

Effects of Counselor Response Behavior on Clients' Impressions During Vocational Counseling

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We examined the effects of four counselor response types—self-disclosure, self-involving, empathy, and open question—on subjects' impressions of the counselor during vocational counseling. A total of 201 undergraduate students viewed videotapes of an initial vocational counseling interview, in which the counselor used either self-disclosure, self-involving, empathy, or open-question statements. Using a 2 (counselor sex) \times 2 (client sex) \times 4 (response type) design, a three-way interaction was found in regard to counselor social influence. However, for the most part, a general lack of significance was found across the dependent measures. These results are interpreted relative to vocational counseling and then compared to the literature on personal-social counseling.

During the last few decades, an impressive amount of research has accumulated on the process of personal-social counseling and psychotherapy. In contrast, little research on the process of vocational counseling has been conducted (Dorn, in press; Harmon, 1989). A large portion of the research on the personal-social counseling process has dealt with the effects of different forms of counselor responses on clients' perceptions. However, the effects of counselor responses during vocational counseling have not been investigated and may differ from the effects of counselor responses during personal-social counseling. Moreover, whereas personal-social and vocational counseling have similarities, they also have their differences. For example, vocational counseling often is more task oriented because of its attention to self-assessment, occupational information, decision making, and career planning. To begin to understand vocational counseling as a unique process, we investigate the effects of several counselor response variables on subjects' impressions of vocational counseling.

We designed this study to parallel analogue studies of the personal-social counseling process. In particular, we drew on the results of previous counselor response investigations that examined the effects of counselor behavior on clients' impressions of the counselor and counseling (e.g., Andersen & Anderson, 1985; McCarthy, 1979, 1982; McCarthy & Betz, 1978; Remer, Roffey, & Buckholtz, 1983; Watkins & Schneider, 1989). Many of these studies have evaluated the compar-

ative effects of counselor self-involving and self-disclosing statements on clients' impressions in the initial counseling interview. For consistency with this body of research, we also chose to use these statements as independent variables in our study. However, we wished to go somewhat further than previous personal-social counseling studies and chose to also incorporate the conditions of empathy and open-question statements into our design. We chose to add these two response variables to our study because they are considered to have particular value during the first counseling session or first stage of counseling (Cormier & Cormier, 1985; Egan, 1982).

We were curious, then, as to how self-involving, self-disclosure, empathic, and open-question statements may differentially affect clients' perceptions of the counselor during the vocational counseling interview. For example, because clients often enter vocational counseling at a higher level of congruence and openness than is the case for personal-social counseling clients (Crites, 1974, 1981), some of the highly supportive counselor response types (e.g., empathy or self-involving responses) may be less important and less necessary initially. Conversely, other response types (e.g., self-disclosure), which have been considered most appropriate after the counseling relationship is established (Weiner, 1978), may actually be more appropriate early on in the counseling process. Vocational clients, we contend, bring their own unique set of expectations about counseling and the counselor's behavior to the vocational counseling process, and this set may differ from clients' expectations in personal-social counseling. But these are speculative thoughts or hypotheses at this point, and we wished to examine them empirically by means of an analogue study.

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Method

Participants

The participants were 105 female and 96 male college students enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses. Most of the participants were either freshmen (73%) or sophomores (22%) and were white (91%). Their average age was 19.0 years ($SD = 2.1$). All participants were given extra credit for taking part in the study.

Stimulus Materials

To make the analogue videotapes, four counseling transcripts were constructed first. The transcripts, virtually identical in content, depicted an interaction between a counselor and client who sought counseling to determine a major and career choice. The only differences in transcript content involved the manipulation of independent variables: The respective response types were inserted in the transcripts, and the client and counselor sex designations were varied. Each transcript was approximately seven pages long and included points at which five self-involving, self-disclosing, empathic, or open-question statements were inserted at identical points in the respective transcripts. Examples of each response type follow: (a) self-involving, "I appreciate your being up front with me"; (b) self-disclosing, "When I was in college, I too was not sure what I wanted to major in or what occupation was best for me, so it was a really frustrating time, and I remember really feeling some pressure to decide"; (c) empathic, "Things are a little confusing to you right now, but you're willing to try and work them out here"; and (d) open question, "But what types of things would you like me to help you on?" After each counselor response type, identical client responses followed so that equivalence across transcripts could be maintained. The transcripts¹ were patterned after transcripts used in previous counseling studies (Andersen & Anderson, 1985; McCarthy, 1982; Watkins & Schneider, 1989).

