

TOWARD AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN COUNSELLING*

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Abstract

A model of communication is offered in response to the need for a meaningful conceptual framework generating representative, systematic, and integrated research in counselling and counsellor training. The usefulness of the communication paradigm for the practitioner and counsellor educator in their conceptualization of the counselling and training process at molar and molecular levels, for the theorist in the study of different counselling approaches, and for the researcher in the formulation of problem, hypotheses, and design, is explored. The specification and systematic study of the complex interactions among the identified variables is intended to facilitate the development of consistently effective counselling and training strategies by counselling researchers and practitioners.

Résumé

Le présent article propose la possibilité d'arriver à une approche conceptuelle intégrée de la recherche et de la pratique en counseling. Les diverses possibilités d'intégration offertes par le modèle de communication sont explorées en fonction du praticien, du clinicien et du chercheur. On suggère l'utilisation commune de mêmes variables clairement identifiées autant dans une perspective de recherche que de pratique. Il est permis de croire que la spécification et l'étude systématique des interactions complexes entre les variables identifiées facilitera le développement de stratégies efficaces et consistantes de counseling et de formation par les chercheurs et les praticiens en counseling.

Counselling practitioners hope to identify effective and efficient means to help clients achieve their goals. Counselling researchers intend to facilitate the job of the practitioner by identifying important variables and successful treatment strategies. In order to achieve this end, researchers have attempted to find clear and consistent results which may be easily interpreted and generalized.

Despite this ideal vision, what is found in much of the counselling literature are conceptual ambiguities, methodological deficiencies, and unquestioned assumptions, which often result in apparently contradictory results, and a disturbing difficulty in replication. There are increasing numbers of nomological studies designed to test intuitive hypotheses about often ambiguous procedural variations. These realities seem to be

hindering the development of a systematically integrated body of knowledge in counselling.

The lack of a conceptual framework largely accounts for difficulties in replication, lack of systematization, and ambiguity of research. There is a need for a broad context through which we may put many of our nomological studies into a functional perspective.

The potential usefulness of a paradigm which conveys the complexity of counselling at a macroscopic level, while at the same time allowing for the intensive examination of counselling at a microscopic level, seems apparent. From a therapeutic perspective, one is interested in what treatment, administered by whom, under which conditions, are most effective for a certain individual, with a specific problem (Paul, 1969). As a researcher, one hopes for the unambiguous evaluation of those elements under investigation. Furthermore, given clear results, one must establish how these particular elements fit into the total counselling picture, if one wishes to achieve predictability for future situations.

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Part of the researchers' work has been in the identification of a paradigm which allows for the systematization of counselling research by accounting for the complexity of counselling, while also facilitating detailed analysis.

MODEL

The historical development of counselling and psychotherapy, when viewed from a broad perspective, may be described in terms of the marked diversity of theoretical viewpoints put forth. Agreement on basic aspects of the therapeutic relationships by proponents of different approaches is far less common. On one dimension, however, the degree of both theoretical and operational convergence is marked, namely the *significance* accorded to the interpersonal communication processes between therapist and client (Strupp, 1973). The long-standing psychoanalytic emphasis upon transference and countertransference effects, the major interpersonal components in Grinker's (1961) transactional model of therapy, Jackson's (1961) interactional approach, and Roger's (1961) concern with basic relationship attitudes are but examples of the pervading importance that has been accorded to the patient-therapist communication process.

To be useful to counsellors and counselling researchers, the concepts derived from such theories must be translated into counselling

terminology and the data generated from such theories must be replicated in non-laboratory, therapeutic settings. The adaptation of the interpersonal communication model to counselling interactions appears particularly appropriate for translation and replication. For example, the contribution of Schmidt and Strong (1971) and Strong and Schmidt (1970a, 1970b) illustrate the feasibility of utilizing the communicator expertness and attractiveness dimension of social influence for study of counselling interactions. What is needed is a model for the systematic application of social psychological influence conditions to counselling process analysis. Figure 1 presents a scheme for categorizing communication concepts which have been the foci of extensive experimental investigation by researchers from various disciplines. By identifying the documented elements of the five communication components basic to social interactions (i.e. source, message, presentation, receiver, and outcome variables), the translation of social-psychological concepts to counselling becomes more readily apparent.

