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Reflecting Character: Counseling With a Virtue Vocabulary

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Abstract

While professionals in the field of counseling have long established that the micro-skills of empathy help build the therapeutic alliance, over the last decade increasingly more attention has been paid to using language of character, virtue, and strengths. Language of this sort that a counselor strategically uses can not only further support the therapeutic alliance, but also empower clients to develop a strength-based orientation grounded in positive psychology and virtue practice. This article presents a rationale for using a virtue vocabulary with empathic affirmations and emphasizes the benefits to both counselor and client. It also provides examples that highlight therapeutic dialogue using virtue language.

Keywords: virtues, character, therapeutic alliance, microskills

Having one or more theoretical orientations with appropriate skills and interventions is important to a counselor (Corey, 2013). Thus, theory and practical skills are the foundation of many training programs for mental health practitioners (American Psychological Association [APA], 2015; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs [CACREP], 2009). However, Ackerman and Hilsenroth (2003) found little difference among theoretical orientations in how they build a positive therapeutic alliance, an alliance that has been considered the main ingredient for success in the counseling relationship (Duncan, Miller, Wampold, & Hubble, 2010; Leach, 2005; Pinto,

et al., 2012). Part of the alliance is having good rapport with the client, which can improve both the assessment process and the treatment's achievement of goals (Leach, 2005). And one way of developing such a good rapport is through a counselor's expressions of empathy (paraphrasing, reflection of feeling, and reflection of meaning) and through active listening (Chen & Giblin, 2014). A key component of being empathic by reflecting feelings is to be knowledgeable enough about various emotions so that a client's feelings can first be recognized and then appropriately reflected back to that client. If, however, a counselor thinks only about being sad, angry, or happy, for example, then those become the only feelings reflected. Having a limited emotional vocabulary, therefore, may drastically restrict or constrain a counselor's range of empathic emotional responses to the client.

Likewise, to listen for and empathically reflect meaning—often found in a client's expressed values—requires knowledge of values that serve as motivators of behavior. Such values include, for example, autonomy, security, and physical health (Busacca, Beebe, & Toman, 2011). Furthermore, lists and inventories of values are easily found in the career counseling literature and can serve as guides to help build that part of a counselor's vocabulary (e.g., Brown, 2012). Saleebey (2007) noted that client motivation also improves as counselors view clients as resourceful and in possession of certain strengths.

While counselors often listen for a client's aspirational values and reflect them as being central to a client's struggle, it is also important that counselors be attuned to examples of how clients were or are living in virtuous ways. Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined virtues as “core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers” (p. 13), characteristics that provide the foundation for good character. Illustrations of virtues such as wisdom, courage, temperance, humanity, justice, and transcendence can be found woven into the fabric of many clients' stories, and counselors can identify them by the character strengths that clients demonstrate.

Clearly important to the foundation of counseling skills is the strengths-based vocabulary used by a counselor as affirmations in order to add dimension and progress toward successful therapeutic outcomes (Chen & Giblin, 2014). This article highlights the need for expanding the therapeutic vocabularies of feeling words and value words by adding a virtue vocabulary based solely on the character strengths identified in positive psychology literature (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Developing a virtue vocabulary not only aligns with the positive psychology and strength-based frameworks, but also helps the counselor listen for and take note of moments in a client's story that reveal character strength and then to acknowledge such by identifying and reflecting these strengths back to the client. Affirming clients is foundational to the therapeutic relationship regardless of which theoretical orientation a counselor uses (Chen & Giblin, 2014). The intent is always to subtly encourage the client to hear feedback that is based on empowerment and to help address what Pinto et al. (2012) noted as still unanswered questions about other factors that might add to the therapeutic alliance and treatment outcomes.

The Therapeutic Alliance

The therapeutic alliance has received much attention over the last decade with the goal being to best understand the ideal working relationship between counselor and client. Most definitions of a therapeutic alliance include the affective bond, treatment goal agreement, interaction, and communication quality (verbal and nonverbal), trust, and empathy (e.g., Duncan et al., 2010; Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000; Pinto et. al., 2012). Having a good therapeutic relationship can also influence a client's willingness to attend regular therapy sessions, actively participate in homework assignments, and perceive the counselor's feedback as reinforcing (Kimerling, Zeiss, & Zeiss, 2000; Sharf, Primavera, & Diener, 2010;). In addition to client satisfaction and treatment compliance (Leach, 2005), a positive therapeutic relationship with good communication and trust can result in fewer malpractice claims (Eastaugh, 2004; Panting, 2004).

In an effort to determine the most influential counselor characteristics, Leach (2005) found that being friendly, empathic, open-minded, flexible, affirming, empowering, and understanding were elements that closely fit with a positive alliance. Furthermore, so were counselor techniques such as attending to the client's experience, exploration, and accurate interpretation (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003). Basic counseling microskills (e.g., active listening, paraphrasing, open-ended questioning, and summarizing) with an emphasis on collaboration are paramount in building the trust necessary for successful client outcomes (Chen & Giblin, 2014; Leach, 2005; Mejo, 1989). Duncan et al. (2010) added that the best-known predictor of treatment outcome, however, was how the client viewed the therapeutic alliance and not how the counselor viewed the alliance.

