Brief Reports

Effect of Counselor Attire in an Initial Interview

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The effect of counselor attire on clients' state anxiety, willingness to self-disclose, and preference to be counseled by the counselor seen in the study was examined in an initial interview. Clients were 50 female undergraduates at an eastern university, and counselors were three male doctoral students in counseling psychology. Counselor attire was fixed at three levels: traditional (coat and tie), casual (sport shirt and slacks), and highly casual (sweat shirt and jeans). Clients experienced significantly lower anxiety with counselors in casual versus highly casual attire, although no differences emerged between traditionally and casually attired counselors. Client report of her own typical dress was a crucial moderator. Those whose attire was typically casual manifested the most positive reaction to traditionally attired counselors, whereas those whose dress was typically highly casual exhibited the most positive reaction to casually attired counselors. Contrary to expectation, client dogmatism did not moderate the effects of attire on our dependent variables.

In many counseling agencies, especially those employing graduate student trainees, it is not at all uncommon to observe counselor attire ranging from the sweat shirt and jeans genre on one end of the continuum to the coat and tie or dress on the other. It makes sense to view the wide variability in attire as a reflection of increased variability and liberalization of dress codes in the broader culture. Yet the acceptability of a variety of dress does not imply that the level of casualness–formality of counselor attire does not influence the counseling process. Such an influence would be most likely manifested through initial expectancies that the counselor's appearance, including attire, stimulates in clients. Over the years writers have made note of this potential influence (Delaney & Eisenberg, 1973; Robinson, 1950), but researchers have given little attention to the role of attire in counseling.

Although earlier social psychological research had been done on the effect of communicator attire (e.g., Aronson & Golden, 1962), the first direct experimental test of the effect of counselor attire was conducted by Stillman and Resnick (1972). Contrary to their hypotheses, professionally attired male counselors (coat and tie) did not elicit greater self-disclosure and attractiveness ratings from male client–subjects than did casually attired counselors (sport shirt and slacks). Similarly, work by Kerr and Dell (1976) and Pricer (1971) yielded mixed results at best regarding the role of counselor attire.

The mixed results noted above may be a function of serious methodological limitations. To date, only two levels of attire, professional and casual, have been compared, while it is now fairly typical for counselors to dress in a *highly* casual way. Also, none of the research has examined client factors (e.g., clients' typical attire, personality) potentially moderating the effect of attire. Finally, the three studies cited above employ a limited range of dependent variables. The present study extended prior research by correcting for these limitations. We compared three levels of attire (traditional, casual, *and highly casual*), attempted to determine if attire effects depend upon both the client's preferred attire and level of dogmatism, and employed several dependent variables. Finally, male counselor –female client dyads were studied, since that may be the most common sex pairing in counseling centers and because some evidence (Pricer, 1971) suggests that sensitivity to attire does occur in such dyads.

Method

Subjects and Counselors

Subjects were 54 females enrolled in introductory psychology in a large public eastern university. (This was probably a typical public university regarding student attire, with students usually dressing casually or very casually.) The modal subject was a 19-year-old freshman. Sign-up sheets were posted on a psychology bulletin board. Subjects were required to have real personal problems which they wanted to discuss with a counselor who would be a doctoral student in counseling psychology.

Counselors were three male doctoral students in counseling psychology. Two of them (ages 25 and 33) had completed three individual counseling practica, and the third (age 23) had no prior practicum. The less formally trained counselor, however, had much informal training, for example, hotline, marathon group. Counselors were asked by the experimenters to use their own style and to interact with clients in a supportive, helpful manner. They were also told to allow their attire condition to affect their styles as little as possible.

Instrumentation

All instruments were completed immediately following the counseling session. Dependent variables were based on past attire research as well as the researchers' expectations. These variables were clients' *state anxiety, willingness to self-disclose,* and *preference to be counseled by the counselor seen in the session.* Anxiety was assessed by the A-State Anxiety Scale (Spielberger, Gorusch, & Lushene, 1970), a 20-item Likert scale measuring subjects' reported situational/transitory anxiety. Subjects responded in terms of how they felt during their session.

