

Towards Wise Decision Making 4 – A Case Study

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Introduction

In our previous papers in this series we have been following the strategy, based loosely upon Aristotle's method¹, of reviewing the literature to integrate the best into a philosophically-based procedure, called 'Progress', which a decision-counsellor can use to help clients to make wise decisions. In order to accomplish this we have taken from the decision-making literature the logical stages of the decision-making process, and then created a synthesis with what we take to be the acceptable philosophical insights and methods relating to each stage. These philosophical insights and methods are related to the role of the emotions, values and critical and creative thinking.

Whilst we are confident on theoretical grounds that we have integrated much wisdom there remains, as ever, one key question: does it work? As philosophical practitioners this is not just a question of academic interest; we have a moral duty to our clients and to the discipline of practical philosophy to check that our methods work as we think they do, and to constantly seek to improve our ways of working². It was in this spirit that we instigated a pilot study of Progress. The study consisted in giving clients a pre-session questionnaire outlining their dilemma before seeking help, a three hour face-to-face session in which we use Progress to help them with their decision, and a post-session questionnaire in which they assess the benefits or otherwise of Progress for them.

This paper is not an account of that whole study, which is still an ongoing project. Instead, after providing a brief recap of the Progress method for new readers, we describe one case that is part of the study, that of Sara³, who was faced with a tricky

career dilemma. We will use this case as a springboard to an assessment of the counselling session with Sara and, more importantly, the Progress method.

1. Decision-Making Theory

The Stages Of Decision-Making

In order to make a wise decision the decision maker needs to evaluate their available courses of action - but how to do this well? In our previous papers we have argued that this requires the successful accomplishment of five stages⁴. These stages are listed in table 1 below.

The Skills of Decision-Making

The wise decision-maker needs to work through these stages exercising the four skills of emotional wisdom (Arnaud, D and LeBon, T (2000)), values wisdom (LeBon, (2001), critical thinking and creative thinking (LeBon, T and Arnaud, D (2001)). The particular philosophical skills used at each stage are summarised in table 2 overleaf⁵. The table illustrates both exactly what we means by these skills and also how they operate at each stage. What is not always obvious from the session, and so needs emphasis, is that whilst being inter-disciplinary in nature (for instance incorporating the ideas of management theorists like Covey (1992) and de Bono (1982)) Progress is to a very large degree influenced by philosophical ideas about each of these four skills. For example, to help clients gain 'values wisdom' we ask them questions inspired by thinkers such as Aristotle, Epicurus, Mill and the existentialists.⁶

example (indeed some aspects didn't go as planned). This case was selected on the pragmatic ground that it was carried out while we were writing this paper.

¹ Pursued in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 1999)

² This is by no means to suggest that the benefits of practical philosophy are easily measurable or can be reduced to facts and figures; it is qualitative rather than quantitative research that is called for.

³ The case is given with the client's full permission. Some identifying features of the case have been disguised or omitted. While we do not think that a single case is anything more than indicative of how successfully the procedure works, it is perhaps worth remarking that this case was not selected as an ideal

⁴ An additional pre-stage, needed on some occasions is spotting that you need to make a decision. For ease of exposition we ignore this stage here.

⁵ This table is adapted from LeBon, T and Arnaud, D (forthcoming in *Reason in Practice*)

⁶ For a more complete discussion of the philosophical nature of Progress see LeBon, T. and Arnaud, D. (forthcoming in *Reason in Practice*)

	Decision-Making Stage	Broad Description of Activities (of client, facilitated by the counsellor)
1	Clarifying the decision & understanding the situation within which the decision is located..	Become clear about what decision(s) you want to make and gain an accurate, fair-minded and full understanding of the relevant situation.
2	Identifying what matters.	Think up values relevant to this decision, and assess them.
3	Searching for options.	Generate options, in particularly by using your values to guide the search for likely options.
4	Choosing the best option.	Assess your options, by selecting the option that has the best chance of realising the greatest weight of your important values.
5	Carrying out the decision	Carry out your choice and assess how well your decision manages to realise your values, continuing, modifying or abandoning your decision as appropriate.

Table 1: The Five Stages of Decision-Making

Stage	Skill	Emotional Wisdom	Values Wisdom	Critical Thinking	Creative Thinking
Understanding the situation & decision		Emotions used as 'windows' to understanding the situation; Identifying how emotions can lead to perceptual distortions	Distinguishing judgements about what ought to be the case from those about what is.	Assessing beliefs about the situation for their truth	Lateral thinking about the decision; Reframing the decision
Understanding what matters		Emotions used as indicators of what matters	Identifying and assessing prudential and ethical values	Assessing what matters in terms of reasons	Thinking up what matters – generating potential goals and values
Searching for options		Emotions used as indicators of options	Using values as a guide to potential options		Thinking up potential options
Choosing the best option				Assessing options in terms of what matters	
Implementing the decision		Overcoming weakness of will; Using emotions to motivate us to action		Thinking up possible setbacks; Assessing effectiveness of decision	Thinking up contingency plans

Table 2: The Skills of Decision-Making at the Different Stages

2. Decision-Making Practice

The Progress decision procedure can be used either as a stand-alone process for clients who are interested only in making a decision, or by integrating it into an on-going counselling relationship when decision-making issues arise. In this article we focus on using it as a stand-alone process.

