



# Client Responses in the Blamer Softening Event

## in Emotionally Focused Therapy

### Introduction

Blamer softening is a pivotal change event in Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT). It occurs when a previously hostile or critical partner assumes a new position of vulnerability and asks for his or her attachment related needs to be met. This EFT event is associated with recovery from relationship distress as it often initiates a new sense of felt safety, trust, and contact in the relationship (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988; 1995). Unfortunately, it remains one of the most common therapeutic impasses encountered among EFT practitioners (Johnson & Talitman, 1997) and a common challenge to the novice EFT therapist. Partners in a more blaming positions in their relationships typically find it difficult to relinquish their stance of perceived invulnerability.

The purpose of this study was to explore whether patterns of client emotional experience in the blamer softening process were typically associated with therapist interventions and a mini-theory of blamer softening (Bradley, 2001; Bradley & Furrow, 2004). This process research study examined levels of client emotional experiencing and vocal quality to better understand the role of emotional experience in the blamer softening process, and to consider how the presence and absence of client experiencing may relate to successful or unsuccessful softening events.

### Method

This study examined tapes and transcripts from five clinical examples of therapist-identified blamer softening events. Each example included a clear demonstration of partners taking either a blaming or withdrawing position within the first ten minutes of the session. Four of the five transcripts were deemed successful softening events as they included a clear shift from in the partner's more blaming position to a new position of vulnerability. The fifth transcript included a failed attempt by the therapist to have the more blaming partner reach to his partner from a position of vulnerability. This example was considered unsuccessful.

Recordings and corresponding transcripts were coded using the Classification System for Counselor and Client Responses (CSCR) (Highlen, Lonborg, Hampl, & Lassiter, 1984), Client Voice Quality system (CVQ) (Rice, Koke, Greenberg, & Wagstaff, 1979) and Patient Experiencing Scale (EXP) Klein, Mathieu, Gendlin & Kiesler, 1969). The CSCR provided a content analysis of individual client responses. The CVQ measures client voice quality according to four categories. The EXP rates the extent to which inner referents become the felt "experience" of clients as well as the degree to which efforts are made to focus on, expand and probe that experience by clients. CVCQ ratings were provided by one of the authors of the system. CVQ and EXP ratings were completed by coding teams that were trained in the two systems and intercoder agreement was satisfactory across the two measures. Estimates of reliability were: CVQ ( $\kappa = .70$ ), and level of agreement for EXP scale ( $r = .80$ ).

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## Results

Ratings of clients' emotional experiencing were compared across the successful and unsuccessful blamer softening events. Ratings of individual talkturns were compared noting the percentage of client responses which were consistent with deeper levels of emotional experiencing (e.g. EXP ratings > 3).

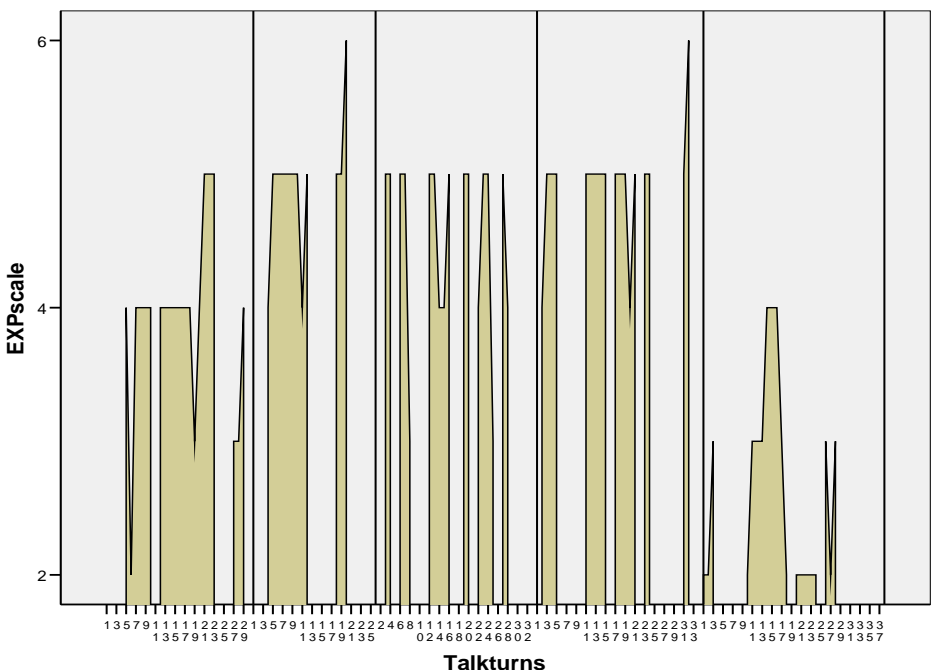
Table 1. Percentage of Blamer's Responses on Process Measures

