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Exploring Client Experiences at a Community-Based Counselor Education Program Training Facility

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Counseling settings are facing increasing demands for accountability with respect to the quality of their services. It is becoming more important to evaluate the degree to which clients think they have received services that are convenient, professional, and helpful. Counselors will experience increasing pressures to integrate program evaluation into their practice and to engage in ongoing data collection and quality improvement (Steenbarger & Smith, 1996). Sexton (1996) and Spinelli (1994) found that outcome research has investigated a wide variety of client problems and clinical techniques; however, there is little research regarding client satisfaction from a client perspective.

The school and community counseling master's level Counselor Education programs through North Dakota State University are accredited through the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). These programs require that students engage in a practicum experience prior to their internship experience and graduation. This experience stipulates that students first apply for and, then upon faculty approval, register for the practicum class and meet with clients within the community to attain 40 (25 individual and 15 group) client contact hours while being supervised. In January of 2004, NDSU's counselor education program was fortunate to secure a more professional site for its Community Counseling Service. It is now off-campus and more visible to the community. Since the move, client numbers increased dramatically, and this researcher began to wonder if the services were meeting client needs.

An exploratory, basic interpretive, qualitative study was conducted that focused on participants' phenomenological experience. According to Creswell (2003), "One of the chief reasons for conducting a qualitative study is that the study is exploratory. This means that not much has been written about the topic or the population being studied, and the researcher seeks to listen to participants and build an understanding based on their ideas" (p. 30). The goal was to tell a rich story about participants' experiences. Semi-

structured, audio-taped interviews took place to collect data focusing on client experience.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of clients receiving counseling services at North Dakota State University's Community Counseling Service. To find out what their experience has been like, what has been meaningful for them, what has possibly changed for them since receiving counseling services, if their needs were being met, and what suggestions they might have for improvements to the training facility. This study allowed me to view counseling services from a client perspective to better understand their experience. The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. Are clients satisfied with the counseling services they receive?
2. What factors contribute to their satisfaction?
3. In what ways can improvements be made to NDSU's Community Counseling Service to increase client satisfaction?

Limitations of the Study

Listed below are the limitations of this study. Some may be viewed as limitations or possibly as strengths depending on the background and research beliefs of the reader.

1. The pool of potential participants for this study was predominantly European-American. One individual participated in this study from a minority ethnic group.
2. This research was conducted at a small community-based counselor education program training facility in North Dakota.
3. This study served as a snapshot of experiences of the particular clients interviewed at the particular time of data collection.
4. There is no guarantee that the clients interviewed provided forthright descriptions of their experience. Participants could have been selective in their descriptions for social desirability.
5. All clients meeting the defined criteria were asked to participate in this study. However, they were asked in person when visiting the center for a scheduled appointment, therefore, clients that did not show up for numerous scheduled appointments, or discontinued counseling, were not contacted for participation.
6. These findings are reports of individual clients' accounts of their experience. Commonalities may be coincidental. Generalizations should not be made without further study.
7. Biases of the researcher. The researcher may not be aware of how she may have influenced the responses of the participants.
8. Inexperience of the qualitative researcher. The researcher served as the instrument in this study, and this was this researcher's first qualitative research experience.

Review of Related Literature

Sexton (1996) and Spinelli (1994) found that outcome research has investigated a wide variety of client problems and clinical techniques; however, there is little research

regarding client satisfaction from a client perspective. The relevance of counseling outcome research was a resonating theme discussed by numerous authors (LaSala, 1997; Sexton, 1996; Sexton & Whiston, 1996; Steenbarger & Smith, 1996; Whiston, 1996). Sexton and Whiston (1996) believe there is a gap between research and practice. The purpose of research should be to contribute in some way to understanding and action that can improve social circumstances (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

In relation to previous studies assessing client satisfaction, Kooyman Kelley (2003) found that numerous studies were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s; however, this tapered off in the 1990's due to repetition, inconsistency, and the difficulty in making comparisons between studies. She went on to express that "satisfied clients are more likely to continue using an organization's services and refer others to the organization" (p. 11). Satisfied clients can help an organization's growth rate increase. Dissatisfied clients, on the other hand, can dramatically hinder growth rate. However, an improvement that needs to be made in client satisfaction research is placing assessments within an evaluation model that guides the purpose and the uses of the client satisfaction data (Lee & Sampson, 1990). Thus, integrating research and practice is imperative to continually assess and improve client satisfaction and services.

