

## Effective Counselor: Characteristics and Attitudes†

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Seventy-three National Defense Education Act trained school counselors, differentiated according to sex and counselor effectiveness, were studied for differences on cognitive flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity, and attitudes toward self, most people, most clients, and counseling. All of the counselors were similar in cognitive flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity, but the most effective counselors were more positive in their counseling-related attitudes than the least effective counselors. Both effective and least effective female counselors were more positive than male counselors toward counseling-related attitudes. Attitudes toward most people, most clients, and counseling differentiated the two counselor effectiveness groups and male and female counselors.

During the past decade, hundreds of trainees have been selected for National Defense Education Act (NDEA) and Education Professions Development Act (EPDA) Counselor Training Programs. Yet, criteria for selection to these programs have gained little in validity and consensus. Research measuring counselor effectiveness is, at best, equivocal. McDaniel (1967), Rogers (1963), and Whiteley, Sprinthal, Mosher, and Donaghy (1967) have pointed out the critical problem of counselor selection that results from a lack of consensus on what constitutes the effective counselor.

Humanistic therapists equate counselor effectiveness with accurate empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard (Blocher, 1966; Patterson, 1968; Rogers, 1963; Truax, 1963). On the other hand, behavior therapists, while not denying the importance of the counseling relationship, emphasize specific reinforcement techniques as being associated with effective counseling (Krasner & Ullman, 1965; Krumboltz, 1965; Sapolsky, 1960; Wolpe, 1958). A third point of view advocates cognitive flexibility (Whiteley et al., 1967) and tolerance of ambiguity (Brams, 1961; Gruberg, 1967; and McDaniel,

1967) as important characteristics of effective counselors. Therefore, the present study was directed toward the resolution of some of the conflicts surrounding the data on counselor effectiveness.

More specifically, the study was an assessment of differences between rated effective and ineffective counselors on cognitive flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity, and attitudes toward *self, most people, most clients, and counseling*. It was predicted that (a) counselors rated high on effectiveness would be more cognitively flexible, tolerant of ambiguity, and have more positive attitudes toward *self, most people, most clients, and counseling*, than those counselors rated low by their practicum supervisors; and (b) sex of the counselor would not be a significant factor when these variables were considered.

### METHOD

Most studies on counselor effectiveness have observed students rather than trained, on-the-job counselors (Patterson, 1968); therefore, the present study was conducted with counselors from five former NDEA guidance institutes at the University of Tennessee. During four summer sessions (1964-1967), counselors spent 35-50 hours in counseling practicum, and those in the (1964) year-long institute between 50-60. Videotapes and audiotapes of the counseling sessions were analyzed by supervisors on the counselor education staff. Supervisors knew the work of each counselor quite well, since the supervisory load

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consisted of only six counselor trainees. Overall ratings of "excellent," "average," and "poor" based on performance in face-to-face counseling situations were designated for each counselor at the end of institute training periods. The criteria for judging a counselor was evidence of client movement toward self-understanding, self-acceptance, skills in satisfying needs, decision-making skills, and specific goal attainment. In particular, the counselor was rated on behaviors such as the following: (a) establishment of a relationship in which the client felt safe to explore a wide range of concerns, (b) demonstration of sensitivity to inner experiences of the client, (c) confrontations of whatever was important to the client without being threatened by it, and (d) focus of the interview on matters of real concern to the client. The counselors receiving ratings of "excellent" were defined as the most effective group and those receiving "poor" ratings the least effective group.

Similarity of criteria used by counseling supervisors in rating counseling effectiveness for the five institute training periods was maintained in an ongoing research program by McClain (1968). Validity of the counseling effectiveness ratings was substantiated by scores made by the counselors on the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16 PF; Tatsuoka, 1968). Counselors in the "excellent" group scored two standard deviations higher than their counterparts in the "poor" groups on traits identified with effective counselors: warm, serious, venturesome, realistic, trusting, analytical, and relaxed. Tatsuoka (1968) reported results from multiple-regression equations for predicting counselor effectiveness from 16 PF scores. Computations were based on the point-biserial coefficients of correlation between 16 PF scores and membership in groups rated excellent and poor. The average group's mean efficiency score on the 16 PF fell midway between those of the excellent and poor groups. The projected scores of the average group constituted a partial cross-validation of the regression equations, since data from the average group played no role in the construction of the regression equations. Tatsuoka (1968), therefore, concluded that "... the supervisors who rated counselors for McClain's study did a very creditable job [p. 1]."