Four actors (2 women and 2 men) were hired to learn and enact the scripts. We developed the tapes to include the variable of sex pairing, so male counselor-male client, male counselor-female client, female counselor-male client, and female counselor-female client tapes were made. In all tapes the counselor was older than the client and dressed more formally. The client was younger and dressed casually. The actors were coached in how to act during the interviews. To be sure the tapes approximated a counseling interview, all tapes were reviewed by C. Edward Watkins, Jr., and Joan Brizzi for consistency and realism. We wanted to ensure that all tapes were the same in mood, dialogue, and counselor-client interaction and that the counselor and client enacted their roles appropriately.

For each counselor-client pairing, a master videotape of the interview was made. An editor constructed four videotapes of each master interview by inserting the counselor self-disclosing, self-involving, empathy, or open-question statements in the appropriate places, which resulted in four videotapes of each counselor-client sex pairing and 16 videotapes in all. In this way, the variables such as gesture, facial expression, and tone of voice were controlled for. The actors portraying counselors were coached to minimize differences between them in gesture, facial expression, and tone of voice.

Dependent Measures

Personal Data Form (PDF). The PDF is a basic information sheet on which participants indicated their age, sex, ethnic and marital status, and year in school.

Counselor Rating Form (CRF; Barak & LaCrosse, 1975). The CRF assesses counselor social influence by focusing on three variables:

expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. The CRF consists of 36 items that use a 7-point, semantic-differential response format. High scores indicate more favorable respondent attributions to the counselor. Subscale reliabilities for the CRF range from .75 to .92 (LaCrosse & Barak, 1976). Research supports the form's predictive validity (LaCrosse, 1980).

Vocational Inventory (VI). The VI is a 10-item form designed to assess respondents' confidence in the counselor's ability to help them resolve 10 issues of importance in vocational counseling. Some of the sample items include: "Helping me decide on a career," "Exploring my career interests," and "Providing me with important career information." Subjects respond to the VI on a 6-point scale, which ranges from *very doubtful* (1) to *very confident* (6); high scores reflect more favorable ratings of the counselor. In analyses of this sample, the VI had an internal-consistency reliability coefficient of .90. The VI items were generated by Watkins and Mark L. Savickas, and they both agreed on the 10 items that were chosen to compose the inventory. The VI items were generated on the basis of (a) our understanding of the literature about important topic areas in vocational counseling and (b) our experience as vocational counselors. The measure was constructed for this study in a manner consistent with Cash, Begley, McCown, and Weise's (1975) Personal Problem Inventory, which consists of a list of 15 problems that college students may experience.

Additional ratings. Three single-item ratings about the counselor were made in addition to the CRF and VI. First, subjects were asked to rate the appropriateness of the counselor's behavior portrayed in the videotape. This rating was made on a 6-point scale ranging from *extremely inappropriate* (1) to *extremely appropriate* (6). Second, subjects rated their willingness to see someone like the counselor portrayed in the videotape. This rating also was made by means of a 6-point scale, which ranged from *definitely would want to see a counselor like this one* (1) to *definitely would not want to see a counselor like this one* (6). Third, as a manipulation check item, we wanted to see how well subjects were able to identify with the client role while taking part in the study. Using another 6-point scale (1 = *extremely difficult to do so* to 6 = *extremely easy to do so*), the subjects rated the degree to which they were able to place themselves in the client role while watching the videotapes and completing the dependent measures. These three items have been used in previous studies and were included here as additional dependent variables (Andersen & Anderson, 1985; Dowd & Boroto, 1982; Watkins & Schneider, 1989).

Procedure

Participants were told that the study was designed to assess potential clients' impressions about counselors during the vocational counseling process. The subjects were assigned by sex to one of eight experimental conditions: (a) self-involving statement, male counselor; (b) self-disclosure, male counselor; (c) empathic statement, male counselor; (d) open question, male counselor; (e) self-involving statement, female counselor; (f) self-disclosure, female counselor; (g) empathic statement, female counselor; and (h) open question, female counselor. All participants were instructed to place themselves in the role of the client as they took part in the study. They then completed the PDF, viewed a counseling videotape, and completed the CRF, VI, and appropriateness, willingness, and manipulation check items.

