

Use of Counselor Street Talk to Stimulate Self-Disclosure of Inner-City Youths

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Counseling interviews were conducted with 60 male and female inner-city youths. Half were interviewed in standard English, and half were interviewed in "street talk." Self-disclosure of girls significantly exceeded that of boys under both conditions. Overall, there was a greater amount of self-disclosure when the counselor spoke in the language of the client. A significant Sex \times Talk interaction showed the least amount of self-disclosure by boys, but the most self-disclosure by girls, in the standard English condition.

The rate of emotional disturbances and behavioral problems among inner-city youths is disproportionately high (Battersby & Landsman, 1992; Green, 1989). These individuals are exposed to far more than the ordinary stresses and problems associated with growing up. As documented by Schoenwald (1995), they also face problems associated with being "members of ethnic minorities, low on the ladder of socioeconomic status, economically disadvantaged, often lacking in socially acceptable role models, frequently raised in single-parent households, exposed to negative gang and peer pressures, menaced by actual and threatened dangers, and foreseeing a short or dim future" (p. 96). Looked down upon by society (Bickel, 1988), they, in turn, xenophobically trust only others from their own social group (Rodriguez & Hernandez, 1993). This, Graber (1992) argued, poses a special problem when "outsiders" try to apply psychological interventions intended for their benefit. As Hernandez (1992) has pointed out, "Professionals who have not shared the experiences of their clients, who do not intimately understand their milieu and way of life,

and who do not even speak the same 'language', are greatly handicapped when it comes to establishing a trusting relationship" (p. 118).

Aside from personal appearance and attire, one of the first things that is evident about mental health professionals is their manner of talking. Here we refer not only to the level of abstraction and the nature and complexity of the concepts being discussed, but to the actual phrases and verbal expressions that are employed. According to McNulty, Spires, and Antonovich (1989), it does not take a prospective client long to "size up" an interviewer and to decide, on the basis of the things that are said and the way that they are said, that this person is an outsider who cannot be trusted. The judgment about whether someone is "one of us" or "one of them" influences what will happen in the dyadic interaction. As Kelly (1978) has shown in his study with 80 outpatients in a mental health clinic, the client will remain guarded and withholding unless there is some degree of interpersonal trust. Under these circumstances, self-disclosure, a sine qua non for successful psychotherapy (Pemberton, 1982), will be minimal.

This study is designed to determine whether the use of "street talk" by an interviewer in a counseling situation will lead inner-city youths to self-disclose more than they will if spoken to in standard English. It is predicted that the use of street talk will stimulate positive transference, make them feel more at ease and more trusting, and (therefore) pave the way for self-disclosure.

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NOTE: This is a fictional article to be used only for purposes of research education.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were 60 youths from inner-city high schools in Newark, NJ. There were 30 male and 30 female teenagers (15–18 years old) of diverse ethnic groups. The ethnic distribution included African Americans (48%), Hispanics (32%), Caucasians (10%), and others (Southeast Asians, Middle Easterners, etc., 10%). All of the youths were born and raised in the United States and were primarily English speaking, although some were bilingual. Classification by the Hollingshead Index placed all at the lower socioeconomic status levels (IV or V). The participants were referred by principals, teachers, and guidance counselors for special help under the auspices of Project Copes. Participants had been singled out for attention for reasons that primarily included disciplinary or truancy problems, a history of aggressive or antisocial behavior, depression, or substance abuse. All had agreed to participate in counseling. In addition, permission was obtained from parents or guardians, and the youths assented to participate in a study designed to “improve communication between youths and their adult counselors.” Project Copes is headquartered in a downtown office building, and the counseling sessions were conducted in this facility.

The first 15 participants of each sex to enter counseling were interviewed in standard English, whereas the second two groups of 15 boys and 15 girls were interviewed in street talk.

Counselors

Two counselors were used for this study. Counselor A was a 42-year-old Caucasian woman with a master’s degree in special education and experience in guidance counseling. Counselor B was a 26-year-old, Caucasian woman with a master’s degree in guidance. Both were regularly employed in the public schools. Counselor A was asked to conduct all interviews in standard English, whereas Counselor B was instructed to use street talk liberally.

Interviews

The study interviews were the initial sessions of an indeterminate series to be held with each participant. The purpose and goals of the ses-

sions were explained initially, and participants were encouraged to discuss how they were getting along in school, at home, and in the neighborhood and to focus on any special problems that they were having and on future plans. Sessions were open ended and were not preplanned for content. Rather than being counselor centered, directive, and advice giving, counselors strongly encouraged participants to talk about themselves. Interviews were 45-min long. Aside from the fact that two counselors were used, the only way that the interviews differed was that half were conducted in standard English and half in street talk.

