

## PATTERNS OF ACQUISITION AND DIFFERENTIAL RETENTION OF HELPING SKILLS AND THEIR EFFECT ON CLIENT VERBAL BEHAVIOUR

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### Abstract

Fourteen community people were trained as drug counsellors through 40 hours of training in microcounselling. The impact of this training on acquisition of counselling skills and their effect on client behaviour was investigated. It was concluded that peer counsellors were successful in modifying the verbal behaviour of clients in desired directions. The data also reveal some counsellor leads and microcounselling skills lose strength and may, over time disappear while others are maintained. Implications of the decay/maintenance phenomena as they relate to counsellor effectiveness need further investigation.

### Résumé

Quatorze travailleurs communautaires reçurent un stage d'entraînement pour devenir des conseillers auprès des usagers de la drogue. Ce stage, d'une durée de 40 heures, centra sur la micro-consultation. On a étudié l'effet de cet entraînement sur l'acquisition des habiletés propres à la consultation et sur le comportement des clients. On conclut qu'une telle consultation par les pairs réussit à modifier, dans la direction souhaitée, le comportement verbal des clients. Les données révèlent également chez le conseiller que certaines de ses approches et de ses habiletés en micro-consultation s'atténuent et peuvent venir à disparaître tandis que d'autres perdurent. Les conséquences de ce phénomène déclin/maintien par rapport à l'efficacité du conseiller font appel à d'autres recherches.

Since the landmark mental health study act of 1955 the use of paraprofessionals in helping roles, other than entertainment and clerical, has steadily increased in order to meet the public demand for mental health services. The increasing demand for service and use of paraprofessionals in the mental health delivery system is slowly but unalterably changing the role of the professionals in the system. As Delworth (1974) has noted the training of paraprofessional helpers is becoming an increasingly important aspect of the professionals' role.

Rioch, Elkes & Flint (1963) provided early evidence of the effectiveness of training paraprofessionals as treatment agents. Important in this program was a carefully designed two year training design which included seminars, individual and group supervision, listening to tapes and observing supervisors in therapy sessions. A three year follow-up (Mason, Golann & Freeman, 1964) of the graduates of this program substantiated the success of the program. Others (Guernsey, 1964; Stollar, 1965) have developed long term training designs for paraprofessionals with similar results. However, as Cowen, Gardner & Zax (1967) have pointed out many

"nonprofessional" programs turn out to be professional education in disguise. If we are to keep pace with the public's demand for service we will have to design efficient short-term training programs to develop effective paraprofessionals. Carkhuff and Truax (1965) were instrumental in demonstrating that through an integrated didactic and experiential approach, it was possible to train high-level-functioning paraprofessionals in approximately 100 hours time.

The purpose of this study was to determine if lay counsellors could acquire minimal counselling skills through short-term training (40 hours) and to assess the impact of this training on the retention of these skills and their effect on client behaviour.

### METHOD

A community-based selection committee chose 14 participants (4 males and 10 females) for a peer drug counselling program from a pool of 27 applicants. Participants were selected by the staff of a private consulting firm using data obtained from interviews with the staff members of SHDC direct observation of participants during group screening procedures and the responses on the

application form completed by each potential trainee. The consultant firm used typical screening criteria such as past experience of the candidate, commitment to the program, time availability, and a subjective judgment as to empathy. It may be seen that the nature of the selection process is typical of those entering paraprofessional training. The selection process is typical of what might be expected in an action research study such as this. But, of course, does not reach usual experimental rigor associated with laboratory studies.

The "typical" volunteer completed two years of college, was married, had two children and was either a housewife or professional person. The trainees were provided with 40 hours of training in the microcounseling model (Ivey, 1971; Ivey & Gluckstern, 1974a; 1974b) which emphasizes a behavioural skills approach to helping. Important in this training is direct observation of overt and measurable verbal and nonverbal behaviours as they appear on videotape and/or audiotape. For the purposes of this action research study only the "attending skills" of questions (open questions, closed questions), minimal encouragers, paraphrasing and reflection of feelings were taught to the trainees. It was decided to rate all subcategories of the Ivey Taxonomy of Interview (IT) to determine if training in attending skills in any way influences the remaining microcounseling skills. The concept of "focus" (centering helper's responses on the client rather than external topics) was similarly not directly taught, but has proven to be a helpful measure of changes in clients from pre to post training (Ivey & Authier, 1978).

Prior to training, participants interviewed a volunteer client concerning "attitudes and feelings about drugs" and these 20 minute sessions were videotaped. This procedure was repeated at the end of training and at a seven month delay period.

After all trainees had completed their seven month follow-up video tape, the second five minute segment from each of the three tapes made by each trainee were randomly presented to, and rated by, two graduate students. The Ivey Taxonomy of Interview and group behaviours (IT) (Ivey & Gluckstern, 1974) was used to rate each of the trainee's video tapes. The IT contains two major rating categories, microcounseling skills (11 subcategories) and focus (5 subcategories) by which both helper and helpee statements are rated. Statements of each client and each lay counsellor were rated on all categories of the IT by the two raters. Inter-rater agreement on the randomly arranged and presented videotapes for the two raters ranged from 80.7% to 92.2% for the mean values of each of the 16 subcategories. Their total percent of agreement for 2,102 ratings was 86.8%.

