

UNDERSTANDING AND REDUCING POWER STRUGGLES:

TRANSFERENCE AND
COUNTER-TRANSFERENCE IN
TREATMENT RELATIONSHIPS

Lorraine E. Fox, Ph.D.
(DrLorraineFox.com)

Introduction

What makes an incident a Power/Control Issue?

Think of actual incidents from your own experience that you would define as a "power-control" struggle:

1. An incident in which someone else was trying to "control" you.

2. An incident between you, as an adult, and a child/teenager in which you felt caught in a power-control struggle.

What was the "underlying" issue for each of you?

How did you feel?

What did you do?

What did you want to do?

ISSUES FOR THE ADULT

THINKING ABOUT POWER/CONTROL ISSUES, AND DEALING WITH FEELINGS

What are some common feelings in these situations?

What are some "automatic" or spontaneous responses?

What do we usually want to happen?

PERSONAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS TO OUR RESPONSES

1. We have **learned** to respond differently when conflicting adult needs are stated, both internally and behaviorally.
2. We "inherit" a way of thinking/responding when conflicting needs are stated between children and adults (ex. "do as I say"; "because I said so").
3. Kid needs are historically not seen as being as important as adult needs. Why?
4. There is often a contradiction in myself! Many of us feel that we can break rules we don't agree with (ex. living together, speeding), but don't allow kids the freedom to evaluate my/our rules.
5. We often do not have a philosophical dispute with the notion of "kids rights"but we do often have an **emotional** dispute!

COUNTER-TRANSFERENCE

Refers to both one's feelings and attitudes toward a client

- Originally understood (by Freud-who coined the term) as an unconscious response of the “helper” to the client’s “transference”
(Process by which the client displaces on to the “helper” feelings, attitudes, and attributes which properly belong to a significant figure of the past, usually a parent, and responds accordingly.)
- Later seen by others as both a conscious and unconscious reaction to a client
- Historically seen as having an adverse effect on treatment
- Confuses what the “real” issue is; material found threatening to the adult affects the accuracy of his/her perceptions
- Occurs under two different conditions:
 - special circumstances
 - habitual need of the adult occurring with all clients
- Seen by some as “inevitable” and an integral and vital part of treatment in that it help the adult to understand the client
- Can both help and hinder the helper’s empathy with the client
- The helper’s “job” is to bring the feelings and attitudes to a conscious level and contain rather than discharge the feelings aroused

It has been found that therapists who were able to express their own anger directly and had low needs for approval were more able to allow clients to express hostility.

INFLUENCES ON PERSONAL PERFORMANCE and RESPONSES

A. EXTERNAL: ROLE DEFINITION

The "Enforcement - Enablement Continuum"

Who's "job" is it to see that children "comply"?

B. INTERNAL: PERSONAL NEEDS

Controlling Personality

Notions about the "place" of children

Beliefs regarding the value of compliance

C. ORGANIZATIONAL/SYSTEM CONTRIBUTORS

Controlling anxiety

Being held accountable for the behavior of children/youth

ORGANIZATIONAL "CULTURE" CONTRIBUTORS TO POWER/CONTROL ISSUES

Think of some features or ingredients in the agency "culture" in which you work that might be contributing to power-control issues.

Some possibilities:

- Personally defined job descriptions
(Ex - make the kids do right)
- Notions about the "place" of children
(ex: "seen but not heard")
- Beliefs regarding the value of compliance
- A behavior management and intervention system which rewards compliance rather than empowerment and assertiveness
- Managers, supervisors and colleagues who hold staff accountable for child/youth behavior

The most powerless position an adult can take when faced with opposition is to blame the child for their behavior in an attempt to feel “powerful” themselves, because it leaves the adult feeling hopeless.

If we believe that we do nothing to cause the struggle, we feel like we cannot change it.

*Our part in the struggle is to **escalate our emotional response**. The child realizes their role in this escalation of emotional and behavior (getting frustrated, getting loud, handling them). When we appear out of control, they feel in control.*

If we realize that our behavior with children is one of the causes for power struggles, we can change ourselves to get out of the “struggle”.

ISSUES FOR THE CHILD/YOUTH

EIGHT “STYLES” OF CONTROLLING PARENTING

Smothering: Terrified of feeling alone, “smothering parents” emotionally engulf their children. Their overbearing presence discourages independence and cultivates a tyranny of repetition in their children’s identities, thoughts, and feelings.

Depriving: Convinced they will never get enough of what they need, “depriving parents” withhold attention and encouragement from their children. They love conditionally, giving affection when a child pleases them, withdrawing it when displeased.

