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A Modeling of Bradford Keeney's Ability to Gain Cooperation with Directives

Robert Musikantow

Psychologist in Private Practice, Evanston, IL, rmuskantow@mac.com

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Abstract

Gaining cooperation with directives is an important aspect of psychotherapy. This paper analyzes therapeutic examples from Bradford Keeney, utilizing transcripts, videos, and the viewing of live sessions. Important factors were identified that lead to improved cooperation with therapist-generated directives. These factors are: Construct a resourceful context, compliment client while highlighting and amplifying resources, utilize resourceful naming, notice reactions and adjust, gain commitment. Each factor is illustrated with examples from transcripts of client sessions.

Keywords

Directives, Bradford Keeney, Client Cooperation, Systemic Psychotherapy

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A Modeling of Bradford Keeney's Ability to Gain Cooperation with Directives

Robert Musikantow

Psychologist in Private Practice, Evanston, IL, USA

Gaining cooperation with directives is an important aspect of psychotherapy. This paper analyzes therapeutic examples from Bradford Keeney, utilizing transcripts, videos, and the viewing of live sessions. Important factors were identified that lead to improved cooperation with therapist-generated directives. These factors are: Construct a resourceful context, compliment client while highlighting and amplifying resources, utilize resourceful naming, notice reactions and adjust, gain commitment. Each factor is illustrated with examples from transcripts of client sessions. Keyword: Directives, Bradford Keeney, Client Cooperation, Systemic Psychotherapy

Read this article slowly. Before starting, sit up straight and take a deep breath. These are all examples of directives. Therapeutic directives are an overt staple in many forms of therapy and a hidden ingredient in other forms of treatment. Directives take place within a session and outside a session, in the form of homework assignments, or behavioral prescriptions. They can range from straightforward as in “Tell your spouse what you want,” to complex and paradoxical as in strategic therapy. Most of what is called hypnosis is a series of directive statements, whether they are direct suggestions or more covert indirect suggestions.

As G. Spencer Brown (as quoted in Wilber, 1998) has suggested, directives are an unspoken yet important aspect of both science and mathematics. In *Laws of Form*, he stated, “The primary form of mathematical communication is not description but injunction. In this respect it is comparable with practical art forms like cookery, in which the taste of a cake, although literally indescribable, can be conveyed to a reader in the form of a set of injunctions called a recipe” (Wilber, 1998, p. 156). In the same way, I would posit that the primary form of therapeutic communication is not descriptive or interpretive but directive—directives that serve to maintain a resourceful context as well as to offer a taste of a resourceful therapeutic cake.

Within the field of systemic therapy, much has been written about the use of and importance of directives in psychotherapy (Haley 1991, Keeney 1990, Watzlawick 1978, Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). In addition, the literature contains numerous examples of Milton Erickson's use of directives in his therapeutic work (Gordon & Meyers-Anderson, 1981, Haley, 1993). Keeney and Keeney (2012) and Rosen (1991) have taken a strong stance against the current trend towards more interpretive collaborative approaches versus more active performance-oriented approaches.

Philosopher Ken Wilber (1998) further illustrates the importance of directives by describing directives as a central part of scientific investigation. He summarizes the first step in scientific investigation as, “If you want to know do this.” He further states, “The injunctive strand leads to an experience, apprehension or illumination, a direct disclosing of the data or referents in the world space brought forth by the injunction” (p. 157). Directives within psychotherapy serve a similar function, leading to an experience that results in an illumination that moves the client from a stuck position to one that is moving forward, where possibilities hidden in the previous construction of reality are now revealed and available to the client.

While each form of therapy has its own forms of directives and its own explanations and rationale for its use, this will not be my focus in this paper. My interest here is how to give directives to clients in a manner in which they will be accepted and carried out. Forms of directives, their rationale, and the methods by which they can be produced are outside the scope of this paper.

My investigation takes a form that has been a long-standing practice within the Ericksonian psychotherapeutic tradition. Over the years, many psychotherapists and theorists who viewed Erickson's work developed various models that attempted to explain how Erickson was able to produce the often surprising results that he did. Perhaps this was a result of Erickson himself teaching via anecdote, examples, and metaphor rather than offering a clear conscious model of how to proceed in therapy. Bandler and Grinder (1975), Haley (1973), Lankton (1983), the researchers at MRI (1974), and, Rossi (1976), each offered their own alternative perspective, which the modelers hoped would help to make Erickson's work learnable by others. The premise underlying this type of modeling is that great therapists are not always in the best position to explain what they do. An outside perspective can offer an alternative way of viewing the situation, which can assist a therapist looking to obtain similar results to the psychotherapist being studied. The subject of my model will be therapist Bradford Keeney, known for his unique take on systemic therapy, which he combines with what he has absorbed and embodied from over 20 years of studying the healing methods of indigenous cultures. Over the years, Keeney has evolved his approach to therapy, and utilized various names for his approach, including *Improvisational Therapy* (1990), *Resource Focused Therapy* (1993), *Creative Therapy* (2009), and most recently *Circular Therapeutics* (2012), developed in conjunction with Hillary Stephenson Keeney.

