as suggestive questioning can lead children (and adults) to falsely report events and perhaps even to believe these reports” (p. 13). It might be assumed that beyond questioning, concern with what one’s behaviour means to a client is important. A male counsellor in suit and tie creates a different mood from one in casual attire (Gallagher, 1993). To some degree this is both recognized and accommodated within counselling training when mnemonics are provided that focus a therapist’s attention on particular aspects of behaviour. The mnemonic SOLER, for example (sit square, keep and open posture, lean towards the client, maintain appropriate eye contact and relax) serves as a reminder that behaviour influences outcome. Not all agree of course. Dalton tells of a seminar with Glasser, the originator of Reality Therapy, who spent the better part of a session with a client, sitting beside him, and looking at the toe of his shoe. When questioned later, Glasser indicated that he thought better that way, and that was what the client wanted – his thoughts (D. Dalton, personal communication, September 16, 2006). Other therapists have held behaviour to be distracting and thus have tried to avoid bringing it into the counselling session. Freud sat behind a client, out of sight so that in no way would he influence the client with his physical presence or appearance having suffered facial disfigurement due to oral cancer (Arlow, 2000).

Finally, it should be noted that no recommendation is being made here for rigid rules with respect to these elements (assumption, situation, or behaviour), yet, there is the potential for these factors to affect client outcome, and treating them intentionally, and bringing them
into awareness, permits the beginnings of a personal investigation into a therapist’s own experience with them.

So far then, four major types of indirect suggestion have been reviewed in the literature. They are assumptions, context and behaviour, reflexive questioning, and metaphor. As we have seen, they are not without controversy, nor are they without potential challenges for the therapist and the client.

*Dangers of Indirect Suggestion*

Among the various indirect techniques which Gilstrap (2004) has studied are precisely those that lie at the heart of indirect suggestion. For example, she cites questions that introduce information as potential sources of problem. As an example, questions which provide forced choices introduce information, because they suggest that the correct answer is one of the options presented (Poole, 1993). This type of questioning falls explicitly within Erickson’s recommended practice and use of indirect suggestion. “Will your right hand or your left hand feel lighter first” is a familiar example of indirect suggestion in hypnotherapeutic work. There is clear intention here to have a hand rise in response to this suggestion.

Other questions that introduce a preference have similar effects. Tag endings are very much of this type. “I think he was wearing black shoes, wasn’t he” is a simple example. Gilstrap goes on to note that questions which are repeated in an interview become more influential as do imagination requests. These latter include visualization, and of course, hypnotic recall (Heap & Aravind, 2002). Yet, this very type of speculative question is one of the useful types of circular approaches used by the Milan therapists (Palazzoli Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1980).
In research requiring the intentional creation of false memories, usually used in studying the processes underlying true memories, it is practical to be able to have paradigms that can create false memories reliably (Miller & Gazzaniga, 1998). Typically, to illustrate a current procedure, investigators have relied on word lists which consist of close semantic associates of a critical lure (p. 513) so, the list may contain words such as ‘bed’, ‘rest’, ‘tired’ and so forth which are all associated with ‘sleep’. Subjects typically report recognizing critical lures almost as frequently as they recognized studied words and a re-reading of the lists. Moreover, when their recall is tested later, they often report that “they can consciously remember the critical lures being presented during the study session” (p. 513). A similar effect is produced using images. So, for example a picture of a stereotypical situation is presented with some element missing. A classroom picture for instance, is shown with the teacher’s desk or a chalkboard missing. When asked sometime later, the missing (typical) items act as critical lures and are reported as having been present in the original picture (p. 514). This has been considered a danger in using hypnotic recall to identify early abuse or trauma, or even recent crimes, or lost objects. There is no evidence that recall of the details of such emotionally charged events under hypnosis is any better than normal recall would be, thought the subjects feel more certain that their memories are indeed more accurate (Lynn, Lock, Myers, & Payne, 1997). Similarly, Loftus (1997), long an advocate of the danger of false memories in therapy, warns in many descriptive cases of how hypnotically and otherwise, the act of investigating memory can often create false memories as in the examples above, and clients then come to believe them. Loftus calls this the misinformation effect, when people who witness an event are later exposed to new and
misleading information about it, their recollection of the actual event often includes introduced elements.

We can see then that indirect suggestion, in the form of a question that contains either false information or inaccuracies can in addition to the beneficial aspects of generating different perspectives, may create false worldviews or non-productive options.

*Indirect Suggestion and the Working Alliance*

How does the nature of the relationship in therapy then affect the use of indirect suggestion? It would seem, that to the degree that meaning-making by clients is influenced by context, and therapeutic interaction, the particular meanings drawn from therapist verbalizations or behaviours, regardless of explicit content, will be influenced by the quality of the working alliance (Horvath & Bedi, 2002).

Many theorists and schools of therapy have seen the nature and quality of the relationship between client and therapist as a critical component in bringing about therapeutic outcome. Rogers deemed the relationship a necessary and sufficient aspect of therapy for effective change (Rogers, 1951). Asay and Lambert (1999) quantify the degree to which the relationship matters suggesting that fully 30% of outcome in therapy depends on it. Horvath and Bedi (2002), in a comprehensive literature review, conclude that establishing a strong alliance early in therapy is crucial to its ultimate success. Lynn and Hallquist (2004) suggest that Erickson’s utilization approach “enabled him to gain the cooperation and trust of many of his clients and to establish a rapid and strong therapeutic alliance” (p. 65). These authors previously note we maintain that Erickson’s success, and the success of many therapeutic endeavours, can be attributed, at least in part, to the therapist’s ability to manipulate response
expectancies, prime therapeutic responses, strengthen positive response sets and intentions, remove impediments to the automatic execution of desired behaviours, and disrupt or modify negative or undesirable response sets (p. 64).

