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ABSTRACT

Attribution theory focuses on the differences in perceptions that people have of the causes of behaviors and events. In this study attribution theory was used to determine the effect of role in a counseling interview on ratings of causal attributions for counselor and client behaviors. Counselor trainees (n=42) were randomly assigned to the roles of counselor, client, or observer for 15-minute counseling interviews. Following the counseling the trainees rated counselor and client behaviors and the causes of the behaviors. Counselors rated their own behaviors and the client behaviors as the most situationally caused. Clients rated their own behaviors and counselor behaviors as the least situationally caused. Dispositional ratings were not used to differentiate the causes of behaviors. The relevance of attribution theory in understanding counselor and client behavior was discussed. (Author)

Effect of Role on Causal Attributions for Counselor Trainee Behaviors

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Abstract

Attribution theory focuses on the differences in perceptions that people have of the causes of behaviors and events. In this study attribution theory was used to determine the effect of role in a counseling interview on ratings of causal attributions for counselor and client behaviors. 42 counselor trainees were randomly assigned to the roles of counselor, client, or observer for 15 minute counseling interviews. Following the counseling the trainees rated counselor and client behaviors and the causes of the behaviors. Counselors rated their own behaviors and the client behaviors as the most situationally caused. Clients rated their own behaviors and counselor behaviors as the least situationally caused. Dispositional ratings were not used to differentiate the causes of behaviors. The relevance of attribution theory in understanding counselor and client behavior was discussed.

Effect of Role on

Causal Attributions for Counselor Trainee Behaviors

Attribution theory focuses on the differences in perceptions that people have of the causes of behaviors and events (Heider, 1958; Jones, Kanouse, Kelley, Nisbett, Valins, & Weiner, 1972). Although Strong (1971) explored some theoretical implications of attribution theory for counseling, almost no experimental studies have approached counseling using this theory. The present study used attribution theory to examine the causal attributions that beginning counseling students in the roles of counselor, client, and observer make about counselor and client behaviors.

One current training model used in counselor education programs has trainees learn about the counseling process by participating in the roles of counselor, client, and observer (Hackney & Nye, 1973). Two major strategies have exerted a strong influence on the procedure of having students assume these various roles. The first strategy is the emphasis on observable behavior (Krumboltz, 1966; Kanfer & Saslow, 1968; Osipow & Walsh, 1970; and Gottman & Leibrum, 1974). The second strategy emphasizes the state of empathic understanding: the perceiving of the world from another person's point of view (Carkhuff & Berenson, 1967; Rogers, 1975). One component of empathic understanding is the process of identifying with accuracy what another person perceives as the causes of his or her own behaviors and the behaviors of others. In other words, one component of empathy is the process of identifying the causal attributions a

person makes for behaviors. Given a counseling model that includes a focus on observable behaviors and on the perception of the causal attributions people make for behaviors, one question that results is: What is the effect of role as counselor, client, and observer that a trainee assumes in a counseling interview on how trainees rate the causes of counselor and client behaviors?

Jones and Nisbett (1972) presented two causal attribution hypotheses to explain how people in three roles perceived the causes of an actor's behaviors. The roles were: (a) actor, a person who observed and rated his or her own behaviors; (b) non-participant observer, a person who observed and rated both participants' behaviors; and (c) participant observer, a person who observed and rated the actor's behaviors. The first theoretical hypothesis states that there is a pervasive tendency for actors to attribute their actions to situational requirements, whereas non-participant observers tend to attribute the same actions to stable personal dispositions. The second theoretical hypothesis states that given a participant observer and a non-participant observer, the participant observer is more likely to attribute greater dispositional characteristics to the actor's behaviors than is the non-participant observer of the same behaviors.

