

Article 63

A Radio Call-in Program: Opening the Hearts of Evangelical Christians

Paper based on a program presented at the 2010 ASERVIC Conference, August 3, SC,
and a poster session at the 2011 CAPS Conference, April 1, IN,

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Although psychology in the media has met with wide acceptance from the general population, little is known about the effects of this type of programming on consumers. Additionally, one specific population, evangelical Christians, historically have been reluctant to access the offerings of psychology and counseling. In this study the researchers explored the perceptions and opinions of listeners to a call in counseling program on a Christian radio station via a survey they developed which was sent out in the monthly newsletter of the radio station to the entire mailing list. Approximately 16,000 surveys were sent out with instructions for responders to complete and return the survey only if they had listened to the call-in program within the last 2 years. A total of 599 surveys were returned with various numbers being accurately marked and included in the sample sizes for each research question. The results indicate the reasons given by Christians for listening to the program. Additionally, the types of actions they took as a result of listening are discussed. The results of the study suggest listeners' opinions of counseling became more positive as a result of listening and that several participants reported entering counseling in person as a result of listening to the program.

Counseling in the Media: Opening the Hearts of Evangelical Christians

A few decades ago, many mental health professionals hotly debated the ethical concerns and potential repercussions of counseling in the media (Balter, 1983; Frank, 1983; Klonoff, 1983; McCall, 1990; McCall & Stocking, 1982; Schwebel, 1982). Proponents of using media to address concerns of callers and listeners touted the benefits of using the media to address mental health issues. They asserted that media psychology was a public service that benefitted persons who were unable or unwilling to access services in person. Further, they pointed out that psychological programming helped to normalize issues, demystify psychology, provide a cost effective means to reach a wider range of persons, prevent mental health problems, allow consumers to hear a variety of viewpoints on many topics, provide a sense of social support, and minimize the perceived risk of accessing help in person. Objectors cautioned that programs of this nature might cause harm by trivializing people's problems for the sake of entertainment because the goals of the media and the goals of mental health professionals differ (Klonoff, 1983, McCall, 1990). Furthermore, they contended that media psychology could compromise the image of psychology as a science in the eyes of the public, confuse the public about the nature of counseling and the counseling relationship, and overlook persons who might be suicidal or require follow-up services.

Those mental health professionals who supported and engaged in media psychology often quoted George Miller, at that time the president of the American Psychological Association, who charged the APA membership to "give psychology away" rather than hide its helpfulness behind the doors of private offices where only a few could access it.

Some members of the psychological community conducted research during the 1980s and early 1990s in an effort to determine how this programming impacted individuals (Bouhoutsos, 1990; Bouhoutsos, Goodchilds, & Huddy, 1986; Collins, 1990; Kaufman, 1992; Levy, 1989; Levy, Emerson, & Brief, 1991; Phelan, 1989; Raviv, Raviv, & Arnon, 1991). More recent research since that time, however, could not be found, presumably because the phenomenon had become so wide-spread that subsequent research might have had little or no impact on whether the practices of psychology and counseling in the media were continued.

Although the public appeared to have an insatiable desire for programming of this nature, many in the Christian population historically have been resistant to the offerings of psychology. Particularly, more conservative, evangelical Christians have typically sought advice or help from within the church or faith community. Many researchers have asserted the high priority Christians place on receiving counsel that is consistent with their Christian values (Eriksen, Marston, & Korte, 2002; Keating & Fretz, 1990; Worthington & Scott, 1983). Fears that their beliefs and convictions will be trivialized or disregarded may prevent many Christians who could benefit from services from seeking them, thus creating an underserved population. Because many persons inside the church report dealing with the same issues and problems as those outside the church, many might benefit from counseling services if those services are consistent with their faith. Therefore, psychological programming that is consistent with Christian values could have a positive impact for the Christian community.

Within a decade of radio becoming a household item, psychological material was broadcasted and studied. Radio is one of the earliest media through which both mental health professionals and Christians have sought to reach the masses with their messages (Cantril & Allport, 1935; Lumley, 1932; Ward, 1994). Nonetheless, it remains largely unknown what effect listening to these programs has on the individual lives of the listeners and on their perceptions of mental health counseling in general. Listeners' perceptions remain an important concern because harm may occur if they misapply information or fail to seek help in person due to a misperception of counseling. Whereas previous researchers' studies addressed various aspects of media counseling, this study is unique in that it was conducted with an evangelical Christian population to determine if listening to psychology programming on the radio influenced listeners' decision to seek counseling in person, and to determine what reported impact, if any, listeners experience as a result of the programming they heard.

The research questions used for this study included:

1. What are the participants' reasons for listening to this program?
2. What type of actions, if any, do listeners take as a result of information or advice they hear on the program?
3. Has listening influenced the listeners' opinions toward counseling, and if so, in what direction (positive or negative)?

Method

This research was conducted by survey because the participants were radio listeners on the radio station mailing list and could not be contacted by any other means. By allowing the participants to give written answers on some of the questionnaire items, the researchers were able to use their words to develop themes and answer the research questions.

