

CHAPTER 9

Client Control Dynamics and Control Stories

IN A control-based approach to therapy, one of the clinician's tasks is to bring the issue of control to awareness and to help the client recognize his or her own control dynamics. Some clients may have difficulty acknowledging that control is a problematic issue (e.g., where the client may be controlling, perhaps without acknowledging it; where the client is being controlled, perhaps without recognizing it).

In Chapter 8 we examined therapists' views of relationship, assessing the clinical concern, and techniques for addressing that concern. In this chapter we look at the dotted lines in Figure 8.1, from the client to each of those dimensions. But we must work on two levels here. One level is determining the client's views; the second level is the therapist's assessment and understanding of the client's views based on recognizing the client's control dynamics. Thus, for example, the dotted lines emanating from the client (Dimension 2) to the relationship (Dimension 3) represent not only the client's views of relationship, but also the therapist's understanding of the client's control dynamics that may be affecting that relationship.

The therapist can use three assessment tools to help pinpoint and bring to awareness the client's control issues. The first is by carefully and sensitively listening to client speech. Appendix C involves a detailed list of key words and phrases from our content analysis research of control-related speech samples of clients (Shapiro, Bates, et al., 1990, 1991). It is helpful to notice key words or phrases related to the client's control profile on the dimensions discussed throughout the book:

1. Sense of control: Is the client feeling in or out of control? Reflected in such phrases as "feel helpless, hopeless" "lost control," "don't believe I can make anything happen," and "feel incompetent."

2. Desire for control: Does the client want to gain more control in some area. Reflected by such phrases as "I want to gain more control," "I'm trying to get my emotions under control," and "I wish my spouse would do what I ask."
3. Agency of control: Does the client focus more on how others control him or her, or beliefs about whether they should be in charge? For example "My mom rules my life," "My boss is a tyrant," and "I know I shouldn't let my spouse boss me around so much."
4. Modes of control: Does the client seem to want to address the concern by changing the situation, or by learning to accept the situation? For example, "I wish I could lose these extra pounds" and "I want to make my child stop acting that way," versus "I want to learn to be happy as I am" and "I want to forgive my parents and move on."

The second way to assess the client is through the SCI. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Shapiro Control Inventory (SCI) provides a structured way to measure a person's control profile on the four control components. The third way is through helping the client understand his or her control story. This third form can be facilitated by information derived from the first two—listening to client speech and formal SCI assessment. The story, in turn, can add a depth and richness of qualitative understanding to the other two forms and help the therapist learn more about the client's control dynamics.

Stories about control are both necessary and inevitable. The stories may be conscious or unconscious, accurate or inaccurate. Part of the therapist's task is to help clients recognize the client's own control story, to see how that story may be affecting the client's assessment of the clinical concern, and to determine whether the story may be a problem in and of itself. Therefore, in this chapter we focus on understanding client control dynamics through an exploration of control stories. The chapter has three parts: an examination of the nature and sources of control stories; potential problems with control stories and difficulties getting clients to investigate their control stories; and a description of how to teach clients to modify, edit, and rewrite chapters to their control story that are inaccurate or no longer helpful (Kass, 1991).

NATURE AND SOURCES OF CONTROL STORIES

A man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them.

—Sartre, (1959)

Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control and self definition is telling stories . . . concocting and controlling the story we tell others—and ourselves—about who we are.

—Claxton (1994)

Control stories are narratives by which humans frame, explain, and understand events in their lives. Some stories are scientific, like the theories discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, which address issues of individual control. Other stories are cultural and religious myths about who humans are and their place in the cosmos. These stories help explain the world, creating meaning throughout the developmental life cycle, addressing individuals' need for a sense of cosmic perspective, and framing existential human concerns of identity (who am I?); direction (where am I going?), and purpose (why am I going there?).

The topic of narrative in psychotherapy has received increased attention (Sorbin, 1986; White & Epstein, 1990). One of the most important narratives to examine in psychology is that which relates to control, the client's control story. Clients' control stories tell why events happen, create a rationale to explain why they act the way they do, and predict how much control they can and should have in influencing the future.

Research over the past 20 years is convincing that our brain/mind constructs reality (Tart, 1972, 1975a, b; Sperry, 1985). This construction involves what individuals see, how they attend to it, and how they appraise what they see. One of the ways individuals construct reality is through the stories they tell about events. Clients' control stories arise based on responses to and cognitions about prior events in their lives. From that conditioning they create beliefs that guide their actions.

