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ABSTRACT

Research has suggested that self-involving responses, i.e., direct present expressions of a counselor's feelings about client statements, are highly effective counselor behaviors, while self-disclosure responses, i.e., references to personal experiences of the counselor, are moderately effective in eliciting positive client perceptions of and responses to the counselor. Female undergraduates (N=180) listened to taped interactions between a counselor and a female client in which the counselor, described as either a professional or paraprofessional, responded with either low intimacy self-disclosure, high intimacy self-disclosure, or self-involving responses. Subjects responded to the counselor as they believed the client would and rated the counselor as they believed the client would by completing the Counselor Rating Form. Results indicated that: (1) high self-disclosing and self-involving counselors received more expert and trustworthy ratings than low self-disclosing counselors; (2) paraprofessionals received more attractive and trustworthy ratings than professionals; (3) client responses to high self-disclosing and self-involving counselors contained more client self-referents than responses to low self-disclosing counselors, which contained more counselor-focused statements; and (4) responses to high self-disclosing counselors contained more affective words and fewer counselor references than responses to self-involving or low self-disclosing counselors. The findings suggest that high intimacy self-disclosure is a superior response to low intimacy self-disclosure and appears to be as effective as self-involving responses. (Author/NRB)

Differential Effects of Counselor Self-Referent Responses and Counselor Status

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Running Head: Differential Effects of Counselor Self-Referents

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Recent studies have investigated the differential effectiveness of two types of counselor self-referent responses -- self-disclosure and self-involving responses (McCarthy & Betz, 1978; McCarthy, 1979). Self-disclosure responses are statements referring to the past history or personal experiences of the counselor, while self-involving responses are direct present expressions of a counselor's feelings about or reactions to client statements and/or behaviors (Danish, D'Augelli, & Hauer, 1980). These studies found that self-involving counselors were more favorably perceived by clients than self-disclosing counselors on dimensions of expertness, social attractiveness, and trustworthiness. Furthermore, self-involving responses elicited client responses that tended to focus on greater client exploration in the present while self-disclosure responses were more likely to elicit counselor-focused client responses that did not emphasize the present. In one study (McCarthy, 1979), these findings were obtained across all possible counselor-client gender pairings.

The results of these studies suggest that self-involving responses are highly effective counselor behaviors while counselor self-disclosure responses are only moderately effective in eliciting positive client perceptions of and responses to the counselor. However, one problem with this conclusion is that it tends to contradict the literature on self-disclosure which, despite its definitional problems, has generally concluded that self-disclosure is a highly effective type of counselor response (Cozby, 1973; Danish, D'Augelli, & Hauer, 1980; Egan, 1975). Counselor self-disclosure has been positively related to client self-disclosure (Simonson & Bahr, 1974; Johnson & Noonan, 1972) and client perceptions of the counselor (Bundza & Simonson, 1973; Murphy & Strong, 1972).

It is possible that counselor self-disclosure statements can be as highly effective as self-involving statements. Some research suggests that intimacy level of an individual's self-disclosure is a significant factor in determining its effectiveness (Chelune, 1975; Daher & Banikiotes, 1976; DeForest & Stone, 1980; Goodstein & Reinecker, 1974; Hall, 1976; Merluzzi, Banikiotes, & Missbach, 1978; Simonson & Bahr, 1974; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969). Intimate self-disclosure has been found to elicit positive attraction to the discloser (Daher & Banikiotes, 1976; Merluzzi, et al., 1978; Worthy, et al., 1969). Merluzzi, et al. (1978) found that high intimacy self-disclosing counselors were superior to low intimacy self-disclosing counselors regardless of sex or status on client perceptions of counselor attractiveness and client positive expectations about counseling outcome. However, they also found that high self-disclosing counselors were perceived as less trustworthy and expert than were low self-disclosing counselors.

Self-disclosure of an intimate nature has also been demonstrated to elicit reciprocal self-disclosure by the recipient (DeForest & Stone, 1980; Goodstein & Reinecker, 1974; Hall, 1976). It appears that as the intimacy of the topics disclosed increases, the recipient of these disclosures also discusses more intimate topics. There is one exception to these findings. Simonson and Bahr (1974) found that demographic self-disclosure by either a professional or paraprofessional counselor elicited greater client self-disclosure and client attraction than did counselor self-disclosure of more intimate information.

