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# KNOWLEDGE OF CLIENT CONCERNS AND ITS EFFECT ON COUNSELING OUTCOMES

One of the points of theoretical conflict in counseling has been the question of giving counselors information about their clients prior to the counseling interview. Arbuckle (1965) stated that the client-centered counselor would have no "previous diagnostic concepts" and therefore would not be in a position to do anything but respond to the client as the interview progressed. Williamson (1966), on the other hand, felt that:

> The appraisal of the individual student in terms of the information given or collected before and during the interview would seem to me to be a most significant contribution on the part of the counselor to the counselee's approximation to full understanding (p. 29).

Resolution of the above conflict is not simple, especially since much of the theory has not been tested. Little research has been carried out on the effects of giving counselors information about clients prior to counseling. Volsky (1965) pointed to the pitfalls of using certain inadequate criteria to evaluate outcomes. He further stated that much research has been carried on which falls into the trap of judging the effectiveness of counseling by reports from clients or counselors, those reports being largely subjective. He was wary of the outcome studies because the criterion measures were often not spelled out enough.

Goldman (1961) has written:

> Here, then, is the dilemma: if counselors don't use the most complete up-to-date appraisal and environmental information possible, they are neglecting to provide their clients with one of the important elements of a good plan or decision. . . . On the other hand, bringing assessment and environmental information into the counseling room seems to disturb the counseling process (p. 44).

In this study an attempt was made to gain some insight into the problem of counseling outcomes by using a test developed by Powell (1955) which measures client concern based on reaction time to emotionally weighted words.

A major assumption of Powell's (1955) study was that when a person is under some type of stress and an anxiety reaction occurs, reaction time to words related to the area of stress becomes longer (Powell, 1955; Nishisato, 1966). Many other studies have been carried out which show a relationship between anxiety and reaction time (as anxiety increase, reaction time becomes longer), but the author could find few which had examined the possibility of assessing outcomes by analyzing the change between pre- and post-test counseling reaction times.

The effect of knowing the client's concerns was investigated by giving each counselor pretest data on his client's areas of concern to see if specific information about the client would affect counseling outcomes as reflected in changed reaction times.

Change was also looked at in terms of the *IPAT Anxiety Scale* as a corroborative measure, but no data from this test were given to the counselors.

The search for some appraisal of the client based on the assumption that beginning counselors seem to reach a point at which they may not be able to differentiate among client leads in order to choose appropriate techniques. The author assumed that some measure of client concerns could help the beginning counselor become more sensitive to client needs. Sensitivity would be generated in two ways: (1) Information about the client would help reduce initial counselor anxiety. (2) If the measure was accurate, the counselor would be aware of real areas of conflict within the client.

## METHOD

SUBJECTS

Counselors for this study were members of a NDEA Institute in Guidance and Counseling. At the time of this study, they were beginning counselors without experience in the field. Participation in this project was considered part of the experience provided by the Institute, and members were urged to participate. Twenty-six members were chosen from the twenty-eight member group; two members were eliminated from the project because long commuting distances prohibited them from participating.

Clients for this study were members of one of three elementary education classes. Seventy-seven females agreed to participate; two who did not take the posttest were excluded from the final analysis. No males were included in the experiment because the number of males in each class was not enough to allow balanced distribution by sex.

INSTRUMENTS

The measure used to provide counselors with information about their clients was the *Reaction Time Test* developed by Powell (1955). The test consists of seven sets of stimulus words relating to areas of possible psychological conflict. Each set of conflict words is followed by a set of neutral words designed to minimize the generalizing effect of anxiety in one area causing a high conflict score in the following conflict area. The test operates on the assumption that the more concern an individual has with a certain area, the longer his reaction time will be to words relating to that area. The test was administered using a slide projector with a specially attached shutter which was wired into the on/off circuit of a timer calibrated in hundredths of a second. Prior to the actual administration of conflict words, a short practice series was presented to acquaint the subject with the test and the response pattern. The practice series was followed by a seven word neutral series designed to obtain a basal response rate used to score the test.

The test was scored by substracting the basal rate of response from the mean reaction time for an emotionally weighted series. Scores were thus obtained for each of the seven areas: (a) Parent-Child relationships, (b)

Emotional tendencies, (c) Heterosexual relations, (d) Physical appearance, (e) Religion, (f) Vocational outlook, and (g) Social acceptability.