For example, research has shown the strong effect divorce has on children. In a landmark longitudinal study, Wallerstein (1989), found that 35% of children of divorce felt they were unparented because parents were too needy or preoccupied to care for them, causing feelings of impermanence, abandonment, and an altered sense of security. Several types of control stories may arise from divorce:

- Quadrant 4 (too little control) story line:
I am powerless to keep bad things from happening.
The world is not a safe place. Those who are supposed to protect me abandon me. There is no one I can trust to help me gain control.
- Quadrant 3 (over control) story line:
I caused them to break up. I have too much control in the world and don't know how to use it in a way that doesn't cause bad things to happen.

I need to rely on myself, for no one will be there for me. People I love will always leave, so to be in control I need to keep myself from getting close to others, always on guard, or I will be harmed. The more control I have, the less vulnerable I will be. It's all up to me, for the world is capricious.

Examining clients' control stories is a way to make explicit and overt how they felt about a particular event such as divorce (e.g., abandoned, loss of control) and the story they tell about that abandonment and loss of control, which may then influence their future behavior and actions. Thus, these stories are more than appraisals (Lazarus, 1981). Rather they are the worldview and cognitive set that clients bring to such appraisals, both primary (e.g., how serious is the concern?) and secondary (e.g., coping attributions of how competent they feel they are to deal with a particular situation).

Major thematic stories, such as those about control, once in place, become extremely important to that individual, helping determine how the individual subsequently acts and behaves. The story line becomes like a map, helping guide the individual through life. The story acts as a perceptual filter through which the individual receives and interprets certain sense inputs and information and rejects others. Thus, the story not only creates beliefs about reality, but it defines that reality. The perceptual and belief systems created through stories are as comfortable and normal to individuals as the pace at which they walk when alone. But stories are more. Like fish and water, the story line is really the material with which individuals surround themselves and through which they swim. It is a life support that holds them up, gives coherence and meaning to their life, and becomes the glasses through which they see the world and a prime determinant of their motivation.

THE STORY-CONSTRUCTING BRAIN/MIND

The psychological need for a sense of control affects a person's perceptions, and hence affects the control stories individuals create. The brain/mind appears to have evolved in such a way as to help humans create the experience of a sense of control in life when things are disordered or chaotic or when the person feels a loss of control (Sperry, 1993). For example, the existential psychiatrist Yalom (1980) noted that our brain's perceptual neuropsychology is such that it instantaneously patterns random stimuli as well as looks for meaning, an explanation.

Even when no real order exists, such as a collection of random dots, the brain/mind attempts to develop order to give a person a sense of control. If

it is not able to create such a sense of control, then there are uncomfortable feelings. The brain/mind similarly seeks meaning out of chaos through the creation of stories.

As illustrated by an example from Sperry's (1985) split-brain research, these stories can be created quickly to help an individual make order out of circumstances that seem confusing. Sperry studied individuals whose corpus callosum connecting the two hemispheres had been surgically cut to help prevent future episodes of epilepsy. He found that our left brain, which is primarily where linguistic, linear knowledge is processed and exhibited, is our story constructor. Further, this story-constructing left brain is willing to comment on matters it knows nothing about.

During one routine test of a female patient's ability to make visual discriminations, Sperry showed slides of a household object, and a nude woman, among others. Using a tachistoscope (which flashes pictures very quickly), he was able to project the picture only to her right hemisphere. Thus, the right hemisphere perceived the slides, but the left did not. The picture of the nude woman caused a sudden change of expression in the participant, and her face reddened as she laughed nervously. "What's so funny?" Sperry asked. Forced to rationalize an embarrassed response to something it had not seen, her left hemisphere replied, "I don't know, nothing, oh, that funny machine."

By attributing her laughter and reddened face to the funny machine, the woman's left brain created a story to make her feel more comfortable and in control. This example is not an aberration based on a split-brain patient, but an illustration of how quickly the brain/mind constructs a story when faced with unclear and ambiguous situations. Further, most individuals are not even aware that they are constructing stories, small and large, or that often the stories are inaccurate.