The Pre-Session Questionnaire

This questionnaire is sent to the client to fill-in before the session. Its purpose is to find out where the client currently stands in their decision-making quandary and to enable them to do some pre-session homework⁷. It is also a useful way for the counsellor to gauge what value they add to the client's decision-making as it provides a convenient way to make a before and after comparison.

The questionnaire asks the client to write about the following:

The decision they are trying to make

The situation they are in

What they would like to achieve

Their concerns and worries

Their current options, and these options' pros and cons⁸

How The Session Is Conducted

After some experimentation, we have found that one long session is an effective way to help people with their decision-making. The process is quite intense, and forward-moving with later parts of the procedure building on earlier parts. Doing the process in 'one shot' helps to maintain the momentum and prevent

⁷ On occasion the pre-session questionnaire provides the client with sufficient clarification that they feel they can make their decision on the basis of this alone – although when this has happened we have been uncomfortable that they might have rushed to judgement. Such decision-making might correspond to the type of decision, identified by James (1890, Chapter 26, p532), that comes after a long period of suspense when 'we find ourselves acting, as it were, automatically, and as if by a spontaneous discharge of our nerves, in the direction of one of the horns of the dilemma. But so exciting is this sense of motion after our intolerable pent-up state, that we eagerly throw ourselves into it. 'Forward now!' we inwardly cry, 'though the heavens fall.' By contrast some clients find thinking about their decision so hard that they can fill in little of the questionnaire.

⁸ These correspond approximately to the areas focused on in the session. Asking clients to identify their values and emotions often produces little response, whereas clients are able to write about what they would like to achieve and their concerns.

important material from being lost. Three hours often seems to be about the time needed for many people to work through the issues surrounding their decision, although this will of course vary depending upon many factors. If additional information needs to be acquired to understand the situation and available options better, or to work through difficult emotional material, the process can of course be split over sessions⁹.

The session begins with the client's narrative, time and space being given for the client to tell their story in their own way and to raise the issues that are troubling them. During this initial stage the client is likely to talk about the decision they want to make, the situation they are in, their concerns, what they want to achieve and what options they have thought of – in other words their narrative telling will cover material from all of the first four stages of the decision-making process.

Attempts by the counsellor at this point, to go deeply into values and options should, in general, be resisted.¹⁰ Firstly, the client is unlikely to be psychologically ready for this without first feeling understood and unburdening themselves, and secondly, any suggestions are likely to be off the mark as not based upon an accurate understanding of the clients' decision, situation and what matters to them. What the counsellor can do is start to form provisional hypotheses, to be tested later, about (i) the exact nature of the decision(s) the client is struggling with, (ii) any biased or inadequate understanding of their situation they might have, (iii) the emotions they are likely to be experiencing, (iv) what seems to be important to the client, and (v) possible options¹¹.

Once the counsellor feels that the client has told their story then it is possible to work through the decision-making stages. While doing this we record, in agreement with the client and in their full view, key

⁹ Counsellors wanting to fit the procedure into one-hour slots will obviously need to break it over several sessions.

¹⁰ Although they won't be gone into deeply, it is certainly worth noting values, emotions and options mentioned at this stage so they can be gone into deeply later.

¹¹ This should be taken as a general statement as different kinds of decision problems require different emphases. For example if you have little time available then asking about values (what really matters) is a very good way to start. There are also relevant differences between very emotional situations (where the unburdening needs to happen) and simply complex ones (where clarity is required) and other (less emotional, less complex) decisions. Flexibility is a virtue.

aspects of their thinking on sheets of paper¹² under the following headings¹³:

- Situation and decision
- Emotions
- Values
- Options
- Value/Option Matrix

Briefly what we aim to do is help the client to:

- Clarify the decision they wish to make.
- Test and expand their understanding of their situation.
- Become aware of the range of emotions they are experiencing, and any information and distortions implicit within these emotions.
- Become aware of implicit values, and assess these values, in particular for how important they are to the client.
- Become aware of different options open to them.
- Choose the option which best enables the client to satisfy the values that are most important to them.