If Jones and Nisbett's theoretical hypotheses about situational and dispoisitional attributions had been ordered they would appear as in Table 1. With the ordering of these theoretical hypotheses, an actor rating his or her own behaviors would tend to rate the behaviors as most caused by the situation, or least caused by his or her own disposition. The participant observer would tend to rate the actor's behaviors

as least caused by the situation, or most caused by the actor's disposition. Relating Jones and Nisbett's terms to the terms used in this study: (a) when counselors or clients rate their own behaviors they function as actors; and (b) when counselors and clients rate each others' behaviors they function as participant observers. The observers always function as non-participant observers.

Two classes of behaviors which occur in counseling sessions were included for ratings by subjects. Some behaviors--calmness, friendliness, interest, optimism, and involvement--required the rater to cluster several different actions and to label them as behavior. These were labeled clustered behaviors. In contrast some behaviors--eye contact, posture, smiling, and verbal following--involved a single action that occurred once or several times. These were labeled single behaviors.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. There are no significant differences among situational ratings by counselors, clients, and observers for (a) all--single plus clustered, (b) single, and (c) clustered counselor behaviors.

Hypothesis 2. There are no significant differences among dispositional ratings by counselors, clients, and observers for (a) all--single plus clustered, (b) single, and (c) clustered counselor behaviors.

Hypothesis 3. There are no significant differences among causality ratings by counselors, clients, and observers for (a) all--single plus clustered, (b) single, and (c) clustered counselor behaviors.

Hypothesis 4-6. These hypotheses were parallel in form to Hypotheses 1-3, but focuses on client behaviors rather than counselor behaviors.

Method

Subjects and Setting

The subjects were 42 master's level counselor trainees in a pre-practicum course at Indiana University. Prior to the mid-semester experiment, all trainees had received classroom instruction in the micro-counseling skills of eye contact, posture, and verbal following (Ivey, 1971). The mean age of the males and females was 26.4 years with a range from 21 to 44 years.

The counseling interviews were held in small observation rooms. Two chairs were arranged so the non-participant observer behind a one-way mirror could see both the counselor and client. A live microphone was suspended from the ceiling directly between the counselor and the client so that the observer wearing earphones could hear their conversation. A small table held a cassette tape recorder.

Questionnaire

The instrument used to collect the dependent measure was the Behavior Rating Scales Questionnaire (BRSQ) which was modeled on the Attribution Scale developed by Storms (1973). The first section of the BRSQ was the Counselor Behavior Rating Scale. This section consisted of three single counselor behaviors--eye contact, posture, and verbal following; and three clustered counselor behaviors--calmness, friendliness, and interest. Two behaviors were rated on each page. The first question for each behavior asked the subject to rate a counselor behavior on a nine-point Likert-type scale. The next two questions, also using Likert-type scales, asked the subject to rate the situational and dispositional causes of the previously rated behavior. A situational attribution was

the act of assigning the following aspects of the environment--being in the study, the counseling session, the topic of conversation, the way the counselor (client) behaved, and so on--as the cause of behavior by a counselor (client). A dispositional attribution was the act of assigning the following aspects of a person--personality traits, character, personal style, attitudes, moods, and so on--as the cause of behavior by a counselor (client). The second section of the BRSQ was the Client Behavior Rating Scale. This section consisted of three single client behaviors--eye contact, posture, and smiling; and three clustered client behaviors--calmness, optimism, and involvement. The form of both the counselor and client rating scales was identical.

Students signed up for groups so that members of the group were not well acquainted with each other. Since the students' sign up did not fill several groups, the experimenter randomly reassembled some groups so that each group had three students. When the groups had been formed, the subjects in each group were randomly assigned to the role of counselor, client and observer. As each group completed its counseling interview the individual subjects in the group completed the BRSQ.

Fulfilling the following conditions was necessary for a group's data to be accepted: (a) all subjects in the group completed all ratings of the dependent measure, (b) two of the three subjects in each group agreed that the counselor actually interviewed the client and that the client actually discussed a problem, and (c) the counseling interview lasted for not more or less than 15 minutes. The last condition was not met by one group and reduced to 14 the number of experimental groups.

Since this research initiated exploration into the relationship

of roles to causal attributions for behaviors, the probability levels for F ratios were reported rather than set: In this way patterns in the data could be examined. The upper limit for reporting was $p=.20$.

