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ABSTRACT

This study compared perceptions held by clients seeking counseling of high school counselors, college counselors, advisers, counseling psychologists, clinical psychologists, and psychiatrists. While five of the six groups were not differentiated in terms of personal characteristics, wide differences emerged, even within the three counseling fields, regarding the types of problems students would discuss with members of the groups. (Author)

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Charles J. Gelso, Linda Brooks and Norman J. Karl

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Abstract

This study compared perceptions held by clients seeking counseling of high school counselors, college counselors, advisers, counseling psychologists, clinical psychologists, and psychiatrists. While five of the six groups were not differentiated in terms of personal characteristics, wide differences emerged, even within the three counseling fields, regarding the types of problems students would discuss with members of the groups.

A recent investigation by Strong, Hendel, and Bratton (1971) indicated that college students viewed professionals labeled "counselors" as very different from psychiatrists in terms of both personal characteristics and types of problems students would discuss with members of the two help-giving specialties. Based on students' perceptions, Strong, et al., concluded that: Counselors are good resources for dealing with vocational and educational problems; they are also sources of help with some specific personal problems. As the problems become more severe and difficult, the more knowledgeable, analytic and intense psychiatrist is more appropriate. While counselors may not be too bright and knowledgeable, they are warm, friendly, and polite people to talk with (1971, p. 237; italics added).

Just what is a "counselor?" Gelso and Karl (1974) have noted that this term serves as an umbrella, subsuming a variety of specialists who in some cases differ widely in important variables such as type of degree and training, amount of training, etc. Thus when students describe a "counselor" and his/her functions, they are probably thinking in highly general terms, with reference to all of the diverse specialists with whom they have come in contact, either directly or vicariously. Based on the assumption that the title "counselor" was too generic, Gelso and Karl (1974) examined students' perceptions of high school counselors, college counselors, and counseling psychologists, and also compared perceptions of these counseling specialists with those of clinical psychologists, psychiatrists and advisers. Gelso and Karl found greater differences in students' perceptions of the three counseling specialties than, for example, between counseling psychologists and psychiatrists or clinical psychologists. In general, counseling psychologists were seen as having more desirable characteristics (e.g., more knowledgeable) and being more likely sources of help for a variety of problems than either high school or college counselors.

The above findings imply that professionals at counseling centers would be wise to inform students that they are, in fact, counseling and clinical psychologists when appropriate. For those college counselors who are not also counseling or clinical psychologists, the Gelso and Karl findings suggest that they should make greater efforts than in the past to inform students of what college counselors do, are like, etc. (see Gelso & McKenzie, (1973).

Non-client students were used as the sample in both the Gelso and Karl and the Strong et al. studies. An important but unanswered question pertains to whether the perceptions held by such groups are consistent with those of students who are the actual consumers of counseling services. If so, then professionals at counseling centers need to do public relations work with their clients (e.g., during screening or initial counseling sessions) as well as with their non-client publics. Relatedly, the purpose of the present study was to compare, from the vantage point of students seeking counseling, perceptions of the personal characteristics of and problems appropriately treated by the six professional groups -- high school counselors, college counselors, advisers, counseling psychologists, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists.

Method

The Ss were 187 students in the process of requesting an initial counseling interview at the counseling center of a large Eastern university. One hundred three of the Ss were females and 84 were males.

The instrument employed in this study was the questionnaire developed by Strong et al. (1971). It contains 100 adjectives reflecting personal characteristics and nine problem topics. Subjects are asked to rate a designated role person (e.g., counseling psychologist, high school counselor) in terms of how well each of the 100 adjectives describes that person on a 5 point scale (1 = not at all descriptive, 2 = slightly descriptive, 3 = moderately descriptive, 4 = descriptive, 5 = very descriptive). Subjects are then asked to rate the role person in terms of the likelihood of their discussing each of the nine problem topics with him/her. Alternatives are: 1 = very unlikely, 2 = probably not, 3 = maybe, 4 = probably, 5 = very probably.

The questionnaire was given to clients as part of a package of pre-counseling research instruments. The receptionist asked clients to complete these questionnaires when they first requested to see a counselor if (a) the client did not appear so upset emotionally that he/she would not complete the forms coherently (this rarely occurred), and (b) the receptionist estimated that the client would have to wait at least 15 minutes to see a counselor (approximately 90 percent of the time). Each questionnaire contained a different title and, thus, each S was asked to complete the questionnaire with reference to just one title (between-subjects design). Questionnaires were shuffled so that each of the six titles appeared in random order. The number of Ss completing the questionnaire for each of the six titles ranged from 24 to 43.

