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ABSTRACT

Many researchers have linked peer counseling skills to skills necessary in acquiring friends. In order to examine the relationship between peer counseling training and friendship, peer counselor trainees' (N=167) expectations of friendship before and after peer counseling training were compared. Peer counselors' expectations of friendship were also compared with those of the trainees' peer group (N=175). Analysis indicated that peer counselor volunteers made more highly developed friendship expectation statements than their peer group before training and after training. Further, changes in the frequencies of their high level developmental responses between the pre- and post-training questionnaires are significantly greater than their peers'. The analysis suggests a relationship between peer counseling training and friendship acquisition and maintenance skill training. Research questions concerning whether or not participants learn and enact new or increased friendship behaviors as a result of peer counseling training still remain for future research. Moreover, research comparing participants who choose to receive training versus participants who are, on some level, forced to receive training might suggest whether peer counseling training might be effective as a school-based curriculum open to all. (ABL)

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**The Influence of Peer Counselling Training  
on Adolescent Expectations of Friendship**

by

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### **Abstract**

Many researchers have linked peer counselling skills to skills necessary in acquiring and maintaining friends. In order to examine the relationship between peer counselling training and friendship, peer counsellor trainees' expectations of friendship before and after their peer counselling training were compared. Peer counsellors' expectations of friendship were also compared with those of the trainees' peer group.

Analysis of variance indicates that peer counsellor volunteers made more highly developed friendship expectation statements than their peer group before training ( $F(1, 340) = 20.921, p < .001$ ) and after training ( $F(1, 339) = 62.844, p < .001$ ). Further, changes in the frequencies of their high level developmental responses between the pre- and post-training questionnaires are significantly greater than their peers' ( $F(1, 334) = 41.196, p < .001$ ).

The analysis suggests a relationship between peer counselling training and friendship acquisition and maintenance skill training. Specific implications linking social skills training with peer counselling programs and focusing on the selection and training of peer counsellors are discussed.

## Learning to be Friends

A rationale upon which peer counselling advocates build peer counselling programs is that natural helpers can be selected and trained to be more enlightened and effective friends. In fact, Peer counselling and friendship behaviors have been described as being substantially the same (Carr, 1984; Carr, 1988; de Rosenroll, 1990; Varenhorst, 1983). Carr (1984) characterized friendships as a "... mutuality or a willingness to be helpers to one another" (p.7). He referred to "being attentive and supportive, able to manage conflicts appropriately, ability to be sensitive to others and express thoughts and ideas in ways others do not feel their esteem is threatened" (p.7) as being learnable skills. He associated acquisition of these specific social skills with ability to acquire and maintain friendships. Carr suggested that use of these skills is more important than a purely cognitive awareness of how to make and keep friends. However, Carr indicated that students can become consciously aware of their social skills through peer counselling (1989) and that they could learn how to teach these skills to others (1984). Further, Varenhorst (1983, p.7) suggested that peer counselling training allows students to learn how to become real friends within themselves, as well as to others.

Skills associated with initiating and maintaining healthy friendships, such as basic interpersonal communication skills, assertion skills, and problem-solving are already being taught within social skills curricula (Benard, 1986; Englander-Golden, Elconin, Miller & Schwarzkopf, 1986). However, whereas social skills

training focuses on participants learning friendship skills for their exclusive and personal use, peer counselling training extends the purposes of training to include participants helping their peers to acquire the same skills in which the peer counsellors have been trained.

During training, attitudes such as keeping secrets, sharing, caring, being real, and not judging are stressed as being important. These attitudes can be grouped within a developmentally advanced level of friendship expectations which Bigelow (1977), Bigelow and La Gaipa (1975), and Reisman and Shorr (1978) have suggested are associated with higher moral development but are not frequently articulated by any age group, including adults. However, a review of training literature has failed to find any reference to changes in friendship attitudes which might be associated with peer counselling training. Evidence to suggest that peer counselling candidates change their friendship attitudes during their training or that after training their friendship attitudes differ markedly from their untrained peers does not exist. Further, if peer counsellors do have high developmental levels of friendship expectations, it is unclear as to whether these attitudes are learned during training or whether peer counselling attracts individuals who already function at developmentally high friendship expectation levels, or both.

