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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the use of feedback and encouragement in improving counselor effectiveness. Clients judged their counselors significantly higher than did expert raters. However, a significant correlation occured between the client and rater opinions concerning helpful counselors. Counselors receiving feedback based on client-rater evaluations and also obtaining encouragement to plan and implement alternative behaviors improved significantly more on their pre-post total scores than did a matched control group of counselors. All counselors improved their client-rater scores as a result of a supervised practicum experience. Implications and suggestions for counselor supervisors are included. (Author)

IMPROVING COUNSELOR EFFECTIVENESS BY MEANS OF FEEDBACK AND ENCOURAGEMENT

by

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IMPROVING COUNSELOR EFFECTIVENESS BY MEANS OF FEEDBACK AND ENCOURGEMENT

Defining and measuring the characteristics of effective counselors is an ongoing task for counseling psychologists. The Graduate Record Examination and other measures of academic ability such as grade point averages appear to be of little value in predicting counselor success. In fact, several studies (Carkhuff and Berenson, 1967; Carkhuff, 1969; Berenson, Carkhuff, and Myrus, 1966; and Carkhuff and Truns, 1965) have shown that the counselors who are functioning at the highest levels of understanding may receive the lowest grades in their training programs. In seeking more valid criteria, many rating scales have been employed, but such instruments have been criticized due to problems including the halo effect, rater leniency, and rater bias.

The relevance of client satisfaction ratings has also been debated by counselors. Rogers (1951) stressed that clients alone have the potential of knowing fully thier perceptions and behavior. Jorgensen and Jurst (1972) found a high degree of congruence between counselor and client perceptions of both their own and each others capability. Conversely, professional criticism of client ratings include a tendency toward subjectivity and bias (Pohlman, 1964; Patterson, 1956; and Rosen, 1967). McAlvaine (1972) reported favorable results in utilizing coached clients and paid clients as sources of evaluating counselors. However, Whitely (1967) warns

that the results obtained from coached clients do not advance knowledge of what actions a counselor may take to help their clients.

Many studies have demonstrated the usefulness of feedback in improving counselor effectiveness. Basic learning theories developed by Skinner (1938) indicate that behavior may be modified or shaped by reinforcing appropriate behavior. In order that an association be made between the desirable behavior and the reinforcement, Skinner stressed immediacy in obtaining maximum effect. Carlson (1974) found that immediate verbal feedback significantly increased the qualitative levels of empathic verbal performance of counselor trainees. Verbal conditioning studies (Greenspoon, 1955; Krasner 1958, Dowd and Blocher, 1974) and the use of such equipment as lights and modified hearing aids (Goff, 1968; Reddy, 1969) have yielded mixed results in eliminating the time differential between counseling behavior and supervision feedback. Jacobs (1974), et. al., have also shown that anonymous feedback increases the credibility and desirability of positive and negative structured feedback.

Ruble (1974) has identified at least four distinct types of feedback: (a) informal verbal and (b) informal written feedback, plus (c) formal verbal and (d) formal written feedback. Informal verbal feedback utilizes general discussions of counseling situations using the trainee as a model, with an attempt to tie counseling behavior to client responses by including behavioral alternatives. Types of informal written feedback include weekly logs of counseling experiences that are shared with the supervisor as well as written critiques of taped interviews. Formal written feedback occurs when individual rating scales are used with specific behavior or attitude characteristics being employed. Finally, formal verbal feedback consists of

coutinual, consistent feedback, incluling the rodeling of effective counseling skills. Although studies cited previously have investigated instant, ongoing feedback during the actual counseling sessions by means of lights, earphones, etc., the present study includes a combination of informal and formal written and verbal feedback shared with trainees one to five days after each counseling session. Because the study was conducted during an ongoing counseling practicum, the control group received informal verbal and written feedback. The experimental group had the additional benefit of formal written and verbal feedback.

Other studies have shown that individuals may change their behavior through perceived inconsistencies between self and others. Bertz (1970) says that people strive to achieve congruence between the way they desire to be perceived and the actual perceptions others hold of them. Combs, et. al., (1971) stress the need for counselors to observe the consequences of their acts. Thus, this study evaluated the use of feedback and encouragement in improving counselor effectiveness by testing for significiant mean differences between the following contrasting groups:

1. Counselors receiving or not receiving formal feedback.
2. Ratings by professional counselor educators or by the clients themselves regarding their impressions of the same counselor trainees.
3. Pre and post-test rank-order total scores of counselors receiving or not receiving formal feedback.

Method

The study was confined to twenty-four graduate students enrolled

in four initial counseling practicum courses at the University of South Carolina. Twelve of the counselors were male and twelve were female; one was black. The practicum experience lasted fifteen (15) weeks, with counselor trainees receiving a variety of practicum experiences in direct supervision with university clients and indirect supervision in more than twenty school and community agencies (i.e. juvenile and adult corrections, mental health, employment service, etc.).

