

Effect of Postural Congruence on Client's Perception of Counselor Empathy

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This study investigated the effects of counselor postural congruence on client perception of the counselor's level of empathy. Specifically, it sought to determine whether a counselor who was mirror imaging a congruent arm and leg position of a client would significantly increase the client's perception of the counselor's level of empathy over the level of the client's perception when the counselor did not mirror image congruent arm and leg position. Eighty adolescents met individually with a counselor for 15 minutes to discuss career plans. Three variables were controlled for in this investigation: counselor's direct body orientation, position of counselor's head, and the empathy level of the counselor's verbal responses. The dependent variable was the Empathy subscale of the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory. In a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis of variance the results were, as predicted, that the clients would rate the counselor as having a significantly greater level of empathy in the congruent condition than in the noncongruent condition. Application to counselor training and suggestions for further research are discussed.

There has been a great deal of research reporting the effects of certain counselor nonverbal behavior on the client's evaluation of the counselor (Haase & Tepper, 1972; Harper, Wiens, & Matarazzo, 1978). Most of this research has measured the effect of a specific counselor nonverbal behavior on a particular variable. High levels of counselor eye contact, forward body lean, direct body orientation (Fretz, 1966), smiling (Bayes, 1972), head nodding (Gladstein, 1974), touch (Hubble, Noble, & Robinson, 1981), and certain arm and leg positions (Smith-Hanen, 1977) have been demonstrated to affect the client's positive evaluation of the counselor on such dimensions as empathy, warmth, genuineness, and expertness.

In a review of the counseling research methodology, Munley (1974) questions the generalizability of the results of many of these studies. One chief difficulty rests with the use of an analogue methodology. This method employs a brief 10-15-minute videotape of a counseling session in which a counselor maintains or does not maintain a

specific nonverbal behavior. The client, or in many cases only the viewer, is asked to rate the counselor on a specific attribute. Seay and Altekruze (1979) and Fretz, Corn, Tuemmler, and Bellet (1979) have pointed out in a series of studies that the positive effects of certain counselor nonverbal behavior on the client's or viewer's perception found using an analogue methodology do not produce similar results when the same nonverbal behavior is manipulated in an actual counseling setting.

Several factors have been introduced to explain the inconsistency of reported empirical data on the effects of counselor nonverbal behavior in a naturalistic setting. Young (1980) suggested that the client's overall perception of the counselor and the counseling process is a factor that influences ratings of a counselor. Experimental effect has also been introduced (Fretz et al., 1979) to explain the discrepancy. For example, a counselor in a naturalistic counseling setting who is told to exhibit preoccupied or nonempathetic nonverbal behavior may compensate for such nonprofessional behavior by being overly empathetic verbally. Without control for the verbal condition as well, the researcher may not be able to control for this effect.

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It is also possible that there may be other behaviors the counselor exhibits that become operative in a naturalistic setting because of the nature of the counselor-client interaction. These specific nonverbal behaviors cannot be anticipated and possibly confound the experimental design. This suggestion has been given strength by Lee, Hallberg, Hassard, & Haase (1979), who have demonstrated the presence of a reciprocal process involving nonverbal behavior between the client and counselor. By delivering a number of verbal reinforcers and nonverbal reinforcers following each reflection of feeling statement made by the counselor, the client was able to influence the counselor's rate of reflecting of feeling statements.

The importance of the reciprocal nonverbal process between client and counselor has been demonstrated in the observational studies of Charny (1966), Condon & Ogston (1966) and Scheflen (1964). It was observed in naturalistic counseling settings that counselors and clients often maintain postural congruence, that is, arm, leg, and head positions are in mirror-imaged positions. Scheflen and Scheflen (1972) define this postural congruence between counselors and client as an indication of empathy between the individuals. However, because these studies are of a descriptive nature, the conclusion that postural congruence is an indication of client-counselor empathy has to be questioned. In none of these studies has postural congruence been analyzed experimentally as either an independent or dependent variable. Moreover, one study (Trout & Rosenfield, 1980), which used counselor postural congruence as an independent variable, had its results limited because it used an analogue methodology of only 40-second video segments of a counseling session with the verbal sound track and the view of the participant's head eliminated.

In light of the conflicting data about the effect of counselor nonverbal behavior in a naturalistic setting on the client's perception of the counselor and the lack of an experimental study in a naturalistic setting on the effects of counselor postural congruence, this study sought to investigate the effect of counselor postural congruence on the client's perception of counselor level of empathy. It

was hypothesized that when the counselor maintains a mirror-imaged postural congruence with the client, the client would perceive the counselor as more empathetic than he or she would a counselor who did not maintain postural congruence.

Method

Subjects

Eighty high school juniors (40 males and 40 females) were randomly selected from a group of volunteers to serve as subjects for this study. All juniors at the selected high school were scheduled to receive individual career counseling as part of their regular guidance program. For the purpose of this study an announcement was made in all the junior classes requesting volunteers who wished to begin their career counseling program as part of a counseling study. Students were told that the first session would be 15 minutes, but an opportunity for further sessions with the counselor would be available. The only qualification was that the student would not have sought the services of an individual counselor in the past for career-related planning.