3. The Case Study

Introduction

This case¹⁴ is part of an evaluation of the Progress decision-making procedure mentioned in the Introduction. In exchange for a free three-hour session the client agrees to fill in a pre- and post-session questionnaire.

Three methods for assessing the effectiveness of the procedure used here are to ask the client to assess the procedure through a post-session questionnaire, analyse key moments in the session, compare the clients' understanding of their decision according to a pre-session questionnaire with their understanding of their decision by the end of the session,

The Pre-Session Questionnaire

Sara, an administrator in her fifties, filled in a pre-session questionnaire indicating she had two related decisions that had been constantly on her mind for the last six months. She wanted to sort out her

¹² We have also, with the client's agreement, used laptop computers on occasion which has the virtue that the results of the session can easily be sent to the client after the session.

¹³ We suggest that these are the key categories to investigate for every decision – in addition other sheets can be used for other categories, such as 'to do', if needed.

¹⁴ The decision counselling in this case was conducted solely by David Arnaud.

priorities in her work and private life and decide whether to stay or move from her current job. She felt conflicted between wanting an easier ride in her work so she could have more time and energy left over for other activities and wanting to be more ambitious, between under-selling herself and over-reaching herself through false vanity. She wanted challenges but was worried that her age and the current job market meant she would have trouble getting the kind of job she wanted – whatever that was! She rated her decision 'very hard to make' because there were so many unknown factors and she was being pulled in opposite directions.

The pre-session questionnaire asked Sara to say what options she was currently considering and their pros and cons. This is what she wrote:

Option 1: Push hard for recognition in current post (i.e. a promotion)	
<i>Pros</i>	<i>Cons</i>
If I left I think I would need to be replaced at a higher level any way.	There is no money available to pay me any more
	'Overload problems' may continue and even more could be expected of me

Option 2: Look for a new job	
<i>Pros</i>	<i>Cons</i>
New challenge & a fresh start	Lots of experience could be wasted
	It might not work out
	Serious job-hunting is very time- and energy-consuming

Option 3: Do nothing very proactive and see how things work out over next year, possibly keeping an eye on job adverts to get a sense of the market	
<i>Pros</i>	<i>Cons</i>
Possibility of positive developments in present post	Wasted opportunities & wasted time

Sara indicated that if she had to choose right now she would probably pick option three because she lacked time to seek a new job or campaign for promotion, she lacked confidence in her ability to get another worthwhile job and she didn't know whether a new job would be the right one for her even if she got it.

She didn't have much confidence in this decision though.

The Session

The Situation

Why was Sara conflicted? What had been her path through life that had brought her to this particular crossroads? The session began with asking Sara to talk about the background to her current decision. Sara felt that she had in the past not directed her work life but rather 'gone with the flow'. Her previous employment had been mainly as an administrator in a variety of different charities. She tended to stay with a particular charity for a maximum of a couple of years before switching to another, either when she felt things go wrong or wanted a change of scene. Eleven years ago, she had started working as an administrator at an institute and for the first time had stayed with the same employer for an extended period.

In the recent past, the institute had expanded considerably, under the leadership of a dynamic and charismatic director. Sara had greatly enjoyed her part in this, taking on the central role in the administration of the institute. Recently the institute had run into problems. The director left to take up a post elsewhere and when the finances of the institute were inspected they were found they were in a terrible state. The director 'came, and saw, and spent' as a colleague of Sara's expressed it. The institute, currently running under a stand-in director was somewhat directionless, and one member of staff was being made redundant with other jobs, including Sara's, under threat; future funding was uncertain. The excitement had gone and a sense of plodding had replaced it.

Emotions

Such was the story told by Sara. Helping her to identify her emotions and what they were about brought four different, more personal, perspectives to her situation. Sara felt jealous and exploited. She had consistently worked a longer day than stipulated by her contract, doing a job that carried more responsibility than the grade she was employed at. She was jealous of other members of staff in the institute, whom, she felt, did less work and took less responsibility than her, but were better paid. Her resentments about how she had been treated were many and strong. She resented the extra time she had put in without adequate recompense, recognition or support from the personnel department, and resented the fact that other people seemed less proactive as she was in their work. She, and other members of the institute had had a love/hate relationship with the ex-

director. He was charismatic and dynamic but had shown little responsibility with regard to the extra work he generated for his staff, this work often resulting from failures of management, proper consultation, frequent changes of plan, and not responding to queries. He had failed to monitor the finances, and left the as it went into deep financial trouble. His charisma had carried the department along on a high, but he had also left a trail of anger and resentments when things turned sour.

