LIBRE model: engagement styles in counseling

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Engagement is essential for the processing of information. It is presented here as 2 points along a continuum: initial attention (primary self-presentation) and sustained attention (continued self-regulation). The LIBRE (Listen, Identify, Brainstorm, Reality Test, Encourage) Stick Figure Tool (N. S. Guerra, 2003) provides a graphic organizer for LIBRE problem solving and is instrumental in the assessment of both initial and sustained engagement tendencies. A vignette is presented to illustrate the application of the model. Implications for the model are then discussed in relation to client engagement style in an employment counseling setting.

The LIBRE (Listen, Identify, Brainstorm, Reality Test, Encourage) Model (Guerra, 2001, 2005) is a structured approach to facilitating problem solving with training and learning implications. Based on social-cognitive theory, goal setting, and self-monitoring, the approach provides a basis for the generation of hypotheses related to the development of client potential in learning how to self-assess, self-regulate, establish goal(s), and cognitively switch personal orientations to help personal presentation in response to context activity and behavioral investment.

LIBRE MODEL: ENGAGEMENT STYLES IN COUNSELING

Case Vignette

Lara, a young professional woman, is referred for counseling by her employer. She works in a highly demanding and stressful position. Recently, she has been having difficulty focusing on completing her assigned work responsibilities. Lara enters the counseling session and, after the usual initial paperwork, is greeted by the employment counselor, Margaret.

Margaret: Welcome, Lara. I am your counselor. My name is Margaret. I am pleased to see you today, and I am wondering if you might want to tell me how things are going for you here at work?
Lara: There is so much. I really don’t know where to begin.
Margaret: [After a brief pause] OK, then how about outlining some of what is going on. This will allow me an opportunity to better know you, and you will be able to see my notes as I record all that you tell me about what is going on. Ready? [Lara nods and Margaret continues by explaining the LIBRE Stick Figure Tool (LSFT; Guerra, 2003).] Lara, I have this stick figure

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Lara: [As Lara speaks, Margaret records each of the identified concerns as individual strands of hair on the LIBRE Stick Figure.] Well, I'm exhausted, and I'm having problems keeping up with my work. My friends from home don't understand that I can't talk with them while I am at work, and my coworkers keep me busy doing work for them. In the end, I sabotage myself, because when it comes to doing what I really need to do, I am so tired that I just can't do anymore.

Margaret: [Margaret reads back Lara's concerns.] What else is going on?

Lara: Well, I feel like everyone is more important than me. When I want to take some time for myself, I feel guilty. So, I just keep doing what I'm doing and supporting everyone else. I think something must be wrong with me and know even my boss sees it.

Margaret: [Margaret reads back each of the identified concerns to Lara and asks her a third time.] Is there anything else?

Lara: Well, I'm lonely. I keep attracting the wrong kind of man. I feel old and I am tired.

Margaret: [Margaret points to each item as she reads them back again.] Lara, there is a lot going on with you right now. I can see why you are feeling so tired. What I would like you to do now is to look over all the items [listed as hair on the stick figure] that you have indicated. Can you identify one area that we might be able to focus our time on today? [Lara's response is written on the shoulders of the stick figure.] When you decide which concern you would like to explore, let's see if you can form it into a question.

Lara: [Reply is swift.] That's easy. What can I do to stop sabotaging myself at work? After all, it was my boss who sent me here to talk with you.

Margaret: Very good, Lara. Now we are ready to begin Brainstorming options to respond to your identified question. Without worrying about limitations, about what or how you'd accomplish it, why don't you tell me about all the ways that you could answer this question. [Her brainstorming is recorded on the left side of the stick figure.]

Lara: [Lara smiles as she begins to list her options.] (1) I could get another job (that way I don't have to worry about what my boss thinks), (2) I could just keep doing the same things I am doing now, (3) I could tell my boss about all the other people's work I am doing (that way he would see that I am working), (4) I could tell my coworkers that I can't keep helping them with their work, or (5) I could tell them that I really can't help them until I have finished my own work. This is starting to be fun [she says as she continues identifying an additional three more options].

Margaret: [Margaret records each option and now reads the fourth prompt.] Lara, we are now ready to Reality Test all the options that you have identified [as she points to the listed information on the right side of the stick figure]. Why don't you tell me which options you would like to eliminate. Then, we can focus on only those that you believe could actually complete the response to your identified question.

Lara: [Lara is beginning to feel energized by the work she has completed and she smiles and begins.] OK, I know that I am not going to do Number 1. I like my job and I definitely want to keep it. I also know 2, doing the same thing in the future, will not work, so I want to scratch that one off also. I think I will keep Item 3 but drop Number 4. I kind of like 5 too. I can see myself finishing my work first and then helping my coworkers. I think I will eliminate the rest of the items.

