
Perceptions of Counsellors' Intentions with High Versus Low Quality Counsellor Responses

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Abstract

The study examined the relationship between high and low quality counsellor responses in seven response modes and client perceptions of counsellor intentions. Sixty-four high school students viewed 14 videotaped interview-vignettes that presented high and low quality counsellor responses of reflection of feeling, questions, paraphrasing, interpretation, self-disclosure, confrontation, and advice. The students responded to the Intention List to indicate their perceptions of the intentions behind the counsellor responses in each vignette. Of the seven counsellor response modes, six revealed somewhat different client perceptions of counsellor intentions under conditions of high versus low quality responses. Overall, however, only 10 to 56 relevant comparisons demonstrated such differences. Implications of the results are discussed.

Résumé

Cette étude examine la relation entre la qualité inférieure et supérieure des réponses du conseiller à l'intérieur de sept modes de réponses et les perceptions du client des intentions du conseiller. Soixante-quatre étudiants de niveau secondaire ont visionné 14 vignettes d'interviews sur vidéo-cassettes qui représentaient une variété allant de grande qualité à une qualité inférieure de réponses du conseiller sur la réflexion des sentiments, les questions, la paraphrase, l'interprétation, l'auto-révélation, la confrontation et le conseil. Les étudiants ont répondu à la Liste d'intentions (List Intention) pour indiquer leurs perceptions des intentions derrière les réponses du conseiller dans chaque vignette. Des sept modes de réponses du conseiller, six d'entre elles ont révélé des différences dans la perception du client des intentions du conseiller sous les conditions qualité supérieure versus qualité inférieure des réponses. Toutefois, l'ensemble démontrent seulement de 10 à 56 comparaisons révélatrices de telles différences. Les implications des résultats sont discutées.

Counsellor intention refers to the counsellor's covert rationale for selecting a specific behaviour or intervention to use with a client at any given moment within the counselling session (Hill & O'Grady, 1985). Exploration of counsellor intentions potentially enables researchers to clarify the counsellor's conceptual framework. Recently there has been increasing attention given to the study of counsellor intentions at the moment of interaction, especially among those researchers who endorse a cognitive-mediational paradigm of counselling. This paradigm views counsellor-client interaction as a continuous cycle of counsellor intention, counsellor behaviour, client perception, client cognitive processing, and client behaviour (Martin, 1984). Researchers have investigated how counsellors' intentions relate to counsellors' response modes or match with

clients' perceptions of counsellor's intentions (Martin, Martin, Meyer & Slemon, 1986).

Because intentions (following Hill & O'Grady, 1985) are by definition subjective, it is not feasible to have external judges determine counsellors' intentions. Counsellor intentions almost always have to be assessed through post-session probes. Using the tape-assisted recall method, Elliott (1979) found only a modest positive relationship between counsellor response modes and client perceptions of counsellor intentions. Specifically, Elliott (1979) found that clients perceived advisements as guiding, interpretations as explaining, questions as gathering information or promoting understanding, and self-disclosure as using self to help the client.

In classifying clients' perception of counsellor intentions, previous studies (e.g., Elliott, 1979; Fuller & Hill, 1985; Horvath, Marx & Kaman, 1990; Kivlighan, 1989; Martin, Martin, Meyer & Slemon, 1986) have not considered the *quality* of counsellor responses as an independent variable. Fuller and Hill (1985) reported that evaluations of sessions were related to different perceptions of interviews by clients. For example, they found that client ratings of depth and smoothness of the session were related to different perceptions of counsellors' intentions. Clients gave deeper ratings when they perceived the counsellor as trying to help them internalize and reinforce change, and not just gather information or set limits. Hence, it seems reasonable to assume that low and high quality counsellor responses would yield different perceptions of counsellor intentions by clients.

In the present study, we incorporated the quality of counsellor responses as an independent variable to examine whether participants' perceptions of counsellors' intentions for seven different counsellor response modes would vary as a function of the quality of the counsellor responses. Though it was realized that counsellor-client intentionality in interactions operates on both sides and is a continuous cycle, the focus in this study was on client recognition of counsellor intention. It was our expectation that the intention of a high quality counsellor response would be clearer than the intention of a low quality counsellor response in the same category; thus the counsellor intention of the high quality response would be more consistently perceived by clients. For example, a high quality open question (such as, "What passes through your mind as you imagine that situation?") which asks a client to report his/her own perceptions of a problem situation, is more likely to be perceived by the client as intended to promote client self-exploration than a low quality open question (such as, "What are you thinking about?") in the same situation. We asked the following question: Do perceptions of counsellor intentions interact with the quality of counsellor responses? That is, given a particular counsellor response mode, does a higher quality counsellor

response yield a different client perception of counsellor intentions than a lower quality response? The practical implications of this study related to increased understanding about how the counsellor's behaviour is evaluated by the client under controlled conditions.

