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## PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SUCCESSFUL COUNSELLOR

### *The Problem*

Arbuckle (1968) has keenly observed that in discussing characteristics of counsellors that one must be cautious of the validity of tags and labels. To recognize the validity of his point one needs only to recognize that complete honesty frequently masks feelings of hostility. Yet tags and labels must be the beginning point in any consideration of personal characteristics, and the use of caution does not negate employment of terms. Rogers (1942) stated that a counsellor should (1) be sensitive to human relationships; (2) display "controlled identification", a term which implies a recognition to the part of the counsellor that the sincere interest he has in his clients' problems need be counterbalanced by an acute awareness of his need for objectivity; (3) have and be able to project respect for the individual; (4) have an understanding of himself, with knowledgeability of his own limitations and shortcomings, and (5) have a good understanding of human behaviour. A study by Bare (1967) suggests that the variables of flexibility, energy and enthusiasm be seriously considered as indicators of good counselling ability. Weitz (1957) speculates that self-acceptance, sensitivity to a wide range of psychological behaviour and the ability to remain objective are critical in the counselling situation. It may be as Rogers (1958) observes: that almost any kind of behaviour may be helpful if the intent of the helper is to help; but would not the logical conclusion of that contention be that training of the professional counsellor is of no consequence, and that all that one really needs to counsel is a somewhat mystical notion that he somehow can be of help in some generalized aspect? Vontress (1969) notes the cultural barriers in the counselling relationships, and advances the idea that counsellor trainees need to be exposed to subcultures in society. As a final note, Fiedler (1950) concludes from his study that a dimension of great importance "which differentiates experts from non-experts is related to the therapists' ability to understand, to communicate with, and to maintain rapport with the patient."

Jones (1951) concluded that studies of personal characteristics of counsellors are both suggestive and helpful but are at the same time unsatisfactory for reasons including the fact that the lists represent merely the opinions of the people who make them and that, in the final analysis, it is the interrelations of patterns of characteristics which are important. Yet it seems to the writer that a publication entitled *Counsellor Preparation* prepared by the National Vocational Guidance Association (1945) is of a more realistic persuasion when it points out that, while the appraisal of characteristics is extremely difficult, it is possible to appraise them nonetheless. It is the opinion of this investigator that studies attempting to assess desirable personality and trait characteristics add significant data to the literature

relevant to counsellor effectiveness. With respect for antithetical positions, the arguments against either the isolation of a single desirable characteristic without regard for the constellation or the failure to recognize limitations are solidly based. However, the symbolic wringing of hands or, its verbal equivalent "what are we ever going to do?" is simply a denial of the reality that we are in a "doing" profession. We "do" what we can; recognizing that in our profession it is rare (if ever) that a definitive and positive direction is indicated.

### *Procedure*

The Directors of Counselling Centres of 75 Colleges and Universities were sent a questionnaire on personal characteristics of the successful counsellor. The institutions sampled were located in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Questionnaires were mailed out in June 1970, and returns numbered 63 (84 per cent).

The summary characteristics are listed as follows:

1. Professional attitude
2. Leadership
3. Knowledge of social and economic conditions
4. Honesty
5. Interest in people
6. Friendliness
7. Dependability
8. Tact
9. Intelligence, mental alertness
10. Sincere appreciation of people
11. Ability to adopt local grammar and colloquialisms quickly, but not in a "put on" manner
12. Ability to relate to people
13. Ability to make a good first impression
14. Broadmindedness
15. Positive attitude towards clients
16. Ability to make clients relaxed
17. Tolerance
18. Neatness
19. Sensitivity to attitudes and reactions of others
20. Trusted by others
21. Common sense
22. Health
23. Good character
24. Poise
25. Conceptual ability
26. Analytical ability
27. Ease of communication
28. Reliability
29. Respect of personal integrity
30. Awareness of alternate sources of help for the client
31. Ability to respond to feelings as well as words
32. Social intelligence
33. Fairness
34. Resourcefulness

35. Warmth and affection
36. Sympathetic attitude
37. Emotional stability
38. Objectivity
39. Broad knowledge and interests
40. Ability to "read" into the discussion for meaning
41. Feeling of responsibility
42. Ability to interact with strangers
43. Flexibility and adaptability
44. Understanding
45. Sense of humour
46. Appreciation of people different from one self
47. Patience
48. Awareness of one's own limitations

A scale was designed which allowed the respondee to give a particular weight to each characteristic. The categories of response for the scale were derived as follows:

**ESSENTIAL**—A personal characteristic that is, in your opinion, absolutely necessary for the individual to possess if he is to be a successful counsellor.

**VERY DESIRABLE**—A personal characteristic which, although not an absolute necessity in the same degree of significance as suggested by category one, is nevertheless quite important.

**DESIRABLE**—A personal characteristic considered to be of some importance for the individual to possess if he is to be a successful counsellor.

