



Improving Counsellor Listening Skills to Enhance Responding Ability in Counseling

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ABSTRACT

An understanding attitude of the Counselor is communicated to the client through verbal, para-verbal and non-verbal communication which helps in information gathering in the counseling encounter. When the client perceives that the counselor listen to and respond appropriately, it makes the client to open up deeply because he feels understood, free and so wants to talk more. The focus of this paper is to sensitize counselors to be aware of the need to listen in order to discover, understand, interpret and respond appropriately to the client message using verbal, non-verbal, vocal auditory or para-verbal communication. An experimental study design of pre-test and post-test was used to collect data from diploma two students studying different courses in Institute of Education, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. From a population of 1,175 students in 2013/2014 academic session, a sample size of 30 students was randomly selected to take part in the study. An instrument titled 'Couples Communication Skills' on Improving Listening communication was administered as pre-test and post-test to the students on the first and last week of the experiment. A four point likert scale was used for rating of responses by the respondents. A t-test technique was used to analyze the data collected. The result of the study revealed that the participants had learn about non-verbal, para-verbal, and vocal auditory communication components which helps in listening to and understanding client's messages thereby responding appropriately. Recommendations were outlined that will help counselors listen, discover, interpret, understand and respond appropriately to clients messages during counseling interaction.

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INTRODUCTION

Counseling thrives on communication between the Counselor and the Client for any meaningful result of the interaction. It is the duty of a Counselor to respond to the messages of the client which are usually verbal and non-verbal in the process of their interaction. The Counselor does this by listening to the client, gathered the necessary information and then responds appropriately. Listening and responding to client's talk is the key functions of the counselor. The ability to listen and respond to messages is the core of interaction by individuals. When the counselor and the client perceived their interaction to be flowing, then there is effective listening and responding in their interaction. Thus, the ability to create a safe environment and show flexibility in regard to the varying ways listening is conducted and response is made reduces concerns and enhanced the

communication patterns of different clients in the counseling relationship (Nelson-Jones, 1991).

Listening is an important aspect of communication in any relationship, one of which is counseling between the counselor and the client. It involves observing the use of parts of the body such as the eyes, ears, voice quality and hands gestures to communicate, interpret and understand what someone is saying and to respond appropriately to the message being conveyed (Dagari, 2009). The listener is required to pay attention to the message spoken or sent, understand the basic message being conveyed and interpret the body language or message appropriately. Listening is trying to understand the thoughts, behavior and feelings of the other person and then respond to them well (Pelt, 2005). Listening in counseling conveys to the client that he is valued. It also reveals that the counselor understand what the client is communicating by observing the non-verbal body

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language of the client and interprets it appropriately, (Egan, 2006). Thus, listening is the vehicle upon which counselors and clients travel together as they explore the challenges facing the counselee.

In counseling, it is important to be aware of the information being revealed by the client and how we respond to messages, because, we may send out unintentional respond messages that we are unaware of and thereby give a conflicting message that may be confusing or vague, and ambiguous to or from the client. This is evident when we fail to appreciate the importance of listening, are not actively involved in what others are saying and are not easily motivated to learn to acquire the art of listening to others (Nelson-Jones, 1991 and Weiss, 2011). Therefore, when you listen, you need to respond to what you have heard by using 'sentence openers' to conversations such as "Where would you like to start the discussion today or Now how do you see your situation" etc. Responding is the counselor's verbal and non-verbal reaction to the message or problem being presented by the client (Nelson-Jones, 1991). The counselor is to be sensitive in responding promptly and adequately to the client's verbal and non-verbal components through the use of continuation response like "ump", "oh", "I see", " indeed", "Tell me more", or "Go on" etc (Nelson-Jones, 1991). That is, the counselor could respond to what the client has said and how he feels or understand the meaning of the client's expression of his problems. This will assist the client to explore his problems and to be able to take actions towards the resolution of his problems. The counselor could also respond by probing, questioning, prodding and exploring with the client (Nelson-Jones, 1991 and Pelt, 2005). These techniques could be of help to both counselor and client in their discussion as they explore together the problem being discussed. Adequate responding depends on the counselor's ability to listen, attend, and interpret non-verbal and Para-verbal communication of the client appropriately.