The findings of a negative relationship between intimacy of counselor self-disclosure and client perceptions and responses in the Merluzzi, et al. (1978) and Simonson and Bahr (1974) studies are somewhat contradictory to the other studies. Still, the majority of research

suggests that increasing the intimacy of counselor self-disclosure has a significant positive impaction on the counseling process. A possible explanation for the contradictory results is that Simonson and Bahr and Merluzzi, et al. failed to clearly define the variable of counselor self-disclosure and to specify the differences between low and high intimacy levels of self-disclosure. They may have been using very different definitions of self-disclosure than those used by the authors of the other studies.

A re-examination of the McCarthy (1979) and McCarthy & Betz (1978) studies of self-disclosure versus self-involving responses reveals that they examined only low intimacy self-disclosure, i.e., personal information about the counselor that agrees with the client's previously expressed experience, e.g., "I remember that I had trouble relating to my parents, too." In contrast, high intimacy counselor self-disclosure responses are statements that agree with the client's experience and also contain a direct feeling which the counselor believes parallels the client's, as yet, unstated feeling, e.g., "I had trouble relating to my parents and it hurt me." Their use of low intimacy self-disclosure may explain their findings that the counselor self-disclosure statements seemed to be less effective than counselor self-involving statements.

Both types of counselor self-disclosure responses as well as counselor self-involving responses need to be examined. Therefore, one major purpose of the present study was to examine the differential effectiveness of low versus high intimacy self-disclosure versus self-involving responses on client perceptions of and responses to the counselor. It was generally expected that self-involving and high intimacy self-disclosing statements would be more effective than low intimacy

self-disclosing statements.

Another factor which seems to interact with counselor self-referent responses is status of the counselor. Some authors have found that individuals of differing status elicit different behavior and perceptions from others (Brooks, 1974; Ellison & Firestone, 1974; Jackson & Pepinsky, 1972; Merluzzi, et al., 1978; Price & Iverson, 1969; Shaffer, 1976; Simonson & Bahr, 1974). High status individuals have generally been found to be more favorably perceived than low status individuals (Ellison & Firestone, 1974; Jackson & Pepinsky, 1972; Price & Iverson, 1969). Brooks found that high status male counselors were more favorably regarded by clients than low status male counselors while the reverse was true for female counselors.

Simonson and Bahr (1974) found that counselor status interacted with intimacy of counselor self-disclosure such that clients preferred professional counselors to use demographic rather than personal self-disclosure while they had no such preference for paraprofessional counselors. Shaffer (1976) found that although high status counselors were rated less favorably than low status counselors at the end of the first counseling session, this finding was reversed when subjects believed they were observing the twelfth counseling session by the counselor.

Ellison and Firestone (1974) found that high status counselors elicited significantly greater amounts of self-disclosure from low self-esteem clients than did low status counselors. Brooks (1974) found that high status male counselors elicited significantly greater amounts of self-disclosure from male and female clients than did low status males while female counselor status did not affect client self-disclosure.

Based on these results, it would be expected that at least male professional counselors would be more favorably perceived than male paraprofessionals and would elicit more positive client responses. It would be further expected that clients would perceive a professional who uses low intimacy self-disclosure more favorably than a professional who uses high intimacy self-disclosure and they would respond more favorably to the low self-disclosing professional counselor. Therefore, a second major purpose of the present study was to examine the extent to which counselor paraprofessional versus professional status affects client perceptions of and responses to the counselor and the extent to which status moderates the effects of counselor use of low self-disclosure, high self-disclosure, and self-involving responses.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 180 female undergraduates enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a large Midwestern university who received credit for their participation. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions: (a) low self-disclosure, paraprofessional counselor; (b) low self-disclosure, professional counselor; (c) high self-disclosure, paraprofessional counselor; (d) high self-disclosure, professional counselor; (e) self-involving, paraprofessional counselor; (f) self-involving, professional counselor. There were 30 subjects per condition.