For the purposes of this study, a profile sheet was designed to allow rank order presentation of areas of conflict for the client. The difference score mentioned above was not used to draw the profiles given the counselors, since only the rank ordering of areas of concern was used. It was therefore possible to use just the average reaction time for each section for ordering purposes.

A slide projector was fitted with a special shutter which was controlled by means of a switch wired to a solenoid. When the shutter switch was closed, the shutter opened and the stimulus word was projected on the screen; at the same time the shutter opened, it closed a micro-switch in the timer circuit and started the clock. As soon as the subject responded, the experimenter released the shutter switch and the clock stopped as the shutter closed.

Although some delay took place between the subject's response and the experimenter's release of the shutter switch, th delay was a constant one. A check was made using a parallel timer circuit and an independent observer who responded to the same stimulus presented the experimenter. The check revealed a constant delay in the experimenter's response; reaction times for this study included this standard error of no more than .10 second.

The projector was placed a fixed distance of three feet from the screen to insure equal luminance for all subjects being tested. A 500-watt projector lamp was used throughout the experiment. The subject was asked to sit in front of the table and watch for words which would be projected on the screen. The projector was always on the right side of the subject being tested; the experimenter always sat to the rear of the subject. Using this seating arrangement, the subjects were not aware that they were being tested for reaction time but thought they were merely engaging in word association test.

According to Cattell and Scheier (1963), the *IPAT Anxiety Scale* measures manifest or free-floating anxiety which is generally conscious anxiety. The scale was developed using factor analytic methods and is composed of forty items in questionnaire form. The scale yields a total anxiety score and subscores for covert and overt anxiety. The test may be broken down into five personality factors, but only the total anxiety score was used in this study. The *IPAT Anxiety Scale* was administered after each subject had completed the *Reaction Time Test*. Since the test can be self-administering, the investigator allowed subjects to take the test to a room adjacent to the room used for the *Reaction Time Test* and complete it at their own rate.

PROCEDURE

A three-group design based on an experimental model suggested by Campbell and Stanley (1963) was employed in this study. Clients were randomly assigned to three groups: Experimental 1, Experimental 2, and Control. The pretests consisting of the *Reaction Time Test* and *IPAT Anxiety Scale* were administered to all the clients. Random pretesting sessions were held for two weeks prior to counseling; the random schedule attempted to control for the effects of group testing.

A Control group was added to two experimental groups to minimize the effects of maturation outside the experimental situation. The Control group also allowed the investigator to determine if counseling *per se* had any effect on the two experimental groups.

In order to control for the effect of any variable in the counseling style of each counselor, participating counselors each had one Experimental 1 and one Experimental 2 client. The counselors received information about their Experimental 1 client but did not get any information about their Experimental 2 client. Counselors were instructed to work on areas which were high on the client's conflict profile (one point above the base rate of reaction). They were also instructed not to show the counselee his profile. No information from the *IPAT Anxiety Scale* was given the counselors in order not to confound the information gathered using the *Reaction Time Test*.

Counselors for this study were not supervised as they ordinarily would have been. It was felt that the counselors might bring their problems with Experimental 2 client to the supervising session. Counselors were asked to discuss clients among themselves, if they felt inclined toward discussion, so that no effects of advanced training would enter into the results.

The Control group was not counseled. Upon conclusion of the one-month period during which counseling took place, the posttest was administered to all three groups. Random testing sessions were again used for two weeks to give both the *Reaction Time Test* and the *IPAT Anxiety Scale*.

## RESULTS

Analysis of the data was done using separate analyses of variance on the pretest and posttest scores for the seven areas of the *Reaction Time Test*. Analyses of variance were performed on the pretest data to determine if the experimental groups were basically equivalent at the beginning of the experiment. In the one case (Emotional tendencies) where pretest means were significantly different, an analysis of covariance was performed on the posttest data.

Analyses of variance were also done on the pretest and posttest scores for the *IPAT Anxiety Scale*.

For both instruments, significance at the .05 level was accepted on the pretest analysis of variance as determining the desirability of using covariance on the posttest data. Significance at the .05 level was accepted on the posttest analyses as determining rejection of the appropriate null hypothesis.

The two major null hypotheses were: (1) There are no significant differences among groups after counseling in any of the seven areas of adjustment tested by the *Reaction Time Test*, and (2) There are no significant differences among groups after counseling in anxiety level as measured by the *IPAT Anxiety Scale*.

