
Brief Report

The Effects of Self-Selection on Trainees' Verbal Helping Skills Performance¹

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Self-selected paraprofessional trainees enrolled in a helping skills training program participated in a 6-minute pretraining helping interview from which their frequency of continuing responses was obtained. Continuing responses allow helpees to present their concerns in a nonthreatening, supportive environment and are important in the relationship establishing stage of the helping process. For data analysis purposes only, trainees were divided into three groups, a high, medium, and low group, based on the frequency of continuing responses made. Following training, at posttest, no significant differences were found among the three groups on the amount of continuing responses made during a second identical 6-minute interview. Implications for various selection procedures and training are discussed.

The increased use of paraprofessionals as helping agents has precipitated a functional restructuring of mental health manpower utilization (Sobey, 1970) and has been accompanied by philosophical shifts which allow for such manpower use (Guernsey, 1969). As their use increases, evidence is accumulating that paraprofessionals, despite minimal formal training in mental health, if trained in applied helping skills, can function at facilitative levels as high or higher than professionals (Carkhuff, 1969; Schauble & Resnick, 1976). The assumption inherent in these recent investigations about paraprofessionals is that, although minimal selection criteria may potentially enhance worker effectiveness, the process of training is a more critical variable.

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Some researchers have suggested that the impact of training might be maximized by a prior selection of individuals most likely to benefit from it, in other words, the development of an "index of trainability" (Anthony, Gormally, & Miller, 1974; Anthony & Hill, 1976). Such indices might include ratings of the prospective trainee's level of functioning on facilitative conditions (Carkhuff, 1969). Anthony and Wain (1971) developed such a method of selecting prospective trainees using a training analogue. They found that a group selected by the training analogue method had a significantly closer relationship with outcome measures than did an unselected control group. Goodman (1972) and D'Augelli and Chinsky (1974) have also developed selection procedures which could be used as an index of trainability.

Since self-selection is used by most human service agencies when agencies employ volunteers, paraprofessionals, and other service delivery agents, it has become an alternative to formal selection. Moreover, such an approach assumes that potential human service workers (or trainees) are able to self-select themselves by their interest in, and motivation to learn, the skills being taught. This viewpoint assumes that self-selection may be an approach equally as valid as agency selection.

This study investigates the adequacy of the self-selection process. An assessment was made to determine whether the helping skills of interested, motivated, self-selected trainees changed during training.

METHOD

Training

Trainees. The trainees in this study were undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in various human service training programs at The Pennsylvania State University. There were 63 students: 50 females and 13 males. All but five were undergraduates. The age range of the students was 19–46 with a mean of 21.84. All participants had elected to enroll in a nonrequired training course in basic helping skills, and thus could be viewed as self-selected trainees.

Trainers and Training Sessions. The eight trainers were advanced undergraduate and graduate students in human development and in other applied fields. The trainers were selected on the basis of their performance in earlier training sections. Trainers were highly competent in the performance of the skills to be trained, and capable of leading the structured training group. In addition, they were closely supervised by two faculty supervisors. There were 10 training sessions, one each week for 10 weeks, each lasting approximately 2½ hours. The content and process of training is described in the training workbook (Danish & Hauer, 1973a) and the leader's manual (Danish & Hauer, 1973b).

Helping Interactions

The basic data for this study was collected during two helping interviews, one before and one after the training program. The format for these interviews was the same as that described in previous research (Danish, D'Augelli, & Brock, 1976; D'Augelli, Danish, & Brock, 1976). Six-minute interviews were conducted with one trainee serving as a helpee and another as helper. The helpee was instructed to present a personal concern to the helper. Helpers were told only to "be effective and as helpful as you know how."

At pretesting, trainees were naive about what was expected, and since all trainees were strangers, helper-helpee familiarity was not a confounding factor. At posttesting, this problem was avoided by having trainees from one training group interview trainees from a different group.

The Helping Skills Verbal Response System (HSVRS: Danish, D'Augelli & Brock, Note 1) was used to evaluate the helping interactions. This system has been previously described in detail (Danish et al., 1976; D'Augelli et al., 1976). The data were rated by trained coders naive to the purpose of the experiment.

Design

Three groups were designated low, middle, or high based upon each trainee's percentage of continuing responses at the time of the pretraining evaluation. Continuing responses have been shown to facilitate significant helpee self-exploration (Ehrlich, D'Augelli, & Danish, 1979; Ginsberg, 1978). The low group, comprised of trainees who made the fewest number of continuing responses during the 6-minute pretest, had a mean percentage of 7.85 continuing responses; the mean for the middle group was 23.86%, and that for the high group was 48.24%. Placement into one of the three groups was made for data analysis purposes only. Training took place in randomly assigned training groups without regard for pretest scores.

RESULTS

Data analyzed using 2×3 analysis of variance with repeated measures (pretest vs. posttest groupings) resulted in a significant interaction effect. Results are reported in Table I. A series of t tests using the Cochran and Cox method (1960) were conducted between groups for continuing responses (low-middle, middle-high, and low-high) at pretest. These tests were all significant ($df = 40$, $t = 11.077$, 5.540 , 8.935 , $p < .01$ respectively). At posttest, mean percentage of continuing response usage were 83.190 for the low group, 84.762 for middle group, and 89.238 for the high group. An identical series of t tests

Table I. Analysis of Variance for Continuing Responses

| Source | <i>df</i> | <i>MS</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Between | | | | |
| Groups (A) | 2 | 5769.929 | 34.261 | < .01 |
| Error | 60 | 168.4095 | | |
| Within | | | | |
| Pretest/posttest (B) | 1 | 109946.7 | 720.392 | < .01 |
| A × B | 2 | 3120.532 | 20.446 | < .01 |
| Error | 60 | 152.6206 | | |

between groups at posttest resulted in nonsignificant differences ($df = 40$, $t = .349, 1.204, 1.521$, respectively).

DISCUSSION

These data suggest that trainees' helping skill behavior do change as a result of training. Further, they support the findings of previous research (Danish et al., 1976). What is unusual about the results is that self-selected trainees, regardless of initial verbal helping skill performance levels, did not differ significantly in their use of continuing responses at posttest. As noted earlier, continuing responses reflect the content or feelings expressed by the helpee and are considered to be central in the establishment of helping relationships. The increase in their use was one of the major objectives of the course. At pretraining, the three groups were divided according to the percentages of continuing responses used. Following training, the groups no longer differed significantly on the percentages of responses made. Although it is possible that this finding could be attributed to regression toward the mean, both the dramatic increase in continuing response usage by the low and middle groups together with the significant interaction term, suggests that this explanation is not plausible. Thus, the training program seemed to be effective in taking self-selected trainees, differing in verbal skill level, and training them to respond similarly. These findings suggest that self-selection may be a valid practice for recruiting trainees to enroll in helping skills training programs.

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