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### **The Halo Effect: Considerations for the Evaluation of Counselor Competency**

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#### **Abstract**

The following experimental study investigated the relationship of the halo effect and gender influence in the counseling evaluation of graduate students using the Counseling Skills Scales-Revised (CSS-R). Participants (N=74) were assigned to two groups where recipients of a digitally recorded counseling session were led to believe a novice performed the counseling session, and the second group was led to believe an expert performed the counseling session. Overall, the findings indicate the halo effect is a significant source of bias.

#### **Introduction**

Recent statistics on the prevalence of licensed professional counselors (LPCs) in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia indicate that there are 120,429 professional counselors. According to the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2011), the number of counselors will continue to grow as new states add licensure

for licensed professional counselors (LPC). Texas leads the nation with 14,595 LPCs (ACA, 2011).

The number of LPCs in Texas and the U.S. is a clear indicator of the training and preparation that is occurring at universities nationwide. Concerning the ethics and legalities of the counseling profession, Sanabria and Freeman (2008) reported that the “ACA Ethics and Professional Standards Department processed 1,052 informal inquiries” (p. 250). The inquiries consisted of complaints related to confidentiality (46%), the counseling relationship (30%), and professional responsibility (10%). The same department received 27 formal complaints; six were formally adjudicated by the ACA ethics board (Sanabria & Freeman, 2008). The growth of the counseling profession requires a conscious effort in assuring proper training of counselor-interns.

The process of evaluating professionals for competence is a central concern for many, if not all, professional organizations. Often the process of evaluation is a combination of subjective and objective measures of competence (Bradley & Ladany, 2001). Gould and Bradley (2001) indicated that multiple measures are commonly used in the evaluation process, and often include structured checklists related to performance and aptitude tests related to the profession of interest. The subjective measures include observation by the supervisor and self-evaluation by the trainee (Bradley & Ladany, 2010; Jordan, 2003; Shepherd, Britton, & Kress, 2008).

As students matriculate into counseling programs, counselor educators share a common goal of training quality students for successful outcomes. Before successful outcomes are established, the educators in the counselor education program must complete a strong and beneficial evaluation. According to the ACA *Code of Ethics* (2005), a crucial responsibility of supervisors in the counseling field is to monitor those services provided by counselor-interns. Counseling supervisors must conduct regular meetings with interns to analyze case notes as well as other examples of their clinical work performed and watch interns as they carry out the duties of a LPC.

Decisions of competence, according to a range of sources, can vary significantly between evaluators (Baltes & Parker, 2000; Darby, 2007; Gaubatz & Vera, 2006; Fitch, Gillam, & Baltimore, 2004; Patterson, Uhlin, & Anderson, 2008; Pike, 1999). Understanding these subtle areas of evaluation and their contribution to bias has the potential to help counselor education programs understand the potential limitations within the training process.

### **The Halo Effect in Performance Evaluation**

The halo effect results when factors other than objective observation or evaluation influence the rating issued by an outside observer. The halo effect takes place when “ratings tend to be influenced by good impressions of the examinee” (Drummond & Jones, 2010, p. 36).

The practice of performance ratings and the presence of rater bias is well documented in a variety of studies from multiple disciplines, including medical schools (Lurie, Lambert, & Grady-Weliky, 2006; Surawski & Ossoff, 2006; Williams, Klamen, & McGahie, 2003) and universities which train professional counselors (Lepkowski, Packman, Smaby, & Maddux, 2009). The current study examines the halo effect through the evaluation of a counseling student.

## **Research Question and Hypothesis**

The hypothesis for this study was stated in the null, which is that there will be no difference between ratings of the novice counseling student and ratings of the advanced counseling student. The question at the center of the study focused on the presence of bias in the evaluation of counseling competence.

### **Participants**

Participants were randomly selected from the American Counseling Association (ACA) membership. A total of 4,000 e-mail addresses were purchased from ACA. Among 4,000 prospective participants contacted, 74 consented to participate and completed the study online and a response rate of 5% return. Participants (N=74) consisted of 29 males (39%) and 45 females (60.8%) which were stratified into two experimental groups based on gender and program accreditation. The current sample demonstrated higher representation of males and less of females than the overall makeup of the ACA membership consisting of a total of 57,000 members, females (74%) and males (26%; Maguire, 2012).

A total of 36 participants (12 male and 24 female) were classified in the experienced condition and 38 (14 male and 24 female) in the novice condition for a total of 74 participants.