METHOD

Participants

The volunteer participants were 64 12th grade students (33 male, 31 female) from a large rural high school in southwestern Ontario, Canada.

Stimulus Material

Fourteen vidcotaped interview-vignettes developed by the authors were used as stimulus materials. These 14 vignettes represent the seven counsellor response modes of reflection of feelings, questions, paraphrasing, interpretation, self-disclosure, confrontation, and direct guidance/advice. For each of the seven counsellor response categories, two vignettes, one depicting "high quality" (more facilitative) and the other depicting "low quality" (less facilitative) counsellor statements were developed. The verbatim scripts for the vignettes were obtained from various textbooks on counselling techniques as well as from actual transcriptions of counselling interviews. Most vignettes were concerned with personal, social and emotional aspects of the client. No vignettes dealt with vocational issues. Each of the 14 vignettes contained one client response (talking turn) that was followed by a counsellor response (talking turn). The length of vignettes ranged from 120 to 180 seconds, with a mean of 135 seconds. These seven target counsellor response modes were chosen because they are mutually exclusive categories and are considered to be important counsellor response modes across different systems of counselling. Counsellor responses varied from 11 to 43 words with a mean of 23 words. (Actual vignettes are available from the first author.)

Two validity checks of the counsellor responses were conducted. First, client and counsellor statements in each vignette were typed, and 10 counsellor educators classified the counsellor responses as to mode. Complete agreement among the counsellor educators was used as the criterion for inclusion of each stimulus vignette. Second, a different group of five counsellor educators rated, independently, the quality of counsellor responses on a 9-point rating scale (1=low quality or facilitation level, 9=high quality or facilitation level). The construct of quality or facilitation level used in this rating was adapted from Carkhuff (1969). High facilitation level referred to a counsellor response that added significantly to the feeling and meaning of the client statement, whereas a low facilitation level referred to a response that did not attend to, or

detracted significantly from, the client statement. The mean ratings for the high and low responses on each response category were: reflection of feeling=6.6 and 1.6; questioning=6.4 and 2.2; paraphrasing=7.0 and 1.6; interpretation=6.6 and 1.2; self-disclosure=6.4 and 1.2; confrontation=4.0 and 4.0; and advice=6.0 and 2.4. With the exception of confrontation, these ratings clearly validate the high and low quality manipulations of counsellor response mode in the vignettes.

The 14 interaction scripts were role-played by seven MA-level counsellors (two men, five women) and seven "clients" (freshman volunteers). Counsellor-client match was randomly determined, and each pair role-played two vignettes (i.e., high and low) for a single counsellor response mode. All 14 vignettes were videotaped in the same interviewing room. Each vignette showed a full frontal view of the counsellor, from the waist up, and the back of the head and shoulders of the client. All counsellors talked an equivalent amount in the high and low quality responses for each response category. The counsellors were instructed to keep the following nonverbal behaviours constant across the segments: head-nods, facial expressions, eye contact, smile, voice, hand-and-arm gesture, and posture. A manipulation check by five counsellor educators was conducted to determine if vignettes were indeed of comparable technical quality and whether counsellors exhibited similar degrees of nonverbal behaviours. Both checks were satisfactory.

Assessment of Participants' Perceived Intentions

Participants' perception of counsellor intentions were assessed by the Intention List (IL) developed by Elliott (1979). The IL includes the following eight pantheoretical, nominal, mutually exclusive counsellor intentions: guiding, reassuring, communicating understanding, explaining, gathering information, using self, disagreeing, and other.

We revised Elliott's (1979) descriptions of the original eight intentions in both wording and vocabulary so that the IL could be easily used by high school students. The preliminary form of the revised IL was given to 50 grade 12 students who were requested to read the descriptions for each of the intention categories, and underline those words or sentences that were not clear to them. Descriptions that were not clear for more than 10 students were further revised using easier wording and more straightforward constructions.

Procedure

A research assistant met twice with the participants in small groups of 5-10. The treatment procedure was administered to eight groups of students. The first meeting (50 minutes in length) was to train the participants in using the IL instrument. The research assistant explained each of the eight intention modes of the IL and described how the IL

would be used in making judgements about the video vignettes. Questions concerning the content and use of the IL were answered.

