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Overcoming Resistance in Clinical and Forensic Interviews

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Reactance is one of the most common underlying causes of resistance. Reactance, a term coined by Brehm, is the reaction that occurs when a person feels their freedom of choice is threatened. Reactance can be especially troublesome for those attempting to gather information through interviews, such as mental health or law enforcement personnel. We explore resistance and reactance, and methods identified to ameliorate these phenomena when they arise during both clinical and forensic interviewing, such as the use of particular language construction, optimal eye contact, acknowledgment of resistance, providing limited and double-bind choices, and advancing the interview through affirmative comments.

\textbf{KEYWORDS}

Resistance; reactance; interviewing; interrogation; linguistics

\textbf{Introduction}

On June 4, 1937, Sigmund Freud boarded the Orient Express and slowly made his way across Germany and into France with several members of his family, his doctor, and his chow. He left behind Vienna, several sisters too old to travel, and his life’s work, but he was free. Before he boarded the train, however, the Gestapo told him he must sign a document. It read: “I, Professor Freud, hereby confirm that after the Anschluss of Austria to the German Reich I have been treated by the German authorities and particularly by the Gestapo with all the respect and consideration due to my scientific reputation, that I could live and work in full freedom, that I could continue to pursue my activities in every way I desired, and that I found full support from all concerned in this respect, and that I have not the slightest reason for any complaint.” Freud signed, but then added a simple sentence, “I can most highly recommend the Gestapo to everyone” (Edmundson, 2010, p. 76).

At some point in everyone’s life, they have been told they cannot do something, or inversely, that they must do something. Although these are conflicting demands, they frequently evoke the same response, the often-involuntary response of resistance. Resistance fundamentally possesses the same qualities regardless of what the resistance is in response to. There are underlying similarities in areas from marketing to therapy to law enforcement interviews. Many researchers have asked, what is at the core of resistance? Historically, throughout varying contexts, it has been referred to as noncompliance with a directive (Newman, 2002), a desire to counteract someone else’s attempt to limit one’s choices (Brehm, 1966), unwillingness to achieve insight about the real nature of one’s thoughts or feelings (Messer, 2002), avoidance of unpleasant or dangerous feelings (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951), or the feeling of ambivalence about change (Arkowitz, 2002).

\textbf{Sources of resistance}

Freud’s (1955) work with Elisabeth von R. led to the conceptualization of resistance in a clinical setting. The problems with this patient led Freud (1955) to note, “In the course of this difficult work I began to attach a deeper significance to the resistance offered by the patient in the reproduction of her memories and to make a careful collection of the occasions on which it was particularly marked” (p. 154). Freud’s later work mirrors the traditional, and commonly held, view of resistance being a defense against awareness that requires overcoming (Rowe, 1996). Beutler, Moleiro, and Talebi (2002) note that early cognitive and behavioral therapists viewed resistance as a barrier to achieving therapeutic goals, but not as a noteworthy topic in and of itself. Eventually, researchers began to recognize the significance of resistance, and a large body of research specifically studying resistance currently exists.
According to Knowles and Riner (2007), the source of resistance can be broken into three categories (a) reactance, (b) skepticism, and (c) inertia. The first category, reactance, is activated when a person feels as though they are losing their freedom of choice. It is a term that was coined by Brehm (1966) to explain an adverse emotional reaction when freedoms are threatened. There are varying degrees of reactance in accordance with the types and levels of freedoms being threatened. This type of resistance is not “content” related, meaning that it is not activated by the change that is proposed, but by the fact, the person feels their freedom to choose is reduced or eliminated. Knowles and Riner (2007) explain that the source of this type of resistance “lies in the actions of the agent promoting the change” and that it “has little to do with the specific change proposed” (p. 85). Fransen, Smit, and Verlegh (2015) further explain that “even when a message is not contrary to existing beliefs or behavior or when the message is in the receiver’s best interest, persuasive attempts are often perceived as an external threat to freedom” (p. 5). Reactance can be described as the affective attitude of “I don’t like it.”

The second category, skepticism, is rooted in the content. The receiver of the message is reacting to the change that is being proposed. Research has shown that some personality types are naturally more prone to experience skepticism (Haugtvedt & Petty, 1992), a cognitive reaction that occurs through direct, indirect, and metacognitive analysis of the proposal (Knowles & Riner, 2007). Resistance is not a foregone outcome with skepticism as it is with reactance and inertia. Skepticism can be described as the cognitive attitude of “I don’t believe it.”

