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CLIENT PREFERENCES FOR COUNSELOR CHARACTERISTICS:  
ATTITUDES TOWARDS HANDICAPPED

by

Benjamin D. Ewing

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Psychology

Approved:

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

1985

## DEDICATION

To Murl Wilmsen for reminding me of humility. To Susan Ewing for reminding me of acceptance. To Arthur Wilmsen for reminding me of responsibility. And finally, to my late grandfather, Russell C. Ewing, who reminded me that just because I've read a book, I don't know everything.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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With great appreciation, I want to express my thanks to Dr. Elwin C. Nielsen. His guidance and direction was always helpful and gentle. With his warm comments and support I was able to progress through this challenge.

I would like to extend heart-felt thanks to Dr. Keith T. Checketts. His reminding me of all the other research that I could leave to posterity was helpful. His family and his office were supportive of my efforts.

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I have family in California, Wyoming, Colorado, and now, Utah. They were patient during this three year sojourn and it is time for me to begin to get back in touch with them. For my friends here in Logan, and the members of the Cache Valley Gourmet/Yacht Club I am thankful.

Lastly, I want to thank M.E.K. who helped me start and asked me to finish on my own.

Benjamin D. Ewing



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## ABSTRACT

Client Preferences for Counselor Characteristics:  
Attitudes Towards Handicapped

by

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Utah State University, 1985

Major Professor: Dr. Elwin C. Nielsen  
Department: Psychology

The objective of this research was to constructively replicate the research of Brabham and Thoreson (1973) and Mitchell and Frederickson (1975) that led to the conclusion that handicapped counselors are preferred.

Subjects were 337 male and female volunteers enrolled in psychology 101 which was taught during the Fall Quarter, 1984, at Utah State University. All subjects were asked to indicate their preference when considering 20 hypothetical problem situations for one counselor from among six photographs of handicapped and non-handicapped counselors. The 20 situations consisted of three types (personal, vocational, and educational). Each subject's score was the total number of times that the subject selected a handicapped counselor.

T-tests for independent means were conducted to determine whether or not the group had a statistically significant preference for either handicapped or non-handicapped counselor when the subjects were considering all problems together and when subjects were considering

specific problem types. Results indicate that subjects have no significant preference for either handicapped or non-handicapped counselor when all problems were considered. For Personal problems subjects preferred handicapped counselors. For vocational problems subjects preferred non-handicapped counselors. For educational problems subjects had no statistical significant preference.

Interpretation of the results suggested preference for a handicapped or non-handicapped counselor is differentially affected by the problem type. It was recommended that much research remains to measure the magnitude of these preferences and the influence of these preferences on the process and outcome of therapy.

(47 pages)

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

It has been suggested that clients have implicit or explicit preferences for counselors (Rosen, 1967). Ziemelis (1974) found that matching of the clients with their preferences produced a consistent effect on both the client's and the counselor's perception of the process and outcome of counseling. Several studies have investigated the effect of counselor characteristics on preference of clients for counselors. Do clients have preferences for specific counselor characteristics? This question has generated many hypotheses. Some of the counselor characteristics which have been investigated include: sex, ethnicity, age and handicap of counselor. A particularly interesting hypothesis is that potential clients prefer handicapped counselors.

Several studies suggest that handicapped people are viewed less favorably than non-handicapped people (Siller, 1970, 1968, & 1963). It appears that this is a general perception held by many people. However, Acosta and Sheehan (1976), and Mitchell and Frederickson (1975) and, Brabham and Thoreson (1973) concluded that handicapped counselors are preferred by potential clients (i.e., more willing to discuss their problems).

Acosta and Sheehan (1976) based their conclusion on a different definition of handicap than did Brabham and

Thoreson (1973) or Mitchell and Frederickson (1975). According to Acosta and Sheehan, a person whom is not a member of the dominant culture is handicapped. This definition was offered when the authors were interpreting unexpected results. Their study was designed to investigate client preferences for Mexican-American vs. Anglo-American professionals and non-professionals. It was not designed to investigate preferences for handicapped counselors.

Mitchell and Frederickson (1975) concluded that handicapped counselors a) are preferred, and b) possess "an enhanced ability to understand and empathize." Their methodology, however, did not test their stated hypothesis which was clients would prefer a handicapped counselor over a non-handicapped counselor because the handicapped counselor has an enhanced ability to understand and empathize. Therefore their conclusion that handicapped counselors were preferred because they possessed a higher level of empathy is unwarranted given their methodology.

