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What do Counsellors think they are doing?

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Abstract

Counsellors' identifications of seven commonly-employed counsellor response modes were studied in order to enhance understanding of counselling from the phenomenological perspective of therapists. The method we used was developed by Vallacher and Wegner (1985, 1987) to study ways in which individuals identify actions in social contexts. Results were that counsellors tended to identify most of the response modes studies in a multifaceted manner that included high-level identities indicative of *why* a response mode is employed, as well as low-level identities concerned with *how* a response mode is executed. We interpreted our results to demonstrate that counsellors' theories of counselling actions are multifaceted, perhaps reflecting their initiation into the 'language game' or 'subculture' of counselling. Results were not affected by differences in counselling experience over a range of from 4 to 25 years of participation as a therapist in counselling.

Résumé

L'identification par des conseillers de sept réponses utilisées couramment par eux ont été étudiées dans le but de mieux comprendre le counseling à partir d'une perspective phénoménologique du thérapiste. La méthode utilisée fut développée par Vallacher et Wegner (1985, 1987) pour étudier les différentes façons avec lesquelles les individus identifient les actions dans des contextes sociaux. Les résultats démontrent que les conseillers tendent à identifier la plus part des études sur les manières de répondre en utilisant une approche à facette multiple qui incluent un niveau très élevé d'identification indicatif du pourquoi une manière de répondre est employée, aussi bien qu'un niveau très bas d'identification concerné avec le comment une manière de répondre est exécutée. Nous avons interprété nos résultats pour démontrer que les théories des actions du conseiller en counseling sont à facettes multiples, reflétant possiblement leur initiation au "langage vernaculaire" ou "subculture" du counseling. Les résultats ne furent pas affectés par les différences d'expérience en counseling, qui elles, variaient entre 4 et 25 années de travail comme thérapiste en counseling.

Research on counsellor response modes has begun to consider counsellors' intentions when using various therapeutic responses during counselling (e.g., Hill & O'Grady, 1985; Martin, Martin, Meyer, & Slemon, 1986). A common finding from such research is that a variety of different counsellor intentions may be associated with the same counselling response. For example, in data presented by Martin, Martin, and Slemon (1989), the response mode of reflection was associated frequently with counsellor intentions such as: explore feelings, clarify, give information, provide focus, encourage insight, and give support. It seems likely that counsellors employ the same response mode with different intentions depending on a host of subtle perceptions concerning clients and counselling contexts, perceptions that may be grounded in their personal theories of counselling (Martin, 1988).

Martin (1988), Rennie (in press), and others have argued that our understanding of counselling is unlikely to advance unless researchers consider counsellors' and clients' theories concerning what goes on in counselling. Counsellors' theories about what they are doing when they use various therapeutic responses logically would seem to constitute an important aspect of their theories of counselling. In this study, we provide initial empirical information about how counsellors identify (conceptualize or think about) several commonly-employed therapeutic responses.

The method we use was developed by Vallacher and Wegner (1985, 1987; Wegner & Vallacher, 1986), and has been used to study the ways in which individuals understand their actions in a wide variety of social contexts. The method asks participants in such contexts to endorse (on 7-point scales) a number (usually 10) of different descriptions or "action identities" of their actions. These identities typically are derived from pilot samples of the individuals studied, and include both "high" and "low" level identifications of the focal actions. Most often, Vallacher and Wegner (1985, 1987) use the term "high," to refer to action identifications that specify *why* or with what intent one acts. However, in many social contexts, "low-level" versus "high-level" action identifications frequently may be viewed as on a continuum, ranging from very specific, straight-forward intentions for focal actions (low-level identifications) to more general, abstract intentions for these same actions (high-level identifications). The empirical work reported here adopts these latter connotations.

In the study reported, we wanted to establish action identification profiles of a representative group of counsellors for seven commonly-employed counselling response modes. In other words, we wanted to learn more about what counsellors think they are doing when they use common counselling responses. We hoped that these profiles would give us important insights into the theories of counselling actions held by this group of counsellors. We also explored the possibility that counsellors with different levels of experience might identify the seven counselling actions in different ways.