The final source of resistance is inertia, which is the desire not to change. This type of resistance is particularly challenging to address because it has little to do with the proposal. People experiencing inertia seek to maintain the status quo; they focus on the past, not the future. Knowles and Riner (2007) note that inertia can lead to the “seemingly paradoxical outcome where the influence target generally agrees with the premises and propositions of an influence attempt but still has no interest in making the change” (p. 89). Often a person experiencing inertia does not even consider the proposal or its contents because they have no interest in change. Inertia can be described as the behavioral attitude of “I won’t do it.”

We will mostly focus on reactance—“I don’t like it”—because this type of resistance is produced by the agent promoting the change (Knowles & Riner, 2007).

This makes reactance of particular interest to those desiring to gain information from another person, such as clinicians. This also includes law enforcement conducting interviews. Although these two occupations are quite different from each other, they share the common goal of obtaining information from others who are often reluctant to reveal. Both professionals are attempting to obtain a “confession” of sorts, containing honest information that the interviewee would just as soon not disclose. Gaining a better understanding of reactance has numerous benefits, including avoiding reactance in the first place and overcoming reactance when it does occur.

**Overcoming resistance – alpha vs. omega strategies**

There are two categories, so-called alpha and omega strategies, to overcome resistance. The aptly named alpha strategies are most commonly used first. These strategies have been studied for some time and have been extensively researched. Knowles and Riner (2007) explain that alpha strategies, “add to the reasons to desire an alternative, [they] are effective only because they overwhelm resistance” (p. 106). On the other hand, omega strategies are used less often and have been recently defined and researched. Knowles and Linn (2004) discuss how omega strategies, “attempt to persuade by decreasing avoidance forces. Thus, omega change strategies work by removing or disengaging someone’s reluctance to change” (p. 118). Alpha strategies intend to move people toward the goal by making the request more appealing. Inversely, omega strategies attempt to reduce resistance (avoidance forces), thereby moving a person toward the goal or request. They attempt to accomplish the same goal of compliance through opposite means. When it comes to solutions for resistance, omega strategies are relatively new but have great potential. Knowles and Riner (2007) elucidate that because omega strategies reduce resistance, they make decisions “less conflicted and more satisfying” (p. 106). In psychodynamic terms, the psychotherapeutic interpretation of resistance as a defense against an impulse would be considered an omega strategy.

Knowles and Linn (2004) and Knowles and Riner (2007) pulled literature together from clinical psychology, social psychology, communications, and marketing to develop a collection of omega strategies: avoid raising reactance, sidestep resistance, address resistance directly, address resistance indirectly, distract resistance, disrupt resistance, consume resistance,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Resistance</th>
<th>Risk Level</th>
<th>Omega Strategy</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Research / Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reactance</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Avoid raising reactance</td>
<td>Do not take the freedom of choice away</td>
<td>“Of course it is up to you”</td>
<td>Brehm (1966)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Minimize the request</td>
<td>Step by step, get them to agree to small request then increase request</td>
<td>“Even one detail”</td>
<td>Freedman &amp; Fraser (1966)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Acknowledge resistance</td>
<td>Acknowledging the person might feel resistance</td>
<td>“I know you may not want to but” or “I know you may not agree but”</td>
<td>Jolson (1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Jujitsu resistance</td>
<td>Refocus the resistance in a different direction</td>
<td>Say the opposite of what you want</td>
<td>Erickson and Rossi (1975)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Providing choices</td>
<td>Providing a choice between alternatives, avoid only one alternative and take it or leave it mentality</td>
<td>“Do you want to speak about your mother or your father”</td>
<td>Wegner (1989) Cline and Fay (1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skepticism</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Counterargue resistance</td>
<td>Strong counterarguments that are communicated gently (this is the key)</td>
<td>Counterarguments must be strong and not forceful or there will be boomerang</td>
<td>Allen (1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Consume resistance</td>
<td>Self-regulation is finite and limited so it can be depleted</td>
<td>Wear people down by lengthening interview; this is less effective with skeptical people</td>
<td>Muraven and Baumeister (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Guarantees</td>
<td>Most effective when concern about offer, provide a guarantee about concern area</td>
<td>Pinpoint the resistance and find a way to assure person this will not be a problem</td>
<td>Walton (1992)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
and use resistance to promote change. Knowles and Riner (2007) have organized the omega strategies into categories based on the source of resistance (reactance, skepticism, and inertia) one is attempting to overcome. They have used available supporting research, but there is no empirical evidence to indicate that different strategies are more effective with different forms of resistance. Knowles and Riner (2007) assert, “logic suggests to us that the same strategies will be more effective with one type of resistance than another” (p. 107). Further research would be advantageous. See Table 1 for a complete list of all omega strategies discussed by Knowles and Riner (2007), including their supporting research references.