Brabham and Thoreson's (1973) conclusions are justified given their methodology. Thus, their study is the only valid research suggesting that clients prefer handicapped counselors.

In summary, there is minimal empirical data regarding client preferences for handicapped or non-handicapped counselors. Previous research by Mitchell and Frederickson (1975) has looked to investigate possible reasons for this preference and in doing so overlooked utilizing a testable



hypothesis. Thus, even the presence of client preferences for handicapped counselors is an unreplicated conclusion. Studies specifically designed to investigate the thesis that handicapped counselors are preferred and when they are preferred are needed. The results of these studies should be discussed in terms of a) reasons and b) further research to be done.

### Purpose

With the limited evidence to date, it appears that handicapped counselors are preferred by potential clients when the potential clients wish to discuss a problem. The previous research focussed on specific problems, but generalized the findings to include all problems. It was the purpose of the present study to investigate the validity of this generalization and also to investigate the effect of problem type on potential client preferences.

### Objective

The present study had one objective:

1) to constructively replicate the research of Brabham and Thoreson (1973) and Mitchell and Frederickson (1975) that led to the conclusion that handicapped counselors are preferred by clients.

### Hypotheses

The hypotheses investigated were:

1) There is no preference of clients for either



counselors with physical handicaps or counselors with no physical handicaps.

2) There is no preference of clients for either counselors with physical handicaps or counselor with no physical handicaps when the clients consider a specific type of problem (personal, vocational, or educational).

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Two areas of literature are reviewed, critiqued, and discussed. The first is the clients' preferences for counselor characteristics. This area focuses upon the literature concerning handicap of counselor and the suggested reasons for the preferences. The second area to be reviewed is the problem type presented by the potential client.

#### Client Preference for Counselor Characteristics

In a review of the literature on client preference for counselor characteristics, Rosen (1967) concluded that potential and actual clients do have explicit and implicit preferences for specific types of counselors. These preferences may determine whether or not clients seek counseling, may influence client-counselor interaction, and may influence the outcome of counseling. Several other publications stress that client attitudes, preferences, perceptions, and beliefs about the counselors are significantly associated with the processes (e.g., rapport and transferences) and outcomes of counseling (Frank, 1968; Goldstein, 1960; Sapolsky, 1965; and Strupp & Bergin, 1969).

Duckro, Beal, and Clay (1978) reviewed a number of studies concerned with the preference of the client for the directiveness of the response style of the counselor. Other

studies focused on particular preferences for characteristics of the counselor: sex of counselor (Briley, 1977; Fuller, 1963; and Koile & Bird, 1956), ethnicity of counselor (Acosta & Sheehan, 1976; Briley, 1977; Jackson & Kirshner, 1973; and Wolkon, Moriwaki, & Williams, 1973), age of counselor (Allen, 1981; and Boulware & Holmes, 1970), type of presenting problem of client (Bordin, 1955; Boulware & Holmes, 1970; Brabham & Thoreson, 1973; Briley, 1977; Grant, 1954; Grater, 1964; Koile & Bird, 1975; and Mitchell & Frederickson, 1975), and handicap of counselor (Acosta & Sheehan, 1976; Brabham & Thoreson, 1973; Mitchell & Frederickson, 1975; Pohlman & Robinson, 1960; Siller, 1970, 1968, & 1963).

Reviewing the literature that focussed upon the preferences of clients for handicapped counselors revealed conflicting reports and interpretations that do not seem to follow from the results. Siller (1970, 1968, & 1963) examined preconceived sets that people have towards counselors with apparent physical handicaps and concluded that handicapped people in general are seen less favorably than non-handicapped people. The type of handicap and the degree (level of incapacitation) of handicap were significant influences toward how less favorably the person was viewed. An example of this would be the person with paraplegia being viewed more favorably than a person with quadraplegia even though both are in a wheelchair. While Brabham and Thoreson (1973) did not cite Siller, they did

form a hypothesis that was consistent with his work (i.e., handicapped and non-handicapped clients prefer non-handicapped counselors over handicapped counselors). The hypothesis was not supported: subjects did not significantly prefer non-handicapped counselors. They appeared to find just the opposite. To explain this the authors suggest that a ...

handicapped counselor is perceived as having a greater credibility when he discusses another's problem in a counseling relationship.... His understanding of another's problem is considered enhanced by his own handicap. (p. 14)

The generalizability of Brabham and Thoreson's (1973) study is limited by two factors. The first was that no reliability estimate of the instrument was reported or determined. There is no reported evidence, to date, measuring the reliability of the instrument. It may be that client preferences for a counselor are not stable. The second flaw concerns their conclusions. The authors argued that the handicapped counselors were preferred because they were "perceived as having a greater [level of] credibility." (p. 14) This conclusion was not warranted because no definition or measure of credibility was made.

