

SOLUTION-FOCUSED INTERVIEWING: A STRENGTH-BASED METHOD FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE

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Abstract

The previous article of this two article series began with a critical examination of how our field focuses on the failed side of juvenile offenders.

Rehabilitation isn't a cure; it really isn't a "treatment." It is an attitude concerned with developing capacities.

Karl Menninger

Introduction

This article will detail a strength-based interviewing method that offers a true alternative. Problem-focused models of treatment determine the types of information we pursue and how juvenile workers conduct assessments. Juvenile workers may believe there is a wide variety in the types of interviewing and assessment procedures used across our field. Scholarly journals and training workshops will often promote "new" or "different" assessment and treatment approaches. Juvenile workers and court managers may feel progressive and potent in considering them. However, upon close examination, one finds a majority of these "new" approaches circumscribe and repackage the all-too-familiar Problem-Focused approach of "fixing failure." This approach drives our workers to assess primarily what offenders cannot do or have failed to do. We are then consumed by work to "fix the failure." This focus is so pervasive and entrenched we are often left blind to any true alternatives.

The strength's perspective is not a rehash of what is currently practiced in our field. It offers a real change and a true difference in how we work with delinquents and their families. A variety of terms - competency based, resilience, wellness, strength-based, and positive focus - can be found as signposts marking this territory. They all have some differences, yet in practice have common characteristics: A respectful partnership between juvenile worker and offender, a singular emphasis on strengths and resources and a hopeful eye to the future.

The philosophical base of the strength perspective is radically different to current approaches, but it is not new to our field. Bendtro and Ness (1995) note that Jane Addams, who was heralded for founding the modern Juvenile Court System in this country, promoted the principles of the strength perspective. However, the Juvenile Court System would never embody the youth development principles she promoted. These authors report:

Early experts on youth problems expressed an optimism that contrasts sharply with contemporary writings. These professionals developed interventions based on strength-building, rather than flaw-fixing; and they achieved what, by today's standard, appear to be remarkable results... These reformers were powerful advocates of positive youth development as the foundation of both prevention and correction. But, if these pioneers were on the right track, why didn't their model endure? Perhaps they were too far ahead of their times.

I believe there is another plausible explanation as to why these models did not endure: There was not an effective extension from philosophy to practice. The philosophical "first step" is to believe that a juvenile offender has strengths and past success that can be utilized to stop delinquent behavior and exit our court system. Just as important is the "second step" of having practice methods to identify and marshal these strengths for the necessary behavior changes.

This article presents a set of interviewing questions that I believe would have been favored by Jane Addams and the early strength building pioneers. This interview method has its origin in the family therapy field and the work of de Shazer, Berg, and colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee (de Shazer, et al.,

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Solution-Focused Interviewing

The previous article in this two part series (Clark, 1995) criticized our field's current problem solving approach for not allowing enough offender participation in the goal setting process. Criticism was also leveled at workers who believe that cooperation is an effort that rests solely with the offender. This article outlined that allowing greater offender participation in the goal setting process and radically changing our role in the development of cooperation, can provide a more efficient route towards court dismissal. However, philosophy alone is not sufficient to accomplish this without accompanying practice methods. It is a mistake to believe that greater offender participation and developing a cooperative relationship is enough to bring behavior change. For real change to happen, the offender and family need to make a shift in how they think about and perceive the problem(s) and to do something that is behaviorally different than before. How juvenile delinquents and families are helped to make this shift involves establishing well formed goals by using solution-focused interview questions.

Goal Setting

When an adolescent enters our juvenile court system, the relationship between worker and offender begins with an initial focus of what criminal or status offense(s) brought them into court contact. Juvenile offenders and their families insist on telling their worker "what's wrong" with their lives. It is important for us to listen to these concerns and to quickly ascertain if any risk or emergency situations need attention. Once we have established that no immediate (emergency) situations are present, we can then turn the conversation towards developing well formed goals.

Several characteristics of well formed goals have been identified by Berg and Miller (1992). Out of many considerations regarding the negotiations of goals, I find four guidelines that are important to review for Juvenile Justice work. The reader will notice a difference in goals that are composed to facilitate an offender's sense of success:

1. Goals must be meaningful to the offender. If we first cooperate with the family's agenda if at all possible, it is easier for them to cooperate with us later. Common sense must prevail. A juvenile who is a

danger to self or others may need to be physically redirected or be taken into custody regardless of the juvenile's preference. However, a majority of our cases do not pose immediate at-risk situations, and one will find it is far easier to start wherever there is interest and energy, rather than trying to create it where it is not. Restitution to victims, community service work, and other requirements for dismissal can be included in mutual goal setting after juveniles believe we will pay attention to what they find important to start with.