	Successful Segments	Unsuccessful Segment
EXP Ratings: Client Experiencing Levels 4 and higher	90.4%	15%
CVQ Ratings: Focused voice	54.8%	35%
CSCR Ratings: Emotion content	21.3%	21.6%

Note,  $n = 73$  for Successful Segments and  $n = 20$  for Unsuccessful Segment for both EXP and CVQ and  $n = 122$  for Successful Segments and  $n = 37$  for Unsuccessful Segment for CSCR scale

The patterns of client emotional experiencing were examined by plotting EXP ratings for each client talkturn. The first four segments included successful blamer softening events and the fifth was unsuccessful.

Figure 1. Segment Analysis of Client EXP Ratings by Talkturn



## Therapist Interventions and Client Experiencing

Productive use of therapist interventions were compared for the successful and unsuccessful examples. This was done by looking at the percentage of client responses that were consistent with higher levels of emotional experiencing immediately following the therapist use of a particular intervention.

Table 2. Therapist Interventions and Client Experiencing

Successful Segments		Unsuccessful Segment	
<u>Intervention</u>	<u>Productive</u>	<u>Intervention</u>	<u>Productive</u>
Evocative Response	94%	Restructuring	33%
Heightening	88%	Evocative Response	50%
Empathic Conjecture	100%	Heightening	0%
Validation	100%		
Reframe	100%		
Reflecting Underlying Emotion	100%		

## Client Experiencing and Therapist Foci

Client experiencing was also examined across both successful and unsuccessful softening using the six therapist foci of Bradley's (2001) mini-theory of the blamer softening event. In successful softening events, productive client experiences were present when the therapist focused on processing "Fears of Reaching" before processing "Actual Blamer Reaching." In the unsuccessful event, the therapist did not process the theme of "Fears of Reaching" before pursuing the restructuring phase of "Actual Blamer Reaching" In the unsuccessful case, this did result in productive client experiencing.

## Discussion

This study examined levels of client experiencing across in five examples of a blamer softening event. In four of the five segments studied, successful softening events were associated with higher levels of client emotional experiencing. This was seen in a client's increased use of "focused voice" (CVQ) and higher percentage of productive ratings on the EXP (ranked 4 or higher). Both measures of emotional expression were less evident in the unsuccessful event. Higher rates of client experiencing preceded the therapist's directive to have the more blaming partner turn toward his/her partner with a reach of vulnerability. These higher levels of experiencing appear to result from the therapist's use of interventions that access, heighten and expand the emotional experience of the client. Successful softening segments were more likely to include therapist interventions that were followed by productive levels of client experiencing.

The use of univariate analysis, while limited, provided an in-depth analysis of series of prototypical softening events. Successful softening events took place when a blaming partner experienced and processed his or her emotions related to reaching to his or her partner in vulnerability. Unless unmet attachment needs and fears were owned and experienced, the blaming spouse was not be able to access, or experience, his or her fear of reaching to the withdrawn spouse for attachment needs to be met. Replication of this study is needed to add support to see if the patterns observed in this study generalize to other examples of unsuccessful attempts at blamer softening in EFT.