One week later, the same research assistant again met with the participants in the same small groups to view all 14 vignettes in one sitting. The participants were instructed to watch the vignettes imagining (as vividly as they could) that they were the clients talking with the counsellor in the videotape, and to indicate their perceptions of the intentions behind the counsellors' responses. After the counsellor's response in each vignette, the videotape was stopped and the participants circled the IL categories on an IL list that represented their perceptions of the counsellors' intentions. Participants were allowed to endorse more than one intention category if necessary. In order to eliminate any possible order effect, the order of presentation of the 14 vignettes was randomized into four "series" (i.e., A, B, C and D), and the series-group match was determined randomly. The only restriction on randomization was the high and low quality counsellor vignettes within each response mode were not presented in tandem.

RESULTS

For each of the 14 vignettes, the total number of endorsements by all participants for each of the eight intention categories was determined. Since participants were allowed to endorse more than one intention (i.e., multiple coding), the total number of intentions endorsed for each vignette varied, ranging from 58 for the low self-disclosure vignette to 89 for the high self-disclosure vignette. The mean number of intentions endorsed for each counsellor response by each participant was 1.16. Occasionally, but very rarely, participants did not endorse any intention for a given vignette.

For each vignette, we compared the total number of endorsements of a particular intention between the high and low response mode conditions, treating the data for the two vignettes as independent. *Z* values, contrasting between high and low quality conditions for each counsellor response mode in each intention category, were obtained. As can be seen from Table 1, there were statistically-reliable differences ($p < .05$) in the total number of endorsements of the various intention categories from the IL between high and low quality counsellor response conditions for six of seven counsellor response modes.

Of the seven counsellor response modes, paraphrasing was the only one in which there were no significant differences in endorsed intentions between high and low quality response conditions. The remaining six counsellor response modes displayed statistically reliable differences for at least one of the eight intention categories from the IL—three for confrontation; two for interpretation and questioning; and one for reflection of feelings, advice, and self-disclosure. However, of 56 (8 IL

TABLE 1
*Frequencies of Participant Endorsement of
 Counsellors' Intentions Between High and Low Quality Conditions
 for Each of Seven Counsellor Response Modes*

| Response Mode | Intention Categories | | | | | | | |
|------------------------|----------------------|-------|-------|--------|-----------|-----|----------|------|
| | G | R | U | E | I | S | D | O |
| Reflection | | | | | | | | |
| High | 0 | 4 | 52 | 16 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Low | 6 | 9 | 21 | 37 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| \underline{Z} | NS | NS | 5.64* | 3.63 | NS | NS | NS | NS |
| Confrontation | | | | | | | | |
| High | 27 | 0 | 6 | 34 | 1 | 0 | 15 | 0 |
| Low | 2 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 13 | 0 | 52 | 2 |
| \underline{Z} | 5.25*NS | NS | NS | 5.85* | 3.56 | NS | 7.09**NS | |
| Advice | | | | | | | | |
| High | 53 | 2 | 4 | 8 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 2 |
| Low | 45 | 26 | 6 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| \underline{Z} | 2.47 | 4.88* | NS | NS | NS | NS | NS | NS |
| Interpretation | | | | | | | | |
| High | 1 | 0 | 18 | 18 | 32 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Low | 2 | 2 | 7 | 55 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| \underline{Z} | NS | NS | 2.38 | 6.71** | 8.33**NS | NS | NS | NS |
| Paraphrasing | | | | | | | | |
| High | 1 | 4 | 47 | 8 | 11 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Low | 0 | 6 | 38 | 2 | 22 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| \underline{Z} | NS | NS | 1.40 | 2.14 | 2.39 | NS | NS | NS |
| Self-disclosure | | | | | | | | |
| High | 4 | 17 | 7 | 2 | 1 | 58 | 0 | 0 |
| Low | 0 | 0 | 1 | 10 | 0 | 36 | 2 | 9 |
| \underline{Z} | NS | 4.22* | 1.72 | 3.19 | NS | .37 | NS | 3.25 |
| Questioning | | | | | | | | |
| High | 1 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 51 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Low | 10 | 3 | 8 | 30 | 14 | 1 | 0 | 8 |
| \underline{Z} | 2.46 | NS | NS | 5.37** | 10.49**NS | NS | NS | 2.53 |

Note: Intention categories are:

G=Guide me, R=Reassure me, U=Communicate understanding, E=Explain,

I=Gather information, S=Use self (share self) to help, D=Disagree, O=Other category.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

categories \times 7 response modes) such comparisons, only 10 reliable differences were noted.

