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THE MICROCOUNSELING PARADIGM
IN THE INSTRUCTION OF JUNIOR
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS
IN ATTENDING BEHAVIOR

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to test the validity of the microcounseling paradigm in teaching a basic counseling and interpersonal skill, attending behavior, to ninth grade students. The experimental design involved training of eight students in attending skills and comparing their interviewing effectiveness with eight untrained students. Training involved video models, self observation, cue discrimination, and reinforcement of desired behavior. The experimental group demonstrated significantly increased verbal and non-verbal attending behaviors on 7 of 13 comparisons. The implications of microcounseling for the teaching of communication skills to clients is discussed.

Microcounseling (Ivey, 1971) is a new and systematic video format for training counselors and therapists in basic skills of interviewing. Utilizing a multi-dimensional format of video models, self-observation of behavior, cue discrimination in the form of written models, and systematic reinforcement of desired trainee responses, microcounseling has proven effective in many settings, among them paraprofessional training (Haase & DiMattia, 1970), drug counseling (Gluckstern, 1973), school-counselor training (Ivey, Normington, Miller, Morrill, & Haase, 1968), training medical students in interviewing skills (Moreland, 1971), and teacher training (Rollin, 1970).

If the microcounseling paradigm proves useful in training a wide variety of professionals and paraprofessionals in interviewing skills, would the same format be feasible for training potential clients in basic communication skills? The objective of this study was to examine the microcounseling paradigm as a method for the direct instruction of junior-high-school students in a basic skill of counseling and human interaction, that of attending behavior, listening to another person.

Osterreith (1969) has noted the adolescent period as one where the youngster is "caught" between childhood and adulthood with no well-defined status. During this period social relations become increasingly important and simply learning how to "talk" with others may prove a difficult and taxing problem for some. The study of the Joint Commission on Mental Health (1970) has noted the strong pressures on youth at this age and indicates the need for open, free, verbal communication between parent and child and between the child and his peers. Unfortunately, open, free verbal communication is seldom defined in objective behavioral terms. Nor is open communication taught to younger individuals in any systematic fashion.

The microcounseling framework provides a set of behaviorally defined skills of communication divided into beginning skills, (attending behavior, minimal encourages, and open questions), listening skills (reflections of feeling and paraphrasing), sharing skills (expression of content, feeling, and "direct mutual communication"), and skills of cognitive restructuring. While these skills are useful to the beginning therapist or counselor, many of them are also meaningful to the younger adolescent faced with the need for communicating with his world.

Attending behavior, the skill selected for this study was selected as being important in facilitating interpersonal communication. For purposes of training, attending behavior emphasized key behavioral constructs of listening, eye contact, physical attentiveness in the form of postural cues, and verbal following behavior. The major hypothesis of this study was that the microcounseling paradigm would prove useful in the instruction of a junior-high-school population in attending skills.

METHOD

Sample

The sample consisted of 11 male and 5 female ninth-grade students. The age range was from 14 years, one month to 15 years, seven months. The students were paid volunteers recruited during free periods of school time. They were told that they were going to participate in a study designed to explore the conversations and interests of the ninth-grade student. The students were randomly divided into an experimental group who received the full microcounseling training and a comparison group who received no training. Eleven males and 5 females served as paid interviewees and were randomly assigned to a peer "counselor."

Microcounseling Model

The following steps were taken with the experimental group: 1) A five-minute diagnostic interview was videotaped in which the trainees were told to interview their "client." The interviewees were simply told that they were to be interviewed by another student. 2) After videotaping, the student trainee was given the "Attending Behavior

Manual" (Ivey, 1971) which describes the basic behavioral components of attending behavior in written form. 3) Videotaped models of attending behavior as exhibited by effective and less effective interviewers were presented. Coupled with this presentation was informal discussion of the model with the investigator-trainer. 4) The trainee then viewed his initial interview (see #1 above) and was asked to identify instances of attending and non-attending. 5) He next planned for his second interview with consultation help from the investigator-trainer. 6) A second five-minute session was videotaped.

Treatment for the comparison groups Ss was identical at steps one and six, but they were given reading material during an interim period of twenty minutes. The entire training program for each S took from thirty to forty-five minutes.

