

THE AUDIO-TAPE RECORDING OF COUNSELLING SESSIONS

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Abstract

Practical suggestions are offered with the objectives of helping counsellors to produce satisfactory audio-tape recordings of individual and group counselling sessions, to derive maximum benefit from the recording of counselling interviews, and to tape record in an ethical manner and without undue stress.

Nothing is more exasperating than to tape record an interview that you are proud of only to find that the client spoke too softly to be heard or the air conditioner made it sound like tourists talking under Niagara Falls. If you are a counsellor who wants to record an interview or a group session on audio tape and at the same time retain your mental health, it is hoped this article will help you. Be assured that you can produce the good sound you want. After outlining general taping considerations, we have added a discussion of technical considerations, ethics involved in taping interviews, a consideration of benefits counsellors can derive from taping, and some ideas on how to alleviate the taping jitters, or counsellor nervousness.

General Considerations

1. Make sure that your purpose in tape-recording is clear in your mind. Different purposes require different explanations to the client, varieties of ethical approval and appropriate technical recording arrangements.
2. Explain your reasons for taping to the client and seek the permission without which you must not tape.
3. Move the equipment, as much as possible from the focus of attention to the side, and proceed with the main purpose of the interview. The main purpose of any real-life interview is the client's reason for being there. If you permit yourself to be sidetracked into a preoccupation with the taping, the client is likely to match your attitude and become as distracted as you are. But so long as you direct your genuine attention to the client and her or his concerns, the tape-recording of the interview is not apt to become a hindrance to the development of the special relationship which effective counsellors always develop with their clients.
4. Consider the possibility that tape-recording can further the main interview purpose. Promise the client a replay of the interview. The prospect of hearing herself or himself in the interview can spark interest in the counselling process in unmotivated clients, and listening to a replay can help the client clarify feelings and thoughts. Unfortunately, doing this will not always be practicable.
5. Try to arrange to tape your interview in a small private room so that you will be as free as possible from background noises and telephone and other interruptions.
6. If the room in which you will tape is air-conditioned, experiment with your tape recorder before your interview. Fortunately, not all air conditioning systems interfere significantly, but sometimes their sound is reproduced so strongly on tape that voices are unintelligible. You cannot be sure unless you experiment beforehand. If you discover the sound reproduces strongly, you may try moving further away from the air vent and/or huddling closer to the microphone. If neither works, you have no choice but to move to another room where interference is less.
7. Don't tap on the mike or on the desk holding it, or fuss with papers or other items on the desk.
8. Place the microphone closer to the client than to you and aimed more in his or her direction. Client confusion, embarrassment, anxiety, depression, or lack of knowledge is usually (but not always) reflected in a lower voice level than the counsellor's, a flatter voice inflection, less distinct word enunciation, and less clear and well-formed sentences.
9. If you and the client move back from where you are sitting to a desk where you pore over test or occupational materials, be sure that you have arranged beforehand an effective

new placement for the mike and/or the tape recorder.

10. Recognize impossible recording conditions (e.g., the client who wants all recording equipment out of sight, or a defective tape recorder) and don't try the impossible. Your perhaps urgent need for an interview tape will do nothing toward making impossible recording conditions less so.
11. Practise makes perfect! Don't make your mistakes during that critical interview. It is an excellent idea to practise on one or two real, or simulated but realistic, interviews of which you do not need good recordings. This is the only way you can adjust your equipment properly and become proficient and relaxed in using it.
12. Unless you are using batteries, make sure your recorder is plugged in. Counsellors have been known to do everything right except this. Their only consolation for having a blank tape after an excellent interview was that their intemperate exclamations were also not recorded!