Results

Two-way analyses of variance (sex by professional group) were performed on Ss' ratings of each of the 100 adjectives from the adjective check list. The frequency of significant interaction effects was no greater than would be expected by chance (see Sakoda, Cohen & Beall, 1954), indicating that similarities and differences in perceptions of the characteristics of practitioners in the six groups do not depend on Ss' sex. Significant main effects for professional group did emerge, however, on 35 of the adjectives. Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for each group on these adjectives, along with F ratios from the analyses of variance and probability levels.

Insert Table 1 About Here

The Duncan Multiple Range Test was used to test the significance of the differences between each pair of means for each adjective on which a significant F ratio emerged.[2] College counselors, counseling psychologists, advisers, clinical psychologists, and psychiatrists obtained highly similar scores; only one adjective, studious, differentiated any of these groups from the

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[2] For the sake of brevity, only the most relevant a posteriori comparisons from the analyses in Tables 1 and 2 are noted, and the probability levels are not given (all discussed as significant were $p < .05$). Copies of the tables presenting each comparison along with its p value are available from the first author.

others. Counseling psychologists and advisers received significantly lower ratings on this adjective than did college counselors, psychiatrists or clinical psychologists. As Table 1 reveals, however, there are wide differences between high shcool counselors and the remaining five titles on nearly all the 35 adjectives. Furthermore, in nearly all cases these differences attained statistical significance in the a posteriori analyses.

Two-way analyses of variance (sex by professional group) were also performed on Ss' ratings of the likelinood of their seeking help from a member of each professional group on the nine problem topics. Again, significant sex by professional group interactions did not emerge. Table 2 presents means and standard deviations for each topic, along with F ratios and probability levels for the differences among means. It can be seen that significant F's occurred for the first seven topics on the table, topics related to therapy or personal counseling. Significant F's did not emerge, however, for the two topics concerned with educational/vocational counseling.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Duncan's Multiple Range Test was performed to compare each between-professional group pair of means for the seven problem topics on which significant F ratios resulted. These comparisons revealed that counseling psychologists and psychiatrists did not differ on any of the seven topics analyzed. Yet both differed widely from the remaining four groups. Subjects would be more likely to discuss all seven problem topics with counseling psychologists and psychiatrists than with high school counselors. This same pattern occurred when counseling psychologists and psychiatrists were compared with college counselors, clinical psychologists and advisers, although the differences did not always attain statistical significance.

Of particular interest in this study were the similarities and differences between the titles college counselor and counseling psychologist, titles that are often used interchangeably. The Ss were significantly more likely to discuss five of the seven topics with counseling psychologists than with college counselors. These topics were: difficult relations with family; uncomfortable feelings and emotions; achieving self development or self fulfillment; gaining insight into personal strengths and weaknesses; and developing more effective ways of handling personal problems. College counselors, in turn, differed from high school counselors in that Ss were more likely to discuss uncomfortable feelings and emotions with the college counselors.

Discussion

A central finding of this study was that clients do not differentiate members of five of the six professional groups in terms of their personal characteristics. Counseling psychologists, college counselors, clinical psychologists, advisers, and psychiatrists are similar kinds of people, at least in the eyes of clients who are seeking a first appointment at a university counseling center. Gelso and Karl (1974), on the other hand, found that in

a large sample of non-client students counseling psychologists, clinical psychologists and psychiatrists were seen as very similar to each other. Yet these groups differed, for example, from college counselors. The flavor of the differences was that of college counselors being seen in a way that most professional help givers would view as less flattering, e.g., less knowledgeable, inquisitive, analytic than members of the other specialties. Why these differences between Gelso and Karl's results and those of the present study? A partial answer may reside in the fact that subjects in the present study were students who had made a decision to seek help from a place called a university counseling center. It is reasonable to assume that such students would have a more positive view of the characteristics of college counselors than students not seeking help, e.g., students in general, as in Gelso and Karl's sample.

Despite the fact that the above five groups are viewed by clients as highly similar in terms of personal characteristics, several differences occurred in clients' reports of the likelihood of their discussing a variety of personal problem topics with members of the different groups. Of special interest was the fact that counseling psychologists and psychiatrists were seen as equally likely sources of help for all seven personal problem topics. Additionally, both specialists would be more likely to be sought out than the remaining groups. Most relevant from the standpoint of public relations efforts of counseling centers, student clients would be more likely to discuss a variety of personal concerns with professionals called counseling psychologists than college counselors. Thus, while students seeking an initial interview at a university counseling center do not differentiate counseling psychologists and college counselors on the basis of personal characteristics, they do appear to distinguish the two labels in terms of professional competencies. This finding suggests that counseling agencies would do well to inform their clientele (e.g., during initial interviews) as well as students in general that they employ people called counseling psychologists when this title is appropriate. When this title is professionally inappropriate, or if and when agencies prefer not to use that title, our data imply that such agencies should make efforts to inform at least their new clients of the range and complexity of the personal problems they are qualified to and do work with.

