

RESEARCH REPORT

## Studying the vocational counseling process: a preliminary examination

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**ABSTRACT** *In this study, we examined the effects of counselor empathic and coping/mastery self-disclosure statements on clients' impressions of an initial vocational counseling interview. A primary purpose of our study was to reconsider one aspect of the investigation of Watkins et al (1990), in which the counselor responses of self-disclosure, self-involvement, empathy and open question were found to have no differential effects on clients' impressions of vocational counseling. Even though we attempted to provide a more specific test of empathy versus self-disclosure responses, we for the most part also obtained a general lack of significance on the dependent variables. In conjunction with Watkins et al.'s findings, we provide some discussion of our results, and their potential meanings for vocational counseling and future vocational counseling research.*

Vocational counseling is an area in which counseling psychologists have long been practicing (Whiteley, 1984). However, as a counseling/therapeutic process, vocational counseling has been inadequately studied. Intensive investigations of the vocational counseling process are sorely needed (Dorn, 1990; Harmon, 1989; Harmon & Watkins, 1990).

In this paper, we reconsider one aspect of a recent vocational counseling study reported by Watkins *et al.* (1990). Specifically, they examined the effects of four counselor response types—self-disclosure, self-involving, empathy and open question—on clients' impressions of vocational counseling. For the most part, they found no significant differences between response types and concluded that, in vocational counseling,

“whether counselors choose to intersperse their verbalizations with self-involving, self-disclosing, empathic, or open-question statements may have little effect on clients' perceptions.” (Watkins *et al.*, 1990, p. 141.)

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In further reflecting on this study, we still had some questions about the results and conclusions of Watkins *et al.* and thought there might be a simple alternative explanation that would account for their findings. With that in mind, we decided to re-examine one particular aspect of their study with greater definition and concreteness. Specifically, we examined the effects of a more defined, specific type of self-disclosure—a coping/mastery self-disclosure—versus an empathic response type on clients' impressions of the counselor. (Definitions/examples of these response types are included in the Method section.) We focused on empathy and self-disclosure for two simple reasons:

- (1) empathy is typically seen as an especially critical behavior to display in beginning counseling interviews (Cormier & Cormier, 1985);
- (2) self-disclosure is a qualitatively different type of counselor response that may be highly appropriate to use in initial vocational counseling interviews (cf. Watkins *et al.*, 1990).

We hoped our study, though limited in its problem scope, would help us to better test out one aspect of Watkins *et al.*'s (1990) study more specifically and possibly provide some alternate explanation about their findings.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 41 female and 43 male college students enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses at a large southwestern university. Their average age was 22.7 years ( $SD = 7.7$ ), most (89%) were in the sophomore, junior and senior years, most (73%) were Caucasian, and most (69%) said they either had had or were now having difficulty deciding on a major or career. All participants were given extra credit for taking part in the study.

### *Stimulus materials*

To make the audiotapes, we developed two counseling transcripts—one for empathy and the other for self-disclosure. The transcripts were similar to the ones used by Watkins *et al.* (1990); the only real modifications in them that were made focused on the specific experimental manipulations that we introduced. The transcripts depicted an interaction taking place between a counselor and client who had come seeking assistance with a college major/career choice problem. All transcripts were identical with but two exceptions: the insertion of the disclosure versus empathy responses (at identical points in the transcripts) and the varying of the counselor-client sex pairings.

Like the Watkins *et al.* study, the transcripts were about seven pages in length (and each resulted in a 10-minute audiotape). Two specific empathy and coping/mastery self-disclosures were introduced in the last third (last 2–2½ minutes) of the transcript, after the client had had an opportunity to describe some of what brought her/him in for counseling. Empathy was defined as communicated understanding of the client's verbalizations by the counselor. An example of an empathy statement, taken from the study's transcripts, is as follows: 'It can be a little scary. It's scary because you're trying to talk about and understand things you don't fully understand.' In a coping/mastery self-disclosure, the counselor

- (a) identifies with the client's problem;
- (b) indicates that she/he has had to deal (cope) with the same problem;

- (c) further indicates that she/he overcame the particular problem by taking certain actions (which may or may not be specified).

Thus, coping/mastery disclosures present the client with both elements of 'having dealt with' and 'mastered' the problem in question and can also serve as encouragement for the client's persistence and effort in likewise dealing with and mastering her/his concern. An example of a coping/mastery self-disclosure, again taken from this study's transcripts, is as follows:

It can be a little scary. Again, if it's any consolation, I remember being scared when I was thinking about what career and major I needed to get into. I didn't find the decision process pleasant, and I don't guess you're feeling all that good in thinking about this now. But by doing just what you're doing now—taking the time out to decide what you want to do—I was able to get things worked out.

