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## Self-Talk of Counsellor Trainees: A Preliminary Report

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### Abstract

This study addressed the following questions: (a) What is the nature of the internal dialogue of beginning counsellors prior to their initial interview with a client, and (b) What is the relationship between that internal dialogue and counsellor effectiveness? A 50-item self-talk questionnaire was designed to assess the positive and negative self-talk of 73 counsellor trainees prior to their initial client interviews. Practicum supervisors used a 10-item semantic differential scale to evaluate counselling effectiveness. The results showed that counsellor trainees experienced predominantly positive rather than negative self-talk. However, neither the amount of positive or negative self-talk, nor the proportion of positive to negative self-talk was correlated with counsellor effectiveness. The implications of these findings for counsellor training and research are discussed.

### Résumé

Cette étude a mis en relief les questions suivantes: (a) quelle est la nature du dialogue intérieur utilisé par les conseillers qui débutent avant leur première entrevue avec un client, (b) quelle est la relation entre dialogue intérieur et l'efficacité du conseiller? Un questionnaire fait de 50 items basé sur le dialogue interne a été créé afin d'évaluer le positif et le négatif du dialogue interne de 73 conseillers en entraînement avant leur entrevues initiales avec un client. Les superviseurs de stages ont utilisé une échelle sémantique différentielle de 10 items afin d'évaluer l'efficacité de l'intervention. Les résultats ont démontré que les apprentis conseillers ont d'une façon prédominante expérimenté un dialogue interne positif plutôt que négatif. Cependant ni la quantité du positif ou négatif ni la proportion du dialogue interne positif ou négatif n'ont été en relation avec l'efficacité du conseiller. Les implications de ces résultats en ce qui a trait à la recherche et à l'entraînement du conseiller sont discutées.

Most counsellor educators have observed that beginning counsellors frequently experience anxiety regarding their initial encounters with clients. Although excessive anxiety is generally thought to hamper learning and interfere with performance, previous studies have produced mixed results regarding the relationship between anxiety and counselling effectiveness (e.g., Bowman, Roberts & Giesen, 1978; Hui-Ho, Hosford & Johnson, 1985; Nieto-Cardoso, 1975; Pennscott & Brown, 1972). These conflicting results provided the impetus for the present investigation.

Studies examining anxiety and counsellor performance have utilized a variety of anxiety assessment procedures. For example, Fry (1973) used standardized personality measures, while Bowman et al. used self-

report on rating scales, and Bowman and Giesen (1982) used physiological indicators. However, given the recent impact of cognitive theories of anxiety (e.g., Lazarus, 1974; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Meichenbaum & Turk, 1976) and the importance of counsellor cognitive process in counselling (cf. Martin, 1984; Martin, Martin, Meyer & Slemon, 1985), it seemed to us that it might be fruitful to explore the relationship between counsellor self-dialogue and performance.

This paper describes a pilot investigation into the nature of counsellor self-talk and its relationship to counsellor effectiveness. The study was conducted in naturally occurring contexts with students in two counsellor education programs. It should be emphasized from the outset that the pilot nature of this investigation is not without shortcomings. However, we believe that this initial attempt might have heuristic value to other counsellor educators or counsellor trainees for integrating research interests into our counsellor education programs.

#### METHOD

Our purpose was to identify the nature of counsellor trainees' self-talk prior to their initial client interviews, and to examine the relationship between self-talk and counselling effectiveness. A 50-item questionnaire, the Counsellor Self-Talk Inventory (CSI), was constructed to assess the predominant form of self-statements made by counsellor trainees anticipating an initial client interview. Counsellor effectiveness was derived from a 10-item semantic differential scale covering various counsellor characteristics and by evaluating audio tapes of an initial interview. The instruments are described below, as is the field test investigating the relationship between self-talk and effectiveness.