It was surprising that our subjects were more likely to discuss, according to their self reports, a variety of personal problem topics with counseling psychologists than clinical psychologists, while in no case did the converse occur. This is discrepant from the Gelso and Karl findings where the two specialties obtained highly similar ratings (in a few instances favoring clinicians). The differences between the two studies may again be attributable to sampling differences. Thus, while students in general make little distinction between counseling and clinical psychologists, students in the process of seeking help at a university counseling center, traditionally a counseling psychology agency, claim to favor counseling psychologists.

Finally, our data, along with Gelso and Karl's, strongly support the importance of differentiating sub-specialties within the counseling profession when studying perceptions of "counselor" role. Professionals with the titles high school counselor, college counselor, and counseling psychologist are

viewed by at least a significant proportion of our potential and actual consumers as differing, sometimes markedly, in professional competencies and personal qualities.

The data also argue for caution in making generalizations from non-client samples to clients and vice versa. Important differences, as well as similarities, exist between these two groups with respect to perceptions of counseling and "counselor" role.

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TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and F ratios for the Adjectives in which Significant Differences Occurred Among the Six Professional Groups

	PROFESSIONAL GROUPS												
	High School Counselor (N = 30)		Advisor (N = 29)		College Counselor (N = 27)		Counseling Psychologist (N = 25)		Clinical Psychologist (N = 32)		Psychiatrist (N = 41)		
ADJECTIVE	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F
INTELLECTUAL	2.93	.98	3.80	.81	3.93	.94	3.84	.94	4.00	.84	4.24	.94	7.79
PURPOSEFUL	2.90	1.06	4.00	.95	3.27	1.10	3.88	1.93	4.09	.78	4.12	.87	7.38
TALENTED	2.40	.93	3.14	.92	3.63	1.28	3.68	1.03	3.41	.91	3.73	1.25	6.85
UNDERSTANDING	3.10	1.13	3.93	1.03	3.89	1.22	4.12	1.09	4.31	.74	4.27	.78	6.29
CURIOUS	3.00	1.14	4.00	1.05	3.69	1.07	3.65	1.02	4.06	.74	4.02	.74	5.86
CLEVER	2.37	1.03	3.38	.78	3.04	.94	4.32	1.07	3.53	.95	3.44	1.12	5.74
INTERESTED	3.07	1.14	4.00	1.95	3.80	1.30	4.04	1.98	3.90	.86	4.29	.78	5.60
STUDIOUS	2.69	.97	2.93	1.08	3.66	.86	2.89	1.28	3.56	1.08	3.61	1.14	5.21
LOGICAL	3.27	1.08	3.93	1.08	4.13	.78	3.80	1.23	4.34	.65	4.24	.94	5.13
INTERESTING	2.60	1.22	3.70	1.02	3.40	1.07	3.64	1.25	3.87	1.01	3.73	1.16	4.91
CAPABLE	3.17	1.21	3.90	1.19	3.87	1.94	3.96	1.02	4.03	.82	4.32	.88	4.71
THOROUGH	2.91	1.06	3.87	1.14	3.69	1.00	3.81	1.20	4.00	.85	3.81	.96	4.70
MOTIVATED	3.03	1.03	3.97	1.07	3.90	1.00	3.56	1.29	3.91	.86	4.15	1.04	4.66
ENT	3.28	1.20	4.10	1.00	3.97	1.15	4.08	1.02	4.18	1.03	4.35	.69	4.59

Table 1 - Continued

ADJECTIVE	PROFESSIONAL GROUPS												
	High School Counselor (N = 30)		Advisor (N = 29)		College Counselor (N = 27)		Counseling Psychologist (N = 25)		Clinical Psychologist (N = 32)		Psychiatrist (N = 41)		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F
RESPONSIVE	2.97	1.15	3.90	.96	3.97	1.05	3.77	1.21	4.03	1.03	3.88	1.10	4.26
BRIGHT	2.97	1.00	3.83	1.85	3.67	1.07	3.52	1.16	3.94	.98	3.93	.99	4.18
FRIENDLY	3.25	1.11	3.93	1.08	4.00	1.04	3.73	1.19	4.09	.93	4.05	.95	4.02
INTENSE	2.47	.97	3.08	1.11	3.27	.98	3.40	1.04	3.22	1.10	3.46	.95	3.88
WARM	2.67	1.12	3.52	1.95	3.56	1.12	3.32	1.25	3.28	1.17	3.49	1.05	3.70
BORED	2.30	1.26	1.41	.91	1.70	1.10	1.44	.92	1.53	.72	1.46	.87	3.69
UNINTERESTED	2.40	1.13	1.62	1.15	1.78	1.25	1.72	1.24	1.53	.76	1.42	.71	3.61
KNOWLEDGEABLE	3.30	1.06	4.03	.91	4.07	1.07	3.96	.98	4.16	.88	4.17	.92	3.57
EXPRESSIVE	3.03	1.09	3.90	1.00	3.66	.94	3.50	1.11	3.62	.92	3.86	.92	3.34
ANALYTIC	3.10	1.03	3.87	1.01	3.70	1.15	3.72	1.31	3.91	.96	4.05	.95	3.14
ENERGETIC	2.67	1.12	3.38	1.12	3.37	1.08	3.28	1.02	3.59	.91	3.02	1.04	3.03
PERSISTENT	2.91	1.06	3.47	1.22	3.79	1.08	3.81	.94	3.53	1.08	3.58	.93	3.00
TOLERANT	3.20	1.03	3.90	.96	3.93	1.02	3.76	1.09	3.97	.93	4.02	1.01	2.89
TRUSTING	2.77	1.19	3.67	1.09	3.63	1.03	3.40	1.26	3.44	1.08	3.59	1.10	2.73
FAIR	3.03	1.13	3.83	1.10	3.52	1.09	3.76	.97	3.47	.95	3.78	.85	2.69