This process occurs within the context of a strong relationship with the client, in which the therapist demonstrates acceptance and respect for the client’s reality or worldview. Given that the relationship is crucial to the process, how then might we incorporate indirect suggestion within a more conventional model of counselling, without being manipulative or damaging the relationship?

*The Structure of Therapy*

Most counselling models lay out a structure to allow the process of therapeutic interaction to move from where the client perceives herself to be at the outset, towards a desired state or place following successful therapeutic outcomes. Many follow a problem solving stepwise approach in which the problem is defined, desired outcomes are explored, and a plan laid out to reach those outcomes. These models focus more or less heavily on assessment, and specific, measurable goals before intervention is selected (Egan, 1998; Hackney & Cormier, 2005). The Campus Alberta Applied Psychology model (Hiebert, 2001, Hiebert, Collins, & Jerry, 2003; Hiebert & Jerry, 2002/2004) is fundamentally of this type, using a variety of microskills to move the client from the present to the desired future.

Solution focus approaches integrate assessment and intervention assuming both to be part of a dialogue with the client, and the focus, as implied in the name, is more on desired outcomes than on defining the problem (De Jong & Berg, 2002). Similarly, Miller and Rollnick (2002) spend significant time in their process building motivation to put in place what the client often already knows he or she needs, but has failed to enact.
Keeney (1990) offers a creative model of what he calls improvisational therapy to contain and focus the therapeutic process. His model uses the notion of galleries and frames to contain phases of an interview, much like acts of a play contain the various macro-elements: the introduction of characters, initiation of conflict and finally a denouement or release of tension. In a counselling setting Keeney suggests the first frame is the problem frame, where the client presents her challenges. This leads with proper openings to an intermediate frame or frames in which the problems are elaborated. Finally, the process moves through another opening into a therapeutic frame. This model would allow the inclusion of various microskills including indirect suggestion to be used as necessary and as appropriate in each phase as co-determined by the client and the therapist. Keeney’s model is the most flexible of the approaches mentioned lending itself to either a strict problem solving orientation or a more emergent process such as those in solution focus or constructivist orientations. What then, does this journey through the literature suggest?

**Summary**

The literature suggests that indirect suggestion is not without controversy. On the one hand, we can let Lynn and Hallquist (2004) sum up the concerns. They note

…the finding that suggestion type is far less important than participant’s understanding of the meaning and intention of the suggestion, and individual’s willingness to respond to what is suggested, is consistent with the idea that the important aspect of a suggestion has less to do with the subtleties of the wording, than with the activation of a response set in the participant consistent with successful response to the suggestion”(p. 75).

On the other hand, in efforts to operationalize this broad concept, they have used a
very restrictive definition and explored it in a particular domain – hypnotherapy. There is much positive support for a broad use of the term ‘indirect suggestion, as a stimulus to creative and integrative thinking on the part of both client and therapist about the topic under discussion. This leads to a constructivist view of the counselling process, one consistent with much of Erickson’s own approach and with many mainstream approaches used today.

By taking a broad view, indirect suggestion moves beyond just verbal interactions into the realm of underlying assumptions, contextual variables and behaviours, thus providing and integrative lens through which to view counselling. In keeping with the flexibility of this approach, Keeney’s notational system provides an ideal process model, as does the gap reduction format of the CAAP model.
CHAPTER III

Procedures

There are several ideas that converge in this project. The first of these is that the techniques of indirect suggestion have value in the therapeutic process. By far the greatest coverage of indirect suggestion as a type of intervention comes from the hypnotherapeutic domain, and the work of Milton Erickson in particular. Second, is the idea that one might be able to use these traditional indirect techniques in a non-hypnotherapeutic context as well as the traditional domain of hypnotherapy. The literature on this notion is far less plentiful, and where it does exist is scattered over many domains ranging from indirect suggestions from a linguistic perspective (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967), to those used for the express purpose of manipulating memories (Erickson, Rossi, & Rossi, 1976). Third, is the idea that several techniques of indirect suggestion can be easily integrated into existing models of counselling should they be seen to be useful. Most mainstream models use some form of microskills approach to teaching counselling within which a counsellor is taught verbal skills such as confrontation or asking open or closed questions and responding in particular ways to clients (Egan, 1998; Hiebert, 2001). Adding the skills of indirect suggestion to this mix is straightforward. Fourth, that several theories of change and human nature underlying most mainstream therapeutic orientations support the basic concept of indirect suggestion if only indirectly. Finally, that there are inherent dangers in doing anything unintentionally in counselling, thus there is a need to recognize that indirect suggestion happens frequently, and being aware of how and when it is likely to occur can prevent harm. Here the literature contains many studies of the danger of inducing false memories and methods for doing so, and these inform this discussion directly (Loftus, 1997).
Indirect suggestion as an intervention is sparsely covered in the non-hypnotic psychological literature. Within the hypnotherapeutic literature, on the other hand, much has been written. The primary source of information for this paper is the work of Milton Erickson. Thus, as a starting point, Erickson’s major works were reviewed, and a number of relevant articles concerning his use of these techniques and their use by others were consulted. Much of this literature is case-based and is, for the most part, supportive of the use of indirect techniques. This literature is largely a ‘how to’ and thus is weak from the perspective of critical analysis. Thus, a formal literature review was conducted with the intent of critically assessing the construct, and seeking any literature which addressed the use of indirect suggestion in a non-hypnotic context, or as an intervention on its own. This process as it unfolded is described below.

*Erickson’s Corpus*

Erickson’s work consists, for the most part of case histories of single clients and a description of how he went about ‘curing’ their particular ills. He (and his co-author for much of his work, Ernest Rossi) has published a four-volume set of texts titled *The Collected Papers of Milton H. Erickson on Hypnosis* containing a rationale and case studies in addition to guidelines for using his techniques, and many instructional chapters. Additionally, he has written many journal articles and two standalone volumes, which summarize his approach. These two volumes are his primary teaching texts and the source for the majority of information in this paper (Erickson & Rossi, 1979; Erickson, Rossi, & Rossi, 1976).

