The Problem With Problem Solving: A Critical Review

Michael D. Clark
Ingham County Probate Court

This article does not necessarily reflect the position of the Ingham County Probate Court.

This is the first article of a two article series.

This article will question the efficiency of the Problem-Solving counseling model that currently dominates our field. An assumption is made that workers in the Juvenile Justice field will allow critical reflection of what currently informs and guides their work to induce behavior change. This review is necessary as Competency-Based Brief Therapy models, originating in the Family Therapy field are now being transitioned and applied to family-based services (Berg, 1994) and Juvenile Probation services (Clark, 1994). This now makes alternative interventions available to Juvenile Justice workers that may not have been readily available before. It is important for field workers to know that there may be a better way in helping a teen and family exit our system by focusing on their strengths and past successes instead of identifying and treating their deficits and failures. Before workers can exercise an informed choice, they must first be able to review and understand the medium they currently work in. This article begins a critical review.

Problem-Focused Treatment. The dominant counseling approach currently used across our field is the behavioral-based, Problem Solving model. This approach, which began to emerge in the 1950's, was a welcomed change from Freud and psychoanalytic theory. Freudian psychology viewed problems as emanating from deep-seated intrapsychic issues. Problem-Solving (Problem-Focused) counseling models were a refreshing change from an over-focus on the client's past and pathology as it saw problems occurring in every day living. Although the Problem-Solving approaches may have been a great improvement over long term psychoanalysis, one basic condition continued: The worker remained the expert. Regardless of where problems may be thought to originate from, the solutions always come from the worker.

Problem-Focused models of treatment are entrenched in the helping professions. With few exceptions, they have dominated the fields of medicine and psychology (and consequently Juvenile Justice) for the past 100 years. Our work that focuses on deficits and problems is so pervasive it is often accepted without question or review.

The Problem With a Problem-Focus. In detention centers and probation offices across our field,

the scenario is the same. The adolescent, petitioned for a criminal or status offense, appears before us. The law-breaking behavior is regarded as symptomatic of some deeper causal problem(s). We begin the search for current troubles and past failures within the individual, family, and their environment. During this search we selectively attend to the offender's defects and failures. This search is generated by the long held idea that if we can "name the problem, the treatment will follow." This search follows a sequential form: Find and recognize the problems (assessment), work to understand their influence as much as possible (diagnosis) before taking any action (treatment). There is an expectation that the offender will agree with both the problems we name and the solutions we designate (cooperation). We also hope that the offender and his family will work to conceptualize and understand the problem as we do (insight).

The problem with a Problem-Focus begins here. The worker names the problem *and* the solution and in the majority of cases does so by forcing them on the offender and family without consensus. We tend not to give credence to their understanding and definition of the problem if it differs from ours. Cooperation is not cultivated. In most cases, our delineation of the problem is correct. This however raises a central question regarding inducing change: Do we want to be "right" or do we want to be successful?

Being "Right" vs Being "Successful." If we cooperate with what the offender and family believes is urgent to start with, they are more likely to cooperate with us later. We try to "join" with the offender *as much as possible.* Most juveniles want something, even if it is to be left alone. Although we might hope the goals for behavior change would be established for more appropriate reasons, "getting the court off your back" is an acceptable point to begin your work. Berg (1994) states: "In negotiating the definition of the problem to be solved with the client, it is important, whenever possible, to stay close to the client's own definition, since he is the one who will have to make the necessary changes," (p. 36). This author also warns, "Do not argue or debate with the client. You are not likely to change her mind through reasoning. If this approach was going to work, it would have worked by now," (p. 59).

We often end up being the "customer" for our own services. When the juvenile does not agree with our view, we take on the added task of proving and persuading the juvenile to agree with us and "see it our way." We have more latitude to agree with their designation of the problem and their ideas for solution than one might think.

