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Clients' Perceptions of Helpful Experiences in Counseling

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The question of what clients experience as helpful in counseling was examined via concept mapping, a methodological approach combining qualitative and quantitative strategies. The purpose of the study was to clarify the scope and interrelations among elements of the retrospective experience of helpfulness among 36 clients who had completed counseling after an average of 11 sessions. Five thematic clusters consistent with previous research were identified: Counselor Facilitative Interpersonal Style, Counselor Interventions, Generating Client Resources, New Perspectives, and Client Self-Disclosure. Four new thematic clusters were also identified: Emotional Relief, Gaining Knowledge, Accessibility, and Client Resolutions. The structure of the concept map generated by the participants in this study was found to be consistent with an integrative, pantheoretical model of the counseling process.

The client's perspective of what is helpful about counseling offers promising possibilities for understanding the counseling process. Although traditionally it has been the counselor's or investigator's point of view that has informed understanding of counseling process and outcome, increasingly the client's perspective is being recognized as valuable, if not essential (Caskey, Barker, & Elliott, 1984; Elliott, 1985; Elliott & James, 1989; Heppner, Rosenberg, & Hedgespeth, 1992; Lietaer, 1992; Lietaer & Neirinck, 1986; Llewelyn, Elliott, Shapiro, Hardy, & Firth-Cozens, 1988; Martin & Stelmaczonek, 1988; Sells, Smith, & Moon, 1996; Wilcox-Matthew, Ottens, & Minor, 1997). Furthermore, it is particularly important to use clients' perceptions of the counseling process, because these perceptions often differ from those of the counselor (Bachelor, 1991; Elliott & James, 1989; Gershefski, Arnkoff, Glass, & Elkin, 1996; Lietaer & Neirinck, 1986; Llewelyn et al., 1988; Orlinsky & Howard, 1986).

In a pioneering study by Elliott (1985), volunteer university students took part in a 20-min mock counseling session and then were asked what they found most helpful about the counselor's responses. Cluster analyses identified eight kinds of helpful events grouped into two "superclusters" that corresponded to task and interpersonal aspects of helping interactions. The predominant cluster in the Task supercluster was New Perspective; also included were Problem Solution, Clarification of Problem, and Focusing Attention. The predominant cluster in the Interpersonal supercluster was Understanding; also included were Client Involvement, Reassurance, and Personal Contact. This study was limited, as noted by Elliott, by the use of pseudo-clients engaging in one brief session of counseling (cf. Hill, 1994) and by having the researchers sort and cluster the data.

Elliott and James (1989) analyzed the main themes in the research literature available at the time dealing with clients' experience of helpful aspects of therapy and summarized them as falling into five subcategories: (a) Facilitative Therapist Characteristics, (b) Client Self-Expression Permitted, (c) Experiencing Supportive Relationship, (d) Self-Understanding/Insight, and (e) Therapist Encouraging Extratherapy Practice. The first three subcategories of experience were seen as being subsumed under the broad category of interpersonal aspects of therapy, and the last two fell under the broad category of task aspects. Elliott and James noted that their review was limited by a reliance on research that used indirect measures of client experience developed to assess what investigators think are important about client experiences. They recommended the initiation of more qualitative, exploratory research.

In addition to the studies reviewed by Elliott and James (1989), a number of investigators have concentrated on identifying and understanding helpful events in counseling. Martin and Stelmaczonek (1988) matched client reports of important events in counseling to Mahrer and Nadler's (1986) categorical system of "good moments in psychotherapy" and found that clients rate events that involve expressions of insight and understanding, provisions of personal material, descriptions and explorations of feelings, and expressions of new ways of being or behaving as important. Helping processes in client-centered–experiential therapy were examined by Lietaer (1992), who matched clients' postsession reports of what they found helpful to a predetermined categorical system and identified three categories: aspects of the relational climate (e.g., warmth and understanding), specific counselor interventions (e.g., confrontation and self-exploration), and process aspects concerning the client (e.g., insight and self-exploration). Gershefski et al. (1996) found that the helpful aspects of treatment for depression most frequently cited by clients were "therapist helped" (e.g., being able to talk and feedback) and "learned something new" (e.g., gained insight), regardless of the type of treatment they received (cognitive–behavioral, interper-

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sonal, medication, or pill placebo). Wilcox-Matthew et al. (1997) identified 200 significantly helpful events in counseling using qualitative methods, from which they derived three main patterns of helpful events: dissonant (e.g., challenging or confronting), question–answer (e.g., providing insight), and congruent (e.g., a supportive relationship).