##### *Counsellor Self-Talk Inventory*

The CSI is composed of 50 randomly ordered self-talk statements presented in a dichotomous (true-false) format that are commonly reported by master's level counsellor trainees when anticipating their initial client contacts. Twenty-five statements are positive (e.g., "This is a good learning experience"), and 25 statements are negative (e.g., "It scares me to death"). The CSI yields total positive, total negative, and percent positive scores—the last calculated as positive divided by positive plus negative times 100.<sup>1</sup>

The reliability of the CSI was established by administering it to a sample of 73 students on two occasions, 4 weeks apart. The internal consistency was .87 for both the positive and negative subscales. Split-half reliability, with the Spearman-Brown correction, was .89 for the positive and .84 for the negative subscale. Test-retest reliability was .73 for the positive and .80 for the negative subscale. The internal consistency as well as the stability of the scale was considered satisfactory.

### *Counsellor Effectiveness Scale*

To quantify counsellor effectiveness and utilize a format that would be consistent across practicum supervisors, the Counsellor Effectiveness Scale (CES) was developed by choosing the 10 counsellor characteristics that appeared most frequently in questionnaires assessing counsellor effectiveness (e.g., Barak & LaCrosse, 1975; Ivey & Authier, 1978). These 10 characteristics were presented in semantic differential format, with a 6-point rating scale between bipolar pairs. An effectiveness score was obtained by adding the ratings on each characteristic.<sup>2</sup>

As well, a 20-minute audio tape of an initial interview was evaluated independently by two experienced and trained Master's level judges using the Global Rating Scale of Responding (Gazda, Asbury, Balzer, Childers & Walters, 1977). Using this scale, each counsellor response was rated on a 4-point scale ranging from "Not Helpful; Hurtful" to "Helpful: Additive."

### *Field Test*

After developing the rating scales described above, our next task was to investigate the relationship between self-talk and counselling effectiveness.

*Sample.* The sample consisted of 23 students in the Master's Counselling Program at the University of Victoria (UVic), 20 students in the Master's Counselling Program at the University of Western Ontario (UWO), and 30 students in the Postgraduate Counselling Diploma Program at UWO. This yielded a total sample of 73 students, 33 males and 40 females, with a mean age of 30.6.

*Data collection.* The CSI was administered in groups at the two universities. Before completing the CSI, counsellors were instructed to imagine, as vividly as they could, that they were about to interview a client whom they had never met before and about whom they had no information. They then completed the CSI. The CES was completed by the practicum supervisor as soon as possible after the interview was completed. Audio tapes of the session were complete for one intact group of 13 practicum students. The average rating of the two judges on the Global Rating Scale of Responding (GRSR) was used in the tape analysis.

## RESULTS

Data for the CSI and CES are presented in Table 1. The mean positive self-talk score was significantly higher than the mean negative self-talk score,  $t = 7.36$ ,  $p < .001$ . Although differences between programs were not a prime interest in this study, a one-way ANOVA was conducted for each of the scales. There were no statistically significant differences in amount of positive or negative self-talk among the three groups of

students. However, there were significant between-group differences on effectiveness ratings,  $F(2,70) = 8.41$ ,  $p < .001$ . Post hoc Scheffe's indicated that the UVic group had significantly higher effectiveness ratings than did either of the UWO groups.

TABLE 1  
*Counsellor Self-Talk Inventory (CSI) and Supervisor-Rated  
Counselling Effectiveness Scale (CES) Scores of 73  
Graduate Counselling Students*

<i>Variables</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>CSI Positive</i>					
UWO* Master's	20	11.15	5.31	< 1	> .05
UVic† Master's	23	11.39	4.06		
UWO Guidance Specialist	30	11.50	5.02		
Total	73	11.37	4.76		
<i>CSI Negative</i>					
UWO Master's	20	3.70	3.40	2.49	> .05
UVic Master's	23	6.70	4.99		
UWO Guidance Specialist	30	5.57	4.55		
Total	73	5.41	4.51		
<i>CSI % Positive</i>					
UWO Master's	20	77.45	14.42	1.74	> .05
UVic Master's	23	67.22	19.03		
UWO Guidance Specialist	30	69.77	20.59		
Total	73	71.01	18.79		
<i>CES</i>					
UWO Master's	20	39.95	10.47	8.41	< .01
UVic Master's	23	50.04	7.00		
UWO Guidance Specialist	30	42.43	8.31		
Total	73	44.15	9.43		

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To investigate the relationship between self-talk and effectiveness, Pearson's product-moment correlations were calculated (see Table 2). None of the correlations between the paper-and-pencil measures was statistically significant. For the 13 students submitting audio tapes, correlations were calculated between the mean of the two judges' ratings and each of the CSI subscales. The result was  $r = .16$  for the positive scale and  $r = .07$  for both the negative and the percent positive subscales ( $p > .05$  in all cases).