METHOD

Participants

Eighty counsellors participated in the study. The most experienced participants included 20 private practitioners in counselling psychology (14 men, 6 women), with an average of 25 years of counselling experience. The "middle-experience" participants consisted of 32 university faculty members in counselling psychology (25 men, 7 women), with an average of 22 years of counselling experience. The novice group included 28 graduate students in counselling psychology (11 men, 17 women), with an average of 4 years of experience. A one-way univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA), with a posteriori comparisons of means (Scheffe, $p<.05$), revealed significant differences in reported years of experience between the novice and the practitioner and the academic groups, but not between the practitioner and academic groups. However, it is undoubtedly the case that the quantity of practitioners' day-to-day participation in counselling services would far exceed similar participation of the academics, even though such a difference would not necessarily be reflected in the years of experience reported. All subjects resided in the United States at the time of this investigation, and were contacted through the membership directory of the Division of Counseling Psychology of the American Psychological Association.

Measures

A set of seven "action identification" questionnaires was used to obtain action identifications for seven common counselling behaviours of all participants. Seven separate questionnaires were developed for (a) approval/reassurance, (b) confrontation, (c) direct guidance, (d) giving information, (e) interpretation, (f) open question, and (g) reflection. Each questionnaire consisted of 10 action identities (randomly listed) associated with one of these counselling responses. Participants were asked to rate each identity on a 7-point scale, anchored by 1 (describes very poorly) and 7 (describes very well), to indicate "how well it describes what you are doing when you use this counselling response." A brief overview to the set of questionnaires and a careful elaboration of the foregoing instruction preceded the seven action identification questionnaires, forming a 10-page booklet. On the first page of this booklet, participants were asked to provide demographic information concerning gender, student status (yes or no), primary work setting (university professor or private practitioner), and amount of counselling experience (in years and months). To guard against any possible order effects, all questionnaires were arranged randomly within each booklet of questionnaires. [Copies of the questionnaires and details of their development may be obtained from the second author.]

The 10 action identities for each of the seven counselling responses were generated from counsellors' open-ended descriptions of their actions and intentions during "stimulated recall" interviews conducted as part of an earlier study by Martin, Martin, and Slemon (1989), from interviews with 10 practicing counsellors, and from relevant counselling literature (e.g., Highlen, Ronberg, Hampl, & Lassiter, 1982; Hill, Greenwald, Reed, Charles, O'Farrell, & Carter, 1981).

In order to validate that the seven sets of identities generated through the foregoing procedures did in fact include a range of high and low identities (a kind of construct validation), six independent raters (two women, four men; all experienced counsellors, and three of whom had participated in the action identification interviews) rank ordered, from high to low, the identities (arranged in random order) associated with each of the seven counselling behaviours. Three of the six "rank-ordering" raters (one woman, two men) independently completed this same task on two occasions (spaced six months apart), so as to permit an estimate of test-retest reliability.

Kendall's coefficient of concordance was calculated to determine degree of agreement among the six experienced raters concerning the ranking of high and low identities for each of the seven counselling response modes. With the possible exception of approval/reassurance ($W=.39$, $p=.01$) and confrontation ($W=.44$, $p=.004$), there was an extremely high degree of concordance among raters for the identities included on the questionnaires for each counselling response mode ($p<.001$). Moreover, the mean rankings associated with the identities for each of the seven counselling behaviours reflected a range of low (e.g., 1.50, 2.00) and high (e.g., 9.17, 9.83) action identifications. These results confirm that each of the *Action Identification Questionnaires* adequately reflected the intended construct of level of action identification as per Vallacher and Wegner (1985).

Average test-retest correlations for each of the seven questionnaires as rated by the three reliability raters across a six-month period were: approval/reassurance ($r=.75$), confrontation ($r=.63$), direct guidance ($r=.71$), information ($r=.73$), interpretation ($r=.72$), open question ($r=.70$), and reflection ($r=.77$). The overall average correlation for all three raters across all seven counselling behaviours was $r=.70$. All these correlations were statistically reliable ($p<.05$).

Procedure

A total of 150 sets of action identification questionnaires were mailed to prospective participants. Of these questionnaires, 100 were mailed to 50 faculty members in counselling psychology programs. Each of these faculty members was sent two copies of the set of questionnaires and was asked to complete only one set. The second set was to be distributed to one of his or her junior graduate students who might agree to participate in the study. [While the selection of graduate students by faculty members could result in a selective sample of "good" graduate students, it is also the case that the faculty and graduate students selected in this manner would be likely to share similar theoretical orientations, thereby equating and neutralizing possible "orientation" effects across these two groups.] The remaining 50 sets of questionnaires were forwarded to private practitioners.