Weekly meetings of five practicum students with the instructor and an advanced doctoral student (two hours) were supplemented by weekly individual sessions with each trainee (one-two hours). Case notes, summary reports, and a weekly counseling log were maintained for all clients, with each trainee accumulating a minimum of 30-35 client contact hours during the semester. Audio tapes of all counseling sessions were secured, including at least one video-taped session in the Guidance Center. All trainees were given the opportunity to view modeling of specific counseling skills by supervisors.

Eight advanced doctoral candidates and doctoral graduates in counselor education served as the raters of counselor effectiveness. Eight taped segments from counseling sessions were judged independently by each rater with a Pearson product-moment correlation indicating the inter-rater reliability to range from .68 to .91. All of these correlations were significant beyond the .001 level.

The clients consisted of adolescents and adults requesting counseling services from the University Guidance Center. Prior to their initial session with the counselor trainees, the author con-

tacted all clients, seeking their cooperation in evaluating the counselors, assuring the clients that their ratings would be kept confidential, plus answering any questions concerning the rating scale itself. Such a brief orientation was aimed at receiving more honest responses rather than coaching or training the clients in any manner. The counselor trainees were unaware that they were being rated by the clients.

No attempt was made at controlling the age, race, or sex of the clients requesting counseling services, or at standardizing the total number of counseling sessions in the eight week interval. Thirty-eight clients attended a total of 108 counseling sessions. Of the total client population, 58% were white females with a mean age of 21; 32% were white males with a mean age of 22; 5% were black males, average age 24; and 5% were black females, average age 22.

Instruments

The Perceptual Characteristics Scale consists of twelve bi-polar variables which previous research (Combs and Soper, 1963, Combs et. al., 1969) has shown discriminates significantly between successful and unsuccessful counselors. The twelve bi-polar variables include the following areas: A. General perceptual orientation, including: 1. internal-external frame of reference, and 2. people-things; B. Perceptions of other people, including: 3. able-unable, 4. dependable-undependable, 5. friendly-unfriendly, and 6. worthy rather than unworthy; C. Perceptions of self, including: 7. with people-apart from people, 8. enough-wanting, 9. self-revealing-self-concealing; and D. Overall purposes, including: 10. freeing-controlling, 11. altruism-narcissism and 12. larger meanings-smaller meanings. An overall total

score based on the sum of the twelve variables was also obtained.

The author developed the Counselor Evaluation Summary, enabling clients to rate their counselors by transforming each variable into a declarative sentence. For example, the "people-things" variable consisted of: "My counselor is more concerned with people and their reactions than with things or events." Clients rated the counselors on a nine-point scale ranging from "always" (9.0) to "never" (1.0).

Procedure

The initial session between each client and counselor was taped and later judged blindly by the raters. To reduce the chance of one particular segment biasing the raters' scores, five different three-minute intervals from the counseling session were recorded on a separate tape for the raters. A mean score based on the five separate ratings for all variables was obtained, the total score serving as the overall measure of the trainee's pre-test counseling effectiveness.

The total mean scores were used in placing all twenty-four counselors in rank order positions from highest to lowest sum scores. Three groups of eight trainees each were obtained and labeled high, medium, or low rated counselors respectively.

Based on the high-medium-low groupings, four counselor trainees from each affect were then selected randomly for either an experimental or a control group. Counselors in the experimental group received written feedback concerning rater and client perceptions at time intervals of two, five, and eight weeks.

In a brief form accompanying the chart, counselors receiving formal feedback and encouragement were also asked to specify: (a) the behaviors that went into forming such a "perceptual image;" (b) the specific types of behavior they wanted to change, (c) the perceptual images they desired to improve; and (d) alternative behaviors in attempting to modify or improve their own perceptual image to others. Such reactions to the ratings coupled with specific behavioral alternatives were discussed with the author and the practicum supervisor.

The pre-test interview and the concluding post-test interview were judged by the raters, while continuous client ratings immediately after each counseling session were also obtained throughout the eight-week interval. Thus, experimental counselors received their pre-test evaluations by the raters, plus mean scores from all clients they had seen during each time interval. The control group did not receive any client or rater feedback.

After eight weeks, all counselors completed a post-test consisting of an initial interview with a new client. The raters judged blindly three pre- and three post-test counseling tapes. Because the clients and raters were evaluating the same counselors, it was also possible to compare their scores.

Statistical Analysis

The independent fixed affects were (a) counselor trainee ratings (high, medium, low); (b) rater and client feedback of counselor effectiveness (received, not received); and (c) three time intervals for rater and client feedback (two, five, and eight weeks). The dependent variables were: (a) rater mean pre and post-test scores

based on the Perceptual Characteristics Scale and (b) client mean pre and post-test scores obtained from the Counselor Evaluation Summary.

A 2 x 2 x 3 analysis of variance tested for significant differences between levels of three contrasted variables (pre-post, experimental-control, and the high-medium-low rated levels of counselor effectiveness). A chi-square was computed for the rank order finish by both the experimental and control groups.

