
A Scale for Assessing Degree of Strength of Client Feeling

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Abstract

Reviews of counseling research indicate that there are no instruments explicitly designed to assess degree of strength of client feeling. Based on a conceptual analysis of related measures, a graduated series of clinical trials culminated in the development of a Strength of Client Feeling Scale for assessing four levels: neutral, low, moderate, and strong. Very low Spearman coefficients between the Strength of Client Feeling Scale and the Experiencing Scale on client-centred, rational-emotive, and experiential sessions indicate that the two scales assess independent constructs. The Strength of Client Feeling Scale is introduced as useful for selected avenues of counseling research.

Résumé

Un examen de la recherche en counseling révèle qu'il n'existe pas d'instruments conçus expressément pour évaluer le degré d'intensité de l'émotion du client. Fondée sur une analyse conceptuelle des mesures connexes, une série graduée d'essais cliniques a permis de mettre au point une échelle d'intensité de l'émotion du client comportant quatre niveaux: neutre, faible, modéré et fort. Des coefficients de Spearman très faibles entre l'échelle d'intensité de l'émotion du client et l'échelle fondée sur l'expérience (Experiencing Scale) dans le cas d'une thérapie basée sur le client, d'une thérapie rationnelle-émotive et d'une thérapie fondée sur l'expérience indiquent que les deux échelles évaluent des constructions indépendantes. L'échelle d'intensité de l'émotion du client est proposée comme utile dans certains domaines de recherche en counseling.

Strength of feeling refers to the degree of charge, force, energy, arousal, saturation, and fullness of feeling, emotion, or affect. Every time the client speaks, there may be little or no degree of strength of feeling, or there may be higher levels of strength of feeling when the client is sobbing hard, engaged in gales of laughter, or exploding in outrage. However, major reviews of the role of feeling, emotion, and affect in counseling (Greenberg & Safran, 1987; Nichols & Zax, 1977; Orlinsky & Howard, 1978; Pierce, Nichols, & DuBrin, 1983) have flagged both the absence of and the need for a rating system or scale of strength of client feeling.

A plethora of counseling instruments assess feeling-related variables, but none were designed to assess the level or degree of strength of client feeling, emotion, or affect. Instead, these instruments were developed to assess problem expansion (Van der Veen & Tomlinson, 1967), voice quality (Rice, Koke, Greenberg, & Wagstaff, 1979; Trager, 1958), novelty experiencing (Kohn & Annis, 1975; Pearson, 1971), actualization (Shostrom, 1966), expressiveness (Wexler, 1975), emotional style (Allen & Hamsher, 1974), sensitivity to emotions (Kagan & Schneider, 1980), self-reported affect (Zuckerman & Lubin, 1965), and depth of self-exploration (Kiesler, 1973; Truax, & Carkhuff, 1967).

In research on client feeling, emotion, and affect, perhaps the most commonly used instrument is the experiencing scale (Klein, Mathieu, Gendlin, & Kiesler, 1969; Klein, Mathieu-Coughlan, & Kiesler, 1986). However, instead of assessing strength of client feeling, the experiencing scale “. . . attempts to assess the degree to which the patient communicates his personal, phenomenological perspective and employs it productively in the therapy session . . . The dimension of experiencing refers to the quality of an individual’s personal, subjective awareness” (pp. 1, 50; cf. Gendlin & Tomlinson, 1967; Kiesler, 1971; Mathieu-Coughlan & Klein, 1984).

Accordingly, the purpose is to present the development of a scale explicitly designed to assess the degree of strength of feeling in client statements, to compare this scale with the experiencing scale, and to outline the usefulness of the scale in counseling research and application.

Development of a Strength of Client Feeling Scale

We began with the feeling intensity scale introduced by Karle, Corriere, Hart, and Woldenberg (1980) to gauge the overall level of feeling intensity in dreams, notably written transcripts of dream reports (Hartshorn, Corriere, Karle, Switzer, Hart, Gold, & Binder, 1977; Corriere, Hart, Karle, Switzer, & Woldenberg, 1978). “This scale measures the overall intensity of the feeling level in the dream. The scale points are: 5 — intense, 4 — Strong, 3 — Moderate, 2 — Slight, and 1 — No feeling” (p. 29). At the intense level, feeling dominates the entire dream report. At the slight level, “the dream itself evokes some feeling response in the scorer” (p. 29).

