

WILLIAM CAMPBELL, JUDITH DONE

Manchester Metropolitan University

## **Communication Skill Training and the development of counsellor attitudes**

### **Background to the Research**

At the Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) student careers guidance practitioners (or counsellors) are encouraged to explore a limited range of models of the career choice and development processes. Particular emphasis is placed upon a social (cognitive) learning view of the career decision making process, which attempts to accommodate both the needs based model of counselling by Egan (1986) and the contribution of Krumboltz, discussed in Mitchell *et al.* (1981). Careers counselling and guidance is seen as an enabling process, designed to assist the individual client to develop an increasing sense of self and the ability to successfully apply this when making and implementing career decisions. Consistent with this approach, the trainers adopt the role of creators of learning experiences through which the students are also required to encourage their clients to engage in critical reflection. Consequently, a sensitive and honest relationship between client and counsellor, as reflected in acceptance of a client-centred approach to the careers guidance process, is strongly encouraged. Initially, this is developed within the CST programme.

This part of the training focuses upon the development of communication skill and its role within the guidance and counselling process. It employs a micro-training format designed to promote the development and appropriate use of observable dimensions of behavioural skill. It concentrates upon

'what to do' when relating to clients. This approach can be criticised for paying relatively less explicit attention to the social cognitive aspects of communication between client and counsellor, and yet these are seen by the course team as crucial if the relationship between communication and guidance skills is to be explored.

The researchers embarked upon this study because they suspected that students following CST were not all equally committed to or indeed capable of functioning within what can be described as a counselling (client-centred) ethos. They suspected that these individuals would experience 'difficulties' during the initial CST, not least because some had expressed concerns about the nature of the training. Their hope was that initial counsellor orientations could be identified and, where appropriate, modified as a result of communication and guidance training.

The selection process at MMU attempts to search out individuals who are disposed to the approach they will meet in training, but this is difficult to achieve. There are able students with valuable life-experience and a real desire to help others who may not have really looked beyond the advising, information-giving concept as a basis for their professional work. These trainees, it is suggested, may well undergo changes in the perception of their role as they progress through training, but unfortunately they may not. Indeed, they may be unsettled by the prospect of such change. This research may help to identify those who cannot adjust to a client-centred approach to guidance practice.

### Communication and Guidance Skill Training at MMU

The current training programme attempts to accommodate at least two compatible theoretical approaches: Argyle's (1967) Social Skills Model of interaction used to promote the development of interpersonal skills, a more recent derivative (Hargie and Marshall, 1986) and Egan's (1986) needs-based counselling model of helping. These make assumptions about the nature of skilled performance.

Traditional definitions of social or communication skill(s) have stressed the outcomes of skilled behaviour rather than the supposed underlying skill. In a sense, they have focused upon the result of successful application of skill, particularly if successful practice is seen in terms of demonstrations of overt behaviour. At best these are more likely to be indications of skill, the consequences of skilled performance, than demonstrations of the skill *per se*. The important point here is that this perspective accommodates the notion of cognition as an essential defining quality of communication skill or competence, yet largely fails to assess it. The concept of counsellor

attitude is likely to comprise of more than that which is observable. Indeed, it may not be amenable to assessment. Perhaps the best we can hope for is indication of its application, i.e. the results as they impinge upon the communication and guidance process.

