Client Personality and Preference for Counseling Approach: Does Match Matter?

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Research in the area of client personality predicting a preference for a counseling approach has been ongoing for many years and has revealed some interesting and often contradictory results. The present study investigates client personality as a predictor for Psychoanalytic, Client-Centered or Cognitive counseling approach. One hundred forty-five participants completed the NEO Personality Inventory-Revised and the Preferences for Psychotherapy Approaches Scale-Revised. Results revealed that participants who scored higher on Extraversion prefer Psychoanalytic counseling approach. Of the four remaining NEO-PI-R personality styles, none predicted for counseling approach, even after controlling for gender, race, and age.

Many therapists and researchers have pondered the need and value of matching personality with the counseling process. Fay and Lazarus (1993) stated that matching counseling style with the personality of the client was necessary for optimal therapeutic outcome. Beck (1974) claimed that choosing a particular therapeutic intervention which targets clients’ specific characteristics would tend to produce the best outcome. As Lazarus (1989) puts it, our guiding maxim in all counseling situations should be, “Who or what is best for this individual?” (p. 9).

One primary research topic over the years has been the personality style of the client. Therapeutically, research indicates that personality style is related to anxiety (Cox, Borger, Taylor, Fuentes, & Ross, 1999), depression (Huprich, 2000), types of marital conflict (Kosek, 1998), obsessive-compulsive disorder (Rector, Hood, Richter, & Bagby, 2002), and psychopathy (Miller, Lyman, Widiger, & Leukefeld, 2001).

Sanderson and Clarkin (2002) suggested that personality dimensions, whether normal or abnormal, contribute to and influence the choice and process of therapeutic interaction. One of

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the ways that matching personality and counseling type has been accomplished is by simply asking clients which counseling approach they prefer (Bishop, 1998; Crocket & Crawford, 1989; McGee-Williams, 1979; Mindingall, 1985). Such studies are based on the notion that positive outcomes are related to individual therapy preferences (Cheng, 2000). Research further indicates that the greater the similarities between clients and therapists on characteristics such as cognitive style and personal value structure, the greater the treatment interaction between clients and counselors, with clients rating the counseling experience more highly. Further, clients who are linked with the counselor in the stated characteristics (e.g. cognitive style and personal value structure) rate their counseling experience more positively (Fry & Charron, 1980; Lyddon, 1989; Kivlighan, Jr., Hageseth, Tipton & McGovern, 1981).

This study utilized the five-factor model (FFM) to operationalize personality. These five factors are: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. The FFM has demonstrated effectiveness in assessing both normal and abnormal personalities, and is both comprehensive and empirically derived, with research implications and applications across settings as well as populations (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Piedmont, 1998). Costa & McCrae’s (1992) NEO Personality Inventory Revised (NEO PI-R) is the only instrument available commercially that measures the five factors (Piedmont, 1998). The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between personality and counseling approach. More specifically, this study attempts to determine if client personality styles predict a preference for a particular counseling approach.

Method

Participants and Procedures

One hundred fifty-five students from two large universities and a small liberal arts college in the southern United States voluntarily participated in the present study. The instruments for this study were administered in several classroom settings at each of the three institutions mentioned above. Of the total 155 participants, 10 did not adequately complete the surveys used in this study and were therefore dropped from the final analysis. Of the 145 participants who adequately completed the surveys, 97 were undergraduates (66.9%) and 48 were graduate students (33.1%); 107 were female (73.8%) and 38 were male (26.2%). Ages ranged from 18 to 53 years (M = 26.9 years; SD = 8.3). The researched sample included 74 African Americans (51%), 64 Caucasians (44.1%), 3 Hispanics/Latinos (2.1%), with four reporting their ethnicity as “other” (2.8%).

Instruments

Personality measure. The NEO Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO-PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992) was used to measure the personality traits: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Alpha reliabilities for each of the personality styles are as follows: Neuroticism, .92, Extraversion, .89, Openness, .87, Agreeableness, .86, and Conscientiousness, .90 (Piedmont, 1998). The stability of this data extends over time for adults up to and beyond 30 years of age (Costa & McCrae, 1994). This instrument has demonstrated effectiveness in understanding and making predictions across a broad range of issues, including
clients’ career choices, coping behaviors, and subjective well-being (Costa & McCrae, 1992b). Furthermore, Ross, Canada, and Rausch (2002) affirm that the NEO PI-R is determined to have “exceptional reliability across observers and multiple methods of measurement” (p. 1175). In addition, the NEO PI-R demonstrates similar factor structure in both white and nonwhite populations, across cultural boundaries, and has been shown to be equally valid for both males and females (Andersen & Nordvik, 2002; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001; McCrae, Costa, del Pilar, Rolland, & Parker, 1998; Velting, 1999).

