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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

Effects of Presenting Problem and Counseling Relationship  
on Client Satisfaction with Counseling

by

Kristine M. Stenberg

A DISSERTATION

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

Interdepartmental Area of  
Major: Psychological and Cultural Studies  
(Counseling Psychology)

Under the Supervision of Professor Collie W. Conoley

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 1999

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Effects of Presenting Problem and Counseling Relationship on

Client Satisfaction with Counseling

BY

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GRADUATE COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

# EFFECTS OF PRESENTING PROBLEM AND COUNSELING RELATIONSHIP ON CLIENT SATISFACTION WITH COUNSELING

Kristine M. Stenberg, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1999

Advisor: Collie W. Conoley

This purpose of this study was to measure the contributions that twelve classifications of presenting problems and the counseling relationship make in determining client satisfaction with counseling in a college counseling center context. Participants were 155 undergraduate and graduate students who engaged in counseling during the Fall, 1997, semester at a large southwestern university counseling center. Data utilized in this study was archival. A recursive, just-identified path model was developed. Multiple regression analyses were used and the maximum likelihood estimation method was applied to the structural equation model. Analysis of Moment Structures (Amos; Arbuckle, 1995) was utilized in the analysis of the structural model. Findings from the study supported one classification of presenting problem (issues related to romantic relationship difficulties) as being an indirect predictor of client satisfaction via its effects on the counseling relationship. When the presenting problem of anxiety was studied in isolation, it was shown to be a significant predictor of client satisfaction. Personally-related problems were identified as four times as influential on client satisfaction than were academic and vocational



problems. Findings also attested to the important role of the counseling relationship as a significant predictor of client satisfaction and as a mediator variable between clients' presenting problems and their satisfaction with counseling. Based on these findings, implications for practice include the importance of counselors being highly skilled in building therapeutic relationships with clients and the possibility of modifying the counseling process used with clients addressing vocational and academic issues to more similarly reflect the process in place with clients addressing personally-related issues. Such modification may serve to increase client satisfaction.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

While client satisfaction has been identified as an indication of the acceptability of services (Hagedson, Beck, Newbert, & Werlin, 1976) and as a means which ". . . provides data about the outcome of therapy untapped by other outcome measures" (Berger, 1983, p. 57), to date, only minimal research has been conducted in the area of client satisfaction within a college counseling center context. An understanding of the factors contributing to the development of client satisfaction can, in practice, lead to means to increase clients' satisfaction with counseling. In turn, counseling services delivered satisfactorily can provide a base of support promoting the long-term existence of counseling centers on college campuses. In support of furthering this area of research, this study investigated client satisfaction with counseling as influenced by the effects of clients' presenting problems and the counseling relationship.

### Summary of Findings

A review of the last 25 years of research addressing client satisfaction within a college counseling center context revealed studies related to the following areas: college-related variables, waiting list, duration and termination, demographic variables, racial differences between clients and between clients and counselors (i.e., cross-cultural), counselor prognostic expectancy and experience level, client expectation, counseling relationship, presenting problem, and overall satisfaction with counseling. In general, only a few studies have been conducted in each of these areas. Many of the

results within these areas showed non-replicated or conflictual findings.

Among the studies that supported one another, survey research showed some support for clients' general, overall satisfaction with counseling (Bieschke, Bowman, Hopkins, Levine, & McFadden, 1995; Consumer Reports, 1995). Further, racial differences between clients and their respective counselors do not appear to adversely effect client satisfaction (Neimeyer & Gonzales, 1983; Proctor & Rosen, 1981; Duckro & George, 1979; Ewing, 1974).

Weak support (i.e., non-replicated findings) was identified in the literature that demonstrated a significant relationship between client satisfaction and the counseling relationship variables working alliance (Bieschke et al., 1995), trustworthiness (Heppner & Heesacker, 1983), and empathy (Hibbs, 1975). No significant relationships were found between satisfaction and: 1) client expectations (Bordwell, 1988; Heppner & Heesacker, 1983); 2) counselor experience level (Stevens, 1971; Hibbs, 1975; Heppner & Heesacker, 1983; Greenfield, 1983); 3) general college satisfaction (Stevens, 1971); or 4) reason for termination (Stevens, 1971).

The remaining research on client satisfaction within a college counseling center context presented conflictual findings.

Contradictory results were evidenced between satisfaction and:

- 1) presenting problem (Stevens, 1971; Hibbs, 1975; Greenfield, 1983; Sweet, 1993; Atkinson, Worthington, Dana, & Good, 1991);
- 2) intensity of presenting problem (Greenfield, 1983; Booth, 1986);
- 3) number of counseling sessions (Hibbs, 1975; Greenfield, 1983;

Tracey, 1989); 4) premature termination (Martin, McNair, & Hight, 1988; McNeill, Lee, & May, 1987; Greenfield, 1983); and 5) waiting list (Budman & Springer, 1987; Sinnott & Danskin, 1967; Freund, Russell, & Schweitzer, 1989; Bieschke et al., 1995). In addition, findings were mixed with respect to the relationship between satisfaction with the availability of counseling services and being placed on a waiting list (Shueman, Gelso, Mindus, Hunt, & Stevenson, 1980; May, 1990; Archer, 1981).