Many well-known counsellors have considered Erickson to be a mentor, perhaps even a guru, and these theorists have written extensively extending many of his concepts and applying them to new and original situations (Bandler & Grinder, 1979; De Shazer, 1994;
Haley, 1967; Lankton, 1980; Rosen, 1982). Today’s solution focus owes its origins to Erickson’s work.

**Formal Review**

In order to gain a more balanced view of Erickson and his work, a formal literature review was undertaken. This review involved searching the electronic databases PsychInfo, PsycLit, PsycARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, and Academic Search Premier. Articles were limited to those in English and published since 1950. The key words used in the searches were “indirect suggestion”, “Milton Erickson”, “implanted memories”, “working alliance”, and “unintentional outcomes”. These were combined in various ways to generate the greatest number of hits. The search resulted in a surprisingly brief list of articles, indicating that indirect suggestion as a particular intervention was not well documented or researched. As noted, within the hypnotherapeutic literature it is well represented. From the 72 articles originally found, the following criteria were used to select which would be included. First, that indirect suggestion was specifically mentioned as an intervention, that the use of indirect suggestion was intentional or obvious, and that there was some assessment of outcome efficacy. The resulting small subset of articles informs this project and are found in the reference section.

The greatest number of additional books and articles were found by looking through references lists of Erickson’s works, and those of his students, interns, and biographers, as well as those researchers who have actively sought to clarify his constructs and methods. Finally, in keeping with the idea that this model might integrate well with other counselling processes, general works on the therapeutic alliance, role of relationship in counselling outcomes and the model of counselling taught in the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology
Master’s Program were consulted, as well as the course materials used in several modules of this program.

Integration

Efforts were then made to do something few others have been successful doing; classifying Erickson’s techniques. Steve de Shazer notes, “…there were too many cases that were unique and thus we ended up with almost as many categories as cases. Erickson, it turned out, was correct in saying that he did not have a Theory” (de Shazer, 1999). As it was for de Shazer and others, creating a simple model of these indirect suggestions has proven challenging. Thus, rather than creating a rather artificial categorization, the model outlined in this paper simply includes several broad groupings of his techniques that subjectively seem to be best suited to integration at a basic level within conventional counselling process models. Further, using a very broad definition of what constitutes indirect suggestion, included in the model are two dimensions, assumptions and counselling environment, which neither Erickson nor his subsequent chroniclers have mentioned, yet seem to meet the criteria for being non-conventional indirect suggestions, or hints (Mackiewicz, 2005).

Thus, the model, while failing to provide a universal way to classify indirect suggestion, does offer a way of looking at the use of indirect suggestion in conventional therapy. This moves it out of hypnotherapeutic practice into more general types of counselling, and in the process integrates several perspectives including Tomm’s interventive interviewing (Tomm, 1988), Keeney’s improvisational therapy (Keeney, 1990), Erickson’s work, and the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology microskills approach.
CHAPTER IV

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

-Frost

A Conceptual Model

In this chapter, a simple model of indirect suggestion will be advanced, a representative sample of the kinds of techniques most useful to non-hypnotic therapy will be described, and some thoughts as to how this model might integrate with the standard clinical model being used within the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology Program (CAAP) will be explored.

As we have seen in previous chapters, there are two conflicting ideas at work when we speak of using indirect suggestions in a counselling situation. The first of these notions is that the use of indirect suggestion is of no particular value over more direct forms of suggestion (Fourie, 1997). This idea has been the subject of considerable research particularly in the hypnotherapeutic literature, given that the work of Erickson and his followers makes much of the value of indirect methods (Erickson & Rossi, 1979). Moreover, at present, there is a resurgence of interest in Erickson’s work (Sparks, 2000) thus, this question of the utility of such methods is very much in the forefront of training and workshops today.

This idea is contrasted with research based in the linguistic traditions (Bateson 1972), and more recent work in family therapy, particularly that of the Milan school (Palazzoli Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1980; Tomm, 1988), where there is considerable interest in using suitable yet vague prompts as “perturbations” to the normal behavioural and
cognitive processes of a client. These perturbations are thought to lead to new ways of perceiving aspects of the client’s life, hence they provide opportunities to re-evaluate, reframe, or revision troubling components (Palazzoli Selvini et al, 1980). It is this opportunity for a pause and re-evaluation, provided by indirect prompts which leads to the model advanced in this paper. In the next several sections, aspects of the conceptual model will be reviewed. It will be seen that the model integrates well with the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology Program model by focusing on four sets of skills in addition to those microskills already used in basic counselling practice. Additionally, the notion of frames underlying Keeney’s Improvisational Therapy (Keeney, 1990) is suggested as a useful way to conceptualize the whole therapeutic process.

The Interventions

Several types of intervention, which have been called “indirect” have been advanced by many authors. Erickson’s hypnotherapeutic work summarized by Rossi in a series of co-authored texts (Erickson & Rossi, 1979; Erickson, Rossi, & Rossi, 1976) describes many of these indirect methods. Several have been extended by others (Bandler and Grinder, 1979; de Shazer, 1994; Haley, 1967). For the purposes of this paper, the definition of indirect techniques is broadened to include underlying assumptions held by the counsellor and the physical situation in which counselling takes place, together with behaviour, a key part of environment. Our definition, then is that indirect techniques are verbal, behavioural, or situational interventions, which regardless of explicit content, provide implicit messages that reinforce the client’s resourcefulness, and capabilities to adopt multiple perspectives, and further, engenders a sense of safety in the counselling situation. Thus, the point of these indirect interventions is to create a disturbance in the client’s thinking, which promotes a
more mindful approach to the presenting challenges (Langer, 1989). They may be seen as provoking the unfreezing of a worldview, prior to reconsideration of alternatives in action or perspective, and then the final refreezing so that the client is able to move out of counselling with newfound optimism.

