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THE INITIAL STAGE OF A COUNSELING RELATIONSHIP

The term rapport is most commonly used to describe one of the initial tasks of the first stage of counseling. Those who have been directly concerned with the training of counselors, including authors of texts intended for beginning counseling practicum students, have attempted to define the meaning of rapport by a summarization of the factors that are considered to be basic to a helping relationship. Of necessity these factors are labeled with terms which are highly abstract and generalized. For example, McKinney (1958) describes rapport as a relationship which is mutually responsive, containing mutual trust, confidence, and esteem. Arbuckle (1965) says it is a relationship which is easy, comfortable, free, and honest. Perez (1968) defines rapport as a working relationship involving mutual warmth, trust, and confidence. Without exception, these authors have proceeded to attempt to describe behaviors which predictably will lead to the establishment of a relationship which would include the factors contained in their definitions. The terms used to describe these behaviors usually include acceptance, understanding, non-punishment, and total attention to the client. Efforts to establish rapport of the type described above are quite often frustrated by the expectations clients bring to counseling about the nature of the relationship they are about to enter. The frustration of a beginning counselor is perhaps intensified by the vagueness of the descriptions of rapport he is given and, in some cases, by the promised magical consequences of behaviors such as acceptance and understanding.

Admittedly, vagueness of attempts to define rapport is caused by the fact that we are forced to use abstract terms which cannot arouse in the reader anything approximating the visceral components which signify to an experienced counselor that a helping relationship is in full flower. Perhaps a more useful approach to helping counselors understand the nature of the task of establishing rapport would be to emphasize some of the interactions which are occurring and the effects of these interactions on achieving rapport.

To begin with it should be clearly stated that rapport is a definition of the relationship mutually arrived at by client and counselor. In order to achieve rapport the definition must accommodate the general motivations and specific intentions of both client and counselor for entering the relationship. In addition, before an agreement is concluded each must either confirm or revise the expectations about the other that he brings to the initial sessions. It seems fair to state that this initial stage continues until both parties are in agreement and comfortable with a definition of the relationship before any further stage in the process of counseling is entered. Quite often, in fact, the relationship is terminated because of the inability of client and counselor to reach agreement on this definition. Because this initial stage is so crucial to successful counseling it seems appropriate to attempt to

describe as specifically as possible the important ingredients that must be dealt with before a mutually satisfactory agreement can be reached.

These ingredients can be classified within three general areas of concern. The first general area could be called "expectations about the other." Both the client and the counselor enter into a counseling relationship with certain expectations about the type of person he is about to meet. These expectations include such things as: the other person's attitude toward oneself; the other person's general values, and attitudes towards persons in general; and more specifically, the other person's valuation of, and attitude toward, a person who enters into this type of relationship. At this point in the relationship the expectations of both the counselor and the client are based on stereotypes. Both client and counselor expect the other to have some sort of stereotype model of him. Depending on the level of experience and sophistication of each, these expectations will be rigid and strong, or tentative and weak. The sophisticated person will understand that he may be perceived as fitting into a number of stereotypes and he may be very tentative in hypothesizing in which of these roles he will be perceived by any one person. On the other hand, the less experienced or more rigid and narrow person may expect others to perceive him in only one way.

The second general area in which agreement must be reached involves the intention of client and counselor, respectively, to be accepted by the other as a certain type of person. This is an attempt to counteract possible stereotypes in which each expects the other to have categorized him. The amount of effort that each puts into his own attempts to clarify himself to the other is an excellent measure of the degree of commitment that each is making toward the formation of a meaningful relationship. On the other hand, it is not at all uncommon for one or both of the parties to send messages to the other that he wishes to be seen as a pure representative of a stereotype with which he expects the other to be familiar. These messages are indications that the sender does not wish, at least at the moment, to enter into a very personal relationship but wishes, rather, to remain anonymous and to be dealt with (or intends to treat the other) as an object. This sometimes represents a real desire on the part of the counselor or client to define the relationship in such a fashion or it may be that person's attempt to meet what he believes to be the other's expectations, and therefore to play the role that will cause the least difficulty in reaching an agreement on the definition of the relationship. Obviously, the latter reason for such behavior on the part of the client can be changed rather quickly by a skilled counselor if he so desires.