Margaret: [Margaret encourages Lara.] Great job. Of the eight items brainstormed, you have three that you could actually do. Let's now talk about what it might look like if you actually did each of those three options, and remember, you are not making a commitment to actually complete them. The goal is to explore what it would look like if you did decide to follow through. What would be involved? How would it happen?

Lara: [Continues] OK, if I were to tell my boss about all the work I do, I would have to begin tracking everything I do, both for other coworkers and for myself. I think I could do that. As
far as doing my work first then helping others, I could just tell the others “no” so they would learn to not ask me. It could be my personal policy. And about the schedule, I could time manage for myself and leave time at the end of the day to help them with their work. Wow, I have some great ideas here! Now what are we going to do?

Margaret: Lara, we are now coming to the final steps—Encourage [the two feet of the stick figure]. This requires the creation of action steps. On the left foot, we will list those steps that you are planning to take. On the right foot, we will list the specifics of your plan. Here, we will include your time line, dates when you will begin, or anything needed to complete your plan. The encouragement intended with the development of your action plans comes with the recognition that you do have action steps that you can take in response to your identified challenge. Let’s begin. Remember, you need only list those steps you will take.

Lara: [Lara does not hesitate responding.] I can do that. I will create a schedule of everything I am doing and make sure I do my work first, and then if I have time, I will help my coworkers. I’m thinking if I do that, I will not need to do anything else. On the left foot, write that I will create a schedule for myself tonight and begin my new work rules in the morning. I will let my coworkers know that I will not be able to help them until (pause) the last 2 hours of the work day. Thanks, Margaret, this was great. I feel like I finally have some control over my life.

Margaret: Well, I am glad that you are feeling better, and I think you have completed a great deal of work with your plan. I was wondering, if you were to offer yourself a word of encouragement, what would that be?

Lara: [Lara’s reply is immediate.] I can do it.

After final review of the LIBRE Stick Figure and concluding remarks, Margaret offers Lara a copy of her LIBRE plan and suggests that they meet the following week to see how Lara is doing. Lara agrees, and the session ends.

LIBRE MODEL

The LIBRE Model (Guerra, 2001, 2005) offers a structured, goal-oriented, self-regulated framework (and ultimately a model) for action. Each of the steps of the model—listen to the narrative, identify the presenting issue, brainstorm possible solutions, reality test all options, and encourage as a plan is developed (Guerra, 2001)—serves as a basis for self-reflection, goal setting, and action planning. The structured dialogue between the counselor and client serves as a model for future independent client action and allows the counselor to operate within the client’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

The LSFT was developed as a visual analogue to the LIBRE process (Guerra, 2001, 2003, 2005). The familiar look of the graphic is intended to be assuring to the client and to guide the counselor and client through the LIBRE process in a manner likely to be easily recalled. In addition, the LSFT results in a written “record” that can be a reminder and cue for self-monitoring. After some preliminary exploratory research work, it was clear that the client problem approach and engagement style were discernible from both the manner and number of responses at each of the steps. After some additional clinical use, a scoring system was developed for the LSFT based, in part, on an adaptation of previous work by Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons (1986, 1988). However, the LIBRE approach resulted in an extension of their notion of self-regulation, which included the current thinking about engagement and attention (Guerra, 2005).
ENGAGEMENT

Furrer and Skinner (2003) referred to engagement as an active, goal-directed, flexible, constructive, persistent, and focused interaction with either physical or social environments. Bandura (1986) described a social-cognitive dynamic that involves an interaction between the individual, the environment, and behavior. It is the interaction between the three factors that determines personal action. Thus, problem-solving skill involves decision strategies, assumptions, values, feedback, and social experience all operating within a particular context. Problem solving therefore may become a challenge not so much because of a lack of knowledge but because the problem is not attended to. As a result, “low-grade” concerns are often the most troublesome.

Client engagement is important for establishing meaningful communications. Working relationships between clients and counselors grounded in strict, active listening enhance mutual trust and a sustained commitment (Tryon, 1990). Guerra (2005), in defining engagement, identified two dimensions: (a) initial attention, which involves groomed/conditioned social, cognitive, and behavioral responses when first encountering a new situation, and (b) sustained attention, which, much like self-regulation, involves the willingness to purposefully stay focused within the situation. The LIBRE Model (Guerra, 2001, 2005) and the LSFT can be used to explore clients’ engagement style, which is a composite of the expressed attentiveness at the beginning, during, and as sustained through to the close of the situation or transition to a new one. The LSFT protocol can later be reviewed to better understand and track the client’s line of thought, verbal expression, value system (e.g., financial, family), social sensitivity, emotional stability, self-awareness, goal setting, planning, and follow-through. For the client, this process, which includes a written record, provides an opportunity to process the self-identified concern with a method that is both reasonable and within the client’s personalized worldview. Similarly, goal setting and planning facilitate action (Bandura & Schunk, 1981) and help the client’s investment in execution of a self-developed action plan. This may be due in part to a greater likelihood of investment as a result of the self-regulation and self-control (Corno, 1986) attendant to LIBRE Model processing (e.g., Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Furthermore, Bandura’s (1986, 2001) explanation of human behavior as triadic reciprocality provides a framework for self-efficacy that tends to be stable unless further informed by the consequences of deliberate action. Triadic reciprocality refers to the mutual and concurrent influences of personal behavior and environment as both causes and effects. In essence, this notion suggests that a person’s behavior influences and is influenced by context and behavior, although either of these foci can be the object of consideration. Preliminary clinical work suggests that identified engagement styles are stable from one session to the next, whether continuing to deal with the initial problem or “moving on” to process the next.