Table 1 - Continued

	PROFESSIONAL GROUPS												
	High School Counselor (N = 30)		Advisor (N = 29)		College Counselor (N = 27)		Counseling Psychologist (N = 25)		Clinical Psychologist (N = 32)		Psychiatrist (N = 41)		
ADJECTIVE	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F
PERSERVERING	2.66	1.13	3.53	1.17	3.35	1.37	3.42	2.24	3.41	1.16	3.47	.88	2.58
UNDERSTANDABLE	3.22	1.16	3.83	1.02	3.86	1.09	3.77	1.18	3.88	.91	4.00	.90	2.39
PRACTICAL	3.09	1.09	3.63	1.03	3.93	.80	3.69	1.09	3.62	.89	3.56	1.05	2.33
HAPPY	2.72	1.05	3.37	1.16	3.45	.91	3.04	.96	3.09	1.08	2.93	.88	2.32
RESERVED	2.40	1.19	2.97	1.03	2.93	1.05	2.88	.83	3.09	1.17	3.24	1.11	2.29
TACTFUL	3.03	1.22	3.66	1.14	3.33	1.39	3.32	1.46	3.78	1.04	3.88	1.14	2.27

F required for $p < .05 = 2.27$, and for $p < .01 = 3.10$

TABLE 2

The likelihood of Clients Discussing Each of the Nine Problem Topics with the Members of Each Professional Specialty

PROBLEM TOPIC	PROFESSIONAL GROUP												
	High School Counselor N = 30		Advisor N = 28		College Counselor N = 28		Counseling Psychologist N = 24		Clinical Psychologist N = 32		Psychiatrist N = 43		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F
Achieving Self Development or Self-fulfillment	3.07	1.36	3.71	1.33	3.46	1.45	4.42	.97	3.22	1.48	4.19	1.12	5.18**
Gaining Insight into Personal Strengths & Weaknesses	3.20	1.42	3.86	1.35	3.61	1.37	4.42	.88	3.44	1.46	4.51	.80	6.15**
Difficult Relations with Family	2.77	1.52	3.57	1.17	3.00	1.66	4.04	1.16	2.97	1.58	3.74	1.33	3.76**
Developing more Effective Ways of Handling Personal Problems	3.13	1.43	3.96	1.29	3.50	1.43	4.46	1.14	3.59	1.50	4.42	1.12	5.06**
Uncomfortable Feelings & Emotions	2.73	1.57	3.75	1.24	3.46	1.48	4.50	1.06	3.41	1.41	4.21	1.23	6.53**
Problems in Getting Along W/Friends	2.60	1.50	3.18	1.42	3.36	1.42	3.67	1.47	2.81	1.64	3.65	1.46	2.73*
Problems of Sexual Adjustment	2.40	1.52	2.71	1.41	2.68	1.49	3.42	1.64	2.97	1.56	3.42	1.45	2.41*

Table 2 -- Continued

PROBLEM TOPIC	High School Counselor N = 30 Mean	SD	Advisor N = 28 Mean	SD	College Counselor N = 28 Mean	SD	Counseling Psychologist N = 24 Mean	SD	Clinical Psychologist N = 32 Mean	SD	Psychiatrist N = 43 Mean	SD	F
Choice of Occupation	3.83	1.15	3.71	1.44	3.82	1.16	3.50	1.47	3.22	1.62	3.23	1.51	1.30
Difficulty with Grades	3.20	1.30	3.54	1.56	3.46	1.43	3.63	1.53	3.00	1.55	2.93	1.37	1.28

** = $p < .01$
* = $p < .05$