In my review of his therapeutic work, I have been impressed by Keeney's ability to rather quickly, often minutes into his first session, offer the client something quite out of the box to do, and just as quickly to gain agreement to carry out the often illogical and on the surface absurd task.

Before proceeding with my analysis of Keeney's work, I wish to underscore two caveats when engaging in any attempt to analyze any particular technique that a therapist utilizes: (1) There is the danger of taking a technique out of the appropriate context, as was the case for many who attempted to reduce Erickson's work to a series of clever language patterns, missing the essence of his approach, and managing only to verbalize odd sounding impotent and disconnected suggestions. In music, for example, an identical set of notes has a completely different feel and meaning depending on the chords that are played in relationship with the notes producing the melody. The context determines the meaning. (2) As the Keeney's have wisely noted, therapeutic interventions preferably arise out of the interaction of the moment and lose their aliveness and power if used in a rote formulaic and clichéd manner (Keeney & Keeney, 2012).

Again using a musical metaphor, though it is useful to learn scales and licks (short patterns of notes), these only have meaning in the total context of the musical piece, which includes the other musicians, the history of the piece, the response of the audience, and even as guitarist Bill Frisell has stated, what the musicians have eaten that day (personal communication, 2000). Licks, chords and scales, however, are important to know, and their mastery is important to becoming a capable musician, as they are the vocabulary of music. One just needs to understand that their mindless and uninspired repetition does not make aesthetically moving music. In the same way, the mindless repetition of therapeutic lines does not make for therapy that is capable of moving the client to more resourceful states. Finally, while great jazz musicians often study in exquisite detail the style of others, making note-for-note transcriptions of great performances, the point is not to imitate but to incorporate what

one has learned to develop a unique therapeutic voice. It is with these limitations in mind, that I will be offering the following ideas regarding improving compliance with directives.

In order to derive the principles that Keeney uses to enhance cooperation with directives, I reviewed transcripts, videos, and live examples of his therapeutic work. My intent was to observe what he actually did apart from his explanation of his own work in order to observe and describe aspects of his work that were not captured in his own descriptions and analysis, and thus to provide what Bateson often referred to as a double description (Keeney's description and my description; Bateson, 1979).

My investigation into how Keeney has able to gain cooperation with the often-outlandish directives that he gives began as a question, "How does he get clients to follow his directives?" My method of investigation involved studying transcripts for his 2009 book, *The Creative Therapist: The Art of Awakening a Session*, as well as viewing a number of live sessions conducted in his home in New Orleans in 2012, which were conducted with his wife and partner Hillary Keeney during a seminar. While I had no record of the New Orleans sessions, they provided a rich source of the non-verbal components of how directives were delivered. An additional resource was the DVD that accompanied *The Creative Therapist*. This DVD contained two complete sessions, *The Man of Plenty* and *Magmore*, and offered a video account of the transcript contained in the book. A total of nine cases were reviewed. Although each case was reviewed from beginning to end, I placed a special focus on the portion of the transcript just before the directive was given to the point where the directive was accepted by the client.

After reviewing the portions of the transcripts where directives were given, I began to look for repeated communication patterns that could explain success with client compliance with directives. My central focus was to identify patterns that I observed that did not appear in Keeney's own description of his work. Since I had prior familiarity with the work of Robert Cialdini on influence, I began to notice that many of his principles of influence were utilized in the examples I had studied. In addition, I searched for any patterns that stood out that were not contained in the meta-commentary of either Keeney or Cialdini. I only included communication patterns that I could clearly identify as occurring at least three times. If a pattern did not occur three times, I discarded that pattern.

I defined directives as action requests, and success as the client verbally expressing a willingness to carry out the task. A weakness to this approach is that there was no data available to determine whether or not the client actually performed the task. Another weakness in this study is that Keeney self-selected the cases to present, so there may be examples where all attempts at getting a client to agree to an action request were refused.

