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THE USE OF THE MINIMALLY COACHED
ROLE-PLAYING CLIENT IN TRAINING EVALUATION

ABSTRACT: This study describes the use of minimally trained role-playing clients in the evaluation of a counselor-training course. Two such role-playing clients were briefly instructed in a separate role and given a list of 15 or 16 variables which were presented to each trainee. The results indicated that with minimal coaching a role-playing client could accurately and reliably play the role. This role stability allows students to be comparatively assessed in a life-like situation. The study concludes that with minimal coaching, role-playing clients could be used effectively in the evaluation of training programs.

In evaluating the effectiveness of training in applied fields the evaluation method should incorporate the following three principles: (1) the evaluation should be a criterion reference task closely approximating the real task the student will later perform, (2) performance on the evaluation task should be quantifiable, and (3) the task must be stable or reliable from student to student to allow fair student comparisons.

The rationale for the first principle has two assumptions. The first is that prediction of success in applied situations is improved as the evaluation task approaches the real-life task. Secondly, in such highly sensitive human interactions as typically take place in helper-helpee relationships in law, medicine, psychology, etc., skillful performance by a trainee in a simulated experience strongly forecasts successful performance in real-life situations. The supervisor of training in a legal, medical, or psychological program is behaving responsibly when he is assured that the trainee is fully capable of integrating his academic knowledge with the needs and characteristics of the client. This assurance comes from the supervisor observing the trainee in an actual or simulated interaction with a client.

The second and third principles deal with measurement. Often assessments in applied training situations are more subjective than

objective. Objectivity is needed since the student should receive feedback on what he did correctly and where he needs improvement. The third principle is frequently not achieved in applied-setting evalution since standardization of an assessment situation is difficult. As a result, one student's performance is compared with that of another, based on two different criteria. This doesn't mean to imply that evaluations of this sort have no value; it is rather that student-by-student comparison is more difficult. The student with a unique problem as an evaluation task, if he does poorly, often feels he has been presented the most difficult problem, and this may be correct.

If the assessment task is to be both quantifiable and productive of scores on which students can be compared, then a highly similar task should be presented to each student or trainee. Such criteria are met by attempting to standardize real-life situations or by situations created to simulate real-life situations and problems.

An investigation of this problem was made during the final evaluation of counseling-psychology graduate students at the completion of their counseling practicum.

Consistency in client behavior seems necessary for the evaluation of practicum students' skills, in that each practicum student should be provided with a similar experience by which his expertise may be judged. Two methods have been employed in attempts to provide consistency in client behavior. The first has been the selection of a homogeneous group such as the tenth-grade students randomly assigned to counselors for pre- and post-experimental sessions as shown in the Kagan and Krathwohl (1967) study. Such homogeneity in a population minimizes differences due to such factors as stage of development, age, or occupational and experiential history. The other method for controlling client consistency has been the use of role-playing or coached clients. This method has involved fairly extensive efforts in role control including biographical information made available to the counselor prior to an interview, use of drama professionals, and carefully structured training sessions. Whiteley and Jakobowski (1969), reviewing the literature related to the role player as a research and training resource, concluded that the methods of controlling for consistency of performance have been unsatisfactory. They developed a role analysis system which provided both quantitative and qualitative assessment of role performance.

To the knowledge of the present authors, no one has questioned the validity of the assumption that role-playing clients must be extensively coached to be able to play a role consistently. Neither has any method been developed for assessing the consistency of nonverbal behavior other than the subjective judgements of practicum supervisors.

A METHOD FOR EVALUATING VERBAL AND NONVERBAL ROLE CONSISTENCY

Part of the evaluation of counseling practicum students at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln consists of a mid-term and final assessment of particular skills in an interview with a role-playing

client. The interview is video-taped so that an accurate behavioral count can be made. Assuring the trainee of some consistency in role performance seems to be a parsimonious way of making such an assessment fair.

Ten counselor-trainees were video-taped in a simulated counseling session with the subjects of this study. The facility used for the video-taping had a one-way mirror with audio headsets for the observers.

The assessments took place in the same room at a time of the trainee's choosing. Furniture positions, lighting, and heating were uniform across interviews. Instructions to the trainees and the length of the interview were identical for all trainees.