It was not all jealousy, resentment and anger. Sara enjoyed the people she worked with, the people she helped, and the continuous personal interactions that were part of her job. She felt loyal towards her fellow staff. In many ways Sara was proud of the work she had done, believing she had played a part in creating a friendly welcoming atmosphere, provided well for the members of staff by having a 'can do' problem-solving attitude, and she saw herself as responsible and competent. She was proud of being able to deal with many different and challenging tasks at once. I¹⁵ wondered aloud whether Sara might currently enjoy her work more if she was not so troubled by her emotions of jealousy, anger and resentment. It was clear that she spoke with enthusiasm about her job as well as expressing a great deal of hurt. A thought experiment to try to determine what Sara would think of her job if the problems had not arisen confirmed her positive evaluation of much of her work in the post.

Her emotions revealed a third side to her situation too. She felt guilt over the financial problems the institute had run into, wondering whether if she had made keeping an eye on the financial situation a priority then the institute would not have its current difficulties. She did not think that this was really her job but was also frustrated with the lack of clarity over responsibilities and roles. Prior to the current crisis, Sara had proudly seen herself as a competent, proactive administrator but now felt that her confidence had taken a huge knock, and wondered whether a brighter person would have seen the financial problems coming. She would be less trusting in future. Because of this view of herself, she worried that she would not be promoted to a higher grade, as she would not be seen as worthy. She had previously taken the initial steps to apply for a promotion but had been turned down. She felt this decision had been unjust but she had not found the time and energy to challenge it. She explained that if she were to be turned down again she would have the suspicion that this would be because she was perceived as to blame for the problems in the or just not highly regarded. In any case she felt that the

¹⁵ David Arnaud

current financial circumstances of the institute made it a bad time to re-apply. This lack of confidence was one of the factors that had also stopped Sara from actively pursuing other work; while she worried that the job market was not good and that her age would count against her, more specifically she did not feel able to put on a front of confidence in interviews.

Finally Sara worried about making her decision in response to outside influences. Her partner was pressuring her as he believed that she was being exploited by the institute as she was working so many extra hours, and being employed below her proper grade. He thought she should not put up with this.

Assessing the situation

As we explored Sara's work situation further factors came to light. The acting director was much more aware of the time and energy demands made upon the administrative staff. There were also plans to find a high calibre replacement director. Throughout the session, Sara also explored various imaginative ways she had thought of to make her work more manageable. For example, Sara talked about setting aside dedicated time for dealing with financial matters, setting up a screen so she would be less visually available, cutting down the amount of times she looked at her email, and finding ways to help other people to solve their own problems rather than solving them herself¹⁶.

Values

Sara's description of her situation and our exploration of her emotions allowed the identification of what it was about her work that she valued:

Sara's work values

Salary
 Friendly people and team spirit
 Loyalty to colleagues
 Being realistic and responsible
 Being competent
 Sorting out problems & putting things together
 A buzz of activity
 A sense of mission to the work
 Being in the middle of things
 Having new challenges
 Being a big cog – having an important role in the team, and not being anonymous in a large department
 Having a break / doing something novel
 Time and energy to pursue other activities

In the pre-session questionnaire, Sara had written that one of her most important objectives was having a sense of self-respect. This, she explained, was connected to being loyal to her colleagues by not deserting a potentially sinking ship, and by feeling that she was competent in her job.

Sara had indicated in the pre-session questionnaire that the decision was over working out her priorities. She valued various activities outside work, such as developing new interests, family, friends, gardening and taking holidays. These were activities that had taken a back seat as her work left her feeling too tired. What she needed was more time and energy.

Options

When we next looked at the options available for her, (without, in this case, recourse to explicit brainstorming) Sara now identified the following possibilities :

Options

Staying with the institute and seeing what happens in the next year
 Telling the institute I am leaving unless certain conditions are met
 Actively looking for a new job while at the institute
 Giving notice to leave the institute and seeing what work turns up
 Taking a part-time job and cutting my expenditure

Note that her options had expanded from her original three options. One of the issues underlying the choice between these options for Sara was wondering whether to develop her career by advancing to become an official (rather than simply de facto) manager or move sideways into being a personal assistant (PA).

Sara was asked to engage in various thought experiments during the session. Earlier she had been asked to imagine how happy she would have felt working in her current job, if the difficulties with the institute had not occurred – this revealed many positive values that Sara derived from her job. Sara was now asked to imagine that she had become an official administrator and to look back from her retirement to assess the satisfactions the job might have provided. She imagined that she had worked in an area of interest to her, in a small, well-managed department providing a good service. She had made order out of chaos, put her own mark on the post and the work had provided a variety of activities. Performing the same thought experiment for working as a PA she imagined she had worked for an interesting organisation such as a university or voluntary organisation which had a sense of mission and that she had limited responsibility, allowing her

¹⁶ As a follow-up activity the counsellor suggested that Sara might profit from the section on time-management in Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

get home by 5:30. She wondered if she would be less satisfied than as an administrator as she would not have had a sense of achievement through overcoming challenges, and thought there was a danger to being a PA of being relatively isolated through working for just one person.