The Disclosure Scale (Shapiro, Krauss, & Truax, 1969) measures verbal and behavioral disclosure of both positive and negative affect. The scale contains 24 items, and subjects responded to each item in terms of the degree to which they would engage in that behavior with the counselor just seen. Finally, preference to be counseled by the counselor just seen was assessed by subjects' responses to the item, "If I were going to see someone for personal counseling, I would want to be counseled by the person I just saw," scored from 1 (very much so) to 13 (not at all).

In addition to the dependent variables, two client factors were used as moderators or blocking variables. Client dogmatism was measured by Form E of the Dogmatism Scale (Rokeach, 1960),

a 40-item questionnaire designed to assess the openness versus closedness of belief systems. Subjects' typical attire was elicited by the item, "As compared to most students, I typically dress traditionally (dress, skirt, and blouse), casually (slacks and top), or more casually (jeans and T-shirt)," scored 1, 7, and 13, respectively.

Procedure

Subjects selected an appointment time upon signing up for the experiment, and they were told to report to the reception desk of the university counseling center. Upon arrival, subjects were informed by the first author of the purposes of the interview, that is, to study counseling communication, and were escorted to the counseling room. Interviews lasted 45 minutes and were conducted in two nearly identical practicum offices. Following the session clients were escorted by the first author to a room where they completed all instruments and were debriefed.

Each of the three counselors saw an equal number of clients (6) under each of three attire conditions: traditional (sport coat and tie, dark pressed slacks), casual (sport shirt opened at collar and casual pants), and highly casual (sweat shirt and blue jeans). To minimize the potential effect of immediate changes in attire on their behavior, counselors saw all clients under one condition before proceeding to the next. The order of the three attire conditions among counselors was counterbalanced.

Subject assignment to treatment condition was determined by the appointment hour they signed up for. The basic experimental design was a crossed and balanced 3 × 3 factorial design (Attire Condition × Individual Counselor), with each counselor seeing 18 clients, 6 under each attire condition.

Results

Two-way analyses of variance (Counselor Attire × Individual Counselor) were conducted for each of the three dependent variables: state anxiety, willingness to disclose, and preference to be counseled by the counselor just seen. Effects for individual counselor or Counselor × Attire did not emerge. Counselor attire itself, however, did significantly affect clients' anxiety level, $F(2, 45) = 3.84, p < .05$.

Means for the traditional, casual, and highly casual conditions were 42.9, 39.4, and 49.5, respectively, on state anxiety (higher scores represent greater anxiety). Post hoc Newman–Keuls analyses indicated that the difference between casual and highly casual conditions was signifi-

cant ($P < .05$); client anxiety was greater with highly casually than casually attired counselors.

To determine if the effect of counselor attire was moderated by clients' own typical dress, clients' responses to the item asking them to rate their dress were split at the midpoint. This median split produced 24 subjects above the median ($M = 11.04$, where 13 on the scale was "more casually, e.g., sweat shirt and jeans") and 23 subjects below the midpoint ($M = 6.43$, where 7 was labeled "casually, e.g., slacks and top," and 1 was "traditionally, e.g., dress, skirt and blouse"). Thus, the two groups could be considered casual dressers and more (or highly) casual dressers.

Using client dress divided as in the above paragraph, 2 × 3 analyses of variance (Client Typical Dress × Counselor Attire) were computed for each of the dependent variables. The central concern in these analyses was the interaction effects of client and counselor attire on the three dependent variables; significance for these interactions was attained on both the state anxiety, $F(2, 46) = 5.58$, $p < .01$, and preference for counselor, $F = 3.46$, $p < .05$, variables.

Means and standard deviations for the two dependent variables on which significant interactions emerged are presented in Table 1, broken down for each variable by counselor attire and client dress. The interactions indicate that *clients who typically dress in a casual way* are least anxious with, and have the greatest preference for, traditionally attired counselors. These clients, conversely, are most anxious with, and have the weakest preference for, counselors in highly casual attire. (The Newman–Keuls test indicated that on both preference and anxiety the difference between the traditional condition and the casual and highly casual conditions obtained significance, $p < .05$). On the other hand, *clients who typically dress in a more (or highly) casual manner* are least anxious with, and display the greatest preference to be seen by, casually attired counselors. (Post hoc analyses indicated that for

these highly casual dressers anxiety was significantly lower, $P < .05$, when seen by casually dressed counselors than counselors in the other two conditions; these clients also preferred, $p < .05$, casually attired counselors over traditionally attired ones.)