Technical Considerations

The Tape Recorder

A small portable cassette recorder of medium quality, mono or stereo, will be adequate, easy to use, and relatively inconspicuous. Note the following tips:

- (a) The recording head and rollers must be clean. See the machine's manual for cleaning instructions.
- (b) After many months of use, the head may need to be de-magnetized before it will produce a clear recording. See the manual.
- (c) If you have a sophisticated tape recorder which can simultaneously record an interview and amplify it for the benefit of an audience, you will need to adjust the machine according to your purpose. If you wish just to tape, be sure that the On-Off switch for the speaker is at Off. If you want the sound amplification, you must have the speaker at On, and you must be sure to keep the microphone over to the side of the path along which the speaker is aimed. If the microphone moves in front of a switched-on speaker you will likely get feedback in the form of an anguished howl.

The Microphone

Which will you use, the built-in microphone of your cassette recorder, or the external mike which probably accompanies your machine?

Some built-in mikes will produce tape

recordings which are quite adequate for some purposes, and do it with a minimum of preparation. On the other hand, a common type of extraneous sound on tape recordings comes from vibrations originating in the motor of the recorder. Furthermore, external mikes can be aimed horizontally and vertically more effectively than the built-in variety, and there are different types to serve different purposes.

If you decide to use an external microphone, it should be stationary and preferably placed in the stand designed for the purpose. For recording counselling interviews, mikes should not be hand-held or passed from one person to another. This is unnecessary and disrupting.

The microphones that accompany most tape recorders are uni-directional in design (see Figure 1), and have a pie-shaped pick-up pattern. This is true whether the mike is external or is built into the tape recorder.

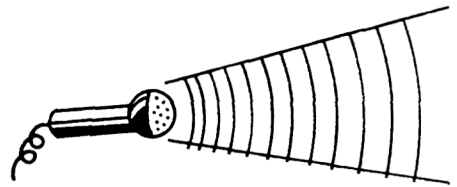


Figure 1.

Uni-directional microphone recording pattern.

Following are a few recommendations for recording a two-party conversation with a uni-directional microphone (see Figure 2):

- (a) If using an external mike, locate the tape recorder at a distance from the microphone, and preferably not on the same table so as to avoid picking up motor vibrations. As an added precaution, the microphone stand should have some vibration-absorbing material, such as rubber or styrofoam, on its base.
- (b) Place the microphone (external or internal) at an angle of 90° to the path of the projected voices. The most suitable distance of the microphone from the speakers can be judged only with experience and practice. The acoustic conditions of the room, the equipment used and the particular voices combine to determine the quality of the recording.
- (c) The seating arrangement may place counsellor and client on opposite sides of a table or on the same side, whichever arrangement is preferred for interviewing purposes (see Figure 3).
- (d) As a general rule, try to keep the microphone on the same horizontal plane as the speakers' mouths. If the microphone cannot be positioned at the height of the

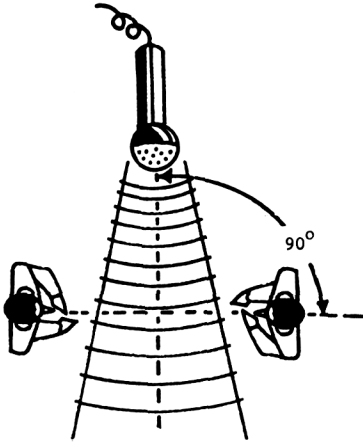
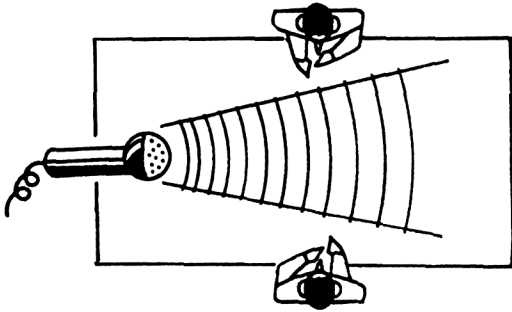


Figure 2.

Interview arrangement using uni-directional microphone.