Despite the methodological flaws of their study, Brabham and Thoreson's study is important for two reasons. First, they provide a list of hypothetical problem situations (representing possible reasons for which a person might seek counseling). Second, their explanation that handicapped counselors are perceived as more credible that

non-handicapped counselors has been interpreted to suggest that handicapped counselors are not only more credible, but also perceived as more trustworthy (Acosta & Sheehan, 1976) and more empathic (Mitchell & Frederickson, 1975).

Acosta and Sheehan (1976), in a study measuring preference for counselor, found that a ...

Mexican American nonprofessional was significantly seen in a more positive way by both Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans than either the Anglo American nonprofessional or the Mexican American professional.... However, this finding is in line with the findings of Brabham and Thoreson (1973). (p. 278)

Presuming that the Mexican-American is handicapped by ethnicity, why are that Mexican-American nonprofessionals seen in a more positive way than Mexican-American professionals? To answer this question Acosta and Sheehan report that Brabham and Thoreson (1973)...

suggest that perhaps a therapist who is seen as handicapped in some way, whether physically or by life experiences, evokes an increased level of credibility and trust. (p. 278)

Acosta and Sheehan interpreted their results as suggesting that nonprofessionals are more handicapped by life experiences than professionals even though professionals have climbed higher on the occupational ladder. Acosta and Sheehan claimed that the Brabham and Thoreson results support this notion.

The problem, however, is that Brabham and Thoreson did not study counselors who were handicapped by life experiences and did not study, mention, or allude to the concept of trust. Acosta and Sheehan appeared to have

forced a handicap upon Mexican-Americans and equated credibility with trust and empathy. Certainly credibility is a component of trust and empathy in the counseling relationship, but they are not equivalent. A person with a doctorate may be more credible, but the degree does not necessarily mean that the person is more trustworthy and/or empathic.

In 1975, Mitchell and Frederickson reported that Brabham and Thoreson (1973) suggested that handicapped counselors are seen as having "an enhanced ability to understand and empathize" (p. 478). Mitchell and Frederickson set this in quotation marks, but Brabham and Thoreson did not report this and none of the other articles referenced by Mitchell and Frederickson did either. Nonetheless Mitchell and Frederickson (1975) designed a study to investigate two hypotheses of interest to the present study. Using the quote referenced to Brabham and Thoreson, Mitchell and Frederickson predicted that:

a) subjects would prefer handicapped counselors over a counselor with no obvious physical handicap "due to an enhanced ability to understand and empathize," [and] b) there would be differences in preferences for the type of handicapped counselor for the different types of problem situations.... (p. 478)

Using the same hypothetical problem situations as Brabham and Thoreson (1973), Mitchell and Frederickson asked subjects to select one from among four counselors that were presented on slides. The authors tested the first hypothesis with a one-by-four chi square analysis for



expected values for each of the 20 presenting problems. The second hypothesis was tested by visual inspection.

The basis for their conclusion was their second hypothesis which stated: there would be no difference in preferred counselor based on problem type. They then looked at the problems more closely and logically deduced that when clients were considering personal problems, they preferred a handicapped counselor. Mitchell and Frederickson assumed that for some one to discuss a personal problem that person would have to feel that the counselor would understand and be able to empathize with them. This was not true for all personal problems.

Mitchell and Frederickson reported that in only four situations was the non-handicapped counselor preferred. The four situations were vocational and personal (3 vocational and 1 personal). Because there were three handicapped and one non-handicapped counselor it would be expected that a non handicapped counselor would be preferred at least five times simply by chance. The results did not support the second hypothesis.

Several flaws limit the generalizability of their findings. The visual inspection method used to determine that handicapped counselors were preferred is a less powerful method than specific post-hoc statistical analyses designed to investigate specifically where the differences existed. It may have been that for a given problem situation two counselors were preferred at an equal

intensity.

The major flaw which serves to reduce the generalizability of their finding concerns the testability of Mitchell and Frederickson's first hypothesis. The first part of the hypothesis in question was "subjects would prefer a handicapped counselor over a counselor with no obvious physical handicap...." Mitchell and Frederickson attached "due to an enhanced ability to understand and empathize" much like a congressman attaches a "rider" to a bill which is likely to pass to ensure the passage of more questionable legislation. Previous research indicated that handicapped counselors would be preferred (Brabham & Thoreson, 1973) but did not state a thesis as to the reason for this phenomenon. Attaching the "empathy rider" to this hypothesis and then testing the hypothesis with similar methodology as was previously used would virtually assure that empathy would appear to be the reason for the preferences found. However, the authors neglected to control for, operationally define, or measure empathy. Because of this neglect the entire hypothesis was not tested, but the authors concluded that handicapped counselors are not only preferred, they are preferred because they possess an "enhanced ability to understand and empathize."