It is important to emphasize—to ourselves and our patients—that the brain/mind is not consciously fabricating a lie. Individuals believe their beliefs as if they were truth. A large part, quite possibly the major part, of our mental actions, and even our behavior, is carried out mindlessly but with an evolutionary purpose: to give us a sense of control. Such story constructing occurs both regarding small events—e.g. when an individual is confronted with an ambiguous or confusing situation (as in Sperry's research study), when their efforts are not successful on a task (e.g., I was tired, the task was too hard)—and larger ones, such as how individuals seek to find meaning and a sense of control when there is adversity or tragedy (Thompson, 1981; Weisz & Rothbaum, 1984; Wortman & Brehm, 1975). That meaning will inevitably involve some story about why the event makes sense (i.e., there is a higher purpose, it is something I can learn from). Thus, control stories provide perceptual control, a known world in which to live, thereby removing chaos and providing the individual with order and predictability. Further,

for many the story allows them to either be behaviorally competent, or to explain times when they are not in a way that makes them feel cognitively competent—correct and justified in how they are living.

EXAMINING OTHER SOURCES OF CONTROL STORIES

Stories are often haphazardly assembled from these bits and pieces of information and experience, and seldom carefully and thoughtfully evaluated. One of the brain/mind's functions is to create stories, but there are also many other sources that influence the nature of the stories created, such as personality, parental upbringing and childhood events, crucial experiences in love and work, point in the life cycle, cultural context, and religious and philosophical training.

For example, we have seen that the cultural context may place varying emphases on the importance of acting assertively (e.g., in the United States) versus learning to yield and harmonize (e.g., in Japan). Different religious and philosophical traditions likewise can be seen as having a continuum regarding the importance of human action and agency (Smith, 1983). Some, such as Zen, existentialism, and stoicism, place primary emphasis on self-agency. Others place more emphasis on grace, salvation, or yielding to a benevolent God or the natural way (e.g., Amidha Buddhism). From these views, individuals learn stories both about the nature of the universe and the nature of self.

In this section, for illustrative purposes, we are going to explore parents as a source of control stories. Although only one of many sources, few would deny that parental styles and family dynamics are an important contributor to a person's control story. Often the control story comes from styles of parenting (Baumrind, 1966, 1993) or the family rules. Issues of dominance and too much control or neglect and too little control are common themes. In the following sections we explore three ways upbringing that affects a person's control story: direct and indirect messages from parents regarding control, which are then internalized and affect the child's story; the effect of family dynamics; and the influences of different styles of parenting.

DIRECT AND INDIRECT PARENTAL MESSAGES ABOUT CONTROL

Parental messages about control can be made directly and verbally. They also can be modeled directly through actions. Other messages are more implicit. For example, if a child feels that he or she is reinforced only for performance, a control story that may develop is "I am not lovable as I am; I

can only be loved for accomplishment." Such a message may never be directly stated, but only indirectly conveyed. Similarly, if parents make a fuss when the child looks nice, the child may come to internalize that "Control of my appearance is important. Being loved depends on how I look." Other indirect messages conveyed either through actions or reinforcement patterns involve issues such as Is the world I live in a place of safety and trust? Can I rely on powerful others to help me? How much of my efforts for control should be directed toward helping myself? How much toward giving to others?

Sometimes parental messages are more direct and overt. Below are some examples relating to assertive and yielding modes of control, as well as emotional control. Some parental messages relate to the assertive mode: "You're too easygoing. You let friends take advantage of you" (i.e., be more assertive). Some relate to the yielding mode: "Don't stand out; learn to get along" (i.e., be more yielding). Some messages are about agency: "You're able to accomplish whatever you want" (self as agent, positive assertive). "You will never be able to succeed without effort." Some messages are about how love and anger should or should not be expressed "Learn to control your emotions. It is not feminine to show your anger." "Men don't cry or hug."

Some patients have seen modeled and therefore have internalized that anger and aggressiveness can be a source of power to effect control in a Quadrant 1/Quadrant 3 manner, to get what they want.

STORIES FROM FAMILY DYNAMICS

Sometimes the control stories emerge from family dynamics. For example, those growing up in abusive homes, or with alcoholic parents, may develop a high desire for control due to the chaos and lack of boundaries that occurred within their home of origin. Stories that can emerge include:

- "I have to learn to protect myself, for no one will do it for me."
- "I must learn to be in control at all times. Look what happens when someone loses control."
- "The family (my world) depends on me to keep it together. I must not only control myself, but control (rescue) them."