The indirect techniques will be summarized in the following four categories: assumptions, counselling environment and therapist behaviour, questions, and metaphors. It should be noted, however, that this listing is far from comprehensive, and following this section a brief variety of other indirect techniques will be mentioned to demonstrate the great scope and opportunity for a creative counsellor to discover and use these approaches.

To aid in the conceptualization, figure 1 shows a graphical interpretation. Here the use of the four categories of indirect suggestion are shown to influence the process of counselling which moves the client from a starting point to some desired end state, and this process is facilitated using Keeney’s notion of frames to both track the process, but also to make it more holistic and integrated than the current CAAP model. Moreover, as noted earlier, the frames concept allows the use of many different techniques beyond the indirect ones suggested in this paper. Thus, direct suggestion, advice-giving could well fit within this model.

Assumptions. Each person, in going about his or her activities operates under many assumptions which guide these behaviours. Very often they remain out of awareness and unexamined by the individual until pointed out by a particular situation. This is the essence, for example, of the provocative situations posed in ethics coursework. Solving moral dilemmas, beyond illustrating useful problem solving approaches, forces students to examine
their assumptions about people and process, and become aware of how they impact daily activities.

Counsellors also harbour assumptions concerning the nature of human beings, counselling, change, and their own role in the process. For example are people basically good or bad or neutral; does counselling mean educating, or co-constructing a story, or perhaps solving a problem. They may assume change is brought about simply by insight, or perhaps only by consciously changing behaviour, and further perhaps their role should be very directive or like a true Freudian of old, to sit passively and simply let the client talk. These assumptions manifest in the relationship forged with a client often unintentionally. Thus, when a counsellor engages in psycho-education, she presumes that the change process for this particular client is based on an absence of knowledge and so she provides it. It could equally be the case that the client possesses the knowledge, but in this particular situation does not see it as the appropriate way to go about resolving her challenge. Thus, faulty assumptions may lead to less than optimal outcomes.

At a more fundamental level, some counsellors assume that insight into a problem is necessary and sufficient to bring about change in a client’s behaviour. In this case, effort would be made in the sessions to arrive at an understanding of the origin of the presenting problem. Taking this further, a counsellor who assumes her role to be directive, might then set about telling the client how he came to be the way he is based on the information he provided. Had the counsellor’s assumptions been different, the session might have gone in an altogether opposite direction. Thus, though the assumptions remain hidden, and thus indirect, they can impact the nature, process and outcome of counselling. Additionally, the therapist,
by making his or her assumptions apparent indirectly may find they conflict with those of the client leading to misunderstandings or worse, a rupture of the alliance.

Assumptions as an aspect of indirect technique are often overlooked. Erickson, for example simply assumed that his clients would become hypnotized when he worked with them. There was no doubt in his mind and thus there were few reported failures on the part of the client to become hypnotized. It was simply expected. Yet, this aspect of indirect suggestion was not mentioned in the reviews or classifications of his indirect techniques (Erickson & Rossi, 1979). Similarly, as noted earlier, Erickson used what was termed a ‘utilization’ approach to counselling process. By this he meant that he believed that all healing or problem solution came from within the client – they brought both the problem and the resources for its resolution with them to the counselling endeavour (Erickson, Rossi, & Rossi, 1976). This assumption changes the process of counselling from problem solving, for example, to resource activation, a notion which has implications for how a counsellor would approach the client, not only from a technical viewpoint, but also from a power structure. If the solution and resources rest within the client, so does the power to effect change.

The conceptual model being advanced here, then, insists that the counsellor’s assumptions about human nature, change, and positive counselling outcomes be clear in his or her mind before seeing clients. To the degree that this is not explicitly addressed in counsellor training programs, it is an area for future development, with the educational goal being that a counsellor needs to have been provided with opportunity and challenged to explore his or her own assumptions in the key areas concerning working with clients. These might include, in addition to the abovementioned, one’s assumptions about sexual
orientation, multiculturalism, the role of spirituality and religion, among others. Perhaps, the Socratic dictate to know thyself is the key concept espoused in this paper.

**Counselling environment.** The environment in which counselling occurs suggests many things indirectly to clients. If, for instance, a goal of counselling is to reduce power differentials between client and counsellor (Collins, 2002), then setting up an office such that the counsellor sits behind a desk, or worse, sits in a chair which places her higher than the client so she ‘looks down on’ her client as they converse, presents herself and the situation in contradictory terms; she is at cross purposes with her own stated goal (Hall, 1966). Likewise, an office which is very institutional in design and decoration may not be conducive to the creation of a secure and safe environment for a teenager who has only experienced institutions as hopeless and dangerous. Hall has pointed out the potential impact of the physical environment on the people who use the space. More recent work reported by Gallagher (1993) makes a compelling case for the emotional changes which environment can evoke in clients. For example, the notion of stimulus reduction has been shown to aid autistic children, and babies born addicted (Suedfeld, 1976, cited in Gallagher, 1993). It would seem that a relatively relaxing and neutral environment would be suitable to counselling, and often this is what is sought. Individual counsellors might experiment with their environment and see what seems best for them.

In a similar vein, pictures on the wall, and literature on waiting room tables sends messages to clients. A personal experience had one of my first-time clients unhappy that there was a sign on my door suggesting that gay and lesbian clients were welcome. My assumption is fairness to all, her assumption is that ‘those’ people are bad.
Taking a few moments before each session or perhaps before setting up a new office, will permit a therapist to get a sense for what clients might be experiencing. My own experience is that if I feel uncomfortable with an office space, a client probably will too. This can be checked out with clients by the simple expedient of asking if they are comfortable early on in the session. Friends and other counsellors may be good sources of information about how a particular office or layout works for them.