Interpersonal communication skill can be seen as an organised, coordinated activity employed in relation to another person which necessarily involves a whole chain of sensory and motor mechanisms. Argyle (*op. cit.*) discussed five elements of his model; the participants' goals for their skilled performance, the selective perception of cues, information processing activities, motor responses and feedback making corrective action possible. It stresses the notion of feedback and the **dynamic** quality of social interaction. Trower, Bryant and Argyle (1978) further developed this model to consider the organisation of the verbal and non-verbal elements of social behaviours in specific situations. They stressed the importance of psychological and sociological determinants of social behaviour such as social rules and environmental stresses and related these to social skills. And Hargie and Marshall (*op. cit.*) proposed that the model must be developed further to illustrate the dynamic quality of interaction more explicitly i.e. to recognise the part played by both individuals in a communicative link. One defining feature of their work is that an increase in communication skill is seen as synonymous with an increase in sensitivity toward one's own thoughts and feelings and hopefully towards others'. This includes the ability to discriminate between small changes in behaviour, and an increase in flexibility whereby the individual modifies his/her behavioural responses as a result of more sensitive appreciation of the situation in which the counsellor or client may find him/herself. In other words, the skilled individual will perceive the other person more sensitively, but will also be more aware of his/her own perceptual habits, attitudes (including those held towards clients), values, emotional tendencies and behavioural skills. This includes awareness of their potential effects on the other. Pendleton and Furnham (1980) argued that self presentation and self perception can indeed be seen as skills in themselves which can be learned. In a sense, the skilled communicator can be described as one who **monitors** his/her 'behaviour'. This may include reference to awareness of internal states (moods etc) and overt actions. 'Behaviour' then may not always be observable. For example, the communicator may monitor his problem solving capacity and compare this with some standard of comparison or guiding principle upon which observable behaviour is (eventually) based. This capacity relates to standards concerned with interpersonal skill, but can also be applied to guidance and counselling practice. The quality of decision made about the success of any interaction can be assessed against personally held values, principles etc. Clearly, there is a strong relation between communication and guidance. A closer look at this is warranted here.

## CST and Egan's (1986) Model of Helping

The term "counselling" can be used in a number of ways. For instance, it may be viewed as a special kind of helping relationship, or as a set of activities and methods. When defined as a helping relationship, certain central qualities are stipulated which represent not only the counsellor's skills but also fundamental attitudes. Three such qualities commonly referred to are: respect for the client's potential to lead his or own life, empathic understanding, and genuineness (Rogers 1957). A common feature in most definitions of counselling is that the counselling process is concerned with enabling the client to explore a problem or issue of importance to himself/herself, identifying solutions where possible, and providing an opportunity to address the way forward. If seen as a set of activities, then it becomes possible to train careers counsellors in the necessary 'behaviours'.

Egan reminds us that counselling may be looked at from the viewpoints of **client development** and of the corresponding counsellor behaviours related to assessments of "where the client is at" and where he/she "would like to be". He emphasises the notion of stages in the counselling process, introducing the concepts of client readiness and the timing of counsellor interventions, both of which are pertinent to the role of the careers counsellor. Nelson-Jones (1982) suggests that this model of helping seems particularly appropriate to relatively time-limited counselling. This constraint is very common for careers guidance practitioners in the UK. It becomes difficult to accept a notion of the skilled practitioner without recognition of the crucial importance of thought processes, not least since they inevitably influence the practice of careers counselling.

The remaining parts of this paper will describe the research method employed and the principal finding of the empirical work that attempted to address the three research foci stated earlier.

### Method

The empirical work was carried out in two stages, each involving a pre- and post-test.

### Sample

The sample for the stage consisted of a cohort of 50 student careers guidance practitioners in the first term of a one year course leading to a Postgraduate Diploma in Careers Guidance. The sample was divided into

an experimental group ( $N_e = 31$ ) and a control group ( $N_c = 19$ ). The groups were matched for age, gender, pre-entry qualification level and previous experience of careers counselling.

In the second stage, this sample, with the exception of six participants who had left the course or who were absent, became the experimental group ( $N_e = 44$ ), now with practical experience of careers counselling. A control group was formed from students following an undergraduate course in community studies ( $N_c = 21$ ). This course also incorporated CST and the helping community but with no reference to careers counselling. The course had a high proportion of mature students relative to other undergraduate programmes, and could therefore provide a reasonable legitimate comparison with the "new" experimental group, who were aged between 23 and 45 years old. The groups were matched for gender, and it was assumed that both groups were of similar academic ability. No attempt was made to consider ethnicity. The groups were in other respects as similar as availability permitted.

#### **Measure: The Counsellor Attitude Scale (Nelson-Jones 1975)**

The scale was devised as an aid to counsellor selection and counselling research. It is based in the hypothesis that there is a theoretical construct of client centredness which is measurable; it differs from the Truax and Carkhuff (1967) empathy scales because it attempts to measure attitudes rather than implementation. Thus, it was particularly appropriate for this study since it measures an important **cognitive** dimension of skill and is appropriate for use with those without extensive experience of counselling. The scale contains 70 statements; for each statement, the participant indicates whether (s)he agrees, disagrees or cannot decide.