A Problem-Focus Antagonizes Motivation. If we assume clients are basically flawed or "damaged goods" this assumption leads to certain ends. A negative view directly or indirectly establishes the juvenile worker as "the expert." This expert status also stems from the paternalism generated by our field's legal doctrine of *parens patriae.* This paternalism and pessimistic view of our offenders gives sanction to the workers naming the problem, telling our offenders what should be done and how to do it. Yet in so many cases this approach inhibits the motivation needed to bring about change.

Dr. Richard Clark, the Chair of the Division of Educational Psychology at the University of Southern California reports, "good performance at any job requires *both* knowledge and motivation, but each one derives from and is supported by different psychological processes" (Personal Communication - February 11, 1995). This expert in human performance and motivation refers to the automobile analogy of our offenders: Knowledge is the engine of performance, but motivation is the gas tank and fuel system. For too long our field has concentrated on the knowledge end of this dichotomy. We have not shown the same commitment to fostering motivation. Our field can be proud of the educational and skill building curriculums that are currently being taught to our teens, parents, and families. However, like a finely tuned care with no gas in the tank, human beings can have great knowledge but very little interest or energy to move.

We must allow more teen and family involvement to build motivation. Selekman (1993) lists several noteworthy research findings on this issue that are thought-provoking:

> *When clients are given a choice regarding treatment goals and the type of treatment they want to receive, they will be more motivated and have more favorable treatment outcomes (Kissen, Platz, and Su, 1971: Parker, Winstead, and Will, 1979.)*
>
> *Insistence on a particular treatment goal, despite the client's perceptions and wishes, can compromise motivation and treatment outcome. (Sanchez - Craig and Lei, 1986: Thorton, Gottheil, Gellins, and Alterman, 1977).*

> *When clients think they have even modest personal control over their destinies, they will persist at mastering tasks, do better at managing them, and become more committed to the change process. (Selekman, 1993). (p.42)*

Problem-Solving's focus on the failed side of our teens and families can lead us to believe that their views may not be trustworthy for an equitable goal-setting partnership. This is a matter of perception.

Negative Perceptions of the Client. The focus on problems can influence a negative view of the teens and families we work with. It can inhibit and stifle the very cooperation and change we work for. Beatrice Wright (1982) contends that:

> *. . . preoccupation with the negative tends to lead counselors to underrate the abilities of clients. Clients are then perceived as less able and more dependent than they are or need to be. They will be devaluated, and their role as active, self-determining, or genuine participants in the treatment plan will be diminished. (p. 232).*

This author also reports that disciplines, such as Juvenile Justice, that are designed to serve social control functions are likely to develop negative impressions of clients as people rife with deficits and problems.

Saleeby (1992) explains that most of our theory and interventions are constructed around this supposition that clients become clients because they have deficits, problems, pathologies, and diseases: That they are, in some critical way, flawed or weak. Viewing offenders in this way affects our personal beliefs and how we communicate to each other about our teens and families - generally in ways that further inhibit change.

A Problem-Focus Involves Labeling. Problem-Focus models rely on diagnostic labels to usher treatment. With labels, the teenager or family member *is* the problem. Labeling comments are so common: "She's a repeat offender," "He's conduct disordered," "We're developing a typical profile of a gang member." These statements obscure or displace many other, perhaps more important, aspects of the individuals we work with: their strengths, past successes, knowledge, experiences, and aspirations.

Deficiency Language. We have a well developed "deficiency language" from our concentration on problems and our study of failure. Certainly, the newly published fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) perpetuates this language with 886 pages of problems and failures with no mention of strengths. Wolin (1991) suggests that, "this volume should contain a listing of client strengths as long and as technical as the diseases and disorders described within it" (p. 21). One needs only to pick up and review the nearest probation or detention case file to find this language detailing the problems and failures.