Many clients have parents whom they felt were too Quadrant 3, overcontrolling. They view their parents as intrusive, overprotective, and too judgmental, imposing too many limitations and rules (Baumrind, 1966, 1993). One client commented, "My mother tried to run my life, always interfering and trying to dominate me." Another noted, "My controlling and suffocating parents made me feel powerless as a child."

The next question is what lesson did the client bring away from this style of parenting, such as the following:

- "Powerful people are scary, and I should avoid them. I can never win."
- "I need to be careful when I assert myself, for I will be punished and told my efforts are insufficient."
- "If I don't assert myself, I will be smothered."
- "I have to keep people at arm's length or they will violate my autonomy, competence, and independence."

One female client commented:

Both our parents felt it was their God-given right to control, pass judgment, and set standards for us. They constantly told us to stand straighter, stand taller, and speak better, even in front of strangers. We could never do anything that was good enough. Even as adults, we were criticized for the way we were raising our children, the style of our clothing. Our parents are both dead, but my brothers and I still feel pangs of inadequacy from their constant criticism.

After letting this client know through paraphrase and active listening that we heard her concerns, we asked her what control story she took away from her parents' judgmentalness. She commented that she realized she had internalized a doubt that she could ever do a good enough job: "I always second guess myself. I do not feel I am adequate to competently exert control in the world in an effective manner."

Another client, Tom, was born to older parents who adored him. His mother said he was everything to them; his father took an almost obsessive interest in his day-to-day events. They had grandiose expectations for him, and praised his great gifts. When he tried to separate from them, they became hurt and angry. Part of him believed if he left them to start a life on his own, his independence might literally kill them with grief. Yet he also felt suffocated and wanted to leave; and then felt guilty for wanting to leave the very parents who loved and needed him: "I am so important that I control individuals' lives in my own hands. I have to weigh every action so carefully, as if it is a life-and-death decision." We discussed how such a story could lead to a type of paralysis on a number of fronts. For example, when he thought about choosing a profession, Tom felt it had to be correct, "for I cannot allow myself to fail."

STORIES FROM OVERLY LAISSEZ-FAIRE, WITHDRAWN FAMILIES

On the other end of the continuum are those clients who feel their parents were not available enough, too distant, uncaring, self-preoccupied, or lais-

sez-faire. As one male client said, "My father and mother never treated me as important. My father was emotionally austere and uncommunicative, my mother a withdrawn cold fish." His feelings of lack of love from unavailable parents caused a story in which he had little control: "I desperately want to be loved, yet feel unlovable . . . that I don't have the ability to make people love me. I'm always trying to please an aloof father and a nonresponsive mother."

One woman client said "Even when I start to get close, I remember my absent father and fear that my partner will eventually leave me. To protect myself from this I sometimes try too hard to please him, which he sees as overcontrolling; and sometimes I pull back and withdraw to protect myself, which of course also harms the relationship."

If the parenting was too permissive, the person may long for order and structure from an external source, such as in the following control story: "If my parents had cared about me, they would have given me more guidance. When others guide me, they aren't trying to control me, but to give me caring feedback." However, a patient may also resent order and structure, as in the following story: "I am so special I should have the right to control my own life and not have to answer to anybody." Of course, some patients maintain both control stories simultaneously, and thus have a resulting push/pull ambivalence toward structure and guidance.

MIXED PARENTAL MESSAGES AND STYLES

Jane felt her father was too domineering and her mother was weak willed, caving in entirely to the demands of her father. Her control story was "If I don't stand up for myself, men will control me." Conversely, John felt his mother was the powerful one in the family, made all the decisions, and henpecked and nagged the father to death. He internalized a similar fearful message regarding the opposite sex: "I need to be careful of, fear, and not trust women's power. Women will run all over me if I am not in control of my life. I'll never allow myself to be so weak and give up so much control and power in a relationship."

Freud (1959) assumed that prior conditioning would lead to a repetition compulsion. A person with a cold, domineering father would in turn pick a domineering suitor. The overt story may be "I want someone warm and caring" but unconsciously, the person may fear intimacy, or the person may not be satisfied with someone too easily won and seek an unattainable partner.

That scenario may sometimes be correct. However, it doesn't necessarily follow. For example, a person with a domineering parent may fear being controlled, develop a control story that says they must have control so "No one will ever again tell me what to do." They then may choose a more passive spouse. Or the person may go from a dominating relation-

ship with parents to another dominating relationship with a spouse, with a story that "The world is not a safe place and I am not capable of getting my needs met without another's protection. I didn't like being dominated, but maybe I'm not capable of handling the situation myself and need another's help."