Construction of Audiotaped Stimulus Materials

Tape recordings of three 20 minute counseling interactions between a male counselor and a female client were devised. The counselor, an experienced clinical psychologist, and the client, an advanced graduate student in counseling psychology, role played the three interviews using

prepared scripts.[1] The three scripts involved discussions of the client's dissatisfaction with herself, her lack of friends, and problems relating to her parents. The discussions were divided into 10 segments of identical conversation with the exception of the last response in each segment which was either a counselor high intimacy self-disclosing, low intimacy self-disclosing, or self-involving statement. With the exception of the last response in each segment, all of the counselor responses were either open-ended questions, reflections of content, or reflections of feeling. The scripts involving counselor low intimacy self-disclosure and counselor self-involving responses were identical to those used by McCarthy (1979) and McCarthy and Betz (1978).

The self-disclosing and self-involving counselor statements were positive rather than negative in nature. Positive self-disclosure statements express similarity rather than dissimilarity of personal experiences and positive self-involving statements express positive, rather than negative feelings about the client (Danish, D'Augelli, & Hauer, 1980). Low intimacy self-disclosure responses were statements in which the counselor agreed with the client's previously expressed experience, e.g., "I remember having to make it on my own when I was growing-up." High intimacy self-disclosure responses were statements that agreed with the client's experience and also contained a feeling which the client had not yet identified, e.g., "I remember having to make it on my own and I felt so lonely." Self-involving responses were statements of the counselor's feelings about the client's behavior, e.g., "I appreciate the way you are relating to me right now."

Dependent Measures

Perceptions of the Counselor. The Counselor Rating Form (CRF; Barak & LaCrosse, 1975) used by McCarthy (1979) and McCarthy & Betz

(1978) was used in this study to assess subjects' perceptions of the expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness of the counselors. The CRF consists of 36 4-point bi-polar items, 12 on each of the three dimensions. Scores on each dimension may range from 12 to 48. This scoring represents a change made by the authors of the original CRF in which there were 36 7-point bipolar items with scores on each dimension ranging from 12 to 84. Studies using the original CRF have demonstrated reliable and valid differences in perceived expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness as a function of appropriate experimental manipulations (Barak & LaCrosse, 1975; LaCrosse, 1980).

Client Responses. Client responses were obtained by asking the subjects to write a response to the last counselor statement (either low self-disclosing, high self-disclosing, or self-involving) in each of the 10 segments of the counseling interview. These responses were analyzed in terms of the following seven categories used by McCarthy (1979) and McCarthy and Betz (1978): (a) total number of words; (b) proportion of affective words to total words; (c) proportion of present tense verbs to total words; (d) proportion of past and future tense verbs to total words; (e) proportion of self-referents (i.e., client referents) to total words; (f) proportion of counselor referents to total words; (g) number of counselor-focused statements, e.g., "So how did you get along without your parents?"[2]

Content analyses of the written client responses were done by two raters carefully trained to identify the presence or absence of each response category and without knowledge of the condition. The degree of interjudge agreement in the eight response categories was calculated using an alpha coefficient (Cronbach 1951) on a sample of content analyses

of 18 subjects' responses. The mean reliability for the eight categories was .98.

Procedure

As in the original McCarthy (1979) and McCarthy and Betz (1978) studies subjects heard a tape of a simulated counselor-client interaction. For each subject group, either a tape using counselor low self-disclosing, high self-disclosing, or self-involving responses was played. One-half of the subjects were told that the counselor was an experienced paraprofessional while the other half were told that he was a professional. Descriptions similar to those developed by Simonson and Bahr (1974) were used. The experienced paraprofessional counselor was described as: "The counselor is a paraprofessional. His academic training involves a bachelor's degree in English, but he completed seven years of supervised work in a community mental health center." The professional counselor was described as: "The counselor has a Ph.D. in psychology and has been practicing counseling for seven years."

After hearing each of the 10 segments of the tape, subjects were asked to respond to the counselor in the way they believed the client would respond. After the completion of the taped interview, subjects rated the counselor by completing the CRF as they believed the client on the tape would rate him.