Counseling is a relationship process, the success of which depends on the quality of the interaction between the counselor and the clients. The basic need of a client is to be heard, accepted and respected by all persons with whom he interacts. The process by which people let themselves be known to others includes unintentional as well as intentional, their actions, what they conceal and what they revealed, are non-

verbal as well as verbal communication (Nelson-Jones, 1991 and Brownell, 2009). The ability to listen effectively greatly enhances the communication process for the clearer people are in their verbal and non-verbal communication, the easier it is for others to listen and respond to them (Nelson-Jones 1991). However, there is research evidence that deficiency exist in the ability to listen and gather available information at our disposal before responding to messages being communicated. When we are unable to listen accurately, we cannot respond appropriately. When we talk back at the same time, or oppose a speaker, or interrupt a speaker, or argue, or become angry, we cannot listen effectively (Burstein, 2010 and Kneen, 2011). This is where the problem exists or is created, that is, listening is not done. For example, according to Egan (1994), Pelt (2005), and Holmes (2004), reported of complaints by individuals that 'they are not listened to' and therefore, do not received the desired response to their messages.

Similarly, some of the ways we respond create problems by hindering conversations and cause others to report feelings of inferiority, hostility, unhappiness, displeasures, pains, anger, subservient, and hurts in their response to conversation (Dagari, 2009 and Kneen, 2011). Others experience distraction in the process of listening such as inadequate or half listening by being carried away by their own thoughts, judging the merits of what the other person is saying or had said, using selective screening or filtered of what is said around them, or distortion of what is heard. The inability to listen and interpret the meaning of what is heard is the major problem which makes responding in interaction difficult. The inability to hear and interpret appropriately what is heard is recreating the condition which pushes an individual into confusion and to seek for counseling help. These challenges tend to affect the communication and relationship between persons. The focus of this paper is therefore, to encourage counselors to explore and listen by becoming aware of verbal, non-verbal and Para-verbal or vocal auditor communication. Also, they should learn to listen to verbal, interpret and observed non-verbal and Para-verbal communication components to understand client's messages and be able to respond or communicate this understanding.

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Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to identify listening aspects of non-verbal, and Para-verbal communication that enhance appropriate responding ability in counseling relationship.

Research Question

What are the listening aspects of non-verbal and para-verbal communication that enhance appropriate responding ability in counseling relationship?

METHODOLOGY

The method of data collection was through an experimental design of pre-test and post-test study where the subjects were randomly selected to form a group for the study. The participants were diploma II students studying guidance and counseling in the Institute of Education, Ahmadu Bello University, and Zaria in the 2014/2015 academic session. The population of the students was all Diploma two students studying various courses totally about 1,175 and a sample of 30 subjects were randomly selected to participate in the research study. The sample size of 30 respondents were pre-tested and then counseled on listening aspects of non-verbal and para-verbal

communication that enhance appropriate responding in counseling relationship for a period of 6 weeks. Then, they were post-tested on the instrument titled "Body Language Communication section of Listening Skills". The data collected was analyzed using a t-test technique.

The procedure for data collection was carried out in two phases. The first phase was the administration of the pre-test which was followed by the treatment package on listening skills aspect of nonverbal and para verbal communication that lasted for six weeks. The second phase was the administration of the post-test instrument. The data collected was analyzed using a t-test tool where the scores of pre-test and post-test were compared. The result of data analyses is presented as follows.

RESULTS

The result of the study is presented based on the research question. The research question of the study states that: what are the listening skills aspects of non-verbal and para-verbal communication aspects which enhance responding ability in counseling relationship? The table below presents the analyses of the responses of the subjects.

Table 1. t-test on non-verbal and para-verbal listening skills aspects that enhance responding ability in counseling.

Variables	No	Mean Scores	STD Dev.	std error mean	t	df	p
Pre-test	30	2.9143	.43525	.07949	2.03	58	.047
Post-test	30	2.6373	.60647	.11073			

Table 1 above shows a t-value of 2.03 which is higher than the critical value of 2.00 which has a degree of freedom at 58. The observed level of significance of p value is .047 which is lower than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). This result reveals that the subjects can now identify the non-verbal and para-verbal communication listening skills aspects which enhance responding ability in counseling. The post-test scores indicate this whereby after the treatment, the respondents rated the instrument items lower than those of pre-test. This revealed that new learning has been acquired. It also indicates that understanding the listening skills aspects of non-verbal and para-verbal communication will help in responding to client's messages in counseling. This finding is in agreement with Kneen, (2011) that active listening recognizes that a speaker's message contains both verbal and non-verbal content as well as a feeling component.

