

# Effects of Counselor Touch on Counseling Outcome

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The purpose of this study was to develop a methodology that would control counselor behavior in a naturalistic counseling interview to examine the effect(s) of counselor touch on client evaluation of counseling and level of self-exploration. A  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  factorial design was utilized in which nonverbal condition (touch, no touch), sex of counselor, and sex of client were the factors. Each client participated in a single individualized vocational counseling session. All 50-minute counseling sessions were similarly structured to include six clusters of verbal and nonverbal procedures that were administered by counselors at predetermined periods of time. Dependent variable data were collected by means of questionnaires and audiotapes that were submitted to independent raters for analysis. Analyses of the data did not indicate clearly significant results. Experimental findings are discussed in light of the relevant literature.

Despite a lack of empirical evidence, there are those who have argued strongly against physical contact in therapy (Burton & Heller, 1964; Wolberg, 1967), whereas others have noted the potential usefulness of counselor/client touch (Fuchs, 1975; Mintz 1969a, 1969b).

Pattison (1973), in the first published report of research on the impact of touch in counseling, found that touch positively influenced subject self-exploration but that subject perception of the counseling experience was not affected. Only one other empirical study of touch within the counseling interview has been published to date (Alagna, Whitcher, Fisher, & Wicas, 1979). The results of the Alagna et al. study indicated that touched subjects evaluated counseling more positively than control subjects. However, a significant Touch  $\times$  Counselor Sex  $\times$  Client Sex interaction was evidenced.

Although important data have been added

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This article is based on the first author's doctoral dissertation, submitted to Purdue University under the supervision of the second author. The authors wish to thank committee members, James Linden, Bruce Shertzer, and Michael Watson for their assistance and support.

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to the debate on touch in therapy, counselor/client physical contact deserves more extensive investigation. The present study was designed to control counselor behavior in a naturalistic counseling interview to examine the effect(s) of counselor touch on client evaluation of counseling and level of self-exploration.

## Method

### *Touch*

Touch was defined as physical contact between the hands and wrists of a counselor and the hands, arms, shoulders, and upper back area of a client. The specific mode of touch used in this study was a "squeeze" (at least 4-5 sec of firm contact) and was chosen from the four touch modalities of a pat, a brush, a squeeze, and a stroke discussed by Nguyen, Heslin, and Nguyen (1975, 1976).

### *Subjects*

Fifty-six males and 44 female subjects enrolled in an undergraduate education course devoted to personal growth and the building of interpersonal communication skills were selected randomly. Subjects were asked to participate in an individualized vocational counseling (Strong-Campbell interpretation; Strong & Campbell, 1974) session and were told that the study involved counselor training and communication patterns.

### *Counselors*

The counselors were 14 male and 11 female graduate

students. They were either enrolled in, or had already completed, an advanced doctoral-level counseling practicum. In addition to utilizing the counseling skills outlined by Hackney and Nye (1973), counselors were free to use their characteristic initial interview counseling methods. Because each counselor saw a client of each sex in the touch condition and a client of each sex in the no-touch condition, counselors acted as their own controls. Therefore, it was not considered necessary to control for counselor variables such as physical appearance, personality characteristics, and so on.

### *Counselor Training*

Counselors were trained in the administration of the experimental procedures. Three separate training sessions were held, each of which lasted between 60–90 minutes. Each counselor was required to attend at least one of these training sessions.

During training sessions, procedures were demonstrated and counselors were given the opportunity to ask questions and to practice implementation of specific procedures. Also, techniques were practiced for dealing with possible negative reactions by clients to touch and clients' attempts to touch in the no-touch condition (actual sessions revealed that these precautions were not necessary).

Counselors demonstrated their competency to implement the experimental procedures in an abbreviated quasi-counseling session. Each session was judged by two independent raters previously trained in the administration of these procedures. Each rater independently judged whether or not each counselor followed each experimental procedure correctly or incorrectly and whether this was accomplished in a natural/spontaneous or awkward/uncomfortable manner. Counselors who failed to obtain favorable ratings from both raters were required to participate in additional practice and observation sessions until they administered each procedure in the desired manner.

### *Experimental Interview*

Clients were greeted on arrival for the experimental interview and seated by a receptionist. Counselors met each client in the reception area and accompanied each client back to the same area following the interview. The receptionist then administered the necessary dependent measures to the client and a procedure compliance questionnaire to the counselor.