**UNIMPORTANT**—A personal characteristic that is, in your opinion, of no significant importance to the successful counsellor.

**UNDESIRABLE**—A personal characteristic which you would consider offensive in a counsellor.

**?** (Questionable)—The character lacks specificity: Difficult to understand or impossible to make judgment.

**N.A.** (not applicable)—Denoting uncertainty with regard to either significance or relevance.

Scale items 6 and 7 were included so that the ambiguous and/or irrelevant characteristics might be deleted in any future study.

*Results*

A rank order of means was obtained from the 48 characteristics from the 63 returned questionnaires. The personal characteristics in rank order are given in Table I. The means were calculated from the 1 to 5 scale as given; the closer the mean to the scale of 1 indicates that, in the opinion of the respondees, the characteristic is a very important characteristic of the successful counsellor.

**TABLE I**  
Personal Characteristics of the Successful Counsellor

ORDER	CHARACTERISTIC	MEAN
1	Respect of personal integrity	1.127
2	Interest in people	1.180
3	Sensitivity to attitudes and reactions to others	1.213
9	Understanding	1.357

ORDER	CHARACTERISTIC	MEAN
4	Ability to relate to people	1.278
5	Ability to respond to feelings as well as words	1.295
6.5	Trusted by others	1.338
6.5	Honesty	1.338
8	Awareness of one's own limitations	1.343
10	Positive attitude towards clients	1.377
11	Professional attitude	1.441
12	Sincere appreciation of people	1.446
13	Reliability	1.517
14	Appreciation of people different from self	1.557
15	Ease of communication	1.593
16	Dependability	1.622
17	Fairness	1.636
18	Flexibility and adaptability	1.649
19	Tolerance	1.672
20	Tact	1.721
21	Emotional stability	1.754
22	Resourcefulness	1.771
23	Intelligence, mental alertness	1.787
24	Broadmindedness	1.793
25	Awareness of alternate sources of help for the client	1.819
26	Warmth and affection	1.830
27	Patience	1.836
28	Feeling of responsibility	1.842
29	Common sense	1.893
30	Friendliness	1.916
31	Objectivity	1.918
32	Ability to make clients relaxed	1.966
33	Ability to "read" into the discussion for meaning	2.000
34	Social intelligence	2.037
35	Conceptual ability	2.100
36	Ability to interact with strangers	2.214
37	Good character	2.246
38	Analytical ability	2.266
39	Sense of humour	2.271
40	Broad knowledge and interests	2.379
41	Knowledge of social and economic condition	2.381
42	Ability to make a good first impression	2.500
43	Sympathetic attitude	2.526
44	Poise	2.625
45	Leadership	2.691
46	Health	2.896
47	Ability to adopt local grammar and colloquialisms quickly, but not in a "put on" manner	2.928
48	Neatness	3.113

#### *Discussion and Conclusions*

The result of this study suggest that the respondees place great significance on those characteristics which are demanding of interpersonal skills and deemphasize those characteristics which represent attributes of the in-

dividual. Generally, we see that the respondees (directors of counselling centres in the main) are more concerned with the counsellor's ability to warmly relate to clients than with the personal trappings in which the individual may invest. Significantly the findings do bear out observations made by previous researchers, and in this respect continued agreement upon the main thrusts of characteristics gives the counsellor-in-training as well as the counsellor in the field several valuable guidelines for personal development. But at the same time it is vital that the counsellor recognizes the validity of Arbuckle's (1968) observation that clients can and do react differently to the same characteristics when he states, "thus a client with extreme paranoid tendencies may view an honest gesture of kindness as very threatening, while another client would feel warmly grateful because of it." Yet, it is the opinion of the writer that simple acceptance of variability in clients perception of personal characteristics of the counsellor means that counsellors (and those schools involved in the training of counsellors) should give short shrifts to the internalization of characteristics, per se: rather it is incumbent upon the counsellor to become extremely knowledgeable of the net effect of his own humanity upon his clients, and hopefully maximize his effectiveness in interpersonal relating skills.

#### REFERENCES

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## DES CARACTÈRES PERSONNELS D'UN CONSEILLER REUSSI

Les Directeurs de Centres de Conseil de 75 collèges et Universités ont reçu une questionnaire à propos des caracteres personnels d'un conseiller reussi. Ces institutions étaient au Canada, en Grande Bretagne, en Australie, aux Etas-Unis et à la Nouvelle-Zélande.

Les résultats de cette étude suggerent que les réponses de ces institutions portent une attention spéciale à ces caracteres qui demandent l'usage des habilités interpersonnels et ne donnent pas la force à ces attribues individuels. En général, ces réponses (la plupart sont des directeurs des Centres de conseil) sont plus interessés avec la capacité du conseiller d'établir un rapport généreux avec ses clients qu'avec des qualités personnels du conseiller individuel.