## RESULTS

The major findings of this investigation are seen in Table 1. Note significant shifts in the paraprofessionals' use of helping skills occurred on three of seven ratings while all three categories of "focus" (the central theme of a helper utterance) changed. Further, client behaviour changed on three of six possible dimensions.

TABLE 1  
ANALYSIS OF COUNSELOR AND CLIENT BEHAVIOR

CATEGORY	COUNSELOR ACTUAL BEHAVIOR				CLIENT ACTUAL BEHAVIOR			
	PRE	POST	DELAY	$\chi^2$	PRE	POST	DELAY	$\chi^2$
Focus of Lead								
Self	23	9	28	9.7*	74	110	103	9.8*
Client**/Counselor	74	129	91	17.2*	11	13	14	.8
Topic	54	9	24	23.6*	67	23	26	11.5*
Microcounseling Skill								
Information					56	38	38	4.1
Closed Info	41	18	15	11.6*				
Open Info	27	10	17	4.6				
Giving Info	23	10	19	4.3				
Feelings					15	40	42	16.5*
Closed Feelings	10	28	6	20.9*				
Open Feelings	21	28	22	2.1				
Reflecting Feelings	4	12	16	9.3*				
Sharing Counselor Feelings	19	12	24	5.0				
Info & Feelings					81	68	63	1.5
Paraphrase	5	9	5	2.3				
Summary	14	13	12	0.0				
Cognitive Restructure	19	21	22	.7				

\*p .01

\*\* For counselor data this reflects a focus on client and for client data this reflects a focus on counselor.

## DISCUSSION

It seems clear from the data that the objectives of this action research study were achieved. It was possible to develop competent helpers in a short period of time and this competence is demonstrated in client verbal changes which appear to maintain themselves over time. The action research design clearly illustrates that training can "make a difference."

The corollary finding of this study is that client verbal behaviour changed as a function of helper behaviour. In the pre-test, the clients tended to talk more about topics external to the interview whereas in both post-tests their behaviour had changed so that they were using more self-reference statements. Further, they had significantly increased their number of statements dealing with affect as opposed to information and maintained this behaviour seven months post-training. Thus, it may be concluded that this group of peer counsellors was able to change the verbal behaviour of its clients.

The study has important limitations. First is the lack of a control group as is typical of (community-based) action research designs. The behavioural orientation of the data and the baseline, pre-test, post-test follow-up design, however, partially compensate for this limitation. The sample size is small and generalization to other populations must be done with care. The data, nonetheless, do reveal interesting trends in

patterns of counsellor skill use and their impact on client behaviour.

The pattern of paraprofessional use of skills is particularly interesting. After training in attending skills (reflection of feeling, paraphrasing, etc.), we see decreased use of the less-desired closed-information questions and increased use of closed-feeling questions and reflections of feeling. At seven months, the closed-feeling questions dropped off while reflection of feeling continued to increase. The focus or main theme of the helper lead changed at each point in the study. Especially noteworthy is the large increase in helpee-oriented statements at the first post-test. *Thus, it can be seen that changes in paraprofessional use of helping skills related rather directly to changes in their client's verbal behaviour.* The skills of self-disclosure, information-giving, and cognitive restructuring did not change during this study and, of course, were not part of the systematic 40 hour program.

It is clear that, in this study, paraprofessional counsellors learned to reflect feelings and focus on the client thus creating an increased number of client self-feeling statements. These skills were taught in a short period of time (40 hours) and were maintained over time (7 months). The data also suggest that both counsellor leads (focus on self, client, and topic) and certain microcounselling skills lose strength at differential rates and may, over time, disappear. The clearest example of this effect is the counsellor verbal focus on self. The data indicate that following short-term training, paraprofessional counsellors learned not to focus on themselves during the interview. Over the next six months this skill disappeared although their self-reference statements did not seem to injure relationship or client talk about self. A close examination of the counsellor data suggests that for each skill and each lead statement there is a differential rate at which these skills are extinguished. The reflection of feeling skill, however, clearly was maintained. If paraprofessional counsellors are to be used then procedures must be developed that extend and strengthen newly acquired skills so that they may be long-lasting effective helpers. It is clear that the implications of the decay/maintenance phenomena, as they relate to counsellor effectiveness, need further investigation.

The study described here may be considered a critical one for the microtraining model as it involves: a) examination of the effect of skills on clients, something heretofore relatively unexplored within the model; b) the first data which

indicates that patterns of skill decay may vary from skill to skill (and perhaps with later study from individual to individual); and c) seven-month follow-up data, an item lacking in laboratory research so typical of microtraining work. While we believe this study has clear deficiencies, we also believe it has major strengths as it clearly points to new and needed research for the future. As such, we suggest that this study be considered a model upon which more fully developed studies can be built. Current exploration within the model centres on having counsellor trainees conduct interviews with clients before training and then presenting *typescripts* of their behaviour to the trainer. Following microskill workshops, the trainees again conduct another interview and submit a second typescript along with their first. Both typescripts are scored for microskills thus making possible far more detailed comparisons of individual pre versus post-training behaviour. The teaching of trainees how to score interviews has proven a useful teaching technique which simultaneously provides interesting research data.

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