Again, there may also be ambivalence. If a daughter's dad was "Mr. Macho," her conscious mind may reject the pattern, but she may unconsciously hold potential males to the same macho standard. An overt control story integrating the ambiguity might be "Men better not be so strong that they control me, but they better be strong enough to protect me."

PROBLEMS WITH CONTROL STORIES

When pickpockets meet a saint, all they see are pockets.

—Anonymous

If a hammer is the only tool you have, all problems look like the head of an undriven nail.

—Abraham Maslow

We often use these quotes with our clients to illustrate the idea that stories and perceptions may be limited. Clients can provide an explanation and organization to events, yet the story may be inaccurate or skewed (Sperry, 1985). The first quote underscores that a person's beliefs (e.g., control stories) determine what we perceive. If the story and perspective are limited, then a person's view of reality is similarly biased and diminished.

The second quotation indicates how a narrow perspective can cause faulty strategies for gaining control. For example, if clients have a control story that posits that only through being assertive and making changes can they be in control and see themselves as competent and special, then they will use only an assertive mode of control in addressing all clinical (and other) concerns. Sometimes that mode will be effective; other times it will be misplaced. As we saw in Chapters 4 and 5, efforts to seek and gain active control are not always healthy and can cause individuals to seek to control others or themselves inappropriately.

Further, when such efforts are not successful, individuals may then create stories that distort reality, involve denial, or seek to maintain unhealthy illusions of competence through automatic strategies—such as finding scapegoats to blame—to provide them with a sense of control and protect their competent and special self. By creating these stories about why it is okay that they were not successful, the brain/mind allows individuals to continue to feel competent and in control. However, such control stories are limiting, causing a client's subsequent experience to be restricted, inaccurate, and distorted.

EXAMPLES OF QUADRANT 3 AND QUADRANT 4 CONTROL STORIES

Many who have experienced times of hurt in their lives develop a control story which states that happiness and well-being require that they be in complete control in their lives (a Quadrant 3 control story). In this way, they hope to never again have to experience being powerless or vulnerable. This story may either cut them off from other people or cause them to impose their own rules and preferences on others. They may feel the need to appear to others (and themselves) perfect and in charge at all times. Such Quadrant 3 overcontrolling behavior can be seen as a direct result of their control story.

For others, past hurts can lead to a story of the self as dependent, passive, powerless, and helpless (a Quadrant 4 control story): "The world is fearful and I am helpless; I have no control in my life." At first glance, it may not seem like such a control story would give a person much of a sense of control. However, there can be a secondary gain, for the story keeps the patient from taking risks and allows him or her to live in a sheltered, cocoon-like existence. Further, it allows the patient to make cognitive excuses about how he or she is not responsible: "I am not to be blamed if anything bad happens in my life. It's not my fault, for I don't have control." Finally, such a story and the resulting behaviors and actions may force others to revolve their lives around the timid person, doing tasks for them.

These control stories may give clients a sense of control, even though they are limiting and even self-destructive. Control stories that lead their creators to develop too much self-protection, too much need for control, can be as problematic as those that lead to too little self-protection, too little desire for control.

Thus, it is important to help our clients understand their control stories, small and large, because the explanations embedded within them, even if inaccurate, can become determinants of future actions. Clients can learn to investigate, evaluate, and, as appropriate, modify their stories. However, getting a client to recognize their control story is not always an easy task, as discussed in the next section.

DIFFICULTIES RECOGNIZING CONTROL STORIES

One of the main problems in helping clients investigate their story about control is that they may not even realize there is a story. They may believe, as in dreams, that what they are perceiving is reality.

In each person's control stories, he or she is the central character. Whether victim or hero, he or she is crucial to the plot. Further, some con-

control stories make the client correct, giving a sense of control through competence, justifying behaviors and actions. Stories may reduce psychological tension by explaining why it is appropriate that a person acted or didn't act as he or she did.

For example, clients who were taught to believe that control can only be effectively exercised by altering and changing will inevitably and reflexively see the use of a yielding mode of control (Quadrant 2) as exercising too little control (Quadrant 4). Therefore, every time they feel themselves starting to yield and accept in a situation, they will immediately feel a discomfort—both in their bodies and their minds—that something is not right. Even if they are not able to verbalize what the problem is, behaviorally and cognitively they will try to find a way to alter the situation and exert control. This response is part of a deeply ingrained control story.