Perfectionistic: Paranoid about flaws, “perfectionistic parents” drive their children to be the best and the brightest. These parents fixate on order, prestige, power and/or perfect appearances.

Cultlike: Distressed by uncertainty, “cultlike parents” have to be “in the know”, and often gravitate to military, religious, social or corporate institutions or philosophies where they can feel special and certain. They raise their children according to rigid rules and roles.

Chaotic: Caught up in an internal cyclone of instability and confusion, “chaotic parents” tend toward mercurial (erratic, impulsive) moods, radically inconsistent discipline, and bewildering communication.

Using: Determined never to lose or feel one-down, “using parents” emotionally feed off their children. Hypersensitive and self-centered, these parents see others’ gains as their loss, and consequently belittle children.

Abusing: Perched atop a volcano of resentment, “abusing parents” verbally or emotionally bully – or physically or sexually abuse – their children. When they’re enraged, these parents view their children as threats and treat them accordingly.

Childlike: Feeling incapable or needy, “childlike parents” offer their children little protection. These parents woefully uncomfortable with themselves, encourage their children to take care of them, thereby controlling through role-reversal.

MISBEHAVIOR IS NOTHING
MORE THAN A NEON LIGHT
FLASHING-

“I need help! I need help!”

NOT ENOUGH PEOPLE SEE THE
LIGHTS!

(“The Gus Chronicles)

POWER AND CHILDREN

A feeling of power is important to us all as a basic emotional need. When the need develops, how it develops and what a child learns regarding his/her power in the world is directly or indirectly taught by the parent.

(Deborah Fox)

OPPOSITIONAL BEHAVIOR IN A DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT

According to Mary Beth Hewitt, oppositional/defiant behavior is developmentally appropriate at three stages in an individual's life:

- At age **two**, when a child is going from infancy to childhood. Until then, a child has very little sense of "self" feeling as "one" with the parent. Somewhere in the second year the child begins to develop a concept of self as separate from the parent.
- At puberty, when an individual is going from childhood to adulthood
- In old age, when a person is going from self-sufficient adulthood to needing supportive care.

Deborah Fox says that by age three the child usually has the skill developed to such an extent that a parent can feel overwhelmed, overpowered, overrun and quite angry and determined to get the child to behave better. When attempts to change the behavior of a defiant child fail, the parent feels guilty, inept and incompetent. This causes the child to behave more defiantly and to continue to be oppositional.

The initial sense of **power** comes when the child discovers that s/he can create an emotion or behavior by the parent.

What is similar about these developmental stages is that each is a time of intense transition when an individual feels “out of control” regarding his or her life.

Aside from issues related to abuse and neglect, some individuals get “stuck” in an oppositional stage, with defiant behavior becoming especially strong when young people feel that they have no control over a life situation, such as:

- Divorce
- Separation
- A move
- Death
- Change in school

The reaction, then, is to fight for control.

TRANSFERENCE IN THERAPEUTIC SETTINGS

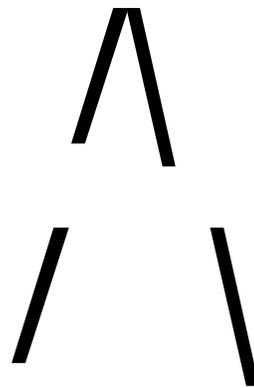
Process by which the client displaces on to the “helper” feelings, attitudes, and attributes which properly belong to a significant figure of the past, usually a parent, and responds accordingly.

Examples

ADAPTIVE RESPONSES TO ABUSE

CONTROLLING BEHAVIOR

POWERLESSNESS *



LEARNED
HELPLESSNESS

COMPENSATORY
REACTION

*power = ability to influence; ability to act or produce an effect
(derivative of the Latin verb *potere* = to be able)

POSITIVE INTERVENTION WITH ABUSE-REACTIVE CHILDREN

Children who experience themselves as “powerless” may respond with fear or despair, but they also frequently respond with anger.

If attempts to act or influence have been ineffective some children feel they have little to gain and little to lose by their actions/decisions. Sometimes this leads to destructive or inappropriate behaviors – they will settle for feelings of “negative” power, which feels better than no power at all.

These behaviors may include:

- Violence
- Bizarre behaviors
- Passive-aggression
- Non-compliance

If we are not successful at turning negative power into positive power, they will settle for power any way they can get it.

If adults working with abused children feel powerless, they may feel threatened by the child’s power – even negative power.