Previous research on client satisfaction also highlights the importance of the relationship between the counselor and the client (Elliott & Williams, 2003; Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996; LaSala, 1997; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1996). Clients judge the quality of services they receive by assessing seven elements of the relationship: respect, understanding, complete and accurate information, competence, access, fairness, and results ("Client-Centered Care," 1998). Organizations that strive to exceed client expectations in these areas will receive high ratings of client satisfaction. Nelson and Neufeldt (1996) stressed that one of the common factors in successful counseling is a strong working alliance between counselor and client. This includes an emotional bond between the two, an agreement about goals for counseling, and an agreement about how to accomplish those goals. Lambert and Cattani-Thompson (1996) expressed that counselor empathy, rather than technique, is the best predictor of client satisfaction outcome. Elliott and Williams (2003) agreed by stating, "It would appear that the key factor in the development of an effective relationship is the counsellor's non-judgmental acknowledgment of the clients feelings" (p. 35). Elliott and Williams went on to say that they believe insight and understanding are rated higher by clients than symptom reduction. Although the counselor-client relationship is extremely important regarding client satisfaction, this study aimed to learn more about what other factors contribute to client satisfaction.

Participants

Patton (2002) suggested that one of the strengths of qualitative research is the capability to gain deep insight and understanding by intensely studying a small purposeful sample. Therefore, criterion, or comprehensive, sampling was utilized for participant selection in this study. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), criterion sampling examines all cases that meet the criteria for the study, and is useful for quality assurance. Every client who was receiving services through NDSU's Community Counseling Service and met the criteria for participation at the time of data collection was asked to participate in this

study. Only two clients declined to participate due to time constraints. There were no participants under the age of 18 receiving services at the time of data collection. A total of nine individuals expressed an interest in the study and met the criteria. There were five male participants and four female participants (Tables 1 and 2). Participants ranged in age from 25 to 48 years. All participants were employed. Information about employment status and annual income was requested to assess the socioeconomic status of clients, although participants self-reported this information. This assisted in ascertaining that the majority of clients receiving services through NDSU's Community Counseling Service considered themselves low-income or working-class individuals. Most of the participants reported not having enough income or insurance to see other, more expensive, counseling providers.

Table 1. Description of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Socio-economic class	Annual income	Length receiving services	Received prior counseling elsewhere
Mary	Female	28	European-American	Working	\$27,000	51 months	Yes
Tom	Male	43	European-American	Low	\$19,000	18 months	Yes
Steve	Male	29	Asian-American	Working	\$25,000	11 months	No
James	Male	43	European-American	Middle	\$40,000	1 month	No
Amy	Female	25	European-American	Low	\$10,000	24 months	Yes
Lisa	Female	27	European-American	Low	\$15,000	7 months	Yes
Eric	Male	37	European-American	Low	\$10,000	2 months	Yes
Gloria	Female	48	European-American	Low	\$18,000	24 months	Yes
Paul	Male	39	European-American	Working	\$30,000	2 months	Yes

Table 2. Summary of Participants

Gender	Males = 56%
	Females = 44%
Age	Mean = 35.44
	Median = 37
	Mode = 43
	Standard Deviation = 8.4
	Range = 23
Employed	100%
Ethnicity	European-American = 89%
	Asian-American = 11%

(continued)

Table 2. Summary of Participants (continued)