RESULTS

Using a randomized block design, analyses of variance showed that role significantly affected, ranging from the $p<.025$ to $p=.20$ levels: (a) all six situational ratings of counselor and client behaviors, (b) all six causality ratings of counselor and client behaviors, but (c) only one of six dispositional ratings of counselor and client behaviors. A summary of the F ratios and probability levels for all causal attribution ratings of counselor and client behaviors is presented in Table 2.

More specifically, for Hypotheses 1 and 3, the counselors rated all their own behaviors, including both single and clustered behaviors, as more situationally caused than did clients. In Hypotheses 4 and 6 again it was the counselors who rated all the client behaviors, both single and clustered, as more situationally caused than did the clients. In contrast to the tendency for counselors to rate both their own and the client behaviors as more situationally caused, the results of Hypotheses 2 and 5 indicated that counselors, clients, and observers did not differ in their ratings of dispositional causes for counselor and client behaviors. Counselors used both the situational and the causality rating scales, but not the dispositional rating scale, to differentiate the causes of their own and the client behaviors from the client ratings. Observers in each part of Hypotheses 1, 3, 4, and 6 made attribution ratings that were between the counselor and client ratings. In relation to the theoretical hypotheses advanced by Jones and Nisbett (1972) the direction of the means

for all parts of Hypotheses 1 and 3 were in the predicted direction, but only two of the six analyses were significant at the $p<.05$. However, the direction of the means for all parts of Hypotheses 4 and 6 were in the opposite direction of Jones and Nisbett's theoretical hypotheses with only two of six analyses significant at the $p<.05$. Hypotheses 2 and 5 also did not support Jones and Nisbett's hypotheses.

Discussion

What accounted for the effect of role in a counseling interview on situational attributions for counselor and client behaviors? The emphasis was on situational rather than dispositional ratings of behaviors as it was situational attributions that differentiated counselor ratings from client ratings. It may be that counselors had more to gain by rating behaviors as situationally caused. One factor that might explain this phenomenon was the instructions given to the trainees prior to the counseling interviews. Counselor instructions seemed to have made salient situational factors, while client instructions seemed to have minimized situational factors.

Some examples of important situational factors made salient to the counselor in the instructions were: (a) knowledge that counseling skills were being observed by both the client and the observer, (b) knowledge that the counseling interview was being tape recorded for a future assignment, and (c) responsibility to demonstrate previously learned skills to help a client. The clients had little to gain by attending to situational factors because their instructions emphasized their role as discussing personal problems.

It also seemed that stepping into the counselor role made more

salient for trainees the current emphasis in counselor education programs of looking at the effects of the situation on behaviors. In other words, what was being taught in terms of more behavioral approaches in the counselor education program found expression in ratings of causal attributions when subjects were in the counselor role.

The finding that prepracticum counseling students perceive the causes of behaviors differently based on the role that they are assigned raises some as yet unanswered questions about the perceptions students have about their own behaviors and the behaviors of others. Do the differences in situational ratings of behavior manifest themselves in terms of behavioral consequences? Do different theoretical orientations teach beginning counselors to perceive the causes of behavior differently? Finally, do counselors facilitate client change more when perceptions of causes of behaviors are similar rather than dissimilar?

Questions raised in Strong's (1971) theoretical article and in this experimental study provide ground for further investigating counselor trainees, counselors and clients' perceptions of the causes of behaviors and events. These perceptions are important since people's perceptions of the causes of behaviors and events can influence their subsequent actions (Kelley, 1973). Causal attribution theory provides a powerful conceptual tool for understanding perceptions of causes of events and behaviors. The theory can help us to understand more fully the complex phenomena that occurs in a counseling relationship.