To determine if the effect of counselor attire was moderated by clients' dogmatism, clients' scores on the Dogmatism Scale were divided at the midpoint, and 2 × 3 analyses of variance were conducted for the three dependent variables. None of the Dogmatism × Counselor Attire interactions obtained statistical significance.

Discussion

A central finding of this experiment was that in an initial interview, and with male counselor – female client dyads, counselor attire does affect clients' anxiety level. Female clients' anxiety level appears to be elevated when they are interviewed by a male counselor who is dressed in a highly casual manner—sweat shirt and jeans in this case. Is this increased anxiety undesirable? The norms for female undergraduates on the A-State Anxiety Scale (Spielberger et al., 1970) indicate that anxiety scores of subjects in the highly casual condition obtained the 93rd percentile. While we cannot be certain on scientific grounds that such a level of anxiety is undesirable, experience suggests that it is. Very high anxiety in a first interview may well impede the development of rapport and a sense of safety in clients that is so important during the initial contact (cf. Delaney & Eisenberg, 1973).

When we examine the moderating influence of clients' own dress, a somewhat different pattern emerges. Clients who themselves typically dress in a casual (vs. highly casual) manner have the most positive reactions—lowered anxiety and strongest preference—when seen by counselors who are traditionally or professionally attired. (These clients, conversely, had the most negative reactions to counselors dressed in a highly casual

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations in State Anxiety and Counselor Preference According to Subjects' Typical Dress and Counselors' Attire

| | | Counselor attire | | | | | |
| | | Traditional | | Casual | | Highly casual | |
Dependent variable	Client dress	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
State anxiety[a]	Casual	37.12	8.72	46.14	5.98	47.71	11.57
	More casual	46.75	12.62	33.88	6.29	47.62	8.62
Preference to be counseled	Casual	2.25	1.58	4.42	2.30	6.00	4.66
by person just seen[b]	More casual	4.62	3.46	2.33	1.50	3.71	1.89

[a] Higher scores represent greater anxiety.

[b] The scale for this item was from 1 (very much so) to 13 (not at all); thus, higher scores represent weaker preference.

way.) However, clients who themselves typically dress in a *highly* casual way exhibit the most positive reactions with casually dressed counselors. Thus, it appears that *clients manifest the most desirable reactions to counselors who dress in a way that is one step or level more formal than the client's own dress level.* While research is needed to replicate and explain the finding, a plausible interpretation of this "one-step-ahead phenomenon" is that it maximally combines perceived empathy and perceived expertness. That is, the counselor is similar enough (only one step more formal) to the client to be seen as potentially empathic, while, at the same time, the greater formality connotes the appropriate level of expertness.

The reader should keep mindful of the fact that the results are based on a one-interview situation. It is possible that such effects do not really matter in the long run. It may be that as Gelso (Note 1) has hypothesized, the effects of contextual variables such as attire dissipate soon after the initial interview, as soon as the counselor's actual therapeutic behavior takes hold in the client. Even if this occurs, however, Gelso notes that these initial effects must not be taken lightly. If the effects of highly casual counselor attire, for example, are disruptive in the first interview, the client may not stay around long enough for the effects of the counselor's therapeutic behavior to take hold. Relatedly, the adverse effects of highly casual attire may require the counselor to work harder (and take more time) to cultivate a working alliance with the client. This delay of a therapeutic alliance would be especially problematical where counseling is brief and/or time-limited.

Finally, while we attempted to enhance generalizability by recruiting students who wanted to discuss actual personal problems with real counselors (doctoral students), the results were not obtained in a fully naturalistic setting and thus must be interpreted with caution. Given such a limitation, do the results have implications for counseling practice? At a minimum, counselors (especially trainees, since our counselors were in training) should be apprised of results

such as the present ones. We need to know the effects of the ways we present ourselves to clients. Beyond simply being aware of effects, supervisors might consider setting limits on the extent of informality in attire. It must be remembered, however, that with some clients (highly casual dressers) very formal/professional attire may have an equally negative initial impact.

Reference Note

1. Gelso, C. J. Discussion of papers presented in the symposium, "The Context of Counseling and Psychotherapy," presented at the 85th Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, August 1977.

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