Mitchell and Frederickson's (1975) study is important because it is currently cited as evidence that handicapped counselors are not only preferred, but handicapped



counselors are more empathic.

Effect of Client's Presenting  
Problem on the Client's  
Preference for a Counselor

The type of problem presented by the client influences the client's selection of a counselor (Brabham & Thoreson, 1973; Mitchell & Frederickson, 1975). There have been three types of presenting problems studied extensively; personal, vocational, and educational.

Personal and vocational problems have been the subject of most of this research. Vocational and educational problems have been grouped together because of the natural link between the two. Thus when vocational and educational problems are considered there appears to be little difference in the preferences for counselor based upon these problem types.

A review of this literature suggests that clients will discuss vocational and/or educational problems with most any counselor. However, clients who want to discuss a personal problem are more discriminating towards counselors (Boulware & Holmes, 1970; Briley, 1977; and Grater, 1964). A reason for this discrimination has been suggested by Carkhuff (1971) and Rogers (1957). They both argue that more personal material will be divulged about a client when empathy and understanding permeate the therapeutic atmosphere.

## CHAPTER III

## METHOD

The present study was conducted in two stages. The first stage concerned estimating the reliability of the instrument. The second stage was the main consideration and involved presenting subjects with the pictures of the six confederate counselors and asking subjects to choose one of the counselors for each of 20 hypothetical presenting problem situations.

Stage One

Subjects. Eighteen subjects (9 male and 9 female) were utilized in the reliability estimate of the instrument. Subjects were enrolled in an undergraduate psychology course and their ages ranged from 19-28 with a mean age of 21.6.

Instrument. The list of hypothetical problem situations used in the present study was taken from Mitchell and Frederickson (1975). (See appendix for questionnaire.) The questionnaire was composed of 20 items. Each item required the subject to consider a specific problem and choose, on the basis of six photographs of counselors, with whom the subject would prefer to discuss the specific problem. The 20 items contained problems of three types: 9 -- personal, 6 -- vocational, and 5 -- educational. The counselors in the photographs were male, had no facial hair, ranged from 24 to 32 years of age, were caucasian with

various hair colors, dressed in sport coat and slacks, and were of the whole person against a photo studio background.

All subjects saw the same set of counselors, i.e., the position or roles of the counselors was not counter-balanced. The order that the four counselors appeared on the questionnaire was as follows: In the upper left quadrant was the counselor in a wheelchair, clockwise from there the role was non-handiapped, blind, non-handicapped, arm amputee, and non-handicapped counselor.

Procedure. The present study estimated the reliability of the potential client's preferences utilizing the Pearson product-moment correlation. Two weeks after the initial administration of the questionnaire a second administration was conducted. Subjects that were not present during either the first or the second administration were allowed to participate but their scores were not considered in the data analysis. The scores that were correlated were the number of times that each subject preferred a handicapped counselor on all 20 hypothetical problem situations.

Reliability. Analysis revealed a significant correlation (.83;  $\alpha < .0001$ ) for all situations. Significant correlations were found for personal, vocational and educational problems (.88;  $\alpha < .0001$ : .81;  $\alpha < .0001$ : and .72;  $\alpha < .0001$  respectively).

## Stage Two

Subjects. Subjects were 374 students (156 male & 218 female) of an introduction to Psychology course at Utah State University. Subjects ranged in age from 17 to 43, with a mean age of 20.7. All students in the class were invited to participate, but were not required.

Instrument. The questionnaire has previously been described in this paper. Counselors and handicap condition were counter-balanced to control for attractiveness. This required 24 different combinations (6 counselors X 4 handicap conditions). Thus, there were 24 different questionnaire each with the same set of questions, but each with a different set of photographs. Position of the handicap was the same as described earlier.

