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Social Conditioning and Students' Perceptions of Counselling

The process of counselling is essentially a relationship between two individuals. As such, each of these individuals brings to the relationship his perceptions of what the nature of that relationship will be. Since the burden of initiating the relationship frequently rests with the client, he will initiate only those counselling contacts which he perceives as legitimate roles performed by the counsellor. As these counselling relationships may occur through circumstances other than client initiation, it is reasonable to assume that the client-initiated relationship will be limited by his perceptions of the counsellor and the process of counselling. In other words, the client will seek the aid of the counsellor only in those areas in which he sees the counsellor playing a legitimate role. Furthermore, it is this writer's contention that the student's perceptions of the counsellor's role determines, in large part, his expectations in the counselling process.

related research

Related research points out the fact that students in secondary schools and colleges tended to perceive the counsellor and the role that he is fulfilling in varying ways. That is, counsellors were perceived as being of assistance to students largely in the areas of educational and vocational planning, but not with problems of a personal, emotional or social nature. Thus students so predisposed and oriented will more than likely, as McGowan and Schmidt relate, see the counsellor

... as a person who will be able to help them select the correct test and who will interpret their scores to them during subsequent inter-

views. Such clients enter into a counseling relationship with the general idea that the counseling process will be basically informational, and that little or no personal involvement will be required, since they do not anticipate that any major changes will take place in them.¹

From a slightly different perspective, the results of Heilfron's study² suggested that students felt that those who were performing well academically and socially hardly needed counselling. The findings indicated that well performing students expected little help from counsellors. Further, in order to rid students of the notion that counsellors deal only with extreme forms of mental and emotional problems, much more education is needed regarding the function of counselling and the services counsellors render.

Similarly, Shertzer and Stone³ hypothesized that individual behavior within a role is determined by expectancies or demands of the role. They contend that much of the current difficulty and confusion surrounding the school counsellor's role stems from the contradictory and conflicting expectancies of his publics. They concluded that students do not view the counsellor as being an effective source of help except in educational and vocational planning and decision making. They also noted that most of the students felt that personal counselling should be reserved for students with character disorders, indicating that they felt counselling might be a risky situation and they themselves would not seek it.

From a completely different perspective, other research^{4,5,6,7} indicated that parents, teachers and school administrators perceived school counsellors to be more helpful to students with educational and vocational problems than with problems of a personal, emotional and social nature.

In a follow-up of their 1961 study, Bergstein and Grant asked parents in the same community to imagine that their children were faced, in turn, with six problem situations and, in each case, to nominate people whom they conceive to be of most help to the child. Once again,

School counselors were conceived most frequently as being helpers with problems of an educational and vocational nature and much less frequently as helpers with aspects of personal-emotional-social adjustment. . . . It is evident that many parents did not spontaneously conceive of him as the one to provide above average help to youngsters experiencing various types of problems typically described in the domain of counselor competencies. In light of these findings, educators should continue to examine the role of the counselors as helper of children and should explore means of demonstrating the concept of counselor to the student population and the community.⁸

the social conditioning process

It would appear because this area of guidance and counselling is still relatively new, that the public at large generally has a hazy and somewhat distorted orientation as to what the purpose of guidance and counselling is, and particularly what the role of the counsellor is within that program. In other words, why do students perceive the role of counsellors as the above research indicates they do, and what factors in our society lead students to form these differing and confused perceptions?

Patterson has suggested that, "The expectations and preferences of clients in counselling and psychotherapy are learned, that they are socially and culturally determined or conditioned." If Patterson's suggestion has any credence, and this writer believes that it has, then on the basis of the above cited research it is safe to assume that societal attitudes to a large extent influence students' perceptions of the counsellor's role. Concomitantly, most students expect the counselling situation to be helpful only in problems relating to educational and vocational planning. Further, Sonne and Goldman suggested that client expectations and preferences in the counselling situation are conditioned by society, for in

... our culture in general, or in the particular subculture from which the subjects were drawn, a relatively dependent relationship between a psychological helper (whether a professional counselor or not) and a counselor may be the norm. . . . thus their preferences may be an indication of a learned standard of counseling.¹⁰

If, as this writer has been suggesting, societal attitudes play a large part in influencing students' views of the counselling process, why is it that the public entertains attitudes in which the counsellor is seen as being helpful in educational and vocational problems, but not in problems dealing with personal-emotional-social aspects — the latter — which by their very nature may be at the root of the former problems? Patterson indicated that the student's expectations for the kind of dependent relationship that Sonne and Goldman infer students desire,