Each 50-minute counseling session was structured as follows. (a) General conversation to relax the client and establish a congenial atmosphere (Minutes 0–5). (b) Interpretation of the Strong–Campbell Interest Inventory (Strong & Campbell, 1974), with the opportunity for client input (Minutes 5–30). (c) Opportunity for client self-exploration and integration. The counselor initiated this period by saying something like, "Now that we have reviewed your scores, I am wondering just how these scores match your perception of your strengths, weaknesses, hopes, and fears, etc.?" The counselor was relatively inactive during this portion of the interview (Minutes 30–40). (d) Integration of session and termination (Minutes 40–50).

Counselors in the touch condition received the following instructions for administration of each touch:

On entering the reception area, walk over to the client and introduce yourself, extending your hand for a handshake. Maintain the handshake, eye contact, and a slight smile as you unhesitatingly complete your introduction (4–5 seconds). Be sure to maintain the distance of one arm's length between yourself and the client.

As the client walks down the hall toward the interview rooms, place your hand and wrist on his/her upper back or shoulder region (8–10 seconds) as you give directions to the room and as you ask about progress or satisfaction with school. Try to establish eye contact and maintain a neutral facial expression during this conversation. When you arrive at the interview room, allow the client to choose one of the two chairs, then seat yourself next to him/her at the table.

Place your hand on the client's arm, upper back, or shoulder area as you begin to interpret the Strong–Campbell Interest Inventory (approximately 5 minutes into the interview). Maintain fairly firm contact for 4–5 seconds and then remove your hand. Your eyes should be directed at the profile sheet so that you will not make eye contact during the period of physical contact.

Fifteen to 20 minutes into the interview, place your hand on the client's arm, upper back, or shoulder area and maintain fairly firm contact for 4–5 seconds. Avoid strongly emotional situations, perhaps pairing your touch with an interruption, a request for clarification, a probe, or a reflection. Attempt to establish eye contact and maintain a neutral facial expression while you are touching.

When the first side of your tape runs out (30 minutes into the interview), interrupt the client as you remove the tape and reinsert it into the recorder. Once you have started the tape, place your hand on the client's arm, upper back or shoulder area and maintain fairly firm contact for 4–5 seconds as you apologize for the interruption. Attempt to establish eye contact and smile slightly as you do so. It is now time to allow the client to self-explore and to integrate the information you have provided. Make sure that you give the client this opportunity by asking a question that approximates the following: "Now that we have reviewed your scores, I am wondering just how these scores match your perception of your strengths, weaknesses, hopes, and fears, etc.?" Note that during this portion of the interview your activity should markedly decrease to allow the client time (10–15 minutes) to process the information you have provided. Although your comments should be reflective, the following two questions are suggested should your client become verbally inactive: (a) How does your Strong–Campbell profile relate to your specific career aspirations and expectations? (b) In what ways do your career interests reflect who you are as a unique individual?

You may terminate approximately 50 minutes into

the interview. Extend your hand as you say good-bye and maintain your handshake, eye contact, and a slight smile for 4–5 seconds.

Instructions for the No-touch condition were identical to the instructions for the touch condition, but they excluded physical contact.

### *Dependent Measures*

A self-report measure (Counseling Evaluation Inventory) and a behavioral measure (Depth of Self-Exploration Scale) were the major dependent measures in this study.

*Counseling Evaluation Inventory (CEI).* The CEI, developed by Linden, Stone, and Shertzer (1965), is a measure of counselor effectiveness as judged by client ratings. Linden et al. have reported a total score test-retest reliability coefficient of .83; Haase and Miller (1968) have suggested that the CEI has high content validity. Furthermore, Linden et al. reported congruent or discriminative validity for practicum grades to be significant at or beyond the .05 level for the total score on the CEI. In addition to examination of total CEI scores, the present study sought to examine each factor (Counseling Climate, Counselor Comfort, Client Satisfaction) separately. The CEI was administered to each client immediately following that client's interview with a counselor.

*Depth of Self-Exploration Scale.* This scale was developed by Truax in 1963 (Truax & Carkhuff, 1967). Truax and Carkhuff have reported the results of 12 studies in which reliabilities for the Depth of Self-Exploration Scale ranged from .59 to .88. Further, they have claimed that the instrument has face validity.