Socioeconomic class	Low = 56% Working = 33% Middle = 11%
Annual income	Mean = \$21,555.56 Median = \$19,000 Mode = \$10,000 Standard Deviation = \$9888.27 Range = \$30,000
Length receiving services	Mean = 15.56 months Median = 11 months Mode = 2 months, 24 months Standard Deviation = 16.12 months Range = 50 months
Received prior counseling elsewhere	Yes = 78% No = 22%

Procedure and Data Collection

First, approval through North Dakota State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was requested in order to begin human research. Next, an informed consent was given to, and voluntarily signed by every client that had agreed to participate in the study. A copy of the signed consent form was also given to each participant. The informed consent described the purpose of the study, how data would be collected, and how confidentiality would be maintained. Name, residence, place of employment, and client files were not used in this study. Pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity. All research materials gathered were kept in a locked filing cabinet to which only the researcher had access. Audio-tapes were erased upon completion of the study. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

The primary means of data collection were audio-taped semi-structured interviews that were between 60 and 90 minutes in length. A semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to use the interview questions as a guide, while allowing the participant to play a strong role in defining the content of the interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Interviews were scheduled with each participant separately and took place at NDSU's Community Counseling Service center. Participants' were asked to disclose only what they felt comfortable sharing, and were informed that the interviews would be transcribed and analyzed.

Interviews focused on a rich and detailed description of each participant's experience. Rubin and Rubin (2005) recommended the use of "main" questions to make sure that the research questions would be carefully explored. Six open-ended questions were asked during the interview with additional follow-up questions generated to clarify information based on the specific exchange. The interview questions were as follows:

1. What can you tell me about your experience at NDSU's Community Counseling Service?
2. What has been the most meaningful thing that you have experienced here?

3. Since you have been coming here for services, what has changed, or is different, for you?
4. In what ways are your needs being met, or not being met, through NDSU's Community Counseling Service?
5. What would need to happen for you to have a better experience?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experience?

Analysis

An exploratory basic interpretive study was conducted in order to better understand a client's experience at a community-based counselor education program training facility. Interviews were conducted, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. QSR Nvivo 2.0 qualitative research computer software was utilized to assist in organizing and analyzing the data. Preferably, the derived themes should reflect the purpose of this study and provide answers to the research questions.

Results

There were 4 major themes and 27 sub-themes that emerged from the 9 individual interviews following the coding and analysis of the verbatim transcripts. The major themes entailed (a) benefits of North Dakota State University's Community Counseling Service, (b) positive aspects of client experience, (c) negative aspects of client experience, and (d) client suggested improvements. The individual sub-themes are discussed under each major theme below.

Participants discussed five benefits in which NDSU's Community Counseling Service has been beneficial for them. The service (a) offers mental health care at a low cost to clients, (b) the facility is nice, professional, and conveniently located for those in the community, (c) there is no diagnosis listed in client files, (d) referrals for other services are made to outside service providers when necessary, and (e) the management and coordination is professional and organized, with an appreciation for the process of matching up clients with student counselors.

There were five specific positive aspects of clients' experiences that were highlighted during the interviews. They included (a) confidentiality, (b) meeting with competent student counselors, (c) the counselor-client relationship, (d) the support system clients receive, and (e) client progression. Client progression was the only theme, out of the 27 sub-themes, that spanned all nine of the participants' interviews. Participants' general appreciations for NDSU's Community Counseling Service were also mentioned and listed as a sub-theme of clients' positive experiences.

There were six negative aspects of clients' experiences mentioned by five of the nine participants. They included (a) difficulty in switching student counselors each semester, (b) the break between semesters without counseling, (c) the lack of communication and collaboration between service providers, (d) the lack of a psychiatrist on-site, (e) working with inexperienced counselors, and (f) the lack of a connection with student counselors.