Counseling preference measure. To measure participants’ preferences for a particular counseling approach, the Preferences of Psychotherapy Approaches Scale (PPAS) (Cheng, 2000) was administered. The PPAS has three one-page scripts describing Psychoanalytic, Client-Centered, and Behavioral counseling approaches. However, this study did not intend to measure a preference for a Behavioral approach and did intend instead to measure a preference for a Cognitive approach. Therefore, the Behavioral approach scenario was discarded from the original scale and a scenario for a Cognitive approach was inserted. Preferences for the following counseling approaches were measured in this study: Psychoanalytic, Client-Centered, and Cognitive. In light of the revisions and additions this study required of the PPAS, validation was completed in a manner similar to Cheng (2000). In a pre-trial validation study, the revised version of the PPAS was deemed valid.

Demographics questionnaire. A demographic questionnaire was also administered to participants. Information regarding participant age, gender, race, and college major was collected.

Results

A review of the data reveals that, when not controlling for variables of age, gender and race, the five personality traits measured here (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness), did not predict a preference for a counseling approach. However, when controlling for these three variables, a statistical significance was found. A multiple regression analysis indicated a preference for a Psychoanalytic counseling approach when controlling for age, gender, and race variables. A statistically significant, positive relationship was found between being extraverted and preferring a Psychoanalytic counseling approach, after controlling for age, gender, and race (F(8,127) = 3.064), p < .05). The regression results revealed that the set of independent variables explained 16.2% of the variance in preference for a Psychoanalytic counseling approach with two of the 8 variables having significant influence on that preference.

Multiple regression was calculated for the Client-Centered approach to see if personality styles, controlling for age, and gender would predict a preference for a particular counseling approach. The results were not statistically significant (F(8,127) = 1.548), p > .05). Multiple regression was also calculated for the Cognitive approach to see if personality styles, controlling for age, and gender would predict a preference for a particular counseling approach. These results were also not statistically significant (F(8,127) = 1.787, p > .05).

In summary, of the five personality traits only Extraversion predicted a preference for a particular counseling approach. Results indicated that the higher people score on Extraversion,
the higher they will rank their preference for a Psychoanalytic counseling approach. Statistical significance was demonstrated, however, only after controlling for age, gender, and race.

**Discussion**

Results of this study revealed that Extraversion predicts a preference for a Psychoanalytic counseling approach when controlling for age, gender and race. The more Extraverted a client’s personality, the more likely that client was to prefer a Psychoanalytic counseling approach, regardless of age, gender and race. The four other personality styles (i.e., Openness, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Neuroticism) did not indicate a preference for any of the three counseling approaches studied.

One possible theoretical explanation for these results comes from the external quality of the life of the extravert. That is, extraverts tend toward externalizing their internal mental events (Piedmont, 1998). In other words, extraverts do most of their processing of thoughts via actual conversation. They talk out their thoughts and Psychoanalytic approaches are known for perusing the internal world and bringing it to conscious awareness (Sharf, 2000). This contrasts with the introvert who tends to engage in an internal dialogue. This reality may be what is tapped in the scenario on Psychoanalytic counseling. The scenario on Psychoanalytic counseling stated, in part, “In addition to the personal problems you are experiencing now, I believe there are issues within you of which you are not aware. Therefore, I will work with you both on solving the present problems and in finding out the conflicts that you are not aware of.” Neither of the other two approaches offered this opportunity to externalize the participants’ internal world.

The present study found significant results, whereas a similar study failed to do so. Bishop (1998) administered the NEO FFI to 183 participants in a study to determine if personality style predicted a preference for three counseling approaches: Diagnostic Interviewing, Solution-Focused therapy (represented by solution focused questioning), and Rational Emotive Therapy (represented by Socratic disputation questioning style). Psychoanalytic counseling was not used as one of the options. This may account for the lack of significance in Bishop’s study and for significant results in the current study. As noted earlier, Bishop (1998) hypothesized, that Extraversion would be negatively related to a preference for RET (i.e., similar to the current study’s Cognitive approach), and that Conscientiousness would be positively related to RET. Neither hypothesis was supported. The current study found similar results; neither Extraversion nor Conscientiousness were found to be related, positively or negatively, to a Cognitive approach. This is particularly meaningful due to the use of the more precise measure of personality, the NEO PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992), as opposed to the NEO FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The NEO FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992b) has only 60 items, with 12 items per factor. The NEO PI-R contains 240 items, with 48 items per factor. The more extensive NEO PI-R provides an increased level of internal consistency (Costa & McCrae, 1992b). In fact, Bishop (1998) purported that if she had used the NEO PI-R, she might have found results that more closely aligned with her hypotheses.

In summary, the present research provides some results that are helpful and some results that are inconclusive. The helpful results are those associated with the positive relationship between extraverted personalities and Psychoanalytic counseling. This information can help clinicians make decisions regarding which counseling approach to use with such personalities. The inconclusive results are that there were no preferences revealed by any of the other four
personality styles. The decision regarding which counseling approach to use with which personality is, therefore, open for future research.
References

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