

COUNSELLOR TRAINEE AWARENESS OF EVALUATIVE CRITERIA: A NEGLECTED VARIABLE

SHAKÉ G. TOUKMANIAN, RONALD G. CAPELLE and DAVID L. RENNIE
York University

Abstract

The counselling performances of undergraduates given 9 weeks of systematic training in either human relations training or microcounselling and of subjects receiving, prior to posttest, brief specific instructions on how to counsel, were compared to the performance of a no-training control group. Fifty-five undergraduate volunteers acted as clients. Empathy and three categories of microcounselling behaviour counts served as criteria. Positive and significant training effects were found. There were no significant differences between the training group and the group receiving specific instructions. The findings were interpreted to indicate that controlling the trainee knowledge of the criteria of evaluation is essential in research assessing the effectiveness of counsellor training programmes.

Résumé

On compare les performances de sujets de contrôle avec celles de deux groupes de stagiaires en consultation. Un groupe a participé à neuf semaines d'entraînement systématique selon la méthode de microconsultation et de relations humaines. Le deuxième groupe de stagiaires a reçu, avant le post-test, des instructions brèves et spécifiques dans la conduite des entrevues. Cinquante-cinq étudiants ont servi comme clients. L'échelle de l'empathie et trois catégories de mesures de comportement ont servi de critères. Les données recueillies confirment qu'un entraînement systématique a un effet positif. Par contre, on ne remarque aucune différence entre le groupe ayant reçu l'entraînement systématique et celui ayant reçu des instructions spécifiques. Les résultats suggèrent que la connaissance des critères d'évaluation par des stagiaires est une variable essentielle qui doit être contrôlée dans toute recherche qui se propose d'évaluer l'efficacité des programmes d'entraînement à la consultation.

Carkhuff's (1969a) human relations training and the Ivey (1971) system of microcounselling have, in recent years, received substantial research support as effective methods of teaching basic communication skills to professional and lay counsellor trainees (Carkhuff & Truax, 1965; Berenson, Carkhuff, & Myrus, 1966; Carkhuff, Kratochvil, & Friel, 1968; Haase & Dimattia, 1970; Perkins & Atkinson, 1973; Moreland, Ivey, & Phillips, 1973).

Despite this accumulated evidence, the failure by most studies to implement adequate criteria and experimental designs has made it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the unique effects that these didactic-experiential models have on the training of counsellors (Resnikoff, 1972; Gormally & Hill, 1974; Toukmanian & Rennie, Note 1). Most studies on human relations training and microcounselling have used criteria that were identical to the content focused on by the particular system of training (Resnikoff, 1972; Capelle, Note 2). The fact that at posttest the training subjects, having been exposed to the

instructional content of the training model and hence to the test criteria, are cognizant of these measures of evaluating, clearly biases results in favour of treatment effects. Furthermore, the inclusion of control subjects, whose awareness of the criteria does not equal that of the training group, does not provide for adequate control of the experimental manipulation. To test the effectiveness of a method of training, the design of a study should be able to demonstrate that the ability to emit facilitative helper responses by experimental subjects, compared to controls who know about the essential components of helpful counsellor utterances but who lack the experience of training, is clearly due to the effects of systematic training (Resnikoff, 1972).

To date only a few studies (Berenson, Carkhuff, & Myrus, 1966; Carkhuff & Bierman, 1970; Boyd, 1973; Higgins, Ivey, & Uhlemann, 1970; Moreland, Ivey, & Phillips, 1973) on human relations training and microcounselling have attempted to use a training control group. In each instance the training control subjects spent the

same number of hours in sessions as the experimental subjects but received instructional material that was unrelated to the content of training in interpersonal functioning. Hence, these studies, similar to those with no treatment controls, fail to provide a rigorous test for the effects of systematic training.