The fourth, and final, theme that emerged was participants' suggestions for improving NDSU's Community Counseling Service. Six of the nine participants

expressed ten sub-themes that included the following improvements: (a) adding group counseling sessions, (b) incorporating a transition session, (c) increasing communication and collaboration with outside providers, (d) developing a referral network, (e) having a psychiatrist or psychologist available on-site, (f) offering additional information about the video cameras and recording purposes, (g) having continuity with one student counselor, (h) being able to switch student counselors when requested, (i) increasing counselor self-disclosure, and (j) enhancing flexibility in scheduling appointments.

Results from this study indicate that NDSU's Community Counseling Service is providing a valued service that includes fees that are low, a quality physical site, a focus on service rather than diagnosis, access to outside referral sources when necessary, and is managed and coordinated professionally.

Discussion of the Results

This exploratory basic interpretive qualitative study offers insight and understanding into the experiences of nine clients receiving services at a community-based counselor education program training facility. The results of this study offered four major themes. All nine of the participants interviewed for this study reported being satisfied with the services they receive. One theme that emerged during the interviews was the benefits of receiving services at NDSU's Community Counseling Service. Clients discussed five benefits including low fees, the conveniently located facility, that a client's diagnosis is not placed in their files, that referrals to other mental health providers are given, and the professionalism of the management and coordination. The second theme found was the positive aspects of client experience. Participants reported appreciating the level of confidentiality, the competent student counselors, the trusting client-counselor relationship, the support system offered, and client progression. General appreciations for the student counselors and the training facility were also discussed.

The third theme focused on the negative aspects of client experience. They included difficulty in switching student counselors, the break between semesters without counseling, the lack of communication and collaboration with outside mental health providers, the lack of a psychiatrist on-site, working with inexperienced counselors, and the lack of a connection with student counselors. The final theme discussed client-suggested improvements for NDSU's Community Counseling Service. These improvements included adding group counseling sessions, incorporating a transition session when switching counselors, increasing communication and collaboration with outside mental health providers, developing a referral network for client use, having a psychiatrist or psychologist available on-site, offering additional knowledge about the video cameras and recording purposes, having continuity with one student counselor, being able to switch student counselors when requested, increasing counselor self-disclosure, and enhancing flexibility in scheduling appointments.

The results of this study and the literature support that the client-counselor relationship is a pertinent factor contributing to client satisfaction (Elliott & Williams, 2003; Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996; LaSala, 1997; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1996), but there is limited research highlighting other factors contributing to client satisfaction. This study found that low fees, the conveniently located facility, the fact that a client's diagnosis is not placed in case files, referrals to other mental health providers are given,

the professionalism of the management and coordination, confidentiality, the competent student counselors, the support system offered, and client progression were also contributing factors to client satisfaction for the participants interviewed at NDSU's Community Counseling Service. There is also limited research assessing client satisfaction from a client perspective. It is hoped that the results of this study will assist in filling the gap in research by contributing to an increased understanding of the lived experience of clients receiving services at a community-based counselor education program training facility.

The results of this study will be useful for NDSU's Community Counseling Service, its administration, faculty members, students, and clients, as well as for other counselor education program training facilities. The negative aspects of client experiences, as well as client-suggested improvements, have allowed for increased insight into how to better meet the needs of clients at NDSU's Community Counseling Service. Ultimately, upon faculty review, client-suggested improvements will be considered for implementation in NDSU's community-based counselor education program training facility. The results of this research study offer insight, but need to be interpreted with caution because the findings are related to a particular sample chosen specifically because of their involvement as a client through NDSU's Community Counseling Service. Therefore, these findings are not intended to be generalizable to all client experiences.

Recommendations for Further Research

Ideas for future research include ongoing data collection of clients' experiences to enrich their voice and to more firmly establish ways in which improvements can be made to NDSU's Community Counseling Service. Additionally, a focus group could be organized for clients to participate in to discuss their experiences. Suggestions for additional improvements could be gathered using this format. Because the sample size was relatively small in this study, NDSU's Community Counseling Service needs to conduct additional client satisfaction assessments to create a larger database of clients in order to be able to draw more general conclusions.