As evidenced by this summary of findings, much of the research in this area has been only minimally supported or has resulted in a host of contradictory findings. Additional research is needed to clarify these confusing results. This study responded to this need by focusing its investigation on examining the relationships between client satisfaction and: 1) the nature of presenting problems, and 2) the counseling relationship.

#### Nature of Presenting Problem

Studies investigating the influence of the nature of presenting problem on client satisfaction have typically classified the nature of the problem as either personal or vocational-educational (Stevens, 1971; Hibbs, 1975; Greenfield, 1983). Results from these studies were mixed. Greenfield (1983) subsequently went beyond this dichotomous classification to group personally-related presenting problems into five categories. In this study, Greenfield discovered differences in client satisfaction among these five categories of presenting problems. These results suggested that type of presenting problem may differentially influence client satisfaction



when more than two categories of problems are used. This study applied Greenfield's strategy of grouping presenting problems into more highly defined categories in order to understand their relationship to client satisfaction.

### Counseling Relationship

To date, only weak support has been shown evidencing a significant relationship between client satisfaction and the counseling relationship. Previous studies have examined counselor trustworthiness (Heppner & Heesacker, 1983), empathy (Hibbs, 1975), and therapeutic alliance (Bieschke et al., 1995) in relation to client satisfaction. Given this weak support, a component of this study addressed the effect of the counseling relationship on client satisfaction. In addition, because client satisfaction may be influenced by the interaction of the counseling relationship and type of problem, the design of this study was such that the interrelationships between the presenting problem, the counseling relationship, and client satisfaction were examined in totality. To date, no study has investigated these interrelationships which may explain the inconsistent results from previous studies.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to measure the contributions of presenting problems and the counseling relationship in the development of client satisfaction with counseling in a college counseling center context. In addition, the investigation was designed to detect any mediating effect by the counseling relationship. Both clinicians and administrators can benefit from

knowing the degree that the counseling relationship mediates the influence of a client's presenting problem in determining client satisfaction. For clinicians, such information highlights the extent of their influence on client satisfaction via the counseling relationship.

The knowledge gained by such an investigation should provide college counseling center administrators a more accurate understanding of their client satisfaction data. Given that many college counseling centers are partially, if not fully, funded by student fees, client/student satisfaction is an important area to address and understand. With increasingly tighter budgets, college counseling centers are called upon to show that they are meeting client/student needs to justify their existence. Client/student satisfaction feedback with counseling services provides strong evidence that such needs are being met.

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of the Literature

The focus of this research was to identify the contributions that classifications of presenting problems and the counseling relationship make to predicting client satisfaction with counseling within a college counseling center context. This chapter presents a review of the literature relevant to this examination. As will be revealed in the following sections, this is an important study to undertake because the relationships between these variables have been only minimally studied. Further, no past study has combined the variables of presenting problems and counseling relationship in their investigation. Overall, results from these past studies have not been replicated or have demonstrated conflictual findings. An understanding of the relationships between these variables is important to college counseling centers because such knowledge enables these agencies to better understand the nature of client satisfaction. Notably, client satisfaction with counseling provides necessary data to justify the continued presence of counseling centers on college and university campuses.

#### Client Satisfaction

Berger (1983) and Waskow and Parloff (1975) suggested that client satisfaction data are a measure of outcome that is often overlooked in research. Client satisfaction, an affective reaction, refers to "a set of positive and/or negative feelings resulting from receiving mental health services" (Berger, 1983, p. 68). Hagedson et al. (1976) noted that "client satisfaction . . . tells the evaluator

something about the acceptability of services being evaluated" (p. 230). Further, Larsen, Attkisson, Hargreaves, and Nguyen (1980) argue that client satisfaction outcome data provide not only a check against clinicians' ratings of client outcome but also provide valuable feedback from a source other than someone employed by the agency providing services. Such feedback provides information about particular dimensions of therapy from the consumer's point of view. Such dimensions include the aforementioned acceptability of services as well as the "effectiveness of psychotherapy as it is actually performed in the field" (Seligman, 1995, p. 971). As noted by Berger (1983), "client satisfaction provides data about the outcome of therapy untapped by other outcome measures" (p. 57).

Further, a focus on satisfaction is necessary for the following reasons. First, evaluating services is inherent to ethical practice. Second, factors such as an increasing interest in consumerism, shrinking budgets and reductions in personnel call for an evaluation of services, an accountability (Lewis & Magoon, 1987). Further, as noted by Lewis and Magoon, collecting client satisfaction data, through client self-report, is a "viable approach to assessing the impact of services rendered to clients" (p. 130).

A review of the last 25 years of research on client satisfaction within a college counseling center context (hereafter referred to as "client satisfaction") evidenced numerous investigations spanning a multitude of variables. A total of 27 studies were identified which addressed client satisfaction within a college counseling center context. In reporting these studies, the variables examined in

relation to satisfaction are organized under the following headings:

1) college-related variables, 2) waiting list, 3) duration and termination, 4) demographic variables, 5) cross-cultural, 6) counselor, 7) client expectation, 8) counseling relationship, 9) problem intensity, 10) presenting problem, and 11) overall or general satisfaction with counseling.

