
Counsellor and Client Reliance on Verbal and Nonverbal Cues in Judging Competency, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness

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Abstract

The present study was conducted to examine the degree to which clients and counsellors rely on verbal and nonverbal cues in judging certain personal attributes of each other. It was predicted that clients would rely more on nonverbal cues than on verbal cues in judging the competence, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of counsellors, whereas counsellors would rely more on verbal cues than on nonverbal cues in judging the same attributes in clients. Thirty-two counsellors conducted a 20-minute interview with 32 clients. Immediately following an interview, the counsellor and client independently judged each other's competence, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, and then indicated their reliance on verbal and nonverbal cues in judging these attributes. Verbal and nonverbal reliance scores were compared between the client and counsellor groups by a $2 \times 3 \times 2$ (Group \times Attribute \times Reliance) analysis of variance. The results did not support the hypotheses. Both counsellors and clients appeared to rely more on verbal cues in judging competence, and on nonverbal cues in judging attractiveness and trustworthiness. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Résumé

La présente étude a été entreprise afin d'examiner le degré auquel les clients et les conseillers se fient aux indications verbales et non-verbales pour juger des attributs personnels de chacun d'entre eux. Il a été prédit que les clients se fieraient plus aux indications non-verbales que verbales pour juger de la compétence, de la confiance et du magnétisme du conseiller, tandis que les conseillers se baseraient plus sur les indications verbales pour juger des mêmes attributs chez les clients. Trente-deux conseillers ont dirigé une entrevue de 20-minutes avec 32 clients. Suivant immédiatement l'entrevue le conseiller et le client ont jugé individuellement la compétence, la confiance et le magnétisme de l'un et de l'autre, et ont ensuite indiqué leur confiance par rapport aux indications verbales et non-verbales pour juger de ces attributs. Le degré de confiance évalué par rapport aux indications verbales et non-verbales a été comparé entre le client et le conseiller par une analyse de variance ($2 \times 3 \times 2$; groupe \times attributs \times degré de confiance). Les résultats n'ont pas confirmé les hypothèses. Autant les conseillers que les clients ont paru se fier plus sur les indications verbales pour juger la compétence, et sur les indications non-verbales pour juger le magnétisme et la confiance de chacun d'entre eux. Les implications de ces résultats sont discutées.

The empirical investigation of nonverbal communication has received considerable interest in counselling and psychotherapy. Numerous studies have examined the ability of clients to perceive nonverbal behaviours emitted by counsellors and found that, at least in a laboratory setting, nonverbal channels of communication predominate and account for more variability than do verbal channels (e.g., Claiborn, 1979; Fretz, Corn, Tuemmler, & Bellet, 1979; Haase & Tepper, 1972; Hackney, 1974; Tepper & Haase, 1978).

The literature suggests that counsellor's and client's perceptions of each other's verbal and nonverbal cues during a counselling interview are different. In a field study, Erickson (1975) found that clients and counsellors do not interpret verbal and nonverbal cues in the same way, and that clients appear to be more accurate than most counsellors in their cue perceptions. Tepper and Haase (1978) also found that clients and counsellors differ in their perception of verbal and nonverbal cues, but they were unable to measure the difference since they had no operational definitions of reliance and judgment. However, they speculated that clients' reliance and range of judgment of nonverbal cues appeared to be greater than that of counsellors. That is, clients were more aware of nonverbal cues in judging counsellors' facilitative behaviours, whereas counsellors appeared to rely more on verbal content in judging clients. Tepper and Haase identified the need for a study to clarify the difference between client and counsellor reliance on verbal and nonverbal cues in the judging of each other's behaviours during counselling interviews.

With these considerations in mind, the purpose of the present study was to address the following question: Comparatively, how much do clients and counsellors rely on verbal and nonverbal cues in judging personal attributes of each other in counselling interviews? It was predicted that clients would rely more on nonverbal cues and counsellors would rely more on verbal cues. This prediction was based on the reasoning presented by Easterbrook (1959); that an individual's ability to utilize cues is significantly reduced during periods of high emotional arousal, and at such times, one pays attention to only a few dominant cues. In a typical counselling interview, we speculated that the client is more likely to have evaluation anxiety, and due to this heightened arousal, the client's ability to encode multiple cues would be reduced, resulting in augmented attention to only the most salient cues. Since nonverbal cues are more vivid and concrete, they are more salient than verbal cues: The client is more likely than the counsellor to pay attention to nonverbal behaviours, at least during the first few minutes of an interview.