Participants

Responders to the questionnaire constituted the participants of this study and included 140 males, 403 females, and 6 persons who did not disclose their sex. The distribution of participants' ages ranged from 19 to 88 with a mean age of 54.72 and a median age of 55. The race and ethnicity of participants included 13 (2.4%) Asian/Asian Americans, 123 (22.4%) Black/African Americans, 40 (7.3%) Hispanic/Latino(a), 1 (0.2%) Middle Eastern person, 13 (2.4%) Multiracial persons, 8 (1.5%) Native Americans, and 331 (60.3%) White/Caucasians. An additional 10 (1.8%) participants reported "Other" for race/ethnicity and 10 (1.8%) did not respond to this question. Concerning marital status, 315 (57.4%) persons reported being married, 121 (22.1%) reported being single or widowed, and 105 (19.1%) reported being separated or divorced. Approximately 37% of the participants reported having earned either an associate's or bachelor's degree, with an additional 32% having earned some college credit without a degree. Approximately 15% of the participants reported having advanced degrees. Persons who reported being homemakers comprised 18.4% of the participants and 16.2% reported being retired or semi-retired. Of the participants reporting being employed, approximately 18% indicated they worked in education, training, health care, or social

service, approximately 12% indicated working in business, sales, management or engineering, and 10% reported office and administrative positions. Approximately 10% of responders' occupations could not be determined. Others represented in this sample included persons who reported being students, disabled, unemployed, or incarcerated. Participants resided in the radio listening area in the section of the country included in the Bible belt, though the station can be heard on the Internet as well. Regarding religious preference, approximately 78% reported a Protestant church affiliation and 3% reported a Catholic affiliation, while the remainder of the participants simply reported "Christian" or did not respond to this question. Consistent with the mission and focus of the radio station, 98% of the participants reported *having received Jesus as Savior*.

Survey Questionnaire

The survey developed by the researchers was sent to everyone on the KHCB radio network mailing list, which totaled approximately 16,000 persons. Researchers did not have access to the mailing list. The surveys and self-addressed return envelopes were placed in the mail along with the station's monthly newsletter by the volunteers of the radio station. Survey questions were designed to gather information from participants related to the impact of listing to the call-in counseling program on participants' lives and whether they intentionally acted on any of the information heard. The participants in this study included persons on the mailing list of a Christian radio station network, KHCB, who chose to respond to the questionnaire that was sent with the KHCB monthly newsletter, *The Broadcaster*. The recipients of the newsletter were requested to respond to the questionnaire only if they had listened to the call-in counseling program, *Vital Issues*, within the last 2 years.

Description of the Radio Station and *Vital Issues* Program

KHCB is a noncommercial, listener-financed radio station with a missionary focus that broadcasts Christian music, preaching and teaching programs, children's programming, and various special features 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The station has been in operation since 1962 and has grown to include almost two dozen network and satellite stations across Texas and parts of Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. KHCB is also broadcasted over the Internet, and some programming is offered in Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese. The *Vital Issues* call-in program is aired weekly and features a variety of mental health professionals who each volunteer their time on a rotation basis to answer questions called in to the program. These professionals included several licensed professional counselors and licensed marriage and family therapists, one psychologist, and one psychiatrist. (An attorney is also featured occasionally to discuss family inheritance laws, but his broadcasts were not included in this study.) The voices of persons who call in a question to the *Vital Issues* program are not heard. The program producer takes the caller's question and reads it over the air. The mental health professional, sitting with an open Bible, note pad, and any other materials deemed helpful, addresses the question. The host of the broadcast, who is sitting with the mental health professional, asks additional questions related to the caller's question and summarizes the professional's comments. The producer then proceeds to read the next caller's question. Because the radio station president had kept notes of all questions called in to the program during the previous 20 years, the researchers were able to

determine the nature of most questions called in. An examination of the questions called in to the program over a 20 year span indicated that the majority of questions were related to relationships in addition to other questions called in about various mental health concerns.

Results

A total of 599 questionnaires were returned. Of these, 549 were suitable for inclusion in the study to address the various research questions. Fifty returned questionnaires were excluded because they were marked in ways that were indiscernible. From these questionnaires, the maximum number of questionnaires was included to address each research question. Survey data were entered into SPSS statistical software to calculate results.

Participants' Reasons for Listening

Eight options were offered on the questionnaire to indicate reasons listeners tuned in to this counseling program, and participants were instructed to endorse as many motivations as applied to them. The majority of motivations endorsed indicated help-seeking behaviors. Reasons given for listening to the program included: (a) *to get a Christian perspective* (75.2%), (b) *listening to anything on KHCB* (60.8%), (c) *to help others* (57.4%), (d) *to get help for myself* (55.2%), (e) *to learn about counseling* (40.4%), (f) *to pass time while doing other things* (21.9%), (g) *for enjoyment or entertainment* (12.9%), and (h) *to compare myself with others* (6.6%). In the category option *Other* (8.9%), participants produced their own reasons for listening. Some of these included: (a) *to receive spiritual benefit*, (b) *to gain insight or understanding*, (c) *to learn about issues or specific information*, (d) *to evaluate counselors*, (e) *listening because receiving the questionnaire motivated them to do so*, (f) *receiving social support*, and (g) *calling to ask a question*.