A $2 \times 2 \times 4$ design was used to analyze the data, with client sex, counselor sex, and response type (self-involving statement, self-disclosure, empathic statement, and open question) as the three factors. Cell sizes ranged from 10 to 15 in number. The CRF and VI were analyzed by means of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA).

¹ Copies of the counseling transcripts may be obtained on request.

The appropriateness, willingness, and manipulation check items were analyzed with an analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedure.

Results

First, we wanted to know if the subjects were able to place themselves in the client role while taking part in the study. In a $2 \times 2 \times 4$ ANOVA, none of the main effects or interactions were significant for this variable. All of the mean ratings by sex and response type clustered around 4, which indicated the subjects found it slightly easy to take on the client role. Although not ideal, this is perhaps the best that can be expected from analogue research of this type.

For the CRF subscales a $2 \times 2 \times 4$ MANOVA was performed, and no significant main effects emerged. The only significant interaction we found was three-way in nature, $F(3, 90) = 2.00, p < .05$, with Wilk's lambda criterion. For the Counselor Sex \times Client Sex \times Response Type interaction, univariate ANOVAs indicated significance for each of the three CRF subscales: Expertness, $F(3, 200) = 2.82, p < .05$; Trustworthiness, $F(3, 200) = 4.64, p < .01$; and Attractiveness, $F(3, 200) = 5.10, p < .01$ (see Table 1 for the means and standard deviations of these variables). For expertness, Tukey post hoc comparisons indicated the following differences: (a) Male counselors who used self-involving statements when seeing a female client were viewed more favorably than male counselors who used self-disclosing statements when seeing a female client; and (b) male counselors who used empathic statements when seeing a male client were viewed more favorably than male counselors who used self-disclosure statements when seeing a female client. For trustworthiness the Tukey post hoc comparisons revealed the same differences. Last, for attractiveness the Tukey post hoc comparisons failed to reveal any significant differences among the 16 means.

In a $2 \times 2 \times 4$ MANOVA, no significant main effects or interactions emerged on any of the VI items. In a $2 \times 2 \times 4$ ANOVA, no significant main effects or interactions were found for either the appropriate or willingness items.

Discussion

This study examined the effects of subject sex, counselor sex, and four response types—self-involving, self-disclosing, empathic, and open-question statements—on subjects' impressions of the counselor. In contrast to previous studies, we examined the effects of these three independent variables on subjects' impressions in a vocational counseling situation. In this analogue study the subjects were able to identify with the client role to moderate, equal degrees (across the 16 cells).

What is most striking about the results is the general lack of significance we found across variables. In terms of main effects, neither subject sex, counselor sex, nor response type significantly affected subjects' impressions of the counselor. Moreover, none of the two-way interactions was significant. Several personal-social counseling process studies have not found significance for either subject sex or counselor sex or for their interaction (DeForest & Stone, 1980; Hoffman-Graff, 1977; McCarthy, 1979), so our findings for these variables are not surprising and seem consistent with earlier work. However, we were surprised by the lack of a main effect for response type.

In previous personal-social counseling studies, which have examined some variables similar to the ones we studied, differences have often and rather consistently been found between self-involving and self-disclosing counselor statements. Whereas we evaluated the effects of these two response types in conjunction with empathic and open-question statements, we found no significant differences between response

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for the Counselor Rating Form Subscales by Subject Sex, Counselor Sex, and Response Type

Rater sex	Counselor sex	Self-involving		Self-disclosure		Empathy		Open question	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Expertness									
Male	Male	61.17	19.39	63.60	10.21	70.46	9.95	62.40	13.45
Male	Female	63.92	10.60	58.85	12.65	67.27	10.77	59.93	16.52
Female	Male	72.00	10.34	53.14	15.46	58.60	15.45	60.08	7.65
Female	Female	59.79	10.46	60.29	12.84	64.20	10.12	59.91	11.96
Trustworthiness									
Male	Male	61.50	15.04	65.40	8.29	72.15	6.50	63.20	10.14
Male	Female	62.54	8.25	60.31	11.66	64.09	10.07	62.21	12.75
Female	Male	71.60	6.43	56.29	12.98	60.73	12.48	63.25	8.87
Female	Female	58.29	8.88	65.00	9.45	65.87	9.40	63.09	10.48
Attractiveness									
Male	Male	58.33	12.94	59.50	9.72	67.62	6.87	58.40	11.12
Male	Female	62.15	6.82	55.23	10.74	61.55	7.22	58.43	15.94
Female	Male	67.30	5.91	54.43	11.49	56.00	14.69	59.00	10.01
Female	Female	59.71	8.99	65.21	9.41	65.67	6.31	58.18	9.65

