Working with Reluctant Clients through Affirmation Techniques

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Affirmation techniques enable reluctant clients, who often have been referred for counseling by others, to accept responsibility for the consequences of their choices and to initiate self-directed change.

THE PROBLEM OF RELUCTANCE

In spite of this historical perspective, Vriend and Dyer (1973) note that a large number of students with whom school counselors work can be considered reluctant clients. Although "each of the basic counseling approaches and theoretical positions include a degree of counselor volition as a postulate of effectiveness" (1973, p. 240), Vriend and Dyer note that large numbers of clients find themselves in counseling sessions in which they have no desire to be cooperative. It is clear that the counselor who attempts to establish and maintain rapport with a reluctant client is faced with a difficult task. Clients, regardless of motivation, enter counseling with an orientation to be self-protective (Brammer, 1979), and their counselors often experience anxiety and some anger (Eisenberg & Delaney, 1977).

Counselors need assistance in both understanding and minimizing client reluctance (Riordan, Matheny, & Harris, 1978). In order to prepare counselors who are equal to the task of helping reluctant clients, counselor educators and supervisors need to consider client reluctance as a major variable in the counseling process (Paradise & Wilder, 1979). A cursory review of relevant literature indicates that resources from which educators or individual counselors may draw are limited. Available literature on client reluctance is described as "leaning heavily on inspiration and falling short of systematizing what we know regarding human behavior" (Riordan et al., 1978, p. 7). Riordan and others present seven motivational factors that are deemed critical to success with reluctant clients. In addition, several verbal and nonverbal approaches are suggested for implementing the principles. Counselors may find such suggestions helpful and yet be somewhat uncertain about exactly how to implement their suggestions in a counseling session with a reluctant client. Case examples in which skills or suggestions are illustrated may enable readers to understand more clearly principles of working with reluctant clients (e.g., Eisenberg & Delaney, 1977; Rios & Ofman, 1972).

This article describes an affirmation approach to working with reluctant clients that is humanistic and compatible with the philosophy of helping that is taught in many counselor training programs. It incorporates the skills of rapport building that are an integral part of the training of most counselors. Although counselors want to facilitate client progress with responses of empathy, respect, and genuineness, they may find it difficult to implement their training when facing a client who is reluctant to cooperate in the traditional client-counselor relationship.

The affirmation approach illustrates the use of facilitative skills when a client is willing to converse but may not acknowledge the existence of a problem or desire to make any changes. The verbal skills used in the approach are operationally defined and illustrated with selected interview segments adapted from an interview with a reluctant client. Finally, implications for the use of the approach with other clients are discussed.

AN AFFIRMATION APPROACH

Affirmation Counseling

The affirmation approach to counseling described by Rios and Ofman (1972) is based on humanistic-existential thought. Ex-
Affirmation through Paraphrasing

Ivey and Gluckstern (1974) state that the objective of paraphrasing is restatement of the essence of what another person has said. They contend that this skill is more than a simple paraphrase

The affirmation approach to school counseling noted in this article emphasizes equality between counselor and student. Although equality between adults and students in a school setting is rare, many counselors find themselves in this position when they seek to learn from their counselees what it is like to be experiencing a particular difficulty. Counselors can seek information in order to understand the dilemma from the student's perspective and yet assist the student in exploring various aspects of the problem by effective use of facilitative skills. Affirmation techniques often result in the student deciding to give up a position of resistance or to change a particular behavior. The counselor's long-range goal is to assist the student in making a change only if requested, rather than to motivate a change desired by others. The counselor's immediate goal is to assist the student to become aware of both

Counselors who are encountering resistant or reluctant students may find affirmation techniques appropriate to use, particularly in initial rapport building. The careful application of well-developed facilitative conditions, if applied within an affirmation framework, can enable a counselor to work with clients who may not even acknowledge the existence of a problem. From an affirmation point of view, counselors can focus on exploration of a behavior that is of concern to others without eliciting the defensiveness customary with reluctance. In this way the client may face the reality of personal choice and accept full responsibility for the behavior.