All of these studies matched client (or pseudoclient) responses to a categorical system developed by the investigator(s), thereby constraining understanding of the counseling process to concepts consistent with the investigators' conceptual framework. In the current study, therefore, we asked a sample of clients who had undergone counseling to respond to an open-ended question and then had them identify the categories that composed their experience. We did so by using concept mapping.

Because concept mapping may be unfamiliar to some readers, a summary of its rationale and procedures is presented here. A more detailed description is provided in the Method and Results sections. Concept mapping is a relatively new methodology that combines qualitative and quantitative research strategies and actively involves research participants in generating items and gathering data (Trochim, 1989, 1993). It is particularly appropriate for clarifying the domain, constituent elements, and underlying structure of a phenomenon as experienced by the population of interest (Trochim, 1989). Procedurally, concept mapping involves three basic processes: (a) generation of ideas, thoughts, or experiences by participants about a specific question or self-report; (b) grouping together of the ideas, thoughts, or experiences through an unstructured card sort of the participants; and (c) statistical analysis of the card sort results using multidimensional scaling (to suggest the organizational principles implicit in the participants' sorting; Davison, Richards, & Rounds, 1986) and cluster analysis (to depict conceptually similar groups of sorted items; Borgen & Barnett, 1987).

Given that the meaning units are sorted by the participants, investigator bias is reduced in contrast to qualitative data sorted into themes by one or more investigators. Bias is further reduced through statistical analysis of the participant-determined groupings, making it unnecessary for either the participants or the investigators to specify any of the psychological dimensions or attributes in the sorting of the data. Identification of underlying psychological dimensions as reflected in the participants' experience can take place from the concept maps obtained by scaling and clustering (Rosenberg & Kim, 1975). Concept mapping was therefore used to answer the question of what clients experience as helpful in counseling.

Method

Participants

Adult clients 18 years of age and older who sought individual counseling services were asked to participate in this study. During the year of the study, 80 clients presented for counseling at the study clinic. Twenty were under the age of 18 years, and 4 were seen for marital or family counseling. Fifty-six clients, therefore, met the criteria for participation; 19 declined to participate, and 1 who initially agreed to participate was ultimately unavailable for any of the data-gathering sessions. The total sample thus comprised 36 participants (9 men, 27 women). Of the participants, 15 were single, 11 were married or cohabiting, and 10 were divorced or separated. Participants' mean age was 34.3 years, with a range of 18–56 years. Participants' mean number of sessions was 11.3, with a range of 1–23. Reasons for attending counseling were childhood issues ($n = 9$), depression ($n = 10$), relationship issues ($n = 12$), emotions ($n = 9$), career ($n = 5$), and personal validation ($n = 2$).

Counselors were 6 master's-level students (1 man, 5 women) and 6 doctoral-level students (2 men, 4 women). Counselors had a range of experience from novice to 5 or more years and had training in a wide variety of counseling approaches, including cognitive–behavioral, humanist, behavioral, and family systems. The three interviewers had completed master's-level counseling practicum courses and had a minimum of 150 hr of counseling experience.

Procedure

Participants were drawn from an educational training clinic affiliated with a large Canadian university that provides a variety of counseling and assessment services to a broad range of community clients. All services at the clinic are provided by counselors in training under the supervision of licensed psychologists.