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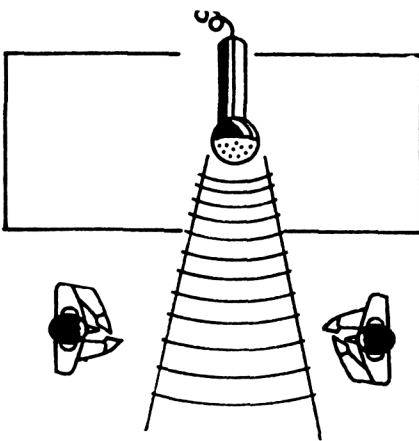
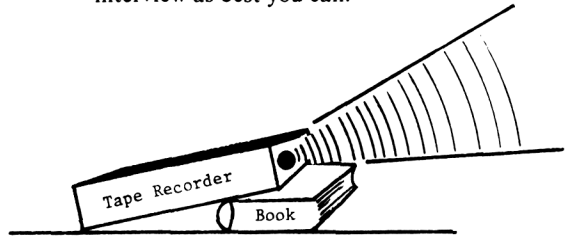


Figure 3.

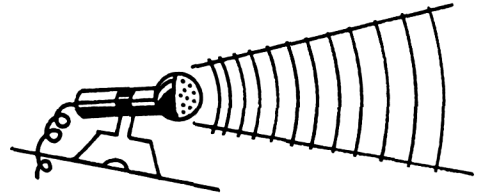
Alternative interview arrangements using uni-directional microphone.

speakers, and usually it cannot in an interview situation, the microphone should be angled up toward the source of the sound. An external microphone usually has an adjustable stand that makes doing this easy. This point is often neglected when an

- internal mike is used, because it calls for angling the whole tape recorder toward the source of the sound (see Figure 4).
- (e) For a quality recording of a two-person interview, two uni-directional microphones should be used. A simple "Y" connector is used to channel the two microphones into the tape recorder.
- (f) There is no substitute for a trial run. Simulate the conditions of the planned interview as best you can.



Directed Tape Recorder with Internal Microphone.



Directed External Microphone on Stand.

Figure 4.

Directed microphone.

Recording a Group

How you proceed with the taping of a group will depend in part upon the group's size. For a small four-person group, try placing two people where each one is placed in Figure 3, better, use a Y connector and two microphones as in Figure 5, each pointed at two people sitting fairly closely together.

For larger groups an omni-directional mike,

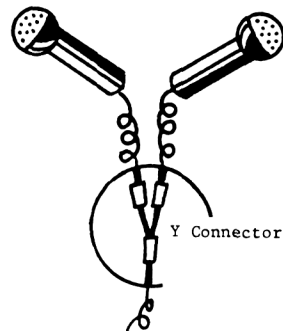


Figure 5.

Microphone arrangement for a quality recording.

having a 360° pick-up pattern, ought to replace the uni-directional type (see Figure 6). Care must be taken to position the group members at equal distances from the mike. Mike elevation is also a consideration, the best arrangement being to have the mike suspended to head level from the ceiling.

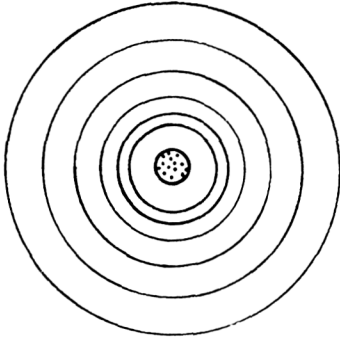


Figure 6.

Omni-directional microphone recording pattern.

The Tape Cassette

The interview process always demands complete attention from participants. It is important to eliminate any unnecessary interruptions. When interviews are likely to last longer than a half-hour, therefore, it is best to use tapes which will run for 45 or 60 minutes per side. Although technical problems sometimes occur with longer tapes, it is worth taking the slight risk involved in order to get a complete interview recorded without having to stop and flip the tape over.

Good quality standard cassettes designed for voice reproduction are essential. The physical construction and resultant mechanical operation of cheap cassettes frequently cause problems. Special tapes designed to record music are unnecessary.