Participants' Actions Resulting From Listening

Three hundred (54.6%) participants responded in the affirmative to the question on the questionnaire, *Have you ever intentionally acted on any information or advice you heard on the Vital Issues counseling program?* These participants were given space to explain if they wished to do so. There were a total of 185 participants (33.7%) of those answering in the affirmative who chose to write an explanation. Their responses were analyzed in a more qualitative manner, by sorting them into categories of actions as suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1999) who asserted "categories should be internally consistent but distinct from one another" (p. 154). The explanations given by participants included: (a) sharing information heard with others, (b) applying the information to their own families, (c) applying the information to help others, or (d) applying information in other non-specified ways. Other actions taken reported by participants included: (a) seeking counseling or information from a counselor, (b) referring someone else to counseling, (c) requesting a tape of the *Vital Issues* program, and (d) seeking more information about a specific issue.

Another question on the questionnaire asked, *As a result of listening, have you sought counseling in person?* Of particular importance is the finding that 92 participants (16.8%) reported that they *sought counseling in person* in response to listening. It is

noteworthy that an additional 77 participants (14%) indicated that although they had not sought counseling in person, they would like to do so. The reasons these participants have not sought counseling in person when they desire to do so are unknown and beyond the scope of this study. Possible reasons may be related to finances, a stigma connected to seeking counseling, or other personal reasons.

Participants' Opinions of Counseling

Using two Likert scales, *before listening* and *after listening*, the researchers compared participants' mean scores of their opinions of counseling. A paired samples *t* test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference in the participants' opinions of counseling *before* listening to the *Vital Issues* counseling program compared to their opinions *after* listening. The results indicated a statistically significant higher score after listening ($M = 4.45$, $SD = .71$) than before listening ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.04$), $t(500) = 20.7$, $p < .001$; Cohens's $d = 1.01$.

One hundred and ninety-four participants' scores indicated that their opinion of counseling did not change. Only one of the participants indicated an opinion of *very negative* for both before and after listening, three indicated an opinion of *somewhat negative* both before and after listening, and 20 participants indicated a score of *neutral* before and after listening. However, 73 participants indicated a score of *somewhat positive* and 97 participants reported a score indicating *very positive* for both before and after listening. Table 4 indicates the differences in opinions before and after listening.

Table 4
Differences in Before and After Listening Scores

Difference score	Frequency	%
-2	2	0.4
-1	4	0.8
0	194	38.7
Difference Score	Frequency	%
+1	176	35.1
+2	92	18.4
+3	29	5.80.8
+4	4	

Note. The difference scores indicate how many points the *after* listening Likert score varies from the *before* listening Likert score. Additionally, three participants indicating somewhat positive and very positive opinions qualified their responses by writing the words "Christian" or "Biblical" before the word "counseling" in this item on the questionnaire.

Discussion

This study contributes new information to the literature in that it was conducted with an evangelical Christian population. The participants in this study represented a help-seeking population as opposed to a more entertainment-seeking group. This fact appears to indicate that there is a desire for psychological information within this faith community. However, evangelical Christians desire counseling that is congruent with their faith perspective, and they may avoid seeking services not deemed by them to be *Christian*. The positive impact reported by the participants in this study is rather strong.

One possible explanation for this reportedly positive impact might be the level of trust already established with the radio station because the participants are persons who have requested to be on the KHCB mailing list. Listening to information and advice presented by counselors permitted by this trusted radio station, may have predisposed listeners to a positive viewpoint. Further research that would help determine whether listeners would perceive the same information as helpful if it were offered by counselors not associated with KHCB would be useful.

It is noteworthy that the participants reported acting in contemplative and intentional ways. Seeking further information, discussing and sharing with others the information heard, and considering how to apply the information heard to one's own life appear to indicate that there is a hunger for psychological information to meet personal and relational needs as long as it is deemed consistent with their Christian faith. The results of this study can serve as evidence that evangelical Christians are more willing to access psychological services if they trust that their values will be taken into consideration and highly regarded when counsel is given. Interestingly, a significant number of persons, almost 17%, reported seeking help in person *as a result of listening* to the *Vital Issues* program and many others reported that although they had not sought counseling in person, they would like to do so. Clearly, the listeners' opinions were influenced more favorably toward counseling *as a result* of listening to the program.

This study has important implications for counselors in practice because failure to offer services that are consistent with the faith perspective of evangelical Christians can result in promoting the underserved status of this population. Additionally, this study emphasized the impact of media psychology programs on listeners, because listeners do, in fact, act on information heard from counseling experts over the air. This is an important concern for counselors as well, given the potential for harm if listeners misapply or misinterpret information heard. The American Counseling Association Code of Ethics offers guidelines for counselors who use media as a method of disseminating psychological information (ACA, 2005, C.6.c.).

Through the *Vital Issues* program, radio is being used in the service of the public to address critical personal and relationship issues with which Christians are struggling. Counselors on this program are "giving psychology away" as well as offering a perceived *Christian* perspective on issues called to the program.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm