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TOLERANCE OF AMBIGUITY: A VARIABLE IN CLIENT AND COUNSELLOR PAIRING

ABSTRACT: This study examined the differential patterns of pairing counsellors and clients on the personality variable Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA) and the effects on amount of counsellor talk during the interview, expressed client satisfaction, and the numbers of interviews attended by the client. Counsellors with a high TA talked significantly more than counsellors with a low TA and there was a significant interaction between differential pairings of the counsellors and clients. Although there was no significant difference in expressed satisfaction about the interviews, clients did return more often to counsellors with a high TA.

The search for relationships between specific counsellor personality variables and successful counselling outcomes is receiving increasing attention. It has also been suggested that, in this type of investigation, the effects of client personality characteristics on counsellors' behavior (Lauver, Kelley, & Froehle, 1971) and on counselling outcomes (Bare, 1967; Gabbert, Ivey, & Miller, 1967) should also be considered.

*Margaret Foote was a graduate student in the Counsellor Education program when this study was completed.

Of the many personality dimensions whose relationships to counselling effectiveness have been investigated, tolerance of ambiguity has frequently been identified as a relevant variable. Brams (1961) showed tolerance of ambiguity emerging as one of the possibly essential counsellor personality variables. Of the several personality variables tested, only intolerance of ambiguity correlated significantly with the criterion variable of effectiveness in communicating with clients ($-.36$, significant at .06 level). Two less rigorous studies explored this same relationship. McDaniel (1967) found intolerance of ambiguity correlated $-.48$ with counsellor effectiveness, but Jackson and Thompson (1971) found no significant correlation. However, Gruberg (1969) found that counsellors with a high tolerance of ambiguity used more nondirective responses, talked less, and were judged more effective in their responses than counsellors having a low tolerance of ambiguity.

The general purpose of this study was to explore the question: Do differential patterns of pairing counsellors and clients on the personality variable of tolerance of ambiguity affect the amount of counsellor talk during the interview, the expressed client satisfaction with the counselling sessions, and the number of sessions attended by the client? Attempting to corroborate Gruberg's findings, it was anticipated that counsellors with a high tolerance of ambiguity (TA)

Table 1
MEASURES OF COUNSELLOR TALK, CLIENT SATISFACTION,
AND NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS

		Client Tolerance of Ambiguity				
		High			Low	
Counsellor Talk in Minutes	Counsellor Tolerance of Ambiguity	Total Score	Number of	Counsellor Talk in	Total Score	Number
		Client Satis- faction	Inter- views	Minutes	on Client Satis- faction	of Inter- views
		27	2		29	7
High	3.84	26	2	6.09	25	3
	5.01	17	2	6.00	23	4
	5.13	26	5	6.30	26	2
	3.66	26	2	3.42	25	2
Low	4.14	26	2	6.57	23	1*
	6.39	21	2	3.09	27	1*
		26	2		13	2

*Two subjects achieved their counselling objectives in the first session and returned the second time only to fill out the client satisfaction questionnaire.

would spend significantly less time talking in an interview than would counsellors with a low TA, and that clients would express significantly more satisfaction with high TA counsellors than with low TA counsellors.

METHOD

Subjects

The client subjects were enrolled in an undergraduate education course and the counsellor subjects were graduate students enrolled in the Counsellor Education program, in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia. All subjects volunteered to participate in a minimum of two counselling sessions.

Criterion Measure

The Complexity Scale of the Omnibus Personality Inventory (Theist & Yonge, 1968) was used as a measure of Tolerance of Ambiguity. The higher the score, the higher the tolerance of ambiguity, with the highest score possible being 32.

Procedure

Two groups of eight client subjects were chosen from 20 client volunteers, based on their scores on the Complexity Scale. The high TA group ($\bar{x}=26$) consisted of six males and two females and the low TA group ($\bar{x}=12.5$) consisted of seven males and one female. The two groups of four counsellor subjects were chosen from the 23 counsellor volunteers using the same procedure. The high TA ($\bar{x}=24$) and low TA ($\bar{x}=10.5$) groups of counsellors each consisted of two males and two females.