### A closer look at reactance

#### State vs. trait reactance

Although the concept of reactance has been researched for decades, it is still not fully understood. While it was initially viewed as a valuable psychological concept, it has shown versatility when applied to other disciplines. Numerous studies have been conducted on reactance since its emergence, creating a large body of existing research. But there is a distinction between trait reactance and state reactance.

Trait reactance is how prone a person is to experience reactance. It has been compared to and can be thought of as a personality trait (Hong & Faedda, 1996). On the other hand, state reactance is a psychological state that is situation-specific. This appears to be in line with Brehm’s (1966) original theory of reactance being a state. Shoham, Trost, and Rohrbaugh (2004) suggest that what is currently referred to as trait reactance does not represent the actual construct of state reactance as theorized by Brehm. Reactance in this article, unless otherwise specified, refers to state reactance.

#### Trait reactance

People differ in the level of autonomy they desire and are comfortable with (Wicklund, 1974). Therefore,
people vary in their proneness to experience reactance. Researchers have shown a positive association with trait reactance and autonomy, denial, dominance, independence, interpersonal mistrust, self-sufficiency, lack of conformity, and a lack of tolerance (Dowd, Wallbrown, Sanders & Yesenosky, 1994; Seibel & Dowd, 2001). Trait reactance can have an impact on state reactance. Dillard and Shen (2005) found that people with high trait reactance experienced greater state reactance than those people with low trait reactance.

Dowd (2002) explains that “some people are just naturally more reactant than others” (p. 187). Over the years he has conducted several studies and found different personality disorders associated with different levels of reactance. Dowd (2002) notes that those personality disorders who show high reactance include borderline, obsessive-compulsive, sadistic and paranoic, while personality disorders with low reactance include dependent, histrionic and avoidant. While this is likely no surprise to clinicians, it does provide an additional lens through which to view clients.

State reactance

Psychological Reactance Theory (PRT) explains that state reactance is a reaction that occurs when freedoms are threatened. Brehm (1966) initially postulated that reactance could not be empirically measured. However, Dillard and Shen (2005) introduced the intertwined model, which empirically supports that reactance is a combination of a cognitive component (negative thoughts) and an emotional component (anger). This conclusion was supported by Kim, Levine, and Allen (2013), who found that reactance is indeed a mixture of anger and negative thoughts.

It is understandable that people would experience reactance when they are faced with a direct threat to their freedom. Research also supports that reactance can be subtly aroused and can occur outside of conscious awareness. Sittenthaler, Jonas, and Traut-Mattausch (2016) found that when people observe the freedom of someone else being restricted, they experience what was labeled vicarious reactance. The emerging concept of vicarious reactance is believed to be driven by cognitive processes instead of emotional processes as in personal reactance (Sittenthaler et al., 2016), but could also be supported by the neurobiology of empathy.

Wellman and Geers (2009) found that participants performed the worst when they were primed with reactance and told they should be good at a task. Chartrand, Dalton, and Fitzsimons (2007) demonstrated that subliminal priming could evoke reactance. In this study the participants were primed with the name of a controlling significant other; these participants completed fewer of the anagrams correctly than those participants that were primed with the name of a noncontrolling person (Chartrand et al. 2007). These studies could be particularly relevant to gathering information from interviewees, both in clinical work and law enforcement, because the people participating in these interviews could have no choice but to attend the interview. This fact could significantly reduce the freedom they are feeling and could act in a way that subliminally primes them and makes them more prone to experience reactance.

Measuring state reactance

Although many studies involving the concept of reactance have been conducted throughout the years, few tools exist to measure state reactance. Brehm (1966) believed that reactance was not something that could be measured. However, research in recent years has yielded a handful of instruments to measure state reactance. Miron and Brehm (2006) suggested that reactance could be directly assessed through measurement of the subjective experience that accompanies the urge to restore freedom. With the agreement that state reactance can be measured, the development of a reliable, valid, and user-friendly instrument to measure state reactance is imperative.

One of the most recently studied measures of reactance is the Salzburger State Reactance Scale (SSR). This scale was used initially by Jonas et al. (2009) and measures the experience of reactance, aggressive behavioral intentions and negative attitudes with 19 items that are rated via a 5-point Likert-type scale. Empirical data support the validity of the SSR, with both divergent and convergent measures, while Cronbach’s alpha and the inter-item correlations indicate an internally consistent scale (Sittenthaler, Traut-Mattausch, Steindl & Jonas, 2015). The validity of the SSR is further supported by its positive correlation with the Dillard and Shen (2005) scale which has been more thoroughly researched.