I utilized three cognitive filters in this search:

- Keeney's own understanding of his work. (*The Creative Therapist*, and *Circular Therapeutics: Giving Therapy a Healing Heart*).
- Robert Cialdini's work on influence (*Influence: Science and Practice Fourth Edition*).
- A search for unique features not directly situated within either Cialdini's or Keeney's work.

Following this review, I set about deriving a series of principles that could explain Keeney's success. After deriving these principles, I revisited the transcripts to check if these principles were indeed represented in the transcripts. Finally, I chose portions of the transcripts that I felt best served to illustrate each principle. My hope was that these principles when applied could be of immediate help to practicing therapists, as well as a source of hypotheses which could be confirmed or disconfirmed by further empirical research.

Results

From my investigation, I derived five principles that can be used to improve client's participation with directives:

- Construct a resourceful context
- Compliment client while highlighting and utilizing client strengths
- Utilize resourceful naming
- Deliver directives with confidence and gain commitment
- Notice reactions and adjust

I will now describe each of these principles with transcripts that demonstrate their use.

Construct a Resourceful Context

Constructing a resourceful context is one of Keeney's most important contributions to the field of counseling. It is the experiential context of any behavior or experience that gives it meaning. A resourceful context is similar to what has been called reframing, but differs in that it covers a wider context, or as Bateson (1972) and Whitehead and Russell (1910) might describe it, a higher logical level. If we use the analogy of a play, reframing is about the meaning of a particular object or event in the play, while creating a resourceful context is about the meaning of the whole play or an act in the play. Once a resourceful context has been established, it creates a background meaning to everything that occurs within it. It is the frame from which you interpret events that are held inside the frame. If you see two people arguing, and one pokes the other in the eye, how would you react? Now imagine that the context has changed, and you are watching a play about the Three Stooges. In the second example, two contexts for interpreting the actions have been created. First, it is just a play, not real, and second it is a specific type of play, a comedy, which creates an additional context and further alters how you respond to the actions held inside that context. When done well, resistance occurs less frequently, because the directives that the therapist offers make sense within that context. They are congruent and logical given the experiential reality created by the frame.

Constructing a resourceful context is beautifully illustrated in the following therapeutic performance, "The Deer Family." Note: In this and the following transcripts quoted from Keeney's work, I have deleted Keeney's own comments on his work to avoid confusion with the comments that I make. This is a court-ordered African- American family from a poor section of the Mississippi Delta, where the oldest boy was in trouble for fighting at school. BK=Bradford Keeney, G=Grandmother

BK: "Your grandchildren know your easy love, but now it may be time for you to introduce some surprising love. They need to see that you have some surprises they don't know about, and this is an important thing for you to introduce to the family."

G: "I'll try anything if it helps my babies."

BK: "Great! Why don't you hold a surprise birthday party for Jack with a cake holding 15 candles?"

G: [Without missing a beat] "That's easy. They love it when I bake a cake for them." (Keeney, 2009, p. 40)

In this example, we can see that Keeney has moved from the initial frame of a troubled family who is in need of court-ordered therapy, to a family in need of some “Surprising love.” Within the frame, “Surprising love,” staging a surprise birthday party makes perfect sense, and is easily accepted by the grandmother. The frame determines which interventions are possible and which are not.

Compliment Client

A main principle of Keeney’s work is to identify and amplify resources for the client. This differs from a solution focus in that a resource such as creativity, can generalize more widely in a client’s life than a more narrowly defined solution. A solution is always tied to a problem, while a resource is not connected to a problem and thus lies outside the solution-problem matrix (Ray & Keeney, 1993). One way to both improve rapport and begin the process of eliciting resources is finding ways to compliment the client. This creates a focus on client strengths and builds states of confidence and encouragement that increase the likelihood that the client will carry out the suggested task. . Complimenting is frequently found in Keeney’s work. It is also a basic technique of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (Walter & Peller, 1992), where it is seen as serving a variety of functions including: creating a positive climate, highlighting recent changes, normalizing, and alleviating fears about change. Also, Cialdini (2001) in his work on influence has shown that we are more likely to comply with a request from someone we like, and liking is increased by sincere compliments.

Following is an example: BK=Bradford Keeney, C=Client

BK: Look...you just got divorced, and you’re able to smile and laugh and be happy in spite of the badness around it. That’s unbelievable. That’s a strong person. You have so many relationships...several...are long term....

The following interchange occurs further along in the session:

C: That’s how my first wife and I communicated back and forth long distance. We taped recorded messages and mailed them across state.