The necessity of controlling for the expectancy set of experimental subjects in counsellor training research has been clearly demonstrated by Rappaport, Gross, and Lepper (1973). These investigators compared the effects of sensitivity training and modelling with control groups under conditions of general and specific instructions on interviewing. They found that when role-played dyadic interactions were conducted following general instructions, the sensitivity training and modelling groups performed significantly better than the control group. However, when the subjects were given specific instructions on interviewing there were no significant differences between either the modelling or the sensitivity groups and the control group. These findings led the investigators to conclude that specific instructions given to a group of college student volunteers were as effective as training procedures in modifying and producing appropriate verbal interviewing behaviours. Related work has also demonstrated that instructions, given to low functioning trainees (Uhlemann, Lea, & Stone, 1976), and didactic self-instructioning by college undergraduates (Dunn, Note 6), produces significant improvement on counselling skills.

The primary purpose of the present study was to determine whether or not information about the evaluative criteria, given to subjects who have a cognitive appreciation of the general principles of counselling, leads to improved counselling performance. The question simply put was: Would there be significant criterion differences between a training group (trained in either human relations training or microcounselling), a training control group (receiving specific instructions prior to an interview) and a no-training control group? Counsellor effectiveness was evaluated on criteria drawn from the two training methodologies. Empathy, as a transactional measure of trainee level of facilitativeness, was the criterion from the human relations system of training. A taxonomy of three categories of counsellor utterances depicting the lexical or stylistic components of counsellor communications (Toukmanian & Rennie, 1975) constituted the microcounselling criteria. While these linguistic criteria are often considered to be independent of the human relations training dimensions such as empathy, genuineness or respect, there is some evidence to suggest that counsellor communication style is associated with empathy (Toukmanian & Rennie, 1975; Uhlemann, Lea & Stone, 1976). The

counselling instructions given to the training control group centred on the behaviours identified by the microcounselling taxonomy.

On the basis of the evidence showing the effectiveness of human relations training and microcounselling and the research indicating the positive effects of interview instructions, it was hypothesized that the gain by the training and the training control groups would be significantly greater than the gain by the control group on empathy and the three categories of counsellor communication. However, since empathy has generally been considered to be a complex interactional counselling skill (Carkhuff, 1969a) which taps both the paralinguistic as well as the stylistic aspects of counsellor responses and which reflects a counsellor's accurate focus on the deep understanding of client feelings (Frankel, 1971), it was further hypothesized that the gain by the training group would be significantly greater than the gain by the training control group on the criterion of empathy.

METHOD

Subjects

The experimental subjects were 30 female and 9 male psychology students enrolled in a fourth year undergraduate course in counselling. These subjects came from two sections of the course with a different instructor leading the seminar of each section.

The training control and the control groups consisted of a sample of 7 and 13 undergraduate psychology majors, respectively. These students were recruited from a counselling course taught by lecture without workshops. A third faculty member, unconnected to our research group, taught this course. Part of the content of the course was derived from the Truax-Carkhuff model of counselling. The members of both control groups volunteered for the research.

Criterion Variables

The measurement of empathy. The empathy dimension has been found to intercorrelate highly with other core conditions dealt with by the human relations system of training (Muehlberg, Pierce & Drasgow, 1969). Therefore, empathy, as assessed by Bierman's (Note 3) modification of Carkhuff's Empathic Understanding Scale was the dimension used in the present study to evaluate trainee acquisition of counselling skill. This scale assesses five levels of empathy. A counsellor communication typical of each level is described to assist the rater making judgments about taped client-counsellor transactions. The Bierman scale has been previously used in counsellor training research with reported rate-rerate and interrater reliabilities in the .90's (Bierman, Note 4) and

intraclass reliabilities ranging from .75 to .89 (Toukmanian & Rennie, 1975). Although the Bierman scale appears to be a more stringent measure of empathy than the Carkhuff scale, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient between the two scales when both were used with the same group of subjects was found to be .78 (Rennie and Toukmanian, Note 5).