Negative Feed Back Loop. This "deficiency language" is so pervasive in the Juvenile Justice system it creates a "negative feedback loop." (Personal Communication with William S. Davidson, III, Ph.D., Department of Psychology - Michigan State University, Lansing, Michigan. August 24, 1994) We generally ask only about problems and report on the same. Self-report information forms that our parents and teens are asked to complete are a listing of "what's wrong." We ask our evaluating psychologists and social work clinicians to answer the question "what's wrong and why?" and their evaluations end up problem saturated. Self-Defeating Behavior (S.D.B.) work sheets are common place in detention centers. Probation reports with accompanying treatment plans, regardless of how they may vary as we cross our country, all carry the same basic structure: A listing of the law-breaking behaviors, a recitation of the problems thought to cause them, and a plan to remediate those problems. The presiding judge hears and reads this litany of failure and mistakes and the cycle is complete. Nowhere in this loop are strengths, aspirations, past or present successes looked for and described. A person's strengths and competencies are never allowed to compete with this "laundry list" of problems for counter-balancing. Davidson challenges the Juvenile Justice system to move towards a "pound for pound" philosophy where an equal amount of strengths are reported for an equal amount of problems. Many would believe our field could do even better.

The problem with a Problem-Focus is found in how we selectively attend to the failed side of our offenders. Albert Einstein, the famous physicist, believed that it is our theories that determine what we can observe. The familiar adage of "seeing is believing" could really be restated as, "believing is seeing." Our negative perceptions about the offenders we work with created a web of negative expectations about these teens and their environment as well as their capacity to deal with the demands of that environment. Over time, with this focus

repeated on the same individual, it carries an insidious capacity to alter the way individuals see themselves and how others view them.

Critical Issue for Juvenile Justice. James Gondles, Jr., the Executive Director for the American Correctional Association, recently spoke on "The Common Myths of Crime and Criminal Justice" as a key note address to association members. An excerpt from this address is of dire importance:

> *Perhaps the most significant myth, though, is the belief that the criminal justice system holds the answer to crime. At best, the criminal justice system is only a small, though important, aspect of our approach to crime. The long term solution involves building strong families and communities. (MCA News, 1994. p. 11)*

In regard to Juvenile Justice this review contends that it is the teenagers and their families that hold the greatest portion of that answer to crime. Our field can help give voice to that answer by changing our focus to client strengths and incorporating *their* ideas for solutions to the problems *they* identify.

Our current Problem-Solving work will always fall short of "building strong families and communities." The critical point is that solving problems only returns a person to a previously help position or equilibrium. It is only through exploiting strengths that *growth* can occur. Creating change by exploiting a client's strengths and resources engenders growth that will continue to occur long after exiting our system. Building strong individuals, families, and communities can never occur through the focus on defects and failures. This focus hampers and limits our ability to utilize the greatest single resource for change - the offender.

A Different Route to Release/Dismissal. Workers are suspicious of any approach that doesn't focus directly on the problems that were identified for the teen and/or family. Consider the following example:

> "You begin working with Ray, an adolescent court ward of fourteen (14). Ray is on probation for several property crimes. As you read past reports, he is characterized as moody and angry. He is often aggressive in relating to peers and siblings, is two years below grade level in reading and has parents who are rarely home.
>
> Without going any further, you are asked to form an impression of Ray.
>
> Now consider what changes in your impression when you learn Ray recently found an after school job all by himself, likes to draw and paint wild-life animals, has a close relationship with an aunt who lives down the street and has had no police contact in the proceeding four (4) months."

The Strengths Perspective and Solution-Focused work believes it is through the second frame of "Ray" that provides the most efficient and respectful route to law abiding behavior. It appears to have greater efficiency as it is easier to follow where the health and motivation are, rather than try to create it where there is none. Expanding what is already present and applying it to other areas of the offenders life can cause a systemic "domino" or "ripple" effect to solve the problem of law breaking behavior. It is a premise of Solution-Focused work that change efforts do not have to be linked directly to the presenting problems for stabilization, growth, and eventual dismissal from court jurisdiction to occur.

By working with Ray's positive attributes, integrity is maintained and respect is communicated. We simply do not have to drag our clients "through the mud" of their own failures and defects to bring about change. Our juvenile workers are familiar with working on Ray's problem side. Insoo Berg (1994) gives an account of what we often experience with a teen and family:

> *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. (p. 128)*

Working with Ray's successful side is not the same as condoning, ignoring, or enabling the problems and the pain. The Strengths' approach is much more than a Pollyanna notion of "looking for the good." It is, a sophisticated intervention that takes a different, and very unfamiliar, route to change and solutions.