The Decision

After these thought experiments Sara said she had made her decision - she wanted to stay at the institute, at least for a while. She was, she said, an 'intuitive decision maker'. Sara's decision was not simply intuitive - she had reasons as she explained. Staying at the institute would allow her to regain her self-respect as an administrator, and stay loyal to her colleagues. The negative emotions that had been plaguing her she thought she could deal with in a variety of ways. She would remember the Serenity Prayer (already familiar to her) and distinguish between those things she could change (her work methods and priorities) from those outside her control (the current ability of the institute to pay her more)¹⁷. She would accept her current situation as a temporary setback and a learning opportunity. By regaining her confidence she would be in a position to either make a bid for better pay and recognition at the institute, if and when it picked up, or she would be able to apply for jobs elsewhere without having the nagging doubt about her abilities and guilt at the back of her mind.

I¹⁸ was somewhat taken aback by the suddenness with which Sara said she had made her decision. The 'gut' reaction of excitement (or lack of it) to an option is an important check upon the decision-making process. If we end up with a decision that leaves us cold this suggests something has gone seriously wrong. Emotions we have argued are an important indicator of value to us, and a motivator to action. A lack of excitement suggests we have failed to identify values that matter to us¹⁹ - moreover an option which we don't give emotional assent to will be one that we will be hard to find the motivation needed to carry through²⁰.

¹⁷ This distinction has a long history and is traceable back at least to the Stoics.

¹⁸ David

¹⁹ Kekes (1988), in his excellent analysis of Mill's mental breakdown, points out that the utilitarian goals he had been brought up to pursue ceased to be meaningful for Mill and he 'became indifferent to his projects' (p 22). To be motivated by values, Kekes argues, we need to see them as our own, giving them both our intellectual and emotional assent.

²⁰ Without emotional assent we need what James (1890, Chapter

One task that Sara had requested was to sort out her priorities in life and I would have liked to spend more time investigating her values, why they mattered to her and which were most important. Once this had been clarified I would have liked to see how well the different options allowed the satisfaction of these important values. It is possible that Sara was overweighing negative factors in her decision. While important factors in making wise decisions are feeling confidence in our ability to carry out our choice, and avoiding unpleasant emotions, these are better thought of as barriers to wise decisions than positive values to be pursued. It is hard to make a choice we do not feel confident in having the ability to carry out and nobody wants to be constantly feeling anger, resentment and jealousy in their work, but don't we - shouldn't we - want more than to avoid these negatives.

Despite Sara's claim that she had made her intuitive decision I wanted to pursue the Progress procedure as I thought it worth at least testing her decision against the values she had identified as important to her²¹. If the match were poor we would need to investigate whether her intuition or the identification of her values was flawed.

This review of values is summarised in table 3 overleaf. It confirms Sara's intuitive judgement; staying working at the institute would allow her to realise most of the values she felt had originally made the work so good, although there would be some trade-off in having less buzz and missing a break and novelty. The idea of having a challenge was reframed from seeking a challenge at a new organisation - Sara's previous pattern when she became dissatisfied with where she was working - to seeing how Sara could adapt her patterns of work and stay at the institute. In doing this the time and energy she needed for her other activities would be freed up. Sara was visibly excited by the decision, although she was aware that it was provisional and would need assessing to see how well this turned out in practice.

An outstanding issue from her original list of concerns identified in the pre-session questionnaire was the pressure from her partner's dissatisfaction with how she was being treated at work. Sara thought about what she could say to him about her choice that he would 'buy'. She would explain that

26) called a 'slow dead heave of the will' to carry out the task. Not a happy situation to be in.

²¹ Even better, although not carried out here, would be to test all the live options against the values.

she wanted to stay in her current position with the institute as:

This would help her build up her confidence, so she would be able to move forward as an administrator

She would be being loyal to her colleagues

She would learn to prioritise to help with the work and time demands

She was determined to limit her attendance to the formal 35 hours/week

After a year at the post she would feel on top of her job, and would have learnt from her experiences.

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²² Sara, in subsequent email communication, wrote that this was 'much easier than I expected. I just explained it over supper one evening in a matter of fact way. He hasn't mentioned it since!'