In the preceding example, there may also be two levels of the story: conscious and unconscious. A person may consciously perceive himself or herself as competent and see the situation as one in which they are acting too passively and need to exert active control. However, on an unconscious level there may be a fear that the person is not as competent as he or she would like to believe, and therefore to give in and "surrender" would only reinforce this below-the-surface view the person has of himself as passive, wimpy, and ineffective. This would further the person's feelings of a need to exert active control.

It is sometimes difficult for people to believe that the brain/mind is creating and constructing stories about reality rather than just perceiving reality (e.g., passive people are ineffective, winners are heroic). Thus, it is difficult for individuals to recognize the underlying control-related assumptions in their story and to pinpoint when and where the stories are life enhancing, when self-defeating. These assumptions are frequently unconscious and deeply embedded, and can involve long-standing habit patterns by which individuals both guide and explain their own behavior.

RESISTANCES TO EXAMINING CONTROL STORIES

Three problems make examining control stories difficult. First, life is ambiguous. It is often difficult to know what portion of success and competence come from skill and what from luck, what is an illusion of control and what is actual control, when an individual is seeing a situation clearly as no longer worth striving for, and when he or she is rationalizing out of laziness. In these ambiguous situations, individuals can selectively filter data that confirm their control story and therefore feel no need to examine it.

Second, many clients may have a push/pull response when it comes to control. On the one hand, they like the results and benefits of control, want

to appear as if they have a sense of control about their lives, and do not like to be controlled. On the other hand, they do not like to appear to others—or to themselves—as if they are controlling. Some people may have negative associations with the term *control*, perceiving it to involve domination, manipulation, and even power hungriness. Again and again, we have heard clients say “I’m not interested in control. I just want to be left alone to do what I want.” Yet it is clear they do in fact want control. They may not want overt control and responsibility over others, but they do want enough control to ensure others give them space and freedom to do as they wish.

Third, control stories feel natural, like the way we walk. Examining the story may cause awkward self-consciousness and feeling of loss of control, not dissimilar to focusing on observing the way one’s hands swing while walking in relationship to the steps you take.

TWO EXAMPLES OF RESISTANCES

Two examples may help illustrate this unwillingness to examine control stories overtly. The first involves a couple we saw in therapy. One of the multiple problems they were having with each other involved the issue of manners. The wife felt that when the husband burped, politeness required him to say “excuse me.” The husband responded with annoyance, saying that his wife was trying to control his behavior, to which his wife replied, “I am not trying to control you, this is just a question of common courtesy.”

There are many ways in which issues can be framed. Certainly, an “excuse me” after a burp is common courtesy. However, based on our definition of control—“the ability to cause an influence in the intended direction”—the wife was trying to influence her spouse’s behavior in the direction of common courtesy. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this effort for control. However, it took a considerable amount of time for the wife to acknowledge that she was, in fact, trying to actively control his behavior. At the same time, we worked with the husband to recognize that he had a freedom reflex that prevented him from hearing feedback that might be constructive.

A second example occurred several years ago while we were in Japan studying stress among business executives. During an interview with a major executive at one of Japan’s largest banks, we asked what he did for relaxation. He replied that several evenings a week, and on the weekends, he worked in his Zen garden with bonsai plants. He described the way in which he would use wires, rope, and scissors to bind the limbs of the plants to keep them small, grow in the direction he liked, and twist in ways that he felt were pleasing and harmonious.

When asked if controlling the bonsai allowed him to gain a sense of relaxation, he replied, "Oh, no, I do not control the bonsai at all," he stated. "I merely allow them to be a harmonious part of nature." We continued to talk about control—the ability to cause an influence in the intended direction. When asked whether, regardless of intent, he could at least see what he was doing to the bonsai as a type of active control, he thought for several minutes, nodded, and then said to me, "Am I a bonsai of my boss?"

All of us, clients and therapists, are immersed in control stories even if we do not recognize them. Metaphorically, sometimes we are someone's bonsai, sometimes we create bonsais.