Dillard and Shen’s (2005) research suggests that reactance can be measured using self-report assessments of cognition and emotion. Specifically, reactance is a combination of negative cognition and anger, and when these two are measured a general index of reactance can be determined (Dillard & Shen, 2005). Statistics strongly support the intertwined
model in Dillard and Shen’s (2005) research. The intertwined model was compared to the dual-process model and was superior as evidenced by statistical analysis. The Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) was .94 for the intertwined model and .87 for the dual process model— a value of .90 indicates a good fit. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was quite impressive for the intertwined model at .006; the dual process model was .110. A value of .08 or lower indicates a good fit, but a value of .06 or lower is preferred. This study builds a robust foundation for the intertwined model, and other researchers continue to add to the body of empirical support that exists for this model.

Quick (2012) conducted a comparison of the Dillard and Shen (2005) measure and the Lindsey (2005) measure. The Lindsey (2005) measure was not created to measure psychological reactance; however, it is widely used to assess reactance and in literature pertaining to reactance. Quick (2012) found that both the Dillard and Shen (2005) measure and the Lindsey measure were reliable with acceptable $z$ of .90 and .93, respectively.

The Lindsey (2005) measure does not separate the constructs of reactance (i.e., negative cognitions and anger). When assessing the validity of these two scales, the convergent validity is superior in the Dillard and Shen (2005) measure as it accounts for more variance and is a better fit for the data (Quick, 2012). Quick’s (2012) comparison found that the Lindsey (2005) model treats and measures reactance as a unidimensional construct, while Dillard and Shen (2005) treat it as an algorithmic function of two constructs: negative cognition and anger.

Another older measure is the Merz (1983) Questionnaire for the Measurement of Psychological Reactance (QMPR). Further research on this scale has found it to be psychometrically unstable (Donnell, Thomas & Buboltz, 2001; Hong & Ostini, 1989; Tucker & Byers, 1987). The QMPR was originally written in German and later translated to English. Tucker and Byers (1987) discuss the possibility of translation loss being responsible for the lack of internal consistency. Regardless of the reason, this scale does not have strong empirical support.

The intertwined model (Dillard & Shen, 2005) is the most empirically supported state reactance instrument. This instrument measures perceived threat to freedom, anger (emotional component) and negative cognitions (cognitive component). However, the negative cognitions were measuring by coding responses and analyzing them. This process is time and resource intensive and causes researchers to give pause when considering this instrument. Cho et al. (2016) utilized the emotional component measure in their study, but the “cognitive state reactance dimension was not assessed because of the difficulty of using standard measurement approaches, which would require collecting and coding open-responses in a reliable way for thousands of observations in an online survey administered in multiple languages” (p. 11).

The absence of a more research-friendly method of measuring the cognitive component is a gap that needs to be filled. The SSR utilized a self-report method to measure negative attitudes, which is a step in the right direction. However, it is unknown at this time if the concepts of negative attitudes and negative cognitions can be used interchangeably when discussing the components of state reactance. Another drawback of the SSR is its minimal amount of empirical support.

There is far too much research that supports state reactance as a multidimensional construct to lend credence to Lindsay’s (2005) model. It does not measure the separate constructs of state reactance, which is a critical factor. Research (Quick, 2012) supports that this is an inferior model for measuring state reactance. The QMPR is also not recommended for use. There is empirical evidence supporting this measure as being statistically unstable.

Research (Rains, 2013) supports that the intertwined model proposed by Dillard and Shen (2005) best fits the data, and as such is a strong model for the experience of reactance. In accordance with this information, it will be most useful to study the combination of negative cognition along with anger when developing a new measure. Research (Dillard and Shen, 2005; Rains, 2013) suggests that reactance is a multidimensional construct, and as such, it should be studied in this manner to ensure the best chances of creating a reliable and valid measure.