The range in time since training varied from 1 to 5 years for the counselors. Research indicates that change during training is minimal, and changes that do occur among trainees are not persistent; also, students tend to revert to their former attitudes (Munger, Brown, & Needham 1964; Patterson, 1968; Rochester, 1967). It was, therefore, assumed that the counselors' behavior and attitudes remained somewhat constant in the time elapsing between their ratings of effectiveness (1963-67) and the testing period (fall 1968). Seventy-three counselors (45 males and 28 females) participated in the study by completing and returning the materials via the mail. The most effective group contained 39 counselors (23 men and 16 women), and the least effective

group contained 34 counselors (22 men and 12 women).

Two case episodes utilized by Whiteley et al. (1967), were used to measure cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility, as defined by Whiteley et al. (1967), referred to open-mindedness, adaptability, and a resistance to premature closure in perception and cognition. More specifically as related to the counselor, cognitive flexibility is the ability of the counselor to respond easily to the content of what the client says and to his feeling. The counselor can answer questions that are necessary and yet keep the counseling dialogue open for additional exploration by the client. Flexibility implies setting a balance between excessive structuring in the counseling situation and the complete ambiguity of nondirection. Four counselors on the staff of the Student Counseling Center at the University of Tennessee were trained to rate responses to the case episodes according to the scoring system developed by Whiteley et al. (1967). Cognitive flexibility scores were based on the ratings on a 7-point scale that ranged from a score of 1 for flexible to 7 for rigid.

Hanson's (1964) modified version of Budner's Intolerance-Tolerance for Ambiguity Scale was used to measure the counselors' tolerance for ambiguity. Tolerance of ambiguity was defined as a tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as desirable. Ambiguous situations are characterized by novelty, complexity, or insolubility and cannot be adequately structured or categorized by the individual because of the lack of sufficient cues (Budner, 1962). Scores for the 7-point, intolerance-tolerance of ambiguity scale (a Likert-type scale) ranged from 16 to 112. Budner's eight positively worded and eight negatively worded statements were utilized in the study. Positive items received scores ranging from seven for strong agreement to one for strong disagreement with negative items scored in the reverse.

The semantic differential (Osgood et al., 1957) was used to measure counseling-related attitudes and contained 12, 7-point, bi-polar adjectives alternated in order and polarity. The counselors rated their own attitudes on seven concepts: *myself as I am now*, *myself in most situations*, *myself as a counselor*, *most people*, *most clients*, *counseling*, and *my purposes as a counselor*. The concepts utilized in the semantic differential were adapted from a report on counselor effectiveness by Combs and Soper (1963).

## RESULTS

Interrater reliability calculated for the two case episodes for cognitive flexibility showed 18 of 28 Spearman rank-order coefficients of correlation to be significant at or beyond the .05 level of confidence. When the Spearman coefficients were averaged in order to obtain Kendall's coefficient of concordance for inter-

rater reliability on each case, the results were: .45 for the case of John; .56 for the case of David; .40 between cases; and .50 for both cases. All of the coefficients were significant at the .001 level of confidence, which was determined by a formula for large samples (Siegel, 1956).

Results of a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  analysis of variance of the cognitive flexibility scores indicated no significant differences between the counselor groups on the cases, but the two case episodes were significantly different from each other ( $p < .01$ ). All of the counselors were similar on cognitive flexibility; however, they were more cognitively flexible on the case of David than on the case of John (see Table 1).

Neither counselor effectiveness nor the sex of the counselor accounted for the variance in a two-way analysis of the tolerance of ambiguity scores. The most and least effective counselors and the men and women counselors tended to score similarly on tolerance of ambiguity (see Table 2). However, the mean scores showed that the men scored slightly higher than the women.

