Cognitive Style and Counselor Credibility: Effects on Client Endorsement of Rational Emotive Therapy

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This study investigated the effects of cognitive style, as assessed by the Thinking/Feeling scale of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and counselor credibility on attitudes toward a Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET) session. Eighty-eight undergraduates, classified as either Thinking or Feeling types, heard an audiotape segment of an RET counseling session with a counselor introduced as either high or low credibility. Given the emphasis placed on cognitive processing in RET, it was predicted that Thinking subjects would have more favorable attitudes toward the counselor and the counseling approach than would Feeling types. It also was hypothesized that this effect would be enhanced when the counselor was introduced as highly credible and minimized with a low credibility introduction. Results supported these predictions.

KEY WORDS: cognitive style; counselor credibility; RET.

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Matching client characteristics to counseling and counselor characteristics has been noted as important to the success of counseling (Kiesler, 1966; Strupp, 1978). One client characteristic with potential importance in this regard is cognitive style, which deals with the way the client processes information and perceives the world (Carskadon, 1979). Although previous research on matching cognitive style using conceptual level (Hunt, 1971) has yielded inconsistent results (Malkiewich & Merluzzi, 1980; Stein & Stone, 1978), another classification system that is a valid measure of cognitive style and shows promise for counseling is the Thinking/Feeling (TF) scale of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI; Myers, 1962; Carlson, 1980; Carlson & Levy, 1973).

Carlson (1980) found that Thinking and Feeling types differed in their emphasis on cognitive clarity versus vividness of feeling. Since various counseling approaches differ in their emphasis on cognitive versus affective processing, the Thinking versus Feeling distinction should be manifested in preferences for particular counseling styles. For example, Carskadon (1977) compared written descriptions of behavioral and humanistic approaches to counseling and found that Thinking types preferred the behavioral approach while Feeling types preferred the humanistic approach. Similar findings were noted by Weir (cited in Carskadon, 1979), who found that Feeling types more than Thinking types preferred an audiotape of a counselor displaying high unconditional positive regard. Given the emphasis placed on cognitive processing in Rational-Emotive Therapy (Ellis, 1962; Ellis & Grieger, 1977), Thinking types should be more attracted to this approach than Feeling types since a rational problem-solving focus would be more natural for clients whose predominant orientation favors using logic, as opposed to feelings, in decision making. This study investigated the relationship between a Thinking and a Feeling cognitive style and attitudes toward Rational-Emotive Therapy.

A counselor characteristic that is relevant to cognitive processing and that has received considerable attention in the literature is counselor credibility (Corrigan, Dell, Lewis, & Schmidt, 1980; Heppner & Dixon, 1981). Credibility of the counselor may be enhanced if his or her behavior (counseling approach) is consistent with the cognitive style or orientation favored by the client. It was predicted that this effect should be strongest when the counselor is described as highly credible, given that high-credibility introductions tend to elicit more attention on the part of the client to the subsequent message when involvement is at least moderately high (see Hass, 1981).

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects for this study were 88 (49 males, 39 females) undergraduate students from a large southwestern university who were enrolled in an in-