

CONTROL ISSUES IN RESETTLEMENT

Working with the Difficult Client

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The chief dynamic in the relationship between caseworkers and the difficult client is often the struggle to maintain or regain control. Such clients, who display overanxious, blaming, entitled, and complaining behavior, evoke feelings of anger and irritation in their workers. Using a developmental object relations framework to conceptualize these behaviors makes work with difficult clients more manageable. By applying the principles of effective parenting, caseworkers can help facilitate their clients' adjustment.

The opposing processes of giving and withholding, nurturing and rejecting are inherent in the complex caseworker-client relationship. To the refugee involved in the resettlement process, the caseworker is a representative of community policy. On a practical level he or she acts as a bureaucrat, but on a symbolic level the caseworker is perceived as an authority figure, not very different from a parent. A person in authority regulates the freedom that dependents can exert. It is natural that those who are dependent need to test out limits to determine the extent of their autonomy.

Part of my role as supervisor in the Resettlement Department is to intervene with difficult clients. These are the clients who seem to have difficulty managing the resettlement process and become involved in struggles with their caseworkers. Caseworkers perceive these clients as difficult because they stir up negative feelings in them. Despite all of these caseworkers' efforts to understand and help their clients get through a very difficult life transition, these individuals stay "stuck." They show no movement toward accepting their new home, relationships, and the limits and boundaries that their new surroundings impose. To understand and work effectively with these clients, workers need to explore their role in the relationship and remain aware of the feelings they are experiencing.

Naturally, the difficult client is not unique to the Russian population. Such clients appear in all populations, including elderly Americans, chemically dependent

young adults, and children. In all of these situations, the chief dynamic between the worker and the difficult client is often the struggle to maintain or regain control. Most clients, Russian and non-Russian alike, who are considered difficult by their workers, are re-enacting unresolved issues of control not very different from those observed in a parent-child relationship. The parallel between child development and difficult adult behavior by no means suggests an infantilized view of the Russian client, but rather offers a model for service delivery based on an understanding of normal psychological development.

Object relations theory provides an understanding of these control issues in terms of infant development. Developmentally, the newborn infant sees him- or herself as one with the world; the world is perceived as secure and controllable if there is appropriate nurturing and responsiveness. Every need or upset is experienced as a crisis that can be relieved by the caregiver's response. As infants develop, they become increasingly aware of their separateness from the nurturer. As this awareness develops, their sense of security decreases and abandonment becomes a possibility.

These separation issues are often dealt with by attempting to control one's world. Russian emigres re-experience this separation process when they leave the security and safety of their homeland. In their new, unpredictable environment, there is an anxious feeling of being unsafe. To allay that anxiety, there is usually a temporary regres-

sion into a control struggle. It is natural for the worker and community to become targets of this struggle because they are reminders of the client's unsettled status and may be viewed as assuming the role of the anxiety-relieving caregiver.

For most of these new Americans, life in Russia was far from perfect, but at least it was familiar, paternalistic, and secure. There was a clear understanding of what could and could not be controlled. Most individuals learned effective coping mechanisms to survive in that environment. Upon arrival in America, however the refugees are often without work, income, language, or basic knowledge about their new environment. Temporary regression is natural as the new emigre re-experiences a loss of control and security.

Four categories of regressed behaviors—overanxious, blaming, entitled, and complaining—stir up the most antagonistic feelings in the worker: This article describes these four difficult client behaviors, the worker's reactions, the developmental basis for the behavior, and the most effective response. These interventions closely parallel techniques of effective parenting, giving the client an opportunity to rework the developmental issues in a therapeutic way.

FOUR TYPES OF CLIENT REACTIONS

Overanxious Behavior

In this client reaction, the client is unable to calm down because the anxiety is so great that he or she behaves in an out-of-control fashion. This overanxious behavior plays out in frequent visits to the office without an appointment, constant telephone calls, and bothering the worker at home. The worker's typical reaction is to feel annoyed and burdened by the client's overdependency and overstepping of boundaries.

This behavior is analogous to that which occurs during the symbiotic stage of development when infants need very responsive mothering to help them calm down and to assure them that they have some control over their environment. The intervention most helpful is also analogous to a new

mother's responsive nurturing behavior. Ideally the worker will tolerate the client's need for dependence and understand that the first few months of resettlement are a time of great insecurity. The worker should allow for more frequent contacts, and limit setting can be done in the form of teaching the client to respect the boundaries of the professional relationship without criticism or rejection.

Angry and Blaming Behavior

In this type of client reaction, the client belittles the worker, attacks him or her for incompetence, and often demands to see the supervisor with various complaints. Such clients cannot see beyond their needs nor can they see the viewpoints of others. The instinctive reaction to such behavior is irritation and anger.

In object relations terms these client behaviors parallel toddlers' efforts at autonomous functioning as they begin to realize their limitations in controlling the environment and having their needs met. For children to come to terms with those limitations, they need a safe, tolerant, supportive, and consistent environment. In the Russian culture, stirrings for independence are often met with destructiveness, overprotection, or rejection. These clients who engage in blaming behavior are likely overcompensating for feelings of helplessness. They become overly controlling and bullying because they feel unsafe. An effective intervention that parallels the parental response is to tolerate the client's anger, empathize with the frustration, and label the wishes and fears. It is helpful to address the disappointment and then to set limits and consistently enforce policy at every level, thereby helping the client establish internal controls.

Entitled Behavior

In the third reaction to loss of control, clients act as if they are very special; they often demand a special living situation, more money, more furniture, more attention, and services. The worker may feel annoyed and

inclined to lecture the client and confront him or her with reality, quickly and firmly.