Value	Whether Satisfied by staying at the institute
Salary	Yes – the salary is acceptable (although it could be more); what rankles is the jealousy of others being better paid and the resentment over the amount of work done
Friendly people and team spirit	Yes – this is how the institute is
Loyalty to colleagues	Yes – I won't be deserting the ship
Being realistic and responsible	Yes – I am
Being competent	Yes – I will strive to develop my administrative skill into new areas, such as financial competence and prioritising
Sorting out problems and putting things together	Yes
A buzz of activity	Less – not the same as there was under the charismatic director, and with my new way of working I'll have less buzz from frequent contact with people
A sense of mission to the work	Yes – I still believe in the work of the institute
Being in the middle of things	Yes
Having new challenges	Yes – rather than thinking of this as requiring a new job, my challenge will be reorganising my work practices to reduce the demands upon my time and energy
Being a big cog – having an important role in the team, and not being anonymous	Yes
Having a break / doing something novel	? – Partly satisfied by managing my workload, saying no to demands, new ways of working
Time and energy for other activities	Yes – if all goes well

Table 3: Sara's values assessed against the option of staying at the institute

How Successful Was This Case?

We suggested above that the effectiveness of the procedure could be evaluated in three ways (see page 69) – by the clients assessment, by our analysis of their understanding, and by analysing the process. So how did this case fare on these three criteria?

i) The Client's Assessment By Post-Session Questionnaire

Sara, in the pre-session questionnaire, had stated that she found the decision very hard as there were too many unknowns and she was pulled in different directions. In the post-session questionnaire Sara wrote:

'I didn't come to the Progress interview with high expectations because I thought the issues (around my current work situation and what I should do about it) were too convoluted and complicated for me to be able to come to a decision and expected that I would end up rather in the hands of fate and not make a clear decision but I ended up making a decision which was satisfactory both to my need to sort things out in my present job and my desire to move on to new challenges where I could put my past experience to good use rather than undersell myself in a bid to escape from an uncomfortable situation'

Contrary to her expectation before the session she came away 'feeling able to take charge of my destiny and in a sense capitalise on events of the past rather than being a victim of them' because 'Progress enabled me to decide which of the factors which had been going through my head over the past months and confusing me were really relevant to my decision'

What had changed so that she now felt she could take the decision, and was even excited by it? Sara identified several general factors that she thought had helped her to move from confusion to decision. These were:

'Feeling that my emotions and values (even if not necessarily rational) had been validated'

'Having owned my feelings and values rather than having an inner debate about them I felt able to move forward positively'

'Talking to outsider who did not really know me well and would not have pre-conceived ideas... [rather than] mainly with partner whose view was (I felt) prejudiced even though well intentioned'

Looking at the problem for different perspectives... in a very broad prospective and under different headings

Sara went on to identify key 'events' (interventions and insights in the session) and how they helped her:

Key events for Sara

1. Thinking about how I would feel in the future

This was very revealing to me

2. Expressing regret and guilt about the past

This enabled me to validate it as part of my feelings

3. Realising that coping with the present and immediate future would be a challenge

I became aware that it could be a good learning opportunity and if I succeeded it would boost my confidence

4. Realising that certain arguments although logical and acceptable were not absolutely critical e.g. age and the job market

I separated out the really important things from the non-critical. The latter were in a sense other people's positions or the 'rational position' but not mine.

5. Looking at all aspects

Things fell into place particularly 4 above

ii) Our Analysis Of The Session - key moments

While it is hard to be sure what factors are key in any counselling session the following seemed to have played an important role:

Exploration of her situation enabled Sara to fully grasp how the institute was different now than in the recent past, with a more responsible director, and how it might change again in the future with a new director and more funding. Exploring the situation also allowed Sara to clarify to herself how she could change her own work practices to reduce the stress she was under.

Analysing her emotions enabled Sara to become aware of the range of both negative (jealousy, resentment and anger) and positive emotions (pride, pleasure in others company, excitement) she had about her post, the judgements she was making (she was unfairly mistreated), and the values she held (being a responsible and competent administrator, team-spirit, being proactive and 'can do').

The realisation that what really annoyed her about her post was not that she wasn't paid more, as she could live with the money that she had although she would prefer more, but rather the jealousy and resentment she felt over her present salary and the contrast between her work load and her official status.

The realisation that many of her negative emotions and the power they had over her were, in part, tied to her sense of guilt over the financial problems. This meant that she could fight the negative emotions by developing her competency into new areas and changing her style of work. With

her self-respect repaired she would be less troubled by jealousy and resentment.

By using the Serenity Prayer to think what was inside and outside her control, and by comparing herself to those less fortunate, she could also control the negative emotions.

The various thought experiments and the identification of her important values enabled Sara to see what was valuable to her about her work at the institute, and become aware that having challenges and a responsible role were important to her.

The reframing of seeking new challenges outside the institute to being challenged to develop her administrative skills in a different direction while staying within the institute allowed her to get an important value satisfied that Sara initially thought could only be satisfied through a job change.