2. Goals must be small and concrete. Goals and objectives in many delinquency caseplans are far too large, encompassing numerous behaviors to reach a goal for dismissal months in the future. If the goal cannot be accomplished within two to three weeks, it must be pared down. In caseplans we enter, most importantly the sub-section on goals, should not be static but should remain open to negotiation and revision as we work with juveniles and families. The goal of "filling out two job applications" is easier to achieve than "getting a job." Goals that are small and spell out the needed effort (concrete) have more utility to starting action. Goals that describe the destination are not as helpful as smaller goals that begin "first steps," creating movement with concrete descriptions.
3. Goals should be interactional. A solution-focus looks to interaction with others rather than centering on the individual psyche. Goals are established in context with others. Parents usually think only in terms of how their child must change. Questions which are interactional in nature, pull in "observers" to subtly challenge their idea that they have no influence in the change process. An example of this challenge can be found in this inter-change:

Worker: What do you suppose will be a small (first) sign that your son is "stopping all this trouble?"

Mother: He will stop skipping school and bugging his younger sister and also he wouldn't "cuss" at me like he does.

Worker: Let's believe for a moment that he starts doing those things. What do you think he would say you are doing different when that happens?

Mother: He would probably say I'm not "on his case" all the time, that I'm not checking up on him.

Worker: What would he say you're doing instead?

Mother: He would say I'm trusting him more and maybe listening to him. Maybe not calling his friends to check on him all the time - he hates that.

Worker: When your son notices that you are more willing to trust him and to listen to him when you both speak, what would he say about how things will be different between the two of you?

The real utility of this kind of goal negotiation is that the mother may get the idea that she can start positive beginnings, rather than waiting passively for her son to change. It is helpful for the mother to begin to believe she has some influence, even indirect influence, on improving her son's behavior.

4. Goals must be a beginning not an end. Many goals currently used in the juvenile justice field call for an end of an illegal or unwanted behavior. Goals have more utility if they are framed as the presence or start of a positive behavior. It is hard to be consciously aware of the absence of something, or of "not doing" something as we go about our day. It is far easier to recognize "doing" that is action or effort. "I won't talk back to my teacher" is reframed to "asking to talk to the teacher after class," "asking for a pass to see a counselor," or "writing down how angry I am at my desk." When juveniles or family members suggest goals posed with never, not, don't or won't, questions are asked, "what will you do instead?" Vague, future conditions also need a concrete beginning; "So what do you need to do to start feeling better about yourself?"

Solution-Focused Questions

Miller (1994) states: "Over time, we have learned that asking the right question often has more impact on the client than having the correct answer." Nowhere is this point more applicable than with adolescents who resist lectures, "being told what to do" or any approach that puts them in a "one down" position. Solution-focused questions help to ignite the shift in the offender's perception of the problem(s) and to begin action that is behaviorally different than before.

Berg and Miller (1992) posit "five useful questions" for interviewing that orient our families toward solutions. I have adapted these questions for juvenile court application:

1. Pre-Session Change Questions. "After being arrested and petitioned, many people notice good changes have already started before their first appointment here at the court. What changes have you noticed in your situation?" "How is this different than before?" "How did you get these changes to happen?" Numerous studies (Weiner-Davis, et al., 1987, Talmon, 1990, Bloom, 1981) found a majority of clients make significant changes in their problem patterns from the time of setting up of the initial appointment to actually entering treatment. In single subject research, this author found similar responses from juveniles and families newly assigned to my juvenile probation caseload. The important point is that teens and families rarely report these changes spontaneously. Juvenile workers must ask questions to elicit and amplify these changes, or they remain obscure. When problems are ignored by those that experience them, they are thought to move underground where they grow and fester and return even stronger. However, when solutions are ignored, they simply fade away unnoticed, and more importantly, unused.
2. Exception Questions. "Have there been times recently when the problem did not occur?" "When was the most recent time when you were able to (perform the desired behavior)?" "What is different about those times?" "When did this happen?" "Who was involved?" "How did this happen?" Teens and their families typically view the complaints they bring into our courts as constant in nature, and therefore any or all exceptions usually go unnoticed. This approach holds to the adage "nothing always happens" (de Shazer, 1988) to convey there are always times when the problem does not happen or is not considered a problem by the family. Experience with this model (Clark, 1994) has shown times when the truant attends school, the angry/assaultive child walks away from a fight, the follower has said "No" to the group, or the parent did not berate or harp on the negative. The idea is simple: Look for how teens and families found success in the past and get them to repeat those same strategies in the future. It is here that a radical difference between solution-focused work and the problem-focused model can be found. In the latter we are asking, "When does the problem happen?" "When does it get worse?" Problem-Focused work is based on the idea, "If we can name the problem, the treatment will follow." However, when we selectively attend to the problem, many difficulties

arise. Insoo Berg (1994) gives a good account of what juvenile workers often experience:

Focusing on a problem usually implies that there is a direct cause. Someone is responsible for the problem and someone is at fault. Whenever families concentrate on problems, the conversation in the family session rapidly deteriorates into arguments, defensiveness and blaming.