A counsellor’s behaviour too impacts the relationship with the client. Most training programs school counsellors in SOLER models to ensure a basic set of attending skills, but under the pressure of the day, it is easy for a busy counsellor to show impatience by tapping a pencil or drumming fingers or even ‘zoning out’ and simply not paying attention. These are evident lapses; other aspects are more subtle. Suits probably send a different message from business casual clothing, which in turn sends a distinctly different message from jeans and a t-shirt. All of these might be appropriate in particular circumstances. The message here is that as a part of setting the stage for good counselling, thinking about how the office, and counsellor as part of that office, induces meaning-making in clients. Again, few hard and fast rule can apply, and the literature is relatively silent on these aspects, yet they are a part of indirect suggestion and worthy of experimentation.

Questions. One of the primary interventions in the ‘talking cure’ has been the asking of questions. There are few counselling orientations in which questioning skills are not both taught and used as a basis of evaluating developing counsellors. These questions can take many forms including the traditional open versus closed. Tomm (1988) has created a taxonomy of questions which suggests four major types distributed across a quadriplex consisting of two major axes: intention and assumptions underlying the specific questions
asked. For example, “what problems brought you to see me today?” is a lineal question whose intent it to gather specific information and orient the therapist to the client’s world. Their use rarely adds new information to the session. Another category of questions is circular questions, whose intent is also to gather information and thus orient the therapist (and client). Questions such as, “who else worries” or, “who do you imagine worries least” begin to generate a broader picture of existing circumstances and open the door to a client taking another’s perspective. Tomm (1988) makes a case for the use of what he terms reflexive questions to bring about the connections with the new and the possible. Questions such as, “if you were to share with him how worried you were and how it was getting you down, what do you imagine he might think” or, “if there was some serious unfinished business between the two of you, who would be most ready to apologize”, or perhaps, “suppose that it was impossible at this moment for her to recognize or to admit to any mistakes on her part, how long do you think it would take before you could forgive her for being unable to do so (Dozier, Hicks, Cornille, & Peterson, 1998, p.4). It can be seen that this type of question does at least two things different from lineal or circular questions. First, reflexive questions ask for the creation of an imaginal outcome on the part of the client, encouraging her to think in terms of other perspectives and, more importantly, other possible actions. The latter question above illustrates this point. If suggests an alternative (status quo) and an imaginal task of putting one’s self in the position of exploring a potential response (and more to the point), other potential responses.

The point of reflexive questions, then is to help a client generate and explore alternatives. It must be noted that this description in no way suggests that orienting questions, the traditional closed questions, are inappropriate. When a fact needs to be confirmed or
specific information is being sought by the therapist, a closed question gets to the point quite effectively. Reflexive questioning moves the course of counselling toward possibilities, alternatives and the potential emotions and outcomes they might generate. This very open style of questions is indirect in that the purpose seems to be informational from a client’s point of view but the intent is not to get information, but to have the client generate and ‘try on’ other ways of looking at their situation and themselves. Dozier et al (1998) note that “the type of questions used in therapy is critical to the level / quality of joining (p. 9).

Another way these questions might be used incorporates the empty chair techniques of the Gestalt therapists (Yontef & Jacobs, 2000). The counsellor might ask, “if your father were sitting across from you right now, what single question would you like to ask him” or, if your husband were here, what question would you most like him to ask you”. These are direct questions, yet they indirectly imply that there is much left unsaid in these two relationships, and perhaps that this is the root of a problem. Thus, we have open questions that create possibilities the client has not likely considered, often in imaginal situations. The answers can then be explored in terms of how they might be implemented even a little bit, and thus form a possible homework assignment (De Jong & Berg, 2002)

Circular questions or as they are often called the ‘gossip questions’ provoke perspective taking too. A therapist might ask the client, in the presence of another, what that other would say in a particular situation, and provoke a ‘getting into someone else’s head’ kind of response which can then be immediately addressed by the third party. This is a less open approach but the indirect intention is still clear. The point is to begin to see that there are multiple ways to view a situation, and that equally, there are many alternative ways to
respond. This is the underlying indirect message in the use of questions being suggested in this model.

Perhaps the ultimate indirect question is the miracle question (De Jong & Berg, 2002) or simply The Question (Adler, 1927). Both are variations on the theme, “if I had the power to make your problems go away by waving a magic wand, and you were unaware of this change, how would know, in the morning that things were different?” This kind of question, also used by Erickson, belies the explicit content, and moves to an imaginal look at a perfect world from as many points of view as the therapist desires. “What would your husband notice that you did differently?”...”What about your kids, how would they know things had changed?”

Metaphors and devices of multiple meaning. Robert Ornstein has evoked the metaphor of multiple minds to explain how we humans deal with our changing and thus uncertain environments. He suggests we rather automatically “wheel in another mind” when prompted by circumstances or the stimulus of other individuals (Ornstein, 1991). To a large degree quotes, anecdotes and metaphors and often humour can bring about similar shifts in mindset. They provide meaning to clients at multiple levels. There are many examples of this technique in the popular press. In a book by Spence (1995), a famous trial lawyer, he makes that case that juries can be swayed to the degree that the legal argument can be made into a story. “The strongest structure for any argument is story” (p. 113). “Let me tell you a story” can be the introduction in counselling too, of a ‘teaching tale’ to use Erickson’s terminology. Rosen (1982) illustrates an Ericksonion tale as follows:

One of my students was less than five feet and she asked me if she had done right.

She was taking her little puppy, a dachshund, for a walk one evening. A big German
shepherd came roaring down the alley, swearing at her and the puppy, declaring his
intent to eat them alive. She grabbed up the puppy and charged the German shepherd,
yelling at him. He turned around and went goggy-eyed and ran back home. Because
it’s when you do the unexpected thing that you cause a lot of rearrangement in a
person’s thinking (p. 222).

