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PHYSICAL APPEARANCE AS A VARIABLE IN CONSULTEE PERCEPTIONS
OF CONSULTANTS

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Ph.D. 1986

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PREVIEW

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE AS A VARIABLE IN CONSULTEE
PERCEPTIONS OF CONSULTANTS

by

Patricia M. Newman

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
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Major: Interdepartmental Area of
Psychological and Cultural Studies

Under the Supervision of Professor Jane Close Conoley and
Professor Terry B. Gutkin

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 1986

TITLE

Physical Appearance as a Variable in Consultee Perceptions
of Consultants

BY

Patricia May Newman

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PREVIEW

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PHYSICAL APPEARANCE AS A VARIABLE IN CONSULTEE

PERCEPTIONS OF CONSULTANTS

PATRICIA M. NEWMAN, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1986

Advisors: Jane Close Conoley and Terry B. Gutkin

This study was designed to determine if dress style of a school psychologist consultant affects ratings given to that consultant by consultees. Subjects were 109 female elementary education teachers. Subjects viewed one of six videotapes of a consultation session. In three videotapes a female consultant was attired in professional, unprofessional and inappropriate attire, respectively and in the other three videotapes a male consultant was dressed in similar fashions. Subjects rated consultant effectiveness on the Consultant Observational Assessment Form (COAF). A factor analysis of the COAF indicated that the scale measures five consultant variables: (a) Interpersonal Skill, (b) Information Gathering Skill, (c) Concern for Consultee Feelings, (d) Clarification of Communication, and (e) Designating Responsibility for Follow-Up. An analysis of variance was performed on each of the five factors. No significant results were found, indicating that dress style did not affect ratings of consultants by consultees. Of interest was the finding that items added to the scale to determine the validity of the dress style manipulation resulted in significant differences between dress styles.

Therefore, subjects noted the difference in consultant dress style but did not use this variable in rating the consultant. Several hypotheses are offered to explain why this variable had a negligible effect on consultee ratings of consultants.

PREVIEW

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

With the continued conceptual research and practice development of school psychology, has come a declining emphasis on the role of the school psychologist as a "tester" (Smith & Allen, 1984). The inclusion of the consultative role into the functions of the school psychologist has been cited as a critical area in need of further study and development (Reschly, 1976). Consultation is defined as "a series of face-to-face interactions between a mental health specialist (the consultant) and one or more persons (the consultees) who provide services of a psychological nature to another (the client)" (Stewart & Medway, 1978, p.711). This thesis will focus on the consultative aspect of school psychology.

School psychologists have rated consultative activities as valuable services which they can provide (Bardon & Bennett, 1974; Ramage, 1979). The research literature contains many examples of school psychologists attempting to reshape and redefine their professional responsibilities to incorporate consultative activities (Meacham & Peckham, 1978). Teachers have been found to respond enthusiastically with regard to the usefulness and effectiveness of consultative interactions and to indicate through the consultative process how their own skills are enhanced (Gutkin, 1980). This is supported by the decrease in numbers of referrals by teachers who have utilized

consultative services (Ritter, 1978). Teachers increase their ability to clarify problems as a result of working within a consultative model (Curtis & Watson, 1979) and decrease their perceptions and ratings of behavior severity (Gutkin, Singer & Brown, 1980). Consequently, the value of the school psychological consultant to school children and teachers is potentially very great. Much research has been conducted to ascertain what variables within the consultative model contribute to consultant effectiveness and should be preserved and built upon. The variable of consultant dress style and its effect upon consultee ratings of consultants was examined in this research.

More specifically, the purpose of this study was to determine the effect of consultant dress on attributions of consultants made by consultees. It was believed that the physical stimulus of a consultant's appearance, specifically the style in which he/she chose to dress, would influence consultee's perceptions of consultant behavior. This belief was based upon a review of attribution theory from within the social psychology literature.

The components of attribution theory were applied to the consultation dyad and resulted in the following assumptions. When a consultee views a consultant and proceeds to make an attribution about him/her, it is done in three distinct stages (Kelley, 1976). First, the consultee observes the behavior (i.e., personal appearance).

Secondly, a judgment is made regarding the intention of the behavior (is the dress style due to consultant choice or district mandated dress code?) If the behavior is not judged as a result of individual choice but as a product of the dictates of a third party, a further attribution (stage three) is unnecessary. Should the behavior be judged as intentional, and a result of individual choice, an additional attribution is made about the consultant. This attributional process entails a series of three determinations by the consultee. On the entities dimension, the consultee will compare the consultant to other consultants he/she has worked with. In the consultative mode, the consultant is placed on the entities dimension by the consultee. Anything undergoing attribution is placed on this dimension. Then the consultee will reflect on how consistent the consultant's behavior has been over time. Finally, the consultee will check for consensus with other individuals who have worked with this and other consultants to determine whether there is consensus on the consultant's behavior.

Take for example, a consultee/teacher who consults with a consultant who always appears casually dressed in jeans and a sweater. In this example when a consultee observes a psychologist's dress style and determines the dress style is intentional and solely the responsibility and choice of the consultant, a thought process like the following may ensue.

First the consultee sees the other consultants dressed in skirts or suits and the target consultant dressed casually. This casual style is seen to be distinctive to this particular consultant. Next the consultee notes that this consultant has dressed in this style since the beginning of the school year. The behavior is thus seen to be consistent over the time modality. Finally, after comparing opinions with other teachers about this consultant's dress style, there is consensus across the people dimension, with other teachers and in other school buildings, that this particular psychologist dresses in this style. After going through these three stages, the consultee feels safe in making a dispositional attribute. For example: this consultant dresses too casually and therefore isn't serious about his/her work.