Characteristics of the Engagement Framework

Engagement as an expression of interaction suggests that a “comfort zone” exists for receiving and processing information. Although self-regulation offers a broad
context to the individual-in-action (Anderman & Anderman, 2000), the introduction of an initial point of review (initial attention) at the onset of the session provides a basis for information about the client’s “potential for change.” Within the LIBRE Model (Guerra, 2001, 2005), the client’s freedom to control options and make decisions facilitates change because actions are the result of self-determination rather than compliance. Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons (1986, 1988) considered specific contextual learning strategies and were able to highlight the progress of self-regulation based on consistency between self-perception and action. Heider (1946) called it “balance theory,” and Festinger (1954) explained this occurrence as “cognitive consonance.”

Social-cognitive problem solving involves socialization and experiences with the environment and others (Chapman, Skinner, & Baltes, 1990). Engagement style (Guerra, 2005) identifies preferences for attending (to an identifiable setting) that enable better understanding of clients’ filtering and communication. Awareness of one’s sense of self and comfort with particular ways of being and doing influences the interactive dynamic between the behavior, person, and context. Thus, guided self-reflection sets the stage for the possibility that problem resolution may require an alternative style. Within the context of the LIBRE dialogue, this consideration may include (a) cultural influences (e.g., core values, beliefs can be identified), (b) environmental influences (in preliminary clinical work, these included financial, work, and social and family concerns and expectations), (c) cognitive influences of concrete/abstract conceptualization of the identified problem, and (d) the fluidness of processing the problem-solving activity.

Engagement Styles

Four engagement tendencies have been consistently identified in clinical study: actual engagement, potential engagement, goal-oriented engagement, and venting engagement.

**Actual engagement.** The client is open and relaxed and is observed as cooperative and invested in terms of behavior, cognition, and culture. The client generates a realistic and detailed plan of action and remains invested through the execution of the self-determined “solution.” In the presented vignette, Lara serves as an example of the actual engagement style.

**Potential engagement.** The client is not open, and the observed client behavior and dialogue are abstract and compliant. This pattern of interaction persists to the end of the activity. The self-identified plan is vague, is abstract, and, although generally addresses the problem, is insufficiently detailed to be likely to succeed.

**Goal-oriented engagement.** The client begins the session much like the potentially engaged client: closed and uninterested. However, personal investment increases tremendously once a personal goal is self-identified. The client becomes focused and intentional in the development of a specific, workable plan.

**Venting engagement.** The client is talkative, attentive, and ready to tell the counselor the complete story of his or her life. However, in listening closely,
the counselor realizes that there is minimal or even no interest in acting on any
identified challenge. A person with this engagement style usually does not gen-
erate an action plan to deal with a self-determined problem. The client may enjoy
the interaction; however, in many cases, the client frames all concerns in terms
of variables outside of his or her personal control. Therefore, there is no point to
even attempting to generate a realistic action plan.

Assessed Engagement

An engagement style hypothesis can be generated following a review of the LSFT protocol
content that includes available information concerning social-cognitive context. Expressions
of culture, environmental pressures, and affective and cognitive processing are considered
as the perspective from which to evaluate the client's operating values, self-awareness,
self-efficacy, and sociocultural responsiveness. This information, together with the client's
statement of the “problem” and the feasibility of the developed “action plan,” provides the
counselor insight into the client's problem-solving experience and investment, the client's
zone of proximal development or potential for change (Vygotsky, 1978). This information
can provide an important basis for treatment planning and subsequent client processing
because the LIBRE Model (Guerra, 2001, 2005) provides client feedback related to the
strengths and weaknesses of his or her engagement style in context with the particular
problem being addressed. Furthermore, the sequencing of the steps may facilitate counselor
efforts to enable the client to see and understand the implications of situational dynamics
and personal values and perspectives. The counselor using the LIBRE Model does not
intend to change the client. Rather, the effort is dedicated to providing a strength-based
perspective (vs. deficiency) and the freedom and safety to move away from a distressing
problem in order to get “unstuck.”