If research could provide evidence for a relationship between peer counselling training and increases in friendship expectation levels, then more educators could expand their expectations of peer counselling training to include teaching social skills such as friendship acquisition and maintenance. Peer counsellors could be more systematically trained in the acquisition of friendship skills and attitudes so

that they could help their peers to acquire the same skills and attitudes. Further, if peer counselling were to become a social skills training component, the selection of those who receive training could be adapted to include individuals perceived to be socially 'at risk' or the program could be offered to all students as a basic course in living skills. Rubin (1980) has asserted that social skills such as making and keeping friends need to be introduced to children as early in their school experiences as possible. Training peer counsellors as peer models and coaches may be useful to the transfer of these essential social skills.

### **The Current Study**

Friendship Expectations (FE's) are "...those attitudes, values and behaviors that a subject expresses as being important characteristics of a friend (Bigelow, 1971, p.1)." FE's are not the same as friendship behaviors. Respondents may or may not behave consistent with their expectations of their friends. However, their answers do imply a specific awareness level pertaining to potential friendship behaviors.

This study compared adolescent peer counsellor volunteers to their nonvolunteer peers in terms of their friendship expectation levels. Further, peer counsellor volunteers' FE developmental levels prior to training were compared with their FE levels after training. The comparison provided information concerning the relationship between peer counselling and the development of friendship acquisition and maintenance skills.

The friendship expectations were coded according to Bigelow and La Gaipa's FE dimensions and the dimensions were clustered according to Bigelow's (1977) developmental hierarchy of responses. The hierarchy includes three levels:

Situational, Contractual and Internal-Psychological. Situational level dimensions tend to be rather superficial in content, usually descriptive of a friend's behaviors and their desirability being weighed in terms of "reward-cost" (Bigelow, 1977). Contractual level dimensions included socially normative friendship expectations. Statements that may be clustered into one of these dimensions tend to be more articulate than situational statements yet they share a similar superficiality in that the values the statements suggest are socially sanctioned and defined, as opposed to Internal-psychological statements which represent the respondents' internalized value system.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The experimental group was composed of one hundred and seventy-five 13 to 18 year old peer counsellor volunteers who were attending a peer counselling training course. The students represented virtually every one of the junior and senior high schools in a local urban area. A complete description of the training program is available in de Rosenroll and Dey (1990). The same number of control peer group adolescents were drawn from school populations. Students from the control group were selected so that the two groups would contain approximately the same numbers when compared by age and by gender.

Although 175 participants in both the experimental and control groups filled in the questionnaires, eight of the experimental group participants were dropped from the comparisons because they had received peer counselling training prior to the summer training. Therefore, the experimental group comprised 167 members.

Twenty-six participants were 13 or 14 years old, ninety-nine were 15 or 16 years old, and forty-two were 17 or 18 years old. Of the 167 experimental group participants, 139 were female and 28 were male. Within the control group, thirty-four were 13 or 14, ninety-eight were 15 or 16 and forty-three were 17 or 18. Of the 175 control group participants, 150 were female and 25 were male.

### **Design**

This cross-sectional developmental study used an untreated control group design with pre-test and post-test (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Cook & Campbell, 1979). This design provided data which represent adolescent FE's and data which represent peer counsellor trainee FE's before and after training.

The data were broken into units and were categorized according to Bigelow and La Gaipa's original 25 FE's (Bigelow & La Gaipa, 1975) and placed hierarchically according to Bigelow's developmental categorization system (Bigelow, 1977). FE developmental levels expressed by peer counsellors before and after training were examined and then compared to their nonvolunteer peer group.

### **Procedure**

#### **Peer Counsellors**

One questionnaire, in which they describe what they believe are the characteristics and behaviors of a friend, was administered at the beginning of the

first day of training. At the end of approximately 35 hours of training, the students received a second brief questionnaire along with their first questionnaire. On the second questionnaire, they were asked to review their previous answers and make any changes. All questionnaires were coded. Instructions for both questionnaires were standardized and read by the trainers.

### **General Peer Group**

Both questionnaires, as well as the verbal instructions, were identical to the questionnaires given to the peer counsellors other than a small section of the school-based questionnaire which asked peer counsellors to identify themselves. The questionnaires were distributed in English classes in local schools. The second questionnaire was given to the students about two or three weeks after the first questionnaire to simulate the lapse time between the peer counsellor questionnaires. Not all participants' questionnaires were used. Reasons for not including a participant were either that the student was a peer counsellor or had failed to fill in one of the two questionnaires. All complete sets of questionnaires were coded.

### **Questionnaires**

The questionnaires were devised by the researcher to help participants to reflect on their friendship experiences and to draw some general friendship behaviors and characteristics from their reflections (Hunt, 1987; Kolb, 1984).