The idea contained in this type of tale is often clear on the surface, but what a client
might take from it depends on her history, and her current situation. Superficially, it might
mean she should act in an unanticipated way in a current relationship, but whether that means
standing up for her rights, or being less aggressive with a partner is a matter for the client’s
interpretation of the story, and whatever emotions it might elicit. From Erickson’s
perspective this leaves the onus with the client to make the necessary changes; his story is
merely a stimulus, not a prescription (Rosen, 1982).

Clearly, the length and intricacy of these stories is not material. In a survey of a
sample of Erickson’s teaching tales, one notes that they run from a few words to many pages;
some are neutral or descriptive, others are personally revelatory. Quotes could serve the same
purpose in an abbreviated way. To cite a personal experience, I use on my business cards the
phrase, “change is constant, progress is optional” and have had many clients refer to this little
statement, taking from it what they seem to need to hear a consultant say, yet for me, it is a
reminder of the growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and the need to embrace change and lifelong
learning. No client has yet interpreted it that way.

Other techniques. Erickson listed 11 large groupings of indirect suggestion. Some, for
example the ‘yes set’ – a series of questions which consistently elicit and ‘yes’ answer from
the client tend to suggest future ‘yes’ answers in response to leading questions of one time or another - have been shown to be of little real use (Lynn, Neufeld, & Mare, 1993).

Other techniques though, often found in popular books on enhancing the mind or creativity, might work well in counselling. Brainstorming, for instance is a well respected tools in the corporate and college boardroom. Its purpose is to generate a large number of idea quickly. The process proceeds without evaluation the ideas that the group (or individual) put up on the board. A similar exercise in the counselling interview could generate lots of different alternative viewpoints, but more importantly, teach the valuable skill of holding off on evaluation, particularly self-evaluation and self-censoring (Ornstein, 1991).

**The Current CAAP Counselling Structure**

In the current model of counselling taught in the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology Program (CAAP), the process moves from initial contact with a client to termination and maintenance, as one sees in virtually all counselling process models. The underlying orientation is that of problem solving. The process starts with a definition of the perceived problem, and the rest of the session focuses on defining and then generating ways to get to a solution. This is accomplished through a series of steps and the use of standard counselling skills including engagement, structuring, reflecting and evaluative skills (Hiebert, 2001). Moreover, the process posits a two phase approach with the first including the establishment of goals and tasks, and the second consisting of the intervention agreed to in the first.

Underlying this process is the working alliance or the relationship, which allows therapy to unfold. The importance of this relationship has been addressed previously, but to emphasize a key point, the relationship has been shown to account for some 30% of the measurable outcomes in counselling practice (Asay & Lambert, 1999). In large measure,
counselling is about the relationship. A further point made clearly in the working alliance model is that there is “an intentional awareness of establishing the core elements of the working alliance at the start (and throughout) the counselling contact” (Hiebert, Collins & Jerry, 2003). The use, then of indirect suggestion, as advanced in this paper seems to fit well within the CAAP model with only very few modifications.

Integration

First, the process that begins with where the client is now, and ends with where the client would like to be, the perceived gap model, can be conceptualized as a search for alternatives as it is in the problem solving perspective. The client has a problem, efforts are made to define and know what the outcome will look like in measurable terms, and then a variety of methods are used to develop reasonable ways of closing the gap.

Alternatively, the process that unfolds between start and termination can be seen as an emerging series of frames, much as there would be acts in plays or chapters in books (Keeney, 1990). Each frame (or stage) has a particular function and there would be transitions between each frame. This approach helps the therapist keep track of where the counselling process is, what has been accomplished and where is might be fruitful to go next. With this thought in mind, we might begin to integrate the indirect suggestions even before the opening frame. In keeping with the theatre terminology, we might call this ‘setting the stage’. In this pre-frame, the frame prior to actually sitting with a client, the therapist’s assumptions are reviewed. The frame might occur as a part of training, or as a routine quality assurance exercise as mandated by the various provincial colleges of psychologists. It requires that the counsellor take the time to do a personal evaluation and scan of assumptions about the counselling process, the nature of the client, the way change happens and his or her
thoughts on the nature of client difficulty (Is it a pathology or rigid coping style for example) (Favier, Eisengart, & Colonna, 2004). This pre-frame might be called a self-awareness frame. Arguably it ought to be part of every counselling session; the one-minute pause, perhaps prior to the first client of the day, allowing a counsellor to remind him or herself of her key values and assumptions. As a second part of this setting the stage, is a literal ‘setting of the stage’ for counselling. Here thought might be given to how the interview room is laid out. Issues such as relative height of chairs, adequate seating for all, neutrality of the decor, presence of allergens (perfume, aftershave, flowering plants), art work that is blatantly suggestive or representative of a perspective which the counsellor does not espouse are all elements that might be considered in this preliminary environmental scan. Thought might be given to subtle aspects; while it might be good to suggest in one’s waiting room that the facility is a safe place for all sexual orientations and races, colours and creeds, overt posters, photos or brochures may well be uncomfortable for some clients. This model presupposes no particular layout or style of furnishing, of course, only that these elements do have something to say to clients about the counselling process, the counsellor, and possibly the tone of the session to follow.

The first frame following the stage-setting, actually involves the client. It is likely one of rapport building, getting acquainted and the problem presentation. Here the client explains why she is in counselling. Here the therapist continues with appropriate attending behaviours, both physically and verbally, using CAAP microskills of structuring and acknowledgement. This process of a series of frames unfolds through several stages to culminate in a therapeutic frame; one where alternatives are both generated and possibly discussed or perhaps left with the client as grist for her creative mill, in coming up with her own unique application. This
supports the notion expressed by Asay and Lambert (1999) identifying 40% of outcome variance being attributed to what happens outside of the therapy room.

Indirect suggestion plays a role then in each stage, though to different degrees and with different techniques. As we have seen, the stage-setting before a session tends to be about what one’s assumptions and environment say to the client. Within the body of the sessions moving through the frames, we see reflexive questions, including the Miracle Question if one is comfortable with it, and possibly the use of self-disclosure or other anecdotes in an effort to provide a teaching tale for the client’s interpretation.