Procedure. Data collection was conducted during a regular class meeting and required approximately 25 minutes. Subjects were introduced to the study and instructed as to how to respond to the questionnaire by the author. The following instructions were read,

Hello, my name is Ben Ewing and I am a graduate student in psychology here at U.S.U. One of the requirements for my degree is that I conduct a study in an area of my choice. What I have decided to study is which counselors potential clients might prefer. People, in general, have many reasons why they may or may not seek counseling and the list on this questionnaire is by no means exhaustive. There are five tasks that I will ask you to do today, in the next 20 to 25 minutes. All five tasks are simple. You are not required to participate and if you decide not to participate you are invited to stay in the class and observe: your

teacher has a lecture planned. For those of you that do decide to participate all information that you provide today will be confidential and that means no one will be indentified individually. However, I need some way of describing my participants. For that purpose, please indicate your sex, now, in the appropriate space. Second, please indicate your age in the appropriate space, now. Third, to answer the items on the questionnaire, consider each item separately and answer each item as honestly as you can. To do this, I would like you to imagine that you are faced with the specific problem right now. Then choose one of the six counselors from the photographs on the last page of the questionnaire as quickly as you can even though the problem may not apply to you. Please consider only one item at a time and answer all items. To indicate you preference circle the letter which corresponds to the photograph of the person you prefer. For example, if you prefer counselor "F" circle the letter "F" under the situation you are considering. The fourth task that I want you to do is to answer the last question on the form. The last thing I want you to do is to not discuss the problems with any one else while you are considering the items. You are free to discuss the items after everyone has had an opportunity to answer the questionnaire. Are there any questions?

Any questions were answered by paraphrasing the above instructions. The cover sheet of the questionnaire restated the instructions for the subjects. No time limit was imposed and subjects were provided time to answer all items. Subjects were debriefed after all questionnaires were collected.

Subjects who indicated that they recognized or thought they knew any of the counselors in the photographs or who did not answer all items, were eliminated from the sample. Twenty-eight subjects (10 males & 18 females) indicated that they recognized or knew one of the counselors and nine subjects (3 male & 6 female) did not answer all items. The number of subjects that were utilized in the statistical

analysis was 337 (143 male & 194 female).

Analysis. To test the hypothesis that there was no preference for either handicapped or non-handicapped counselor, a t-test for independent means was computed between the group's mean score and the expected mean score. The expected mean score was the value that would be expected if the null hypothesis were true. If the null hypothesis was true, then the expected mean score would have been 10, therefore, the test was designed to test whether or not the group mean score was significantly different than 10.

To test the hypothesis that there is no preference for either handicap or non-handicapped counselor when clients consider a specific type of problem, a t-test for independent means was computed between the groups mean score for each problem type and the expected group mean for each problem type. There were 9 personal, 6 vocational, and 5 educational problems on the test, therefore, the expected group means would have been 4.5, 3.0, and 2.5 respectively.



## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### Tests of Hypotheses

It will be recalled that the following hypotheses were central to the study:

1. There is no preference for either counselors with or without a physical handicap.
2. There is no preference for either counselors with or without a physical handicap when clients consider a specific type of problem (personal, vocational, or educational).

Overall Preference. A  $t$ -test for independent means was computed between the experimental group mean score and the expected group mean to determine if a significant difference existed. No difference at the .05 level was found. This indicates that the subjects' group mean did not differ statistically in terms of reported preference for handicapped or non-handicapped counselors. (See Table 1).

Preference for Counselors by Problem Type. A  $t$ -test for independent means was computed between the group's mean score on personal items and the expected group mean on personal items. A significant difference ( $p < 0.001$ ) was found. This indicates that when considering a personal problem the group had a statistically significant preference for handicapped counselors. A  $t$ -test for independent means

was computed between the group mean score on vocational items and the expected group mean on vocational items. A significant difference ( $p < .001$ ) was found. This indicates that when considering a vocational problem the group had a statistically significant preference for non-handicapped counselors. A  $t$ -test for independent means was computed between the group mean score on educational items and the expected group mean on educational items. No statistically significant difference at the .05 level was found. This indicates that the group mean for educational problems did not differ statistically from the expected mean for educational problems. A summary of  $t$ -test findings is presented in Table 1.

In summary, when all twenty items are combined and analyzed the group did not significantly prefer either type of counselor. For personal and vocational problems the group preferred the handicapped and the non-handicapped counselors respectively. For educational problems the group did not significantly prefer either type of counselor.



Table 1

T-tests for Problem Type Between Group Mean and Expected Mean

| Problem          | Mean  | S.D. | d.f. | t value | 2-tail probability |
|------------------|-------|------|------|---------|--------------------|
| Combined<br>20   | 10.35 | 4.04 | 336  | 1.60    | p. > .05           |
| Personal<br>9    | 5.39  | 2.06 | 336  | 8.05    | p. < .001*         |
| Vocational<br>6  | 2.41  | 1.76 | 336  | -6.13   | p. < .001*         |
| Educational<br>5 | 2.56  | 1.40 | 336  | 0.48    | p. > .05           |

\* Significant values

## CHAPTER V

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter contains a discussion of the data presented and conclusions drawn from the data in this study.