METHOD

Thirty-two counsellor-trainees (hereafter referred to as "counsellors") conducted a 20-minute interview with 32 students (hereafter referred to as "clients") enrolled in summer school at The University of Western Ontario. After completion of the interview, each client and counsellor: (a) independently rated the other on the attributes of competency, trustworthiness, and attractiveness; and (b) indicated the degree to which they relied on verbal and nonverbal cues in judging each

attribute. The dependent variable, the degree to which the counsellor and client relied on verbal and nonverbal behaviours in judging each of the attributes, was compared between the counsellors and the clients.

Counsellors

The 32 counsellors (21 female, 11 male) were trainees concluding a Ministry of Education sponsored Counsellor Training Program at The University of Western Ontario. All trainees had Bachelor's degrees. Their ages ranged from 25 to 52 with a mean age of 36 years. The reported years of experience in counselling ranged from one to 17 with a mean of four years.

Clients

The clients were 32 (17 female, 15 male) students enrolled in an introductory Guidance Specialist Program at The University of Western Ontario. All had Bachelor's degrees, and their ages ranged from 23 to 48 with a mean age of 36 years. Of the 51 volunteers from the Guidance Specialist Program, only those who had no previous formal experience in counselling were included in the final sample.

Instruments

Verbal/Nonverbal Reliance Questionnaire (VNRQ). The VNRQ was designed by the present authors to assess subjects' reliance on verbal and nonverbal behaviours in judging attributes of a target person in a dyadic interaction. The two verbal behaviours (content and complexity) and the two nonverbal behaviours (facial expression and voice) used in judging, are components thought to be important dimensions underlying effective therapeutic messages (Tepper & Haase, 1978). The attributes judged are those dimensions (expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness) present on the Counselor Rating Form (CRF); (Barak & LaCrosse, 1975). Each attribute is evaluated by 12 adjective-pairs. The term competence replaced expertness for the purpose of this study because it denotes a broader meaning that relates to the client as well as the counsellor (Egan, 1982).

Five adjective-pairs were randomly selected from each of the three CRF attributes. Adjectives from the competency (expertness) dimension were: clear-vague; intelligent-stupid; insightful-insightless; informed-ignorant; and confident-unsure. Adjectives from the trustworthiness dimension were the following; sincere-insincere; honest-dishonest; respectful-disrespectful; open-closed; and straightforward-deceitful. Finally adjectives from the attractiveness dimension were; compatible-incompatible; likeable-unlikeable; warm-cold; attractive-unattractive; and friendly-unfriendly. Each adjective-pair was rated on a 6-point rating continuum (1 = negative, 6 = positive).

Subjects reported their reliance on verbal content (i.e., what was spoken), verbal complexity (i.e., choice of words, as in easy or difficult to understand), facial expression (i.e., smile, frown, and head nod), and voice (i.e., vocal tones and volume) in judging each adjective-pair of the target person on a 6-point rating continuum (1 = did not rely, 6 = relied heavily). Reliance scores were obtained from each subject by summing the scores of a given category of verbal and nonverbal behaviour for each attribute. This resulted in two reliance categories (i.e., verbal and nonverbal) for each of the three attributes, with 60 being the highest possible score.

The VNRQ showed satisfactory reliability. One hundred and fifty 12th-grade students completed the VNRQ after seeing a videotaped stimulus interaction depicting a 4-minute conversation between two persons, with one serving as the target person. Cronbach coefficient alphas obtained were .92, .93, and .92 in judging competence, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, respectively. When 40 of these 150 subjects were retested on the VNRQ four months later, the test-retest reliability was .89, .89, and .87.