The win-win solution of staying at the institute, while changing her work practices and attitudes to the unpleasant aspects of her situation meant that she could both progress her career and have the time and energy for other activities²³

iii) Comparing The Client's Understanding In The Pre-Session Questionnaire With Their Understanding After The Session

Certainly part of successful decision counselling is moving someone from doubt, uncertainty and confusion to clarity and action. While this might conceivably be a necessary condition of success it certainly isn't a sufficient condition, as this depends upon how wise the action is. We suggested above that making wise decisions depends upon having true²⁴ beliefs, emotional wisdom, enlightened values and thinking creatively and that we aim to help the client to:

Clarify the decision they wish to make.

Test and expand their understanding of their situation.

Become aware of the range of emotions they are experiencing, and any information and distortions implicit within these emotions.

Become aware of what they, perhaps implicitly, value, and assess these values, in particular for how important they are to the client.

Become aware of different options open to them.

Choose the option which best enables the client to satisfy the values that are most important to them.

Comparing the client's analysis of their decision in the pre-session questionnaire with that achieved in the session how well did we accomplish these aims:

1) Clarifying the decision to make

Sara came with two decisions, to decide what was most important to her and to decide what to do about her career. Sara was clear about the decision she wanted to make before the session so there was little value-added here except perhaps in clarifying the relationship between these two decisions – Sara wanted to know what was important to her so she could make her work-related to decision.

2) Testing and expanding the understanding of the situation

The changes in Sara's intellectual understanding of her situation were increasing her awareness of how the institute is now, rather than in the recent past, and how it might change in the future, and the kinds of actions she could engage in to reduce her workload. A criticism that could be levelled is that not enough was done to find out about what working in other jobs would be like.

3) Becoming aware of the range of emotions experienced, and any information and distortion implicit within these emotions.

The changes here seem to be of a much larger order than the above categories. Sara became aware of the range of both her positive and negative emotions, what they were telling her she valued and how they were distorting her assessment of the importance of these values to her and her understanding of her ability to carry out options.

4) Becoming aware of implicit values, and assessing these values, in particular for how important they are to the client.

In the pre-session questionnaire Sara indicated that what she valued were an interesting job, money, more time, and self-respect. In the session we explored in more detail what Sara found interesting in her job, and what she meant by self-respect, as well as its relationship to the guilt she was feeling. The thought experiments also provided a powerful method for her to assess how important a challenging post was to Sara and creative thinking enabled her to reframe what she meant by challenging. A limitation of this session is that Sara was not helped sufficiently to decide how important the different values were to her, and how they related to non-work values, especially given that she identified this as an aim. This might not matter too much given that her intuitive choice matched her identified values, but a more explicit analysis of what matters to her might have enabled Sara to make future decisions more easily as she would have a more precise chart to

²³ The influence of these factors is supported by the facts that Sara herself identified many of these in her post-session questionnaire, and when later shown any early draft of this write up agreed that she too thought these factors had been influential

²⁴ Well-founded

guide her course. One way to achieve this is to take time out to do a full blown values clarification, for example using RSVP (LeBon, 2001).

5) Becoming aware of different options open.

The decision Sara finally made was different from any of the three she was considering in the pre-session questionnaire. Two of these, like her final decision, were to do with staying where she currently was. The first one was pushing for an upgrade, which she doubted would happen and even if it did might result in even greater work overload. The other was for doing nothing proactive, waiting to see what happened to the institute, and keeping an eye of the job market. While this might result in positive developments Sara feared it could also lead to wasted opportunities and wasted time.

The option that Sara identified and chose within the session was to stay in the institute where she was without currently pushing for an upgrade as the institute's financial position was too weak and anyway she felt that she needed to reclaim her self-respect as an administrator before she wanted to do this. Neither though did she want to do nothing proactive by just waiting to see what would happen. Instead, she would be developing new areas of competency while reclaiming her confidence, and consequently strengthening her position to take up new posts within or outside the institute in the future.

6) Choosing the option which best enables the client to satisfy the values that are most important to them.

So did the session enable Sara to choose the best option? Clearly there can be no definitive answer to such a question, given the uncertainties of the world and the difficulties in determining what we value. It does seem fair to conclude though that Sara was better placed after the session than before. In her pre-session questionnaire Sara, if forced to choose, would 'Do nothing very proactive and see how things work out over next year, possibly keeping an eye on job adverts to get a sense of the market'. The pro side to this choice was the 'possibility of positive developments in [my] present post', but she feared that hanging around for this would lead to 'wasted opportunities, wasted time'. By contrast Sara was now going to be proactive in her work, so that while the positive side of the possible developments in her post were there, even if this were not to happen she would not be wasting her opportunities and time, but rather developing her skills and fulfilling many of her values. Could she have chosen better? Would she have chosen differently if she had greater confidence in her abilities, a more fully worked out set off enlightened values and greater knowledge about other options?

