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ABSTRACT

A criterion system based on client perspective was developed to appraise the effects of counseling. There were four subject samples: (1) 142 clients seen for individual counseling during 1967-68; (2) 42 clients counseled during 1969-70; (3) 17 clients seen for group counseling; and (4) 60 respondents to a letter asking for volunteers. The instruments used were a goals checklist which contained a broad range of personal goals, and a follow-up questionnaire mailed to each subject. Clients marked their goals on the checklist, were counseled, and later reported by the questionnaire significant events indicating progress toward their goals. Interjudge agreement on classification of the questionnaire responses into 29 categories exceeded 85%. Goals and questionnaire categories ranged from general attitudes to specific behaviors. The system is discussed in terms of its potential usefulness, validity, and versatility. (Author/BW)

Steps Toward Outcome Criteria in Counseling and Psychotherapy

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and

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Two of the difficulties facing any researcher who intends to conduct a follow-up study on the outcomes of counseling and psychotherapy are to decide "who" should be the judge of success, and "what" criteria constitute success. The judge could be the researcher, the therapist, or the client. The viewpoints of the various judges do not necessarily converge; in fact as Strupp and Bergin (1969) note, client self-evaluation of degree of success usually falls out as a separate factor in factor analytic studies (Cartwright, Robertson, Fiske, & Kirtner, 1961; Forsyth & Fairweather, 1961). But perhaps even more important, the client may not agree with others as to what would be an appropriate measure of success for him. Thus, for example, the researcher may decide that raising a student's GPA is a good thing (e.g., Hill & Grienecks, 1966) or increasing his length of employment (e.g., Zax & Klein, 1966), or lowering his score on some anxiety measure (e.g., Cattell, Rickles, Weise, Gray, & Yee, 1966) or getting a "better" profile on innumerable other psychological inventories. In each case the client-subject may, if asked, select other potential changes in his life as being much more significant and relevant to his particular goals.

One way of circumventing this limitation has been for the therapist and the client to jointly decide on some target behaviors at the beginning of treatment. However, it is quite possible that the client will find it difficult and artificial to specify such behaviors and will do so only for the sake of the research and/or to please his therapist. He may consider the target behaviors thus arrived at substantially peripheral to his real

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concerns. And finally, it is likely that his and/or his therapist's goals for the treatment will change during the course of counseling or therapy (Thompson & Zimmermann, 1969).

For these reasons it was decided to try to develop a criterion system based primarily on the client's point of view, with provisions for any changes in that perspective during counseling or therapy. It was hoped that this system would be broad enough and varied enough to fit a variety of treatments; and that the measurement procedures used for the criterion system would be reliable, practically useful, and easily validated.

Subjects

There were four subject samples. The first consisted of 142 clients who were seen at the University of Oregon counseling center for individual counseling during August, 1967 to April, 1968. They completed follow-up questionnaires from 10 to 19 months after the termination of counseling. The second sample consisted of a similar group of 42 clients who had initiated counseling during the 1969-70 academic year. They had not returned for individual counseling from two to ten months prior to December, 1970, at which time the follow-up questionnaire was mailed.

The third sample consisted of 17 clients seen for group counseling or therapy. They were from five groups offered during Fall term, 1970, and received follow-up questionnaires seven to eight weeks later. The fourth sample consisted of 60 respondents to a letter sent in early 1971 asking for volunteers from 211 nonclient students randomly selected from the university population. They were sent follow-up questionnaires two to three months after completing the initial goal checklist.

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The percentage of useable returns from the four samples ranged from 28% (nonclients) to 45% (group members). No attempt was made to obtain a greater rate of return since the purpose of sampling was to obtain a diversity of input, and it was thought that sufficient diversity was achieved by sampling across a relatively wide range of counselor-client combinations and follow-up periods.

Instruments and Procedures

There were two basic instruments used, each of which had been developed over a period of years and which had undergone several revisions. The first was a goal checklist which contained a broad range of personal goals that had been found to be of frequent concern to clients at the University of Oregon counseling center, and which included such goals as "more sensitivity and perceptiveness in social situations", "determination of careers for which I am best suited", "fewer, less intense periods of depression", and "loss of weight". The 1967-68 checklist had 37 goals; the 1970 checklist was slightly revised and contained 38 goals. A fuller description of the checklist, its rationale, and its uses can be found in a previous article (Thompson & Zimmermann, 1969).

Clients were instructed to check any goal of concern to them that they wished their counselor to help them obtain. The nonclient sample were asked to check goals "that really are personally meaningful to you and which you hope to make progress towards in the near future." The clients were given the checklist to complete before they were seen for their first appointment or their first group meeting. Nonclient volunteers completed the checklist in response to the letter asking their participation in the study.

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The second basic instrument was the follow-up questionnaire that was mailed to each subject. Mailed along with the questionnaire was a fictitious example of a completed questionnaire, illustrating the degree of detail appropriate for responding. Also enclosed was a completed copy of the subject's own goal checklist.

The questionnaire consisted of four parts. In the first part the subject was asked to rate the degree of progress he had made towards his goals. Each goal was assigned to one of the following four categories: "definite progress", "some progress", "no progress", and "doing worse." Secondly, he was asked to "indicate what sorts of events have occurred which support the progress ratings you assigned above." Thirdly, he was asked if there were any other goals that he did not mark initially but which proved to be relevant later, and if so, to indicate which goals these were and what progress he had made toward them. Finally, he was asked whether his counselor was of any aid in achieving any of the goals he had marked or considered relevant. Only the data provided by parts two and three will be reported in this study, since it is the responses to these parts that constitute the clients' perceptions of what progress meant for them.

