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STEREOTYPIC CONCEPTIONS VS PERCEPTIONS OF EXPERT COUNSELLOR BEHAVIOURS

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Abstract

Similarities and differences were investigated between subjects' existing conceptions of counsellor characteristics and behaviours, and their subsequent perceptions of these same characteristics and behaviours following videotaped samples of two counselling interactions represented by Rogers and Ellis who demonstrated client-centered and rational-emotive therapy. Both conceptions and perceptions were assessed by means of the Counselor Rating Form (CRF), and the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (BLRI). ANOVA results indicated that while subjects' existing conceptions and their subsequent perceptions of counsellor characteristics (e.g. attractiveness, expertness and trustworthiness) were largely congruent, in contrast, subjects' conceptions of counsellor behaviours (e.g. empathy, and level of regard) were much lower than their actual perception of the presence of these factors in counselling. The potential role of the socially stereotypic aspects of counsellor role and functions in subjects' perceptions cannot be overlooked.

Résumé

Cet article rapporte les ressemblances et les différences entre les conceptions que les sujets ont des caractéristiques et des comportements du conseiller. Il traite aussi des perceptions qu'ils ont de ces mêmes caractéristiques et comportements subséquemment à un visionnement d'échantillons vidéo-enregistrés d'interactions de counselling produites par Rogers et Ellis en vue d'illustrer la thérapie centrée sur le client, d'une part, et la thérapie rationnelle-émotive, d'autre part. Les conceptions et les perceptions sont mesurées à l'aide du Counselor Rating Form (CRF) et du Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (BLRI). Les résultats de l'analyse de variance démontrent une forte congruence des conceptions et des perceptions subséquentes que les sujets ont des caractéristiques du conseiller (e.g. attrait, expertise, crédibilité); par contre, leurs conceptions des comportements du conseiller (e.g. empathie et niveau de considération) s'avèrent fort différentes des perceptions subséquentes qu'ils ont de la présence réelle de ces facteurs dans le counselling. Pour ce qui est du rôle et des fonctions du conseiller, on ne peut donc ignorer, du moins au niveau de la perception des sujets, l'apport potentiel d'aspects socialement stéréotypés.

In the personality literature, there is now wide support for the notion that when we label people in a particular way, we typically ascribe properties of and features to that person which are consistent with the labels we adopt (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1981). Similarly, we

tend to formulate cognitive representations of event sequences that are consistent with the labels we use to describe specific situations (Schur, 1971). Some cognitive structure is clearly needed to account for our understanding of events occurring in a preconceived fashion, while viewing or thinking about a set of events — such as thinking about people and their attributes — provides us with a readily available set of anticipated instances

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that (more often than not) we expect will be confirmed (Ostrom, Lingle, Pryor & Geva, 1980).

In the counselling literature, however, there is some suggestion that clients and observers attribute certain characteristics to counsellors and that these attributions may be related to socially stereotyped expectations about the counsellor's role. Rotter and Stein (1971), for example, found attributions of altruism and truthfulness associated with the counsellor's role; and, Corrigan (1978), investigating the predominant attributes of friends and mental health professionals, found the salient attributes of the professional to be perceived expertness and trustworthiness, while the major attributes of the friend were perceived attractiveness and trustworthiness. Finally, Corrigan, Dell, Lewis, and Schmidt (1980) indicate that clients may have a positive stereotype of counsellors which leads them to attribute certain desirable characteristics to persons identified as counsellors. It seems important therefore to ask, firstly, what stereotypes or conceptions do individuals hold about counselling and those who function as counsellors, and secondly, how do such initial conceptions correlate with the individuals' perceptions following exposure to actual counselling events?

Initial impressions may be influenced (either negatively or positively) by exposure to therapeutic interactions, and different types of treatment approaches may affect existing conceptions in distinctive ways. Client-centered counselling, for example, may be seen as demonstrating more empathy than initially considered while rational-emotive counselling with a more cognitive approach may be considered less empathic than originally believed by observers. Although it is not clear whether stereotyped expectations apply equally to all therapies, there is some evidence that reported perceptions of counsellor characteristics and behaviours may well be similar across theoretical orientations.

The present study selected for consideration two specific areas of client conceptions about counselling: counsellor characteristics, and counsellor behaviours. The research, exploratory in nature, investigated the similarities and differences between subjects' existing conceptions of counsellor characteristics and behaviours and their subsequent perceptions of actual counselling behaviours following exposure to two different therapeutic interactions. Specifically, the study examined

observers' existing impressions or conceptions of counsellor characteristics and behaviours, and compared these observers' subsequent perceptions after viewing two distinct counselling approaches (client-centered counselling and rational-emotive therapy).

