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Relationships Among Personality, Empathy, and Counselor Effectiveness

Brian R. Brewer and Robert A. Apostol

Scholastic aptitude and other academic variables relate positively to success in counselor education programs (Blocher, 1963; Callis & Prediger, 1964) but it appears they have little or no relationship to counselor effectiveness (Arbuckle, 1968; Wittmer & Lister, 1971). In spite of the evidence on counselor effectiveness, academic variables have remained the most frequently used criteria for determining admission to graduate school programs in counselor education (Santavicca, 1959; Gimmestad & Goldsmith, 1973).

The problem of counselor selection is not one that has been ignored by the counseling profession. Most counselor educators are acutely aware of the need to go beyond academic variables and include the variable of personality in the selection process. The problem seems to be that there is so little agreement in the literature as to what personality characteristics relate consistently to counselor effectiveness. Moreover, an examination of this literature suggests other reasons why counselor educators have been reluctant to require measures of personality as part of the selection process. The studies are difficult to compare because of differences in subjects, instruments, criteria of counselor effectiveness, and statistical analyses; many of the findings have not been reliable; some of the instruments have been sharply criticized (e.g., Heikkinen & Wegner, 1973); the validity of using supervisors' judgments of counselor effectiveness has been questioned (Payne & Gralinski, 1968; Wedeking, 1973); and some of the studies contained weaknesses in design (e.g., Mills & Menke, 1967).

In order to examine the relationship between personality and counselor effectiveness, the present study included a measure of personality that has shown reliability over studies of this topic. It also included a new measure of empathy, used independent raters instead of practicum supervisors as judges, and utilized multiple criteria as measures of counselor effectiveness instead of a single criterion.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 34 volunteer counseling graduate students, 21 males and 13 females, enrolled in the masters level counseling practicum at the University of North Dakota and North Dakota State University. Their ages ranged from 22 years to 38 years. The students engaged in practicum experiences at a wide range of locations including public schools, vocational rehabilitation services, mental health centers, alcohol and drug addiction centers, juvenile hostels, employment bureaus, and senior citizen homes.

Instruments

Three instruments were used in the present study, the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16 PF), the Affective Sensitivity Scale and Blocher's (1968) measure of counseling effectiveness. The 16 PF provides an objective measure of sixteen independently functioning personality traits of the individual (Cattell, Eber & Tatsuoka, 1970). The Affective Sensitivity Scale is a measure of empathy obtained through responses to videotape segments of actual counseling sessions. Campbell, Kagen, and Krathwohl (1971) described the development of the instrument and presented evidence of its reliability and validity. The instrument is composed of 33 counseling segments involving 11 different clients and counselors representing a variety of counseling situations varying in emotional depth and content. Following each segment the subject answers a number of multiple choice questions to describe the affective state the client was "really" experiencing. The measure of empathy is the number of correct responses the subject makes.

Blocher (1968) developed an instrument to measure counseling effectiveness around five theoretical constructs of counselor behavior: Role adaption, cognitive flexibility, consistency of communication, perceptual sensitivity, and interpersonal involvement. From these constructs the five rating scales were developed and identified.

The instrument was adapted for use with audiotapes by Wedeking (1973) by omitting scale 3, Consistency of Communication Between Verbal and Non-Verbal Behavior. This adaptation together with further adaptations was used in the present study.

In the original use of the instrument, for each of the five scales, the judges viewed a counseling segment, responded to a list of from 14-35 questions pertaining to the counseling behavior of the particular scales, and rated the counseling segment on a one to nine point summary sheet. From these five summary sheet ratings an overall assessment of counseling effectiveness was made on a one to nine point scale. This procedure required a judge to rerun the counseling segment at least once for each scale prior to answering the related questions and making a rating.

In the present study the specific questions pertaining to the counseling behaviors of each scale were kept available for reference but were not responded to for each counseling segment. Each judge was made thoroughly familiar with these questions as well as Blocher's (1968) theoretical constructs and the design of the instrument. With this information, a rating was made on each of the four scales immediately after listening to a counseling segment. An overall assessment of counselor effectiveness was made by applying a clinical judgment criterion to the data.

Judges

The ratings of counselor effectiveness were made by three judges. These judges hold doctoral degrees in counseling and guidance and are practicing counselors in the field.

Once the judges became familiar with Blocher's Scale several meetings were held for them to practice using the instrument. At the end of these practice sessions several counseling segments were presented to the judges to test for inter-rater reliability. The product-moment correlations (reliabilities) were .82 for Role Adaptation, .67 for Cognitive Flexibility, .74 for Perceptual Sensitivity, .82 for Involvement with Client, and .76 for the Overall Rating.

Procedures

During the early part of the spring term of 1974, each subject completed the 16 PF and the Affective Sensitivity Scale. Toward the end of the term, each subject also submitted an audio tape recording of what he regarded as one of his better counseling efforts of the practicum experience.

From the tape each subject submitted, three segments of three minutes each were transcribed and placed in random order on a master tape. The three segments were taken from the first third, middle third, and last third of each tape. The master tapes were then submitted to the judges for their ratings of counselor effectiveness. The judges' ratings yielded nine ratings for each of the five counselor effectiveness variables. The ratings were averaged and each subject received one score for each of the five counselor effectiveness variables.