Instrumentation and Scoring of Dependent Variables

Thirteen dependent variables, involving non-verbal and verbal components of behavior, were selected for the study as representing observable components of attention. Behavioral counts of non-verbal behaviors were made by two independent raters and included the number of eye contact breaks, arm and hand movements, leg and foot movements, postural ratings, and expressive gestures. Correlations of ratings on these variables ranged from .91 to 1.00. All videotapes and typescripts were presented randomly.

Verbal components of attending behavior were obtained from a verbatim typescript of the videotapes for pre- and post conditions. Two independent judges (percent of interrater agreement 91.8) counted the number of times the trainee spoke, the number of words spoken, the percent of talk time, mean length of utterance, and number of topic changes.

Following each five-minute session, the interviewee rated his interviewer on a 20-item semantic differential form, the Counselor Effectiveness Scale (Ivey, 1971). This scale (reliability .975) has been used in several microcounseling studies to examine client attitudes toward their counselors.

A change or improvement score for each interviewing trainee was developed by subtracting posttest from pretest measures and a *t* test was computed comparing the improvement scores of the two groups.

RESULTS

It may be observed in Table 1 that significant differences between the experimental and control group occurred on seven of thirteen variables on the computed improvement scores.

The number of breaks in eye contact proved to be an important variable in differentiating trained and untrained subjects. A large improvement by the trainees may be noted. Gross body movement in the form of major shifts in posture declined markedly in the trainees. Verbal ratings indicated that the interviewer made fewer topic changes and lowered his percent of talk time and talked less.

It also may be noted that the clients who talked with the trained interviewers rated them significantly higher on the Counselor Effectiveness Scale, although they did not know whether or not their interviewer had received training.

TABLE 1
RATINGS OF EXPERIMENTAL AND COMPARISON
GROUPS IN ATTENDING BEHAVIOR

Variable	Group	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Improvement Score	<i>t</i>
Non-verbal Behavior					
No. of breaks in eye contact	E	14.75	3.00	11.25	3.003**
	C	17.06	15.13	1.93	
No. of arm and hand movements	E	9.94	7.06	2.88	.323
	C	9.25	6.44	2.81	
No. of leg and foot movements	E	5.88	1.88	4.00	1.979
	C	3.13	3.56	-.43	
No. expressive gestures	E	7.13	9.69	2.56	.804
	C	10.63	11.44	.81	
No. of gross body movements	E	8.25	1.19	7.06	2.685*
	C	3.69	4.50	-.81	
No. of total body movements	E	24.69	11.50	13.19	3.476**
	C	16.13	14.56	1.57	
Posture Ratings	E	2.0	2.0	—	.000
	C	2.0	2.0	—	
Verbal Behavior					
No. of times trainee spoke	E	39.63	28.25	11.38	1.1378
	C	35.13	29.13	6.00	
Total No. of words spoken	E	399.3	216.5	182.8	2.1885*
	C	328.9	298.9	30.0	
% of Talk Time	E	52.06	30.88	21.18	3.900**
	C	46.09	50.07	-3.98	
Mean Length of utterance	E	10.27	7.87	2.40	.6480
	C	9.88	13.60	-3.72	
No. of topic changes	E	7.63	2.00	5.63	2.419*
	C	6.75	5.50	1.25	
Counselor Effectiveness Scale Rating	E	99.63	135.00	36.37	3.577**
	C	99.88	109.00	9.12	

* $p < .05$ $df = 14$

** $p < .01$ $df = 14$

DISCUSSION

The major premise of this study, that junior-high-school students may be taught the counseling/interpersonal skill of attending behavior, appears to be substantiated. The experimental student trainees demonstrated significantly improved non-verbal and verbal behaviors and were rated more highly by their interviewees on a subjective semantic differential test.

As in other microcounseling studies, eye contact proved to be an important behavior learned through this process. Perhaps most crucial in indicating to another that you are attending to them is the simple act of looking. Major shifts in posture declined markedly in the trainees. Observation reveals that one way a person indicates discomfort with a situation is by shifting his trunk frequently. While the number of leg and foot movements did not reach statistical significance, a trend in the predicted direction may be observed. As in major body shifts, discomfort is often expressed by jiggling or moving feet and legs.

Perhaps most important among findings in the verbal area is that the interviewer made significantly fewer topic changes and lowered his percent of talk time. If a young person or a counselor is to listen to another, it seems important that he stay on the topic and provide time for the other to talk.