Because clients are in many ways controlled by their own stories about control, it is critical to help them ensure that their stories are as accurate and helpful as possible. Each person is different in the degree to which he or she identifies with a particular domain at a given time in life and the amount of active control he or she feels it is important to have. Yet, even though a client may believe in the truth of his or her story, or may not even recognize that a story exists, the story may simply be inaccurate, misplaced, or outdated. However, by adhering to it, the client continues a self-fulfilling prophecy and pattern that may be limiting. Only when people can recognize their stories are they in a position to decide if they want to edit or change them.

EDITING AND REWRITING CONTROL STORIES

Client control stories affect the therapeutic relationship (transference). They also affect the way the client assesses the clinical problem, and, in turn, which techniques the client feels will be most helpful. Our focus as therapists is on helping individuals to gain a higher level of control in their life, to teach them to rewrite, edit, adapt, and, if need be, add new chapters to change their control stories and ultimately their lives—including attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, emotions, and behavior—in more life affirming, healthy, and growth-oriented ways.

The therapist can be particularly helpful to the client in making the story overt and conscious. For example, an angry client who does not acknowledge her own feelings may project that emotion onto the external environment: "My husband is angry; my boss is upset with me." The client feels that what needs to be controlled is the husband's anger or the boss's displeasure, and focuses on how to defend against attack. But in totally identifying with her story, the client does not "see the story" or learn to look at her own emotions and recognize what she can learn about herself.

It's impossible for individuals to investigate their stories unless they can differentiate themselves from their stories and look at them objectively. The

process is similar to what Piaget (1952) and others (e.g. Wilber 1993) have noted regarding self and environment: It is only when a person differentiates from the environment—distinguishing self from not-self—that he or she learns to operate on the environment. To control the story rather than being controlled by it, the person needs to differentiate and separate from the story, see it almost as if it is outside himself or herself (Wilber, 1983). Then the person can learn to perform higher-level control operations on it: to edit it in more adaptive ways.

AN EXTERNAL RORSCHACH VIGNETTE

As a way to make these issues of a person's control story and dynamics overt in the therapeutic setting, we have developed an exercise utilizing an external situation of control to help the client explore his or her internal control dynamics. The first purpose of this exercise is to have the client learn how he or she would most likely respond in the situation, which gives insight into the client's current control story and dynamics. The second part is how the client would like to respond, which provides information about how he or she would like to edit and rewrite his or her control story.

In our control-based research program we have developed several standardized vignettes and coded and categorized individuals' reports of their normal and desired response. The following is an example of one such vignette: "You and your spouse have agreed that your spouse will water the plants. You notice that the plants are beginning to wilt. What do you do?" We listen to the client's answer, and then ask the client to rate it based on our four-quadrant model: Do they feel it is positive assertive, overcontrolling, positive yielding, or evidencing too little control? How the client views his or her behavior provides insight into the client's control story and dynamics.

For example, some note that they would say nothing and let the plants die. If the spouse doesn't honor the agreement, that is the spouse's problem and the spouse should suffer the consequences. "I'm tired of always being the responsible one and having to take care and rescue my spouse from his (her) laziness and bad habits." Some would see this as positive assertive position, taking a firm stand. We view it as potentially passive (Quadrant 4) and aggressive (Quadrant 3). There is no direct communication and sharing (too little control), yet a willingness to let plants die to make a point (overcontrolling).

Others state that their normal strategy would be to become angry and even yell at the spouse for lack of follow-through, or try to find a way to retaliate—such as withholding verbal or physical intimacy. "I am not willing to act weak and passive anymore. I'd feel like a wimp if I watered it for my spouse. This is just one more area where I am being pushed around." Again,

the client may see this response as positive assertive and that to yield would be passive and weak. We see it as negative assertive (overcontrolling). Positive assertive would be clear, direct communication, and a mutual agreement about consequences.

Some have stated that they would water the plants and see that as negative yielding, passive and accommodating from fear of the spouse, or unwillingness to stand up for their side of the agreement. They often have control stories that emotional control is necessary, expressing anger is negative, and assertiveness only escalates into control battles and can't be trusted.

To help individuals rewrite their stories involves providing them with a model in which they can move from Quadrant 3 and 4 responses to any of several possible Quadrant 1 and 2 responses, used either alone or in combination. We begin by acknowledging where they are and how they feel their response is helpful in providing them with a sense of control in the situation. We then point out that every situation in life, no matter how small or seemingly trivial, provides a potential opportunity for increased self-understanding. What is needed is to step back and consider the glasses being worn in the situation (the control story), and the alternative choices available.