There were two data-gathering sessions. During the first, 36 client participants were contacted after the termination of counseling to arrange a mutually agreed-on time to conduct a telephone interview. All were interviewed within 3 weeks of termination. One participant was unavailable for an interview. Participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended probe: "What was helpful about counseling?" The probe was designed to elicit participants' perspectives on their experiences without overly constraining their responses. Participants were encouraged to report anything that they experienced as helpful about counseling. Interviewers took notes on participants' responses and transcribed their notes immediately after the interview. At the end of the telephone interview, participants were asked whether they would be willing to return to the clinic for a sorting and rating task (described subsequently).

Using Giorgi's (1985) four-level scheme as a procedural guideline, a five-member research team that included the three interviewers met as a group to analyze participants' responses. The team had been meeting biweekly for approximately 6 months with a primary focus on counseling process research. The intent of this analysis was to distill an inclusive set of statements that captured the essence of the participants' experiences, while retaining their language. This involved intensive scrutiny of each participant's response, primarily by grammatical rules that demarcated separate sentences and also by taking into account the content and meaning of the response so as to identify statements that represented a discrete idea. Next, contextual or irrelevant material (e.g., "I found one session in particular really helpful") was separated from statements potentially relevant to the experience of what was helpful in counseling (e.g., "My counselor was nonjudgmental") and discarded. Ninety-nine statements that retained participants' language and completely reflected the domain of their experience were initially identified. The 99 statements were next compared with each other to identify redundancies, resulting in a final list of 80 nonredundant qualitative description statements of what participants found helpful about counseling.

In the second data-gathering session, held within 2 weeks of the first, 19 participants returned for the sorting and rating tasks. The 19 participants who returned were compared with the 17 who did not. Chi-square analyses were performed to compare the two