BK: So you managed to have a relationship without being totally there, but by still having the voice of the marriage. You are a complicated and interesting guy. [C. Laughs.] You are fascinating. (Page ref)

Resourceful Naming

As social psychologists have discovered, humans tend to act consistently with ideas that we have about ourselves (Cialdini 2001). Keeney utilized this idea by often giving new names to his clients. If these new names are accepted, then directives can be formulated that reflect the new resourceful name. The directives themselves can be thought of as a way to solidify both the new resourceful context and the newly accepted label. In the following example, note the establishing of a new identity as well as the actions that now naturally flow from this new perspective: Bk=Bradford Keeney, C=client

BK: What if someone from another planet came with higher intelligence and superior spiritual sensitivity, whatever that means, and gave you a special name? Do you know what happens in other traditions? You would be given another name for what you know. Without thinking, what new name for you comes to your mind?

C: Cody

BK: Cody, that's nice. Where did that come from? That's my curiosity....

C: It feels okay, but...

BK: Cody, I'm going to call you Cody. From now on, you're Cody. Would you name me? Give me a new name?

C: No!

BK: No? Amazing! Who is this guy? He's just so authentic. He knows that it just doesn't feel right to name someone else. You've got to come up with your own name, don't ya?

C: Yeah. (Keeney, 2009, pp.141-142)

Notice Reactions and Adjust

It is a given that clients are not always going to respond in expected ways to assignments that we suggest. I have noticed that Keeney exhibits great flexibility when things go in a direction that at first blush is heading dangerously off the rails. The skill here is derived from the now well-known and foundational Ericksonian orientation of utilization (Keeney & Keeney, 2013; O'Hanlon, 1997). Utilization is the ability to use whatever is present in a therapy situation to move the situation forward. Whatever is present can include aspects of the client as well as anything else that happens to be present in the current situation. It can be thought of as a kind of psychological alchemy, where ordinary given elements are turned into therapeutic gold that move a session forward. The following transcript contains elements of both pattern interruption and utilization. The initial directive here was abandoned, and the resistance of the client to the directive was construed in a positive manner and then utilized in order to move the therapy forward. What strikes me most powerfully here is that Keeney did not simply give in and say, "Sorry, wrong directive." Rather, he used the energy of the initial reaction to propel the family in the intended direction. The energy was absorbed, redirected, and then utilized toward therapeutic objectives.

In the following case, a son who has been in jail will soon be leaving prison and returning home. Operating from the frame of, "Welcoming the son home," Keeney suggested that the father call the son a different name to reinforce the marking of this event as a transitional ritual. The father reacted with anger. Keeney stood up and shook the father's hand (pattern interrupt) and then framed the father's resistance as a demonstration of his love for his son and his willingness to take a stand. These attributes were further reinforced by creating a cause-effect relationship between these qualities of the father and the son's doing well in prison. He and the mother were then redirected to focus on welcoming the son home with the additional resources of a father who loves and is willing to take a stand for his son. What appeared at first to be an error on Keeney's part was utilized to reinforce the foundation from which the final intervention was born: BK=Bradford Keeney, F=Father.

BK: [To the treating Therapist] You know this shows a father who really loves his son.

F: I love my son. I'm gonna call my son what I've called him since the day he was born.

BK: That's good. And he is your son.

BK: No, you didn't offend me. You know what you did? You impressed me.

F: I'm not going to change what I do just 'cause he got into trouble.

BK: You know what you just did? You said I'm willing to take a stand...

BK: [Looking at therapist] Maybe this has something to do with why their son has done so well in prison.

F: I think....

BK: Because he knows that he's got a father who will stand up for him...his father is going to stay all the way with him...he knows that the family's there for him.

BK: So there's been a lot of care, a lot of love and support.

M: Oh yes.

BK: Let me start again. I failed to see how much love and caring there was in this family. I'm sort of knocked out by how strong your stand is for you son. I'm going to ask the same question, but now I'm going to ask it even more seriously. How are you going to welcome this boy home? He's been away for more than a year? He's over a year older, and he knows that [looking at F] some things are not going to change. You're always going to be there for him. Yet, he's been out of the world and that's not an easy transition.

In the end, the family planned a huge homecoming for their son, which included some songs written for the son by his father.