Four counseling psychology doctoral students enacted the counselor and client parts. The students were given the scripts, told to go over them and enact them in as realistic a manner as possible. Coaching to that effect was provided by the third author. Audiotapes were specifically developed so that the variable of sex pairing would be addressed. Therefore, female counselor–female client, female counselor–male client, male counselor–male client and male counselor–female client tapes were made.

### *Dependent measures*

*Personal data form (PDF).* The PDF, a one-page sheet that asks respondents to indicate their age, sex, ethnicity, marital status, and year in school, was used to gather personal data.

*Counseling Evaluation Inventory (CEI; Linden et al., 1965).* The CEI, a 21-item scale in Likert format, assesses clients' perceptions of three dimensions of counseling: counseling climate, counselor comfort and client satisfaction. Lower CEI subscale scores (1 = always, 5 = never) indicate greater client satisfaction (Haase & Miller, 1968). Test-retest reliabilities range from 0.63 to 0.78 for the climate, comfort and satisfaction subscales; the test-retest reliability of the total scale is 0.83. Two CEI items that focus on the counselor's uses of tests were deleted for this study, because testing was not addressed in the audiotapes.

*Counselor Effectiveness Rating Scale (CERS; Atkinson & Wampold, 1982).* The CERS is a 10-item, semantic-differential scale (1 = bad, 7 = good) that assesses clients' perceptions of the counselor's credibility. The scale's 10 items are summed to provide a total credibility score. High scores suggest counselor credibility, whereas low scores suggest the opposite. The CERS appears to have satisfactory reliability and validity (see Atkinson & Wampold, 1982).

*Additional ratings.* Participants were asked to indicate their willingness to see a counselor like the one they heard on the audiotape. This rating was made on 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). Participants were also asked to indicate the degree to which they were able to place themselves in the role of the client as they listened to the audiotape. This rating was made on a 6-point scale, which ranged from 'extremely difficult to do so' (1) to 'extremely easy to do so' (6). The willingness item, which has been used in a number of similar counseling studies, has been described as a bridge between analogue and field research (Dowd & Boroto, 1982). The second item was used for manipulation check purposes, to see if participants were able to assume the client role to equal degrees (cf. Watkins et al., 1990).

### Procedure

Participants were told that the study's purpose was to assess potential clients' impressions about counselors during vocational counseling. Based on their sex, participants were assigned to one of four conditions:

- (1) empathy, female counselor;
- (2) self-disclosure, female counselor;
- (3) empathy, male counselor;
- (4) self-disclosure, male counselor.

In listening to the respective audiotapes, participants were instructed to place themselves in the role of the client to the best of their abilities. After listening to the tape, they were asked to fill out the PDI, CEI, CERS, and willingness and manipulation check items.

A  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  design was used in analyzing the data, with client sex, counselor sex, and response type (empathy, self-disclosure) being the three factors. Cell sizes ranged from 10 to 12 in number. The CEI was analyzed by means of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), whereas the CERS, willingness, and manipulation check items were analyzed by means of analysis of variance (ANOVA).

### Results

First, to see if participants were indeed able to place themselves in the client role, we ran a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  ANOVA on the manipulation check item ( $M=4.19$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ). None of the main effects or interactions were significant for this variable, so it appeared that across the eight cells participants were able to place themselves in the client role to equal degrees.

The means and standard deviations for the CEI subscales, CERS score, and willingness score by counselor and client sex and response type are provided in Table I. Based on the  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  MANOVA, significance was not found for any of the main effects or interactions when the CEI subscales were analysed. Based on the  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  ANOVA, neither main effects nor interactions were found to be significant for the CERS score. For the willingness item, however, a significant main effect for response type emerged,  $F(7, 83)=5.2$ ,  $p<0.03$ . Participants were more willing to see the empathic as opposed to self-disclosing counselor.

### Discussion

Consistent with the Watkins *et al.* (1990) study, when comparisons were made between counselor empathic statements and coping/mastery self-disclosures in vocational counseling, we too found a general lack of significance across dependent variables. Specifically, we found these response types did not produce differential effects on subjects' impressions of the counseling climate, client satisfaction, counselor comfort and counselor credibility. Even though we attempted to provide a more specific test of the empathy versus self-disclosure responses than Watkins *et al.*, our results did not really differ much from theirs. Our results run contrary to what we expected to find, because we thought coping/mastery disclosures (by providing subjects with a model of 'having coped with' and 'having overcome' the

TABLE I. Means and standard deviations for the Counseling Evaluation Inventory (CEI) Subscales, Counselor Effectiveness Rating Scale (CERS) Score and Willingness Item Score