Sample

The two clients who played the roles were females in their thirties, both paraprofessionals in a student affairs office. Several days prior to the time they were to role-play, each was handed a list which contained over a dozen statements of personal problems. Before the assessment interviews, each person "played the role" with one of the authors. One role was used for the mid-term assessment and the other for the final assessment. Other than studying the list of statements and playing the role once with one of the writers, the clients were not "coached." One role-player, identified as Jennifer, played the role of a young, unhappily married housewife. The other, identified as Mary, acted the part of a single, paranoid office worker. Both subjects were female, single, in their thirties, and working on a master's degree at the University. Neither subject had professional training in counseling and both volunteered to participate in this study.

The Simulated Counseling Session

Both women were video-taped playing their roles during ten twenty-three-minute individual interviews with counseling practicum students functioning as counselors. Each of the ten practicum students counseled both role-playing subjects, Jennifer first, with Mary's interview about four weeks later. At the beginning of each interview, the counselors-in-training were asked to read aloud the following instructions:

> You are going to be video-taped in a simulated counseling session with a role-playing client. Go in and talk with this role-playing client as if it were an actual interview. You have 20 minutes or so of counseling time with your client.

In order to investigate the possibility of a minimally coached client's playing a prescribed role consistently from counselor to counselor, the first ten minutes of each interview were analyzed to determine whether or not each counselor was exposed to a similar set of verbal and non-verbal stimuli. In an attempt to keep the cognitive input of the role consistent from one interview to another, a check list of essential information for each subject was made before video-

taping began. As this essential information was presented during the role, it was checked off.

Check List — Jennifer
1. married for 5 years
2. two-year-old little boy
3. husband graduated from law school last year
4. taught to put husband through law school
5. husband too immersed in work
6. husband not home for dinner or is very late
7. this is not client's idea of marriage
8. he says she is nagging if she brings up the problem
9. she is worried this will continue and feels she can't cope with it
10. she is becoming bitter
11. he won't discuss his work because of legal ethics
12. she is jealous of law, it is her enemy
13. she feels husband is insensitive to her feelings
14. no companionship, responsibility or challenge in housework
15. tied down, it's not feasible for her to participate in social activities
16. tight financial situation

Check List — Mary
1. client unmarried
2. lives with parents
3. works in a large law office
4. five years experience and now given much responsibility
5. people in the office out to get her
6. items frequently missing from her desk
7. parents are unsympathetic, seem like jail keepers to her
8. people in the office laugh at her behind her back
9. used to have lots of boyfriends, now can't trust men
10. afraid to go out at night
11. bosses can no longer be trusted
12. no woman safe on the streets anymore
13. gets to parking lot and can't get out of car
14. no one has her best interests at heart
15. office atmosphere used to be open, but now it is closed

Measurement of Nonverbal Behavior

The nonverbal behavior of the role-playing client was assessed with the use of the Dunning Metacommunication Check Card (Dunning, 1971). On this instrument, nine categories of nonverbal behavior may be scored periodically according to a time schedule selected.

Depending on the ability of the rater to score rapidly, observations can be made every few seconds. The obvious advantage of this type of instrument is that it provides actual behavioral counts rather than subjective ratings.

Precise observations are made possible by plugging into the tape-deck a mechanically timed sound device (time-lapse beeper or clicker). When replayed, the tape emits a sound and observations are made

at the moment of the sound. The time-lapse clicker, for example, can be set to feed the sound onto the tape every ten seconds. This was the time sequence used for measuring nonverbal behavior in this study.

Nonverbal observations in this study were recorded in two general categories: attending behavior as evidenced by eye contact, head position, and body position, and maintenance of a neutral counseling position as evidenced by head, hand, and body gestures, positions, or movements.

In both the verbal and nonverbal analysis, the subject was considered consistent in her behavior if the number of behaviors in each category for each counselor were similar. The test for goodness of fit (Ferguson, 1966) was used with the level of confidence set at .05.

Analysis: Verbal Behavior

In the actual interviews both subjects, in response to specific questions asked by the counselors, produced verbal statements in addition to those on the check list. Therefore, in analyzing the subjects' verbal consistency, categories of verbal content were defined and comparisons were made using the number of responses in each content category.

The verbal content categories for Jennifer were:
1. General information
2. Specific complaints about husband's job
3. Husband/wife relationship problems or issues
4. Other personal problems

As reported in Table 1, the null hypothesis was retained for all categories of verbal content.