In the vignette presented previously, Lara was able to identify a plan that re-
lected her actual engagement style. Previous clinical experience suggests that
this is likely to be her preferred style in dealing with “problem situations.” Given
Lara's response to the LIBRE steps, it is possible to hypothesize that she is likely
to be concerned with others' judgment of her decision making and behavior and
desirous of their acceptance. The counselor may begin exploring with her the
impact of the hypothesized sociocultural sensitivities and personal perspectives
and the likely influence that these and other tendencies may have on her ability
to objectively self-assess, set goals, and self-monitor. As a result, for example, the
counselor and client may decide to explore the importance of applying appropriate
“filtering” to enable her to move from an extrinsic basis of action (reaction)
to an intrinsic one (deliberate proaction). In addition, the LIBRE Model (Guerra,
2001, 2005) can provide a framework for self-protective cognitions and actions and
allow for the development of adaptive, productive self-appraisal and action. This
is possible because the LIBRE Model encourages the safe exploration of many
different perspectives and potential courses of action without commitment to any.
The client is encouraged to establish a (healthy) balanced coping style that meets
sociocultural, environmental, and behavioral press of any situation.
IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYMENT COUNSELORS

Preliminary work with the LIBRE dialogue has resulted in significant and successful results in terms of client adjustment and problem solving, both from within counseling and independent of it. In addition, this work has facilitated the conceptualization of engagement as an important operational construct. Recognizing that engagement is reflected in differential attention responses to stimuli provides counselors a basis for developing hypotheses concerning client "style" in dealing with the world. Furthermore, the structured process allows many clients the temporary investment of affect in the process rather than a total investment on the problem. This "distribution" of affect can result in clients being able to move on an identified problem that they could not previously attempt.

In addition, when counselors use the LIBRE Model (Guerra, 2001, 2005) in counseling sessions, clients report the ready establishment of rapport and trust. They believe that their counselor really understands their particular perspective of the world. Furthermore, the systematic examination of the triadic basis of behavior with the LIBRE problem-solving activity offers a window into how the client sees him- or herself as a change agent. Once a trusting relationship and rapport are established and there is a mutual basis of understanding, the counselor is better situated to begin facilitating the processing of ineffective behavioral approaches to problems, especially when there is a mismatch between the environment and the client's personal engagement style. It is important to recognize that the issue is not an ineffective style but rather the appropriateness of the given style to a particular context and problem. The LIBRE strength-based client-centered dialogue shifts from problem focused to problem preventive (Bernard, 1991), often described as a developmental-preventive model.

Maslow (1968, 1970) described hierarchical needs as needs that, once met, motivate the individual to move forward. When counselors recognize and respond to a client's particular engagement style, the client often experiences a sense of comfort that offers safety and belongingness from which esteem can be developed and achieved. This in turn has the potential to facilitate the client's achievement of self-actualization—true freedom to self-define and select healthy engagement. In addition to facilitated problem solving, the counselor is able to support the emergent development of realistic "self-care" during the processing of personal, environmental, or behavioral challenges. Lara, for example, may need to learn that a filtered goal-oriented engagement style may offer her more options in coping with the pressures of work and the resultant stress. By observing and understanding herself (her engagement style and associated perspectives and her likely actions, including self-sabotaging tendencies), she will more likely be better situated to meet her goals.

CONCLUSION

The LIBRE Model (Guerra, 2001, 2005) and associated LSFT hold promise as a means of both providing structure for processing of problem situations, cognitions,
and affect and providing a basis for counselor generation of hypotheses related to the nature and extent of client potential for self-assessment, self-monitoring, goal setting, and the usual personal and individual context for these activities. One intention for the LIBRE Model and engagement style assessment is to create strategic processing options for balance between the external environmental expectations and individual “personalized” accommodation. In the example with Lara, she received a structured approach to the management of her engagement style and problem solving that she could use independently of counseling in future situations. As she realizes how demanding her job is, she may respond in the future by establishing boundaries, recognizing the difference between job-required demands and social press, and thus respond to situations with an appropriate degree of self-control and self-care without risk to self-esteem. This outcome prevents and insulates Lara from detached “destructive engagement” with self-blame and social isolation (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003) and provides her with a positive engagement repertoire that should enable her to deal with future demands strategically, thereby achieving greater success.

Finally, as Jacobson and Truax (1991) asserted, it is the clinical significance of clients’ progression from dysfunctional to increased functional states that is of import. Balancing the person-in-environment with behavior not only reflects a social-cognitive orientation, it also affirms the value of balancing self-awareness in engagement styles. Knowledge of preferred engagement styles provides critical information. The diagnostic assessment, although early in its development, holds promise for making and testing predictive hypotheses about typical client response in terms of engagement as conceptualized.

REFERENCES

Guerra, N. S. (2003). LIBRE Model Stick Figure. Unpublished instrument.