Somewhat greater variability in participants' endorsement (perception) of counsellors' intentions between high and low quality response conditions was evident for the more advanced counselling responses of confrontation and interpretation than for the remaining more basic response modes, with the exception of questioning. Despite the fact that counsellor educators' ratings of the high and low confrontation vignettes did not validate this manipulation, the two vignettes yielded different perceptions of counsellor intentions by the participants. The counsellor educators who evaluated the confrontation responses, which were taken from a textbook demonstrating exemplary high and low quality confrontation, showed wide variability in their rating of the two vignettes. However, the designated high quality confrontation response was perceived by participants as intending to explain or guide, while the designated low quality confrontation response was viewed as intending to disagree or gather information. High quality self-disclosure was perceived as intending to use self to reassure, and the low quality response was perceived as intending to explain. High quality interpretation was perceived as intending to gather information, while the low quality interpretation response was perceived as intending to explain.

In addition, questioning and advice responses are frequently thought of by counsellors as less desirable response modes, especially in more humanistic models of counselling. In this study, high quality questioning was perceived as intending to gather information, while low quality questioning was perceived as intending to explain. Low quality advice was perceived as intending to explain. Low quality self-disclosure was perceived as intending to reassure. High quality self-disclosure was perceived as intending to use self to reassure.

DISCUSSION

When Elliott (1985), Fuller and Hill (1985), and Hill and O'Grady (1985) report that certain counsellor response modes are associated with particular client perceptions of counsellor intentions, they did not specify the quality of counsellor responses. Many of the specific findings of our study associated with more facilitative counsellor responses agree with previously-reported associations found between counsellor response modes and client perception of counsellors' intentions, (e.g., Elliott, 1979). However, our findings also suggest that the quality of counsellor responses within a particular response mode may deserve greater attention, especially in cognitive-mediational research in counselling. Clearly, participants in our study had very different perceptions of counsellor intentions as a function of the facilitative level or quality of certain specific counsellor responses. At the same time, it must be ac-

knowledge that, overall, only 10 of a possible 56 comparisons of this sort displayed this differential effect of quality of counsellor responses on participant perceptions of counsellor intentions (see Table 1).

Limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. Short, isolated interview vignettes in a laboratory setting were used as stimulus material. Such interview segments between a counsellor and a client may not depict adequately the rich, complex context of specific counsellor responses in ongoing counselling interactions. An additional limitation is the repeated use of the same statistic in data analysis that runs the risk of increasing a type I error. However, acceptance of such a possible statistical limitation is considered justified in an initial study of a new area of investigation with a small N. The participants in this study were not screened in any fashion to permit the researchers to suggest they would be representative of genuine clients. Further, participants in the current study were requested to select perceived intentions from eight preset categories rather than to verbalize (generate) their own perceptions. Thus, the generalizability of these findings to more natural counselling settings is uncertain and perhaps should not be attempted. Replication of the present study in a more ecologically-valid counselling context obviously is desirable.

Nonetheless, we do note that the types of perceptions of counsellor intentions associated with the various counsellor response modes we studied are very similar to those associations reported in more naturalistic research on counselling by Elliott (1985), Fuller and Hill (1985), and Hill and O'Grady (1985). Consequently, we feel justified in speculating, based on our results, that the quality of counsellor verbal responses may affect clients' perception of counsellors' intentions in certain cases (again see Table 1). However, we also reiterate that such effects seem not to be as pronounced as we had initially thought (10 out of 56 possible comparisons of this sort in our data set).

Attention should be given to the possible implications of this study for counselling practice. These findings stress the importance and complexity of the client's phenomenological interpretation of the meaning of counsellor responses in the helping process. Our findings tentatively indicate that the quality of a counsellor response, as well as the type of counsellor response, may influence clients' perceptions of counsellors' intentions. It may be that the impact of a particular counsellor response on clients is even more variable than previously thought. As indicated in another recent study examining client cognitions in the counselling process (Uhlemann, Lee & Martin, in press), it is important that counsellors realize that our theories of counselling interaction are based more on philosophical belief systems than on the empirical examination of the counselling process as experienced by the client. Our present state of knowledge does not permit us to assume that clients will perceive coun-

sellor behaviour in the same way counsellors have theorized. As a result, it might be appropriate for counsellors to assume less about their impact on clients and to put more attention into regularly reviewing with clients at the end of a session what was important and helpful, what was not important and not helpful, and what a client would like to have more of and less of from the counsellor to enhance the client's experience in counselling.

In concluding, we also want to note that it is quite possible for a client to perceive a counsellor's response as, for example, intending reassurance, but for the client not to feel reassured. It may be that the quality of a counsellor's responses exert greater influence on client cognitive and effective operations other than perceptions of a counsellors' intentions. Our study does not speak to such possibilities. However, possible relationships such as these deserve attention in future cognitive-mediational research in both analogue and naturalistic settings.

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