In order to secure confidentiality, participants did not provide their names or addresses on the completed sets of questionnaires. Out of a total of 150 sets of questionnaires, 80 sets were completed and returned (32 by faculty members, 20 by private practitioners, and 28 by graduate students). Thus, 53% of potential participants responded to the action identification questionnaires. Relative to the return rates reported by Vallacher and Wegner (1985) (as low as 20%), the return rate of 53% was regarded as a respectable percentage of possible respondents. Moreover, there was no reason to expect differences between those who did and those who did not respond. [The lower response rate of the practitioners, as compared to the other two groups, may possibly be attributed to the fact that they are outside of the University community where participation in research projects is more common.]

RESULTS

Factor Analysis

In keeping with the procedures recommended by Vallacher and Wegner (1985), factor analyses were performed to determine the factor structure of participants' responses to each separate "action identification" questionnaire and the specific identities that loaded heavily on each factor (.40 or higher). Participants' ratings of identities (based on the 7-point scale) for a given counsellor behaviour were intercorrelated across participants, and a principal axis factor analysis (with communalities on the diagonal) was performed and rotated to a varimax solution. Vallacher and Wegner's (1985) research reveals that this procedure typically results in a full range of easily interpretable factors with these sorts of data.

The factor analyses revealed interpretable factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 for six out of seven counselling behaviours (see Tables 1 to 6). In the case of the counselling behaviour, interpretation, the communality of one of the variables exceeded one and no factors were generated. Thus, responses to the interpretation questionnaire were dropped from this and subsequent analyses.

The mean rank orderings of the action identities on each questionnaire by the group of six experienced raters who participated in the test validation were used in the interpretation of the factor structures. If the average mean ranking of the identities comprising a factor was less than or equal to 5, that factor was labelled low level; if the average mean ranking was greater than 5, the factor was identified as high level. For ease of reference, low-level factors are simply identified as "low level," while high-level factors (typically being more numerous in research of this kind—cf. Vallacher & Wegner, 1985) were given descriptive titles. As in Vallacher and Wegner (1985), the anecdotal labels assigned to high-level factors were based on the thematic composition (as interpreted by the researchers) of the identities comprising these factors.

TABLE 1

Identity Factors for Approval/Reassurance (n = 80)

Factor	*Loading*	*Identity*
1. "Establish trust"	.79	Get client to explore feelings
	.79	Get client to speak more openly
	.67	Let client know behaviour will be accepted and not judged
	.40	Help client feel reassured of personal strengths
2. "Low level"	.71	Provide positive reinforcement
	.61	Help client feel reassured of personal strengths
	.54	Give approval to client
	.51	Reassure client of counsellor's emotional support
	.42	Induce a positive "mindset"
3. "Offer emotional support"	.76	Offer client hope when he or she is feeling despair
	.73	Affirm client's progress
	.42	Reassure client of counsellor's emotional support

TABLE 2

Identity Factors for Confrontation (n = 80)

Factor	*Loading*	*Identity*
1. "Deepen counselling relationship"	.86	Stimulate both counsellor and client
	.66	Maintain an honest counselling relationship
	.61	Challenge client to be open to different points of view
	.58	Get client's reaction to counselling relationship
	.47	Get client to focus on relevant issues
2. "Promoting client responsibility"	.60	Challenge client on exploitative, manipulative and/or self destructive behaviours
	.58	Promote client responsibility for personal behaviours and feelings
	.47	Point out inconsistencies and distortions presented by client

TABLE 3

Identity Factors for Direct Guidance (n = 80)

Factor	*Loading*	*Identity*
1. "Promote sense of self-empowerment"	.78	Reinforce positive thinking
	.70	Bring clarity and focus to a session
	.60	Motivate client to work outside of the counselling session
	.59	Encourage client to take responsibility for own learning
	.52	Clarify the counselling process
2. "Encourage plan of action"	.84	Suggest initial step(s) in a plan of action
	.75	Help client develop a specific plan of action
	.54	Provide concrete suggestions and/or examples
	.43	Motivate client to work outside of the counselling session
3. "Low level"	.69	Give advice
	.42	Get client to change topics

TABLE 4

Identity Factors for Information (n = 80)

Factor	*Loading*	*Identity*
1. "Encourage deeper level of exploration"	.85	Help client explore at a deeper level
	.76	Help client reflect on a concept
	.67	Clarify for client what counsellor is saying and/or thinking
	.65	Suggest possibilities for exploration
	.45	Provide structure to the counselling relationship
2. "Low level 1" (Client initiated)	.77	Inform client of available services and resources
	.54	Respond to a direct question posed by the client
3. "Low level 2" (Counsellor initiated)	.85	Clarify procedural arrangements
	.42	Share with client counsellor's theoretical orientation