Nesterkin (2013) discourages researchers from using structured questionnaires to investigate reactance until “psychometrically sound measures of reactance are developed or until existing measures are improved satisfactorily” (p. 591). This is a clear indication that empirically sound reactance measures are in short supply. While trait reactance measures do exist, we do not address them since the principles upon which they are based are too far removed from the concept of state reactance. Although the development of a state reactance measure is a daunting task, it is the most accurate instrument to measure reactance.
Avoiding and overcoming reactance

“The most effective strategy to reduce reactance is not to raise it in the first place” (Knowles & Riner, 2007, p. 89). Achieving this goal can present a sizable challenge, especially when dealing with those who are more likely to experience state reactance. There are specific groups of people who are more prone to state reactance based on their level of trait reactance. The good news is that communications research has contributed a wealth of information concerning the avoidance of reactance. Inevitably situations will occur where reactance is raised and will need to be overcome. In these situations, the omega strategies discussed by Knowles and Riner (2007) can be utilized in an attempt to reduce reactance and obtain compliance. The most promising strategies are discussed below. The strategies discussed below fall within a rapport-based interview model. Vrij et al. (2017) state there is a growing body of evidence supporting that rapport-based interviewing “encourage[es] a productive exchange and minimiz[es] reactance while offering empathy and autonomy to the interviewee” (p. 934).

Language

One of the most, if not the most, effective strategies to avoid triggering reactance revolves around language; word choice is paramount. Many clinicians and other interviewers may focus on the language they use for other purposes, including relationship building, demonstrating empathy and demonstrating active listening; however, it is unlikely many view language through the lens of avoiding reactance. Coppola and Girandola (2017) discuss how several studies concerning reactance support that rapport-based interviewing “encourage[es] a productive exchange and minimiz[es] reactance while offering empathy and autonomy to the interviewee” (p. 934).

Dogmatic language triggers reactance. Quick and Stephenson (2008) describe dogmatic language as being “characterized by forceful language that explicitly pressures audiences to conform to a message” (p. 450). While this specific linguistic feature has been referred to as assertive (Baek, Yoon, & Kim, 2015; Kronrod, Grinstein, & Wathieu, 2012), controlling (Miller, Lane, Deatrick, Young, & Potts, 2007), deductive appeals (Buller, Borland & Burgoon, 1998), dogmatic (Quick & Stephenson, 2008; Shen, 2014), domineering (Dillard, 2014; Quick, Shen & Dillard, 2013), explicit (Grandpre, Alvaro, Burgoon, Miller & Hall, 2003; Quick & Stephenson, 2007; Wagner, Howland, & Mann, 2015), forceful (Dillard & Shen, 2005; Quick & Considine, 2008) and threat-to-choice (Quick & Stephenson, 2007) language, the underlying premise is the same: it is language that builds the illusion of limiting choice. As such, it should be avoided if at all possible. Inversely, language “favoring a feeling of increased freedom” such as “it is up to you” or “but you are free to” can reduce reactance by nearly 40% (Gueguen & Pascual, 2000, p. 266). The interviewer should consider adding these simple phrases when reactance is possible.

Vivid language also evokes more emotion and is often perceived as posing a threat, making it highly likely to cause reactance (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Vivid language includes using descriptive and graphic words designed to help people gain a visual image (Quick & Stephenson, 2008). Instead, practitioners should use pallid language, which is more general and bland. For example, a message using vivid language would state, “sun exposure causes skin blisters that ooze,” while pallid language would state “sun exposure causes skin injuries” (Quick & Stephenson, 2008). LaVoie, Quick, Riles, and Lambert (2015) report that graphic imagery on cigarette warning labels increases threat to freedom, reactance, and is perceived as a source of domination. These studies provide strong support for not using language that is construed as vivid or graphic when attempting to avoid reactance.

Katz, Byrne and Kent (2016) argue that if the “situation is occurring at a closer distance and you are thinking about it very specifically, you are likely to perceive a greater threat to freedom than if the situation is occurring in the future or you are thinking about it abstractly” (p. 2). This demonstrates the importance of increasing the psychological distance of the request. If possible, the receiver should view the message more abstractly. This is in line with Wicklund (1974) who noted that increasing distance implies that the implications of one’s actions are diminished. The message is less likely to arouse reactance. For the same reasons it is often wise to begin interviews with “there and then” questions, and later move to questions of “here and now.”

Avoiding what researchers have termed scalar adverbs can also prevent reactance. Although no formal definition of scalar adverbs exists, Fraser (1990) explained them well: “[they do] not create mean-...ing...but only orient the hearer...[and] are extremely useful guides for clarifying the speaker’s communicative intention” (p. 390). These scalar adverbs include almost (Jarvella & Lundquist, 1994; Van Gerrevink & De Hoop, 2007; Winterstein & Schaden, 2011), already (Apotheloz & Nowakowska, 2011; Michaelis, 1996), even (Kay, 1990; Snoeck-Henkemans, 2010), more than (Fahnestock, 1998;
by positing that “Lost” is the best. Kamalski et al. (2008) theorize that coherence markers warn readers or listeners that an attempt to persuade them is going to occur. Their studies have demonstrated that subjective coherence markers seem to cause the forewarning effect and result in more resistance (Kamalski et al., 2008). However, objective coherence markers do not cause the forewarning effect. The takeaway message for coherence markers is merely stating a causal relationship using a coherence marker likely will not result in reactance, while using a subjective coherence marker overtly demonstrates the intent to persuade and should be avoided.