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 83 students (23 males and 60 females) enrolled in freshman psychology courses. They received course credit for participating in experiments and voluntarily selected those experiments in which they wished to participate.

Instruments

In order to provide a basis for comparison, the same two instruments were used to measure subjects' existing conceptions of counsellor characteristics and behaviours in the counselling interaction and their perception of actual characteristics and behaviours. It is recognized, however, that the use of such instruments to tap subjects' existing conceptions of counselling could have served to shape these conceptions and thereby introduced greater similarity into subjects' impressions than if an unstructured instrument had been used (Cook, 1979).

Two instruments were used to measure conceptions and perceptions of counselling. Firstly, the Counselor Rating Form (CRF; Barak & LaCrosse, 1975) contains 36 7-point bipolar items (e.g., enthusiastic-indifferent, and diffuse-analytical), 12 each for the measurement of the three social influence dimensions proposed by Strong (1968), counsellor expertness, attractiveness and trustworthiness. The possible range of scores for each dimension is from 12 to 84. LaCrosse and Barak (1976) reported reliability coefficients (split-half with the Spearman-Brown correction) of .87 for expertness, .85 for attractiveness, and .91 for trustworthiness. Secondly, the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (BLRI; Barrett-Lennard, 1962) was used to measure counsellor behaviour. The BLRI measures the dimensions of level of regard, empathic understanding, unconditionality of regard, and congruence (e.g., items include, the therapist respects the client, and the therapist is interested in the client). The observer form of the inventory was employed. The BLRI has 64 items (each of which varies along a 6-point continuum), has acceptable reliability (Barrett-Lennard, 1962), and has

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been used extensively in counselling research.

The order of presentation of the instruments was counterbalanced for both the measurement of existing conceptions and perceptions of actual counsellor characteristics and behaviour.

Procedure

Forty subjects were exposed to the client-centered videotape (Rogers) and 43 subjects saw the demonstration of rational-emotive therapy (Ellis). Before viewing the videotaped counselling demonstration, subjects completed the CRF and BLRI. They were instructed to use the two instruments to help them to set out their impressions and ideas about counselling. The instructions to the CRF and BLRI were modified such that subjects were asked to indicate their ideas and expectations of what they considered counselling to be. For the CRF, for example, subjects were instructed as follows: "Given your own idea of what counselling is, rate the extent to which each of the following scales would describe the behaviour you would expect of the counsellor if you were receiving counselling". Subjects were informed they were to view an experienced counsellor in a videotaped interview, and they saw either client-centered counselling or rational-emotive therapy. (These interviews were part of the *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy* series: Shostrom, 1966.) Following the viewing, the CRF and BLRI were again administered. The subjects were asked to consider each item and to indicate whether it was present in the interaction they had just witnessed between the counsellor and female client.

Results

Analysis of variance was conducted for each counselling orientation (client-centered and rational-emotive) with the factor (a repeated measure) being conception and perception of counselling.

With respect to counsellor characteristics (CRF), and the dimensions of attractiveness and expertness in particular, there were no differences between subjects' existing conceptions and their perceptions of these counsellor characteristics (see Table 1). For trustworthiness, however, there was a significant main effect over time (see Table 1). Subjects expected a higher level of counsellor trustworthiness than they perceived in the videotaped counselling interviews.

TABLE 1

F Ratios, Means, and Standard Deviations of Counsellor Characteristics and Behaviours for Observers' Conceptions and Perceptions of Client-centered and Rational-emotive Counselling

Counsellor characteristics and behaviours	F		Counselling type			
			Client-centered		Rational-emotive	
			\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD
CRF	0.05	Conception	65.5	10.1	66.4	6.4
		Perception	68.3	9.3	64.2	9.3
	0.53	Conception	73.6	7.0	72.9	10.5
		Perception	71.7	9.2	72.8	10.5
	4.42*	Conception	73.0	7.1	75.0	7.3
		Perception	72.7	7.7	70.8	11.4
BLRI	9.78**	Conception	22.7	7.1	20.8	11.2
		Perception	31.1	7.0	21.2	15.1
	30.83***	Conception	14.2	8.3	8.2	11.0
		Perception	23.0	9.8	16.3	15.2
	59.32***	Conception	16.1	7.9	10.5	12.7
		Perception	24.8	9.2	22.3	14.3
	65.07***	Conception	6.3	10.8	1.3	13.2
		Perception	16.5	10.4	12.6	13.4

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; $df = 1, 81$.