Categories of communication. A taxonomy of counsellor responses developed by Toukmanian and Rennie (1975) was the second criterion measure used in the present study.² The measure consists of seven counsellor communication categories: minimal activity responses, open ended questions, bids for clarification, reflections, closed questions, interpretation and advice, and other. Each scoreable counsellor response unit (*i.e.*, a counsellor utterance occurring between two client utterances) is given a single categorization. Since the first four categories consist of counsellor interventions that are regarded as being facilitative of client self-exploration, for the purposes of data analysis, the frequencies in each of these four categories are pooled into a general category labelled, open invitation to talk. The resulting four main classifications, open invitation to talk, closed questions, interpretation and advice, and other, have been used in previous research and have shown to yield 75% interjudge agreement on rated counsellor responses and interrater reliabilities that range from .63 to .90 on each of the dimensions evaluated (Toukmanian & Rennie, 1975).

Procedure

Trainers and training workshops. Literature on human relations training and microcounselling has consistently demonstrated that beginning paraprofessional counsellors increase in levels of interpersonal functioning in as brief a time as three hours of systematic training (Butler & Hansen, 1973; Payne, Weiss, & Kapp, 1972; Ivey, Normington, Miller, Morrill & Haase, 1969; Dunn, Note 6). Subjects in this study received 9 weeks of training in either of these two systems. They met in groups of four to six, once a week, for sessions approximately 3 hours. There were eight training groups. Two advanced doctoral students in clinical psychology, experienced in both methods of training, conducted two workshops in each of the two training systems.

Human relations training. The human relations training model is a two phase methodology consisting of a discrimination and a communication phase. In the discrimination phase the trainee is taught in the use of 5-point rating scales to distinguish different levels of counsellor functioning. In the communication phase the trainee is taught, through repeated client-counsellor role playing experiences, how to interact facilitatively.

Since there is considerable evidence to suggest that skills gained in the discrimination phase do not generalize to communication (Carkhuff, 1969a; 1969b; Carkhuff & Banks, 1970), the human relations training programme implemented in the present study focused mainly on communication training. Discrimination training was held briefly whenever a new dimension was being considered. Subjects were trained on three dimensions: accurate empathy, genuineness, and respect. The training involved having trainees pair off into helper-helpee dyads and role play 10-minute counselling interviews. These interviews were either audio- or videotape recorded and subsequently replayed, rated, and discussed by the "client", the other trainees, and the trainer. Each trainee role played both a helper and a helpee approximately three times. Thus, trainee active participation in the counselling process, including the feedback resulting from each of the role playing occasions, entailed about nine hours of training.

Microcounselling training. Training sessions were focused on the acquisition of the following five basic counselling skills: attending behaviour, verbal following behaviour, minimal activity responses, open inquiry and reflections of feeling. The training process slightly deviated from the typical microcounselling training paradigm in that tapes of models depicting the expression of particular counselling skills were not used. Training for each skill began with an initial 5-minute audio- or videotape recorded interview of a trainee with a peer. The trainee was then asked to read a manual describing the target counsellor behaviour to be learned in the session. Subsequent to this, the initial interview was replayed and discussed by the trainer and the group in the light of the target behaviour under consideration. Following feedback and instruction the trainee reinterviewed the same peer in another 5-minute taped session. This second interview was similarly examined for further feedback from the group. Each trainee played the role of both the helper and the helpee approximately three times and was actively involved in the counselling process for about nine hours during the course of training.

Instructions. The following general instructions were given verbally to all subjects before their pretest interview with a client:

You will be meeting a person who will be discussing a real problem or concern with you. The two of you will be spending 20 minutes together. Your role during this time will be to be as helpful as you can with this person.