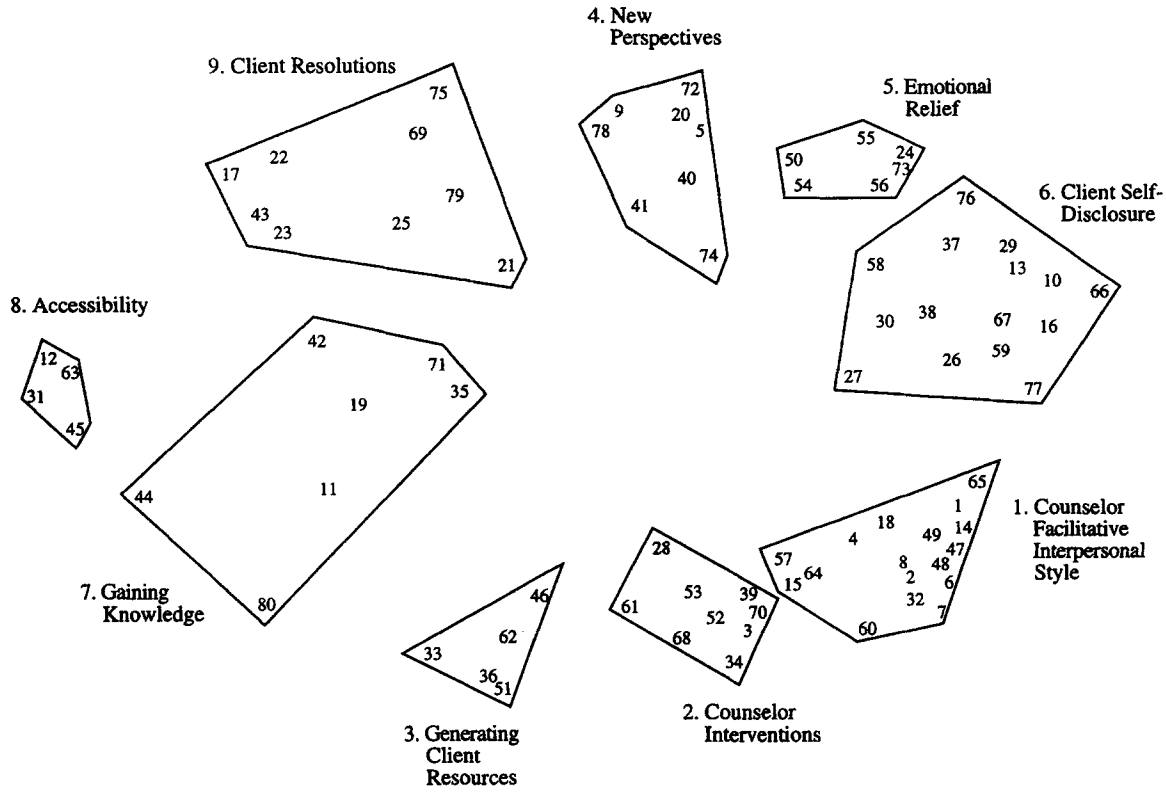

Figure 1. Concept map of 80 elements of what 35 clients found helpful about counseling derived from a qualitative analysis of their response to the probe "What was helpful about counseling?" (based on multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis of 19 clients' open card sort of these elements).

groups on the basis of reason for attending counseling, gender, and marital status. The results were not significant ($p > .05$). One-way analyses of variance were also performed to compare the two groups on the basis of age and number of counseling sessions attended. Again, the results were not significant ($p > .05$).

For the sorting task, each of the 80 statements derived from the qualitative analysis was printed on a card so that each card represented one qualitative description of what clients found helpful about counseling. Participants were asked to place the 80 cards in piles according to "how they seem to go together." No restrictions were placed on participants' sorting strategies other than that they not place each item card alone in a pile or place all cards in one pile (Rosenberg & Kim, 1975).

For the rating task, the 80 helpful items from the qualitative analysis were compiled into a questionnaire in which participants rated each on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). The intent of this procedure was to enable identification of the relative importance of the helpful aspects of counseling.

Results

A nonmetric multidimensional scaling (MDS) procedure was performed on the data from the sorting task. MDS arranges points representing items along orthogonal axes such that the distance between any two points reflects the frequency with which the items were sorted together, making it especially suitable for spatially representing unknown latent relationships among variables (Fitzgerald & Hubert, 1987; Kruskal & Wish, 1978). The MDS procedure resulted in a final stress value of .27 for a two-dimensional solution, which is reasonably stable (Kruskal & Wish, 1978). The stress value is an index of the stability of an MDS solution and ranges from 0 (*perfectly stable*) to 1 (*perfectly unstable*). The selection of a two-dimensional solution was also appropriate given that the primary purpose of the MDS configuration is to display clustering results visually, which is difficult to do in three or more dimensions (Kruskal & Wish, 1978).

Hierarchical cluster analysis of the MDS similarity matrix was then used to group sorted items into internally consistent clusters, this cluster solution being superimposed on the MDS point plot. Ward's (1963) minimum variance method was used to optimize distinctiveness across clusters (Borgen & Barnett, 1987). The research team then met as a group to reach consensus about a descriptive and justifiable label for each of the clusters of MDS items on the basis of inspection of the constituent items. Because the cluster solution is based on estimated distances between items from the MDS two-dimensional solution, the cluster solution was used as a secondary guide to interpreting the map, with the MDS solution (i.e., the relative distance and position of items on

Table 1
Clusters and Items From Clients' Concept Map of What They Found Helpful About Counseling

