Relationships Among Experience Level and Value Orientation and the Performance of Paraprofessional Telephone Counselors

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The effectiveness of indigenous paraprofessional helpers is thought to be partially due to the similarity in style and values between them and their clients. However, there is a concern that as they gain experience in an agency, their identification may shift from the clients to the agency. Also, there is a question as to how effective paraprofessionals (selected due to their shared values with a target population) are with value-dissimilar clients. Truax and Carkhuff's scales of facilitative conditions as well as a technique functioning scale were used to assess the helping behavior of paraprofessional telephone counselors at three levels of experience in response to value-similar and value-dissimilar simulated calls. The results indicate that performance generally improved with training and experience and that instead of a uniform deterioration with dissimilar value calls, a complex relationship existed between performance, values, and experience level.

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The use of paraprofessional human service workers drawn from the target population of a community agency has been considered advantageous for effectiveness as well as manpower reasons. Because paraprofessionals lack professional roles and techniques, have similar social positions and life-styles to clients, and are familiar to and with the community, they are purported to gain entry and establish rapport with clients more easily (Reiff & Riessman, 1965; Sobey, 1970). Thus, the paraprofessional is seen as serving as a bridge between the professional and the community (Kalis, 1973).

However, this intermediary role often places paraprofessionals in a limbo between the professional community and the consumer. It has been suggested that paraprofessionals may attempt to resolve any role confusion by identifying increasingly with the professionals and the agency (Durlak, 1971; Group for Advancement of Psychiatry, 1974; Reiff & Riessman, 1965). This weakening of identification with the target population may take the form of a condescending attitude toward those who are seeking help (Goldberg, 1969, pp. 12-39).

In addition, as paraprofessionals gain experience and acquire technical skills, they may begin to develop what Caplan (1961) described as a professional armor — a sense of detachment or distancing that serves to protect the helpers from the experience of vulnerability which arises when their own identification with the problems of the clients interferes with their role as helpers. Edwards (1970) described what may be an instance of this phenomenon in full time paid paraprofessional workers in a large metropolitan emergency service. He observed that after 12 to 15 months of service, the paraprofessionals had begun to sound overly professional on the phones and had lost some of their effectiveness as crisis counselors.

Regardless of the motivation involved, any form of distancing which would significantly attenuate the paraprofessionals' involvement and identification with clients would seem to undermine one of the presumed bases for their effectiveness (Cowen, Gardner, & Zax, 1967).

A parallel dilemma arises in the area of value systems. Paraprofessionals are thought to have an advantage in establishing rapport with clients due to their similarity of values and life-styles. It would be naive, however, to assume a unitary "community value system." Thus, an important question is raised concerning how the paraprofessionals who are chosen for identification with a particular clientele deal with clients who express value orientations different from their own. This issue is potentially critical in telephone crisis services which are dominated by paraprofessionals (Dublin, 1969; Durlak, 1971), but which, for conceptual and practical reasons, can neither restrict the types of clients served, nor match clients with value-similar counselors.

Studies of the effects of therapist-client value similarity in psychotherapy, although not consistent in their findings, support the salience of value similarity—dissimilarity in helping interactions. Mendelsohn (1966; Mendelsohn & Geller,