At posttest, the training and control groups were given the same general instructions as at pretest. Subjects in the training control group, however, received specific instructions in how to conduct the counselling interview. The specific

instructions encouraged the subject to (a) set limited goals for the interview; (b) encourage, through prompts and reflections, the expression of feeling; and (c) avoid closed questions and interpretation and advice.³ Subjects in this group listened to a 5-minute audiotape recording of the instructions while simultaneously reading a typed copy of them. At the end of the tape presentation, a research assistant collected the typed instructions and introduced the trainee to the client. Trainees were neither given the opportunity to ask questions nor were they allowed to discuss the instructions with the research assistant prior to their interview with the client.

Clients. Two groups of clients, each consisting of second and third year undergraduate psychology students, volunteered for the study. The first group, used at pretest, consisted of 24 females and 3 males. The second group of 19 females and 9 male students was used at posttest.

The clients were first asked to identify two or three personal concerns which they felt they could discuss in a short counselling interview. They were then encouraged to present a different area of concern in each counselling transaction.

Assessment and data collection. All subjects spent 20 minutes in transaction with a client prior to training and again after completion of all training sessions. On both testing occasions the subjects were randomly assigned to the clients, within the limitation imposed by scheduling difficulties.

All counselling transactions were audiotape recorded. After the completion of the experiment the tapes were edited for any identifying content. A 3-minute segment was obtained from the beginning, middle, and end of each interview. An 8-digit code was assigned to each dyadic interaction. The total set of recordings (both pre- and posttest dyadic communications) were then pooled and randomly transcribed onto a master tape.

Empathy was independently assessed by two raters who had been trained in the use of the Bierman version of Carkhuff's empathy scale. Two other raters were trained to discriminate between the three microcounselling categories of communication. Since these judges had to rate each counsellor response separately they were given sheets prepared by an independent person listing each rateable counsellor utterance. The raters then worked independently to produce their ratings.

Judges' average ratings of the three segments were collapsed to obtain a single score per subject per interviewing occasion for each of the criterion measures. Using the total number of utterances per subject per interview, the frequency data on the three counsellor communication categories

plus the "other" category were then transformed to proportions which constituted the basic unit of analysis for the microcounselling criteria.

RESULTS

Interrater Reliabilities

The "other" category was not analyzed because of few entries. The intraclass reliabilities (Ebel, 1951) on empathy and the remaining three microcounselling categories for each segment within the pre- and posttesting occasions ranged from .68 to .96. The mean reliability for empathy judges was .86. The mean interrater reliability for counsellor responses classified into open invitation to talk, closed questions and interpretation and advice were .85, .88, and .76, respectively.

Assessment of Training Factors

To examine the effects of various training factors, a 2(Trainers) \times 2(Systems) \times 2(Media) \times 2(Testing occasions) mixed design analysis of variance was conducted on empathy and on each of the three categories of counsellor communication. The unequal *n*'s per cell necessitated tests for three separate orders of effects. The results showed no significant effects involving trainers and systems. However, in each of the three analyses a significant main effect was found for media on the open invitation to talk communication category. Given that only one of the possible 28 main and interaction effects per analysis was significant it was considered appropriate to pool across the training factors to form a single training group of 38 subjects.

Group Comparisons

The pre- and posttest means and standard deviations on empathy and on the three communication categories for the training, training control, and the control groups are shown in Table 1.

The *F* values for the analysis of variance contrasts (Keppel, 1973) between the three pairs of groups on all criteria are reported in Table 2. These contrasts had 1 and 55 degrees of freedom.

As can be seen, results on three of the four criterion variables (empathy, open invitation to talk and interpretation and advice) supported the hypothesis that the gain by the training and the training control groups would be significantly greater than the gain by the control group. However, no significant differences were found between either of these two groups and the control group on the closed questions communication category. Finally, contrary to expectation, there was no support for the prediction that the training subjects would be superior to the training controls on empathy.