Another relevant and interesting linguistic marker is the pragmatic marker. Furko (2017) explains that although pragmatic markers don’t typically change the propositional meaning of a statement, they do “mark the speaker’s attitude” about the proposition and “facilitate processes of pragmatic inferences” (p. 1). So, for all intents and purposes, pragmatic markers simply convey the attitudes and inferences of the speaker or writer. In the example, “Of course I want to help”, the phrase “of course” serves as a pragmatic marker. It does not change the meaning of the sentence, but it infers that the speaker’s attitude is likely something along the lines of “what is wrong with you or you should know I want to help”. Often people are unaware that they are using pragmatic markers and the reaction these pragmatic markers can cause in others. It is particularly important that interviewers be aware of and limit their use of pragmatic markers because they are often perceived as manipulative. This can be particularly true when “look” is used as a pragmatic marker. Brinton (2001) studied the historical transition of “look” into a pragmatic marker. For example, “Look, the chocolate is superior to the vanilla” or “Look, that doesn’t change anything”. Preceding the thought with the pragmatic marker “look” can be interpreted as an attempt to control the conversation, draw attention, or disregard the opinion of another. The authors have noted the increasing use of the verb “look” to begin a response by TV pundits, and also the personal reactance—an irritating feeling of being controlled—by the second author.

A small amount of promising research exploring the relationship between coherence markers and reactance exists. While this research does not explicitly study reactance, it does provide insight into the relevance of coherence markers. Despite the fact that no research was located examining the relationship between pragmatic markers and reactance, applying the known information regarding reactance theory
demonstrates how these linguistic markers relate to reactance. According to reactance theory, using “look” would elicit reactance because it removes freedom of choice by demanding control, attention, or agreement. Table 2 summarizes the findings of language research concerning reactance.

### Acknowledging resistance

Of the various omega strategies, one of the simplest is merely acknowledging resistance. While the general term resistance is used throughout this section, this strategy is most effective at reducing reactance, as opposed to skepticism and inertia. This is likely the case because acknowledging that the person has a choice keeps the person’s feeling of freedom intact. It

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**Table 2. Language strategies which avoid or trigger reactance.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoiding Reactance</th>
<th>Example(s)</th>
<th>Source(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Make allusions to choice</td>
<td>You have a chance to…</td>
<td>Miller (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>… We leave the choice to you…</td>
<td>Quick and Stephenson (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Use qualified propositions</td>
<td>There is some evidence…</td>
<td>Miller (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This is fairly serious…</td>
<td>Quick and Stephenson (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Use impartial, objective, fact-driven information</td>
<td>Say “this movie contains violence” instead of “viewer discretion is advised because this movie contains violence”.</td>
<td>Bushman (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Emphasize freedom</td>
<td>“But you are free to…”</td>
<td>Gueguen and Pascual (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Increase the psychological distance</td>
<td>Move the request to the past or the future and induce abstract thought about it</td>
<td>Katz et al. (2016)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Triggering Reactance</th>
<th>Example(s)</th>
<th>Source(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Use imperatives</td>
<td>You must…</td>
<td>Miller (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You need…</td>
<td>Quick and Stephenson (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You will…</td>
<td>Rains (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Use absolute allegations</td>
<td>You cannot deny…</td>
<td>Miller (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This issue is extremely serious…</td>
<td>Quick and Stephenson (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This issue is extremely serious…</td>
<td>Rains (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Use threats</td>
<td>You will be sorry if…</td>
<td>Bushman (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bushman (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Zillmann and Brosius (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Use scalar adverbs</td>
<td>Almost, already, even, more than and only</td>
<td>Coppola and Girandola (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Decrease psychological distance</td>
<td>Move the situation to the present and induce very specific thoughts about it.</td>
<td>Katz et al. (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Derision towards other perspectives</td>
<td>Any reasonable person would agree…</td>
<td>Quick and Stephenson (2008)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
may seem counterintuitive to some, however acknowledging resistance does not create resistance. “Acknowledging the resistance, labeling it and making its role overt may have the paradoxical effect of defusing its power and rendering that resistance less influential” (Knowles & Linn, 2004, p. 138). Knowles and Riner (2007) declare that “an acknowledgment of resistance often has a dramatic effect on compliance rates” (p. 92). The mechanism for its effectiveness may lie in empathy. An acknowledgment of resistance communicates empathy and allows the requester to join the person’s emotional experience (Knowles & Riner, 2007).