The purpose of this study was to determine what effect the school psychologist's dress style has upon consultee attributions. Elementary education teachers viewed videotapes of consultation sessions. These sessions featured either a female or male school psychologist consultant. Subjects viewed the female or male consultant dressed in one of three dress styles: (a) professional (suit and tie); (b) unprofessional (jeans and a t-shirt); and (c) inappropriate (faddish, "loud" clothing). With exception of dress style all variables were held constant. Upon viewing the videotapes, the subjects completed the 21 item

Consultant Observational Assessment Form (COAF) on the consultant's behavior. Two additional items were added to the COAF to serve as validity checks for the manipulation of the dress style.

It was hypothesized that a significant difference would result among groups of subjects viewing the three different dress styles. Analyses of variance were conducted to test this hypothesis. Had significant differences been found, the intent was to perform Tukey multiple comparison tests to determine the source of the significance. Further, it was hypothesized that the COAF measured fewer than 21 separate dimensions of consultant behavior. A factor analysis was conducted to test this hypothesis.

Given the growing importance of school psychological consultation, variables influencing consultee perceptions of consultant behavior are significant research topics. The social psychology literature, specifically the research on attribution theory, provided a conceptual framework with which to study the influence of physical variables on characteristics attributed to consultants. It was hypothesized that physical appearance, specifically dress style, would influence attributions measured by the COAF of consultants by consultees. A review of the psychological literature demonstrated that numerous attributes have been made on the basis of physical characteristics including physical appearance, vocal characteristics, nonverbal

communication, racial characteristics and handicapping characteristics. Additionally, the business literature reports the significant impact of dress style on employment opportunities, employer--employee relationships and advancement in the business field.

As the dress style of the consultant is a variable that can be changed with relative ease, it was felt that its impact on consultee perceptions of the consultant should be studied. Thus, if dress style had been an influential variable, consultants would possess additional information with which to enhance their influence. The consequence of an enhanced consultant image might possibly have been increased consultee trust and respect for the consultant. Were this to be the case, the consultee might be more likely to accept and implement consultant recommendations, thus increasing the likelihood of positive behavioral changes in the classroom.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Consultation Effectiveness

Consultation has attracted increasing attention in the research and training literature. Conoley (1981) described the basic consultative models from which the consultant may choose: mental health, behavioral, consultee centered, organizational and advocacy. Sandoval, Lambert and Davis, (1977) discussed the necessity of training teachers and other school personnel to be effective consultees. Still others have focused upon the service delivery model of the consultant (Gallessich, 1974), and the contribution of the school's climate and the principal's leadership (Bossard & Gutkin, 1983) to consultation effectiveness.

The effectiveness of consultation is dependent upon several factors. The consultee's perception of having control over a situation has been correlated with his/her willingness to utilize the services of consultants (Clark & Gutkin, 1982) as have the factors of consultee skill level and motivation (Curtis & Anderson, 1977). "Open" classroom organization (Ford & Migles, 1979), principal leadership and principal style (Williams, Wall, Martin & Berchin, 1974) are also factors that have been found to influence consultation effectiveness.

Bergan and Tombari (1976) investigated consultant skill and efficiency and their effects on consultation effectiveness. They found consultant ability to identify

problems and to act promptly on a referral (efficiency) increased perceptions of consultant effectiveness by teachers. Consultants' ability to flexibly apply psychological principles in problem solving and to make verbalizations that elicit information and ideas from the consultee also enhance consultation effectiveness.

Dinkmeyer and Carlson (1975) found consultation effectiveness is enhanced by a positive and trusting relationship between consultee and consultant. Russ (1978) supported this, finding that the consultative process is benefited when the consultant indicates respect for the consultee during consultation.

Research on Attributions of Physical Characteristics

Although a large consultation literature exists, a variable of interest to this study has been ignored in the research on psychological consultation. This variable is the overt, physical stimulus that presents itself immediately to the consultee: the physical appearance of the consulting psychologist.

It is conceivable that a wide array of clothing is being worn by school psychologists across the country. Recent graduates coming fresh from university campuses to be school psychologists may or may not make the transition from the very casual, comfortable "blue jeans and sweatshirt" look into a more businesslike "coat and tie" appearance. Teachers coming into the ranks of school psychologists may

continue to wear the very casual, indestructible clothing worn for protection from children and their activities, forgetting they now have a new, more mature audience of peers. Others, caught in the spirit of the sixties and the "as you like it" attitude may refuse to consider that physical trappings may greatly influence the perceptions of "significant others" within their environment.

Although no one seems to have studied the physical stimulus characteristics of the consultant, such characteristics have an obvious opportunity to make impact on the consultee. Furthermore, should such variables be found important in the consultant-consultee relationship, they would be far easier for the consultant to change than other consultant variables such as personality traits, knowledge, and social skills.

People formulate impressions almost immediately upon encountering physical stimulus. This is the case whether the physical stimulus is an object (Goldstein, 1980) or a person. The specific study of why people form impressions of others on initial visual impact and then attribute personality traits of dispositions on the basis of those visual stimuli is addressed under the umbrella of attribution theory.

Currently, no research is available considering the influence of dress style on attributions made in school psychology consultation. Studies have been conducted in the