Resistance in couples counselling: Sequences of talk that disrupt progressivity and promote disaffiliation

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Abstract

From the video-recordings of a single complete case of couples counselling, this article examines how repeated occurrences of client opposition and avoidance or resistance is managed over extended sequences of talk and across sessions. By drawing from the methods of conversation analysis, resistance is analyzed in terms of how a client resists the constraints set up by a counsellor's questions and, subsequently, how resistance is oriented to by the next speaker. It was found that the counsellor's orientation to the client's resistance became more disaffiliative and oppositional in the later stages of counselling. This increased disaffiliation was found to facilitate an alliance between the counsellor and client's spouse against the client. This lead to more explicit forms of disengagement from the client and, ultimately, to a breakdown in the progressivity of counselling work. Counsellor practices used to deal with resistance are critically discussed in terms of their effectiveness.
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1. Introduction

Client resistance has been observed to frequently occur in most forms of counselling and therapy (Arkowitz, 2002; Westra and Arkowitz, 2009). By and large, resistance has been conceptualized as a form of non-compliance (e.g., opposition or avoidance) that ultimately works to obstruct therapeutic work (Beutler et al., 2002; Newman, 2002). There is now a growing body of research in conversation analysis (CA) that has examined client actions of resistance within the local confines of sequences of interaction. This work has targeted conversational sequences that involve questioning (Hutchby, 2002; MacMartin, 2008; Muntigl and Choi, 2010), advice giving (Silverman, 1997), conclusions (Voutilainen et al., 2011) and reformulations of client's talk (Antaki, 2008). In these contexts, client resistance has been shown to be realized through acts of disconfirming or disagreeing, rejecting advice or not providing a 'relevant' answer (i.e., avoidance).

What makes resistance a particular concern for practitioners and psychotherapy/counselling researchers are its potential negative effects. These include halting or derailing the progress of therapy or counselling, minimizing the degree of success in which counsellors may realize their aims and creating a poor working relationship (Beutler et al., 2002; Safran and Muran, 1996; Safran et al., 2001; Westra and Arkowitz, 2009).[1] But the ways in which the *non-successful* management of resistance becomes played out turn-by-turn and moment-by-moment are still not very well understood.

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  [1] Bordin (1979, 1994) theorized that the essential components involved in establishing a working relationship or alliance are the agreements and collaborations between client and therapist over the means (tasks) and goals of treatment along with the formation of a personal bond between the participants.

How, for instance, does the progressivity of therapeutic work eventually become blocked and how do 'strains in affiliation' between the counsellor and client, as resulting from the resistance, become interactively displayed? It has also been commonly observed that resistance tends to occur for considerable durations across treatment intervals (Aspland et al., 2008; Safran and Muran, 1996). Thus, the examination of a single (or merely a few) instance(s) of resistance may be of limited value in tracking the interactive progression of resistance and, especially, the ebb and flow of which social bonds between counsellor and client become reinforced or weakened or of which the progressivity of a specific therapeutic activity becomes on- or off-track.

A central aim of this study is to shed more light on how resistance may negatively impact counselling activities and the working relationship between counsellors and clients. Investigating what goes wrong and how is important because it can help to (a) better locate those interactional sequences that occasion less productive counselling trajectories; (b) account for why these trajectories occurred; and (c) suggest alternative practices for obtaining more productive trajectories. In order to explore these issues, a single complete case of couples counselling is examined using the methods of CA (Schegloff, 2007; for a comprehensive overview see Levinson, 1983). By examining a single case of counselling, two perspectives could be brought to bear on the data. First, it allowed me to chart repeated occurrences of resistance within and across sessions, thus providing insight into the progression and interactional management of resistance over time. Second, resistance could also be considered from a more *local* angle, by allowing me to focus on a specific sequence type in which resistance commonly occurred. This sequence unfolded as follows: (1) Counsellor's question; (2) Client's resistive response; (3) Response to client resistance. Special focus was given to the *next turn* or *move* following client resistance, because this revealed how resistance was being managed by the other conversational participants. Resistance management was considered in terms of the following: (1) the degree to which next speakers *affiliated with* the client's prior response[2]; (2) the degree to which the *progressivity* of the counsellor's agenda becomes disrupted (Stivers and Robinson, 2006); and (3) how next speakers orient to *epistemic responsibility* or the client's obligation to provide an answer (Heritage and Raymond, 2005; Stivers et al., 2011).

This study shows how client resistance in multi-person (i.e., couples) contexts can set in motion unproductive trajectories of talk that result in deepened disaffiliation and impasses in therapeutic work. It was found that, in the later sessions of counselling, the counsellor would more often display heightened disaffiliation towards the resisting client. This then led to (1) an alliance of opposition between the counsellor and client's spouse against the client; (2) more explicit forms of disengagement from the client; which, as a consequence, ultimately led to (3) a temporary breakdown in counselling. The client's regular practices of evading answering, and thus not taking up epistemic rights on a topic, also shed important light on the practical epistemics of multi-person talk among intimates. Just as Bolden's (2011) work has shown that the organization of other-initiated repair is sensitive to the distribution of and rights to knowledge among the participants, so does resisting answering in couples counselling bring into play specialized epistemic rights and obligations; that is, if a spouse avoids answering on a relationship topic by denying knowledge, other spouse may then demonstrate certain rights in policing the spouse's knowledge by demanding a response. Finally, this study provides added support for the premise that change, albeit negative, in counselling or psychotherapeutic contexts may be indexed in interactional sequences (see Voutilainen et al., 2011). By tracking next responses in question sequences that contain resistive acts, changes in affiliation between the speakers and in the progressivity of therapeutic activities may be detected.

2. Participants and case selection

This paper forms part of a larger study on brief couples counselling involving twelve couples who each underwent a total of six conjoint counselling sessions with a professional counsellor.[3] Couples were drawn from a large urban community within Canada. All cases were audio- and video-taped. From these cases, one couple (pseudonyms used are Lisa and Dave) who underwent the required six sessions of counselling and who had demonstrated problems of resistance during counselling was selected. The counsellor self-identified her approach as eclectic, drawing from a range of therapeutic practices.[4] All sessions from this case were recorded on video and audio and each counselling session ranged from 50 to 60 min. Audio and visual information from all six sessions was transcribed using the transcript notation of conversation analysis (Jefferson, 2004).

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[2] The term *affiliation* is taken from Stivers' (2008) work on everyday storytelling. According to Stivers et al. (2011:21), "affiliative responses are maximally pro-social when they match the prior speaker's evaluative stance, display empathy and/or cooperate with the preference of the prior action."

[3] Prof. Adam O. Horvath was a co-investigator in this study and allowed me access to these cases (see Symonds and Horvath, 2004 for the complete background on the original study). All data were collected with the informed consent of the counsellors and couples involved. Ethical approval to use these data for this study was obtained from the Office of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University.

[4] The ways in which the counsellor tends to design her questions, however, is suggestive of specific approaches. For instance, the focus on 'feelings' or 'emotions' is consonant with experientially oriented therapy approaches (Greenberg et al., 1993), whereas the focus on present client experiences is commonly practiced in existential approaches such as Gestalt therapy (Perls, 1973).