Based on the centrality of communication processes in counselling and psychotherapy, we suggest an integrative approach to research and practice through a functional and multidimensional paradigm of communication. At the heart of this perspective is an assumption basic to complex behaviours that therapeutic changes are

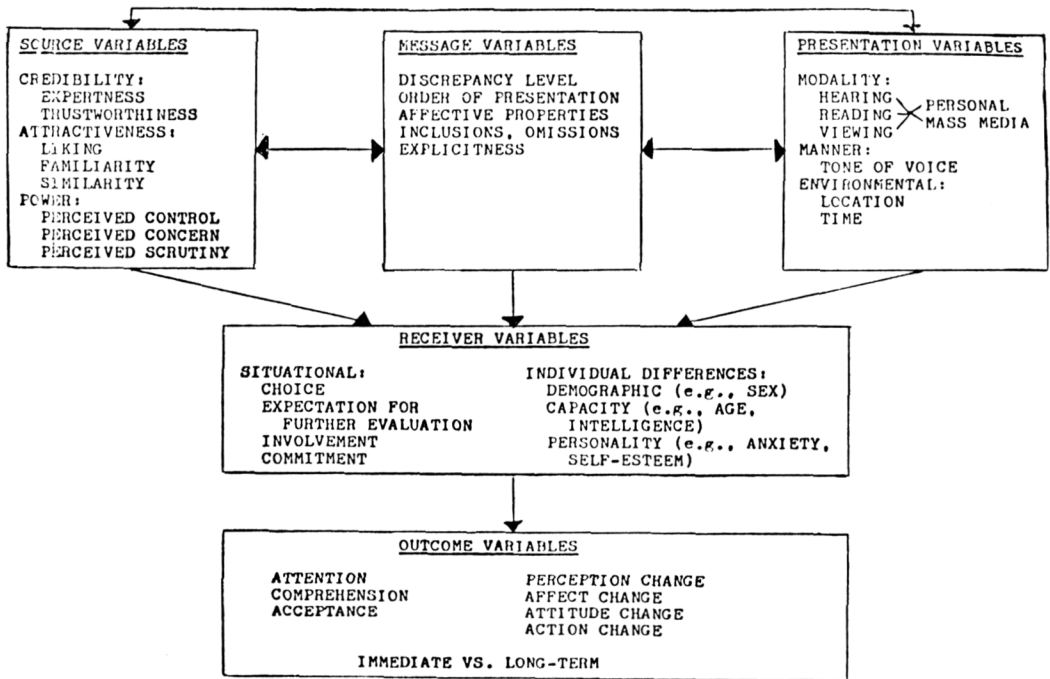


Figure 1. A multidimensional paradigm for counselling interactions

multidimensional and must at a minimum be considered within a broad and relevant context.

The utilization of a communication model is suggested here as the most meaningful way of viewing therapist-client transactions, not because of any greater parsimony implied by the construct but because this model enables us to integrate a wide variety of interdisciplinary findings in counselling research and practice.

A number of theories have been identified as having profound implications for counselling. For example, Hullian learning theory (Dollard & Miller, 1950; Pepinsky & Pepinsky, 1954), Skinnerian learning theory (Krasner, 1963; Krumboltz, 1965); dissonance theory (Goldstein, Heller, & Sechrest, 1966; Strong, 1968); attribution theory (Strong, 1968), social learning theory (Heller, 1969), and expectancy theory (Goldstein & Dean, 1966), all provide important perspectives for studying the counselling process.

This communication model facilitates an integrative approach to research and practice in counselling. In counselling, the basic variables of counsellor, client, treatment strategies, and goals, have been investigated. In counsellor training, aspects such as supervisor and counsellor trainee characteristics, teaching methods, and skills are typically examined. In research itself, one studies the effects of experimenters, subjects, treatments, and outcomes. These basic elements of counselling, counsellor training, and research can be incorporated into a basic framework, a common language, a practical scheme: that of communication. In fact, the communication model provides more than just a framework: it is, in fact, the basic unit of counselling, counsellor training, and the research process.

Specifically, when one speaks of counsellor, supervisor, or experimenter characteristics, the reference is to what we call "source variables". In the study of counselling treatments, teaching methods, and experimental treatments, the elements under investigation are "message" and "presentation" factors of communication. Client, counsellor trainee, and subject variables correspond to the "receiver" aspect of the communication process. Finally, counselling goals, skills, and research outcomes point to the "outcome" category in the communication paradigm.

IMPLICATIONS

As Figure 1 indicates, any counsellor-client, supervisor-trainee, experimenter-subject interaction occurs amidst a complex web of dynamic, interrelated, and interactive components. In order for any counselling research to do justice to the complex process, it must necessarily take into account all the elements present which may contribute singly or in interaction, to the ex-

perimental outcome. The identification of the multidimensional communication framework therefore has important implications for research design in counselling.