Table 1

Summary of Chi-Square Analysis of Goodness of Fit for Verbal Content — Jennifer

Variable	N*	X^2	p
General information	9	2.01	.95
Complaints about husband job	9	10.92	.30
Husband/wife relationship	9	6.00	.70
Other personal problems	9	6.40	.70

*one tape had such poor audio, it could not be analyzed

The verbal content categories for Mary were:
1. Specific concerns related to the job environment
2. Family conflicts
3. Personal/social problems or behaviors

The subject also was able to deliver consistent verbal information to each of the ten counselors as reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of Chi-Square Analysis of Goodness of Fit for Verbal Content — Mary

Variable	N	X^2	p
Job related concerns	10	1.35	.95
Family conflicts	10	15.87	.10
Personal/social problems	10	13.35	.20

Analysis: Nonverbal Behavior

For all the attending variables: eye, head, and body, and the neutral counseling position behaviors: head, hand, and body, Jennifer was consistent from counselor to counselor. Table 3 contains these data.

Table 3

Summary of Chi-Square Analysis of Goodness of Fit for Nonverbal Behavior — Jennifer

Variable	N	X^2	p
Attending Behavior			
eye contact	10	12.06	.30
head position	10	6.49	.70
body position	10	.02	.95
Maintenance of Neutral Counseling Position			
head	10	2.85	.95
hand	10	2.47	.95
body	10	.06	.95

Mary presented nonverbal cues consistently on all the variables except a rather major one, eye contact. Table 4 indicates that the client's eye contact varied significantly from counselor to counselor.

Table 4

Summary of Chi-Square Analysis of Goodness of Fit for Nonverbal Behavior — Mary

Variable	N	X^2	p
Attending Behavior			
eye contact	10	39.06	.01*
head position	10	.89	.95
body position	10	.27	.95
Maintenance of Neutral Counseling Position			
head	10	.63	.95
hand	10	.25	.95
body	10	.02	.95

*Null hypothesis rejected

A subsequent analysis was done in an attempt to determine whether Mary's eye contact responses varied with the sex of the counselor. Some of the variance was explained in this analysis (see Table 5) since the client had eye contact with the males half as often as with females. However the frequency of eye contact with males was consistent ($p = .30$) whereas there was significant variance with the females ($p = .01$).

Table 5

Summary of Chi-Square Analysis of Goodness of Fit for Eye Attending Behavior, Male vs Female — Mary

Variable	N	Mean Number of Responses	X^2	p
eye attending with males	4	7.5	4.13	.30
eye attending with females	6	15.7	17.80	.01*

*Null hypothesis rejected

DISCUSSION

The study has a major limitation. The number of role-playing clients was only two, even though the role was tested against ten counselors. In several semesters following the collection of the reported data a similar process was used in the assessment of practicum students. While no attempt was made to collect quantitative data the observable results were consistent with the findings reported here.

Research often creates more questions than answers. This study does not tread on the bridge that should exist between the artificiality of the simulated counseling setting and the reality of counseling with an actual client, a bridge which surely needs building through practicum research methodology as Kagan and Krathwohl (1967) have noted. However, even as a pilot study, the study does present some interesting challenges:

First, it weakens the assumption that it is necessary to use a "coached" consumer or client in order to assure role-playing consistency. Coaching the role-player in this study was kept to the minimum of reaching agreement on the items of information which would be essential to the interview.

Second, it raises questions regarding the necessity of using "professional" people, such as persons with dramatic or professional counseling backgrounds, in the simulated role. The two subjects in this study could not be placed in either "professional" category.

Third, the study provides useful information regarding the ability of the minimally-coached, non-professional person to avoid "role decay" over successive presentations of the same role. In both cases consistency of role presentation, verbal plus nonverbal, held up from early to late presentations of the same role. Coached or "professional" consumers may very well lessen the realism in the simulated counseling session rather than enhance it.

The final contribution the study may provide is related to the quantification of nonverbal behavior. Although no attempt was made to interpret nonverbal behavior, it was identified, defined, and measured in this study. The authors consider this to be an important step forward in practicum student evaluation and research.

While this study dealt specifically with evaluation within a counseling practicum setting, there is generalizability to a variety of other applied settings. The use of a role-playing client provided valid, reliable, and ethically safe, evaluation.

RESUME: Cette étude décrit l'utilisation de sujets entraînés à exercer le rôle du client pour fins d'évaluation de la formation des conseillers. Deux de ces "clients" furent brièvement entraînés dans leur rôle. Les résultats démontrèrent qu'avec un minimum d'entraînement le sujet pouvait jouer son rôle avec précision et fiabilité. Cette stabilité dans le rôle permet de comparer les étudiants dans une situation très semblable à celle qu'on trouve habituellement dans la pratique. L'étude permet de conclure qu'avec un minimum d'instruction, les sujets jouant le rôle du client pourraient être utilisés efficacement dans l'évaluation des programmes de formation.

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