

Absolute Versus Tentative Interpretations: Mediating Effects of Client Locus of Control

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Abstract:

An analog design was used to investigate the mediating effects of client locus of control (i.e., an internal focus or external focus) on perceptions of counselor style of interpreting events (i.e., absolute or tentative interpretations) on measures of perceived session depth and smoothness, and perceived counselor expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. One hundred and thirty-four undergraduate college students, crossed on level of locus of control, were randomly assigned to one of two treatment conditions, and then completed measures of perceived session depth and smoothness, as well as perceived counselor expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. Results indicated a significant interaction effect on perceived counselor trustworthiness. Implications for college counselors are provided.

KEY WORDS: interpretation; locus of control; psychotherapy research.

Article:

The use of interpretations by counselors to provide clients with an alternative framework to conceptualize their problems and make changes in their lives has long elicited interest among researchers as an avenue for influencing clients (Levy, 1963) that cuts across theoretical orientations (Claiborn, Ward, & Strong, 1981). However, the therapeutic value of interpretations has received mixed empirical support (Jones & Gelso, 1988; Milne & Dowd, 1983). One possible explanation for the mixed results was provided by Claiborn (1982), who argued that variability in the forms of interpretation used in research may account, at least in part, for the discrepant results of interpretation studies.

Traditionally, researchers have focused on characteristics of the interpretation itself, such as depth of interpretation (Speisman, 1959), suitability (Silberschatz, Fretter, & Curtis, 1986), accuracy (Crits-Christoph, Cooper, & Luborsky, 1988), congruence with the client beliefs (Claiborn, Ward, & Strong, 1981), attributions (Claiborn & Dowd, 1985; Forsyth & Forsyth, 1982), transference versus nontransference interpretations (Marziali, 1984; Piper, Debbane, Bienvenu, Carufel, & Garant, 1986) or the use of absolute versus tentative interpretations (Milne & Dowd, 1983). However, throughout all of these investigations, few researchers have considered characteristics of the client that may serve to mediate the influence of these interpretations. In other words, research on interpretations may have fallen prey to the "universality myth" (Kiesler, 1966; Silberschatz, Fretter, & Curtis, 1986), the notion that all persons will be influenced identically by a given stimulus.

Levy (1963) suggested that counselors could either provide interpretations in an absolute or decisive manner or in a more questioning and tentative manner. While some researchers (Milne & Dowd, 1983) found little difference in the impact on clients of tentative versus absolute interpretations, others (Jones & Gelso, 1988) found tentative interpretations to be viewed more positively by clients than absolute interpretations. This latter finding is more consistent with the content of textbooks on counseling skills (Brammer, Abrego, & Shostrom, 1982; Hackney & Cormier, 1995) which advocate for the use of tentative interpretations.

Milne and Dowd (1983) hypothesized that tentative interpretations would be rated higher than absolute interpretations by respondents. Within an audiotape analog design, 163 participants rated counselors using tentative versus absolute interpretations. Results suggested that there was no significant difference in the evaluation of counselors using tentative versus absolute interpretations. Seventy-eight percent of the participants in the Milne and Dowd study were female and no information regarding the ethnicity of the participants was provided. Further, no effort was made to examine personality factors of the respondents that might mediate the influence of style of interpretation.

Among such client characteristics that might moderate reactions to different styles of interpretations, one that seems particularly relevant is client locus of control. Persons with an external locus of control expect others to take more responsibility for their problems and solutions to these problems, while persons with a more internal locus expect to take more responsibility for their fate (Rotter, 1966). It is theoretically logical, then, that persons with a stronger external locus would prefer a more directive intervention (i.e., absolute interpretation) while persons with a stronger internal focus would respond more favorably to a more collaborative intervention (i.e., tentative interpretation).

Various researchers have considered the mediating influence of client locus of control on reactions to various interpretation styles. Forsyth and Forsyth (1982) hypothesized that client locus of control would mediate the influence of attributional interpretations. In their research, attributions that focused on internal and controllable causes yielded more positive respondent affective reactions, but this was only true among respondents with an internal locus of control. Among respondents with a more external locus of control, responses were more variable and no type of attributional interpretation consistently proved to be more effective.