If an adult understands power, and has confidence in his/her own power, s/he will be able to accept a child/youth’s attempt to gain personal power.

Paradox

Allowing a child to make a decision that has a “negative” consequence can be a positive experience, even if in the adult’s eyes it was a “wrong” decision.

A decision can be “positive” when a child accepts the consequences of the decision and learns from the experience.

Multiple Placements for Foster Children Or Shared Custody with Inconsistent Parenting

UNDERSTANDING FAMILY "SYSTEMS"

Summary

IDEAS COME FROM NATURE

Systems have certain properties in common:

They are part of a "larger" and "smaller" system

A system is different, and more complicated, than the sum of it's parts

Some structure and degree of organization

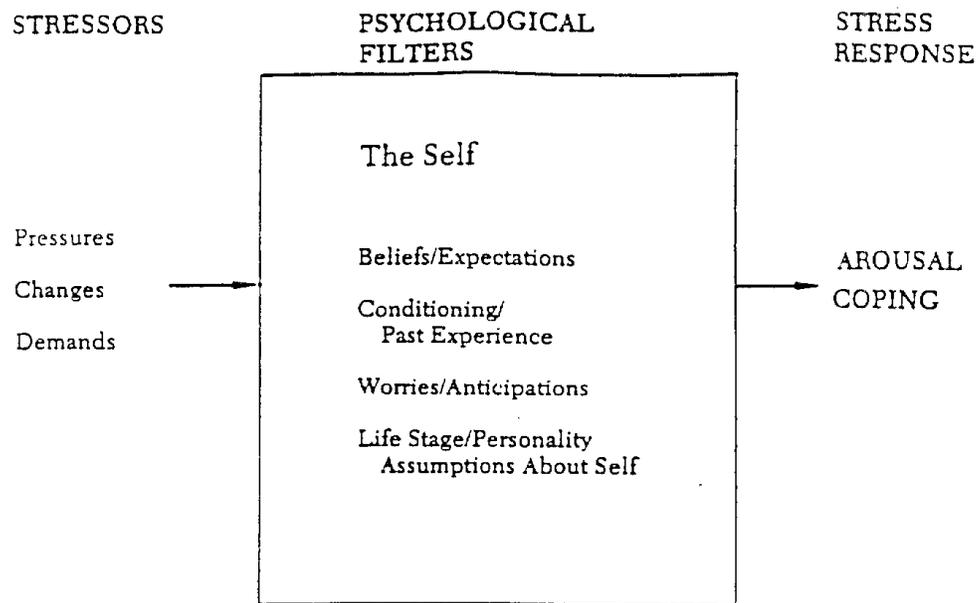
Boundaries (distinguish a system from it's environment)

- May be too "open"
- May be too "closed"
- May be too rigid
- May be too flexible

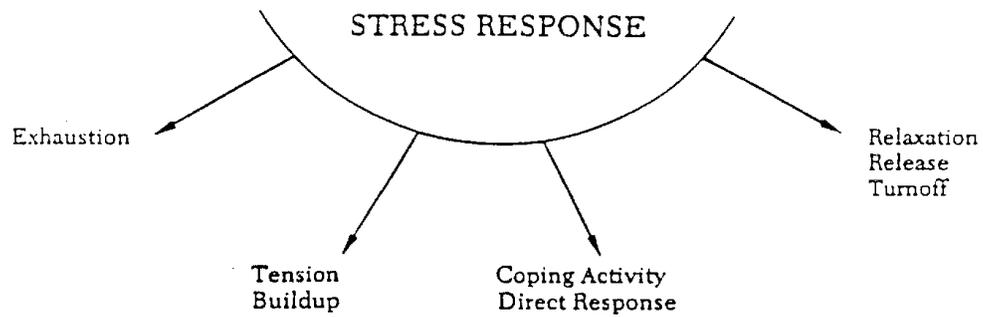
Systems have relationships between the "objects" and their attributes

"Operating Rules" (spoken or unspoken rules that govern behavior)

Systems devise a state of equilibrium, or "steady state"



TRIGGERING THE STRESS RESPONSE



OUTCOMES OF THE STRESS RESPONSE

Intervention Strategies

DEALING WITH POWER/CONTROL ISSUES

1. PERSONALIZE EXPECTATIONS

- it's more honest
- it's harder to "fight" with a person than with a "rule"
- enables use of our relationships

2. STATE YOUR EXPECTATION (request, demand, rule) ONLY ONCE!

3. FOLLOW UP ONLY WITH QUESTIONS.

- Is this unreasonable?
- Do you understand the instruction and the reason?
- Why are you having trouble?
- What can/should I do to help?