To help decrease effects of social desirability in this type of study, organizations may want to use researchers who are not directly related to the organization to conduct client satisfaction assessments. Another possibility would be to distribute questionnaires, or set up interviews with, clients when they end counseling and are no longer receiving services from the organization. This may help to decrease the fear of repercussions if something negative is said about the organization.

It would be beneficial for researchers and for organizations to not only assess how satisfied clients are with an organization's services, but also to assess the client's perceptions of and experience with the process of participating in such a study. Not much research has been conducted on and not much is known about the client's experience in participating in this type of research. For example, questions could include whether participants wanted to be assessed, whether they enjoyed it, whether the interview made them uncomfortable, whether they would have rather not been asked to participate, whether they felt they really had a choice, whether they feared negative consequences if they did not participate or said anything negative, and so forth.

In this study, only the satisfaction of the clients at NDSU's Community Counseling Service was explored. Future research may also include assessment of the counselors' satisfaction. There is some evidence that the levels of satisfaction of the counselors at an organization impact the levels of satisfaction of the organization's clients (Jimmieson & Griffin, 1998; Schmit & Allscheid, 1995). If both counselor and client satisfaction are assessed, correlations can be conducted to help determine if counselor and client satisfaction are correlated, and if so, what the specific relationship is between client and counselor satisfaction for a particular organization.

Conclusion

This research study explored the experiences of nine clients receiving counseling services through a community-based counselor education program training facility. Themes were found within individual participant interviews and across all nine participants. The results of this study and the literature support that the client-counselor relationship is a pertinent factor contributing to client satisfaction (Elliott & Williams, 2003; Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996; LaSala, 1997; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1996), but there is limited research highlighting other factors contributing to client satisfaction. This study found that low fees, the conveniently located facility, that a client's diagnosis is not placed in case files, that referrals to other mental health providers are given, the professionalism of the management and coordination, confidentiality, the competent student counselors, the support system offered, and client progression were also contributing factors to client satisfaction for the participants interviewed at NDSU's Community Counseling Service. There is also limited research assessing client satisfaction from a client perspective. It is hoped that the results of this study will assist in filling the gap in research by contributing to an increased understanding of the lived experience of clients receiving services at a community-based counselor education program training facility.

During the data collection segment of this study, the researcher met with nine clients who shared their unique experiences. Participants were given the opportunity to talk to or call the researcher if there were any questions or problems during the study, and it should be noted that no participants called, and there were no expressed complaints. Clients seemed willing and enthusiastic to participate in this study, as most scheduled an interview time immediately after learning of the study and reading through the informed consent to participate.

The analysis of this study indicates that clients were generally satisfied with the counseling services they received. The information in this study will be useful for NDSU's Community Counseling Service, its administration, faculty members, students, and clients. The negative aspects of client experiences, as well as client-suggested improvements, have allowed for increased insight into how to better meet the needs of clients at NDSU's Community Counseling Service, and hopefully for other counselor education program training facilities as well. Ultimately, upon faculty review, client-suggested improvements will be considered for implementation in NDSU's community-based counselor education program training facility. The results of this research study offer insight, but need to be interpreted with caution because the findings are related to a particular sample chosen specifically because of their involvement as a client through

NDSU's Community Counseling Service. Therefore, the findings are not intended to be generalizable to all client experiences.

The writing of this project was a journey in itself. This researcher wants to express her appreciation to each of the participant's who shared their time and experiences. Elbeck (1992) believed that when client satisfaction is assessed, clients feel valued, as they perceive that the organization is genuinely interested in them and their attitudes, and they feel that they are part of the system. It is hoped that this project has empowered each participant by having his or her experience acknowledged and voice heard.

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