Results

Perceptions of the Counselor

Multivariate analyses of variance were conducted on perceived counselor dimensions of expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. Significant multivariate Fs were obtained for the main effect of counselor response type, $F(6, 344) = 4.00$, $p < .0007$, and for the main

effect of counselor status, $F(3, 172) = 4.01$, $p < .009$. The multivariate F for the interaction between counselor response type and counselor status was not significant. Subsequent univariate analyses of main effects were performed. Cell means and standard deviations for significant effects are presented in Table 1. The univariate analyses indicated a significant main effect due to counselor response type on the dimensions of expertness, $F(2, 174) = 9.68$, $p < .0001$, and a non-significant trend on the dimension of trustworthiness, $F(2, 174) = 2.82$, $p < .06$. There was no significant effect due to counselor response type on the dimension of attractiveness. There was a significant main effect due to counselor status on the dimensions of attractiveness, $F(1, 174) = 7.33$, $p < .008$ and trustworthiness, $F(1, 174) = 7.33$, $p < .008$. There was no significant effect due to counselor status on the dimension of expertness.

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey test of honestly significant differences and $p < .05$ as the level of significance revealed that, in the case of counselor response type, both the high self-disclosing and self-involving counselors were rated as significantly more expert and more trustworthy than the low self-disclosing counselor. There were no significant differences in perceived expertness or trustworthiness of the high self-disclosing and self-involving counselors. The comparisons of counselor status revealed that paraprofessional counselors were rated as significantly more attractive and trustworthy than the professional counselors.

Client Responses to the Counselor

Multivariate analyses of variance were conducted on client responses to the counselor. A significant multivariate F was obtained for the

main effect of counselor response type, F (16, 334) = 12.31, $p < .0001$. The multivariate Fs for the main effect of counselor status and for the interaction between counselor response type and counselor status were not significant. Subsequent univariate analyses of main effects were performed. Cell means and standard deviations for significant effects are presented in Table 1. The univariate analyses indicated a significant main effect due to counselor response type on the dimensions of proportion of affective words, F (2, 174) = 27.46, $p < 0001$; proportion of past and future tense verbs, F (2, 174) = 5.05, $p < .007$; proportion of client referents, F (2, 174) = 8.76, $p < 0002$; proportion of counselor referents, F (2, 174) = 13.53, $p < .0001$; number of counselor-focused statements, F (2, 174) = 16.04, $p < .0001$. There was no significant univariate main effect due to counselor response type on total number of words or proportion of present tense verbs.

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey test for honestly significant differences and $p < .05$ as the significance level were conducted on counselor response type. The analyses revealed that client responses to the high self-disclosing and self-involving counselors contained significantly more self (client)-referents than responses to the low self-disclosing counselor. There were no significant differences between the proportion of client referents contained in responses to the high self-disclosing and self-involving counselors. Responses to the low self-disclosing counselor contained a significantly greater proportion of past and future verbs and more counselor-focused statements than did responses to either the high self-disclosing or self-involving counselors which did not differ significantly from each other. Finally, responses to the high self-disclosing counselor contained a significantly

greater proportion of affective words and a significantly smaller proportion of counselor referents than did responses to the low self-disclosing or self-involving counselors which did not differ significantly from each other.

Discussion

Generally, the results support the findings of McCarthy and Betz (1978) and McCarthy (1979) that counselor self-involving responses are more highly effective than low intimacy self-disclosure in eliciting positive client perceptions of and responses to the counselor. They further indicate that high intimacy self-disclosure is a superior response to low intimacy self-disclosure and appears to be as effective as self-involving responses. It is interesting to note that high self-disclosure and self-involving responses were very similar in their quantitative effects on counseling process. However, one important difference is that high self-disclosure responses were more effective than self-involving responses in eliciting affective words in client responses.

High intimacy self-disclosure and self-involving responses also differ qualitatively with respect to their focus. Self-involving responses process the "here-and-now" relationship between the counselor and the client. On the other hand, high self-disclosing statements process the client's concern by accurately relating an experience that is similar to the client's and expressing an underlying feeling which the counselor believes the client also shares.

Finally, the results suggest that paraprofessional versus professional counselor status seems to elicit different client perceptions of the counselor, although counselor status does not seem to differen-

tially affect client responses not does it seem to moderate the effects of counselor self-referent statements on either client perceptions or responses.