In order to modify the feeling intensity scale for use with audiotaped and videotaped counseling sessions, four steps were carried out in a programmatic development of a scale for assessing strength of client feeling. The purpose of the first step was to identify the components that may be used in defining levels of strength of feeling. Accordingly, a content analysis was performed on all of the previously cited feeling-related measures. This analysis yielded four composite dimensions useable in scaling strength of feeling: (a) degree of charge, force, energy, loudness and volume; (b) degree of spontaneity, freedom from control and restraint; (c) degree of fullness and saturation; and (d) degree of strength and breadth of bodily sensations.

Using these composite dimensions, the purpose of the second step was to arrive at provisionally defined levels of strength of feeling by examining representative empirical data. On the basis of the four composite dimensions, a team of one counseling psychologist, two doctoral students, and three research associates assessed the strength of feeling in 225 recorded client statements excerpted randomly from 15 sessions

conducted by a variety of counsellors representing a variety of approaches. This step generated a provisional scale of four levels of strength of feeling: neutral, low, moderate, and strong, together with definitions and examples of each level. The unit of analysis is the audiotaped or videotaped complete client statement, preceded and followed by counsellor statements. The client statement is judged as being at a given level of strength of feeling whether that level is judged as occurring at a single point or throughout the entire client statement. Judgement is based on the rated degree of strength of feeling in the client statement, independent of the denoted content in what the client says or talks about. Accordingly, statements such as, "I feel very angry" may be rated at any of the four levels of strength of feeling.

The purpose of the third step was to fine-tune the scale and to obtain preliminary data on overall inter-judge agreement. For comparative purposes, two different sets of judges were used with two different counsellors and clients. One team consisted of a counsellor, four doctoral students, and three honours students; the session was a client-centred session conducted by Carl Rogers, including 105 client statements (Mahrer, Stalikas, Fairweather, & Scott, 1989). The second team was comprised of four counsellors and eight doctoral students; the session was a Gestalt session conducted by Fritz Perls, and included 121 client statements (Mahrer, White, Howard, & Lee, in press). Criterion level of interjudge agreement was set at 75% for both teams of judges. Results indicated that level of obtained interjudge agreement was 89.5% and 88.2% in the client-centred and Gestalt sessions respectively, and that criterion level of agreement was attained in the total of 226 client statements in both sessions. On the basis of these two findings, preliminary interjudge agreement was deemed satisfactory, and the definitions of the four levels of strength of feeling were fine-tuned.

The purpose of the final step was to apply the scale to a larger sample of clients, using different counseling approaches covering the range of levels of strength of feeling, and to examine both interjudge agreement and kappas (Cohen, 1960) for each of the four levels of strength of feeling. Accordingly, the study included 10 audiotaped sessions conducted by exemplars of client-centred, rational-emotive, and experiential counseling, with a variety of clients, both initial and ongoing sessions, male and female clients, and a total of 982 client statements (Mahrer, Lawson, Stalikas & Schachter, in press). The substantively new team of 12 judges included 4 counsellors, 6 doctoral students, and 2 research associates. Criterion was set at 75% agreement among the 12 judges. Results of interjudge agreements and kappas were quite satisfactory at each of the four levels of strength of feeling: neutral (87.8%), low (86.2%), moderate (90.4%), and strong (92.3%), with kappas at each level in the .75-.79 range.

These four steps enabled the progressive development and refinement of a scale comprising the following four levels of strength of feeling:

Neutral Level of Feeling Strength: At the neutral level there is essentially no strength of feeling. Feeling is lacking, absent, flat, turned off. There is essentially no charge, force, energy, loudness or volume; no spontaneity, freedom from control and restraint. There is essentially no fullness or saturation of feeling. Strength and breadth of bodily sensations are lacking. Client statements are typically coherent, connected, and organized whether or not the patient is talking about or referring to feeling.

Low Level of Feeling Strength: Feeling is definitely present and discernible, but only to a minimal degree. There is some charge, force, energy, loudness and volume. There is a discernible degree of spontaneity, freedom from control and restraint; a low degree of fullness and saturation of feeling. Bodily sensations are mildly present and generally localized.

At the low level, there may be a burst of nervous laughter or laughter that is light, giggling, chortling, chuckling. Tearfulness may be imminent, or crying may be light and gentle. There may be tension or “butterflies” in the stomach region, some facial warmth, mild perspiration, mild flushing, some significant change in breathing or heart rate, mild trembling in arms or legs. Speech may be somewhat rapid, fragmented, and disconnected.