Discussion

The first hypothesis, that there was no preference by clients for either counselors with or without a physical handicap was supported. This outcome is in direct contrast to the findings of several previous authors. Mitchell and Frederickson (1975) concluded that handicapped counselors were not only generally preferred over non-handicapped, but were preferred because of "an enhanced ability to understand and empathize." (p. 480). Rosen's (1967) conclusion that clients do have preferences for counselors and Brabham and Thoreson's (1973) finding that handicapped counselors are preferred more frequently over counselors with no physical handicap are two studies which also appear at first to be in conflict with the present study.

The second hypothesis, that there was no preference by clients for either copounselors with or without a physical handicap when the clients would like to discuss different problem types was not accepted.

The present findings partially support the previous findings of Mitchell and Frederickson (1975) and Brabham and Thoreson (1973). Subjects preferred handicapped counselors

when they were considering a personal problem and they preferred a non-handicapped counselor when they were considering a vocational problem. Subjects appeared to have no preference when they were considering an education problem. These findings support Rosen's conclusion that clients have implicit and explicit preferences more strongly than would a finding of a general preference. A general preference for handicapped counselors among clients considering the three problem types presented in this study would indicate an expectation (i.e., response bias) by the clients that they should choose a handicapped counselor. The suggested relationship between problem type and counselor preference found in the present study might further suggest that the problem type differentially supports Rosen's (1967) observation of implicit and explicit preferences of clients for counselor.

It therefore appears that when all items are combined the significant preferences of the subjects for a type of counselor are cancelled out. If subjects preferred handicapped counselors for personal problems, non-handicapped counselors for vocational problems and either (handicapped/non-handicapped) counselor for educational problems the over-all results would show no significant preference. When each problem type is considered, implicit and possible explicit preferences of clients are found. Further research is necessary to delineate the possible reasons for this outcome.

The finding that different counselors are preferred depending upon type of problem partially supports Brabham and Thoreson's (1973) conclusion. Brabham and Thoreson did not break down their problem situation according to problem type. If they had they may have found similar results. Their conclusion was based on a generalization from specific problems to all problems. The present study generalizes to categories of problems, but does not generalize to specific problems in each category of problem.

The purpose of the present study may have been transparent and the subjects may have answered as they perceived they should. That is, are the subjects answering the questions based on an idea (demand characteristic) that they should not appear prejudiced against handicapped counselors. If this were the case two results may have occurred. First as a form of compensation, it might appear that handicapped counselors are preferred across all problem situations presented in this study. As another possibility, it could be that the subjects would have no preference for a type of counselor. Because the problem type appeared to differentially affect the preferences of the subjects neither result was observed. Therefore, the subjects did not respond in a manner indicating the presence of demand characteristics.

One might also consider the possibility that the breakdown of problems and the significant results attained by such a breakdown are artifacts of the results regarding

the hypothesis regarding overall preference. Because the problems are independent and discreet it seems more appropriate to interpret the results as valid. It seems more probable that the results obtained regarding the first hypothesis is an artifact of the preferences found when individual problems were considered.

When subjects wish to discuss a personal problem they want a handicapped counselor. Perhaps the reason for this is that the potential clients who are considering the problem would feel more comfortable talking with someone whom they feel is more likely to understand them. Previous research (Brabham & Thoreson, 1973) concluded that perhaps people in general believe that handicapped people have suffered more than non-handicapped people or they have had a more difficult time climbing the occupational ladder (Acosta & Sheehan, 1976). Using the same logic, a person whom has suffered may be more able to understand another person's suffering. This may or may not be true, but it is a possible logical explanation for the significant results which were attained.

Subjects in this study preferred non handicapped counselors significantly more often when they wished to discuss a vocational problem. It may be that people perceive non-handicapped counselors as more able or successful in their vocation because they have no obstacle to overcome as do handicapped people.

Pohlman and Robinson (1960) reported that they found no



significant results when investigating client preferences for a listing counselor characteristics. Although, it was not their purpose to investigate the attitudes towards handicapped counselors, when they were looking for trends in their data, the authors reported that subjects rated counselors with obvious visual and hearing handicaps negatively. It appears that their subjects reacted with mild disfavor to counselors with obvious visual and hearing handicaps. In the present study, it may be concluded that handicapped counselors are not preferred when clients wish to discuss vocational problems. The conclusion that handicapped counselors are reacted to with mild disfavor cannot be made because subjects were not asked to indicate with whom they would not prefer to discuss a specific problem.