TABLE 5

Identity Factors for Open Questions (n = 80)

Factor	*Loading*	*Identity*
1. "Encourage disclosure of feelings"	.90	Clarify client's feelings and concerns
	.58	Encourage client to disclose feelings
	.48	Encourage client to stay on track
	.44	Get client to reflect on personal meanings and feelings
	.43	Establish rapport between client and counsellor
2. "Promote openness"	.68	Broaden the field of exploration
	.66	Encourage client to relax allowing thoughts to flow freely
	.58	Determine what has been "going on" with client since last session
	.58	Establish rapport between client and counsellor
3. "Low level"	.86	Get client to be more specific
	.54	Elicit information from client

TABLE 6

Identity Factors for Reflection (n = 80)

Factor	*Loading*	*Identity*
1. "Being directive"	.80	Provide client with alternate perspective
	.62	Get client to take responsibility for own feelings
	.57	Focus on a specific issue
2. "Build conceptual bridges"	.85	Draw together themes, issues, and patterns
	.62	Help client connect between thoughts and feelings
3. "Low level"	.87	Let client know that counsellor is listening
	.59	Track what client is saying
4. "Promote client-counsellor relationship"	.65	Establish rapport with client
	.56	Check out if client feels and thinks counsellor's perception is accurate
	.49	Encourage client to explore at a deeper level

Multivariate Analyses of Variance

Proportion factor scores for each participant on all factors with eigenvalues greater than one for each questionnaire were then computed by summing item ratings on all the identities that loaded heavily (.4 or more) on a given factor, and dividing such sums by the sum of ratings for each participant across all identities on a given questionnaire. Thus, respondents received a score on each factor that represented their summed endorsement of identities on that factor relative to their total endorsement of identities across all factors. [The use of proportion factor scores effectively partials out the influence of any possible response set on subjects' scores and permits an assessment of the relative prepotency of each identity factor.] An arc sine transformation was used to normalize distributions of scores for all the action identification factors.

To determine whether participants' action identifications varied as a function of experience groupings, a series of one-way multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) was performed on the transformed identity factor scores associated with each of the six counselling behaviours for which factor solutions were obtained. These analyses failed to reveal any differences among the groups ($p > .05$). Thus, the action identification factors presented in Tables 1-6 may be viewed as representative of the action conceptualizations (action theories) of a broad range of counsellors with varying levels of experience.

DISCUSSION

Central to Vallacher and Wegner's (1985, 1987) theory of action identification is the premise that actions are defined on a continuum from the particular specifics and obvious intentions of executing an act to more abstract levels of intentions and imagined consequences of performing the act (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). For five of the six counselling behaviours for which factor analytic solutions were obtained, at least one low-level factor was observed along with one, two, or three higher level factors (see Tables 1-6).

In the case of confrontation (see Table 2), both of the factors obtained were high level. Confrontation is considered to be a more complex, higher-level response mode in many systems of counsellor skill training (e.g., Egan, 1990). It is quite possible that the action of therapeutic confrontation defies low level identification by its very nature. With the exception of this single factor, all other factor structures associated with the counselling behaviours had distinctive low- and high-level factors. Thus, results of the factor analyses depict a range of factors in the identification of counselling actions that seem to reflect basic descriptions and intentions of the focal counselling behaviours and more abstract intentions and consequences associated with the focal actions. In sum, the overall factor analytic results offer strong support to the predictions from action-identification theory that (a) clearly-identifiable high- and low-level factors would emerge from subjects' responses to the set of questionnaires, and that (b) the high-level factors obtained would be more numerous and varied than the low-level factors obtained.

In all cases, the low-level factors consist of action identifications that are very close to conventional connotations for the labels used to denote the different counselling responses we studied. For example, the low-level factor for open question contains the action identities, "elicit information from client," and "get client to be more specific." In the only case in which two low-level factors were obtained (i.e., information), these two factors seem to be distinguished by whether or not the counsellor's giving of information is self-initiated or in response to a client's comment or question.

High-level factors, on the other hand, consist of action identifications that reflect more specialized connotations of the labels used to denote the various counsellor responses. For example, action identifications loading on the high-level factor for information include "help client explore at a deeper level" and "provide structure to the counselling relationship." In general, the high-level factors described and labelled in Tables 1-6 appear to be grounded more in specialized linguistic subcultures of counselling and counsellors.