The case illustration approach that follows is a presentation of specific skills of counselor verbal behavior that are particularly helpful in implementing affirmation techniques. Interview segments are used to illustrate each skill.

THE "SKIPPER": A CASE ILLUSTRATION

Establishing Initial Rapport

The interview segments used to illustrate affirmation techniques are drawn from an initial interview with an 8th-grade female student of Hispanic origin. She has been attending school but regularly skips one or more class periods each day. The student was referred to the counselor, and the counselor's initial contact with the student occurred in a hallway the day before the first counseling session. At that time the counselor entered into a friendly conversation and asked the student to come by to talk the next day.

The counselor's goals for the first session were:

1. To get the student to focus on her class-skipping behavior.
2. To get the student to explore the positive and negative aspects of this behavior.
3. To get the student to assume responsibility for the behavior.
4. To understand the student's position and reasons for maintaining that position.
5. To respond in a nonthreatening manner to facilitate exploration and provide a positive atmosphere that would be unlikely to prompt client defensiveness.

In order to achieve these goals the counselor planned to use paraphrasing, reflection of feeling, open-ended questions, and leads while avoiding judgments or negative implications about any responses made by the student. Although this strategy appears to be highly nondirective, the counselor entered the session with some hypotheses about aspects of the client's position on the class-skipping behavior. These hypotheses provided the framework for beginning the exploration process. Such hypotheses are used to direct the exploration process. The counselor's leads are clearly working hypotheses that must be verified by the student if they are to be helpful for understanding her position. In this case, the counselor maintained an open mind regarding the student's position on the skipping behavior but used hunches as working hypotheses. Each working hypothesis was discarded if it was not declared to be applicable from the student's point of view.

The "Skipper": A Case Illustration

The purpose of affirmation counseling is to help a client "face the reality of the nature of his life, to affirm and nature the essence of himself, and to see that he has chosen to lead the life he is leading for good reasons" (Rios & Ofman, 1972, p. 259). In affirmation counseling, the counselor is interested in helping clients face the reality of personal choices. This personal examination leads to clients' acceptance of responsibility for the consequences of their choices.

The basis for the therapeutic relationship in an affirmation approach is equality, although therapists traditionally view themselves as experts (Ofman, 1976). Most therapeutic approaches contain the proposition that acceptance is a necessary condition for growth; however, clients who seek assistance are likely to think that such action is an admission of unacceptability (Brammer, 1979). It seems paradoxical that clients must believe in themselves as capable of solving problems, yet also feel somewhat inadequate in order to seek assistance.

Traditionally, client resistance to therapy was viewed as negative. Nevertheless, resistance is now considered by some therapists to be a personal integrity issue that would threaten a client's self-image if it were abandoned (Ofman, 1976). In addition, an affirmation counselor considers resistance to be a valid position for a client to maintain, not something to be overcome. Because resistant client positions have both positive and negative aspects, the counselors need not take an adversarial stance toward the existence of such a client position. The counselor may address resistance in a manner that will assist a client to openly explore both the positive and negative aspects of this choice rather than overly confront the client as being uncooperative. Rios and Ofman (1972) illustrate counselor affirmation of the choice of resistance in a segment of a counseling session with a Mexican-American youth. The counselor accepts this client's silence as a decision to resist, and the resulting dialogue leads to the client's decision to return for help. These authors state that affirmation counselors do not imply in any way that a client is inadequate or unacceptable, nor that there is a better or more effective way to be. Rather, counselors help clients face and affirm their realities by seeing that each position one takes has both positive and negative aspects. To maintain that the client is in error is asserted as playing into a defensive posture and catering to the client's lack of responsibility. Instead, the affirmation counselor addresses the reality of the negative aspects of the position the client has chosen and affirms that such a choice was made for good reasons.