Note. CRF = Counsellor Rating Form; BLRI = Barret-Lennard Relationship Inventory. The range of scores for the individual BLRI dimensions was from -34 to +47, explaining, in part, the relatively small means.

With regard to counsellor behaviours as measured by the BLRI scales, all four scales (level of regard, empathic understanding, unconditionality of regard, and congruence) were significantly lower than the actual perceptions of these counsellor behaviours (see Table 1). For level of regard, in particular, the client-centered orientation was perceived as demonstrating markedly more regard than the subjects' existing conception.

It is acknowledged that the repetitive analyses of the same set of data by means of univariate analyses of variance may have inflated the rate of experiment-wise error by increasing the probability that at least one comparison would be declared significant when in fact the null hypothesis was true for all comparisons (Hummel & Sligo, 1971).

Discussion

This study provides information about the nature of subjects' existing conceptions of counselling and a comparison between these conceptions and the same subjects' perceptions of actual counsellor behaviour for two different counselling approaches (client-centered and rational-emotive).

For counsellor characteristics (e.g., attractiveness, expertness, and trustworthiness), subjects' conceptions and perceptions following exposure to a counselling interaction were largely congruent. They differed only in the

case of counsellor trustworthiness, where the actual perceived level was lower than the anticipated level. Although this finding may relate, in part, to the actual samples of counselling viewed by subjects, other data bear upon the issue. Barak and LaCrosse (1975), for example, found that subjects (undergraduate psychology students) differentially perceived Rogers, Ellis, and Perls in that Ellis was rated as more expert than Rogers. In the present study, however, subjects were informed that they were to view experienced counsellors and these instructions could well have confounded the results.

For counsellor behaviours, on the other hand, in the form of the relationship dimensions measured by the BLRI (level of regard, empathy, unconditionality of regard, and congruence) subjects' perceptions were higher after exposure to actual samples of counselling. In the present study, though, the significantly lower initial expectations about the extent of the presence of these counselling behaviours raise a number of issues. The current study did use well known professionals such as Rogers and Ellis, which makes generalizations tentative, but there are implications which could be pursued further. For example, are the lower existing conceptions due to lack of information about the specific counsellor functions that are part of the counsellor role? Do socially stereotyped aspects of the counsellor role consist more of person attributes than specific counsellor behaviours associated with role functions? What are the effects on the counselling process and eventual outcome of the counsellor disconfirming the client's expectations about the relationship dimensions? It does appear that whereas counsellor characteristics (e.g., attractiveness and expertness) seem to be relatively stable after exposure to the counselling interaction, the perceived level of counsellor behaviours such as level of regard and empathy appear more susceptible to influence by being rated more positively following counselling than the existing conceptions may initially suggest. Additionally, although the current results reflect trends for an observer group, further research may well assess the manner in which both counsellor characteristics and behaviours are perceived by clients who actually undergo a counselling interaction. It does appear however, that subjects in this and other studies (e.g., Holen & Kinsey, 1975) are able to differentiate the type of counselling witnessed in terms of the specific counsellor behaviours demonstrated. In other words, in terms of perceived counsellor characteristics,

following exposure to a counselling interaction, subjects could well attribute to counsellors, characteristics that were less desirable; alternatively, for perceived counsellor behaviours, subjects could consider such relationship factors more positively than they initially believed them to be. The suggestion then, albeit tentative, is that subjects' responses may not be purely stereotypic which raises questions about the extent to which the positive stereotype of counsellors as discussed by Corrigan *et al.* (1980), for example, actually leads subjects to attribute favourable characteristics to persons identified as counsellors. The present study, however, does not directly address the question of the potential relationship between conception and perception, and no causality is implied.

The degree of dissimilarity between subjects' existing conceptions and their perceptions of actual counsellor characteristics and especially counsellor behaviours (e.g., level of regard, and empathy) is noteworthy in light of the recent studies by Ostrom *et al.* (1980). These authors suggest that when client-subjects are asked to report an impression of a counsellor with whom they had a brief interaction or whose counselling behaviour they have just observed, they tend to rely on stereotypic information unless something in the situation or in the counsellor's behaviour contradicts the stereotypic impression. Further research is needed not only to explore the extent to which subjects' perceptions are influenced by stereotypic information but to identify specific counsellor behaviours that contribute towards or mitigate against a stereotypic response.

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