The third general ingredient of the definition of a counseling relationship has to do with the intentions of both the client and the counselor to establishing their desired methods of giving and/or receiving help. A client often seems to be making a deliberate effort to be perceived as typical of some stereotype (presumably) because that stereotype includes a rather specific method of interaction (or of being acted upon) in learning situations. The same situation is of course true of counselors who wish to proceed immediately to the teaching phase and who wish to define this aspect of the relationship as quickly as possible.

Each of these three ingredients of the definition of a counseling rela-

tionship are closely interrelated. The messages which are given out and received about any one of the three areas will tend to confirm or deny messages given by both parties in the other two areas.

CONFLICT CAUSED BY CLIENT STEREOTYPING OF COUNSELORS

The possible conflicts, which can occur between counselor and client during the defining stage of a relationship, are related to the intentions and expectations both possess and the degree to which one or both are willing to compromise on these. The good counselor would be more likely to revise his expectations of the client's personality than he will be to revise either his own image or counseling methodology. The client, on the other hand, may have more difficulty in revising his expectations about the counselor's personality than in compromising on the method of giving and receiving help. In terms of his own image being revised, it is more likely that what he becomes more or less willing to do is to be more self-revealing about himself, rather than changing to meet the counselor's expectations.

The conflict between client expectations about the counselor's personality and the counselor's preferred way of being perceived has received a considerable amount of attention, as has been noted by several investigators (Arbuckle, 1965; Bordin, 1955; Lorr, 1965; Rogers, 1951; Shaw, 1955). The client's expectations are centered mainly on the type or method of help he expects to receive and are likely, therefore, to expose certain personality characteristics which are related to this learning procedure. The most common expectations of students towards school counselors are that they will behave as do most adults towards students. These expectations can be further refined to apply specifically to teachers, school administrators, medical people, and psychologists or psychiatrists. The expected nature of all of these social roles is to be superior to adolescents, to give advice, to give information, to give directions, to ask questions, and to make judgments. The type of person the client expects to meet on the basis of these preconceived roles is one who is self-assured, remote, friendly in a superficial manner, concerned with problems rather than people, opinionated, and determined to have his own way. These characteristics will prove useful or harmful to a counselor depending on his preferred method of counseling. Many counselors make attempts in the beginning stages of counseling to upset the expectations of a client by attempting to show interest in the client as an individual, to indicate real concern for the client and his problem, and to be a genuine and truly friendly person.

Perhaps the aspect which is most often overlooked is that the client expects the counselor not only to be opinionated but to have a high degree of vested interest in any ideas, opinions, hypotheses, or suggestion that he makes. It is this latter expectation, coupled with the expectations that students have about how adults in positions of authority behave when they have a vested interest in their own ideas, that causes so much difficulty in establishing a meaningful relationship. A person whom one assumes to have a vested interest in his own ideas and opinions is expected to be rigid and unchanging and, when in a position of authority, to use the power of that authority to insist that others agree. These are the expectations adolescents typically have of teachers, doctors, and parents in such circumstances. Because of the

probability of being perceived in this way, such practitioners as Arbuckle (1965), Boy and Pine (1963), Patterson (1959), and Rogers (1951) have recommended that, within certain limitations, counselors refrain from offering opinions, advice, ideas, or suggestions, so that clients will not be put off as soon as they hear such statements by their own perceived lack of choice in responding. There can be no avoiding these expectations and what any particular counselor does about them will depend on his general beliefs about what will motivate a change in his client's behavior.

There seem to be two general methods of aiding a client to modify his behavior. One is to help a client to become more comfortable with himself and to view himself capable by changing his interpretation of previous behavior from that of inadequacy and failure to a more positive viewpoint of his previous accomplishments. As a result of this re-evaluation, a client would be expected to begin to behave more assertively, to make a more positive and continuing effort to succeed, to use feedback from his efforts for information rather than gross judgements of success or failure, and in general to take control of his own environment. The second method is to aid the client in attempting new behaviors with a high predictability of success, and assuming that a change in the client's self-perception will occur as a result of actually experiencing success in these situations. In the latter case a counselor would be likely to utilize those client expectations of counselors which are associated with earned authority and power, so that new modes of client behavior can be initiated as soon as possible. When this is the case there will be little conflict between the usual client expectations and a counselor's intentions to define the relationship. The counselor's task in this case will be to perceive indications of a client's expectations and to respond to these by confirming them as correct. However, when the counselor's preferred method is to aid the client in revising his self-estimates by utilizing reinterpretations of previous behavior, then his task is to perceive those indications of a client's expectations which imply distrust of the counselor and to upset them as quickly as possible while at the same time attempting to present a clear image of the way he prefers to be seen. Obviously, this is the more difficult definition to establish and the time and effort spent in doing so is justified by the assumption that meaningful learning can occur only within a relationship where the counselor is perceived by the client as concerned, genuine, non-punishing, and in a position of inferior responsibility for the conduct and outcome of the relationship.