The general success of the training was rated subjectively by the interviewee and a significantly higher rating was obtained by the experimental subjects. This would seem to suggest that the behaviors of attending were received favorably by the interviewees. Most of us like to be the recipients of attending behavior, we enjoy being actively "listened to."

The lack of statistical significance in the ratings of posture, expressive gestures, and the number of arm and hand movements should be considered. Perhaps the most economical explanation of the lack of differences found here is the general relaxed and normal body state presented by both the experimental and comparison students. While the television situation was not a normal setting for them they appeared to be able to function without undue discomfort. Further, the training itself stresses only body posture, eye contact, and verbal following. These findings may be compared to those of Ivey (1971) who, when working with mental patients, found many marked examples of changes in such body states after training in behavioral skills was initiated, even though specific instruction was not always included in the training.

The important question of the generalization of these skills beyond the microcounseling training session should be considered. Krasner (1971), in reviewing the literature on behavior modification, pointed out clearly that learned behavior in the laboratory does not always transfer unless specific plans for transfer are part of the training program. Unless the trainees are given individually tailored programs to transfer attending, it may be anticipated that attending skills will remain laboratory artifacts. The authors have developed individualized

clinical programs to ensure transfer of learned behavior. In one such example, a mother in a ghetto neighborhood had trouble communicating with her child. Attending behavior training was instituted in this setting and behavioral transfer and rapid change in child and mother behavior was observed. The present study, however, was not concerned with behavioral transfer, but with identifying more precisely the key components of attending and examining the efficiency of the micro-counseling model for training a new population, junior-high-school students, in attending skills. Gluckstern (1972) and Moreland (1971) have found that counseling and therapy skills learned in micro-counseling can be taught so as to generalize beyond the training session.

It should be mentioned that the students found the video training sessions interesting and exciting. They felt they had learned a skill which could be useful in communicating with others. Students who felt they had minimal social skills and who showed particularly marked improvement saw that engaging in attending behavior might be one route toward a closer and more effective communication with others.

The validity of this particular training model for teaching attending behavior should be considered. What is the key factor in the learned behavior? McDonald, Allen, and Orme (1966) varied the method of microtraining systematically and found that the total learning package proved most effective. Self-observation seemed to be the most potent force for change, but, of necessity, had to be coupled with cue discrimination so that individuals could know what to look for when they viewed the videotape. Most recently Higgins, Ivey, and Uhlemann (1970), in teaching the skill of "direct mutual communication" derived from encounter groups, found that it was possible to teach behavioral skills in a completely programmed format without the need for a supervisor-trainer.

Limitations of this study should be considered. Although each subject showed improvement in his or her ability to attend, it must be remembered that these were paid trainees and that the five-minute sessions are not necessarily representative of real-life situations. Topics discussed during the sessions did appear to be normal junior-high-school topics of conversation, but this does not mean that generalization to daily life situations will occur. It may be predicted that the behavior will follow usual learning curves and, unless reinforced fairly rapidly in the environment, will gradually extinguish.

The implications of this study for the practice of school guidance and human relations training may be considered. Other skills of communication within the microcounseling framework can undoubtedly be taught to students. The authors have taught children as young as third graders the skills of attending. It seems valuable for people to learn skills which may lead to more effective communication. If the skills of counseling and therapy are useful in the professional interview, they should be behaviorally identified so that they may be easily transferred to other populations. It is no longer necessary for counseling skills to be kept as the strict province of the counselor and therapist.

A problem in counseling is that the skills learned have not been equally useful in daily life. A potential future role for the school counselor or school psychologist may be instructing students in the behavioral skills of living. Recently, the microtraining paradigm has been applied to psychiatric patients. Early results suggest that a systematic *educational* approach to behavior change shows some promise.

RESUME: Le but de cette étude était de vérifier la validité auprès d'élèves de neuvième année, du paradigme du micro-counseling dans l'enseignement d'une habileté fondamentale du counseling et des relations interpersonnelles, soit le comportement de prêter attention. Le schème expérimental consistait à entraîner huit élèves à ce comportement et à comparer leur efficacité en entrevue avec celle de huit élèves non-entraînés. L'apprentissage comportait l'utilisation de bandes video, l'observation de soi, la discrimination d'indices et le renforcement du comportement souhaité. Dans 7 comparaisons sur 13, le groupe expérimental a manifesté une augmentation significative de comportements d'attention verbale et non-verbale. On discute des implications du micro-counseling pour l'enseignement des habiletés à communiquer avec les clients.

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