Acosta and Sheehan (1976), Mitchell and Frederickson (1975), and Brabham and Thoreson (1973) concluded that handicapped counselors actually have "enhanced" abilities. Perhaps handicapped people as a group are viewed less favorably as Siller (1970, 1968, & 1963) suggested, but when a handicapped person is presented as a professional he may be perceived as less handicapped. A critical difference between this explanation and the explanations of Mitchell and Frederickson (1975), Brabham and Thoreson (1973), and Acosta and Sheehan (1976), is that, in the latter, emphasizes that the handicapped counselor is perceived as less handicapped and not, necessarily, more able than the

non-handicapped counselor. This thesis better explains the results found in the present study.

In 1984, in the national media, Edward Kennedy Jr. described himself as physically challenged, but not physically handicapped or handicapped. This description not only has less stigma, but more importantly, it points to the intrinsic equality of people previously thought of handicapped and non-handicapped people. Perhaps when people are told more about a person than simply that the person is handicapped, they can view that person in an unbiased manner. Research is needed to test this notion.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to test the thesis that handicapped counselors are preferred by potential clients. Influence of problem type on preference for a handicapped counselor was also examined.

The data indicate that potential clients have no preference for either handicapped or non-handicapped counselors when personal, vocational, and educational are considered together. However, when each problem type is considered separately, potential client preferences were found. Potential clients do have preferences for handicapped counselors when considering only personal problems. Potential clients prefer non-handicapped counselors when considering only vocational problems. Potential clients do not have significant preferences for either type of counselor when considering only educational problems. These results partially support previous research.

Previous research suggested that handicapped counselors are preferred over non-handicapped counselors. The present study concludes: problem type (personal, vocational, and educational) differentially affects client preferences for handicapped or non-handicapped counselors.



### Implications and Recommendations

The major finding of the present study, that no overall preference exists may be the most important to counseling agencies. A problem in one area of a person's life rarely exists without influencing other aspects of that person's life. The preferences found in the study may be inconsequential if a client presents multi-modal problems. In addition to the multi-modal quality of problems, it is not uncommon for a client to initially seek counseling for one problem and later decide to discuss another problem (Beier, 1966; Gutkin & Curtis, 1982). None of the information to date supports a placement of a client with a handicapped or non-handicapped counselor based on the type of problem with which the client is concerned. While type of problem appears to influence the preferences of clients for a counselor, placement decisions would be inappropriate because the relationship strength remains unknown at this time. No research has been reported which focused on individual preferences. Group preferences are not applicable to individual placement decisions. Questions for counseling centers to consider for future research include: Would the preferences of clients diminish once counseling was initiated or would clients want to change all together to a counselor with different characteristics? Would it be beneficial to the client to change a therapist based on a change in preference of a counselors preferences? Would a

characteristic of a counselor influence the seeking of, entering into, process, or outcome of counseling? What is a significant preference i.e., at what point would a preference be great enough to warrant placement congruent with the preference?

The present study was designed to clarify the discrepancy between Siller's (1970, 1968, and 1963) conclusion that, in general, handicapped people are viewed less favorably than non-handicapped and Mitchell and Frederickson's (1975), Brabham and Thoreson's (1973), and Acosta and Sheehan's (1976) conclusions that handicapped counselors are preferred. Future research could focus upon specific problem types and explanations for the preferences.

The present study has implications regarding the area of prejudice. Stereotypes, as the basis for prejudice, are generalizations of interrelated traits of one person of a particular type to all members of a similar type (Shephard & Voss, 1978). Stereotypes breakdown when a member of a stereotypes category is viewed in different situations than the situation that originally gave rise to the stereotype. This appears to be what happened in this study. Handicapped people are viewed negatively for some reason, but when a handicapped person is viewed in a situation that is different from the situation that gave rise to the negative view, then the view must change or the new situation must be considered invalid (Allport, 1958). It may be that most people do not consider handicapped people as capable of

counseling, but when the handicapped person is presented as a counselor and when the situation cannot be discarded (because of the design of the study), then the view must be reassessed. Thus the stereotype breaks down. Because prejudice is based on stereotypes the prejudice against handicapped counselors also broke down.

Relating this study to the understanding and overcoming of prejudice must be done tentatively. The present study did not ask subjects to indicate with whom they would not prefer to discuss a problem. Thus the present study does not measure prejudice. This area deserves further research.

