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PREVIEW

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Brennan, Thomas Patrick

**COMMITMENT TO COUNSELING: EFFECTS OF MOTIVATIONAL
INTERVIEWING AND CONTRACTUAL AGREEMENTS ON HELP-SEEKING
ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR**

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln

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PREVIEW

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COMMITMENT TO COUNSELING:
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AGREEMENTS ON HELP-SEEKING ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

by

Thomas Patrick Brennan

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of Psychological
and Cultural Studies

Under the Supervision of Dr. John A. Glover

Lincoln, Nebraska

August, 1982

TITLE

COMMITMENT TO COUNSELING: EFFECTS OF MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING AND

CONTRACTUAL AGREEMENTS ON HELP-SEEKING ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

BY

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Thomas Patrick Brennan

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of the present research was to attempt to enhance client receptivity and commitment to utilize professional counseling services. The voluntary utilization of professional psychological services by individuals who are experiencing psychological disturbances and/or personal problems is implicit in the wide scale availability of mental health services in our communities. Apparently, there seems to be an implicit belief that those individuals who are in need of mental health services will readily use them. In reality, however, this is not wholly the case. There is increasing evidence that there are large numbers of the general population, as well as specific subgroups, who, for a variety of reasons, do not seek professional assistance for troubling personal problems.

For instance, past research has indicated that lower-class persons are less inclined to seek psychological help than upper-class people (Redlich, Hollingshead, & Bellis, 1955). There is also widespread stigma attached to seeking professional psychiatric help (Farina, Allen, & Saul, 1968; Farina, Holland, & Ring, 1966; Nunnally, 1961; Phillips, 1963). Moreover, there is virtual agreement among investigators that those subjects who suffer most from psychological disturbances display more negative attitudes toward mental illness and report less perceived need for psychiatric treatment than those who are mentally healthy (Calhoun & Selby, 1974; Lehtenen & Vaisanan, 1978; Loriton, 1974).

Even a brief review of the literature indicates that there is

considerable evidence that many individuals who are in need of professional psychological assistance do not utilize such services. In spite of the obvious practical significance of this problem, it has been largely ignored by clinicians and researchers. There are very few studies specifically focusing on actively enhancing an individual's motivation for, and commitment to, utilizing professional psychological services. The present study addressed this problem in directly attempting to increase individuals' decisions to utilize counseling services by means of specific commitment-enhancement techniques.

The research setting was the Lincoln Employee Assistance Program (EAP) which, by the very nature of its services, afforded an excellent opportunity to influence individuals' decisions to engage in counseling services. The EAP provides consultation, assessment, and referral services to employees and family members of participating companies. The primary objective of its services is to motivate individuals with troubling personal problems to avail themselves of community counseling services. As such, the EAP has exposure to many individuals who have not yet committed themselves to pursue professional counseling assistance. Moreover, the Lincoln EAP is a model program for consortium EAP service centers (Phillips, Note 1). Therefore, it not only provides an excellent research setting, but the experimental results will also have wide generalizability to other similar settings. Thus, a concomitant purpose of the present research was to attempt to increase the effectiveness of EAP referral services.

A third purpose of the research was to explore the relationship between individuals' attitudes toward professional counseling services

and their actual utilization of such services. Theoretically, attitudes and expectancies are strong predisposing influences which affect behavior (e.g., Frank, 1961; Goldstein, 1962). Empirically, there is evidence that those individuals who have used counseling services have more positive attitudes toward counseling than those individuals who have not used counseling services (Cash, Kehr, & Salzbach, 1978; Fisher & Turner, 1970). However, there is no direct evidence for the interaction between the predisposing nature of attitudes toward counseling and subsequent utilization of counseling services. That is, there is no empirical support for the assumption that persons with more positive attitudes toward professional counseling services are more inclined to actually utilize those services at a greater rate than individuals with less positive attitudes toward counseling. Therefore, an additional intent of this research was to examine the differential utilization of counseling services by individuals with divergent attitudes toward counseling.

