Nonprofessional Counselors: 
Revisiting Selection and Impact Issues¹

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This study examined two issues related to the use of nonprofessional coun-
selors (n = 159) within the context of a diversion program for juvenile 
offenders. First, the relationship of the nonprofessionals' personality traits 
and general attitudes to client outcome was examined. No statistically sig-
nificant correlations were observed. Second, the differential impact of vari-
ous training and supervision factors was examined in terms of nonprofessional 
satisfaction, attitudes, and locus of control. Results suggested that training 
intensity, training content, and supervision setting may influence nonprofes-
sionals' attitudes towards various social groups and their satisfaction with 
the nonprofessional experience.

Over the last two decades a wide variety of individuals have been utilized 
as nonprofessionals in the human services (Gershon & Biller, 1977); however, 
the group most often utilized has been university undergraduates (Heller & 
Monahan, 1977). The historical roots of many contemporary nonprofessional

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programs can be traced to the Harvard/Radcliffe program in which undergraduate nonprofessional counselors served as companions to institutionalized mental patients (Umbarger, Dalsimer, Morrison, & Breggin, 1962). Since then, the roles of university undergraduates have expanded to include peer counselors, mental health aides to adults and children and adolescents (Durlak, 1979; Gershon & Biller, 1977).

One of the consequences of the increased use of undergraduate nonprofessionals was the experimental comparison of the effectiveness of nonprofessionals and professionals. Durlak (1979) reviewed 15 such studies; in 3 studies the nonprofessionals had a more favorable impact on clients than the professionals, while in the remaining 12 studies there were no significant differences between the effectiveness of university nonprofessionals and professionals. In none of the studies examined were professionals found to be superior to nonprofessionals in their impact. Although Durlak’s review was not unequivocally accepted (Durlak, 1981; Nietzel & Fisher, 1981), no clear-cut evidence of professional superiority has been presented. Given these findings, the nonprofessional movement became well established in many human services (Alley, Blanton, & Feldman, 1979; Robin & Wagenfeld, 1981).

Outcome studies, such as those examined by Durlak, raised two additional questions. First, were some nonprofessional counselors more effective than others? Second, what impact did the service experience have on the nonprofessionals themselves? The question of differential effectiveness among nonprofessional counselors naturally led to issues of selection. That is, how does one select the nonprofessional counselors most likely to be effective? Selection studies have typically focused on the psychological attributes of nonprofessionals as assessed by professional clinical interviews, although a few research studies have attempted to measure psychological traits by using various personality inventories (Dooley, 1980). Unfortunately, selection studies have rarely included the prediction of behavioral outcomes for the client population. Rather, emphasis has been on predicting changes in either nonprofessional attributes, the nonprofessional’s behavior, or hopefully (but often only hypothetically) “intermediate” client behaviors which are related to the ultimate behavioral change desired (e.g., in the case of the institutionalized mentally ill, prediction of client behavior in the ward, rather than a client’s release from the institution; Rappaport, Chinsky, & Cowen, 1971; Stollak, 1968). While a potentially useful concept, the selection issue remains complex and controversial (e.g., Hart & King, 1979; Sakowitz & Hirschman, 1977; Stack & Conoley, 1977).

In general, studies examining the impact of the service experience have found that it improved nonprofessionals’ self-perceptions (e.g., Golann, Baker, & Frydman, 1973; Holzberg, Gewirtz, & Ebner, 1964; Scheibe, 1965; Umbarger et al., 1962), enhanced their attitudes towards the client population