It may be that while significant preferences were found for personal and vocational problems, they were artifacts of large preferences on one or two specific problems in each group and relative indifference for the remainder of the problems of that type. The data in the present study was not gathered and managed in a manner which would facilitate this analysis. Mitchell and Frederickson's (1975) data indicates that the magnitude of preferences differed among problem types, but not significantly. This is an area which merits further research.

The present study manipulated a few obvious handicaps and the number of handicapped subjects was not controlled. Perhaps other obvious handicaps would yield different results as other less obvious handicaps might. Siller (1970) reported that level of handicap (degree of

incapacitation and visibility of handicap) influence whether or not a handicapped person is viewed in a negative manner. Other handicaps may be worth investigating. A liberal definition of handicaps could include psychopathology, divorce, culturally disadvantaged, and economically disadvantaged. Future research could study handicapped subjects' preferences for handicapped and non-handicapped counselors.

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APPENDIX

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Sex M F  
(Circle One)

#### INSTRUCTIONS

This study is designed to investigate which counselors a potential client might prefer. Previous studies have suggested that in general, people have many, varied reasons why they may or may not seek counseling and the following list is composed of only 20 possible reasons. The list is by no means exhaustive. People, also, may have specific preferences for a counselor depending upon the type of problem they would like to discuss. An example of these two principles would be, a person who prefers one counselor to discuss a financial problem might prefer a different counselor to discuss a more personal problem.

The following questionnaire requires six tasks of you, as a participant. All information is confidential and you may decide not to participate in the study at any time. If you are willing to continue, please follow the instructions below.

Indicate your age at the top of this page.

Indicate your sex at the top of this page.

On the next two pages there are 20 problems. Take each problem in turn and imagine that you are faced with the specific problem right now. You may have never had some of the problems described in the questionnaire, but just imagine that you are currently faced with the problem.

After considering the problem, turn to the last page of the questionnaire and choose the photograph of the counselor with whom you would prefer to work. To indicate your preference, circle the letter under the specific problem which corresponds to the picture of the person you prefer as a counselor. Try to do this as quickly as you can. Indicate your choice for each item before going on to consider the next problem. Please continue this process until all 20 items are completed. Complete all items. (It probably won't take more than twenty minutes.)

Knowing a person may bias your preference, so it is very important that we are aware of whether or not your preferences are based solely on the photograph. Please be sure to answer the last item.

Because this is an ongoing study, it is important that your experience here today not be discussed outside of the class. Please do not discuss your participation in this study with others who have not yet had the opportunity to participate.

If you have any questions please raise your hand. Now turn the page and begin the questionnaire.

Thank you

20 Hypothetical Presenting Problem Situations

1. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to discuss your doubts about the wisdom of your vocational choice?  
A B C D E F
2. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to work closely in your chosen profession?  
A B C D E F
3. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to discuss a clash of opinion between you and your parents?  
A B C D E F
4. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to discuss a legal problem you were having?  
A B C D E F
5. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to discuss your fearing failure in college?  
A B C D E F
6. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to discuss your confused feelings about your religious beliefs?  
A B C D E F
7. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to talk to find out more about your vocational abilities?  
A B C D E F
8. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you prefer to discuss a sexual problem?  
A B C D E F
9. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to discuss the merits and value of a purchase you were considering?  
A B C D E F
10. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to want help from in learning to study more effectively?  
A B C D E F
11. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to discuss your vocational interests, or lack of them?  
A B C D E F
12. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish do discuss your feelings of depression and/or thoughts of suicide?  
A B C D E F
13. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to discuss your courses, grades, or progress here at the university?  
A B C D E F

14. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to discuss your not getting along with a teacher?  
A B C D E F
15. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to discuss a personal health problem?  
A B C D E F
16. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to obtain certain occupational information?  
A B C D E F
17. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to discuss a marital problem you were having?  
A B C D E F
18. If you could select from among these individuals, with whom would you wish to discuss your feelings of inadequacy or inferiority?  
A B C D E F
19. If, from these individuals, you could select your college advisor or major professor, with whom would you wish to talk about a change in your program?  
A B C D E F
20. If, from these individuals, you could select your employer or immediate supervisor, with whom would you prefer to discuss a problem on your job?  
A B C D E F

\_\_\_ Yes, I recognize one of the counselors.

\_\_\_ No, I do not recognize one of the counselors.



20 Hypothetical Problem Situations

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Sex M F  
(circle one)

Please choose one of the following six counselors for each of the 20 problems. To indicate your preference please circle the corresponding letter under each problem.



A



B



C



D



E



F