#### College-Related Variables

Two studies (Stevens, 1971; Sweet, 1993) were found which investigated counseling satisfaction and its relationship with general college satisfaction and with living in a college residence. Stevens (1971) found no significant relationship between client satisfaction and general college satisfaction. Sweet (1993), on the other hand, found a negative association between gay, lesbian, and bisexual clients living outside of a college residence and their satisfaction with counseling. Given the sparseness of studies, it is inappropriate to draw conclusions from the findings reported on above.

#### Waiting List

A review of the literature investigating the influence of waiting lists on client satisfaction with counseling revealed mixed findings. All of the following studies were conducted with college counseling center clientele with the exception of the study by Budman and Springer (1987). The effect of waiting lists on client satisfaction was found to be negative (Budman & Springer, 1987; Shueman, Gelso, Mindus, Hunt, & Stevenson, 1980; Sinnott & Danskin, 1967), positive (Freund, Russell, & Schweitzer, 1989), and of little to no effect (Bieschke et al., 1995; May, 1990; Archer, 1981). Budman and

Springer (1987) found that clients who waited a longer period before starting short-term therapy were significantly less satisfied with their therapy than were clients who began counseling sooner. In the Budman and Springer study, the average waiting period for clients was 31 days. This finding supports other research reflecting increased dissatisfaction with counseling among clients who had to wait for counseling services (Sinnott & Danskin, 1967). The study by Shueman et al. (1980) found client dissatisfaction with the delay of counseling services. Their results showed that, compared to clients presenting with vocational or educational concerns, clients presenting with personal concerns may be more dissatisfied with counseling due to the wait for services. Shueman et al. found that 40% of clients with personal concerns expressed dissatisfaction with the delay of counseling services whereas only 5% of clients with vocational or educational concerns expressed dissatisfaction.

In contrast to Budman and Springer (1987) and Sinnott and Danskin (1967), Freund et al. (1989) reported, based on the results of their study, that longer waiting periods for counseling were positively related to clients' satisfaction with counseling. Freund et al. hypothesized that this positive relation was due to the increased attractiveness and value of counseling to clients the longer they wait for services. Bieschke et al. (1995), however, found no impact of length of waiting period on satisfaction with counseling. The waiting period in this latter study averaged 13 days although it ranged from zero to seventy-five days. In a telephone follow-up survey to assess attitudes of waiting list clients who later declined counseling when it

was available and their satisfaction with delay of services, only 7% of the sample (n=27) expressed their dissatisfaction with the delay of counseling services (May, 1990). This supports Archer's (1981) finding of only 16% of waiting list clients (n=25) expressing dissatisfaction with the delay of counseling services.

To summarize, Shueman et al. (1980), May (1990), and Archer (1981) found dissatisfaction with the delay of counseling services. The compilation of this subset of research presented mixed findings. The remaining studies (Budman & Springer, 1987; Sinnott & Danskin, 1967; Freund et al., 1989; Bieschke et al., 1995) addressed satisfaction with counseling itself and also, taken as a whole, presented mixed findings.

#### Duration and Termination

This section on duration and termination of counseling comprise studies addressing counseling satisfaction and: 1) number of sessions (Hibbs, 1975; Greenfield, 1983; Tracey, 1989); 2) premature termination (Martin, McNair, & Hight, 1988; McNeill, Lee, & May, 1987; Greenfield, 1983); and 3) reason for termination (Stevens, 1971).

Number of sessions. Three studies (Hibbs, 1975; Greenfield, 1983; Tracey, 1989) in the literature addressed satisfaction and number of counseling sessions. Hibbs (1975), in his study of counseling satisfaction with clients who present with vocational-educational concerns and personal-adjustment concerns, found that client satisfaction was not related to the number of counseling sessions for

either clients presenting with vocational-educational concerns or personal-adjustment issues.

In contrast, Tracey (1989) found that clients tended to be more satisfied with counseling the longer they stayed in it. In this study, the mean number of sessions was 16, with a range of 5-34 sessions. Interestingly, Tracey also found that the increasing satisfaction of clients across sessions was not differentially related to outcome. Clients were grouped as either highly, moderately, or least successful based on their outcome scores. Outcome was operationalized by using the Follow-Up Questionnaire on Individual Counseling (FUQIC; Gelso & Johnson, 1983). On the FUQIC, clients are asked to rate on a 5-point Likert-type scale their perceived change in areas such as ability to solve problems, self-confidence, and interpersonal relations relative to the onset of counseling. Tracey's study revealed that clients tend to be more satisfied with counseling the longer they continue counseling; further this satisfaction was not differentially related to their perceived outcome with counseling.

Greenfield (1983), on the other hand, reported finding a curvilinear relationship (i.e., an inverted u-shaped distribution) between satisfaction and number of sessions. His study revealed that satisfaction was lowest for a single session and subsequently increased until reaching its highest level within the range of 16-20 sessions. After reaching that high point, satisfaction slowly decreased across the 21-98 session range and then sharply dropped after 98 sessions. The conflictual findings from these studies