Wieck et al. (1989) speaks directly about this unfamiliar route:

> *One of the signs of a dominant view is the suspicion it generates about any approach that contradicts*

> *its premises. For all those trained in the current models of helping, it may seem foolish or dangerous to ignore what seems to be the clear presence of pathological behavior or to consider any approach that would sever the ties between recognition of human difficulty and interventive strategies for dealing directly with its causes. (p. 352)*

Discussion. Several issues call for discussion. First, veterans in the field will believe this is the 1970's revisited. This review does not attempt to "re-invent the wheel" but to point out that our field only pays lip-service to attending to our delinquent's strengths and positive attributes while we continue to identify, assess, and intervene with their failures.

Second, it should be noted that the Problem-Solving model brought many helpful approaches to our field: System's Theory, behavioral techniques, and theories of Communication Patterns to name a few. The Brief Competency-Based approaches continue many of these theories and techniques. This new approach is not a cure-all; but when adopting this approach, workers will notice a distinct difference. They will notice a change from an atmosphere of pessimism and the feelings of being overwhelmed by the multitude of problems. It is replaced by a brighter atmosphere of hope that involves encouragement and optimism.

Optimism is very important. The juvenile and family members may appear "stuck" and not have ready access to ideas for solutions. In these cases, working on the side of their strengths, to expand them to other areas, is all the more important. Walter and Peller (1994) describe that if clients come in feeling that they have no options, no possibilities or any way to make a difference in their situation, they will leave our office or detention centers feeling that they are already doing something or that they now have options available to them that they did not have before. The problems that brought them to Court jurisdiction may not be totally solved, but they now think that they are already doing something or thinking in some way that will eventually lead them to what they want, (p. 113).

Third, responsibility and accountability is not sacrificed with this new approach. Many believe it holds the client more responsible as this new approach has been called a "goal driven model" (Berg and Miller, p. 32) as there is an expectation that the juvenile or family member will *do something* in relation to the problem that is jointly defined.

Fourth, this new approach aides the Juvenile Justice worker in being culturally sensitive. Since the problems that are named and the routes to solutions come more from the offender and family, our work has more of a natural fit. This model does not ignore or trample on the offender's personal, familial, or cultural systems, but rather operates in tandem with them.

In Summary. In summary, a growing faction within the Juvenile Justice field believes the current problem solving model is not the most efficient treatment approach to induce change with our teens and families. Its efficiency is suspect as it can suppress motivation. It often creates obstacles that must be overcome before problem resolution can begin. It appears to be, metaphorically, the "long route" or the "slow boat" to dismissal from court jurisdiction.

Many believe the Strengths Perspective and Brief Competency-Based therapy approaches could be a viable alternative for our field. In Michigan, the Department of Social Services - Office of Delinquency Services is strongly supporting and adopting a Strength-Based Solution-Focused approach for working with juveniles and their families. The new approach is spreading across other areas of the country. In Omaha, the local office of the Nebraska Department of Social Services - Child Protective Services has recently adopted a Competency-Based Brief approach. Bob Zimmerman, Director for this local office, stated that worker and client satisfaction are up, and caseload numbers are on their way down (Personal Communication, December 21, 1994).

To begin to operate form a Strengths Perspective and focusing on positive client attributes requires a "top down - bottom up" effort by policy makers and direct services staff. Organizations such as the National Juvenile Detention Association (NJDA) can assist in this process by disseminating information about this new approach to aid its membership in the process of choice.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael D. Clark, M.S.W. is a Juvenile Probation Officer for the Ingham County Probate Court in Lansing, Michigan. Mr. Clark has also provided consultation and training in Brief Solution-Focused work and has been transitioning this approach to Juvenile Probation and Child Welfare Services.