Moderate Level of Feeling Strength: Feeling is conspicuously present in substantial quantity, and the degree of strength is moderate. There is a moderate degree of charge, force, and energy, generally with elevated loudness and volume. There is a moderate degree of spontaneity and freedom from control-restraint, with substantial fullness and saturation of feeling. Bodily sensations are of moderate strength, somewhat compelling and rather conspicuous, and either localized in one part of the body or extended over a good measure of the whole body.

Laughter may occur as a substantial outburst of moderate intensity, somewhat unrestrained, and generally of some duration. Crying may likewise be rather loud and full, rather unrestrained, generally of some duration, and often with sobbing. Speech is typically rapid, occurring in bursts and volleys, may be broken, fragmented, moderately disorganized, and occurring with some pressure or rush. Noise level is typically rather high. Words and phrases are frequently repeated.

Strong Level of Feeling Strength: Feeling is quite powerful, intense, high, robust, all-pervasive. There is a strong degree of charge, force, and energy, and a high degree of loudness and volume. There is virtually open and unrestrained spontaneity and freedom from control. Feeling is full and saturating. Bodily sensations are quite strong, quite compelling and conspicuous, and generally extended over the entire body.

Laughter may occur as sheer gales of hard and essentially unrestrained outbursts. Crying and sobbing may be hard and full, quite unrestrained, with wailing and moaning. There may be screamings, yellings, sharp and shrill outcries, shriekings, piercing outbursts, or roarings. Speech may be very rapid, highly pressured and rushed, with little choice of words, repetition of words and phrases in a manner that is quite jumbled, fragmented, broken, and disorganized. Loudness and volume may be booming, explosive, and powerful. Bodily sensations may include almost uncontrolled shaking and trembling, faintness or weakness, hot or cold flashes, a sense of floating or elevation or falling or forward movement, muscular contraction or clenching, gasping for breath.

The Strength of Client Feeling Scale and the Experiencing Scale

The experiencing scale (Klein et al., 1969, 1986) was not designed to assess strength of feeling. However, it is perhaps the most commonly used scale in the general field of feeling assessment. Accordingly, the purpose was to provide a comparison of the degree of measured construct overlap between the two scales.

In order to assess the correlation between the two scales, the decision was to use comparable sessions from three different approaches. Accordingly, initial sessions were used from client-centred, rational-emotive, and experiential approaches conducted by Carl Rogers, Albert Ellis, and Alvin Mahrer respectively. The client-centred session was with Mrs. P. S., American Academy of Psychotherapists Tape Library; 105 client statements. The rational-emotive session was with Gloria, Psychological Films: Three Approaches to Psychotherapy II; 40 client statements. The experiential session was with Ms. J., University of Ottawa Tape Library; 86 client statements.

Judges for the Strength of Client Feeling Scale included four counsellors and 8 doctoral students. Each of the 12 judges had a minimum of 20 hours of experience and training in applying the Strength of Client Feeling Scale to audiotaped client statements not used in the present study.

Judges for the Experiencing Scale included one doctoral student in psychology, two research associates, and an honours student in psychology. Training followed the guidelines provided by the manual for the Experiencing Scale (Klein et al., 1969).

For both sets of judges, data consisted of all of the client statements in each of the three audiotaped sessions complemented with a verbatim transcript. In order to maintain task enthusiasm and to reduce the effects of set, the total of 231 client and counsellor statements was divided into approximately eight weekly assignments. Each judge listened independently to the three sessions, assisted by the verbatim transcript and the appropriate rating system.

Each of the team of 12 judges independently rated each client statement as containing one of the four levels of strength of feeling: neutral, low, moderate, or strong. Criterion was 75% agreement among the judges.

TABLE 1

Levels of Strength of Feeling and Experiencing Scale Scores in Client-Centered, Rational-Emotive, and Experiential Sessions

EXPERIENCING SCALE

	1		2		3		4		5		6-7	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
CCT												
Neutral	4	4.3	66	71.0	19	20.4	4	4.3	0	0	0	0
Low	0	0	5	41.7	5	41.7	2	16.6	0	0	0	0
RET												
Neutral	1	2.8	20	55.6	11	30.6	4	11.1	0	0	0	0
Low	0	0	1	25.0	1	25.0	0	0	2	50.0	0	0
ET												
Neutral	2	4.7	31	72.1	10	23.3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Low	0	0	28	84.8	5	15.2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Moderate	0	0	5	50.0	5	50.0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total												
Neutral	7	4.0	117	68.0	40	23.2	8	4.7	0	0	0	0
Low	0	0	34	69.3	11	22.4	2	4.1	2	4.1	0	0
Moderate	0	0	5	50.0	5	50.0	0	0	0	0	0	0

With regard to the Experiencing Scale, the independent team of four judges rated each client statement as falling into one of the seven stages of experiencing. Criterion was likewise 75% agreement among the judges.