Linn and Knowles (2002) conducted two studies that found when resistance was acknowledged the acceptance rate of the statements was higher. The results were only statistically significant when the statement was met with resistance (in this case tuition, which students care about). These results suggest that acknowledging resistance diffuses it instead of empowering it. They also support the fact that acknowledging resistance is best used when the person is likely going to resist the request. Werner et al. (2002) found that clinically validating resistance by acknowledging it had a dramatic effect on compliance with recycling. They found that adding the statement “it may be inconvenient” (p. 200) to the recycling sign caused more students to recycle even when the recycling bin was in an inconvenient location. HimmatPatil (2006) studied the impact of acknowledging resistance on charitable giving and found that guilt- and empathy-induced giving increased with acknowledgment. The increase in guilt was statistically significant while empathy was not (HimmatPatil 2006).

Knowles and Riner (2007) asked strangers to mail a letter. The first group was simply asked, “Would you mail this letter for me?” 71% agreed. The second group was asked, “I know you might not want to, but will you mail this letter for me?” 100% agreed (Knowles & Riner, 2007). The second study was set up similarly, but it involved giving change for the parking meter; 91% of people gave money when resistance was acknowledged compared to only 58% when it was not. These studies show strong support for acknowledging resistance; however, the sample size was small, and the results were not published independently of the book chapter in a peer-reviewed journal. Finally, a study conducted by Kemp and Creyer (2007) on attending the symphony orchestra found that acknowledging the resistance people were experiencing was more effective than just emphasizing the benefits of attending the orchestra.

Hours of combing through research studies produced a disappointing number of research results done involving omega strategies to reduce resistance. Knowles seems to be the researcher that predominately uses the term “omega strategies”. The research specifically on acknowledging resistance is quite sparse. Initial findings are encouraging. However, these results need to be conducted on a larger scale and replicated to be considered empirically valid. If validated, these findings could be very useful for many disciplines.

**Provide choices**

Another promising option when reactance is encountered is to provide choices. As discussed throughout this article, reactance occurs when freedom is limited; providing choices can be an effective means to restore freedom. The power of choice has been documented by researchers (Cialdini, 2000; Dillard, 1991) for a number of years. Knowles and Riner (2007) describe how providing choices allows competing desires within a person to be met. “The motivation to resist is satisfied in the rejected alternative at the same time the approach motivation is satisfied in the accepted alternative” (Knowles & Linn, 2004, p. 139). Higgins (1999) further explains that choosing one alternative while rejecting the other is self-satisfying because the person is both promoting and protecting.

But the choices should be double-bind choices as described by Erickson and Rossi (1975). These double-bind choices are still seen as choices, but they both “bind” the person to the same outcome. For example, asking a person, “do you prefer to discuss your mother or your father?” Knowles and Riner (2007) provide the example of moving a negotiation along by asking, “Which is the more important issue to you, wages or job security?” (p. 94); regardless of the answer the negotiations are advanced. Knowles and Riner (2007) note that the “double-bind works best when the choices are distinct and meaningful because the control implied by the choice restores decisional freedom, which reduced reactance and provides the chooser with a sense of efficacy” (p. 94). This is a promising option, but these choices should be carefully planned and crafted to increase the odds of success.

**Just say yes**

Winter, Sagarin, Rhodes, Barrett, and Cialdini (2000) report that advocating action yields higher compliance
rates than prohibiting action. In essence, people show less reactance when they are told they should do something than when they are told they cannot do something. As such, simply implementing the word yes into responses can be powerful. These would include statements such as “Yes and…” or “Yes but…” (Knowles & Riner, 2007). The premise here is that the word no triggers reactance, so if possible, it is beneficial to begin the question with yes and add a caveat. Consideration should be given to whether “and” or “but” is used. As MacLeod and Haworth (2016) point out, “and” gives the response a routine characteristic while “but” can indicate incongruence or a problem.