Results

Although an analysis of variance was calculated for each variable, only the key findings and relevant total mean scores based on a maximum of 108 total points will be presented. The results may be summarized in the following manner:

1. Independent client ratings of all trainees judged by professional counselor educators as high, medium, or low in pre-practicum effectiveness were significantly ($p < .01$) similar ($\bar{x}$: 82, 78, and 69 respectively).
2. Professional ratings for all counselors improved significantly ($p < .05$) during the pre-post eight week training interval ($\bar{x}$: 74 & 79 respectively).
3. Clients judged the same trainees significantly ($p < .0001$) higher than did professional counselor educators ($\bar{x}$: 87 & 66 respectively).
4. Although clients had greater mean ratings, there was a high correlation between the client-rater opinions of successful counselors. A Pearson product-moment correlation comparing client and rater mean scores was significant above the .01 level ($r = .78$). Thus, both groups appeared

adept at differentiating various levels of counselor effectiveness.

5. Both the experimental and control groups increased on all client and rater variables resulting from a supervised practicum experience. Such changes by all trainees appear to indicate self-exploration, insight, and behavioral changes due to training and feedback from clients and supervisors.

6. The experimental group receiving formal feedback and encouragement had higher total post-test mean scores (78 & 75 respectively). A chi-square based on the pre-post rank-order scores indicated that the experimental group improved significantly ($p < .05$) more than did the matched control-group counselors. Seven of the highest eight post-test scores by the total trainee group were earned by counselors receiving formal feedback and encouragement.

Implications

A major finding of the study was that a significant correlation occurred between clients and raters in their perceptions of helpful counselors. In the current era of accountability, the impressions of both clients and raters should be utilized in assessing counselor effectiveness. Supervisors also have an ethical responsibility of encouraging counselors consistently receiving low client and rater evaluations to modify their counseling behavior, or, as a last resort, to pursue other vocational opportunities.

But feedback will be most effective if each trainee has the option of deciding whether or not the client and raters opinions are valid. Such a supervisory attitude can help prevent the defensive trainee

reactions of denial, projection, or rationalization concerning evaluations. Supervisors should find that labeling specific counseling behaviors as "effective or ineffective" rather than "good or bad" often encourages trainees to be more receptive to client-rater feedback.

Another finding was that the overall client opinions were much higher than similar rater scores. One possible explanation for such ratings may be that most clients indicated they had formed negative images based largely on peer opinions of their high school guidance counselors. Most clients assumed that such counselors were seldom involved with personal concerns of students. Thus, the clients were pleasantly surprised when the graduate counselor trainees displayed genuine understanding, leading to client insights and behavioral changes. The counselors also helped modify a common belief that "only abnormal people seek counseling services." By changing previous negative attitudes of many clients toward the entire counseling process, most trainees earned high client ratings.

The raters probably used a different standard in judging counselors than did the clients. Whereas clients often had no actual counseling experiences, the raters quite possibly compared the same counselors to such an eminent helping person as Carl Rogers. Thus, most trainees probably exceeded client expectations based on limited exposure to high school counselors. Conversely, few trainees met rater standards judged by constant comparisons with professional therapists.

Since all feedback was based on a normal standard distribution, it can be stated "objectively" that the total group of trainees received

equal percentages of "positive" and "negative" feedback. However, the subjective "inner frame of reference" of each trainee made such feedback difficult to quantify objectively. For example, one counselor receiving high scores was disappointed because his scores were not the highest. Individual value judgments concerning the relative importance of the twelve different variables also influenced personal reactions to high or low scores.

Another major finding was that formal feedback coupled with encouragement can aid counselors. Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance states that individuals strive to maintain harmony between internal and external evaluations. Festinger postulates that when a person holds "nonfitting" cognitions about self, individual behavior, and the environment, such inconsistent "dissonant" feelings will be important. When individuals become aware that they are acting in a fashion discrepant with an important attitude, either the attitude or the behavior will change. In this study, positive feedback and encouragement probably reinforced counselors who believed they were effective helpers. For counselors having a low self concept, positive feedback regarding their counseling behavior could have stimulated an encouraging change in their own self-perceptions.

Conversely, negative feedback may aid both competent and hesitant counselors in re-evaluating their own level of helpfulness. Such negative feedback initially may result in discouragement, but such discrepancies may serve as a needed catalyst for counselors in modifying their attitudes or behaviors. Over-confident counselors receiving low ratings may decide they are not destined to be effective counselors after all (an attitude change); or they may improve their actual

counseling skills (a behavior change). In either event, such "negative" feedback can lead to a "positive" modification in attitudes and/or behaviors.

For example, one counselor receiving low pre-test ratings said: "Initially, I was afraid to counsel individuals for fear of ruining their life. But the more I thought about the ratings, the more I realized I needed to work on some things. I made a plan, followed it, and now I feel better about myself and my counseling skills."

Thus, both "positive" and "negative" feedback can lead to changes in attitudes and behaviors when coupled with supervisor encouragement toward improving specific counseling behaviors.

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