RESULTS

Initially 73 categories were devised into which the variety of events reported in parts two and three of the follow-up questionnaire could be classified. However, by eliminating or combining infrequently used categories, the number was reduced to 29 for the 1969-70 subjects and to 28 for the 1967-68 sample. The 29 categories are listed in Table 1. Those considered specific enough to qualify as target behaviors are asterisked.

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Interjudge Agreement

The categorization procedure required that each judge separately categorize the events for each questionnaire. A categorization form was developed for ease of classification and for convenience in checking judge agreement. In preparation for use of the scheme, each judge studied the written descriptions of each category. Then each judge separately classified reports for a small representative number of questionnaires. Finally, judges discussed and reconciled discrepancies.

The two authors categorized 75 of the 261 follow-up questionnaires in common. Each of the four subject samples were represented. Their overall interjudge agreement was 88.9%. The lead author and a doctoral intern categorized another diverse sampling of 20 questionnaires and obtained 85% agreement. This was computed by dividing the total number of responses (disagreements were weighted double) into the number of responses that were classified in the same categories by both judges.

Insert Table 1 about here

In order to determine the extent to which subjects voluntarily report specific changes as opposed to broad general ones each sample was analyzed in terms of the percentage of the total responses that occurred in specific categories lending themselves to target behaviors (asterisked in Table 1). It was decided to exclude category one, "changes in overall attitude towards self", from this analysis since the instructions for using this category practically guaranteed that it would be checked. It was to be checked any time there was a preponderance of either positive or negative changes in any of the other categories.

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Forty-eight percent of the responses of the 1967-68 individual client samples were classified into specific categories. The corresponding percentages for the other samples were 35% for the 1969-70 individual client sample, 44% for the nonclients and 24% for the group clients. The longer time before follow-up of the earlier individual client sample (10 to 19 months contrasted with 2 to 10 months) may have promoted greater use of the categories having to do with decisions regarding academic majors, careers, and marital status, all of which are specific behaviors. The nonclient sample chose a greater proportion of specific vocational-academic goals on their initial checklists than any of the other three samples and gave correspondingly more responses in the specific follow-up categories in these areas. The group sample chose a greater proportion on interpersonal goals and gave correspondingly more responses in general categories 23 and 26 having to do with general changes in interpersonal relations.

Fifteen percent of the total subject sample gave responses that were classified in the final miscellaneous category, indicating that the preceding 28 categories were reasonably but not completely inclusive of the follow-up events that were considered relevant by the subjects.

DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this study was to develop and evaluate a criterion system for counseling or psychotherapy based on client perspective of what is relevant, rather than on criteria advanced by therapists, researchers, or others. The intention was not to supplant other criterion systems, but to complement them, thus increasing the number and type of potentially useful and relevant criteria for follow-up research. Krumboltz (1966) and Paul (1967)

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have argued that we need to particularize our treatment and outcome measures to fit each client and each therapist and/or treatment modality. But it is difficult, and perhaps impossible to make such particularizations if we do not have a clear picture of what the clients themselves think is relevant in terms of outcomes.

There was nothing surprising about the categories that evolved from analysis of the events and feelings that clients thought were relevant to their experience of progress (or lack of progress). All of these things have probably been parts of previous therapist- or researcher-developed criteria of success. However, there are many ways to cut a cake and this category scheme has at least the advantages of being: 1) certified by the clients to a greater extent than most systems; and 2) reliable in terms of agreement of classification by judges; and 3) apparently inclusive of most criteria that clients from a university population deem relevant in terms of counseling and psychotherapy. Also many of the outcomes were quite specific and would require little checking to determine if they actually occurred. Others could be readily ascertained by a variety of current psychological tests which reflect changes in mood or self concept.

Further steps in utilization of this system might involve development of a questionnaire or checklist based on the 28 categories which clients could complete either during or following counseling or therapy, or both. Part of this questionnaire would consist of an estimation by the client of the relevancy of each of the outcome categories to his present concerns. The data thus acquired should provide a composite description of the client's progress.

TABLE 1

Categories for Questionnaire Responses

1. Changes in overall attitude toward self.
2. Changes in overall sense of direction.
3. Changes in feelings about self maturity, competence and independence.
4. Changes in level of depression.
5. Changes in level of guilt.
6. Quit or decided to quit school.*
7. Decision regarding academic major or program.*
8. Change in grade point average.*
9. Change in level of work-study skills.*
10. Holding a job which is considered relevant to career choice.*
11. Vocational testing.*
12. Other career exploration (interviews, reading about careers, etc.).*
13. Change in level of certainty about vocational future.
14. Change in level of control of specific and named habits.*
15. Change in level of control of specific but unnamed habits.* †
16. Change in marital status.*
17. Change in level of satisfaction with marital sex.*
18. Other changes in satisfaction with marital relationship.
19. Change in satisfactoriness of relations with parental family.
20. New significant one-to-one relationship.*
21. Discontinuance or decision to discontinue a significant one-to-one relationship.*
22. Specific changes in one-to-one relations (frequency or amount of contact, change in level of satisfaction with sexual relations).*

TABLE 1 (Cont'd.)

23. General changes in satisfactoriness of one-to-one relations.
24. Joined a new group (other than a therapy group).*
25. Change in general level of satisfactoriness of one-to-many relations.
26. Change in satisfactoriness of interpersonal relations not elsewhere classified.
27. Change in satisfactoriness of level or types of activity.
28. Change in level of competency in some specific area (has learned new skill or has demonstrated increased competency in an old area).*
29. Miscellaneous significant events not elsewhere classified (e.g., moved to new location, pregnancy).*

+ Not included in the 1967-68 sample.

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