Independent Variable Conditions

Chisholm and Grady’s (1984) standards for street talk were adopted for this study. They include colloquialisms, slang, local pronunciations and syntax, vulgarisms and obscenities, interjections (e.g., “like,” “man,” “you know”), and assorted nonverbal gestures that accompany, accentuate, and highlight vocal expressions. Counselor B, who was not unfamiliar with street talk, was nevertheless given orientation and instruction in its use. A 2-hr practice session was held, featuring recording and instructional feedback. Not until she was judged to be proficient was she permitted to proceed with actual study participants. The principal investigator used Chisholm and Grady’s checklist to determine proficiency. As a manipulation check, 5-min time samples from early, middle, and late portions of recordings of actual experimental interviews were subjected to the same checklist appraisal. The speech of Counselor A, who was to speak standard English, was similarly checked to make sure that this condition was correctly applied.

Dependent Variable Criterion

The dependent variable criterion, self-disclosure, was rated by Hannigan’s Method (1982). This method evaluates 10 aspects of speech pattern, including use of first-person pronouns and self-referential themes, and it involves talk about one’s feelings, attitudes, hopes, wishes, fears, relationships, and personal experiences. Self-disclosure during the interview was rated on a 4-point Likert scale as follows: 4 = *a great deal*, 3 = *considerable*, 2 = *a little*, and 1 = *not*

at all. Interviews were tape-recorded and were rated by two research assistants. As described above, early, middle, and late time-sample segments were rated. When the two raters disagreed on a rating they reviewed the tape segment together and reevaluated the rating until they reached a consensus. If they could not reach agreement, the decision was made by the principal investigator. The three segment ratings were averaged for each of the 10 items, and then the average scores for each of the 10 items were summed. This provided a score for each participant with a possible range of 10 to 40.

Results

As can be seen in Table 1, the self-disclosure score for the girls ($M = 22.57$) across the two conditions exceeded that for the boys ($M = 17.13$). In a 2×2 analysis of variance, $F(1, 56) = 9.67, p = .003$, for the sex variable as shown in Table 2. As predicted, self-disclosure to street talk ($M = 21.37$) was greater than to standard English ($M = 18.33$). The F test for this comparison showed a strong trend in support of the hypothesis, $F(1, 56) = 3.01, p = .088$. There was a significant Sex \times Talk Type interaction, $F(1, 56) = 4.01, p = .05$. This interaction is portrayed in Figure 1. The least amount of self-disclosure was shown by boys in interviews that were conducted in standard English ($M = 13.87$), and the most by girls in the standard English condition ($M = 22.80$).

Discussion

As the data demonstrated, there was a strong trend to support the proposition that the use of street talk by counselors leads to increased self-disclosure, at least in the initial interview with male inner-city youths. The first interview is critical in determining the future path of the

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of
Self-Disclosure

Sex	Street talk			Standard English			Total
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	
Boys	20.4	3.80	15	13.87	4.24	15	17.13
Girls	22.33	11.37	15	22.80	5.53	15	22.57
Total	21.37			18.33			

Table 2
Analysis of Variance of Self-Disclosure by Type of
Talk and Sex Group

Source	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>
Sex	442.817	1	442.817	9.67***
Type of Talk	138.017	1	138.017	3.01*
Sex \times Talk	183.750	1	183.750	4.01**
Error	2,565.067	56	45.805	
Total	3,329.651	59		

* $p = .088$. ** $p = .05$. *** $p = .003$.

intervention, particularly for disaffected youths who are not strongly committed to the idea of counseling in the first place. If resistance to counseling is reinforced instead of diminished during the initial interview, the outlook for future sessions (if the client ever returns) is dim indeed. The use of street talk by counselors who are faced with this type of client has proven to be a promising way of cutting initial resistance, increasing comfort, decreasing xenophobic attitudes, and thereby providing an atmosphere that facilitates self-disclosure.

It is interesting to note that the data revealed a significant client gender effect. Girls displayed significantly more self-disclosure than did boys. It made no difference for them whether they were interviewed in street talk or standard English. This gender difference in self-disclosure has been shown in related contexts. Females, in general, are known to be more expressive of feelings (Elkin, 1979), more verbally communicative (Schwartz & Sopwith, 1991), quicker to relate

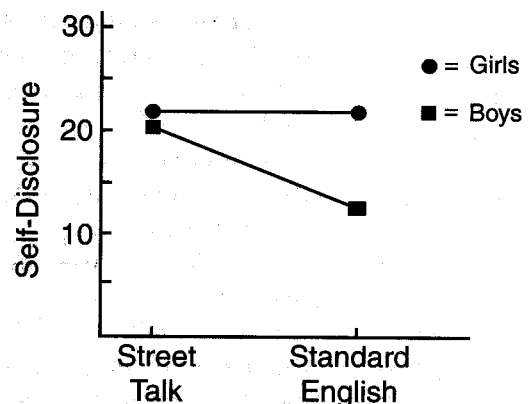


Figure 1. Sex \times Type of Talk Interaction.

interpersonally (Feldman, Crouch, & Rodriguez, 1994), and more apt to seek out psychotherapy (Feodor, 1989). The finding that they self-disclose more readily is consistent with all of these prior findings.

This study has implications for counseling and therapy with various other groups. It shows that it is important to "talk the talk" of the group with which the client is principally identified. Counselors and psychotherapists are advised to speak the "language" of the client in order to maximize the chances of early self-disclosure.

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