Table 1 shows pre- and posttest means for the *Reaction Time Test* and *F*-ratios for the posttest analyses of variance for each area. In no case was there a significant difference among groups after counseling.

Table 2 shows pre- and posttest means for the *IPAT Anxiety Scale* and *F*-ratios for the posttest analysis of variance. Again, no significant differences among groups after counseling appeared.

TABLE 1

Comparisons of Reaction Time Test Pre- and Post- Measures
of Experimental 1, Experimental 2, and Control Groups

| Reaction Time Test | Group+ | Pretest Mean | SD | Posttest Mean | SD | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parent-Child Relationships | E1 (N=26) | .061 | .340 | .083 | .354 | |
| | E2 (N=25) | .123 | .377 | .181 | .379 | |
| | C (N=24) | .218 | .501 | .173 | .446 | .487 |
| Emotional Tendencies | E1 (N=24) | .791 | .993 | .624* | .717 | |
| | E2 (N=24) | .398 | .539 | .712* | .823 | |
| | C (N=24) | 1.036 | .912 | .679* | .622 | .109** |
| Heterosexual Relations | E1 (N=26) | .678 | .703 | .613 | .400 | |
| | E2 (N=25) | .735 | .763 | .376 | .567 | |
| | C (N=24) | .889 | 1.254 | .614 | .338 | 2.372 |
| Physical Appearance | E1 (N=26) | .540 | .654 | .635 | .617 | |
| | E2 (N=25) | .591 | .968 | .464 | .557 | |
| | C (N=24) | .638 | .730 | .407 | .349 | 1.288 |
| Religion | E1 (N=26) | .505 | .495 | .582 | .516 | |
| | E2 (N=25) | .505 | .495 | .582 | .516 | |
| | C (N=24) | .646 | .732 | .532 | .558 | .485 |
| Vocational Outlook | E1 (N=26) | .636 | 1.137 | .633 | .530 | |
| | E2 (N=25) | .559 | .797 | .529 | .459 | |
| | C (N=24) | .860 | .804 | .638 | .504 | .379 |
| Social Acceptability | E1 (N=26) | 1.103 | .775 | 1.074 | .836 | |
| | E2 (N=25) | .754 | .881 | 1.041 | 1.243 | |
| | C (N=24) | 1.168 | 1.340 | 1.030 | .896 | .013 |

Note: +E1 = Counselors given data on client; E2 = Counselors not given data on Client; C = Control.

*Adjusted mean
**Analysis of covariance

TABLE 2

Comparisons of IPAT Anxiety Scale Pre- and Post- Measures
of Experimental 1, Experimental 2, and Control Groups

| IPAT Anxiety Scale | Group | Pretest Mean | SD | Posttest Mean | SD | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | E1 (N=26) | 25.961 | 12.427 | 25.692 | 12.168 | |
| | E2 (N=25) | 28.960 | 11.069 | 27.720 | 11.935 | |
| | C (N=24) | 28.125 | 11.822 | 27.375 | 10.704 | .221 |

Note: E1 = Counselors given data on client; E2 = Counselors not given data on client; C = Control.

## DISCUSSION

It is evident on the basis of the findings presented in Table 1 and 2 that no answer is yet available to the question, "Does giving counselors information about their clients before the counseling process make a difference in the outcome of counseling?" It is possible to explain these results in several ways. It is, of course, possible that giving information does not make a difference or at least a difference that is measurable, and the lack of significant differences can be attributed to this fact. There are, however, other possible reasons for the failure to find significance, among them, the ex-

perience factor for counselors, for length of time between testing and counseling, the length of time for the counseling, the nature of the information giving, and the readiness of the clients to participate in a meaningful counseling relationship.

*Counselor experience.* The most difficult aspect to control in the present study was the counselor variable. Although counselors were instructed to work on the areas of concern rated high (one point above the base rate on the conflict profile), it is questionable that at the stage of development the counselors found themselves, they could effectively use the information they had. It is felt that since the counselors were involved in formal, didactic classes stressing the concept of acceptance as a desirable trait for therapists, the counselors may have attempted to emulate as a theoretical model the accepting therapist. Discussions were primarily centering around client-centered, non-directive counseling. It is conceivable, therefore, that the counselors did not attempt to act upon the knowledge they had about the client. This feeling is somewhat verified by the observations the experimenter made of various counseling sessions during the experiment.