Cluster and item	Bridging value	Rating value (mean)
Cluster 1: Counselor Facilitative Interpersonal Style	0.07	4.04
8. My counselor was supportive	0.00	4.39
2. My counselor was very personable	0.01	3.89
4. My counselor asked very good questions	0.03	4.24
14. My counselor listened to me	0.04	4.56
49. My counselor was attentive to me and my needs	0.05	4.28
32. My counselor was very understanding	0.05	4.22
64. Good insight from my counselor	0.05	4.06
48. My counselor was compassionate	0.06	4.06
57. My counselor gave me things to think about	0.06	3.72
47. My counselor followed my pace	0.06	3.67
18. My counselor allowed me to direct the counseling flow	0.07	3.17
15. My counselor validated me	0.09	4.00
6. My counselor was open-minded	0.10	4.33
1. My counselor was like talking to a friend	0.11	3.61
7. My counselor was nonjudgmental	0.12	4.50
60. My counselor was empathetic	0.12	4.00
65. Reassurances from my counselor	0.15	4.06
Cluster 2: Counselor Interventions	0.15	3.80
39. My counselor gave me an objective opinion	0.07	4.06
70. My counselor provided clarification	0.07	3.94
53. My counselor made me feel more secure	0.12	3.67
52. My counselor gave me confidence	0.13	3.94
28. My counselor reinforced my decisions	0.16	3.67
3. My counselor offered suggestions	0.16	3.61
61. My counselor gave me helpful exercises	0.18	3.56
68. My counselor facilitated my process	0.23	3.67
34. When I was down my counselor helped me to overcome it	0.27	4.11
Cluster 3: Generating Client Resources	0.40	3.53
46. My counselor was helpful in finding me other resources	0.32	3.28
62. My counselor showed me ways to deal with things	0.33	3.83
51. My counselor gave me written information	0.39	3.17
36. My counselor guided me through the steps of what I had to do	0.44	3.44
33. My counselor showed me how to stand up for myself	0.52	3.94
Cluster 4: New Perspectives	0.33	4.03
74. I felt like I was on the right track	0.22	4.11
40. Counseling motivated me to help myself	0.28	4.33
41. Counseling gave me a focal point	0.30	4.00
72. I found out that I know myself better than I thought	0.33	3.83
5. It got me to think about things differently	0.36	4.17
9. Coming to some realizations about my life	0.36	4.17
20. Receiving feedback	0.38	4.17
78. It was interesting	0.39	3.50
Cluster 5: Emotional Relief	0.27	3.91
54. I listened to myself and felt more realistic after my session	0.19	4.00
73. I felt relieved	0.22	3.72
55. Relieved the stress	0.28	4.06
56. I didn't have to talk to friends who were getting tired of listening to me	0.29	3.44
50. Working through things	0.29	3.94
24. Emotional release	0.34	4.28
Cluster 6: Client Self-Disclosure	0.21	4.14
27. Unloading on my counselor rather than my family	0.12	3.61
26. Sharing my pain	0.14	4.17
30. I understood my situation	0.14	4.00
58. The rapport that developed	0.15	4.17
38. I could tell someone about all the skeletons in my closet	0.17	4.28
67. Having someone treat me like a human being	0.17	3.94
37. Venting problems	0.18	4.33
59. Knowing there is at least one person who is there for you when you're down	0.19	3.89
29. I had someone to talk to	0.21	4.39
13. It felt good to open up to someone	0.23	4.06

Table 1
(continued)

Cluster and item	Bridging value	Rating value (mean)
77. I felt like someone was on my side	0.24	4.06
16. Speaking to someone who was neutral	0.25	4.44
76. It eased my mind	0.25	4.11
10. Gave me an opportunity to talk about and focus on myself	0.32	4.28
66. Felt safe to say anything I wanted to say	0.35	4.33
Cluster 7: Gaining Knowledge	0.61	3.58
35. I gained more knowledge	0.36	4.11
71. Talking things out before I do anything	0.44	3.50
19. Linking things together that seemed unrelated	0.52	3.67
42. Learning skills to deal with my anger	0.54	3.56
11. Got the kind of therapist I requested	0.63	3.50
80. Relaxation techniques were good	0.81	3.00
44. I didn't feel like I was kicked out the door	1.00	3.72
Cluster 8: Accessibility	0.81	3.65
31. Accessible hours	0.77	3.72
63. The fact that it was constant; once a week	0.80	3.67
45. Affordable	0.82	4.61
12. I wasn't kept waiting in the waiting room	0.83	2.61
Cluster 9: Client Resolutions	0.61	3.46
21. Knowing I can come back if I need to	0.37	3.89
79. It helped knowing that what I had chosen was within my grasp	0.46	3.39
25. Problem solving	0.48	3.50
69. It was like being on a journey and having someone to guide you	0.59	3.50
75. Counseling opened up options	0.59	3.61
22. The tools I was provided	0.70	3.61
23. Feedback from observing professors and students	0.75	3.17
17. Planning my future	0.75	2.94
43. I got closure	0.82	3.56

Note. Participants rated each item according to its importance in counseling on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not important*) to 5 (*extremely important*).