The suggested integration using the notion of frames as a process to move through the gap between ‘as is’ and ‘to be’, and the microskills toolset expanded by specific use of indirect suggestions as described in this paper seem to allow the client freedom in co-constructing a sense of themselves, their situation, and their personal resources. As such, it is growth oriented therapy, which has a by product the heightened awareness on the counsellor’s part of his or her biases, and behaviours. For these reasons, this model of indirect suggestion has much to recommend it.

Summary

Indirect suggestion, or the implicit meaning or hint attached to explicit comments, questions, behaviours or contexts, can be a useful tool for facilitating client change. This change occurs by disrupting existing dysfunctional patterns of thought, word or deed, thus, permitting space to generate alternative perspectives, and try on different behaviours. It draws on a client’s resources, thus is empowering, growth oriented and optimistic. As an approach it is integrative, based on a long history of linguistic, cultural, and therapeutic experience, and easy to understand. In practice it requires awareness, sensitivity to clients’
process of making meaning in therapy, and a willingness to experiment a bit with different formulations of questions, and stories. In short it is a viable addition to counselling theory.
CHAPTER V

*It finds its own name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase.*

*No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.*

- *Frost*

Synthesis, Implications, and Extensions

The ideas expressed in this paper draw on five main themes from the psychological literature, and counselling practice. First, the notion of indirect suggestion has been most fully explored and empirically tested within the hypnotherapeutic arena (Heap & Aravind, 2000). It is here that indirect suggestion is still taught and used routinely by practitioners (Sparks, 2000), but it is here too that empirical research suggests that the techniques are not particularly advantageous, and certainly no more so than direct suggestion or simple direction (Lynn, Neufeld, & Mare, 1993).

Second, the Milan School of Family Therapy has focused on perturbing the existing patterns of behaviour and thought within a family system or client in order to provide a space for these clients to revise their working models of the relationships and pathology, and to create and explore possible solutions (Palazzoli Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1980). This work has been extended by Tomm (1988), and others to include a taxonomy of questions that help bring about this perturbation. These circular and reflexive questions seem to unfreeze the existing maladaptive patterns of functioning and “loosen and open up rather than constrict and close down (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p. 381).

Third, there is awareness that much of what happens in therapy happens unintentionally (Andersen, 1987; Tomm, 1988). Outcome studies have suggested that the majority of that portion of therapy results that can be attributed to what actually happens in
the therapy hour have their basis in the quality of the therapist – client relationship (Asay & Lambert, 1999). Thus to some degree, the specifics of what is said in session is arguably important more in terms of how it maintains the relationship and prevents ruptures (Safran & Muran, 2000). Extending this logic is work within the social constructionism model, which advances the idea that to a large degree change is about co-constructing alternative perspectives about a particular client challenge, and then supporting the client in efforts to explore some of these different viewpoints and enact those that make the most sense (Gergen, 1985).

Fourth, there is empirical evidence that therapists can mislead clients quite unintentionally by particular use of language and suggestion (Gistrap, 2004; Loftus, 1997). The examples given and research reviewed imply that at the very least, an awareness of the power of unintended or indirect suggestion might prevent some of this danger for clients and their counsellors. Indeed, one domain of the literature on indirect suggestion that was beyond the scope of this paper, yet has informed many of the earlier attempts at understanding the work of Erickson, is the linguistic or communications approach in which language is broken down into constituent pieces and examined for pattern and effect. Bateson, for example has coined the term ‘double bind’ for those situations brought about by language use in which a person cannot respond to a command or suggestion without disobeying a rule of nature or a previous unstated rule. For example, a parent might say, “do not go to the store” yet there is a standing rule in the household that taking initiative is a valuable asset for a child. Thus, the child is damned if she does, damned if she does not, (Bateson, 1972). Subsequent authors have elaborated this line of research and its role in counselling (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974).
Finally, there is the need, if the model is to be useful, that it be integrated into a conventional counselling process model. Thus, the intentional use of indirect suggestion, as a means of opening up alternatives with clients, drawing on their own models of the world and their native abilities to extend and use their own resources seems to make sense as a form of non-directive intervention or even an overall approach to counselling. Indirect suggestion is a polite way to provide hints that encourage clients (Adler, 1927) to explore and perhaps safely try on a variety of perspectives.

*Will it Work*

Using indirect suggestions in the form of acting on one’s awareness of appropriate assumptions, creating situations fostering power equality and empowerment, questions, and teaching tales has as its goal the opening up of possible perspectives that may broaden the range of options for clients. Moreover, being exposed to multiple perspectives is at the heart of reflexive practice (Andersen, 1987) and thus seems a credible yet relatively new approach. Though reflexive practice had its origins with the seminal paper by Andersen (1987), it is far from a standard practice at least in the experience of this writer. The notion of reflexivity extends the Ericksonian use of a more restricted type of indirect suggestion, which as noted may well include some techniques that in application are really quite direct and directive in nature (Fourie, 1997).

Anecdotally, the response to reflexive input is both liberating and informative (Pare, Audet, Bailey et al., 2004). Those exposed to it note a reduction of defensiveness even in what is perceived to be a dangerous situation (student case presentations), and an opportunity to be provided with a ‘menu’ of alternative ways of both seeing a situation, and options for acting differently in that situation (p. 127). On this basis, using the client’s own resources and
creative potential seems to make good sense. To the degree that the indirect suggestion techniques noted in this paper can do this, the method would be a useful addition to the counsellor’s set of tools. Perhaps more importantly, an awareness that one is making suggestions indirectly and potentially, unintentionally, reduces the risk of blindly directing clients in ways that are disempowering and harmful. If the model in this paper did no more than that, it would be valuable.