Solution-focused work finds greater utility in amplifying what is occurring during times when the problem does not happen than when it does. It is very important to note that exceptions need to be purposeful. To find out that during a certain period of time a substance abusing juvenile abstained from using drugs only because the local "dealer" was out of town is certainly an exception that is of no use!

3. **Miracle (Outcome) Questions.** "What if you went to sleep tonight and a miracle happens and the problem(s) that brought you into the court (detention center) are solved. But because you were asleep, you don't know the miracle happened. When you wake up tomorrow, what would you notice as you go about your day that tells you a miracle has happened and things are different?" "What else?" "Imagine yourself, for a moment, that we are now six months or more in the future, after we have worked together and the problems that brought you (this family) to court jurisdiction have been solved. What will be different in your life, six months from now, that will tell you the problem is solved?" "What else?"

The miracle question is the hallmark of solution-focused brief therapy. A miracle in this context is simply the present or future without the problem. It is used to orient the juvenile and family toward their desired outcome by helping construct a different future. Contracting about offender/family goals needs to be preceded by an understanding of what they want to happen. When (if) a worker finds no past successes to build on, the family can be helped to form a different future by imagining a "miracle." As many delinquency workers have experienced, it is often difficult to stop a family from "problem talk" and start the search for solutions. This question was designed to allow the offender and family to "put down the problem" and begin to look at what will occur when the problem is not present. Furman and Ahola (1994) report, "In our view, the single most useful issue to be talked about with clients is how

they view the future without the problem... When people are helped to foresee a good future for themselves, they automatically begin to view their present difficulties as a transitory phase, rather than an everlasting predicament." This question is used to identify the client's goals for court jurisdiction to end. If the juvenile begins with a fantasy response of "a new car" or "winning the lottery," the worker can return the conversation to a more productive track by using humor or normalizing these wishes. Juveniles and family members will quickly settle in to describing a more realistic miracle.

This miracle question is followed by other questions that shape the evolving description into small, specific, and behavioral goals. "What will be the smallest sign that this (outcome) is happening?" "When you are no longer (skipping school, breaking the law, etc.), what will you be doing instead?" "What will be the first sign this is happening?" "What do you know about (yourself, your family, your past) that tells you this could happen for you?"

4. **Scaling Questions.** "On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the day after the miracle and 1 is when you were arrested (petitioned - problem was at its worst), where are you today?" "Numbers help me understand better, if on a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 is your problem solved and 1 is when it was at the worst, where are you now?"

Scaling questions help us establish a baseline against which future progress may be measured. They are used at the end of the initial session and all subsequent meetings. Scaling also helps us know when a client is satisfied without having to define vague terms such as "communicating better" or "feeling better."

Once a baseline is established, they can be used to identify small, specific and behavioral actions for the juvenile. "You said a moment ago you were at 3. What would have to happen for you to move to a 4?" "What will you be doing when you are at a 4?" "What will others be doing?" "What would be the smallest (first) sign if you were moving to a 4?"

Finally, scaling questions can assess a juvenile's confidence and willingness to work. "On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you that you can reach this goal?" "Mother/Father you gave John a 7 but John only rated himself a 6. What do you know about John that makes you more confident?" Using scaling

questions and exploring the differences in the answers can give a richness of information about assets and strengths that can be used for reaching goals.

5. Coping Questions. "How have you managed to cope?" "Given how bad things are, how come they're not worse?" "This problem could certainly get worse - how have you (others) stopped this from getting worse?" Coping questions are used with a small percentage of persons who present a hopeless view of the situation. They often resist any comfort or reassurance that the situation will improve.

Encouraging "pep talks" of "you can do it" or "it's not that bad" to hopeless family members never seem to work. Rather, the person becomes even more entrenched in their feelings of hopelessness and the session spirals downward. Raising self-esteem can never come from pep talks. Self-esteem can only be raised by accomplishing tasks or by honest self-appraisal of past or current accomplishments. Real encouragement and hope is summoned when individuals look inward for this honest self-appraisal of accomplishments that they know to be true about themselves. Coping questions can begin this self-appraisal and amplify what is found. Coping questions are also important to use if juveniles disclose a past traumatic event that they may be sharing for the first time.

Post Script on Interviewing

Experience with a solution-focused approach (Clark, 1994) has found that despite the numerous questions asked of them, offenders and family members rarely (if ever!) refuse to answer.