4. KEEP THE FOCUS ON THE CLIENT'S/YOUNG PERSONS' DIFFICULTY WITH SELF CONTROL

- Getting into power/control makes it **our** problem!
- Issue is not why or whether I can or can't "make you do it", but why you won't or can't.

5. BE WATCHFUL OF LANGUAGE.

- Avoid: "yes you will"; "you need to", etc.
- Those statements aren't usually true!
- Such statements work against empowerment and self esteem.

6. **ALLOW THE CHILD/YOUTH TO SAVE FACE.**

- Be aware of his/her position in the peer group.
- Allow changing of behavior without feeling coerced or having to "give in".

7. **REMAIN AWARE OF YOUR OWN INTERNAL PROCESS.**

- This allows us to be in control of ourselves and our responses.
- This keeps the "real" issue(s) more clear.

Concluding Thoughts

Some positive outcomes resulting from reduced power-control struggles between adults and children/youth include:

- taking the fear out of "challenges" (for both kids and staff)
- having an "approach" for dealing with these situations that is therapeutic for the child and reframing the situation removes the "challenge"
- keeping relationships and relating more positive
- keeping problems in the appropriate place
- changing skepticism to confidence
- enhancing the self esteem of both workers and youngsters
- providing true "discipline" (teaching and learning)

Notes:

- this approach will only be adopted when staff share a positive view of kids (human nature)
- this approach will only be adopted when staff share a common view of "treatment"
- this approach has the potential to re-structure relationships between kids and staff, staff and staff, and peers
- this approach is stress reducing for both clients and staff

COMPONENTS OF THE STRUGGLE

Meaning: It does not matter what the adult making the request actually means. The only thing that is important is how the child/youth hearing the request interprets it. The meaning of a message is in the interpretation of the receiver. The angry defiance is the clue that the request is not being interpreted as a simple, harmless or reasonable request. To the child, it is a show of power that invites a response of power.

Power: The adult attempting to exercise power is an attempt to get the child to a) do what they say; b) stop doing something; or c) change in some way. All interactions that go badly involve at least some of these power elements. The person who wants something is in the weaker position. Thus, when an adult wants something from a child the adult actually risks losing power. In the ensuing whirlwind of negative interactions, both adult and child are struggling for power.

Expression: Simple requests become complicated and important. Both want to be “heard” by the other. Both have desires and fears that have the potential to contaminate the interaction.

Deficits: When power and expression are not handled well, the unresolved issues and feelings are carried over to the next interaction. If a child/youth has “lost face” the next struggle will become even more important. If neither the adult or the child feels “heard” (understood) the need to be heard will be greater next time. When issues of power and expression are unresolved each succeeding interaction will be more tense and potentially more explosive.

Irrationality: In disagreements, in order to be “heard”, young people often come up with irrational statements (if you let me do this now I’ll never ask again). Adults also often get irrational (I sound just like my parents). It seems so important to “win” the contest that both resort to irrational means (without being aware of it) to gain power and to be heard. If irrationality is a product of negative interactions, then rationality can be increased by improving the interaction.

STRATEGIC INTERACTION

When a young person shows disrespect for an adult, the natural thing is for the adult to fight back. However, fighting back begins the power struggle, and the adult ultimately loses that struggle. The following “Six P’s” are suggested to allow us to act differently:

Prepare: Remain aware of the dynamics of interactions and power struggles. Know what your “buttons” are and how young people push them so you can avoid automatic reactions.

- How do I get “hooked” into negative interactions?
- What are the looks and attitudes that annoy me?
- How can I know that I am in a negative interaction (tight stomach, anger, frustration, dread, feeling weak)?
- What are this child/youth’s “buttons”? What are the things I know will get him/her defensive, oppositional, and irrational?

Predict: Make an educated guess, based on your experiences with a particular child, about how an upcoming situation may go. How will they react? How will they try to “hook” me?

Plan: What should I say and do instead of what I normally say and do? Which phrases will I memorize and use? What is my game plan for staying out of the power struggle?

Practice: Practice your plan until it comes naturally, as an automatic response. This can be done with a friend or colleague.

PAT the young person: Praise, Appreciate, and Thank the young person when they cooperate. When the child/teen does what is requested, or even when they make improvement toward doing what is expected, let them know you see and appreciate the effort. Even if there is a negative consequence it can be done in a warm and supportive way and use the consequence the young person doesn’t like to help them plan for next time.