... has its origin and development in the attitude towards specialists in our society. The doctor, the lawyer, the engineer, and the teacher are people who do things to us or for us, or who tell us what to do and/or how to do it. In other words, the relationship is one of dependency, of reliance on authority figures — to counselors and psychotherapists. . . . Because of experiences with the teacher, the counselor-client rela-

tionship is the signal for the assumption of a student pattern. The client expects to be told, to be informed, to be led, to be questioned, to speak only in response to the counselor — in other words, to be dependent on the lead of the counselor who takes the responsibility for the relationship.¹¹

Similarly, Bordin has pointed out that “most frequently clients approach counselling with the orientation of receiving help regarding a particular decision.”¹² He further suggested that client expectations are to some extent dependent upon the type of problem that led the client to the counsellor. That is, clients with problems of a personal-emotional-social nature had different expectations about the counsellor’s role than did those clients with educational and vocational problems requiring a specific decision. The latter type of client more so than the former, visualized the counsellor as an information source and expected, as part of the counselling process, to be given information by the counsellor.

If this is the case, why do the majority of students expect help mostly in reference to educational and vocational problems? Are there factors other than the social conditioning process which would reinforce students’ perceptions, and ultimately, expectations of the counsellor’s role? For example, could the personnel composition of the guidance and counselling services *per se* be responsible in some way for reinforcing the prior social conditioning?

Ivey raises an interesting point in this connection:

Role theory proposes that clearly defined (i.e., unambiguous) expectations are necessary for positive interaction in a situation. Students have certain expectations for the behavior of classroom teachers (lectures, discipline, marking, etc.). Similarly, students have expectations for the behavior of counselors (permissive, holds confidences, non-judgmental, etc.). When a counselor also meets his clients in the classroom, these clients are likely to experience conflict, and hence hold back confidences because of the divergences of roles ordinarily associated with teacher and counselor roles.¹³

If, as Ivey suggested, full-time counsellors are in a better position to handle problems of a personal-emotional-social nature than part-time teacher-counsellors, then, by the very nature of the guidance and counselling department’s personnel composition, students’ perceptions and expectations may be further conditioned as the majority of counsellors also perform teaching and quasi-administrative duties. For as Goodstein and Grigg point out:

If counseling is seen by the client as a learning or educational experience, then one of the expectations of the client will be for the counselor to assume the role of the teacher. This expectation is heightened by the fact that counseling is most frequently carried on under the aegis of educational institutions and counselors frequently also have a formal teaching role in these institutions in addition to their role as counselors.¹⁴

Recent research by Hart and Prince¹⁵ and Arbuckle¹⁶ indicated that the role of the counsellor as it is presented by counsellor educators is basically much different than that expected by school administrators. Counsellors are trained to assist students in the process of self-discovery either through individual or group counselling, to maintain the confidentiality of student communications, and to encourage self-adjustment rather than adjustment to the system. On the other hand, school administrators perceive the counsellor as an extension of the school's authority, and as one who will persuade the student to adjust to the reality of the school. Further, school administrators perceive the counsellor as one who deals with educational and vocational planning, and as an informational source concerning students.

This discrepancy between counsellor training and practice is not only perceived by school administrators and school counsellors, but unfortunately by students, for

Student concepts of the roles counselors seem to serve in the school environment indicate that they see the counselor variously as one who is an administrator, a disciplinarian, an activity director, a part-time librarian, etc. In fact, interviews indicated that many students did not recognize the counseling function as a major duty of the secondary school guidance worker.¹⁷

conclusion

The implication is clear that the counsellor's role must be clearly differentiated from that of the teacher or administrator if the counselling process is to be meaningful in helping the students to deal effectively with his problems. Also, it is necessary for this differentiation of roles to exist and more importantly, to be made known to society in general and students in particular, if the students' expectations are to be changed in such a way as to make the counselling process a situation to be desired rather than shunned in the solution of their problems — personal-emotional-social, as well as educational and vocational. For

... part of the process of dealing with oneself involves differentiating oneself from others. As an administrator of social policy, the counselor would become identified with "the other" from whom the individual is seeking to differentiate himself. Thus, it seems probable that a counselor seen in that light by a client would lose some of his potentialities for aiding the client to delve deeply into his problem.¹⁸

Although client expectations are subjected to many variables prior to the initial counselling session, i.e., type of referral, client's perceptions regarding broad groups of people, age and sex differential between counsellee and counsellor, and the personality and attitudes of the counsellor, it appears to this writer that the social conditioning process mentioned above is the underlying variable most responsible for the student's orientation and expectations to be so ridiculously distorted and biased. We as professional counsellor educators and counsellors must be responsible, along with aid from all educators, for educating society as to the importance, meaning, and functions of guidance and counselling within the educational setting — unique and differentiated as it is from all other roles of education in general. Until this is accomplished, this writer contends that counsellors will continue to be viewed as people with a hodge-podge conglomeration of roles and duties; inadequate in most, and proficient only in the administration and interpretation of tests and measurements as they pertain to educational and vocational planning.

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