Table 1
Empathy and Communication Category Means
and Standard Deviations

Group	Empathy				Communication Category ¹											
					Open Invitation to talk				Closed Inquiry				Interpretation & Advice			
	Pretest		Posttest		Pretest		Posttest		Pretest		Posttest		Pretest		Posttest	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Training groups (<i>n</i> = 38)	1.30	.27	1.77	.51	.42	.16	.64	.18	.36	.18	.25	.17	.14	.12	.08	.09
Training control group (<i>n</i> = 7)	1.21	.22	1.74	.48	.40	.13	.70	.17	.39	.17	.19	.13	.17	.17	.10	.06
Control group (<i>n</i> = 13)	1.22	.23	1.30	.23	.36	.17	.40	.12	.42	.19	.36	.11	.14	.16	.18	.12

¹The communication category data are represented as proportions of total verbal activity. The category "other" is excluded from the table, hence the sum of the mean proportions of the three communication categories, for each testing occasion, is less than 1.00.

Table 2
F-Values of Analysis of Variance Contrasts Between Groups
Interacting with Testing Occasions

Groups	Empathy	Communication category		
		Open invitation to talk	Closed Inquiry	Interpretation and advice
TG vs. CG	4.79*	5.09*	.42	4.05*
TG vs. TCG	.65	.05	.16	.56
TCG vs. CG	4.72*	8.82**	2.03	3.96*

Note: Abbreviations: TG = Training group ; TCG = Training control group;
CG = control group.

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

DISCUSSION

The overall results of the present study were similar to those of previous studies indicating that microcounselling and human relations training increase communicational effectiveness in low functioning trainees (e.g., Haase & Dimattia, 1970; Berenson, Carkhuff & Myrus, 1967; Perkins & Atkinson, 1973). The results were also congruent with the findings of other investigations demonstrating that specific instructions are effective in changing verbal interviewing behaviours (e.g., Uhlemann, Lea & Stone, 1976; Rappaport, Gross, & Lepper, 1973).

The nonsignificant results obtained on the closed questions criterion between either the training or the specific instruction group and the control group were unexpected and puzzling. The results on the other criteria were clear and consistent in showing that, the gains by the

specific instruction subjects were not significantly different from those of the subjects receiving systematic counsellor training. The *F*-values depicting the significance of the difference between these two groups indicate that the smallest probability, associated with any of the comparisons, was greater than .25. This pattern included empathy, which is surprising in terms of our expectation that, in being a complex criterion, significant improvement on it would require role playing and rehearsal. It is possible that this finding reflected the quality of training given to the training groups. However, the gains on empathy by the training subjects in this study were comparable to those reported by other investigators using low functioning trainees (e.g., Carkhuff, Kratochvil, & Friel, 1968; Pierce, Carkhuff, & Berenson, 1967; Anthony, Note 7).

It will be recalled that the control and training

control subjects had a cognitive awareness of the Truax-Carkhuff facilitative dimensions by the time the subjects reached posttest. Apparently, for the members of the training control group, the specific instructions reintegrated that awareness. More importantly, these subjects were able to act on the reintegrated awareness in the absence of systematic practice at counselling. These results suggest that, for low functioning individuals, cognitive understanding of the general principles of counselling, combined with explicit guidelines about expected performance, may be as effective as elaborate training procedures designed to modify counsellor behaviours. As such, the results offer empirical support for Resnikoff's (1972) contention that there is a need, in counsellor training research, to control for the training subjects' awareness of the test criteria.

Further research is recommended to determine (a) whether or not specific instructions have a significant impact on subjects who are cognitively naive about desirable counsellor behaviours; (b) the maintenance of counselling skills acquired by the specific instructions vis à vis systematic training; and (c) the extent to which the results of the present study are generalizable to relatively high functioning trainees.

Footnotes

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Requests for reprints should be sent to S. Toukmanian, Department of Psychology, York University, Downsview, Ontario, Canada.

2. Detailed definition, as employed by the raters assessing the structures, are available on request.
3. The content of specific instructions are available on request.

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