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mirroring of content. It is effective for beginning to establish a counseling relationship because it conveys that a counselor is trying to understand the other person’s frame of reference, and it can give direction to an interview. Hill (1978) labels counselor paraphrase responses as restatements whether they are simple repeats of client words or rephrases of client spoken content. In either case, this response typically contains fewer but similar words and “may be phrased tentatively or as a statement” (p. 467).

In the following example, the school counselor is implementing an affirmation approach by using paraphrasing to work toward attaining the goals for the first counseling session. (C & S designate counselor and student responses.)

C: We briefly mentioned something yesterday that I’d like to bring up again. Yesterday you missed one of your classes.
S: I don’t think I skipped yesterday; maybe it was the day before. (Mild reluctance shows in the attempt to correct the counselor.)
C: You skipped class day before yesterday then. Tell me a little bit about it. (The client’s position is affirmed as corrected by using a paraphrase, and a lead is used to begin the exploration process.)

S: Well, me and Jackie, we were going to have a test. Mrs. C. had told us to study. I had forgotten my tablet, so I didn’t study. We went and walked the halls and then at lunch time we went to Mrs. C’s room and asked her for a lunch card, and she didn’t have any. We went through the lunch line anyway. When the lunch bell went off we went to the library like it was our right lunch time, and stayed in there till 1:00 o’clock when fourth period bell rang. Then we went to fourth period.
C: Because you had not studied, then you decided to skip a class. (Paraphrase of content affirms the client’s reason for making the decision to skip class.)

In the preceding segment the counselor uses two responses that are paraphrases of content. These responses function to “build rapport and to help move toward goal attainment. Here the paraphrase is used specifically to focus on the problem behavior (Goal 1) and to reinforce student responsibility for decisions (Goal 3). The counselor is also communicating understanding of the student’s position and is responding in a nonthreatening manner (Goals 4 and 5, respectively).

Affirmation through Reflection of Feeling
Reflection of feeling is similar to paraphrasing, but the counselor places emphasis on the emotion or feeling aspects of the communication rather than on the objective verbal content (Ivey & Gluckstem, 1974). Hill (1978) defines reflection as a repeating or rephrasing of client statements. She specifies that the response “must contain reference to stated or implied feelings” (p. 467).

In the following interview segment, the counselor affirms the student’s position with reflection of feeling responses. In addition, the counselor uses leads to direct the client to explore a working hypothesis that the counselor suspects could be a part of this student’s perspective.

C: How do you feel about skipping classes in general? (Counselor wonders if she is afraid of getting caught.)
S: Uh, I don’t know. It’s just that once you get use to it, it’s just sort of, it’s easy. But, uh, I think me and Jackie realize we’re not going to skip anymore. (Reluctance shows in the attempt to offer compliance to adult expectations.)
C: You’re pretty comfortable and you find it a little easier to skip now. (Reflection of positive feeling is focusing on client affect rather than dealing with the diversion.)
S: I guess.
C: Let’s talk about how you feel when you skip. How do you feel when you think that you’re going to get caught? (Counselor directs the focus to the hypothesized negative aspects of the choice to engage in skipping classes.)
S: Well, sometimes I feel like maybe Jackie’s going back to class or that she got caught. Well, if we were late or saw Mr. Jones down the hall you know, we’d get a permit. I’d write myself a permit and I’d write Jackie a permit. You know, like Mrs. Sharp said that we were going to the library, or something like that. And if he asked us for our permit we’d let him look at it and he’d say hurry up and get somewhere.
C: So you’re pretty satisfied with skipping and more or less kind of worked out a way where you won’t get caught in the hall. (Reflection of positive feeling reinforces client responsibility and reasoning ability presented in the student’s example of her behavior.)
S: Yeh, sort of. Once he caught us at our locker and, you know, it was still lunch time, third lunch, and he says, “You’re supposed to be,” “he told me, “Jackie, you’re supposed to be at lunch, not at your locker.” He didn’t know we were in Mrs. C’s class.
C: Then you’re not really too scared of getting caught. (Reflection of absence of negative feeling affirms satisfaction and negates the counselor’s hypothesis about fear being an important factor from the student’s viewpoint.)
S: That’s because I’ve got caught many times, and I realize, I mean they’re not gonna do nothing to you but just put you on suspension or whatever.
C: You’re not afraid of the punishment of getting caught because you’re really not punished. (Reflection of absence of negative feeling affirms the clear position that the client is satisfied with this aspect of the skipping behavior.)