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Table 1

Ordering of Jones and Nisbett's Theoretical Hypotheses for Situational and Dispositional Causal Attributions

Terminology	Situational attributions	Dispositional attributions
Actors	Most situational	Some dispositional
Non-participants observers	More situational	More dispositional
Participant observers	Some situational	Most dispositional

Table 2

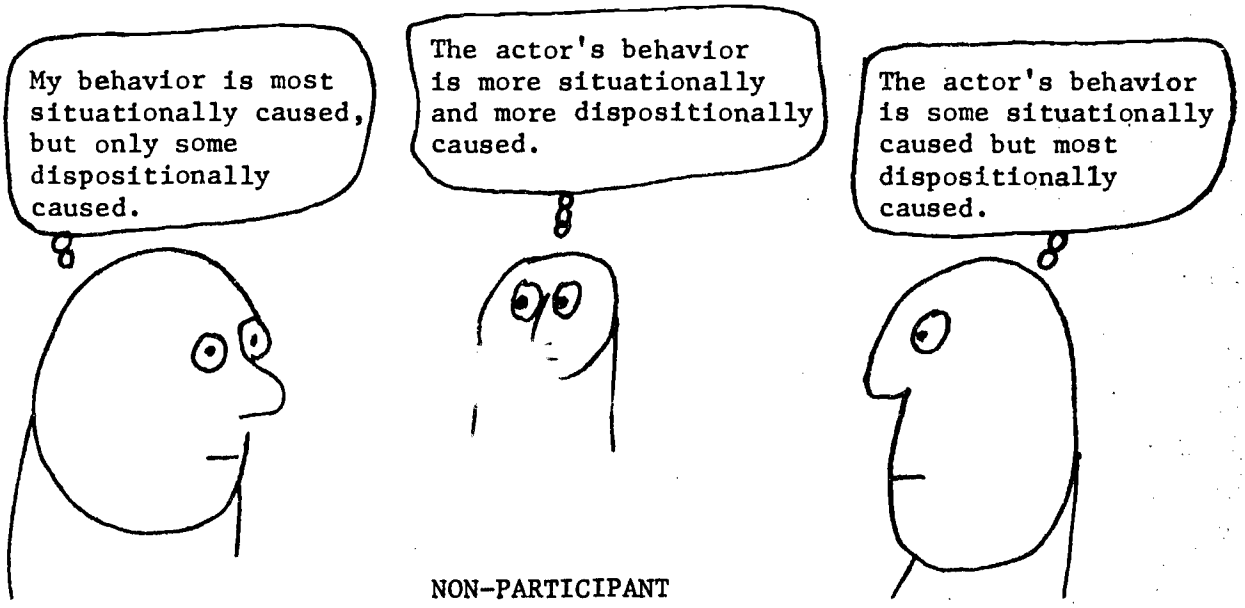
Summary of F Ratios and Probability Levels for Causal Attribution Ratings of Counselor and Client Behaviors

Analyses of variance for causal attribution ratings	F ratios and probability levels			
	Counselors		Clients	
	F	p	F	p
Situational ratings	H_1		H_4	
All behaviors	4.82	.025	2.71	.10
Single behaviors	4.26	.05	2.71	.10
Clustered behaviors	3.04	.10	1.88	.20
Dispositional ratings	H_2		H_5	
All behaviors	.16	ns	.83	ns
Single behaviors	.07	ns	.01	ns
Clustered behaviors	.22	ns	2.43	.20
Causality ratings (difference scores)	H_3		H_6	
All behaviors	3.19	.10	3.43	.05
Single behaviors	2.96	.10	2.07	.20
Clustered behaviors	2.25	.20	3.87	.05

Note. All F ratios have 2, 26 df.

Note. $p > .20$ reported as ns.

SITUATIONAL AND DISPOSITIONAL ATTRIBUTIONS



ACTOR
(Counselor/Client)

NON-PARTICIPANT
OBSERVER

PARTICIPANT OBSERVER
(Client/Counselor)

1. When the counselor rates his/her own behaviors, the counselor functions as an actor. When the counselor rates the client's behaviors, the counselor functions as a participant observer.

2. When the client rates his/her own behaviors, the client functions as an actor. When the client rates the counselor's behaviors, the counselor functions as a participant observer.