During administration of the VNRQ, subjects first responded to each adjective-pair and then indicated the degree to which they relied upon the verbal and nonverbal behaviour categories in making the judgment. Thus, the subjects responded to the shortened CRF at the same time as the VNRQ. The adjective-pairs appeared in the order of competence, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, and the polarities of each adjective-pair were randomized.

Data Collection

Each subject participated in only one interview. Clients and counsellors were randomly matched to form interview dyads. The clients were instructed to talk about "real personal concerns" to the counsellor, and the counsellors were instructed to be as "helpful as possible to the client." The interview was conducted in a small interviewing room. Immediately after the interview, the experimenter led the client and counsellor to separate rooms and requested them to complete the VNRQ.

RESULTS

In order to examine whether counsellors and clients relied more on verbal or on nonverbal cues in judging each other, the data was analyzed by a $2 \times 3 \times 2$ (Group \times Attribute \times Reliance) analysis of variance, with the last two factors treated as repeated measures. The results are presented in Table 1. As evident, neither the Attribute \times Reliance \times Group interaction, $F(2, 124) = 2.97, p > .05$, nor the Reliance \times Group interaction, $F < 1$, was significant. However, the Attribute \times

Reliance interaction, $F(2,124) = 33.96$, $p < .001$, as well as the main effects of Attribute, $F(2,124) = 10.86$, $p < .001$, and Group, $F(1,62) = 16.53$, $p < .001$, was significant. The means and standard deviations are shown in Table 2.

The significant Attribute \times Reliance interaction was further analyzed by Scheffe's post hoc comparison method. For both counsellor and client groups, reliance on nonverbal cues was significantly higher than reliance on verbal cues in judging attractiveness ($M = 50.98$ vs 44.11 ; $SD = 6.73$ vs 9.11 , $p < .01$) and trustworthiness ($M = 49.55$ vs 46.59 ; $SD = 7.57$

TABLE 1
Analysis of Variance on Verbal and Nonverbal Reliance Scores

Source	df	MS	F
Group (A)	1	2490.84	16.53*
Error	62	150.68	
Attribute (B)	2	137.69	10.86*
A \times B	2	19.60	1.55
Error	124	12.68	
Reliance (C)	1	243.84	2.68
A \times C	1	9.38	1
Error	62	91.01	
B \times C	2	1181.40	33.96*
A \times B \times C	2	103.23	2.97
Error	124	34.78	

* $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Verbal and Nonverbal Reliance Scores

	Reliance				Counsellor Rating Form	
	Verbal M	SD	Nonverbal M	SD	M	SD
Counsellor						
Competency	46.56	6.53	39.59	10.03	25.63	3.31
Trustworthiness	44.66	7.04	46.97	7.92	26.06	3.40
Attractiveness	40.91	8.57	49.41	6.37	25.81	3.40
Client						
Competency	50.63	5.67	47.50	7.50	23.31	3.44
Trustworthiness	48.53	8.03	52.13	6.33	24.59	2.84
Attractiveness	47.31	8.61	52.56	6.07	24.84	3.16

Note. Higher reliance scores indicate greater reliance on either the verbal or nonverbal mode, with 60 being the highest possible score.

vs 7.74, $p < .05$). In judging competency, however, the verbal reliance score was significantly higher than the nonverbal reliance score ($M = 48.59$ vs 43.55 ; $SD = 6.40$ vs 9.64 , $p < .05$).

Regression Analysis on Verbal and Nonverbal Cues

Regression analysis was performed entering the two verbal (i.e., verbal content and verbal complexity) and the two nonverbal reliance scores (i.e., facial expression and voice) as predictors. The competency, trustworthiness, and attractiveness scores were entered separately as criteria. To control for error the Bonferroni approach was used, which involves splitting the conventional alpha of .05 by 3 for the counsellor and client group separately.

For the counsellor group in judging competency, verbal content, verbal complexity, facial expression, and voice accounted for 49% of the competence variance, $F(4,27) = 6.41$, $p < .001$. In judging trustworthiness, these four variables accounted for 29% of the criterion variance, $F(4,27) = 2.71$, but they did not reach statistical significance ($p > .02$). For attractiveness, all four predictors accounted for 53% of the criterion variance, $F(4,27) = 7.50$, $p < .001$.