Patience: Results may not come soon. Every time the adult avoids the power struggle and every time an interaction goes well, the chance of the next interaction going well will be greatly increased. Over time, the interactions become increasingly positive, or at least less stressful.

EMOTIONALLY “NEUTRAL” OR DE-ESCALATING RESPONSES

When caught up in a power struggle, it is most important to keep the struggle within the child/youth, and not between them and us!

The goal is not to control the child, but to control the interactions we have with the child.

You may need to practice some responses that will avoid having the defiant child/youth feel powerful by watching you lose control.

Examples:

- Laugh – if the name you are being called is really outrageous (what if they had called you a frying pan instead of a curse word?)
- There might be some truth to that, at least for you
- When did you start (feeling, thinking, believing) that?
- That’s an interesting opinion
- I must not be showing up for you because if I were I don’t think you’d talk to me like this. How can I do a better job of helping you?
- I’m glad you trust me enough to tell me how you feel. Here’s why I’m concerned....
- When you refuse to cooperate and talk to me like this I feel upset but I don’t want to attack you back. How can we work on this problem together?
- Why do you think I’m asking you to do this?
- Can you tell me why you think my request is unreasonable?
- We seem to be at a standstill. What do you suggest?
-
-

PROBLEM SOLVING SHEET

STOP What was the problem?

LOOK
LISTEN Who else is involved?

THINK What can I do? What will happen?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

THINK Which one should I choose?

DO If I have the problem again what will I do?

What is **MY PLAN**?

**A MATURE CONCEPT
OF “FREEDOM” DOES
NOT IMPLY NOT
HAVING ANY LIMITS!**

Transfer of Learning

FORMS OF OPPOSITIONAL BEHAVIOR

1. Complying with the “letter of the law” but not the “spirit of the law” (exploiting loopholes):

- When given the direction “Bring your chair up to the front of the room”, the child/young person may bring the chair up but then sit on the floor
- When given the direction “Lower your voice”, the child/young person may speak in a lower tone but use the same volume
- When told, “Take your hat off”, the child/young person may take it off and then put it back on.

Strategy

2. “Let’s Make a Deal

When told, “You need to finish your math before you go to recess”, the child/young person responds, “If you let me go to recess, I’ll do my math later. I want to do reading now”. If the adult persists, the child will continue to try to “make deals” (i.e. “I’ll do half my math now, only have half of recess, and then come back in and finish my math”)

Strategy

3. Violating Rules Right in Front of a Staff Member

- A teacher tells everyone to remember to please raise a hand when answering a question, but the student immediately shouts out an answer.
- A staff member is walking through a room and as s/he passes, the child puts his or her feet up on the furniture

Strategy

4. Intense Need to “Have the Last Word”

Because oppositional behavior is all about control, children who exhibit it often have the need to have the last word. They do not want the argument to end, because when it does, their sense of control ends also. Unfortunately, dealing with a child/young person who has the intense need to win often generates in us the same intense need to come out on top.

Strategy

5. Constantly Questioning “Why?”

Like two-year-olds, these children will question the purpose for a direction. Then they will question the explanation. Their purpose is to maintain control of the discussion.

- “I want you to put your feet down”
“Why?”
“Because that’s the rule”
“Why is it the rule?”
“Because having your feet up bothers other people and is not good for the furniture”
“Why should it bother them?”
“Because if your feet bump them or get in their way”
“Why is that a problem? They could move or go around”
“Because other people are entitled not to be bothered”
“Why?”

And on and on and on.

Strategy

6. Staff Splitting (“So and so doesn’t say anything when…….”)

Many children/young people who are oppositional constantly point out inconsistent enforcement of the rules by adults, and use this as a rationale for their own behavior. What they are trying to do is make this an issue of whether or not adults are consistent, rather than focusing on the real issue – whether they are choosing to follow or break a rule, command, or request. (“I don’t have to follow the rules if the adults don’t enforce them uniformly”).

Strategy

7. Refusal to Comply

- “You can’t make me”
- “What are you going to do about it?”

In this case the child/young person is asserting their control and challenging yours. They are silently hoping that you will rise to the challenge and try to control them. Like it or not, they are right. We can’t make anyone do anything against his or her will as children grow. These children are also upping the ante – challenging us to come up with some punishment that will mean something to them. The “game” is to show us our own powerlessness and these children/young people will often laugh in the face of any punishments we might use, even if at a later time they might wish they hadn’t.

Strategy