*Reflective* questioning is by no means new to the literature (Austin & Thompson, 1948; Hayes, Gershman, & Bolin, 1980; Weiss & Lowenthal, 1975). Asking the participants to make general statements based on their reflected experiences adds

new levels of awareness for participants answering the questions and develops their answers beyond the reality sphere of what their friends are like into the ideal sphere of friendship expectations, that is, what they perceive as a best friend in the best of all worlds.

## **Training of Judges**

### **Friendship Expectation Dimensions**

Five judges received ten hours of training, including explanations of the 25 FE dimensions, the 3 FE levels, definitions and examples. The judges clustered the 25 FE's under one of each of the three FE developmental categories. Any of the 25 FE's that were not unanimously placed in a given FE developmental category was discussed and placed according to consensus. In order to analyze the response units for FE dimensions and levels, each judge worked through case examples obtained from a pilot study. Initially they openly discussed their choices. Any disagreements were negotiated and mediated if necessary by the researcher. When the judges seemed able to reach agreement on unit analyses, a further set of 100 response units were content analyzed to determine quality of inter-rater agreement. Cronbach's Alpha generated inter-judge reliability scores of .9747 across judges on FE dimension statements and .9789 on FE levels indicating high reliability among judges as to the consistency with which they categorized participants' statements.

### **Friendship Expectation Developmental Levels**

The relationship between Bigelow's (1977) 3 FE developmental levels, (situational, contractual and internal-psychological) and the 25 FE dimensions was

determined by the judges prior to content analysis. The final breakdown of FE dimensions into FE Developmental levels is shown in Table 1 below.

**TABLE 1**  
**FE Dimensions by FE Levels as Clustered by Judges**

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<b><u>I: Situational</u></b>	<b><u>II: Contractual</u></b>	<b><u>III: Internal Psychological</u></b>
Propinquity	Common Activities	Similarities of Attitudes and values
Demographic Similarity	General Play	Intimacy potential
Common Interests	Organized play	Genuineness
Altruism (helping): friend as giver	Reciprocity of liking  Altruism (helping): friend as receiver	Acceptance  Loyalty and Commitment
Altruism (sharing): friend as giver	Altruism (sharing): friend as receiver	
Ego reinforcement	Stimulation value	
Incremental prior interaction	Admiration of character	
Physical characteristics	Evaluation	
Similarity of physical characteristics		
Admiration of physical traits		
Source of humor		

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## Results

### A Comparison of Experimental and Control Groups

FE dimension and FE level frequencies, as attributed to both groups during their first and second questionnaires and their differences in frequencies between the two questionnaires, were analyzed on a per item basis. In the first questionnaire, significant differences between groups are suggested in the FE dimensions of 'intimacy potential' ( $F[1, 340]=20.160, p<.001$ ) and 'acceptance' ( $F[1,340]=6.996, p<.01$ ) and in FE level III: 'Internal-Psychological' ( $F[1,340]=20.921, p<.001$ ). A comparison of the other 3 dimensions which are clustered within level III did not yield any significant differences nor did a comparison of the other dimensions clustered under either level I or level II suggest any significant differences.

In the second (follow-up) questionnaire, significant differences between groups are apparent in 'similarity of attitudes and values' ( $F[1,339]=8.674, p<.01$ ), 'intimacy potential' ( $F[1,339]=67.063, p<.001$ ), 'genuineness' ( $f[1,339]=5.406, p<.05$ ), 'acceptance' ( $f[1,339]=26.108, p<.001$ ) and FE level III: 'Internal-Psychological' ( $F[1,339]=62.844, p<.001$ ). None of the other dimension comparisons clustered under Levels I or II appear significant.

A comparison of the groups according to the differences of frequencies between their first and second sets of responses indicates significant differences in the FE dimensions of 'similarity of attitudes and values' ( $F[1,334]=13.120, p<.001$ ), 'intimacy potential' ( $F[1,334]=28.644, p<.001$ ), 'genuineness' ( $F[1,334]=5.006, p<.05$ ), 'acceptance' ( $F[1,334]=22.712, p<.001$ ) 'loyalty and commitment' ( $F[1,334]=10.878, p<.01$ ), and FE level III: 'Internal Psychological'

( $F[1,334]=41.196, p<.001$ ). No other dimension comparisons in either Levels I or II appeared significant.