For the client group in judging competency, verbal content, facial expression, verbal complexity, and voice accounted for 20% of the competence variance, $F(4,27) = 1.70$, $p < .01$. Twenty-three percent of the trustworthiness variable was accounted for by the four predictor variables, $F(4,27) = 1.96$, but they failed to reach statistical significance. For attractiveness, the four predictors accounted for 36% of the criterion variance, $F(4,27) = 3.87$, $p > .02$.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to examine client and counsellor self-reported reliance on verbal and nonverbal communication cues in judging attributes of each other in a counselling interview. It was predicted that clients would rely more on nonverbal cues and counsellors would rely more on verbal cues. The method was expanded to include client and counsellor recall as suggested by Hill et al. (1981), and Gladstein (1974).

The results did not support the research hypotheses. The absence of a significant Group \times Reliance interaction suggests that the counsellor and client reliance modes are similar to each other in that both groups rely more on verbal cues than on nonverbal cues in judging competency, whereas they rely more on nonverbal cues than verbal cues in judging trustworthiness and attractiveness. This predominant reliance on nonverbal cues in judging attractiveness supports the laboratory findings of many investigators who assessed facilitative verbal and nonverbal

behaviours (e.g., Claiborn, 1979; Dell, 1973; Siegel & Sell, 1978; Tepper & Haase, 1978). The predominant reliance on verbal cues in judging competency (expertness) contradicts the findings of these same investigations. Some researchers (e.g., Claiborn, 1979; Dell, 1973; Dell & Schmidt, 1976) suggest that expertness is more closely related to verbal response categories such as interpretation, restatement, and advice-giving. It could be that competence or expertness is related more to a cognitive domain that leads interactors to rely more on the spoken word. Trustworthiness and attractiveness may be related more to the affective domain; hence individuals would rely more on nonverbal cues in judging these perceived attributes. Another possibility is that trustworthiness and attractiveness may be more related to information that is perceived vividly, and acts on levels of memory, imagery, and affective impact (Taylor & Thompson, 1982), and are therefore more related to reliance on nonverbal cues.

The results of the regression analysis revealed some interesting findings. For the counsellor, the competence, trustworthiness, and attractiveness variance accounted for by the four predictors (verbal content, verbal complexity, facial expression, and voice) was 49%, 29%, and 53%, respectively. For the client, competence, trustworthiness, and attractiveness variance accounted for by the same predictors was 20%, 23%, and 36%, respectively. It appears that, given the four predictors, counsellors accounted for more of the competence and attractiveness variance than did the clients. It is interesting to note that, for both counsellor and client groups, trustworthiness was not well accounted for by the four predictor variables entered in the regression equation. The meaning of this is not clear. Perhaps trustworthiness is more efficiently accounted for by some other verbal and nonverbal variables not included in this study. Another possibility is that the prediction efficiency of trustworthiness could be increased if the reliance data were collected in extended interview settings. This would permit the client and counsellor to have ample opportunity to observe consistencies (or inconsistencies) between verbal and nonverbal behaviours. Regardless, the regression analysis findings should be interpreted cautiously, because of the large variable to subject ratio.

The present study used the methodology of allowing verbal and nonverbal behaviours to occur naturally in a counselling interview and obtaining reliance ratings from quasi-clients and counsellors rather than from uninvolved observers. Three limiting factors that have a direct bearing on this study should be mentioned. First, the similarity between the clients and counsellors (i.e., age, level of education) may have made the two groups too similar. This may have made it more difficult to detect any real difference in the results.

Second, the study used an initial interview. Hence, other factors such as anxiety and unfamiliarity with the situation may have interfered with

the subjects' perception of their reliance on communication cues. What this study has examined is the reliance on verbal and nonverbal cues in forming a first impression. It may have been more effective to have clients and counsellors meet for two or three interviews prior to rating their reliance on verbal and nonverbal cues.

Finally, the counselling sessions were not "real" sessions. Although the authors instructed the clients to discuss real personal concerns, there is no assurance that the advice was heeded. Thus, use of analogue clients as well as counsellor-trainees limits the external validity of the study.

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