#### **Reliability and Validity**

The item content is derived from the theoretical issues and technique problems commonly discussed by leaders of directive and client central counselling schools of thought. It is based on the work of Stewart (1958) who devised a 50 item scale focusing on both the theoretical and the practical aspects of client centred counselling. Reliability of the scale was reported as  $r = 0.90$  and subjects' scores concurred with Stewart's evaluation of their growth in client centredness. Nelson-Jones and Patterson (1975) applied modified and revised versions of Stewart's original scale and arrived at the final 70 item scale.

Prior to Stewart's work, earlier attempts to measure client-centred attitudes had not been supported by reliability and validity data (Jones 1963). Nelson-Jones and Patterson maintain that if a client-centred attitude scale is valid it must accurately measure a deeply-held philosophical orientation towards the promotion of the client's capacity for responsible self-direction. However, evidence suggests (Munger *et al.* 1963) that attitudes of trainee counsellors later employed as counsellors were more resistant to change than those of noncounsellors. And Rogers (1951) stressed that a basic client centred attitude is challenged and developed through experience. The writers acknowledge the potentially serious limitation of this study in that the experimental period under scrutiny does not permit assessment over a protracted period during which the practitioners engage in work with their own clients.

Patterson and Nelson-Jones produced test-retest and split-half reliability coefficients which were derived from administering the questionnaire to groups of university students from three different institutions. Test-retest reliability coefficients for all groups were in excess of  $r = 0.88$  and split-half reliability coefficients in excess of  $r = 0.81$ .

Construct validity was assessed by administering the scale to four counsellor trainers who were asked to respond as they thought a client-centred counsellor would. Two had two disagreements with the scoring key, one had six and one had ten. Nelson-Jones suggests that these data may be taken either as suggesting the validity with which the scale measures the construct of client-centredness, or as indicating the extent of the staff-members' knowledge of the construct, or both. He suggests that the fact that two of the trainers scored 68 out of a possible 70 illustrates that the scale has meaningful construct validity.

## Procedure

In **Stage I**, the writers were interested in examining the impact of an initial stage of guidance and counselling skills training on participants' attitudes to counselling, as measured by the dependent variable, the Counsellor Attitude Scale. At the beginning of the initial experimental period, the Scale was administered to both groups separately.

During the period, the experimental group underwent an intensive three week skills training programme. The control group were denied this but carried out course activities unrelated to guidance and counselling. All participants in both groups spent one day per week over six weeks gaining experience practising communication skills with clients (Year 10 and 11 pupils in comprehensive schools).

At the end of the experimental period, the Counsellor Attitude Scale was again administered to both groups separately. The control then underwent the skills training programme. Consequently, by the beginning of the second stage of the empirical work, both groups had completed the same elements of training.

In **Stage II**, the writers were interested in examining the impact on participants' attitudes of further practice in communicating with clients, this time with a specific guidance focus. The initial experimental and control groups were combined into a new experimental group. A new control group was formed from students on a course unrelated to guidance and counselling. These students had, however, followed an introductory communication skills training programme of a similar nature to that completed by the rest of the sample prior to Stage I of this study and had some experience of communicating within the helping community. They had no experience of careers guidance and counselling. All students were taught by the same two tutors.

The Counsellor Attitude Scale was administered to both groups separately at the beginning and end of the experimental period.

In the intervening time, the experimental group spent one day per week for six weeks in schools, conducting guidance interviewing and small group work with Year 10 and 11 pupils. This practical experience was observed and reviewed by both peers and a tutor. Feedback on communicative competence was given after each interview/group session. Groups of participants also spent time in weekly tutorials reviewing their progress and discussing their perceptions of the communication and guidance process.

The control group followed their normal course syllabus, which did not at this point include any CST. Their educational placements within helping contexts had been completed. These included work within such environments as social work, citizens' advice work, youth and community centres etc.

## Results and Discussion

In the first stage, when the independent variable was the communication, guidance and counselling skills programme, a t-test for correlated means revealed no significant difference in performance of either the experimental group ( $t_{1m} = 36.9$ ,  $SD 9.01$ ;  $t_{2m} = 37.6$ ,  $SD 3.52$ ) or of the control group ( $t_{1m} = 31.63$ ,  $SD 8.47$ ;  $t_{2m} = 33.10$ ,  $SD 7.79$ ) on the Counsellor Attitude Scale over the period of training. Both groups maintained positive orientations towards client-centredness.