Product-moment correlations were computed between the 16 factors of the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire and the counselor effectiveness ratings; between the Affective Sensitivity Scale score and the counselor effectiveness ratings; and between the 16 factors of the 16PF and the Affective Sensitivity Scale score. Also, a backwards stepwise multiple linear regression was utilized to identify significant predictors of counselor effectiveness.

Results

Table 1 presents the correlations between the 16 personality factors and the counselor effectiveness ratings. Examination of Table 1 reveals 11 r values significant at the .05 level. Factor A (Reserved vs Outgoing) correlated $-.35$ with Role Adaptation and $-.34$ with Involvement with Client. Factor G (Expedient vs Conscientious) correlated $-.33$ with Perceptual Sensitivity. Factor L (Trusting vs Suspicious) correlated $.35$ with Perceptual Sensitivity, and $.36$ with Overall Rating of counselor effectiveness. Factor O (Placid vs Apprehensive) correlated $.32$ with Cognitive Flexibility, $.36$ with Perceptual Sensitivity, $.37$ with Involvement with Client, and $.32$ with Overall

TABLE 1
CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS BETWEEN PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS AND
COUNSELOR EFFECTIVENESS RATINGS (N=34)

Personality Characteristics	Counselor Effectiveness Scales				
	Role Adaptation	Cognitive Flexibility	Perceptual Sensitivity	Involvement with Client	Overall Rating
A (Reserved vs Outgoing)	-.35 ^a	-.26	-.27	-.34 ^a	-.28
B (Less Intelligent vs More Intelligent)	.02	.07	.11	.07	.11
C (Affect by Feelings vs Emotionally Stable)	-.06	-.13	-.15	-.27	-.16
E (Humble vs Assertive)	-.16	-.05	.02	.03	-.03
F (Sober vs Happy-Go-Lucky)	-.22	.02	.00	.02	-.05
G (Expedient vs Conscientious)	-.14	-.20	-.33 ^a	-.18	-.16
H (Shy vs Venturesome)	-.14	-.06	.01	-.03	-.05
I (Tough-minded vs Tender-minded)	-.05	-.06	.15	-.03	.05
L (Trusting vs Suspicious)	.26	.30	.35 ^a	.26	.36 ^a
M (Practical vs Imaginative)	.10	.06	.06	.04	.11
N (Forthright vs Shrewd)	-.13	-.16	-.22	-.20	-.17
O (Placid vs Apprehensive)	.22	.32 ^a	.36 ^a	.37 ^a	.32 ^a
Q1 (Conservative vs Experimenting)	.06	.13	.14	.04	.14
Q2 (Group-dependent vs Self-sufficient)	.11	-.03	.02	-.09	.02
Q3 (Undisciplined Self-conflict vs Controlled)	-.09	-.23	-.36 ^a	-.31	-.22
Q4 (Relaxed vs Tense)	.19	.25	.26	.32 ^a	.29

^asignificant at .05 level

Rating of counselor effectiveness. Factor Q₃ (Undisciplined Self-Conflict vs Controlled) correlated $-.36$ with Perceptual Sensitivity and Factor Q₄ (Relaxed vs Tense) correlated $.32$ with Involvement with Client. In summary, this study has found moderate but significant relationships between personality and counselor effectiveness.

Among the correlations between empathy and counselor effectiveness, only one correlation is significant at the $.05$ level; Empathy correlated $.36$ with Perceptual Sensitivity.

None of the correlations between the 16 PF variables and Affective Sensitivity Scale score is statistically significant. Thus this study has found no relationship between personality and empathy.

Discussion

The results provide a basis for a description of the personality characteristics that relate to counselor effectiveness for the counselors in this study. The correlation between Factor A (Reserved vs Outgoing) and Role Adaption suggests that the counselors who received higher ratings on the ability to choose appropriate roles and the ability to shift roles efficiently in counseling are less outgoing and less comfortable in their general interpersonal relationships than those who received lower ratings on these counselor skills. Also, counselors who were judged higher on the ability to understand and respond appropriately to counselee verbal and nonverbal expressions (Perceptual Sensitivity) are those who described themselves as more reserved than those who were rated lower on this effectiveness criterion. Further, counselors rated higher on Perceptual Sensitivity tended to be more expedient and less rule bound (Factor G), and more suspicious, hard to fool, and opinionated (Factor L) than those rated lower on Perceptual Sensitivity.

Those counselors who received higher ratings on Cognitive Flexibility, Perceptual Sensitivity and Involvement with Client tended to describe themselves as being more apprehensive, moody, worrying and sometimes depressed than those having lower ratings on these

criteria. Finally, counselors rated higher on Perceptual Sensitivity were less disciplined, less controlled, less socially precise but more empathic than those who were rated lower on Perceptual Sensitivity.

In summary, the counselors who received the higher ratings on counselor effectiveness were more reserved, apprehensive, less rule bound, and more empathic than those who received lower ratings. These results are at least interesting if not somewhat surprising. However, it must be remembered that the findings are relative to those who tended to score higher and lower on counselor effectiveness. Actually, the counselors in the study scored in the average range of all of the variables in comparison to published adult norms. Nonetheless, the results place in question the stereotype of the effective counselor as being outgoing, warm, conscientious, and trusting. Is it possible that a new breed of students is coming into the counseling field? If so, then counselor education programs must consider this possibility in their selection practices.

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