In the most comprehensive effort to date, Jones and Gelso (1988) conducted an analog study to consider the influence of level of client resistance on the impact of style of interpretation (i.e., tentative versus absolute). "Resistance" was partially defined by the locus of control of the respondent, with respondents who had a more external focus considered more resistant. Jones and Gelso hypothesized an interactive effect between interpretation style (absolute versus tentative) and locus of control of the respondent, whereby persons with a more external locus of control would respond more positively to absolute interpretations and persons with a more internal locus of control would respond more positively to tentative interpretations. The data failed to support their hypothesis of an interaction effect. Rather, they found that tentative interpretations were viewed more positively than absolute interpretations for all respondents, regardless of locus of control. One limitation of this study, however, is that all respondents were female. The purpose of this study, then, was to extend the work of Jones and Gelso by examining the mediating influence of client locus of control on reaction to interpretation style among a more diverse sample of participants. The dependent measures for this study were respondents' perceptions of the counselor's social influence (expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness) and the perceived session impact (depth and smoothness). The design of the study was causal-comparative, using a 2×2 multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) with respondent locus of control (high or low) crossed with style of interpretation (tentative or absolute) on the dependent variables of perceived counselor expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness, and session depth and smoothness. These dependent measures were selected because of their prominence in counseling process research.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred and thirty-four volunteer undergraduate students enrolled in counselor education and psychology classes were selected for participation. The total number of participants consisted of 42 (31%) freshman, 34 (26%) sophomores, 30 (22%) juniors, and 25 (19%) seniors, with 3 (2%) participants not responding to this demographic item. Among the participants, there were 92 (69%) White, 35 (26%) African-American, 1 (.7%) Asian, 2 (1.5%) Latino, and 1 (.7) "other" respondents. Three participants (2%) did not respond to this item. Eighty-three (62%) females and 48 (36%) males participated in the study, with three (2%) participants not responding to this item. The average age of participants was 21 years ($M = 20.99$, $SD = 3.93$). Participants received no formal credit or remuneration for their services.

Instrumentation

Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ)

The SEQ (Stiles, 1980; Stiles & Snow, 1984) consists of twenty-four 7-point bipolar adjectives used to describe the counseling session. Two of the four subscales (depth and smoothness) of the SEQ have been consistently supported through factor analysis (Stiles & Snow, 1984; Stiles et al., 1994). Additionally, these two measures of session power and effectiveness (depth) and comfort (smoothness) have been demonstrated to function independently in the session (Stiles et al., 1994). Stiles et al. (1994) reported Cronbach alphas of .90 and .92 for the Depth and Smoothness subscales, respectively. Cronbach alphas for the current sample were .68 and .70 for Depth and Smoothness, respectively.

The Counselor Rating Form—Short Form (CRF-S)

The CRF-S (Corrigan & Schmidt, 1983) consists of 12 bipolar items, 4 items to assess each of the three constructs of counselor expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness established as components of the counseling social influence process (Strong, 1968). Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which the counselor on the video demonstrated each of the 12 attributes on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “not very” to “very.” Confirmatory factor analysis has supported the use of the CRF-S as an indicator of the three dimensions of counselor expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness (Corrigan & Schmidt, 1983). Corrigan and Schmidt (1983) reported interitem consistencies ranging from .82 to .94. For the current sample, Cronbach alphas were calculated to be .87, .88, and .86 for the expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness dimensions, respectively.

The Adult Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Control Scale (ANS-IE)

The ANS-IE (Nowicki & Duke, 1982) consists of 40 items, answered either “yes” or “no,” and was designed to measure locus of control independent of social desirability and intelligence. Higher scores indicate an external locus of control. Nowicki & Strickland (1982) established the construct validity of the ANS-IE and found split-half reliabilities ranging from .74 to .86 with various populations, and a six-week test-retest reliability of .83 with a college population.

Procedure

Participants completed the measures of locus of control. Participants who scored above the median for this sample were classified as external, and participants who scored below the median for this sample were classified as internal. This procedure is justified as the scores on the ANS-IE for this sample approximated the norms reported by Nowicki & Strickland (1982). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two interpretation conditions, instructed to put themselves in the place of a client attending a third session, presented with a four minute videotaped excerpt from a counseling session, and finally asked to complete the SEQ and CRF to evaluate the session and the counselor, respectively. Following the experimental procedure, the participants were debriefed.

The videotaped excerpts were developed from scripts of a typical counseling session with a traditional college-aged woman suffering from depression. The counselor in the videotape also was female. The two tapes were duplicates, with the exception of the final interpretative statement by the counselor, to minimize the influence of nonverbal cues or other extraneous factors. The tapes were equal in content with the exception of the final counselor-offered interpretation placed at the end of each excerpt with no client response to the experimental manipulation. The experimental conditions consisted of the following counselor responses:

Absolute Interpretation

“You are depressed because of the control your parents have placed on you and continue to place on you.”

Tentative Interpretation

“I’m wondering if perhaps it might be that your parents have exerted this control over you for so many years and now you are fighting this lack of power and that may be what is causing the depression. What do you think about that?”

Data Analysis

A Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was calculated, with respondent locus of control (external or internal) crossed with style of interpretation (tentative or absolute) on the dependent variables of perceived expertness, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and session depth and smoothness.

Results

First, the data was examined for conformance to assumptions of homogeneity of variance (through a Cochran's C and Bartlett-Box F statistic) and covariance (through a Box's M and Chi-square statistic), normality (through the K-S Lilliefors statistic), linearity and multicollinearity of dependent variables (through collinearity diagnostics using singular value decomposition), and sensitivity to outliers (using a series of boxplots). There were minor violations of the assumptions of homogeneity of variance, normality, and sensitivity to outliers. The violation of the assumption of homogeneity of variance was not considered problematic, however, because the groups were of approximately equal size (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). Similarly, given the sample size of the study, the violation of the assumption of normality was not considered problematic (Hair et al., 1998). Finally, consistent with best practice recommendations (Hair et al., 1998), the outliers were retained to avoid weakening the generalizability of the findings.