One high and one low TA client was randomly assigned to each counsellor. Counsellors tape-recorded their initial interviews with each client. These tapes were utilized to determine the amount of counsellor talk during the interview. Counsellor talk was operationally defined as the number of minutes that the counsellor talked during the half-hour segment which began ten minutes after initiation of the first interview. At the end of the second interview the counsellors were instructed to leave the interview room and the clients remained to fill in the client satisfaction questionnaire. The client satisfaction questionnaire consisted of seven questions referring to the counsellor-client relationship and the clients were asked to respond by circling one of the numbers on a five point rating scale, with a higher score meaning greater satisfaction. Near the end of the term, each client and each counsellor was contacted to ascertain the number of counselling interviews attended by each client.

On the dependent measure, counsellor talk, there was a machine failure on one tape in three of the four groups. One of the tapes in the fourth group was removed at random and analysis was conducted on the three remaining measures in each group.

A two-way analysis of variance was used for the statistical analysis of the three dependent measures. The significance level chosen was .05. The dependent measures and their values for each subject are presented in Table 1.

Results

Results of the analysis of variance for the dependent measures of counsellor talk, client satisfaction, and number of interviews are presented in Table 2. Analysis of time talked by counsellors during the thirty-minute segment of the interview revealed that counsellors with a high TA talked significantly more ($F = 6.54$) than counsellors with a low TA.

There was also a significant interaction effect ($F = 7.59$) suggesting that counsellor talk is affected by the differential pairings of counsellors and clients with high and low TA. Visual inspection of the means reveals that high TA counsellors paired with low TA clients produce greatest counsellor talk; high TA clients paired with low TA counsellors produce the second highest amount of counsellor talk; high counsellor and client TA produces the third highest amount of counsellor talk; and finally low client and counsellor TA pairings produce the least amount of counsellor talk.

Analysis of client satisfaction data revealed no significant differences.

Analysis of the number of sessions the clients and counsellors met showed that clients returned significantly more often to counsellors who have a high TA ($F = 5.83$).

Discussion

This study did not support Gruberg's (1969) finding that counsellors with a high tolerance of ambiguity talked less.

However, the study pointed out the importance of interaction between counsellor and client on the personality variable tolerance of ambiguity. It is suggested by the authors that in studying any personality variable important to the counselling process, the researcher consider the client-counsellor interaction effects.

This study also suggests that, although clients do not state any difference in levels of satisfaction, they do return more often to see counsellors who have a high tolerance of ambiguity.

Table 2

SUMMARY TABLE OF ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR COUNSELLOR TALK, CLIENT SATISFACTION, AND NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS

Counsellor Talk	SS	df	ms	F
Columns — Clients	.90	1	.90	2.71
Rows — Counsellor	2.17	1	2.17	6.54*
Interaction	2.52	1	2.52	7.59*
Within Cells	2.66	8	.332	
Total	8.25			
Client Satisfaction	SS	df	ms	F
Columns — Clients	1.00	1	1.00	—
Rows — Counsellor	9.00	1	9.00	—
Interaction	20.25	1	20.25	—
Within Cells	246.50	12	20.54	—
Total	276.75			
Number of Interviews	SS	df	ms	F
Columns — Clients	.56	1	.56	—
Rows — Counsellor	10.57	1	10.57	5.83*
Interaction	3.06	1	3.06	1.5
Within Cells	21.75	12	1.81	—
Total	35.94			

* $p < .05$

RESUME: On a étudié les différences du pairage de conseillers et de clients sur la variable de la tolérance à l'ambiguïté, les effets sur le degré d'expression du conseiller durant l'entrevue, la satisfaction exprimée par le client et le nombre d'entrevues. Les conseillers possédant un haut niveau de tolérance à l'ambiguïté se sont exprimés significativement plus que ceux ayant un bas niveau. On a observé que l'interaction était significativement différente selon les pairages. La satisfaction exprimée au sujet des entrevues n'a révélé aucune différence significative, mais les clients retourneront davantage consulter les conseillers possédant un haut niveau de tolérance à l'ambiguïté.

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