the map) given primary consideration. Cluster labels were assigned by the research team in consideration of the items making up the clusters, inspection of those items contributing most to the uniqueness of each cluster, and relative distance of each item from other items on the map. As with other procedures, such as factor analysis, labeling of clusters is both statistically and conceptually influenced. Interpretation of the concept map involves informed conjecture about the possible structure participants imposed on the items in their sorting (Kunkel & Newsom, 1996). Initial examination of the map involves attempts to identify implicit dimensional axes around which points may be configured (Buser, 1989). Inspection of the placement and adjacency of statements and clusters can also be helpful in this process to identify apparent regions of the map and potentially related concepts. The cluster structure can be understood as well in terms of adjacency of constructs, with the close placement of statements reflecting the participants' perception of them as similar.

The concept map of the 80 helpful aspects of counseling is presented in Figure 1. Each of the 80 statements derived from the participants' phenomenological response is represented as a point on the map. The relative position of the points from one another was derived from the MDS solution and reflects the frequency with which the statements were sorted together by participants; points that are closer together represent statements that were more frequently sorted together than were statements represented by points farther apart. The cluster boundaries around groups of points represent statements that were more frequently sorted together in the same pile and less often sorted with statements in other piles. A statement key, statements within each cluster, and descriptive statistics for each statement and cluster are presented in Table 1.

Bridging values can range from 0 to 1 and depict how frequently statements were sorted together, with lower values indicative of statements sorted together frequently and higher values indicating statements sorted together less frequently based on estimated distances between statements from the MDS two-dimensional solution. Statements with a high bridging value indicate that a statement bridges two or more clusters to which it is related. Statements with a bridging value of 1 suggest that this item could potentially be sorted with every cluster. A low bridging value means that the statements in a particular cluster were more frequently sorted with statements within the cluster than with statements in other clusters.

Rating values range from 1 to 5 and represent the importance participants placed on each statement. Low values reflect statements experienced as less important, and higher values reflect correspondingly more important experiences of helpfulness in counseling.

An examination of the map in Figure 1 reveals that client experiences of the helpful aspects of counseling appear to

move along a continuum from interpersonal–affective aspects on the right-hand side of the map to task–impact aspects on the left-hand side. A top-to-bottom examination of the map suggests a continuum of processes that the client engaged in and experienced on the top half of the map to activities on the part of the counselor as perceived by the client on the bottom half of the map.

Further examination of the map (see Figure 1) starting at the bottom right-hand portion and moving along to the bottom left-hand portion suggests aspects associated with the counselor's contribution to the counseling process. Participants sorted together items associated with the counselor's facilitative interpersonal style (e.g., "My counselor was very supportive"), what the counselor did (e.g., "My counselor provided clarification"), what the counselor provided (e.g., "My counselor showed me ways to deal with things"), and what the client gained (e.g., "I gained more knowledge"). Inspecting the map from the top right-hand portion and moving along to the top left-hand portion suggests conditions associated with the client's experience of process. Here participants sorted together items associated with self-disclosure (e.g., "Sharing my pain"), emotional relief (e.g., "I felt relieved"), new perspectives (e.g., "It got me to think about things differently"), and resolving issues (e.g., "Counseling opened up options").

The map can be further conceptualized by visualizing various portions of the map as composing distinct areas of clients' experiences. Clusters 1, 2, and 3 encompass counselor style and activities that clients experience as helpful in the counseling process. The area of the map that contains Clusters 4, 5, and 6 depicts the processes clients experience in counseling. The relatively low bridging values and high rating values (see Table 1) for each of these three clusters (4, 5, and 6) indicate that items in these clusters were consistently sorted together and seen as important by participants. The area of the map that depicts what clients perceive when they leave counseling is contained in Cluster 7 (Gaining Knowledge) and Cluster 9 (Client Resolutions). The statements in Cluster 8 appear on the map as outliers from other statements. Although clients identified accessibility issues as important in terms of ratings, the high bridging values indicate that clients were often unsure where to sort these statements in the overall counseling process.