However, in Stage II of the research, where the experimental group consisted of student careers counsellors with practical experience of careers

counselling, and the control group of undergraduates from a community studies undergraduate programme, significant changes in perspective emerged in both groups.

The newly formed experimental group had several months' practical experience of both interviewing and guided small group discussion with clients. A t-test for correlated means identified a significant difference in attitude  $t(43,44) = 1.7 < 0.05$ . Inspection of the means revealed that the group members became **more positive** in their views of the use of client-centredness in the careers counselling process ( $t_{1,m} = 35.7$ , SD 8.98;  $t_{2,m} = 36.5$ , SD 8.83).

However, the control group members also changed their perspectives  $t(20,21) = 3.18 < 0.01$ . Inspection of the means revealed that this group also significantly **more positive** in their acceptance of client-centredness ( $t_{1,m} = 32.7$ , SD 7.95;  $t_{2,m} = 37.0$ , SD 9.31).

For this second experimental group, the independent variable became **observed practice** in guidance and counselling interviews, with **feedback** from tutors and fellow students. The criteria for assessment included demonstration of behaviour reflecting attitudes appropriate to effective communication. Measurement of the frequency and use of verbal and non-verbal referents was employed. Presence of prosocial behaviours was sought. It seems reasonable to suggest that, in so far as behaviour reflects attitudes, successful practical experience is accompanied by a more positive attitude to a counselling ethos. This is very important in MMU careers counsellor training programmes.

While the presence of significant change in Stage II compared with Stage I may be related in part to the longer time interval (6 weeks compared with 3 weeks), it seems reasonable to suggest that attitudes to counselling are more likely to be affected by practical experience with clients, accompanied by feedback, than by a training programme alone which, although skills-based and participative, does not provide the opportunity to work with "real" clients. It is important to remember however, that the practice and focused feedback presented in Stage II followed exposure to CST for all subjects in the "new" experimental group. However, the fact that this change was also experienced by the control group with no experience of careers counselling raises the possibility that the change could simply be due to the effects of maturation, history, repeated testing or some other factor. Since no such change was evidenced in Stage I of the testing, one possible explanation for the change in the control group lies in the nature of this particular group's experience during the experimental period. Although the group received no formal training during the time interval in question, they were following an undergraduate degree course which is regarded at MMU as in part a pre-vocational preparation for individuals wishing to enter community-based or caring professions. The syllabus includes psychology

and communication studies and practical placements in related professions and agencies. It is possible therefore that prior, even vicarious, learning took place within this group. They could also have become more sensitised towards counselling approaches and settings. In any event, sensitive conclusions drawn from this research study about the efficacy of CST training provided at MMU cannot be made.

## Conclusion

Nelson-Jones and Patterson (*op. cit.*) reported for trainee counsellors a significant rank order correlation between end of course ability to communicate empathy and scores in the Counsellor Attitude Scale. They submit this finding as tentative evidence that, at least at the end of a period of training, counsellor attitude as measured by the scale may reflect behaviour demonstrated. This study has also revealed significant positive change in attitude towards a counselling ethos when measured by the Nelson-Jones Counsellor Attitude Scale. Clearly, the Scale measures phenomena relevant to careers counselling training and practice.

The writers suggest that the scale could be of particular value to trainers and students: it could provide a means of identifying and monitoring one important aspect of the development of the practitioner (although the findings of this study throw little light on the issue): it may help those trainees (and potentially experienced practitioners) who find difficulty in working within a client centred framework by providing a focus for discussion of why he/she behaves in particular ways. This will necessarily draw attention to the trainee's attitudes, beliefs and other important aspects of cognition and affect. Findings from this study suggest, not surprisingly, that experience may be particularly important in the development of clientcentredness. The Counsellor Attitude Scale may offer one way of measuring this. Perhaps more importantly, it could be used at the end of a training programme to provide insight into how a practitioner is likely to operate in practice. At the very least its use promotes focused reflection upon practice.