Wright (2001), also reported that listening is a learnable skill which individuals can acquire where the mind and ears can be taught to hear more keenly and the eyes can be taught to see more clearly and to read the non-verbal messages in communication. Similarly, Pelt (2002), further states that counselors can learn to listen to non-verbal and para-verbal aspects of communication and reflect upon what they see on the face, in the posture, hear in the voice, and walk or pace of a client and to interpret and respond to the actions behind the message. That is, to look out for body language messages which offer keys to feelings behind words and could set up barriers before conversations begins. Although Pelt (2002), Melgosa and Melgosa (2006), and Holmes (2004), opined that listening can be difficult, yet the fundamentals and tools can be learned, understood and put to use through practice. Thus, to respond appropriately would require that

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an individual learns to be aware and recognize the listening aspects of non-verbal and para-verbal communication components, develop ability to understand and interpret what is being said.

CONCLUSION

To enhance effective communication, there is need to develop an awareness of the importance of the speaker's and listener's attitudes to conversations. Counselling is a communication process between the counselor and client in exploring the problems of the client in order to resolve it. The function of the Counselor in the process of interaction with the client is to listen and respond appropriately to the message being sent which could be verbal, para-verbal or vocal auditory or non-verbal components in nature. It is therefore required of him to listen, identify, interpret, understand and respond appropriately to the verbal and non-verbal messages which the client have sent. Thus, when the counselor receives (listen to) a message from the client and respond correctly, the communication with the client will be deeper and more open. The two will explore the problems and help could be easier to give. Counselors therefore, need to learn and acquired mastering of all communication components in order to understand their clients better and relate well with them by responding appropriately.

IMPLICATION FOR COUNSELLING

The implication of this study to Counselling is that the primary work of the Counselors is to interact with the client through listening to the description of the problem disturbing his mind. Understanding what the client is saying is very crucial in determining the next line of action by the counselor. Therefore when the Counsellor knows the various non-verbal and para verbal communication and their meanings, his responds to the Client would be meaningful and assuring. It would also communicate that he is listening, understands, and interprets appropriately what is being said. For effectiveness of counseling, the Counsellor is required to use vocal sounds and either rephrase or seek for clarification from the client on what he has said in order to be sure that he heard him well and clearly. Similarly, the client will benefit from the communication going on between him and the Counsellor as he perceives interest, attention and acceptance from the Counsellor. This will create a warm atmosphere for a relaxed and smooth

conversation from the client and the Counsellor. It will also give the client the feeling of acceptance by the Counsellor when they both put to use the listening skills aspect of non-verbal and para verbal communication in responding to each other as their conversation flows.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the finding of the study, the following recommendations are made as summarized by Brownell (2009), Burstein (2010) and Kneen (2011) to assist Counselors listen and respond appropriately to discussion in a counseling session.

1. The capacity to listen determines the level of understanding in a conversation of which counseling is one, therefore, it is necessary that counselors learn about listening methods, verbal communication rules and methods, so as to enable them hear and understand what the client is presenting while expressing his problem.
2. The Counselor is also to learn about Para-verbal or vocal auditory (vocal area) communication such as volume of speech, pitch in terms of high or low, pace like fastness or slowness in speech, clarity, pronunciation, and vocal auditory sounds like umm, hum, stress of utterance, 'framing' signals and so on, in order to help you identify and interpret messages sent to the client.
3. The Counselor should also learn about non-verbal (bodily areas) communication which include gestures, head movement, posture, facial expression, eye contact, proximity and spatial position, touch, clothes, and physical environment in order to understand clients accurately and respond to them appropriately in speech.
4. The Counselor should learn about conversation openers and use such when interacting with the client so as to make him talk more about his problems. Such conversation openers include: 'would you like to...', 'where would you like to start...', 'you have been referred by....', 'I am interested in ', are opportunities that allow clients to explore more of their problems with the counselor.
5. The Counselor should endeavour to learn and practice regularly continuing responses



in conversation with the client. Examples of such responses are: 'I see', 'what, do you mean it', 'I am keen to', etc.

6. The Counselor should listen to feelings by identifying how the client or speaker feels in terms of the message content. This can be done by asking "what are you trying to say".
7. The Counselor should listen for message content and try to hear exactly what the speaker is saying in the message.
8. The Counselor should respond to feelings by letting the speaker know that his or her feelings as well as the message content are recognized.
9. The Counselor should learn to rephrase the speaker's message either by restatement or paraphrase the verbal and non-verbal messages as feedback to the speaker.

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