Each subject was given a number from a list of random numbers and then ranked according to number from lowest to highest. Each male subject was picked in order from the list and assigned to an experimental condition starting with Condition 1, then Condition 2, and so forth, until each of the four conditions had 10 male subjects. Each female subject was assigned to a condition in similar manner until each of four conditions had 10 female subjects. Each condition then was randomly assigned to a male or female counselor. Those subjects not assigned to a condition were referred to another counselor who was not participating in the study.

Counselors

The counselors for this study were a male and a female in their late thirties certified in New York State as school psychologists. The male counselor had completed course requirements for a doctorate in psychology and the female counselor had recently received a doctorate in psychology. Both counselors have counseled adolescents for 8 years.

Postural Congruence

Scheflen (1964) describes a postural congruent condition as one in which two individuals face each other and hold either their arms, legs, and/or heads in mirror-imaged positions. For example, when Person 1 raises the right arm, Person 2 will raise the left arm.

Procedure

Each subject met with a counselor on an individual basis for 15 minutes. The counseling process had as its goal to help the client clarify career plans by establishing

some behavioral goals. All the sessions were videotaped. In the first four conditions the counselors maintained arm and leg positions that were congruent with the positions of the subjects. To measure sex differences these four conditions involved assigning a male and a female counselor two groups of subjects each, one male group and one female group. The same counselor-sex and subject-sex distribution was used for the remaining four conditions, but under these conditions the counselors did not maintain congruent arm and leg positions.

The counselor initiated each condition 1 minute after the session started and continued the condition for the entire session. The counselor changed position each time the client changed position of either the arm or leg within the first four conditions only. This change was initiated only after $\frac{1}{2}$ minute had lapsed after the client changed. The counselor did not change position in response to a spontaneous client movement such as scratching or gesturing. In the second four conditions the counselor moved his or her arms and legs in a spontaneous manner but never into a congruent position with the arms and legs of the client. In all conditions the counselor's head was kept in a center position to control for possible effects of mirror imaging a right or left cock of the client's head position. The counselor also maintained direct body orientation 100% of the time in both conditions to control for a nonverbal behavior previously identified (Haase & Tepper, 1972) as influencing a client's perception of counselor level of empathy. This behavior is defined as the counselor sitting directly facing the client with his or her trunk directly opposite the client's trunk. To ensure that the counselor maintained the experimental condition during the entire session and to ensure that the counselor maintained appropriate body orientation and head position that was to be controlled for during the entire session, the sound was turned off on the videotapes and the two raters observed every 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-minute point of each session. A reliability coefficient was used to obtain an interrater reliability for these variables. In the training sessions the two raters had established a .95 reliability coefficient for judging presence or absence of the experimental condition and a .98 reliability coefficient for determining the presence or absence of direct body orientation and center head position. A comparison of counselor level of verbal responses across both conditions was conducted after the data was collected to determine the quality of verbal empathy expressed. The raters were given a written transcript of responses for every 4th- and 8th-minute point of the session. The raters were instructed to rate each counselor response according to Carkhuff's (1969) 5-level scale of Empathetic Understanding in Interpersonal Processes. An average of the two raters' ratings were used to obtain an agreement of the level of verbal response for each counselor in each condition. During training the raters achieved a .86 interrater reliability on rating verbal responses according to the Carkhuff scale.

Instrument

The Empathy scale of the Barrett-Lennard (1962) Relationship Inventory was administered to subjects

immediately after the counseling session. This scale is used to assess the client's rating of the counselor's expressed level of empathy. The client has a choice of six possible answers for each of the 16 questions relating to counselor level of empathy. There are three grades of yes (+1, +2, +3) and three grades of no responses (-1, -2, -3). The scoring range is from -48 to +48 for this scale.

Results

A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis of variance was employed to test the effect of counselor postural congruence on perceived counselor level of empathy. The three independent variables were condition of counselor postural congruence, sex of counselor, and sex of client. The dependent variable was counselor level of empathy. The main effect of condition of counselor postural congruence was found to be significant, $F(1, 72) = 13.70, p < .01$. The main effects for sex of counselor and sex of client were not found to be significant nor were the interaction effects.

To determine which condition, congruent or noncongruent, was instrumental in reporting significance, it was necessary to inspect the mean scores on the dependent variable. The clients' mean score on the empathy scale for the counselors in the congruent condition was 30.1, and in the noncongruent condition it was 23.0. These scores show that the counselor was perceived as more empathetic when he or she maintained postural congruence than when he or she did not.

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the level of empathy reported by clients on the Barrett-Lennard (1962) scale for the counselor in the congruent and noncongruent conditions.

