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EFFECTS OF POSTURAL SHIFTS ON COUNSELLING INTERACTION: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study recognizes the communicational nature of helping and the importance of the process conditions of helper empathic understanding, respect, genuineness and intensity and the helpee behaviour of self-exploration. Additionally, nonverbal behaviour is regarded as a critical aspect of helping interaction and for the helper this centres on a composite of variables incorporated within the concept of attending. Recently training and practice have emphasized a skills approach with the Human Resource Development model of R.R. Carkhuff being one comprehensive model which recognizes the positive functions of process conditions and helper nonverbal attending.

The technology of the skills approach can often be over-emphasized, and this can be seen for example in the manner of prescribing a forward-lean behaviour to enhance helper attending. Although often resisted by trainees, this deliberate lean frequently becomes an aspect of the trained helper's integrated repertoire. Experienced helpers have at times reported that such a deliberate movement often in and of itself promotes heightened involvement and increased levels of communicated process conditions. The present study was designed to examine the relationship between such a postural shift and helping interaction.

Twelve trained male helpers and 12 female volunteer helpees were the subjects. Each helper met three helpees in separate sessions. The sessions began with helpers in an upright attending posture and at a signal they had one minute during which to adopt one of three designated behaviours - a prescribed forward lean; a prescribed backward lean; or a choice of any posture. These alternatives were counterbalanced within the design to control for order effects. The overall duration of the sessions was 19 minutes (nine minutes for each of the pre-signal and post-signal periods and one minute for the signal period).

Data were collected from several sources. The primary data were audiotaped segments within the sessions which were given in random order to trained raters using Carkhuff's (1969) scales of Empathic Understanding, Respect, Genuineness and helpee Self-Exploration, and Truax's (1962) scale of Intensity. For each scale the ratings were pooled into

pre-signal and post-signal scores and analysed using analysis of variance with repeated measures. Supplementary data were obtained from the helpees, the helpers and from videotapes of the sessions, focussing on similar criteria to the rating scales. These data were analysed independently.

Analyses were done in regard to postural-shift conditions for the total helper sample then for helper sub-samples based on distinctions of forward or backward postural preferences. Results from the helping interaction data revealed significant differences on levels of Intensity and Respect in relation to the backward lean movement away from the initial upright posture. An overall pattern of differences between and within the postural conditions emerged on the scales, which suggested a compensatory relationship between verbal and nonverbal behaviours. On the whole, making a forward lean was associated with decreased levels on the scales and a backward lean with increased levels. This was most evident on the Intensity and Respect scales and in particular for those helpers whose preference was to move forward. The pattern of differences was considered in relation to Argyle and Dean's theory of compensation in the maintenance of an equilibrium level of interpersonal intimacy.

There were essentially no differences, based on the various postures, in the helpees' assessments of the helpers' communications nor in the helpers' experiences of the sessions. These findings were related to the equilibrium level of the helpers' overall communication, to the perspective of participating in the sessions, and to the likelihood of the initial upright attending position being an especially powerful pre-helping behaviour.

A strong and consistent finding was that helpers whose preference when given the choice was to lean forward, communicated at higher levels on all of the scales and were regarded as more competent counsellors by their trainers than those whose preference was to move backward.

The context of the interaction is important in considering the meaning of the findings of this study. The results may represent the helpers' maintenance of a subtle balance of verbal and nonverbal communication appropriate to the experimental setting. This would

suggest a transcendence of mechanical techniques in line with the intentions of Carkhuff and others using skills methodology. The relationship between a torso lean and levels of communication on the process conditions seems more complex than has been previously considered.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The question that this study addresses emerged as a result of my experiences in counselling practice and then more recently in the training of counsellors. It springs from a long standing interest in nonverbal behaviour and a belief in the importance of the relationship in helping, and crystallized at the point of trying to assess the value of skills applied in intentional ways.

Over the lengthy period of the project I have benefited in a variety of ways from the assistance of a large number of people. Thanks expressed at the time often seemed somewhat inadequate and I would like to record my gratitude here to several people who have been of particular help to me. In doing so, I recognize that the list extends beyond those acknowledged and not naming people in no way diminishes my appreciation of their assistance. In particular I wish to thank:-

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