The results of this study have important implications for counseling practice and research on self-referent responses. For counseling practice the results suggest that counselor high self-disclosure and self-involving responses enhance client perceptions of expertness and trustworthiness and facilitate client self-exploration in the present. Counselor high self-disclosure and self-involving statements, which contain more highly personal material, may enhance a counselor's perceived expertness and trustworthiness because the counselor is seen as willing to take a greater risk than is a low self-disclosing counselor who is merely agreeing with the client's stated experience. Because counselor high self-disclosure statements involve revelation of counselor feelings that parallel the client's underlying feelings and counselor self-involving statements express direct present feelings about the client's behavior, the client remains the focus of the conversation. Client responses tend to be "I" statements rather than statements focused on the counselor. Counselor low self-disclosure statements, on the other hand, may detract from the process of client self-exploration when they shift the focus to the counselor and the counselor's past concerns.

An extremely significant finding is that counselor high self-disclosure statements may be a useful method for increasing client expression of affect. Revelation of feelings by a high self-disclosing counselor may serve as a model for the expression of affect. The counselor is not only relating an intimate personal self-disclosure, but is also expressing an understanding of the client's underlying feelings. As

such, the high self-disclosure is "additive" because it identifies previously unstated client feelings, thus adding to an understanding of the client's concern. These additive self-disclosure statements may have effects similar to Egan's (1975) "advanced empathy" responses which can lead to increased client expression of feelings and greater understanding of the client.

Finally, the findings suggest that status of the counselor affects client perceptions such that experienced paraprofessionals are seen as more attractive and trustworthy than professional counselors. Clients' evaluations of a counselor's expertness, attractiveness and trustworthiness may be related to their initial expectations about the counselor. For example, clients may expect a paraprofessional to be somewhat less expert and more like themselves. This would account for enhanced ratings in attractiveness and trustworthiness but not of expertness for the paraprofessional. A professional counselor would be expected to be more expert but dissimilar to the clients. These expectations would explain the higher ratings of the professional counselor on expertness but not attractiveness or trustworthiness.

For research on self-referent responses, these findings suggest that self-disclosure and self-involving responses need to be specifically defined and studied as separate variables. Furthermore, subtypes within these categories of counselor responses varying on such dimensions as intimacy need to be studied for their differential effects on the counseling process. Additional counselor variables such as status need to be examined to see how they may interact with counselor self-referent responses to affect the counseling process.

A limitation of this study derives from its analogue nature. Studies of self-referent responses by counselors of varying status need to be studied in naturalistic settings. A second possible limitation is that only female clients with a male counselor were studied. Although McCarthy (1979) found no differences due to gender-pairings on client perceptions and behavior in her study of low self-disclosing and self-involving responses, her results need to be replicated. Moreover, high self-disclosing responses and counselor status need to be examined using different counselor-client gender pairings. The need for this type of research is supported by Merluzzi, et al. (1978) who found that intimacy of self-disclosure interacted with sex of counselor and Brooks (1974) who found that status interacted with sex to affect the counseling process. Studies of this type will, hopefully, lead to a better understanding of the specific variables affecting the counseling process.

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Footnotes

[1]Scripts are available upon request from the author.

[2]Definitions of client response dimensions and specific instructions for rating each dimension are available upon request from the author.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived Counselor Attributes and Client Response Categories as a Function of Counselor Response Type and Counselor Status

	Response						Status			
	Low Self-Disclosure		High Self-Disclosure		Self-Involving		Paraprofessional		Professional	
Variable	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Counselor attributes[a]										
Expertness	35.3	7.1	39.1	6.2	40.1	5.4	38.7	6.1	37.6	6.9
Attractiveness	36.0	6.1	36.6	6.3	37.4	6.7	37.9	5.3	35.4	7.0
Trustworthiness	37.6	5.7	39.2	6.3	40.4	7.2	40.3	5.4	37.8	7.2
Client Response Categories										
No. Words	214.2	58.8	213.6	71.0	210.7	65.1				
No. Counselor-Directed Statements	2.5	3.8	.43	1.1	.43	.87				
P[b] affective words to total words	.27	.11	.40	.11	.30	.08				
P present-tense verbs to total words	.85	.10	.89	.08	.87	.11				
P past/future tense verbs to total words	.43	.16	.36	.12	.38	.10				
P client referents to total words	.72	.13	.78	.13	.81	.08				
P counselor referents to total words	.21	.22	.10	.14	.25	.12				

Note: The mean for each client response category represents an average total over 10 responses per subject. n = 60 for the counselor response types and n = 90 for counselor status categories.

[a]Scores on each dimension may range from a low rating of 12 to a high rating of 48.

[b]P = proportion