When conducting studies involving deception, researchers often request that participants not disclose information by saying, “Please don’t tell other potential participants that feedback from the other person was false”; however, this forbids them from disclosing information and raises reactance (Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer, Fujita & Oettingen, 2004). Knowles and Riner (2007) suggest instead saying, “To help make sure that other people provide answers as useful as yours have been, please tell them that you and another person answered some questions about each other” (p. 92). Another example is explained by Knowles and Riner (2007): instead of a “Do not touch sign” on a fragile piece of artwork, include a sign that says “Please touch with your eyes.” This approach may not be appropriate with all people, especially those who are particularly prone to reactance. However, situations will likely occur where a carefully crafted response beginning with yes can assist in overcoming reactance.

**Applying the strategies**

As previously mentioned, avoiding reactance is optimal. This can be accomplished through several of the linguistic strategies discussed above. For example, if there is a specific person or event that the interviewee has skirted around and appears resistant to discuss, the interviewer could say, “There are some reasons to discuss person X in due time, how about just one detail, but it is up to you of course.” This employs a combination of the strategies mentioned above. First of all, the interviewer uses a qualified proposition by saying “some” reasons while increasing the psychological distance of the request by adding in due time. This will likely reduce or eliminate the interviewee from feeling forced into the discussion because the discussion is not presented as being imminent. The request for just one detail minimizes the request (see Table 1) by asking for just one piece of information. Finally, the request ends with the phrase “it is up to you of course” to emphasize freedom of choice and remind the interviewee they are not being forced into the discussion.

Alternatively, the interviewer may make the same request by saying “We need to discuss person X now, we only have limited time together”. The interviewer might be attempting to convey urgency and motivate the interviewee to discuss, in this case, this specific person; but according to psychological reactance theory this request will cause reactance and have a boomerang effect. Breaking this down from a linguistic perspective gives insight into why this request would result in not obtaining the requested information. First of all, this request begins with the imperative “need,” which gives the illusion of limiting choice. The word “need” can be perceived as controlling and trigger the threat to freedom that causes reactance. Next, the psychological distance and abstractness of this concept are reduced by using the word now. This places the conversation directly in front of the interviewee, which makes them feel trapped, triggering reactance. Finally, what was probably meant as a motivator contains the scalar adverb only. Scalar adverbs are theorized to be reactance-inducing because they attempt to manipulate interviewees by distorting reality to serve the purpose of the interviewer. In this scenario, the interviewer could be perceived as attempting to manipulate the interviewee by drawing attention to the limited amount of time available.

If you have an interviewee whom you know or expect to be averse to discussing any negative/traumatic experiences, you could try using “You have the chance to discuss any unfavorable experiences” instead of “Explain any traumatic experiences.” The first request uses an allusion to choice by stating “you have the chance,” this allows the person to feel as though they are making the choice. This makes the person feel the freedom to choose and as such reactance will not be experienced. Having the freedom to choose and not having the freedom to choose are, in theory, mutually exclusive, so if the interviewee feels free to choose reactance cannot exist. The second strategy employed here is the use of pallid language versus vivid language. The term unfavorable is a much blander way of asking about negative experiences than the word traumatic. As, Quick and Stephenson (2008) and Zillmann and Brosius (2000) report, vivid language causes reactance, so pallid language is preferred to avoid reactance. The argument can be made that the words unfavorable and
traumatic are too far apart to be used interchangeably in this context. However, if the interviewer begins at the shallow end of the pool so to speak, the interviewee is much less likely to experience reactance and thus resist discussion of negative experiences of any sort. The goal of the interviewer in this example is to linguistically craft a dialogue that will successfully lead the interviewee to the deep end of the pool without experiencing reactance.

While these examples might appear elementary, they are intended to provoke thoughtful analysis of how questions are worded in an interview. Practitioners, be it clinical or law enforcement, should approach these strategies as additions to their interview toolbox. Words have enormous power, which is often over-looked. MacLeod and Haworth (2016) point out that language is the means through which daily activities are accomplished; and as such, it is clear that the best practice of interviewing should be informed by sociolinguistic research. Try these strategies out in everyday life, get comfortable using certain words over others, and watch reactance melt away.

Conclusion

We hope the information here has been presented in a way that is useful to many professional disciplines, including mental health, legal, intelligence, security, and law enforcement practitioners. These strategies can be applied in a multitude of settings in order to prevent and overcome reactance and resistance. We have found them helpful when attempting to gather information from difficult individuals who are prone to resist such requests. The relationship of the interviewer to the interviewee will vary—a patient, client, defendant, interviewee, suspect, person of interest, prisoner, or victim—but resistance often seems immutable when it appears.

Disclaimer

The opinions of the authors in this article are their own and do not in any way reflect official policy or positions of the FBI.

References


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