Ethical Considerations

People who need help are in some way and to varying degrees weak and vulnerable. They must trust those professional persons whose help they seek. In meeting a need of their own for a tape recording of a counselling interview, counsellors must be absolutely sure that they safeguard the vulnerable client and deserve his or her trust. Counsellor assumption of the right to tape-record an interview without adequate explanation and permission, the application of pressure to obtain permission to record, a preoccupation with recording procedures at the expense of help to the client, and negligence in the use and erasing of recorded material are only some of the ways in which counsellors may betray the trust of the client.

It is important for ethical reasons that the ultimate erasing of most interview tapes not be

neglected. Tape recorder manuals will give erasing instructions.

Mark your tapes conscientiously, both on the cassette container and on the cassette itself. Marking the date of the recording is recommended, along with the names of the client and counsellor, the number of the interview in a series of interviews, and perhaps a category name, such as Vocational Counselling, Test Interpretation, or Academic Planning.

Doing this will ensure that your tapes are easy to refer to, and it will help keep you ethical. It is harder for a busy counsellor to become careless and permit tapes to lie around in publicly accessible places when they are clearly labelled with clients' names. Marking your tapes is worthwhile even though you should plan to erase each tape as soon as its purpose has been served, and it is doubly important if you wish to keep it indefinitely. In the latter case you may wish to keep with the tape a written statement from the client giving you the permission you need for long-term use of the tape.

Benefits to Counsellors

While observing these cautions, however, counsellors depend for their effectiveness upon a positive orientation; hence they should view the tape-recording of interviews less as a series of pitfalls to be avoided than as a means of improving their counselling effectiveness. Tape recordings can enable a counsellor to supply direct evidence of his or her counselling competence, and they can be used as feedback by the counsellor for skill-building purposes.

Groups of counsellors who are able to act toward one another in a mature, non-threatening manner can listen to tape recordings of one another's interviews. Constructive discussion can bring forward new ways to help a client, and ways for each counsellor to develop his or her helping skills.

Once a month or so you can make a point of reviewing one or more of your own tapes by yourself. The exercise can help you to detect any flaws which may have crept into your counselling practice. It will give you occasion to reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of your chosen counselling approach. It can be a planning opportunity for new techniques to try, and it can contribute to your confidence as you hear the competent, if not perfect, work that you have performed.

Finally, three points may be of help to counsellors who suffer from nervousness when they tape an interview or even think about doing so. Firstly, your worry about the reaction of your client to being recorded is probably unfounded or exaggerated. Occasionally you will encounter a client who,

in spite of your reasonable explanation and your assurance that confidences will be secure, reacts as if to a bee-sting to the notion of recording. Pass him or her by. That is not the common reaction. Most clients will accept your explanation and assurances. They may even be eager about the prospect of hearing a replay and they may quickly become absorbed in their problem and accept the recorder as part of the furniture. After all, once interview security is assured, the tape puts the counsellor on the spot, not the client.

Secondly, face your nervousness rationally. You are a trained professional. Dealing with new clients who may without warning present any of a thousand different formidable problems is a rather frightening task, and this is what most counsellors who are nervous about taping really fear. "How will I do? Will my inadequacy be exposed by the tape?" If you really are inadequate, colleagues or superiors who hear one of your taped interviews will know what your shortcomings are and what assistance they need to add to your own

improvement efforts. If you ordinarily do a competent counselling job, however, you have already faced and dealt with what is difficult and awesome, and your nervousness in a perhaps novel and evaluative situation will evaporate 10 minutes into the interview as you bring your attention to bear on your client.

Thirdly, use a shaping technique. Do some easy taping before you tackle a critical session. Your tape-recording rehearsals will serve not only to teach you procedures and help you work out equipment and other bugs, they will also dispel nervousness and build confidence.

Now that we have outlined considerations for the trouble-free taping of clearly audible interviews, discussed the ethics of the taping of interviews, suggested benefits for the counsellor in taping some interviews, and considered the nervousness with which most counsellors face the task, we wish you the satisfaction of listening to the well-recorded replay of a truly helping interview.