Strength Approaches

Strength approaches have become commonplace in the counseling field as counselors recognize, and science substantiates, the merits of stressing positive client attributes, proposing solutions that have assisted a particular client before, and emphasizing strengths to help empower for positive change (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Having a strength-based philosophy is believing that clients have resources and abilities they can access to help themselves and their relationships (Bannink, 2014).

Certainly it is not simply enough to pay attention to a client's dysfunction (Seligman, 2011); counselors must also notice what clients do well. When client strengths are highlighted, client motivation increases. Likewise, focusing on a client's strengths can help reorient the counselor to look for and value the very things that can motivate and keep hope alive (Saleebey, 2007). Even more specifically, Gassman and Grawe (2006) found that successful therapy sessions had a strength focus at the beginning, middle, and end of a session; from the start of a session and then throughout that session, a counselor who acknowledged client strengths, abilities, and support systems, conveyed to a client the overall feeling that he or she is viewed as a capable person.

Positive Engagement

Positive engagement is one of the practices identified in positive psychology as leading toward well-being and optimal functioning (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005) and is based on identifying and practicing character strengths in daily living in order to improve quality of life. The other areas of positive psychology include emphases on positive emotions such as gratitude, forgiveness, love, and hope; on positive relationships; on meaning and purpose; and on accomplishments (Seligman, 2011).

In fact, a decade ago Peterson and Seligman (2004) created the VIA Classification categorizing 24 character strengths and six virtues that transcend culture, geographic location, and societies (see Table 1, which illustrates the six virtues and their corresponding strengths). These strengths and virtues are considered the building blocks of good character and contribute to personal and professional development in notable ways such as happiness, mental and physical health, satisfying work, and supportive social networks (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Table 1

The Six Virtues and Their Corresponding Strengths

Wisdom & Knowledge	Courage	Humanity	Justice	Temperance	Transcendence
Creativity	Bravery	Love	Citizenship	Forgiveness & Mercy	Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence
Curiosity	Persistence	Kindness	Fairness	Forgiveness/Modesty	Gratitude
Open-Mindedness	Integrity	Social Intelligence	Leadership	Humility	Hope
Love of Learning	Vitality			Self-Regulation	Humor
Perspective					Spirituality

Then, to ensure the universality of these strengths, there was a collaborative effort in research that included multiple disciplines, dozens of scientists, and historical analysis. In addition, ten established criteria for determining the strengths were identified (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), along with the overriding belief that good character could be developed and occurred throughout the lifespan (Park & Peterson, 2009). A more recent study showed that context also influenced character practice and allowed for the strengths to exist on a continuum or in degrees of practice (McGrath, Rashid, Park, & Peterson, 2010). For example, a person might be very self-disciplined at work and therefore productive, yet might be undisciplined at home and therefore unproductive, letting chores go undone.

Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2005) found that persons who were the most satisfied put an emphasis on living a virtuous and meaningful life. Individual well-being could be further encouraged by knowing one's signature strengths and practicing them in creative ways. The VIA Inventory of Strengths survey determines a person's five most important strengths of the 24 and designates them as signature strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). All 24 strengths, however, are rank ordered and require mindful consideration.

Clients can discuss their signature strengths in session with a focus on how they are currently practiced, in what context they were or are practiced, and how they represent the client's Best Self. Seligman (2002) suggested that building the character strengths, or buffering strengths, along with instilling hope should be considered deep strategies in effective positive psychotherapy and also recommended certain tactics to be used to maximize the therapeutic experience such as giving a client attention and building rapport. Also important is to explore new ways in which the strengths can be applied to the various life domains, such as career, relationships, leisure, and civic participation (Hall, 2006). Application should be consistent with a client's goals, how a client makes decisions, and how the client relates to others. Although this is a fitting method for highlighting strengths and virtue practice, opportunity also exists in the therapeutic alliance. The counseling dialogue itself can help build virtue language and strength language, thereby boosting client optimism in the belief that living a life with virtue is possible.

Rationale for a Virtue Vocabulary

In addition to building an emotional vocabulary, we advocate that counselors develop and use a virtue vocabulary. Using a virtue vocabulary with empathic reflections and affirmations begins to model a new label for thoughts and behavior and indirectly encourages a client to hear about, perceive, and speak about their behavior and thoughts differently. Kimerling et al. (2000) identified such reflections as informational because they were specific responses to clients about their behavior and characteristics. Likewise, Bannink (2014) stated that moving from problem talk to strength talk was an effective foundation for successful client change, and this is what Chen and Giblin (2014) recently described as positive affirmations. Such affirmations are simply statements or responses that acknowledge a client's strengths, accomplishments, and efforts to change in constructive ways. In addition, Ackerman and Hilsenroth (2003) wrote that hope and trust followed affirmative dialogue, which was essential to the ongoing therapeutic alliance.