THE CORRECT MODE: REWRITING STORIES

In our clinical practice, we work to help individuals realize the problems that can occur when a Quadrant 3 (overcontrolling) and/or Quadrant 4 (too little control) mode is utilized. We then work with them to envision what positive mode—assertive or yielding—would be most helpful to them.

Our view is that there is no right answer in terms of a Quadrant 1 or 2 response. The client's answer in many ways depends on a deeper understanding and exploration of his or her individual circumstances and the story he or she brings to the situation. For example, some people are in a developmental stage where it is important for them to assert themselves, to go from Quadrant 4 to Quadrant 1. We then work on positive assertive strategies. Others are at a point where they are realizing the potential problems and limits of being too ego-oriented and self-focused (a shift from Quadrant 1 to Quadrant 3) and their goal is to better harmonize and interrelate with others. To these individuals we teach a Quadrant 2 positive yielding mode.

We also emphasize two additional points. First, the two positive control modes are not exclusionary choices, but may be situationally appropriate at different times in the life cycle (e.g., what is positive assertive with a child at one stage may be overcontrolling at a later stage) or in different situations and domains in a person's life (e.g., what is positive assertive in the work world may be overcontrolling in the domain of the relationship). Second,

the client needs to become clear about his or her own control story, dynamics, and needs, so that he or she is comfortable with the mode choice. (In Chapter 10 we explore an exercise to help the client investigate his or her ambivalence regarding the different modes.) Clarifying client goals is critical because how a mode is perceived is often subjective.

What the client may feel is acting positive assertive (making clear consequences for an action), the spouse may call overcontrolling. Similarly, what the client may see as positive yielding (not making too big an issue of a minor situation) a friend or coworker might say is acting like a victim, passive, and reactive (Quadrant 4). Helping these clients become aware of their views of each of the four modes is an essential step in helping them making wise choices regarding assessing the problem and the subsequent choice of intervention.

Part of the question clients need to ask is whether they would rather err on the side of feeling too accommodating and passive in addressing the spouse's lapses, or prefer being too assertive and nagging. The answer to that question helps clients recognize their control story, their fears, and their views of the shadow side of assertiveness and yielding. We also ask these clients to explore their stories about emotional control (i.e., is it positive to control one's emotions, or is it better to express those emotions openly?).

ADDING NEW CHAPTERS: TECHNIQUES FOR USING BOTH MODES

In any situation, initially all emotions should be acknowledged and the client should accept that is how they are feeling. These emotions provide the client important feedback. Having experienced the emotion, the client should try to stand back and observe it, almost like a writer observing his writing, or a painter the palette. Such a stance gives distance, reduces fear, and creates space between the individual and the emotion so it becomes easier to not be so identified with the emotion and to better accept both the emotion and the feedback it is offering: "Yes, I am angry. I feel I have been taken advantage of."; or "Yes, I feel helpless; it seems like agreements mean nothing to my spouse."

Rather than being caught by these emotions, the client can see that emotions serve as an opportunity for recognizing that they are uncomfortable with the current situation. Such a recognition can in turn allow them to rewrite the situation in a way that can provide a higher-level sense of control. For example, clients may recognize that their anger is justified and that they should accept and not punish themselves for what they feel. After such acceptance, they can learn to deal effectively with such an emotion, deciding whether they want to change the anger into a place of forgiveness and healing, or into healthy assertive confrontation.

They could clearly and directly tell their spouses that they are uncomfortable with the plants not being watered, and would like the agreement to be honored. They could note that the plants are not being watered and ask if a new compromise agreement needs to be worked out (e.g., "We are a team. Both of us have agreed that the plants need to be watered. I'd be willing to pitch in and water the plants for you, but would like you to help me by doing the dishes while I do that."). They could even decide to water the plants not from a place of victimhood or feeling taken advantage of, not indulging in self-pity, but focusing on the life-giving consequences of their behavior and their generosity of spirit.

Again, what is important is that clients recognize their control stories and dynamics, and learn to move from Quadrant 3 and 4 behaviors and cognitions toward a script involving Quadrant 1 and 2 modes of control. It's clear that negative assertive and negative yielding responses are lower-level and less-skillful responses. By knowing the skills of both positive modes, clients increase their understanding and eventually their behavioral repertoires of positive coping styles.