Note. Higher scores indicate more favorable attributions to the counselor. For each subscale possible scores range from 12 to 84.

types in regard to subjects' impressions of the counselor. Why does our study contrast with other similar studies on the variable of response type? Although this study was developed in a manner consistent with earlier studies (e.g., Andersen & Anderson, 1985; McCarthy, 1979, 1982), one aspect of it is distinctive: We investigated a vocational rather than personal-social counseling situation.

Can it be that subjects' perceptions of counselor response types vary from a vocational to personal-social counseling interview? Previous studies have suggested that various response types have differential effects within the personal-social counseling session (Remer et al., 1983; Watkins & Schneider, 1989), but perhaps this conclusion does not apply as readily to the initial vocational counseling interview. Our results indicate a lack of significant differential effects in vocational counseling for the four response types. If these findings are supported by future studies, the results suggest that counselors can be quite flexible in their responsive behavior during beginning vocational counseling interviews. Whether counselors choose to intersperse their verbalizations with self-involving, self-disclosing, empathic, or open-question statements may have little effect on clients' perceptions. Thus, counselor behavior perhaps can reflect greater variance in responding. Again, these conclusions are offered in a tentative fashion and will need to be tested through additional research.

With the general lack of significance in our findings recognized, we need to make mention of the significant three-way interaction that we did find on the dependent variables of expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Although three-way interactions are often difficult to interpret, this one result seems easily understandable: Male counselors who used self-involving statements when seeing a female client were perceived as more expert and trustworthy than male counselors who used self-disclosing statements when seeing a female client. Although the data generally suggest that counselors can be more varied in their vocational interview behavior, this three-way interaction proves to be an exception. Therefore, male counselors who work with female clients may find self-involving statements more favorably received than self-disclosure. This differential use of responses, however, cannot be said to apply also for empathic and open-question statements.

These results raise questions many counseling researchers and practitioners have no doubt considered before: How do clients' perceptions of the counselor and of counseling differ between the vocational and the personal-social contexts? How do counselor interventions and response variables differentially affect the vocational and personal-social counseling processes? Moreover, how should counselor behavior vary from the vocational to personal-social counseling situations? These questions, although often considered in the practicum and counseling training literature, have not often been considered in the empirical literature of vocational counseling. If anything, our study indicates that these questions and issues will provide fruitful avenues for further research into the vocational counseling process. Indeed, the vocational counseling process is a central aspect of the field of counseling and the specialty of counseling psychology, but it has not been empirically investigated to any real degree.

Although we believe our study provides some interesting results, it is not without limitations. First, it was an analogue study. An analogue design, however, seemed appropriate to us because there were no previous response-type, process studies that focused on vocational counseling. We thought it best to test our ideas by means of an analogue first and later consider more field-based research. Second, although we consider our study to focus generally on the vocational counseling process, we realize it focuses specifically only on the initial interview. The initial interview is certainly an important component of the counseling process, but it remains only one session. Studies that examine the vocational counseling process over time will provide a nice complement to our investigation.

Third, although we assessed subjects' ability to identify with the videotaped client, future studies will also do well to assess if and to what extent the participants are experiencing or have experienced a college major or career choice problem. This type of manipulation check information will help to strengthen further such studies. Fourth, although we attempted to control for extraneous variables, it is possible we attended to this goal too closely in one respect. More specifically, because each counselor self-disclosing, self-involving, empathic, and open-question statement was followed with an identical client response, this may have affected the lack of results we found across counselors. Thus, our desire to concurrently manipulate the independent variable of counselor response type, while we maintained equivalence on all clients' return responses, may have homogenized the results. Whether this is the case or not, this issue is important to consider in planning similar career counseling studies in the future.

In conclusion, let us again emphasize that the vocational counseling process is an all-important area in counseling, which has typically been neglected from a research perspective. We present our vocationally oriented study as exploratory and suggestive in nature and offer our conclusions in a similar manner.

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