### **Within Experimental Group Comparisons**

ANOVA was used to compare the frequencies of the experimental group participants' responses on dimensions of the first questionnaire with their frequencies on the second questionnaire. Significant FE dimension changes include 'similarity of attitudes and values' ( $F[1,332]=7.609, p<.01$ ), 'intimacy potential' ( $F[1,332]=12.727, p<.001$ ), 'acceptance' ( $F[1,332]=9.949, p<.01$ ), and 'loyalty and commitment' ( $F[1,332]=4.678, p<.05$ ), while the only significant FE level change is level III: Internal Psychological ( $F[1,332]=33.428, p<.001$ ). Again, no other dimension comparisons in either Level I or II appeared significant..

## **Discussion**

### **Experimental and Control Groups: Differences**

#### **Pre-training Questionnaire**

An analysis of the 25 FE dimensions between groups indicates that levels of significance were attained in two level III FE dimensions, 'intimacy potential' and 'acceptance'. Both of these dimensions contribute to the analysis of the difference between groups in FE level III which also appears significant.

It seems that adolescents from this population who volunteer to be trained as peer counsellors are significantly different than their non-volunteer peers in the frequency that they resp. with both 'intimacy potential' and 'acceptance' friendship expectations. Further, it appears that these two dimensions are significant to the degree that, when placed with the other 3 level III FE dimensions,

the difference between groups in level III FE's is also significant. Other than within the 'internal-psychological' FE level, the groups appear to be similar.

As children mature into adolescence both intimacy and acceptance become more important. Particularly in early and middle adolescence, acceptance is crucial to the developing identity and fluctuating self-concept. Similarly, intimacy is important. Through sharing ones' insights, feelings and concerns with another, the adolescent finds relief, support and validity.

Peer counsellor volunteers express these dimensions more often than the control group. This could mean that on average they have a greater awareness of these two dimensions or that they place more importance in the two dimensions than the controls. It could also mean that peer counsellor volunteers have a greater desire than their peers to be accepted (and to accept) and to be emotionally intimate with others. Perhaps their volunteerism to become peer counsellors reflects a predisposition toward two peer counselling characteristics, acceptance of others and sharing ones' real feelings.

### **Post-training Questionnaire**

An analysis of the second questionnaire suggests that the peer counsellors are still significantly different in the frequencies of responses coded as 'acceptance' and 'intimacy potential'. Significant differences also appear in 'similarity of attitudes and values' and 'genuineness', both of which are level III FE's. An analysis of FE level III also indicates a significant difference between the two groups.

The two added dimensions, 'similarity of attitudes and values' and 'genuineness' can both be traced to the peer counselling training much like 'acceptance' and 'intimacy'. In these two variables, though, the peer counsellor trainees were not coded as having more frequently expressed these dimensions before training. During peer counselling training, the group focuses a great deal of time and energy on sharing their attitudes around developmental issues. Values-oriented exercises often propel the group members into sharing their own values, sometimes for the first time with others. Genuineness is frequently stressed within the group. 'Being real', 'being visible', and 'being in the here-and-now' are all expressions peer trainees may hear and use to suggest that being genuine (not phony) is an important personal ingredient.

### **A Comparison Of Changes Between Groups**

A between group analysis concerning changes in the frequency of their FE responses between first and second questionnaires suggests that all 5 level III dimensions, 'similarity of attitudes and values', 'intimacy potential', 'genuineness', 'acceptance' and 'loyalty and commitment' are significantly different and a further analysis indicates that differences between groups in FE level III: 'Internal Psychological' is significant.

Peer counsellors appear to be different from their nonvolunteer peers on two level III FE dimensions before training and 4 level III FE dimensions after training. Further, analyses have indicated that, when compared to the control group, the differences in the number of statements over all coded level III dimensions that the peer counsellors submitted on their post-training questionnaire versus their pre-

training questionnaires are significant. Because of the variation of FE frequencies among individuals in both experimental and control groups when they entered the study, it is important to note that a comparison of their pre/post-training questionnaire differences supports the relationship between peer counselling training and learning about friendship attitudes and values.

### **Differences Within the Experimental Group**

An analysis of the differences in FE dimensions between the peer counsellors' pre- and post-questionnaires indicates that 4 level III FE dimensions, including 'similarity of attitudes and values', 'intimacy potential', 'acceptance', and 'loyalty and commitment', are significant, while FE level III: Internal Psychological is also significant. We can infer from this analysis that the peer counsellors generated significantly greater frequencies of level III responses, as coded by the judges, after their training than they had generated on the first day of training.