TABLE 2  
*Correlations Between the Counsellor Self-Talk Inventory and  
 Supervisor-Rater Counselling Effectiveness*

<i>Counsellor Groups</i>	<i>Counsellor Self-Talk Inventory</i>			
	<i>n</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>% Positive</i>
UWO* Master's	20	-.12	-.23	.26
UVic † Master's	23	-.04	-.26	.31
UWO Guidance Specialist	30	-.05	.00	-.01
Total	73	-.06	-.01	.05

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## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify the predominant self-talk of counsellor trainees prior to their initial client interviews, and to examine the relationship between that self-talk and counselling effectiveness. The CSI, developed for this study, showed a satisfactory level of internal consistency and test-retest reliability. However, neither the amount of positive or negative self-talk nor the relative proportion of positive self-talk with respect to negative was related significantly to counselling performance, whether determined by a supervisor's evaluation of counsellor effectiveness or external judges' ratings on the GRSR of an audio-taped interview. Counsellor educators frequently assume that counselling students are anxious going into an initial interview, that this anxiety is related to negative self-talk, and that the negative self-talk will have a detrimental effect on counselling performance. Our data casts doubt on the truth of these assumptions. However, the exploratory nature of this investigation, and some of the problems inherent in the design, open the door for other considerations. Some of these are discussed below.

First, it will be noted that no measure of anxiety was used in this study. Therefore it is not possible to say how anxious the students actually were going into their interviews. If anxiety levels were low, then one would expect to find low negative self-talk levels and little interference with counselling performance. We stated at the outset of this paper that it was our intent to study the relationship between self-dialogue and performance. In retrospect, it would have been helpful to have included an anxiety assessment among our dependent measures.

Second, negative self-talk levels may have been low among the students in this sample because they had confidence in their abilities to handle the situation they faced. Perhaps when students have completed

a prepracticum course in counselling skills and have feedback from that course, they are then competent in the use of those skills. Hence, negative self-talk is reduced and relatively little performance interference is experienced. Recent studies suggesting that people who perceive themselves as coping effectively with the demands they face have low stress levels (cf. Hiebert & Basserman, 1986) would support this. However, it should be noted that no assessment of students' perceptions of their competence was made in our pilot, and therefore we have no evidence relating to the conjecture that negative self-talk was low because perceived competence was high.

Third, although the CSI demonstrated satisfactory reliability, it may be that the number of positive or negative statements experienced is not the best self-talk indicator for situations like this. For example, it might be the case that one powerful negative self-statement will have such a strong impact on the person's affective experience that it takes numerous positive self-statements to restore equilibrium (or vice versa). Therefore, rather than presenting self-statements in a dichotomous fashion it might be better to ask respondents to indicate the frequency of such self-statements, or perhaps the intensity with which those statements are experienced. Such a procedure might produce higher correlations between self-talk and performance.

In summary, we found that some of our assumptions about counsellor trainees were not supported: Students had very low levels of negative self-talk, and the type of self-talk they experienced seemed to have little effect on their performance. We must now consider the ways this observation will change our instructional practices. Perhaps the greatest merit of this paper is as an example of how it is possible to combine research endeavours with instructional pursuits as counsellor educators. We hope that other counsellor educators will find our attempt interesting. Perhaps it will assist others in conducting similar investigations, avoiding our mistakes, but retaining the sincere desire to validate empirically some of the assumptions and/or training practices we bring to our counsellor education endeavours.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A description of the procedures involved in developing the CSI and a copy of the instrument are available from the first author.
- <sup>2</sup> A copy of the CES is available from the first author.

#### About the Authors

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