In a  $2 \times 2 \times 7$  analysis of variance of the attitude scores, significant  $F$  ratios obtained for counselor effectiveness, counselor sex, and concepts indicated the three major sources of variances between groups ( $p < .001$ ). Variance attributed to interactions was insignificant (see Table 3).

The most effective counselors were significantly more positive in their attitudes toward

TABLE 1  
Summary of Analysis of Variance of Cognitive Flexibility Scores of Two Case Episodes for Two Counselor Groups

Source	df	SS	MS	F
Counselor effectiveness (A)	1	6.09	6.09	.2426
Counselor sex (B)	1	29.92	29.92	1.1920
Cases (C)	1	188.74	188.74	7.5111*
A $\times$ B	1	.52	.52	.0207
A $\times$ C	1	.21	.21	.0084
B $\times$ C	1	.21	.21	.0084
A $\times$ B $\times$ C	1	22.94	22.94	.9139
Error	65	1631.62	25.10	
Total	72	1880.25		

\*  $p < .05$ .

TABLE 2  
Analysis of Variance of Tolerance of Ambiguity Scores for Two Counselor Groups

Source	df	SS	MS	F
Counselor effectiveness (A)	1	.8303	.8303	.155
Counselor sex (B)	1	10.8830	10.8830	2.038
A $\times$ B	1	2.4248	2.4248	.454
Error	69	6277.5873	5.3397	
Total	72	6291.7254		

\*  $p < .05$ .

TABLE 3  
Summary of Analysis of Variance of Attitude Scores on the Semantic Differential for Two Counselor Groups

Source	df	SS	MS	F
Counselor effectiveness (A)	1	533.895	533.895	20.924***
Counselor sex (B)	1	297.316	297.316	11.652***
Concepts (C)	6	3550.050	591.675	23.188***
A $\times$ B	1	2.825	2.825	.111
A $\times$ C	6	92.610	15.435	.605
B $\times$ C	6	160.890	26.815	1.051
A $\times$ B $\times$ C	6	51.102	8.517	.334
Error	483	12324.228	25.516	
Total	510	17012.916		

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

*self*, *most people*, *most clients*, and *counseling* than the least effective counselors ( $p < .001$ ). Female counselors proved to be significantly more positive on the same concepts than their male counterparts ( $p < .001$ ). The counselors were more positive toward the concepts of *self* and *counseling* than the concepts of *most people* and *most clients* ( $p < .001$ ). Duncan's new multiple-range test was applied to the concept ratings in order to validate significant differences among the concepts.

The  $t$  test was used to determine significant differences between pairs of counselor groups on each of three dimensional factors on the semantic differential. Six of the 13 significant differences found were on the evaluative dimension, five were on the potency dimension, and two were on the activity dimension. Omega-squared was used to indicate the population strength of the statistical association and the predictive

power of the relationship between the semantic differential concept ratings and group membership (Hayes, 1963). The Omega-squared values derived from the significant differences between pairs of counselors ranged from .08 to .24. Four of the 13 values were from .20 to .24 and were considered to be moderately high, since .25 was suggested by Hayes (1963) to be high (see Table 4).

### DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicated that effective counselors are not more cognitively flexible and tolerant of ambiguity than ineffective counselors; male and female counselors also were not differentiated on these two dimensions. All counselors made higher scores on cognitive flexibility as measured on the case of David. The less ambiguous nature of the case of David which provided more cues was apparently responsible for the higher scores on cognitive flexibility and influenced the raters as well as the counselor responses. Perhaps the counselor can exercise more cognitive flexibility in the counseling situation when he has a clearer concept of the client's problem. An inverse relationship may, therefore, exist between tolerance of

ambiguity (a preference for ambiguous situations) and cognitive flexibility (maintenance of balance between excessive structure and complete nondirection).

The most effective counselors were more positive than the least effective counselors in their attitudes toward *self*, *most clients*, and *counseling*. As a group, the female counselors were more positive than the male counselors in their attitudes. Effective counselors and all female counselors viewed the *self* as more identified than unidentified, enough rather than not enough, and revealing rather than unrevealing. The most effective counselors were more positive in viewing *most people* and *most clients* as friendly, able, and worthy while viewing *counseling* as freeing, altruistic, and important.