The preceding concept that counselors were so engulfed by the formal idea of acceptance that they could not help the client leads one to ask if acceptance is enough, or must there be other characteristics evident in an effective counselor. Does an effective counselor have to be more than a very interested listener?

It is also of importance to understand that the counseling sessions which were part of this experiment were the first sessions in which any of the counselors had participated. The counselors were new to counseling and extremely anxious. The notion that information might help beginning counselors to be more sensitive does not hold up in light of the findings, and one asks if this is due to the type of information, the way it was presented or to the inexperience of the counselors in using information. As Goldman (1961) has said,

> . . . there remains one possible conclusion . . . one which is painful but unavoidable at least as a possibility: It may be that we are as a profession not very effective in using our tools and techniques (p. 45).

Bergin (1967) presents an interesting concept in his discussion of the deterioration effect in counseling. He points to the quite promising idea that "poor" counseling can cause a decline in adjustment for the client. It is highly possible that some "poor" counseling did take place in this experiment. It is evident upon inspection of the data that some individuals, and therefore parts of groups, actually showed greater anxiety and longer reaction times after counseling. It is the experimenter's feeling that counselors may not have had the sufficient attributes mentioned by Bergin and that the absence of some of these qualities of warmth, empathy, adequate counselor adjustment, and experience contributed significantly to a deterioration effect.

It is also possible that a seeming reversal of scores indicates the effect Ehrle and Auvenshine (1964) mention.

> Inspection . . . does not indicate a clear linear relationship between anxiety and client improvement. The cause of this relationship is not clear; it may be that the counseling program, as established, is not relevant to the high anxiety group or that some other factor which causes a high anxiety score may be inhibiting improvement (pp. 286-287).

*Time lag.* Another major factor which may have contributed to lack of significant findings is the lapse of time between the testing and counseling sessions. It was necessary to test each client prior to the counseling process. However, it was a mechanical impossibility to test each client just prior to the first meeting. Therefore, a two-week block of time was used as the pre-test period. The same amount of time was used as the posttest period. Clients were randomly tested to control as much as possible for the effects of time, but it is a very trenchant possibility that intervening stimuli changed the pattern of client concerns enough to make the information given the counselors of limited value. If anxiety was reduced during the counseling period, this might not have been measured since in some cases the posttest was not administered until a week after the termination of counseling. A one-week lapse between counseling and testing may have been long enough to allow the client's anxiety level to rise again.

*Length of counseling.* The use of an arbitrary length of time for counseling may have forced counselors and clients into an artificial posture. There may not have been time for the new and inexperienced counselor to get over his initial anxiety; this may have impeded establishing an effective relationship which would have allowed him to make use of the information available. It is also a possibility that the artificiality of the counseling situation did not allow for the spontaneity necessary for client growth. The problems of the counselees might have been touched upon but not resolved thus leaving the client anxious at the end of the counseling session.

*Nature of information giving.* One of the assumptions of this experiment held that counselors would use the information given them about the client. It was also assumed that the counselors would use the information in a way that would reduce the client's anxiety. Although they were instructed to work on the areas of client concern which rated high on the conflict profile, the counselors might not actually have had any notion of the way in which the information could be used. It seems important that a much more specific set of instructions be given counselors so that they will understand in what ways knowledge of the client can be utilized.

*Clients.* If felt need for counseling is a necessary requisite for a beneficial outcome, the clients in this study may have been atypical. Since the clients were students encouraged to participate in this project, they were not chosen on the basis of adjustment. The assumption was made that all people have levels of anxiety which fluctuate. It may have been more important to choose only those students who showed high anxiety on the *IPAT Anxiety Scale* for the Experimental 1 group. Certainly much more consideration of the type of counselee is necessary if effective therapy is to be posited as the treatment variable. In this study, students may have been unwilling or unable to enter into a meaningful relationship simply because they felt no need for counseling.

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# LA CONNAISSANCE DES INTERETS DU CLIENT ET SON EFFET SUR LES RESULTATS DU COUNSELLING

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Le présent travail étudie les résultats du counselling par une évaluation des intérêts du client perçus à travers une épreuve de vocabulaire dans laquelle on étudie ses réactions émotives. On croyait que l'information fournie au conseiller avant l'entrevue diminuait l'anxiété de celui-ci.

Des essais sur 26 conseillers dans un institut NDEA et 77 étudiants de collège ont semblé prouver que l'information fournie au conseiller avant l'entrevue ne semblait guère diminuer son anxiété.