

Some Essentials of a Client-Centered Approach to Assessment

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The process of client assessment is a counseling function in which most, if not all, professional counselors engage. The assessment enterprise, however, tends to be viewed differently by different counselors; thus the range of helping behaviors implemented in the process is often characterized by immense diversity and uniqueness. This commentary briefly summarizes some of the distinguishing features of a particular approach to assessment (i.e., the client-centered approach) and indicates some of its essential guiding tenets. More specifically, we will examine: (a) the therapeutic attitude in the assessment process, (b) the purpose of assessment, (c) test selection, and (d) test interpretation.

THE THERAPEUTIC ATTITUDE IN ASSESSMENT

The attitude of the counselor, characterized by the relationship conditions of empathy, respect and warmth, genuineness, and concreteness (Patterson, 1974, 1979), is a *sine qua non* in the practice of the assessment process. This attitude, which is basic to all counseling endeavors, provides clients with an atmosphere in which they can fully explore the intricacies of varied assessment data and understand the personal implications. Patterson (1958) indicated that there are two central elements of the client-centered counselor's attitude that seem to have special bearing on the assessment process:

- “1. Each person is a person of worth in himself [or herself] and is therefore to be respected as such.
2. Each individual has the right to self-direction, to choose or select his [or her] own values and goals, to make his [or her] own decisions.” (p. 217)

The counselor's behavior, therefore, tends to be pervaded by a belief in the client's worth and self-direction; this belief provides the base from which the client-centered therapist operates.

The relationship conditions facilitate the construction of an open, nonthreatening, and receptive environment within which clients feel able to express and disclose themselves. When attending to clients' personal feelings and meanings, the client-centered counselor assists them to more adequately examine and synthesize assessment data. The conditions of empathy, respect and warmth, genuineness, and concreteness contribute to the process of client self-exploration and understanding and thereby aid in constructive development and change.

THE PURPOSE OF ASSESSMENT

Carkhuff (1969) stated that counseling is for the client. It can be added that assessment is for the benefit of client. The process is designed to assist clients in a better understanding of themselves

and in using assessment data to learn about potentially desirable changes in their lives. The ultimate purpose of this process, therefore, is to facilitate clients' self-actualization.

The construct of self-actualization has many implications for the counselor and the procedures employed in gathering information about clients. Full and optimal development of one's self serves as an orienting focus, and the variety of counselor information collecting methods serves the ultimate goal and value of assessment; that is, client self-actualization. The client-centered counselor, recognizing that assessment is for the client, attempts to provide clients with programs that would be of the most personal benefit to them. Recognizing that assessment is a client-oriented process tends to bring a radical, refreshing view to the manner in which test selection and test interpretation are construed. We will examine these two procedures from a client-centered perspective and provide some indication of how a relationship therapist operates in the testing endeavor.

TEST SELECTION

Too often, the selection of tests is a function in which clients tend to have little input. In client-centered assessment, clients are given the opportunity to choose tests they consider best for their needs. Patterson (1971) states:

“The essential basis for the use of tests in counseling is that *they provide information which the client needs and wants* information concerning questions which the client raises in counseling Tests, then, are introduced ... when the client, either overtly or covertly, indicates a desire or need for the kind of information which tests can help to provide. The counselor indicates the kind of information which tests may provide and describes the appropriate tests in non-technical terms. The client decides whether or not he wants this information”. (144-145)

Throughout the test selection procedure clients are provided with the freedom of self-direction and the personal autonomy of thought and action. It is the client, therefore, not the counselor, who ultimately determines the usefulness and validity of the testing and assessment processes in the counseling relationship.

An essential aspect of test selection is that clients be provided with enough accurate and useful information about available tests so that they can choose those most appropriate for them. Watkins (in press), in his article on client-centered test interpretation, provides a brief description of how the California Test of Personality (CTP) can be introduced:

The California Test of Personality is a personality test which can give some indication as to how you view your personal and social life. The test provides you with an opportunity to evaluate yourself and the results can indicate how you currently regard your life in several different areas. (in press)

Further elaboration on the CTF could provide clients with an understanding of the test's various scales and what they measure. For other ideas of how to introduce tests to clients, see: Bixler and Bixler (1946), Bordin and Bixler (1946), Seeman (1948), and Stephenson (1963). More recent

indications of the client-centered attitude can be found in Bradley (1978), Bradley and Snowman (1981), and Cummings (1981).

TEST INTERPRETATION

When using the client-centered approach to test interpretation, it is important that the locus of evaluation remain with the client. Patterson (1960) states:

“Tests can be used if this locus of evaluation is kept in the client and not transferred to the counselor.” (p. 156)

The client-centered counselor should strive to facilitate clients' self-appraisal and assessment, thereby providing them the opportunity to interpret their own test results.

The reasons for allowing clients to engage in a self-interpretive process are multiple. Rogers (1946) seems to state the case well:

“For the counselor to interpret tests to the client is to say, "I am the expert, I know more about you than you can know yourself, and I shall impart that superior knowledge." (p. 141)

He continues:

“Tests which are initiated by the counselor are a hindrance [and] tend to increase defensiveness on the part of the client, to lessen ... acceptance of self, to decrease . . . sense of responsibility, to create an attitude of dependence upon the expert.” (p. 141)

Interpretation by the counselor is therefore avoided because it often arouses anxiety and threatens the client, thus preventing the test data from being fully used. If clients are to make adequate use of their test results, two elements are essential: The data must be (a) understandable and (b) acceptable (Patterson, 1971). Patterson (1971) stated:

“The results must be communicated objectively, that is, without judgments or evaluations by the counselor. The results must be allowed to speak for themselves, with the counselor providing only an explanation of the meaning of the scores.” (p. 147)

Further, it is essential that counselors be honest when presenting test information (i.e., they should not conceal or withhold data from clients). Quite conceivably, some counselors may not divulge all of a client's scores for fear that unpleasant results will deeply hurt the client. Unfortunately, when clients are not fully informed, they must make decisions based on insufficient information, and difficulties that could arise from a decision based on inaccurate or incomplete data can be averted if counselors are accurate in their presentation of test results.

CONCLUSION

Traditional approaches to the assessment process have tended to focus on what the counselor can do to the client. The client-centered orientation, however, provides a radical and different view of assessment and how it should be conducted. We have attempted to highlight some of the essential elements of a client-centered approach to assessment and indicate four of the guiding tenets that orient the relationship therapist. We have specifically emphasized: (a) the function of empathy, respect and warmth, genuineness, and concreteness in the assessment endeavor; (b) the purpose of assessment; (c) test selection; and (d) test interpretation. It is our hope that these concepts will assist the reader to understand more fully how the client-centered approach can be implemented in the process of assessment.

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