Just as counselors use lucid feeling words when paraphrasing, when empathically reflecting, or when giving affirmations, they can do the same with virtue words. For example, I might say to a client that the effort to learn about and try different things in his or her relationship shows persistence. Similarly, I might say I appreciate the honesty with which he or she shared his or her own limitations, fears, and hopes for the relationship—that it takes courage to do that. Reflecting client strengths and previous coping strategies has also been found to build resilience to current and future struggles (Kuyken, Padesky, & Dudley, 2009). With such feedback from counselors, clients begin to realize that in the midst of difficulty and uncertainty, they do in fact practice character strengths.

Paying attention to client strengths is also fundamental to motivational interviewing (Moyers & Martin, 2006). To note this in session is validating to a client's worth and promotes optimism (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010), feelings of competence, relatedness (Pinto et al., 2012), and healthier ways for clients to view themselves. Bannink (2014) also found that counselors who focused their attention on client strengths and possibilities were more apt to lessen their dialogue about problems and weaknesses.

Building a Virtue Vocabulary

The first step in building a virtue vocabulary is to become familiar with the 24 character strengths within the six virtues of the VIA Classification that Peterson & Seligman (2004) established. This includes knowing both the meaning of each of the character strengths as well as specific ways each can be practiced in life. Much like learning a foreign language, it takes time and conscious effort to begin using the character strength words in conversation and therapeutic dialogue. Choosing just a few words each week can make mastering the 24 strengths less daunting. The second step is to begin listening for character strengths in the stories clients tell. Because stories are dynamic, it is important that counselors remain flexible in how they listen for character indicators. Clients are more apt to be descriptive of character practice as opposed to clearly labeling their experiences and behavior with character words. For example, a counselor might hear the statement "I'm willing to see what my role has been in all of this" as an indication that open-mindedness and fairness are parts of the client's character. The third step is to then reflect, affirm, and challenge clients based on those identified character strengths. To continue with the same example, a counselor could empathically respond with the following statement: "Having an open mind and being fair are admirable, and at the same time they are critical for your moving forward. I'm encouraged by your initiative." With such encouragement, clients can begin to practice virtue self-monitoring and self-affirmations (Critcher, Dunning, & Armor, 2010) in how they view themselves and make decisions. Furthermore, clients can set goals that reflect specific virtue practice as related to relationships and career in ways that promote happiness and well-being (Seligman, 2011).

The following sample statements made by clients offer additional practice in words and phrases to listen for, along with sample empathic reflections that use virtue strength affirmations:

1. Client: "It was really hard for me to come in today and share what I did."
Counselor: "I appreciate your sharing that with me. It showed real *courage* to open up like you did with me today."
2. Client: "I want things to get better, which is why I keep trying to make the relationship work."
Counselor: "You know you have really been persistent throughout these past several months, and even when things have been tough you haven't given up *hope*."
3. Client: "I feel so alive when I travel to other countries."
Counselor: "It seems your *curiosity* about the world really sparks a sense of *vitality* for you."

4. Client: “I like to try different foods and get bored easily with the same old things.”
Counselor: “You seem to really be curious about trying new things—it takes such *open-mindedness* to explore foods the way that you do.”
5. Client: “My favorite movies are Lord of the Rings, Saving Private Ryan, or anything where there is a quest or a challenge.”
Counselor: “I see a theme here, and it seems you really value the *bravery* it takes to overcome life’s challenges.”
6. Client: “I like to donate clothes and food during the holidays—and year round for that matter.”
Counselor: “It shows real *kindness* to take the time to give to others the way that you do.”
7. Client: “At work my boss likes to micromanage and wants us to always work independently, even if it makes more sense to work in small groups.”
Counselor: “You know, your hanging in there shows a sense of *citizenship*, but I also detect qualities of *leadership* in that you are thinking about how things could improve.”
8. Client: “I limit myself to one drink when we go out. I don’t make a big announcement about it, though.”
Counselor: “You’ve really shown that you can self-regulate, and the fact that you’re not looking for a pat on the back shows *modesty*.”
9. Client: “I love to go to the art museum. I’m amazed at the talent.”
Counselor: “You really seem to have an *appreciation of beauty and excellence*.”
10. Client: “What makes for a good night? Maybe a movie, or some lighthearted conversation, and some laughter. I love to see her laugh. I try to point out things that we would find funny.”
Counselor: “It really takes *creativity* to find things in life that are funny, and you *value* humor a great deal.”
11. Client: “I appreciate the help our family and friends gave when our power went out. I guess there is a reason for everything, though, so having faith is important.”
Counselor: “It seems that *spirituality* is important for you, and this experience of *kindness* was meaningful.”

Summary

It has long been established that the micro-skills of counseling, including empathy and unconditional positive regard, can have a clear and positive impact on the therapeutic alliance. The language a counselor uses not only builds the foundation of each therapeutic relationship but also sets the tone for future progress to be made. By using a virtue vocabulary, a counselor can help set a client on a path towards realizing his or her strengths and can help suggest ways on how to apply those strengths to present and future challenges. It has also been found that practicing virtues can help buffer against mental illness (Seligman, 2002), and that virtue-enhancing interventions can reduce depression and boost well-being (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). In sum, a counselor’s words not only matter, they can also be the catalysts for lasting growth and change.

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