Discussion

The concept map generated by the participants in this study is consistent with previous research and extends understanding of what is helpful in counseling. In particular, the role of the counselor's interpersonal style and the role of the therapeutic relationship emerge as helpful elements in the counseling process. In addition, participants identified client change processes as central and highly important in counseling. The scope and structure of this concept map are congruent with an integrative, pantheoretical model of the counseling process (e.g., Lambert, 1992). Client self-disclosure, for example, was rated by clients as the most helpful aspect of counseling and is certainly a necessary, if not central, component of all forms of counseling. Meaningful disclosure typically takes place only if a facilitative interpersonal relationship exists with the counselor, and the presence of a positive working relationship is the best predictor of a positive outcome in counseling, regardless of the type of counseling used (Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Orlinsky, Grawe, & Parks, 1994). Self-disclosure may prompt emotional relief, which, along with the assistance of counselor interventions, increases the probability of the client developing a new perspective on his or her concern(s). This new perspective, coupled with self-resources bolstered by the counselor and knowledge gained, may increase the probability of the resolution of concerns.

The concordance of the current results with Elliott and James's (1989) review is particularly striking. Our Counselor Facilitative Interpersonal Style category is obviously very similar to Elliott and James's Facilitative Therapist Characteristics, whereas the categories of Counselor Interventions and Generating Client Resources are similar to Experiencing Supportive Relationship. Our categories of Client Self-Disclosure and New Perspectives are similar to Client Self-Expression Permitted and Self-Understanding/Insight, respectively. Only Elliott and James's Therapist Encouraging Extratherapy Practice was not identified in the current study.

Also, four new categories were identified: Client Resolutions, Gaining Knowledge, Emotional Relief, and Accessibility. It is interesting to note that these categories are distinctly client experiences and, therefore, unlikely to be identified via counselors' perceptions or investigators' categories. The breadth of client experiences depicted by the thematic clusters suggests that the experience of helpfulness in counseling is multifaceted and that reducing such experiences into fewer categories would detract from the richness of clients' experiences and the complexity of the dynamics of the counseling process.

The cluster comprising emotional relief refers to the expression and release of emotions as an agent of helpfulness. Participants' identification of emotional relief as helpful in counseling is consistent with the emerging counseling literature (Greenberg & Korman, 1993; Greenberg & Safran, 1989; Korman & Greenberg, 1996). Korman and Greenberg (1996) argued that attending to the emotional experiences of clients is a necessary function of counseling. Doing so permits a reorganization of an individual's perception of reality that subsequently leads to cognitive and behavioral changes. The role of emotions and emotional restructuring in the counseling process may represent a blind spot in understanding the therapeutic process if there is sole reliance on the counselor's perspective.

The two newly identified categories of Client Resolutions and Gaining Knowledge deal with the client having had a positive experience. The Client Resolutions category refers to being able to achieve what was desired and being able to return to counseling if needed. Interestingly, clients did not make reference to the attainment of specific, tangible goals or symptom reduction. The Gaining Knowledge category refers to gaining new information and learning new interpersonal skills. Previous investigators have tended to group these processes together into a single category such as

"learned something" (Elliott & James, 1989) or "question–answer" (Wilcox-Matthew et al., 1997). Our client participants, however, viewed these as related but different themes.

Accessibility refers to the availability and affordibility of counseling. It is worth noting that the most highly rated helpful aspect of counseling was affordability, which suggests that financial considerations play a more important role than has been previously recognized.

A limitation of the current study is its retrospective nature and reliance on the self-reporting of participants. Retrospective reporting can result in important aspects or nuances of particular experiences being forgotten or misremembered. Client reports may be biased by response sets, preexisting beliefs, and self-presentation style.

In this study, we asked clients to impose a structure on their experience, which resulted in a thematic conceptualization of their counseling experiences. However, it is important to keep in mind that this structure is not static. Future research might examine the relative importance and sequence of these helpful aspects, as well as their relationship to immediate and long-term outcomes (Hill & Corbett, 1993). Also, the items identified by the participants could form the basis of a helpfulness scale to be used in future counseling process and outcome research.

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