The model is not an easy one to practice, however. It requires considerable effort in reviewing and reflecting on the language used with clients, the potential meanings, which might be ‘read into’ questions, comments, and stories, and the implications of everything from mode of dress to office layout. One might easily become overwhelmed with this ‘hidden’ aspect of virtually all communications with clients. Yet, much of the approach can be standardized and a significant portion of the necessary reflection can occur during training, long before clients are even on the horizon. To some degree, this occurs in graduate training programs now. The new requirements for an ethics course in counsellor training encourages an active reflection on one’s beliefs and underlying assumptions concerning clients and their rights, and the process of change, is reviewed from many perspectives during theories of counselling courses. These are excellent starts to building an awareness of the co-construction of meaning, which underlies counselling (Gergen, 1985).

A final challenge to any model is the degree to which it can be learned and used in situationally appropriate ways. Truscott and Crook (2004) make the case that “competence is the cornerstone of professional practice” (p. 97), and that this competence comprises four elements: Knowledge, skills, judgment, and diligence. Knowledge and skills are obvious aspects of a graduate program, and they can be tested through exams, papers and supervised
practice. Judgment is more complex. Judgment means knowing when to use this knowledge
and these skills, and under what particular conditions. This is the element that creates
performance on the job, rather than its potential as indicated by evaluations of knowledge
and skills. Teaching indirect skills such as those included in this paper involves first the
awareness of the knowledge and skills themselves as noted in the discussion on assumptions
and their roles. More importantly, a reflective stance is necessary, the diligence component
noted above, to ensure that the practitioner is continuously examining his or her application
of the techniques, the understanding of them, and perhaps most importantly, the outcome of
using them in specific situations.

What Needs to be Done

For any model to be advanced as efficacious, outcome research is necessary (Mertens,
1998. This model draws together and extends ideas from several approaches to client change,
some better documented than others. In fact, in reviewing this paper, one sees the gradual
building on the previous work of Erickson, by the communications theorists, for example
Gregory Bateson and Paul Watzlawick, the family therapists of the Milan School, and
modern writers on hypnotherapy such as Fourie, Spanos and Lynn. In a sense, this analysis
has mirrored the development of key principle used by Erickson in somewhat altered form in
many modern therapies including solution focus and client directed approaches. This
notwithstanding, the techniques incorporated within the various approaches have remained
largely confined to those approaches. There has been only limited cross-pollination (Corsini,
2000). The first necessary step then is a program of research designed to test the whole
model, as opposed to its separate parts. This would most likely have to happen initially
through qualitative avenues given the difficulties with definitional issues and the challenges
to deconstructing meaning after the fact (Sparks, 2000). As has been noted, indirect suggestion can often seem surprisingly direct; it is the implicit suggestion or underlying meaning of a comment or question that makes it indirect. Thus, this research has to focus on meaning from the client’s perspective. This has only recently become the focus of research generally, and from it, several novel aspects of therapeutic outcome have become known. For example, the idea that the client’s perception of the quality of therapist-client relationship is more predictive of outcome success than that of the therapist (Batchelor & Horvath, 1999) was determined by asking the client directly. Similarly, asking the client about meanings of statements, questions, and contexts will necessarily form some part of the research design (Mertens, 1998).

Preceding this research is the need to define with much greater rigour, just what constitutes indirect suggestion. The definition used in this model is explanatory but insufficient for operationalizing the construct. Moreover, indirect suggestion occurs in many flavours and colours such that each type (reflexive questions, anecdotes, self-disclosure) might have to be assessed separately as to effectiveness with particular client types or contexts. For example, at the most fundamental level, many of Erickson’s indirect suggestions were made under hypnotic conditions. How well these generalize to routine (non-hypnotic) therapy is uncertain. There is much debate about what hypnosis is and to what degree it affects perception, but here it is presumed that at a fundamental level hypnosis differs less from other therapeutic states than one might think. Yet, this too needs to be addressed in continuing research. Spanos & Coe (1992) for example, explain hypnosis as a socio-cognitive process wherein clients act as they believe ‘hypnotized’ people should, and further attempt to meet the expectations of the hypnotist. This contrasts with traditional
trance models (Hilgard, 1992), but fits well with a more interactive style of therapy in which implicit meanings of indirect suggestions are more important than particular wording of comments or questions. Moreover, there is an interaction between the specifics of the intervention and the nature and type of client (Batchelor & Horvath, 1999). Once more, research on this interaction is relatively new.

Conclusions

Indirect suggestion techniques, broadly defined, are offered, as an intentional intervention with clients. The purpose of the intervention is to loosen the tightly-held beliefs, attitudes and patterns of behaviour clients bring to counselling, in order to enable these clients to co-construct and explore alternative perspectives concerning their challenges. It draws on Erickson’s extensive repertoire of techniques, and extends those to include assumptions and contexts. The difficulties of defining indirect suggestion operationally, and the practical use of techniques that operate, by their nature, at the edge of awareness are noted. Research is needed to support the holistic approach suggested within the model, most likely continuing the tradition of qualitative approaches initially.

The suggested techniques integrate well with the broad model of counselling used within the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology program. This gap analysis model which contains the microskills used in actual conversation with clients can equally well contain the indirect techniques reviewed here. To make this process more easily followed, Keeney’s notion of frames and galleries has been invoked to monitor the process as it moves through the gap between present situation and desired counselling outcomes.

A valuable byproduct of the model is seen to be an increased awareness that we create meaning in dialogue with clients, and what meaning is taken from particular comments
or questions or stories in particular contexts are often unpredictable, and rest with the client. Awareness may not be the ultimate solution to this problem, but awareness can only help. The proposed model allows counsellors to be aware in a proactive way that is integrative and flexible.
REFERENCES


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FIGURE CAPTION

*Figure 1.* Conceptual model showing the integration of the frames concept with the use of indirect techniques of metaphor and reflexive questions to move a client from the starting position (as is) to the desired ending point (to be). Underlying the whole process and informing both environment and counsellor behaviour are the assumptions of both counsellor and client.
Figure 1