Reflection of feeling is used by the counselor throughout this sequence of responses to help build rapport and move toward goal attainment. It is clear that the counselor is beginning to explore the student’s positive perceptions of her position and test out working hypotheses about the negative aspects (Goals 1 & 2). In addition, the counselor reinforces client responsibility (Goal 3) and continues to work on rapport building (Goals 4 & 5).

Affirmation through Open-Ended Questions or Leads
In the entire interview open-ended questions or leads are used periodically to direct the student into exploration of various aspects of the skipping behavior. The open-ended question is most frequently used by the counselor to open an area of exploration that will clarify a working hypothesis. An open-ended question is generally considered a probe (Okun, 1976). Hill (1978) specifies that the open question “requests a clarification of feelings or an exploration of the situation without purposely limiting the nature of the response to a yes or no or a one or two word response” (p. 467). Requests in imperative form, such as “Tell me about...” or “Let’s talk about...” are also included in this category.

In this next interview segment, the counselor begins an exploration of her hypothesis that the detrimental effect of skipping classes on the student’s grades may motivate her to want to change her class attendance patterns.

C: What effect does this skipping have on your grades that you’ve seen?
S: It doesn’t really matter to me if I fail because I’ve been through failing before when I was in summer school.
C: So failing doesn’t really affect you much. (Paraphrase)
S: No. And just like my brother, I’m not interested in classes. You know, my brother’s not interested in classes. But he doesn’t skip. He tries as hard because it’s the way he is. I wouldn’t blame him for trying. The way I am, nothing would stop me from skipping. (Statement of rationale for not caring about grades)
C: So you don't care to make good grades. (Paraphrase of basic position.) You really don't worry about making good grades. (Reflection of feelings about basic position.)

S: Well, I do, in a way, to get my diploma and a job. In a way I don't because I just try to be free, and have a lot of experiences. (Clarification of positive and negative aspects of the position on skipping.)

C: In other words, the diploma may not mean that much to you because you're really interested in being free to do other things. (Paraphrase.)

S: Well, when you're skipping... I mean if you really want a diploma that bad, then you know that skipping's bad. But if you don't, then you skip.

C: So as far as you're concerned, getting a diploma and getting good grades is not really that important to you. (Paraphrase.)

S: Not really. It's not, I don't care what happens to me in the future. I've tried to pass, but I don't have to. My mom says it doesn't make sense for somebody to skip, for somebody that just don't care.

C: Mom disagrees, but it makes sense to you. (Paraphrase affirms rational thinking.)

S: Yeh. It does.

C: Let's talk about what you want for your future. (Inquiring into rationale for student's position.)

The open-ended question about grades with which the counselor opened this segment directed the student's thinking toward a working hypothesis without communicating the bias inherent in a closed-ended question. If the counselor has asked, "Have you thought about the effect skipping classes is having on your grades?" the question would have been closed. A reluctant client is often able to read an underlying message into such a question. In many cases such a question is interpreted to mean, "I think you should be concerned about your grades." It is easy to move a client into a defensive posture by using closed questions.