Gaining Commitment

Social psychologist Robert Cialdini (2001) holds that commitment and consistency are important components of persuasion. Notice how artfully and determinedly Keeney utilized this strategy to assist the client in making a stand to make a change. Notice in the following transcript that there was another principle at play, the reciprocity principle. By asking the client to do something beyond what he is willing to do, and then asking for something easier, Keeney has made a concession, which increases the likelihood that the client will carry out the task: BK=Bradford Keeney, C=Client

BK: I'm not asking you to understand it; I don't think it's understandable. I think you're a big mystery. But the mystery holds these connections and holds these facts---and that we can work with. Tonight go celebrate your birthday. This means the friend you're with, or you, must ask the waiters to sing "Happy Birthday." Go to a place where they sing "Happy Birthday."

C: Oh, that would be so embarrassing. I couldn't do that to myself. Oh my God, I couldn't do that to myself.

BK: See?

C: I might sing "Happy Birthday" to myself.

BK: You could sing with them. I'm not asking you about embarrassing yourself. I'm asking you to celebrate your birthday tonight so that you feel that you're 31.

C: I have not had a meaningful birthday....

BK: Of course.

C: Since 30.

BK: I mean, look, "since 30." There it is. Do you realize...[BK stands up and walks over to C] Do you realize what's happened to you today? You found what you're looking for.

C: It's like an epiphany.

BK: Will you do this? [BK steps back]

[C sighs.]

- BK:** Will you do it? Will you take a step forward?
C: I will, I will, so heartily, strongly try.....
BK: Nah, that's not good enough. [BK sits down.] No. I don't buy that. No. I don't want to leave this room until I hear you tell me that you will do it. I'm asking you to have a birthday tonight. I need to hear that. Otherwise I'm just going to assume that number 30 will be present for you the rest of your life. It's now. Let me ask a different way. Which of these things will you agree to? Will you agree to get a birthday card?
C: Sure.
BK: Okay. Promise?
C: Promise [BK and C shake hands.]
 The interaction continued resulting in the client's agreeing to order dessert, get a candle, and sing Happy Birthday to himself.

From the case of Cody: Notice the relentless way the Keeney worked to gain a firm commitment from the client.

- BK:** What are the odds? Greater than 50 percent? Less than 50 percent?
C: Probably is less than 50 percent.
BK: 40 percent?
C: Yeah, I'd go with that.
BK: How do we increase it to 60 percent? What do we have to say to increase it to 60 percent?
C: I have to get some sleep first.
BK: It's too much to have it at dinner? Maybe you should have breakfast.
C: Yeah, that'd probably be easier.
BK: Let's change it. Make it breakfast then. Go with breakfast. Instead of a movie, maybe just a small cartoon for sure.
C: Okay.
BK: Okay. Would you agree with me that you will accomplish one of these three things? You'll either have dinner and a movie, or you'll have breakfast, or you'll have just a glass of juice and a commercial.
C: Okay [There is a long silence in the room.] (Keeney, 2009, p. 148).

Discussion

In my review of Keeney's own description of his work, Keeney (2009), Keeney and Keeney (2012), I found no explicit reference to methods for gaining client cooperation with directives. My observations in no way contradict Keeney's commentary on his work, but rather adds missing pieces that he did not comment upon. Whether he did not comment because he was not conscious of these patterns, or was conscious but choose to not comment, I have no way of knowing other than asking him directly, which I have not done. I would welcome any commentaries Bradford Keeney might have regarding this paper.

Also, excluded from this study was an analysis of the non-verbal communication that may have been relevant to the topic. Though I made a conscious choice in this paper to limit my comments to the verbal portions of the subject, Keeney's non-verbal communication likely was an important variable leading to his success. To use a musical analogy, I am aware that I have presented the lyrics of the song, while excluding the equally important melodic and rhythmic elements.

Conclusion

In this paper I have distinguished a number of methods that can be used to improve clients' cooperation with directives. Though the methods appear to be separate and distinct approaches, they are in fact linked and inseparable. Forming a new identity can be seen as just another way of identifying and amplifying a resource; identifying and amplifying a resource is another way of creating a new identity. Gaining commitment to carry out an assignment is a way of highlighting, amplifying, and embodying a resource. It is only in the interactive weave of these approaches that a powerful therapeutic result can be cooperatively created with the client. Like separate tracks in a recording studio, these approaches must be mixed and mastered to create a whole and powerfully affecting therapeutic session.

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Author Note

Robert Musikantow, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist and a former faculty at the Adler School of Professional Psychology in the Masters of Counseling Psychology Program. His research interests include Recursive Frame Analysis, indigenous healing practices, and creative approaches to online learning. He is a practicing psychotherapist in Evanston, IL. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Robert Musikantow at, rmuskantow@mac.com

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