The concepts differentiating the two counselor groups most significantly were counselor attitudes toward *most people* and *most clients*. Apparently, whether or not counselors view and act toward most people and most clients as being friendly or unfriendly, able or unable, worthy or unworthy is related to a counselor's effectiveness. Significant differences between pairs of counselor groups showed the most effective female counselors to be consistently more positive in their

TABLE 4  
Significant Differences between Counselor Groups on the Semantic Differential Concepts

Concept	Factor	Group Ms	<i>t</i>	Omega
Most people	Evaluative	M-1 (37.1) vs. M-2 (33.1)	2.37*	.09
		W-1 (38.0) vs. M-2 (33.1)	2.78**	.15
Most clients	Evaluative	W-1 (36.7) vs. M-2 (30.3)	3.55***	.24
	Activity	W-1 (10.2) vs. M-2 ( 8.6)	2.31*	.10
Counseling	Evaluative	W-1 (41.8) vs. M-2 (38.5)	2.04*	.08
Myself as a counselor	Potency	W-1 ( 8.1) vs. W-2 ( 7.2)	3.44***	.24
		M-2 ( 8.9) vs. W-2 ( 7.2)	3.06**	.20
	Activity	M-1 (11.1) vs. W-2 (10.6)	2.21*	.10
My purposes as a counselor	Evaluative	W-1 (44.1) vs. M-1 (41.1)	2.35*	.10
		W-1 (44.1) vs. M-2 (40.0)	2.97**	.17
Myself in most situations	Potency	M-1 ( 8.9) vs. W-1 ( 7.6)	2.85**	.15
		M-1 ( 8.9) vs. W-2 ( 7.2)	3.35**	.21
		M-2 ( 7.6) vs. W-2 ( 7.2)	2.32*	.11

Note.—M-1 = most effective male counselors; W-1 = most effective female counselors; M-2 = least effective male counselors; W-2 = least effective female counselors.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

counseling-related attitudes than the least effective male counselors. Evidently, these two counselor groups are the most divergent in their attitudes. Attitude similarities between all female counselors and effective male counselors relate to the Farson (1954) and McClain (1968) statements on "the counselor is a woman."

The most effective counselors were differentiated from the least effective counselors by their more positive attitudes toward *self*, *most people*, *most clients*, and *counseling* on the evaluative and activity dimensions of the semantic differential. Female counselors were differentiated from male counselors by their more positive attitudes on the evaluative dimension of the semantic differential for the concepts: *most people*, *most clients*, and *my purposes as a counselor*.

The results of the study support the need to research student attitudes as a viable criterion for admission to counselor education programs. While results of the present study were based on attitudes of trained, on-the-job counselors, several observations have revealed that counselors revert to their former attitudes following training (Munger, 1964, Patterson, 1968, Rochester, 1967). If attitude change is indeed a difficult task in counselor training programs, perhaps those applicants with positive attitudes toward counseling-related concepts should be given admission preference over an applicant with higher academic ratings and negative attitudes toward counseling-related concepts.

Generally, it may be concluded from the study that counselor effectiveness during training is related to on-the-job counselor attitudes toward *self*, *most people*, *most clients*, and *counseling*. Such a relationship between counseling attitudes and performance suggests that counselor trainees might work on personal attitude change and self-analysis at least as much as they do on counseling techniques. Special attention should be given to factors in the counseling situation toward which counselors may react negatively. Negative counseling attitudes could be stimulated while working with "nonpreferred" clients and counseling problems (Thompson, 1969).

The problem of communication between counselor and client may stem more from attitudinal biases than from gaps in mutual understanding of cultural differences. More important to counselor effectiveness is the feeling that the other person is a human being who is friendly, able, and worthy, and an approach to the counseling situation that is freeing, altruistic, and important. Counselors, if they are to be effective, will either have to work through their negative attitudes toward certain client types or refer these clients to a counselor who can feel positively toward them. How can a counselor who expects failure achieve anything else?

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