Rater sex	Counselor sex	Empathy		Coping/mastery self-disclosure	
		M	SD	M	SD
<i>Counseling climate (CEI)</i>					
Female	Female	14.10	6.26	13.10	8.49
Female	Male	16.27	7.79	12.10	4.77
Male	Male	14.80	5.45	17.80	7.38
Male	Female	16.33	5.79	15.73	5.04
<i>Counselor comfort (CEI)</i>					
Female	Female	7.90	2.85	7.70	3.20
Female	Male	9.00	3.61	8.00	2.79
Male	Male	9.00	3.40	9.90	3.96
Male	Female	10.00	4.11	9.91	2.51
<i>Client satisfaction (CEI)</i>					
Female	Female	10.70	4.81	9.40	4.01
Female	Male	12.00	2.53	8.80	1.99
Male	Male	12.40	4.67	11.90	3.57
Male	Female	12.67	4.14	11.64	4.06
<i>CERS</i>					
Female	Female	56.00	13.47	62.10	10.91
Female	Male	54.82	12.37	61.10	7.81
Male	Male	54.40	14.77	56.80	10.50
Male	Female	56.25	12.63	54.55	10.43
<i>Willingness item</i>					
Female	Female	2.80	1.69	2.10	1.52
Female	Male	2.82	1.78	1.70	0.68
Male	Male	2.70	1.57	2.20	1.23
Male	Female	2.67	0.99	2.27	1.01

Note: Lower scores on the CEI and willingness item indicate more favorable attributions to the counselor. Higher scores on the CERS reflect more favorable attributions to the counselor. For the CEI climate, comfort and satisfaction subscales, scores range from 8 to 40, 5 to 25, and 5 to 25, respectively. For the CERS, scores range from 10 to 70. For the willingness item, scores range from 1 to 6.

problem) would be perceived more favourably than empathic responding alone. However, this was not the case.

How might we explain our findings? It may be, as Watkins *et al.* proposed, that whether counselors use empathy or self-disclosure statements in the initial vocational counseling interview makes little difference overall. Perhaps in the initial vocational counseling interview, as opposed to the beginning interview in personal-social counseling, counselors need not be that concerned about self-disclosing early

on. Empathy or self-disclosure may be equally appropriate, and clients may not have a real preference or be all that discriminating about either response type. Exactly why clients would have such a lack of preference or would not be more discriminating, however, is unclear. Because clients are thought to often enter vocational rather than personal-social counseling with a higher level of openness and congruence (Crites, 1974, 1981) and with a different set of expectations (Watkins *et al.*, 1990) would seemingly be two possible reasons for this.

Having recognized this general lack of significance across dependent variables, still we must acknowledge that a significant main effect for response type was found for the willingness variable. Participants said they were more willing to see an empathic rather than self-disclosing counselor. If supported by future research, this finding alone would seem quite important in and of itself. However, considering some of the questions that could be raised about the willingness variable *per se* (e.g. that only one item was used to assess it), our finding should be regarded with some caution.

With the exception of the willingness variable, we must admit that we are puzzled by the consistent lack of significance found in our study and by Watkins *et al.* What does it all mean, if anything? Could it be, as Watkins *et al.* have proposed, that counselors can be more flexible in their responding in initial vocational counseling interviews? Could it be that counselors, in contrast to their performance in personal-social counseling, need not be as concerned about the response types they use, when they use them, and the frequency with which they use them? On the one hand, it is somewhat difficult to respond affirmatively to these questions (because they run counter to how we typically think about counseling interviews, particularly the initial ones), but on the other hand, this study as well as the study of Watkins *et al.* raise these issues as definite possibilities to consider. Thus, our study seemingly raises questions that need to be further examined about the vocational counseling interview process and we hope it will prove heuristic.

While of interest, our study does have its limitations. First, the study was analogue in nature. Secondly, our analogue tapes were developed in a manner consistent with Watkins *et al.*'s study (i.e. after each counselor empathy and self-disclosure, an identical client response followed), which could have led to homogeneity of the results. While this was a possibility, we do not know how likely it was in actuality. Future analogue studies that better approximate real-life vocational counseling (e.g. by closely adhering to Strong's, 1971, five-boundary conditions) would be a definite improvement upon our study. Even better still, field-based vocational counseling studies would provide a complementary, true-to-life means of further testing out our study's findings.

Let us close by echoing the opinions of Harmon (1989), Dorn (1990), and other psychologists of like mind (e.g. Osipow & Betz, 1991). The vocational counseling process is much in need of investigation and, as a research area, is open territory that needs to be mined more fully.

We recognize that our study was restricted in its scope and focused on only a small segment of the counselor-client interaction, but we hope this inquiry draws further attention to the vocational counseling endeavor and the need to research it.



As counseling psychologists continue their practice of vocational psychology and vocational counseling, more studies of this sort will be increasingly important to conduct.

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