Interpretability

A primary goal of any research design is to create the conditions under which the effects of the independent variables can be evaluated unambiguously. It becomes evident from Figure 1, however, that a great deal of research in counselling overlooks many of the factors possibly confounding the experimental results. Typically, a few independent variables are controlled while the remainder are ignored. With the identification of all variables operating during any interaction, it becomes imperative to specify and control the influence of these variables on the experimental outcome, in order to attain interpretable results. The usual control procedures of randomization, variables, matching, or use of covariance techniques, can be selectively applied in the research design. The aspect of specification, although frequently difficult due to the subjective and individualistic nature of many of the variables (e.g., source familiarity), is a highly significant prerequisite and adjunct to the control of extraneous elements. Although this demand for specification and control of confounding influences greatly increases the researcher's task, it is clearly a necessary ingredient in the researcher's attempt to identify exactly which variables, singly or in interaction, at which levels, under which conditions, are contributing to a well-specified outcome of an interpersonal interaction. Although careful specification is frequently a complex task for multivariate studies of aptitude-treatment interactions or instructional effectiveness, this difficulty does not reduce the need to clarify and specify variables in the pursuit of interpretable results.

Generalizability

The problem of generalizability, or external validity as explicated by Campbell and Stanley (1963), questions the validity of generalizations made of an effect to other or larger populations, settings, treatment variables, and measurement variables. More recent articles by Bracht and Glass (1968) and Snow (1974) elaborated on Brunswick's (1956) work by distinguishing the concepts of population validity, ecological validity, and referent generality within the larger area of external validity. The major concern of the three areas is the extent to which the sample population, the sample treatment situations, or the dependent variables studied in an experiment, are representative, respectively, of the accessible and target populations, of the universe of situations, or of the range of possible outcomes to which the

researcher wishes to generalize. The objective of true representativeness, then, would be to sample randomly from the target population and from the universe of treatments or outcome variables to which one wishes to generalize.

Such representativeness cannot be approached until we adequately define and describe the populations and universes with which we are concerned. As Fredericksen (1972), Sells (1974), Shulman (1970), and Snow (1974) have emphasized, no taxonomies are as yet available which could aid the behavioural researcher in the description of population, ecological, and referent dimensionality. In light of this need, the compilation of information referred to in Figure 1 may be a step toward the development of such a taxonomy for counselling researchers. Although the factors identified are not exhaustive, they do indicate the range of variables that need to be accounted for within each category. In counselling research, sampling from the relevant factor dimensions within the categories of source, message, and presentation variables would approach the demands of ecological validity. Receiver variables and outcome variables correspond to the questions of population validity and referent generality, respectively.

Short of the ideal of representativeness, Snow (1974) stresses the need for detailed description of the sample population, the experimental treatments, and the dependent measures used, as well as for tests of interaction. Given the communication paradigm offered above, the conscientious researcher, without feasibly being able to measure all possible elements, can at least specify those source, message, and presentation variables which prior research, theory, or intuition suggest are relevant to this selected and well-specified experimental and dependent variables. With rigorous adherence to this basic principle of detailed specification of experimental conditions, replicability will be enhanced, and counselling research can move in the direction of systematic, cumulative, and meaningful research.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

There are several additional implications derived from the model of communication. First is the clear need for more multivariate studies. Experimental design must be consistent with the subject matter under investigation: complex behaviour in multidimensional situations. As authors have begun to point out (e.g., Berliner & Cahen, 1972), the discovery of stable interactions from multivariate designs examining multiple independent and dependent variables may be more meaningful and consequently more useful to behavioural researchers than the apparent main effects derived from univariate research.

A second series of implications addresses the realm of the counselling practitioner. The model of communication as presented has practical applications as it contributes to the counsellor's awareness of the complex nature of the counselling process. The model provides not only the means for a global vision of counselling, but also the possibility for the intensive analysis of any particular unit of counselling interaction. Such a microanalysis allows for the specification of the dynamic counselling process in the same way that performance-based approaches have detailed counselling outcomes. The usefulness of this scheme clearly has analogous implications for the counsellor educator in his supervision of counsellor trainees.

Finally, the communication model provides an interesting foundation for the theoretical comparison of different schools of counselling. The elements of the model offer a paradigm by which to meaningfully compare and contrast the assumptions, techniques, areas of emphasis, and intended outcomes of various counselling theories.

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