The variables that were to be controlled in this study were maintained. The raters agreed 94% of the time on whether the counselors maintained 100% direct body orientation and agreed 97% of the time on whether the counselors maintained 100% center head position. The average ratings (based on Carkhuff's 0-5 Empathy Scale) given by the two raters on the level of empathy presented by the male counselor in the verbal responses to the client in the congruent conditions was 2.3 and in the noncongruent condition was 2.4. The average ratings given the female counselor's verbal responses in the congruent condition was 2.5

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Scores on the Empathy Scale by Sex of Client and Sex of Counselor in Congruent and Noncongruent Conditions

Condition	Client	
	Male	Female
Male counselor		
Congruent		
<i>M</i>	29.1	29.2
<i>SD</i>	5.9	7.3
Noncongruent		
<i>M</i>	23.3	26.2
<i>SD</i>	8.4	9.5
Female counselor		
Congruent		
<i>M</i>	33.6	28.5
<i>SD</i>	7.3	3.7
Noncongruent		
<i>M</i>	21.5	21.3
<i>SD</i>	10.5	15.0

Note. $n = 10$ for each condition.

and in the noncongruent condition was 2.3. The empathy level of the verbal responses of the counselors is considered equal during each session. The raters agreed 98% of the time on whether the counselor maintained postural congruence in the congruent condition and they agreed 96% of the time on whether the counselor did not maintain postural congruence in the noncongruent condition. The counselors therefore did maintain the appropriate conditions during each session.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that differences in counselor's arm and leg positions (congruent vs. noncongruent) can influence the client's perception of counselor's level of empathy. These results give empirical support to the theoretical concepts expressed by Schefflen (1964) that body extremity congruence between two individuals is an indication of rapport, interest, and understanding between them. The results also support the earlier research by Schefflen (1965) and Charny (1966) indicating that postural congruence has an effect on the counseling process as well. Finally, the re-

sults support the theoretical definition of empathy expressed by Buehheimer (1963) and Hastorf and Bender (1952) that one of the dimensions of empathy, especially in the initial stages of a relationship, is that of imitating the kinesic position of another.

The relative strength ($p < .01$) of the effect of the postural congruence condition has been shown. No significant findings were found on the effects of counselor sex and client sex and the interactions of each. This may be due to a number of factors. First, the clients may have viewed the counselors as somewhat similar. The counselors were approximately the same age and had about the same number of years' experience in counseling. Also, it has been shown that the counselors' verbal responses were rated as similar in level of expressed empathy. Second, the client sample was similar in age level and grade level for males and females and also across conditions. Therefore, any differences accountable to client sample may have been small.

Although this investigation is more natural than past analogue research, it still has some attributes of the analogue realm. The clients were recruited for an experiment, told it would last only 15 minutes, and audio-visual equipment was present for recording. The attribute that made this research more natural than others perhaps is that it allows the counselor and client to interact with each other in a dynamic, spontaneous manner without being limited to predetermined roles. As a result, the conditions of postural congruence are seen by the client as part of the natural interaction process of the counselor.

The importance of the present investigation lies in the fact that it suggests additional procedures or skills in the area of nonverbal behavior that a counselor may use to positively affect the counseling process. Most training programs in the use of counseling skills do not emphasize the opportunity a counselor may have to increase the client's perception of the counselor's level of empathy by using postural congruence. The need for the client to perceive the counselor with a high degree of empathy has been emphasized by Brammer (1973), who cites empathy as the principal condition for the counselor to understand the client and for the client to

feel understood. Carkhuff (1969) states that without the condition of empathy there is no basis for helping in a counseling setting.

There were a number of unexpected effects observed on the videotapes after the data was collected. The first was that as the sessions progressed, 10% of the clients in the noncongruent counseling session moved arm and/or leg position to match the arm or leg position of the counselors. This resulted in the counselor having to change arm or leg position to avoid the congruent condition. It is possible that these clients perceived the counselors so positively that they sought to imitate them. The second effect observed was that 2% of the clients in both conditions shifted arm and/or leg positions when there was a change in the context of discussion or when the counselor made a self-disclosure statement. For example, the client would move an arm or leg when shifting from discussion of career plans to conversation about personal problems. Or, the client would move arm and leg positions when the counselor initiated a conversation about his or her own personal career decisions. It is possible, then, that postural congruence can be a marker for shifts in the verbal dialogue.

Since the effect of postural congruence has been demonstrated with a client population of adolescents, it is recommended that the methodology of this investigation be extended to include older and younger clients. There was a possible "authority effect" present in this investigation, since the counselors were on the average 17 years older than the clients. Would the same effects be demonstrable if the clients were of approximately the same age as the counselor? This study included counseling that dealt primarily with career planning for adolescents. It is recommended that this technique be used with different types of counseling such as emotional, academic, assertive training, and behavior modification to determine if there is a differential effect for type of counseling. The unexpected effects observed (during the sessions in which the client matched the counselor's postural position in the noncongruent conditions) and the possible correlated shifts of postural positions and verbal content are other areas warranting investigation if the effects of counselor postural congruence are to be fully

explored. Last, it is recommended that the effects of client postural congruence with the counselor be investigated. The purpose of this would be to further study the reciprocal process in the counseling setting with regard to nonverbal behavior. Lee et al. (1979) have demonstrated that specific nonverbal behaviors of the client can influence specific counselor behaviors. The counselor is no longer perceived as being able to manipulate the feelings and behavior of the client by showing a certain nonverbal behavior. Rather, the counseling process is seen as an active forum for multiple sets of dynamics to occur.

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