Developmentally, this client's behavior parallels a toddler's attempt to separate. When parents have difficulty accepting their toddler's independence, they may react with rejection, which can feel shaming. To defend against feeling shamed, the child may behave in an entitled way. Similarly, clients who feel rejected by their caseworkers may react in like fashion. A great deal of empathy and positive feedback is necessary to encourage efforts at independent functioning and increase feelings of competence and control. Consistency in enforcing limits, however, remains essential.

Complaining Behavior

The fourth client reaction is complaining behavior, which is characterized by whining about relatively insignificant issues: "The apartment faces the wrong direction," "our pots are too small," or "another family got more towels." The worker's initial reaction may be to want to quiet these clients and label their concerns as insignificant.

From an object relations framework these people have likely experienced great loss with which they have never dealt. As toddlers they may have experienced traumatic separations from their parent, possibly without support or comfort. This is relatively common in Russian culture where separation and individuality are not encouraged. The worker best responds with tolerance and acceptance of the client's upset mental state. Depending on his or her skill level and the development of the relationship, the worker may be able to lead the client to discuss the feelings of loss and to proceed with the grieving process.

DISCUSSION

Many resettlement workers are themselves relatively new arrivals, which affects their ability to implement the interventions described above. Female Russian caseworkers may enact the parental role as they experienced it in the Russian culture. They may see themselves first as a nurturing mother

and so eagerly attend to the concrete needs of their clients, such as housing, food, and furniture. Despite the fact that community policies are explained in the first session, concerns about basic needs override all else, and clients do not initially understand policies or their implications. Later when the client begins to exhibit some autonomous struggling about the policies, trying to test the system, the worker is likely to respond with a rigid, authoritarian stance. This is often a defense against feeling confronted or rejected. Workers often complain that clients are unreasonable and should be grateful for what is being given to them. Worker reactions have varied from defensive and indignant to authoritative and angry, and sometimes overanxious and even helpless. The real work in supervision is to help caseworkers increase their self-awareness by examining their reactions to feeling helpless. The supervisor needs to provide the caseworker with a model of tolerance, nurturance, and consistency, despite the many on-going policy changes.

CASE EXAMPLE

The N. family consists of 57-year-old grandparents and a 27-year-old daughter, who is the single mother of a 2 1/2 -year-old child. The family members arrived together as one unit. At the first orientation meeting and at several subsequent meetings, the mother provoked the child to tears several times. The family voiced an understanding of our policies and seemed to understand the need for them to live together until they were working and could afford separate living accommodations. They seemed to accept the terms of our assistance without resistance.

Two months into the resettlement process, however, the daughter began to demand separate living arrangements. The father and daughter began to harass the worker, attacking her for not helping them and demanding a meeting with the supervisor. The meeting was held, and it was agreed that an apartment would be authorized on the condition that the daughter cooperate with the Resettlement Vocational Department in finding

work. All the family members agreed to these conditions. This plan was arrived at with the intent of being supportive to the family, but also to offer a structure that would eventually result in more self-sufficiency. However, three months into the resettlement process, we were informed by the job placement specialist that the daughter had undermined a job interview by using her child in the same way that she had used her in previous interviews with us: to avoid our process and to demonstrate the overwhelmingly negative nature of the family's living situation.

The supervisor invited the family for a meeting to clarify the terms of support and to restate the need for them to cooperate in finding work. At that meeting, the daughter disclosed for the first time that she was enrolled in beauty school; she began to argue vehemently against our way of thinking and demanded we support her re-training and also finance a separate apartment. To date, this client continues to live with her parents and has proceeded with her retraining.

Case Analysis

Most families experience some regression—a phase of testing the limits, making excessive demands, and complaining—early in the resettlement process; this is both a natural and predictable phase of resettlement. However, the normal regression pattern lasts only a few months. After that initial struggle most families accept the new realities. The N. family, however, continued the struggle and seemed to re-enact an old dysfunctional pattern. It is clearly a highly enmeshed family in which there have been serious separation difficulties. The parents disclosed that their daughter was very rebellious as an adolescent. It seems that she was only able to pseudo-separate from her parents by becoming rejecting and acting out. Her parents were unable to set appropriate and consistent limits, with the result being ongoing, unresolved separation issues accompanied by feelings of helplessness on everyone's part.

The daughter's interaction with her child

was especially revealing. Ms. N. did not seem to understand or accept her child's upset feelings, nor did she express any comfort toward her. It is likely that Ms. N. experienced similar rejection as a child and adolescent and, as a result, feels shamed and with no sense of control. To compensate for that shamed feeling, Ms. N. behaves in a very entitled way. The family seems caught in a three-generation cycle of unsuccessful separations and ongoing struggles to control the world.

Based on the initial meeting, the caseworker assessed the N. family as requiring special attention. The worker brought the case to supervision, and we were able to discuss and sort out the struggle in terms of control issues. Viewing the family's behavior and poor adjustment from this perspective led to the development of appropriate interventions, such as offering empathy and support, establishing consistent and firm limits and clear consequences, and remaining available and nonrejecting.

CONCLUSIONS

In conceptualizing the struggles of the difficult client, using a developmental object relations framework helps make the work more manageable. It is critical that the caseworker remain aware of his or her own reactions to the client because they serve as a means of understanding the internal process of the client. The recommended interventions are based on object relations theory and define the struggles of the difficult client as struggles to control. To be effective with difficult clients, the caseworker needs to understand the issues that underlie control struggles. The combination of that understanding with an empathic relationship that establishes consistent limits, boundaries, and consequences will most benefit the client. There may be very little precedence for this type of relationship in the Russian culture. Nevertheless, a satisfactory resettlement and adjustment to life in America can be facilitated by adhering to the principle of effective parenting.