Significance of the Research

This is an empirical field study, building on theory and previous research, which specifically attempts to influence individuals' decisions and commitments to initially engage in counseling relationships. The practical value of such research is obvious for therapists, counselors, intake and outreach workers, and referral specialists. In addition, this is the first empirical study to examine the relationship between reported attitudes and actual utilization of professional counseling services in a natural setting with a representative sample of adults. Furthermore, this is the first study to focus on the

Employee Assistance Program process of motivational interviewing in an attempt to increase the effectiveness of the process. Since there are more than 2,500 EAPs operating today, and since the motivational interviewing process is the most vital EAP service, this focus is long overdue. This is particularly important in light of the lack of knowledge regarding the motivational interviewing process in general (Older, Note 2; Weinstein, Note 3). The research results have potential significance for individuals interested in commitment to counseling specifically, as well as commitment to change in general.

Overview of the Thesis

The specific problem addressed by this study was an attempt to increase commitment to, and utilization of, professional counseling services via techniques that theoretically decrease client resistance and increase commitment to change in a counseling relationship. In particular, an attempt was made to increase the effectiveness of the motivational interviewing process employed by the Lincoln Employee Assistance Program through the use of behavioral contracts to seek counseling assistance. The effectiveness of these procedures was measured by the number of clients who followed through with the referral recommendations, as well as by their reported attitudes toward the utilization of professional counseling services.

Chapter II provides a review of the literature on factors that affect commitment in general, and commitment within a counseling context in particular. The Employee Assistance Program is described and a rationale is provided for its utilization as the research setting. From the literature review, the problem statement and several research

hypotheses are formulated and discussed in terms of their relevance and importance to commitment to counseling.

Chapter III explains the methodology employed to investigate the research hypotheses. This chapter contains descriptions of the research subjects, setting, dependent measures and instruments, research procedures and design, and statistical analysis.

The results of the study are reported in Chapter IV. Research data and statistical analyses are summarized in tables and discussed.

Chapter V provides the reader with the research findings and conclusions, and their implications for theory as well as for practical application. Finally, limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are presented.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background and Rationale

In order to explore and influence an individual's commitment to engage in counseling, it is necessary to examine the factors involved in the process of decision-making in general and those within a counseling context in particular. By most accounts, the process of decision-making and commitment to change consists of two phases (Festinger, 1957; 1964; Janis, 1959; Kanfer, 1977; Strong, 1968). The first phase, pre-commitment, involves factors that influence the initial making of a decision; the second phase, post-commitment, involves factors that influence the actual execution of the decision.

Pre-commitment factors include the awareness of the need for some kind of change, the importance of the change, and a consideration of the alternatives available, both situationally and intrapersonally. That is, pre-commitment involves the valuing of alternatives independently and comparatively in terms of the suitability of the expected outcomes and their feasibility for resolving the precipitating conflict. Post-commitment factors are integrally related to pre-commitment factors as well as subject to influences by dynamically different intrapersonal factors (e.g., dissonance; Festinger, 1957). In addition, in many instances, and especially within a counseling context, interpersonal influences also affect commitment to, and execution of decisions (Janis, 1959; Strong, 1968).

This chapter provides a review of the literature on factors that affect decision-making and commitment in general, and within a

counseling context in particular. Pre-commitment, post-commitment, and interpersonal influences are described. From this review, factors and procedures that increase commitment to counseling are summarized. A rationale is then provided for the research process and setting. Finally, within this context, the problem statement and research hypotheses are described.

Pre-Commitment Influences

Commitment is defined as any verbal or overt action socially defined as a decision to carry out a specified task or to adhere to a particular course of action in the future. Conflict theory (Janis, 1959; Janis & Mann, 1968) uses an information processing framework to describe human decision-making and commitment. This model proposes that decisions are outcomes of cognitive processing, on which an individual is committed to act. Such commitments are usually made in response to the desire to attain certain utilitarian gains or approval from self and/or significant others. Using different hypotheses, Festinger (1957; 1964) formulated a "cognitive dissonance theory" that similarly postulates that the underlying dynamic of decisions is to resolve conflicts, but they further serve to reduce subsequent dissonance. Both conflict theory and cognitive dissonance theory view the pre-commitment phase in terms of conflict resolution between competing alternatives. Adherence to commitments, in part, is motivated by the individual's desire to avoid future dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and by the individual's awareness of the difficulties involved in reversing decisions (Janis, 1959).

Within a counseling context, a reasonably obvious and basic