The data reported here concerning how counsellors identify (and therefore, conceptualize) what they are doing when counselling seem particularly amenable to interpretation in terms of Wittgenstein's (1968, 1969) notion of "language games." For Wittgenstein, mastery of or being able to do things in any field of endeavor involves being initiated into the complex webs of assumptions, rules, and understandings that members of a particular field (community) share, and that enable them to do whatever it is that they do. Language is functionally anchored in the conventions of a community, and is the basis for the knowledge that members possess. The more specialized the community, the more specialized the language games that support its knowledge.

The high-level action identification factors displayed in Tables 1-6 are distinctive from the low-level identification factors in these same Tables. Whereas the former seem restricted to a specialized professional culture and community, the latter contain action identifications for actions such as questioning and giving information that would make sense to most lay persons.

Given the wide variety of action identifications, especially higher-level identifications, available to counsellors because of their joint membership in both professional and general linguistic-conceptual communities, it should come as no surprise that researchers like Martin, Martin, and Slemon (1989) have documented highly variable, uncertain patterns of cognitive-behavioural interactions in therapeutic contexts. Clearly, a single response mode may be employed for a variety of purposes.

Since variation in cognitive-behavioural interactions during counselling probably is as much conceptual (in the minds of counsellors and clients) as empirical (in observable nuances in the social, linguistic contexts of counselling), it is unlikely that any system for recording counsellor or client response modes in counselling could be developed that would discriminate clearly among all the interpretive possibilities and uncertainties that typify social interactions during therapy. Nonetheless, greater precision in research on counselling response modes may be possible through a refinement and elaboration of currently available instruments, such as the Hill et al. (1981) CVRCS, consistent with research on counsellor's personal theories of counselling actions. For example, a multi-tiered system of response mode coding that incorporates some of the identity factors presented in Tables 1-6 as subcategories of major counselling response modes might be feasible, assuming the possibility of empirically discriminating amongst at least some of these factors.

Our study had two purposes. Primarily we wanted to document action identification profiles of a representative group of counsellors for a number of commonly-employed counsellor response modes. In this pursuit, we believe we have made significant progress. Secondly, we wanted to explore the possibility that counsellors with different levels of experience might hold different action identification theories. Our data do not support the existence of such differences as a function of counselling experience, at least over the range of average experience of the three groups of counsellors we studied—i.e., from 4 to 25 years.

One possible explanation for our failure to find an experience effect in our study relates to our use of a paper and pencil task in which participants rated how well various action identifications depict "what they are doing" when executing a given action. It may be, consistent with comments by Hillerbrand and Claiborn (1990), that the graduate students in our study exhibited a more sophisticated conceptual structure on such a written task than they might in actual counsellor-client interactions. Following this line of reasoning, the academic and practitioner groups may be employing the same conceptual structures on the written task as they would in a counselling interaction. In contrast, the graduate students may be able to access more sophisticated conceptualizations on the written task than in real life counselling situations.

However, it also seems possible that graduate students with an average of four years experience in counselling have been initiated sufficiently well into the culture of conselling, that their linguistic and conceptual structures are quite similar to those of more experienced counsellors in both analogue and actual settings. After all, a considerable amount of research on the effects of experience in counselling has yielded equivocal results, with many of the differences that have been documented existing between complete or "true" novices (with less than one year of experience) and more seasoned professionals (cf. reviews by Berman & Norton, 1985; Beuller, Crago, & Arizmendi, 1986; Highlen & Hill, 1984). Thus, future empirical examinations of the theories of counselling actions held by more novice counsellors (with less than one year of experience) would be of considerable interest (particularly to counsellor educators and supervisors).

In the absence of experience effects in our data, we think that the theories of counselling actions, reflected in Tables 1-6 and discussed herein, probably are quite representative of those held by counselling psychologists with a broad range of experience. To the extent that counsellors' conceptualizations of their own actions are important aspects of counsellors' theories of counselling, we believe that Tables 1-6 contain much information that advances our understanding of the phenomenal perspectives and theories of therapists (cf. Martin, 1988).

Clearly, counsellor's conceptualizations of their therapeutic responses and the purposes for which they may be employed are multifaceted. Researchers, counsellors, and counsellor educators must attend to the diverse ways in which response modes are employed across a wide variety of individuals and counselling contexts. It cannot be assumed that what holds for one counsellor in one situation will hold for other counsellors and/or other situations. Whether or not more exacting specifications of relationships among counsellors' intentions, actions, and different therapeutic contexts can have real pragmatic utility must await more extensive study and reflection.

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