## Bibliography

- Argyle M. (1967), *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour*, Penguin, London  
Egan G. (1986), *The Skilled Helper*, Brookes Cole, Monterey CA  
Hargie D., Marshall P. (1986), [in:] Hargie D., Saunders C., Dickson D. (1994), *Social Skills in Interpersonal Communication*, Routledge, London  
Jones V. (1963), *Attitude Change in an NDEA Institute*, „Personnel and Guidance Journal”, 42, 387–392

- Mitchell A., Jones B., Krumboltz J. D. (1981), *Social Learning & Career Decision Making*, Carroll, Cranston RI
- Munger P. F., Myers R. A., Brown D. F. (1963), *Guidance Institutes and the Persistence of Attitudes: a Progress Report*, „Personal and Guidance Journal”, **41**, 415–419
- Nelson-Jones R. (1982), *Theory and Practice of Counselling Psychology*, Cassell, London
- Nelson-Jones R. (1975), *Measuring Client Centred Attitudes*, „British Journal of Guidance and Counselling”, **3**, 2
- Nelson-Jones R. C., Patterson C. H. (1975), *Measuring Client-Centred Attitudes*, „British Journal of Guidance and Counselling”, **3**, 228–236
- Pendleton D., Furnham A. (1980), *Skills: A Paradigm for Applied Social Psychological Research*, [in:] Singleton W. T., Spurgeon P., Stanmers R. B. (eds.) (1980), *The Analysis of Social Skills*, Plenum, New York
- Rogers C. (1951), *Client-Centred Therapy*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston
- Rogers C. (1957), *The Necessary and Sufficient Condition of Therapeutic Personality Change*, „Journal of Consulting Psychology”, **21**, 95–103
- Stewart C. C. (1958), *Attitude Change Following Counselling Seminar*, „Personnel and Guidance Journal”, **37**, 273–275
- Trower P., Bryant B., Argyle M. (1978), *Social Skills and Mental Health*, Methuen, London
- Truax C. B., Carkhuff R. R. (1967), *Toward Effective Counselling and Psychotherapy*, Aldine, Chicago

WILLIAM CAMPBELL  
JUDITH DONE

## Trening uniejętności komunikacyjnych a postawy doradcze

Studentów kierunku „Doradztwo zawodowe” poddano „Treningowi Umiejętności Komunikacyjnych” (TUK). Trening przygotowano po to, aby nauczyć studentów stosowania w praktyce doradczej tzw. podejścia skoncentrowanego na kliencie. Zasadniczymi celami niniejszego badania było: (1) sprawdzenie, czy możliwe jest zdiagnozowanie postawy orientacji na klienta wśród kandydatów na doradców zawodowych, (2) skontrolowanie wpływu doświadczenia na kształtowanie tej postawy, (3) identyfikacja osób, które są potencjalnie zdolne zaadaptować się do pracy w ramach ethosu orientacji na klienta.

W pierwszej części badań porównano postawy grupy eksperymentalnej złożonej ze studentów doradztwa zawodowego i kontrolnej, w skład której weszli studenci innego kierunku, po czym obie grupy przeszły trening TUK. Badania postaw dokonano przy użyciu Skali Postaw Doradczych (Nelson-Jones, 1975). Po treningu obie grupy powtórnie poddano badaniu tą samą skalą.

W dalszej części eksperymentu obie grupy ćwiczyły nabyte umiejętności w kontakcie z klientami, a efekt ćwiczeń poddano kontroli. Badanie wykazało, że trening TUK nie zmienił znacząco postaw studentów doradztwa zawodowego w kierunku większej orientacji na klienta. Stwierdzono natomiast w obu grupach znaczący, pozytywny efekt dalszych ćwiczeń.

Z badań wynika, że Skala Postaw Doradczych może być używana jako narzędzie do badania postawy koncentracji na kliencie wśród kandydatów na doradców z wcześniejszymi doświadczeniami w zakresie treningu komunikacji. Nie znaleziono natomiast dowodu na wsparcie tezy o możliwości diagnozy i modyfikacji postawy doradców w kierunku większej orientacji na klienta, gdyby zachodziła taka potrzeba.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Trening umiejętności komunikacyjnych, postawy doradcze, doradztwo zawodowe.