On both the Strength of Client Feeling Scale and the Experiencing Scale, all 231 client statements met the criterion 75% level of interjudge agreement, and kappas (Cohen, 1960) of .75-.80 were deemed adequate. With regard to interjudge reliability, it is encouraging that the overall mean level of agreement among the 12 judges of strength of client feeling was 90.7%, comparable to the satisfactory high interjudge agreement found in earlier trials of the scale.

As indicated in Table 1, none of the client statements in the three sessions were judged as falling into the strong level of strength of client feeling or in upper levels (6-7) of the experiencing scale. Furthermore, only 10 (4.3%) of the 231 client statements were judged as at the moderate strength of feeling level, and all 10 instances occurred in the experiential session. Likewise, only 2 (0.9%) of the 231 client statements were judged as attaining stage 5 in the experiencing scale, with both instances occurring in the rational-emotive session.

In the client-centred, rational-emotive, and experiential sessions, the Spearman correlation coefficients between scores on the two scales were, respectively, .24 ($p=.05$), .29 ($p=.03$), and .10 ($p=.17$). Overall, combining all three sessions, the correlation was .09 ($p=.08$). These very low correlations may be taken as indicating very little relationship between levels of strength of client feeling and stages of experiencing, i.e. between scores on the strength of feeling scale and scores on the experiencing scale. It would appear that there is very little overlap on the constructs measured by the two scales.

Research and Applied Uses of the Strength of Client Feeling Scale

What are some of the illustrative uses of a scale for assessing strength of feeling in client statements? Although the scale is expressly designed for research use, it may also contribute to counsellor training, supervision, and practice.

In regard to research, a number of illustrative lines of investigation may be facilitated by such a scale. (a) The scale may be used in studies of the relationship between strength of feeling and counseling outcome, especially with regard to approaches that highlight emotional feeling expression, such as primal, Reichian, encounter, Gestalt, implosive, bioenergetic, and reevaluation counseling, and also in approaches that utilize such methods as flooding, implosion, and focusing on felt meaning (e.g. DeMoor, 1970; Greenberg & Safran, 1987; Hackman & MacLean, 1975; Hekmat, 1973; Mathieu-Coughlan & Klein, 1984; Orlinsky & Howard, 1978). (b) The scale may be used in studying the relationship be-

tween the client's general level of strength of feeling and psychodiagnosis, or personality dimensions such as depression, internal-external control, or readiness to enter into a helpful alliance. (c) The scale may be used in studying counsellor methods and procedures for increasing or decreasing levels of strength of client feeling in approaches and with clients wherein there is a preferred working level of client strength of feeling. (d) The scale may be used in studying the relationships between level of strength of client feeling and the occurrence of selected categories of in-session process changes. For example, one study reported that both within and across several counseling approaches, each level of strength of client feeling was associated with its own distinctive set of categories of significant process change events, thereby moving toward the identification of the in-session advantages and disadvantages of each level of strength of client feeling (Mahrer, Lawson, Stalikas, & Schachter, in press).

Although the above lines of research bear implication for applied use, there are a number of avenues of illustrative uses for counsellor training, supervision, and practice. (a) The scale may be a useful adjunct in pre-counseling assessment or initial screening or intake evaluations, especially in alerting the counsellor to the client's general baseline level of strength of feeling or to topics associated with significant increases or decreases. (b) The scale may be used in gauging the relationship between the strength of feeling in both client and counsellor with regard to matching and tracking the strength of feeling in both participants. (c) In ongoing sessions, the counsellor's assessment of the client's level of strength of feeling may be helpful in determining the appropriate methods and procedures in that phase of the session. (d) Sustained changes in the client's baseline level of strength of feeling may be used as a marker or indicator of counseling progress or deterioration. (e) Conspicuous peaks or dips in level of strength of feeling may sensitize the counsellor to useful changes in in-session process.

In summary, while the strength of client feeling scale warrants further standardization, its program of development, comparison with the experiencing scale, and usefulness in counseling research stamp it as a useful instrument for assessing a central dimension in counseling research and applied practice.

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