### *Raters and Segment Rating*

The Depth of Self-Exploration Scale was used by three independent raters. One systematically selected portion of audiotape (an 8-minute segment following the fifth counselor touch) from each counseling session was submitted to the raters for analysis. Winer's (1971) analysis of variance (ANOVA) technique for estimation of interrater reliability on interval scales indicated that the three raters were trained to an interrater reliability of .916. The estimate of the reliability of any single rater was .785. The interrater reliability check on actual experimental material has been presented in the Results section.

### *Checks on Internal Validity*

In addition to ratings by independent judges of counselor competence to administer experimental procedures correctly and in a natural/spontaneous fashion, three additional checks on internal validity were obtained. (a) The experimenter listened to the second half of all tapes and to the first half of randomly selected tapes to ensure that verbal procedures had been administered correctly and at the specified time. (b) An awareness questionnaire was completed by all clients. This questionnaire sought to determine the

extent of client knowledge of the purpose and parameters of the study. (c) A procedure compliance questionnaire was completed by each counselor immediately following each counseling session. This questionnaire sought to determine the extent of counselor compliance with experimental procedures.

### *Strategy of Analysis*

This study utilized a fixed-effects model that was based on a 2 (nonverbal treatment)  $\times$  2 (sex of counselor)  $\times$  2 (sex of client) randomized block design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). A three-way ANOVA was used to test for the significance of nonverbal treatment, counselor sex, and client sex on client self-exploration and evaluation of counseling. Specifically, weighted scores on the Depth of Self-Exploration Scale and standard scores on the CEI were examined for differences related to touch effects, counselor sex effects, client sex effects, and interactions among these variables.

## Results

Analysis of the procedure compliance questionnaire and the awareness questionnaire revealed that experimental procedures were observed closely and that clients were not aware of the parameters or the purpose of this study. Where these circumstances were not indicated (eight cases), data were not subjected to further analysis.

### *CEI*

No significant main effect or interaction ( $p < .05$ ) was evidenced because of nonverbal treatment (touch or no touch), counselor sex, or client sex. This was true of all CEI factors (Counseling Climate, Counselor Comfort, Client Satisfaction) and of total CEI scores. A possible trend ( $p < .078$ ) toward higher levels of self-reported satisfaction by clients who were not touched, in comparison with clients who were touched, was found.

### *Depth of Self-Exploration Scale*

Interrater reliability on ratings assigned to audiotaped segments was high (.967). Overall, client level of self-exploration was judged to be moderately high. However, female clients were judged to be significantly more self-exploratory than were male clients ( $p < .05$ ). Other main effects and interactions were not significant ( $p < .05$ ).

### Discussion

A significant achievement of this study was the implementation of an experimental design that allowed for experimental control in a naturalistic setting.

Counselor touch was not found to have a significant effect. Clearly, this finding is at odds with the results reported by Pattison (1973) and by Alagna et al. (1979). Pattison's experiment was limited by a small subject sample ( $N = 20$ ), the fact that all subjects were females, and the fact that only one counselor of each sex participated in the experiment. However, the design utilized by Alagna et al. was not limited in these ways and was similar to the design of the present study. Therefore, differences in the results of these two studies are somewhat puzzling.

Perhaps differences in findings resulted from differences in the degree to which the experiments were controlled. For example, this experiment appears to have controlled counselor nonverbal behaviors, such as eye contact and facial gestures, to a greater extent than did the Alagna et al. (1979) study. By achieving this control it was possible to accompany each counselor touch with predetermined combinations of nonverbal behaviors. Thus, the possibility that touch could be confounded with other nonverbal behaviors was greatly reduced. Further, the reliance on independent raters, audiotapes, a procedure compliance questionnaire to monitor counselor procedure compliance, and the use of an awareness questionnaire, made the present experiment more internally valid than the study by Alagna et al.

Other possible factors that may have led the findings of this experiment to differ from those of Alagna et al. (1979) include differences in the length of counseling sessions, the sensitivity of dependent measures, the focus of sessions (the use of an interest inventory vs. less structured conversation) and the method and timing of touch manipulations.

The experiment at hand represents an attempt to study a problem that has received very little attention in the literature. Both self-report and behavioral dependent mea-

asures were utilized (Alagna et al., 1979, did not use a behavioral dependent measure). Experimental findings contrast with earlier research demonstrating positive effects of counselor touch. Clearly, this experiment complicates the debate over the use of touch in counseling and indicates that further research is necessary.

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Received September 17, 1979 ■