CONFLICT CAUSED BY COUNSELOR STEREOTYPING OF CLIENTS

The conflict between the client's self-presentation and the counselor's expectations about the client is perhaps the easiest of all to overcome. The counselor who is willing to revise his expectations to meet the reality of the picture that the client is presenting needs merely to perceive the client's intentions and to indicate his agreement with the client. This particular task in the initial stages of counseling is likely to be helpful for any counseling relationship regardless of the type of image the counselor wishes to project or his preferred method of offering help.

A frequent occasion of conflict, at least for high-school counselors, is when little or no effort is made by the counselor to pay particular attention

to these messages on the part of the client. All too often, when the client is making an effort to define himself to a counselor, the counselor seems to behave as if lack of argument is all that is necessary to indicate acceptance and understanding of the client. In many cases the most important aspect of a client's messages in the initial stage of a counseling relationship is the definition of himself to the counselor. As mentioned earlier in the discussion of a client's expectations of a counselor, the client often expects the counselor to be interested in the problem first and the person second. This indicates that the client expects to be perceived by the counselor as an example of a particular category or classification of problems and solutions.

A client who presents himself to the counselor in the initial stage of counseling only in terms of a general description of his problem is telling the counselor either, "I don't expect you to see me as a unique person," or, "I don't wish you to know me as a unique person," or both. The reasons for wishing to present himself in this manner are, of course, unique to each individual, but quite often they seem to include a withholding of any commitment either to the relationship itself or to possible solutions to the problem which may be presented. To many school counselors this situation seems to be the preferred relationship. The situation thus presented is one in which we have a client, representing a stereotype of a student, who presents a problem as typical and general sounding as he can make it, and then waits for a suggested solution appropriate for some hypothetically typical person. The client seems to be saying that regardless of the authority (power) of the counselor or any vested interest the latter may have in the suggested solution, *he* is free to reject that solution as personally inappropriate for him. Such a situation is unlikely to support any prediction of a successful outcome of counseling, but because the situation seems to relieve the counselor of almost all responsibility except to suggest some solution (which need not be appropriate) many school counselors seem to make no attempt at a different definition of the relationship.

By insisting that the definition of the relationship include knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of each other as unique human beings, the counselor must give up stereotype solutions to particular classifications of problems. Instead of stereotyping he becomes committed to both a solution satisfactory to the client and to continuing the relationship until a successful conclusion is reached. It is this commitment to share in the frustrations and struggles for success that is perhaps the source of a counselor's too-ready acceptance of a relationship defined on the basis of superficial stereotypes.

A *different problem entirely* occurs when the client's desire to be seen in a certain way is based on his strong desire to be seen as a unique human being. Because so many adolescents do not expect to be perceived in such a manner by an adult in an institutional setting, the client will often send out many messages about his own personality during initial counseling sessions. This information about themselves is most often contained in broader statements which also contain information about the nature of the problem, its causes, and the degree of importance to them for an appropriate solution. Counselors who tend to be problem-oriented rather than people-oriented will often respond to the parts of these messages which refer to the problem rather than to those which refer to the personality of the client. This type of

situation is often exemplified by clients who repeat themselves over and over, adding further elaboration and examples of frustrating situations to illustrate the problem. Seemingly, the client is attempting to define the problem; however, what is probably more important, the client is attempting to have himself seen in such a way that the counselor perceives the problem in its relationship to the client's own personality. Thus, both the definition of the problem and the definition of the client take on aspects which make them *unique*. Counselors must learn to perceive and respond to the major intent of a client's messages during the initial stages of counseling because until the client has confirmation that his attempt to be perceived as *unique* has been successful little or no progress can be made.