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for each variable by group are Provided in Table I. A series of three MANOVAs were then calculated to examine for interaction effects of the two independent variables and for direct effects of each independent variable. An alpha-level of .05 was used for all analyses. First, a MANOVA was used to examine possible interaction effects between locus of control and type of interpretation used. The omnibus test was not statistically significant ($F = 1.36, p = .24$). Because of the exploratory nature of the study, however, post-hoc univariate analyses were conducted for heuristic purposes. Post-hoc analyses, which may be more sensitive to differences than the omnibus test, indicated that there was a significant interaction between locus of control and type of interpretation on the dependent variable of trustworthiness ($F = 4.14, p = .04$). Respondents who were more internal in their locus of control rated as more trust-worthy the counselor who used a tentative interpretation, and respondents who were more external rated as more trustworthy the counselor who used an absolute interpretation.

Table I. Summary of Means and Standard Deviations by Type of Analogue and Locus of Control for Outcome Measures

Outcome measures	Absolute		Tentative	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
External locus of control				
Expertness	16.85	5.20	17.31	4.67
Attractiveness	18.62	5.23	17.73	5.01
Trustworthiness	18.97	5.33	17.50	4.73
Depth	20.29	5.74	20.15	4.40
Smoothness	23.56	4.96	23.00	5.89
Internal locus of control				
Expertness	17.29	5.73	18.74	4.93
Attractiveness	17.00	5.87	19.31	4.63
Trustworthiness	19.31	5.09	21.18	3.55
Depth	20.69	4.60	20.62	5.48
Smoothness	21.60	5.37	22.23	5.37

A second MANOVA was calculated to examine the main effect of type of interpretation on the composite dependent variable. The omnibus test was not statistically significant ($F = 2.19, p = .06$). The univariate post-hoc tests for the main effect of type of interpretation revealed statistical significance on the dependent variable of session depth ($F = 4.82, p = .03$). Because of the small effect size (eta-square = .03), a lower estimate of reliability for the depth variable (alpha = .68) for this sample than what has been found in the past, and the violation of the assumption of homogeneity of variance, however, this finding should be viewed with caution. There was no main effect on any of the social influence measures (expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness).

Finally, a MANOVA was run to examine the main effect of locus of control on the composite dependent variable. The omnibus test was significant ($F = 2.61, p = .028$). The univariate post-hoc revealed a significant main effect of locus of control on one dependent variable, trustworthiness ($F = 6.03, p = .02$). Respondents who were more internal rated the counselor as more trustworthy, regard-less of the type of interpretation used, than did respondents who were more external.

DISCUSSION

Likely the most clinically significant finding in the current study is that respondents who have a more internal focus rated the counselor as more trustworthy, regardless of the type of interpretation used. Further, the highest ratings of trustworthiness were from respondents with an internal locus of control who were responding to the tentative interpretation condition. That is, the significant inter-action between locus of control and type of interpretation on the dependent variable of trustworthiness may have implications for counseling process. Although the effect sizes were relatively small, it may be that student clients who have a more internal locus of control may have more trust in a counselor who provides interpretations in a tentative manner. Conversely, clients who have a more external locus of control may consider more trustworthy a counselor who uses a more directive and decisive (i.e., absolute) interpretation. This finding may best be understood relative to client expectations. Perhaps a client with a more external locus of control expects that solutions to problems will come from external sources (including the counselor). Perhaps this expectation is met more fully when the counselor provides interpretations in absolute language. While the ultimate goal of counseling may be to help clients accept more responsibility for problems and solutions to these problems, it may be more important in the early stages of the counseling process to meet client expectations to facilitate the development of therapeutic trust.

The lack of a main effect of type of interpretation is consistent with the findings of Milne and Dowd (1983), differs from the findings of Jones and Gelso (1988), and provides some empirical evidence that a counselor delivering a tentative interpretation is not rated differently on measures of social influence (i.e., expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness) than a counselor delivering an absolute interpretation.

The findings of the current study should be considered in the context of methodological limitations of the study. The use of an analog design, coupled with the use of a non-clinical sample of college students, may limit the generalizability of these findings. While 51 participants (38%) reported having received counseling in the past, further inquiry is needed to validate these findings among clinical samples in the context of their ongoing counseling. Also, future research should examine the issue of attribution as interpretations can be internal (focused on client) or external (focused on environment), and framed as controllable or uncontrollable in addition to being presented in an absolute or tentative manner. In the current study, external interpretations were used that made no attribution as to whether the situation was controllable or uncontrollable. Also, it is important to note that the findings were based on one interpretative comment made near the beginning of one counseling session. Additional inquiry is needed to examine if this holds true with more frequent interpretations made throughout a counseling session and over time. Finally, the modest Cronbach alphas for session depth and smoothness call into question the reliability of these factors for the sample used in this study.

Within the constraints of the current study, it seems fair to conclude that interpretations promote counselor trustworthiness more among clients who have a stronger internal locus of control. In particular, the use of tentative interpretations with clients who have an internal locus of control shows promise. Subsequently, further research on the therapeutic consideration of client locus of control when using interpretations is essential.

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