Reflections on Progress

We have been arguing in our series of articles that decision-making is both of central importance to people in their lives and largely ignored in the counselling literature. Directly focusing on the decisions that someone is puzzling over is puzzlingly rare in counselling practice but we suggest of crucial importance; it can also be quick.

We are also aware of its limitations. In particular, we would now like to consider three objections that we have heard about Progress and relate them specifically to this case study.²⁵

Objection 1: Progress is not sufficiently philosophical

As with some good philosophical counselling, the philosophy in Progress does not always advertise itself; in using methods derived from philosophy the name of the philosopher associated is not usually mentioned, nor even the fact that a specific intervention is philosophical. On the whole we think this is a good thing, as it allows the client more freedom to challenge the method on its own terms rather than be afraid to question the 'wisdom' of Aristotle or Sartre. It does however mean that some readers, on reading this case study, may find themselves asking 'Where is the Philosophy?' We can of course point to the philosophical nature of the methods in table 2, but then the objection can be taken to a further level of sophistication. The objector may say 'OK, Progress is philosophical, but what I see as helpful to this client, and what I see you actually doing in the session, could come straight from a 4 stage management procedure. It's like someone going to a philosophy class and having their life improved tremendously – but not from the philosophy, but from meeting someone at the class.' It is therefore worth pointing to the specifically philosophical interventions and insights arising from the session. In this session, we would point mainly to the emotional enlightenment (see previous section) and the greater values wisdom gained.²⁶ The Serenity Prayer can be argued to be a statement of 'enlightened existentialism'. You are the master of your own fate (existentialism) but some things are beyond your control (enlightened). To help Sara gain 'values wisdom' she was asked questions

²⁵ These objections are not 'straw men'. They have all been made (though not usually by clients, but when Progress has been presented at conferences or workshops).

²⁶ It is also true that when management thinkers come up with 4 stage models, they are actually doing philosophy (not necessarily very well)

inspired by thinkers such as Aristotle, the Stoics, Epicurus, and Mill. The client's situation was also examined in terms of issues in political philosophy such as power relationships, duty, rights and fairness.

Objection 2: Progress takes too long

The full Progress template²⁷ is indeed quite long, and to go through it fully takes several hours. Isn't this too long? Tempting as it is to search for shortcuts – perhaps by missing out parts of the process, or trying to intuit likely 'key moments' in advance, our experience suggests that spending a few hours on an important decision is a most rewarding investment. Indeed Sara, our client in this case, had a rather different perspective on this issue. Sara had been thinking about this decision for over six months, and it was constantly in and out of her mind. Although Sara had come to the session not expecting Progress to help her resolve her decision, she left with a decision made. This might be, she suggested, better than months of counselling: 'My overall assessment of Progress – certainly very helpful for me – could possibly short cut hours and hours of counselling!'²⁸

Objection 3: The same result could be achieved by unstructured philosophical counselling

Whilst objection 1 implies that traditional management decision procedures could reach the same conclusion, this objection claims that unstructured philosophical counselling can achieve this. Of course it is an empirical question as to whether other forms of counselling would be as effective; our pilot study does not measure its relative effectiveness. Yet we have two reasons for thinking that Progress is likely to be more effective for decision-making. In the first place, one of us²⁹ has used both unstructured ways of dealing with decision-making and other decision-making methods (such as 'Pros and Cons') as well as Progress and has found Progress to be by far the most effective. Secondly, there are good theoretical reasons for this: the structure ensures that the decision gets enough time and attention and the stages and steps within the stages mean that it gets the right sort of attention. As we said, though, this is an empirical question and we very much welcome research on other ways of helping clients make wise decision.

Conclusion

²⁷ See www.decision-making.co.uk

²⁸ Sara had been to a counsellor before when she was dissatisfied with her work situation at the institute.

²⁹ Tim LeBon

In this paper we have described one case, that of Sara, where Progress was used to help a client make a difficult career decision. We indicated three ways in which the case could be assessed; client feedback, an analysis of key moments, and a comparison of client understanding pre- and post-session. On all three criteria the case appears to have been a success; the client thought it very helpful, key moments could be discerned and the client clearly had a better understanding after the session. Yet the case also illustrates that, in the time constraints and ebb of flow of a session, there is always room for improvement; in this case possibly in more exploration of values and options. We went on to use the case to argue against three common criticisms of Progress. However, we do not wish to end on a note of complacency. In conducting the study we recognise that decision-making is both important and difficult. We very much welcome feedback and suggestions from our philosophical colleagues. If other practitioners would like to contribute to this research, either by themselves trying the Progress procedure on their clients and providing feedback, or by taking part in a comparative study of other methods, we would be delighted to hear from you.³⁰

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³⁰ We would like to thank Peter Raabe and Shamil Chandaria for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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