CONFLICTS CAUSED BY CLIENT AND COUNSELOR PREFERENCE FOR GIVING AND/OR RECEIVING HELP

The overriding purpose in forming a counseling relationship is that of giving or receiving help. It is, as has often been said, a learning situation for which the roles of both parties to the relationship are generally clear. It is also a learning situation in which both parties are highly motivated to achieve a successful outcome. It seems strange, given these two conditions, that so many counseling relationships result in unsatisfactory conclusions. Agreement between counselor and client as to how they will proceed would seem to be but a temporary and fleeting problem. It is, of course, precisely that when both the expectations and preferences of the client and the preferences of the counselor are the same. When the client expects and desires to be told what to do and the counselor desires to tell the client what to do there is no problem except that far too few satisfactory outcomes of counseling result from such a procedure. Quite often, however, there is a conflict between the preferences of the client and the counselor as to the method of proceeding in the relationship. The pure logic of the situation would seem to be that if a client comes to a counselor for help because he expects the counselor to be an expert or specialist in the area in which the client needs help then, logically, the client should expect that whatever method of procedure the counselor prefers would be best, and he should therefore be willing to proceed as the counselor suggests. In practice clients don't perceive school counselors as being quite that expert, and neither do they accept totally, on faith, the magic of any particular procedure. The problem of procedure seems to be crucial because any change resulting from counseling is likely to occur only when the client is committed to the effort required for change and feels personally responsible for change if it occurs. These conditions would seem to hold for whatever method of promoting change is used. The commitment on the part of the client to the counseling procedure must include client responsibility for the outcome. As mentioned earlier, both client and counselor can enter into an arrangement whereby the client has no commitment to follow the suggestions of the counselor and where, because of this, the counselor has no real responsibility to make sure the suggestions are appropriate.

The client's expectations as to how counseling will proceed are most likely based on his stereotype of a counselor. Voluntary clients come to counselors presumably expecting to be treated in a certain way and at least

in some degree this treatment is appropriate to how they see themselves. When a client is treated by the counselor in a way drastically different than that expected, this may be not only surprising but intolerable to a client. Some clients enter counseling by attempting to be exactly what they think they are expected to be and are prepared to behave exactly as they have always behaved, that is, in an inferior position when the goal of the situation is learning. Other clients seem to have intentions of upsetting these expectations in one of three possible ways: to be different than expected; to be equal rather than inferior; to prefer a method of learning which is atypical to most institutional settings. Conflicts occur when the counselor is unprepared to accept and work along the lines that seem to be presented by the client. For example, a counselor who prefers a method of counseling which is dependent upon the client being fairly helpless, highly suggestible, and in a position obviously inferior to his own either confirms the client's expectations or upsets them, depending on what expectations the client presents. The commitment on the part of the client to the method of procedure is dependent upon all three ingredients of the definition of the relationship being in harmony, and this aspect of the definition of the relationship is the last to be confirmed.

SUMMARY

In order for counseling to proceed to a successful conclusion some sort of mutually satisfactory relationship must be established between client and counselor. In order for a relationship to be mutually satisfactory, both parties must feel that there is no conflict caused by stereotyping of one party by the other, nor between the methods of giving and/or receiving help preferred by each.

The tasks of the counselor in the initial stages of counseling are to perceive the client's attempts to define the relationship they prefer and to convey his own preferences as clearly as possible. The counselor must convey to the client, first of all, that he understands and accepts the client as he wishes to be known. He must convey to the client as clearly as he can those aspects of his own personality by which he wishes to be known, and he must convey to the client the way he wishes to proceed in order to be of help. The length of time spent in this first stage of counseling depends on how well the counselor performs these tasks and to what extent the counselor must upset the expectations of the client in order to reach a mutually agreeable definition of the relationship. There are a number of commonly occurring conflicts between the intentions of the two parties, and this discussion of several of these possible conflicts may be of some use in sensitizing counselors to the meaning of the various messages they are receiving and giving, and to the importance of resolving these conflicts in as positive a fashion as possible.

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L'ETABLISSEMENT DE LA RELATION DE COUNSELING

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L'auteur dégage que la situation de counseling se déroulera avec succès si le conseiller et le client y trouvent une satisfaction mutuelle. Pour que cette relation soit mutuellement satisfaisante les deux parties doivent sentir qu'il n'existe entre eux aucun conflit généré par les stéréotypes individuels et liés aux méthodes de donner et/ou de recevoir l'aide désirée. Weiser présente plusieurs raisons à la base de ces conflits, espérant contribuer à sensibiliser les conseillers à la signification des divers messages qu'ils reçoivent ou donnent. De plus, il dégage l'importance de résoudre ces conflits de façon positive.