

Equipose and Equanimity in Motivational Interviewing

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Abstract

The spirit of MI bespeaks a kind of equanimity as a general characteristic of MI practice. This desirable counselor quality is quite distinct from the conscious choice of counselor aspiration: whether to strategically move toward a particular change target, or to intentionally maintain neutrality with regard to change goal (the latter being referred to as equipose). Both choices would involve equanimity, and both require intentional, conscious and skillful attention to the interpersonal dynamics of change talk that have been elucidated through the development of and research on MI.

Keywords

decisional balance, equanimity, equipose, neutrality

I will begin by confessing that I had forgotten I was to give one of the papers in this symposium. I thought I had only agreed to be the discussant. So, I went back to the hotel room last night and wrote the opening talk. These are simply some thoughts with much help from Steve Rollnick about this particular situation where you either don't have an opinion or you want to be sure that you don't exert influence on the process of a person moving one way or another. I've distinguished equipose from equanimity—the latter being a kind of balance or presence that we would like to have as a part of the spirit of motivational interviewing no matter what we're doing. To avoid strong advocacy and exerting your expertness and so forth is just a characteristic of MI spirit—to keep that kind of general balance. With equipose, though, we're really talking about a particular situation that has to do with counselor aspiration and the question, "Should I proceed to strategically favor the resolution of ambivalence in one particular direction?" I'm saying that equipose involves making a conscious decision of whether you want to do that or not. "Should I try to maintain a neutrality about this and carefully not tip the balance in one direction or another?" And I'm going to encourage very much that you be aware of which way you're going, and to make a conscious decision whether you are trying to steer in a particular direction or you're trying to avoid doing so. I further maintain that what we have learned about motivational interviewing is important here and helps us know to proceed. MI was originally developed for the former situation where you have the intention of resolving ambivalence in a particular direction.

So here are a few scenarios where you're faced with a client and you have to make that choice:

- One that I used in the 1983 article is a person coming to try to

get some help in deciding whether to have children. Now that, in my mind, very clearly is something that I should stay out of. It is not my business to tip the balance one way or the other, but it would be very possible if you're not aware of what you're doing to inadvertently favor going down one route without even realizing it, and that is exactly the scenario in my original paper.

- What about an adolescent who's considering whether to use condoms when having sex? Well, I'm a little more swayed by that one. So what decision will I make here? Am I steering in that direction or not?
- How about a man who is injecting speedballs into his veins, injecting combinations of heroin and methamphetamine, a very dangerous practice. Now I'm pretty clear on this one. Particularly if I work in an addiction treatment center, I'm wanting and expected to steer him in one particular direction.
- What about a drunk driver? Now here is someone who affects not only him or herself, but is endangering other people as well, and just on behalf of the social welfare I'm feeling inclined to not be in equipose here.
- What about a soldier, someone in the military, who, for whatever reason, is playing Russian roulette in his spare time, spinning the barrel of the gun and pointing it to his head? Well, I'm getting more urgent about my decision.
- What about a sex offender who's contemplating new victims?

So here we have a whole range of clinical situations, ranging from some where I clearly think, "No, I really want *not* to be influencing the person's direction of choice" to other situations where I am inclined very much to be steering the person in one particular direction.

I especially like something that Terri Moyers has offered us, which is "the waitress test." Terri says, "I want you to imagine a waitress who works on her feet ten hours a day, works very hard for the money she earns. She pays taxes on her earnings, and part of the taxes that she pays support my salary to be sitting in this chair and talking to this client. Would it make sense to her, would she be okay with my not having an opinion and not moving in any particular direction in these various situations?" I think there are some where clearly she would not be too happy with me just sitting there and not steering in one direction or another. It's a kind of common-sense equipose question.

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Within the model that Steve and I talked about this morning this comes up in the second process of focusing, where you identify a change goal. I would maintain, in fact, that the term “equipoise” doesn’t make any sense until you know a change goal, because it’s equipoise *about* something. So we have to have a particular scenario and then decide whether we’re in equipoise about a particular goal, and it should be a conscious choice. “I’m willing to pursue aspirations of moving the person in a certain direction,” or “I’m going to try to carefully not to tip their balance in one direction or the other.” If we go down the aspiration route then we’re into the latter two processes that Steve and I spoke about: evoking and planning. But what if you choose to go down the other route? What do you do then? Both of these choices involve equanimity. Both of them involve that kind of balanced way of being that we talk about as MI spirit. Both involve a collaborative approach. Both of them recognize that ultimately it is the other person who makes this decision, so it’s not any different with regard to spirit.

One thing that we know very clearly is that if you cause people to argue for a particular position on a consequential issue, one that matters to them, without any obvious coercion or heavyhanded influence, they are likely to move in that direction. That was the work of Leon Festinger with cognitive dissonance and of Daryl Bem in developing self perception theory. That was what Bob Cialdini (2007) described in *Influence*, a human tendency toward consistency with what we say, and it’s what we’re finding in MI process research, that you can evoke change talk and when you do that people tend to move in the direction of doing it, as long as they don’t feel coerced or unduly influenced. If you hold a gun to their head and say, “Tell me you’re going to change.” they don’t internalize that, but when the arguments emerge without there being any obvious coercion to do it, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. So I would maintain that understanding the psycholinguistics of choice is very relevant for keeping your balance in equipoise. If you want to avoid moving a person in one direction, then you should avoid differentially listening to and reinforcing change talk on one side of the argument, either consciously or inadvertently.

Now that is very different from client-centered theory and therapy. In client-centered counseling you wouldn’t worry about these things. You wouldn’t really be strategically pursuing goals, nor would you be strategically avoiding it. Truax (1966) did publish an article maintaining that Carl Rogers differentially reinforced certain kinds of client statements even though he was unaware of it and denied that he was doing it. Truax analyzed transcripts of Rogers’ counseling and found that he was responding differentially, conditionally, and I think it’s quite possible to do that without being aware of it. The psycholinguistics of motivation suggest that there are particular things to do to avoid this when what you choose is equipoise.

So how can you keep your balance? How do you not accidentally or unknowingly favor one direction or another? To me equipoise is exactly the situation where a classic decisional balance is the thing to do. You consciously give balanced attention to the pros and cons in listening, in what you ask about and where you ask for elaboration, in what you affirm, what you reflect and what you include in your summaries. All of the things that are directional within motivation interviewing become two sided, double sided when you’re doing a decisional balance, when your intention is equipoise. Decisional balance is an ideal tool to remember and use when you want to keep your balance and not inadvertently steer a person in a particular direction.

So is that motivational interviewing? It is certainly informed by MI research on change talk. If we didn’t know what we know about motivational interviewing, we wouldn’t know how to do this and wouldn’t even be worried about it. It does involve skillful guiding to explore both sides equally. Thus there’s still conscious intention and direction to it in that sense of working to keep your balance. You are surely using

engaging skills in listening to both sides of the dilemma—not just one side, but both sides of the dilemma. So it sounds a lot like motivational interviewing. It’s also clearly different from client-centered counseling. Yet Steve and I are provisionally persuaded that the answer to that question is “No.” It’s not uniquely motivational interviewing until there is a change goal and you’re strategically moving toward it.

My final point, however, is that it doesn’t really matter whether it’s called MI or not, because the question is “What’s the right thing to do when you’re in one of these situations and you want to be sure to maintain equipoise? What’s the best thing to do?” That to me is what matters much more than whether it is regarded as inside or outside the tent of motivational interviewing.

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