As the segment closes the counselor uses a lead to probe the student's thinking about what is important to her future. In both cases open-ended inquiry is followed by a series of paraphrases and reflections to affirm both positive and negative aspects of the student's position. If the counselor continues to respond affirmingly, the student sometimes becomes aware of some of the limitations of a particular position. In this case, the student begins to consider that there may be negative aspects to her position (Goal 2). To work toward Goals 3 and 4, the counselor continues to affirm that the student has good reasons for her behavior even though others disagree. The student is then willing to share her desires for the future.

The student then reveals that getting a job is of little concern because she wants to be like her sister (be married and have her own home and two children). In addition, it is learned that the sister damaged family relationships when she quit school and left home. When the counselor asks the student to talk about the life she wants for her future, she begins to tell about some of the negative aspects of her sister's life. By paraphrasing and reflecting feelings, the counselor helps the student recognize that her sister's life is quite unhappy.

The counselor's assistance in exploring this aspect of the student's viewpoint elicited a conclusion that skipping classes led to several negative consequences in her sister's life. The counselor found that a brief exploration of the situation from another perspective was beneficial. The counselor pursued a hunch (by enabling the student to act as an observer of her sister's life) and took the personal threat out of the exploration process. This enhanced the student's ability to assess the negative consequences of class-skipping behavior.

The counselor was able to move the focus back to the student's behavior by asking her to discuss how much her situation is like that of her sister. In this section, it becomes clear that she is reconsidering whether to be like her sister if her behavior also might have a severe negative effect on her family.

C: How much is your situation now like the one your sister experienced?

S: Well, it's just a little bit different. I didn't run away when I was 11. That's the only part I didn't do. I would always feel like running away, but, I mean, running away's not gonna do you any good.

C: You've decided not to run away because you realize that when she ran away it didn't really accomplish anything good for her. (Paraphrase to affirm logical thinking.)

S: Right, because when she came back she just came back to tell my momma she's pregnant, and she just took off and got married. My mom and dad couldn't hardly stop her.

C: The situation was really bad for the home, yet I'm wondering if it's the same for you. (Open-ended lead to change focus to client situation)

S: If my mom and me got along better it would be different.

C: What do you think you would do, let's say, if your family situation were a little better?

S: Right now I'd be home studying. I'd be getting better acquainted. I mean, that way, if we were a lot better, I wouldn't probably even know Jackie at all because we get along too good and we skip too much. I'd have a lot of other friends.

C: Then if things were different at your house you wouldn't be doing what your sister did. (Response focuses on implied meaning associated with behavior.)

S: Yeah, she really destroyed my family.

C: Since this was something that you said messed up the family, and you want to be like your sister, what do you think your doing this would do to your family?

S: It would probably mess it up worse. Especially my mom, and she can't take it.

C: From what you said about wanting to be like your sister, you seem pretty convinced that what your sister did messed up the family and that if you did something similar it would probably mess it up worse. I wonder how willing you are to be like your sister if it would cause this much trouble. (Summary statement and open-ended lead direct client thinking to her choice, the consequences, and her personal responsibility.)

S: You mean if it would cause even more trouble? Well, I really want my family to be happy like before she got pregnant. But now that I realize that's gonna mess up your family for the rest of your lives, I don't think I can do what she did. It's like skipping's no good for me either.

C: You don't want to do what your sister did because it will mess up your family. Let's talk about what you really want to do instead of skipping, what you want for you and your family. (Paraphrase and open-ended lead.)

In this segment of the counseling session, the counselor is successful in getting the student to apply her awareness of the negative aspects of skipping classes to her personal behavior. The facilitative skills are used to guide the student's self-exploration and accomplish all five of the counselor's goals. This case illustration fits many situations in which clients may be unwilling to cooperate. As Brown and Brown (1977) indicate, clients who are referred to counselors by parents, teachers, judges, or welfare workers can be resistant because they perceive no problem. They point out that these individuals may be hostile or manifest subtle resistance by rambling or changing topics. The client, in this case, rambles frequently, but the counselor is able to focus on the behavior that is of concern and to elicit relevant self-exploration with affirmation techniques. Change is the result.