The inducement stems from the realization by those we work with that we are looking for solutions rather than trying to fix blame. Questions, attending to the positives, are asked with a genuine curiosity. We are met with shoulder shrugs or stony silence when we use leading questions that adolescents and family members quickly recognize will end in their being blamed. It is important to reflect on the difference between blame and responsibility. Blame involves accusations and condemnation. Responsibility entails accountability and obligation.

Berg (1994) highlights this difference with two sets of questions:

- "The record indicates that two years ago you had

your child returned to you from the foster home. What did you do right that time?"

- "What do you suppose the Social Worker thinks you did to convince him that you were ready to have your child returned?"

Compare those questions with these:

- "The record indicates that the Department placed your child in a foster home. Do you remember why that happened?"
- "What do you suppose the social worker thought was wrong with your parenting that made it necessary to take your child away from you?"

It is easy to find the difference between these two sets of questions. The first set points out in a matter-of-fact way that there were past problems but also past successes. Heavy-handed blame is by-passed yet fact and responsibility are not. The conditions of "what has been" or "what is" can be posited with a less blaming tone.

Delinquency workers wed to the problem-focused approach may bristle at this contrast. There is a belief with this approach that assignment of blame is all-important. They follow a conventional criterion of mental health that an accurate view of reality, including knowing one's faults as well as one's virtues, is a necessary hallmark of good mental health.

Many rigorous new studies contradict this long-held idea. Research in health psychology (Wellness Paradigm) has found that optimism, even unrealistic optimism, is associated with better physical and mental health (Peterson & Bossio, 1991). More important, social scientists now indicate that human beings may actually have an innate predisposition to process information in an optimistic fashion. Taylor (1989) reported studies of human information processing that indicate the human mind appears to have an innate predisposition to attend to positive information and to screen out negative information.

These findings are surprising to say the least. Psychology has long viewed the brain as a producer of rational thought (Ornstien & Sobel, 1987). We have always thought of our brain similar to "a scientist" where it collects data, organizes it in some logical fashion, and makes decisions based on an "accurate" perception of reality. Yet, Walters and Havens (1994) state, "The actual ways in which

people process information, however, do not conform to this "brain as scientist" model. Rather, people tend to process information about themselves and their environment in ways that are not always accurate, but are consistently self-enhancing." This mild positive bias or slightly rosy filter serves as a buffer against emotional distress and is thought to be normal, inherent, and adaptive.

These findings allow us to de-emphasize the assignment of blame. Many consider it the experienced worker's hard earned virtue to be able to "tell it like it is," but getting people to admit their faults is exhausting work. It is not difficult to see how assigning blame and then withstanding the defensiveness and resistance that follows, must certainly contribute to the high worker turnover rate suffered by our field. Problem-focused work can create many obstacles that must first be overcome before we can move towards solutions.

Solution-focused work, with its emphasis on strengths and successes, can still maintain responsibility and accountability, yet avoid these obstacles. We often resign ourselves to resistance and lack of cooperation, believing it "comes with the territory" due to the nature of our work. It is not, however, the nature of our work so much as the nature of a problem-focused approach to clients. We simply do not have to drag our juveniles and families "through the mud" of their own failures and defects to bring about change. With this model of questions, resistance is lowered and cooperation is raised by what we ask, how we ask it, and (very importantly) for what purpose the questions are asked.

Discussion

There are several benefits to this approach that need to be discussed. First, a solution-focused interview serves a very different purpose. This model believes the most important task of an assessment is to motivate the offender and family to do something about the situation that brought court contact. Problem-focused assessments labor to identify and understand the problem(s) in great detail as a necessary prelude before taking action. A solution-focused approach is more direct and efficient as it views assessment as intervention - not a preliminary exercise.

Second, problems-focused interviews, with a primary focus on problems and failures, can leave an offender and family feeling more overwhelmed and less able to

take action. Focusing on strengths and what offenders can do or have been successful at raises optimism and hope - vital ingredients for motivation.

Third, our work suffers when treatment goals become expressed as probation orders. Social control can co-exist with treatment if each is allowed to be expressed to juvenile offenders as separate entities. Probation orders that define the limits of behavior, convey expectations, and identify consequences for noncompliance have a legitimate place in our field. This article has outlined the utility of well-formed goals, and they too, should be allowed a legitimate place in our work. Goals should no longer be subsumed in probation orders.

Finally, this approach is not a cure-all. Even with the advantages of a solution-focused approach, the full continuum of sanctions and alternative (out-of-home) placements will still be necessary in our field. We must, however, never lose sight of the fact that a majority of our teens do not progress to the adult correctional system. Any approach that can lessen the need for elevated (and costly) services by enhancing cooperation and motivation deserves our attention.

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