### **Implications**

In this study, the Friendship Expectations of peer counsellor trainees were compared to a group of nonvolunteer peers. Analyses of the results indicate significant differences between the two groups on two Internal Psychological level dimensions before training and four dimensions after training. Further analyses of net frequencies (pre-training questionnaire frequencies subtracted from post-training questionnaire frequencies) both between groups and within the experimental group were undertaken. The analyses suggest that the peer counsellor trainees, when compared to their nonvolunteer peers, significantly increase their frequencies of Internal Psychological level coded statements over

their peers.

Therefore, the answer to the question concerning whether or not peer counselling volunteers are different than their nonvolunteer peers even before training seems to be "yes". The answer to the question as to whether or not peer counsellor volunteers increase their friendship expectations during their training is also "yes". However, both answers require qualifications.

According to this study, prior to training peer counsellors were significantly different from the peers in only 'acceptance' and 'intimacy potential'. These two dimensions are important to all ages in both groups, so participants from both groups were similar in their perceptions of relative importance. As stated in the Discussion section, one can only guess as to where the difference arises, though it is possible that the experimental group was more predisposed to generating responses that might be coded into these dimensions. However, further research seeking similar information from groups in more comparable environments may provide more information.

A second possibility arises concerning peer counsellor selection processes. Although 'intimacy potential' and 'acceptance' are not overt selection criteria, peer counselling supervisors may inadvertently look for these characteristics when interviewing candidates or reading their letters of application. Further, if candidates require references (from peers, teachers, etc.), the referees may agree to nominate them based on the candidate's intimacy and acceptance behaviors. Further research into this possibility would be interesting and, if these two dimensions are associated with successful peer counsellor trainees, peer counselling supervisors

could remain more alert for signs of presence or absence of these dimensions in their candidates.

Even with differences in the two dimensions, at the end of training the peer counselling trainees had made significant changes in the frequencies of their Internal Psychological level responses. So, peer counsellor supervisors are not just choosing candidates who have high level expectations of friendship and training them in micro-counselling skills. The net differences between Internal Psychological level FE's within the peer counselling group indicate that the trainees were able to provide significantly more of this level of responses after training than they were before training.

There is clearly an association between peer counselling training and the growth in frequency of Internal Psychological level responses. Pinpointing any one variable within the training as being more important than others is beyond the scope of this study. However, further research in this area would be of use to peer counselling trainers as well as professionals whose interests focus on pro-social skill acquisition.

Several aspects of the training would certainly predispose participants to re-evaluate their initial responses. During the training, the group members quickly become a cohesive group. The trainer, the exercises, the common learning goals and the learning environment all contribute. The peer counselling trainees contribute. First, they are there for a common purpose and they recognize a common goal. They are kindred spirits. Second, their disclosures within session

exercises are rewarded by being attended to by one or more group members and by disclosures being shared by other participants.

The relationship between peer counselling training and increases in level III FE's suggests that level III FE dimensions are learnable. Trainers do not consciously explore the dimensions with the participants but the participants appear able to generalize high level friendship expectations from the training experience. However, these peer counsellor trainees have volunteered to receive this training. They are likely to be more motivated than nonvolunteers to learn about themselves and their attitudes and values. Whether or not individuals who were not volunteers could learn in a similar way or to a comparable degree remains a question for further research.

This study has focused on questions surrounding friendship expectations, as opposed to friendship behaviors. Pursuant to this, any associations which are drawn from analyses of the data must be in the context of expectations not behaviors. Therefore, this research suggests that peer counsellor trainees, before training, have higher frequencies of expectations but not friendship behaviors in the areas of intimacy and acceptance. Further, any significant changes within the peer counsellor trainees and any differences between groups is within the parameters of friendship expectations, not behaviors.

Peer counselling training allows participants to discuss personal and developmental issues which may increase their awareness of and sensitivity to the needs and wants of others. Peer counselling training also offers participants the opportunity to learn and develop communication skills which enable them to

become more effective in their interpersonal interactions. These skills allow the participants to immediately put into practice their new awareness and sensitivity. Moreover, the training program offers trainees a relatively safe environment within which they can explore new ideas and try out new behaviors. The environment provides a space where the participants can integrate their new perspectives among a group who have similar goals.

Research questions concerning whether or not participants learn and enact new or increased friendship *behaviors* as a result of peer counselling training still remain for future research. Moreover, research comparing participants who choose to receive training versus participants who are, on some level, forced to receive training might suggest whether peer counselling training might be effective as a school-based curriculum open to all. Finally, more peer counselling research which compares age groups is vital. We must train young people in social skills like making and keeping friends early in their development so that those that have friends can better maintain and expand those relationships and those that are friendless can end the 'friendless cycle' by learning how to make and keep friends.

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