### **Materials**

The materials used in the study consisted of an online survey eliciting volunteer participants and a second formal instrument used by the participants to evaluate the student counselor's performance. The first e-mailed message consisted of the consent to participate and the questions: "What is your gender?" "Did you graduate from a CACREP accredited counseling program?" and "Do you agree to participate in the study?" Participants replied with an agreement to participate and a second e-mail was sent with the video and the link to the survey embedded in the e-mail. The data collection through SurveyMonkey.com was compiled and downloaded into a Microsoft Excel document for further analysis.

Participants in the study evaluated and scored a 5-minute digital video of the student counselor using the Counseling Skills Scale-Revised (CSS-R). Eriksen and McAuliffe (2003) designed the CSS-R to evaluate a single counseling session as opposed to scales that require the evaluator to observe the counselor over longer periods. The CSS-R assesses micro-level counseling skills such as body language and appearance, minimal encouragers, vocal tone, encouraging exploration, reflection skills, and encouraging change but does not make assumptions in terms of pathology or treatment options.

### **Instrument**

The CSS-R includes 19-items, grouped into six scales, which include: a) Shows Interest and Appreciation, b) Encourages Exploration, c) Deepens the Session, d) Encourages Change, e) Develops Therapeutic Relationship, and f) Manages the Session. These basic skills indicate evidence of competence and counseling proficiency (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2003). Evaluators rate a counselors' skills on a 5-point Likert-type scale as

"highly developed" (+2), "well developed" (+1), "developing skills" (0), "continue practice" (-1), "major adjustment needed" (-2) and an additional option of "not performed but not necessary (NN)." The option to rate a response as "not necessary" gives the rater flexibility to rate the skills observed and avoid categorizing responses not demonstrated. The mean for each of the six scales are determined and totaled. Skills not observed (NN) are not included in the mean group and do not affect the overall score of the counselor. In the current study, participants used the CSS-R evaluate the 5-minute "snapshot" of a typical counseling session.

**Reliability and Validity of the CSS-R.** The sample of the pilot study used to establish the interrater reliability of the CSS-R consisted of a five-person focus group (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2003). The participants, 2 men and 3 women, were between 28 and 53 years of age. The group examined a 10-minute video of a counseling session and rated the session using the CSS-R. The initial interrater reliability was 56.84%. The participants were allowed to discuss the tape and re-rate the counseling session resulting in an interrater reliability of 76.8% (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2003).

Two trained administrators used the scale in a theories and techniques of counseling course as a pre-test and post-test to assist in the validity and internal consistency of the instrument. The sample (N=29) consisted of 18 females and 11 males enrolled in the counseling techniques course (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2003). Students worked with a partner and conducted a 10-minute videotaped session of the student's "natural ways of helping" (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2003, p. 9) at the beginning and the end of the course. The trained administrators viewed and evaluated the pre- and post-training videos using the CSS-R (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2003). A Cronbach's alpha of .90 was obtained on the scale, indicating a strong internal consistency (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2006). The construct validity of the assessment was confirmed through the evaluation of observed changes in the participating student's performance during the semester. A t-test indicated a significant positive change in scores on the Counselor Skills Scale by the end of the semester ( $t = 4.51, p < .001$ ), thus indicating that the CSS-R detected a significant increase in mean difference of competency prior to and post counselor training (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2003).

The authors of the CSS-R reported strong construct validity when compared to counseling textbooks, strong face validity, and strong internal consistency; Eriksen and McAuliffe (2003) noted that the subscales in the inventory "do not represent true factors" (2003, p. 6). The authors of the CSS-R did not evaluate each subscale for reliability due to the small sample size used to create the instrument.

## **Procedure**

The study was designed as an experimental study to investigate the halo effect (novice vs. experienced). A student at a local university volunteered to play the counselor in the video to assist in manipulating the halo effect. Two versions of the same video were created to signify an expert and a novice in the session for the two groups. Participants received the video within 24 hours of consent. Group 1 received the link to the video with the label "The student in this role-play was enrolled in Internship I. It has been reported that she is not involved in any professional association and shows little interest in professional identity," while group 2 received the link to the second video with the label reading, "The student in this role-play is enrolled in Internship II. It has been

reported that she is very involved in a professional association and shows significant interest in professional counselor identity.” Descriptors could be viewed on the left side of the video vignette in size 18 font for easy viewing.

Participants reviewed the student’s performance and then evaluated the counselor’s competence using the CSS-R. Gender of the evaluator, the second independent variable, was embedded in the analysis which investigated the effects of the independent variables in addition to the interaction effects between both variables, halo effect and evaluator gender. The demographic information for the original study was limited to the participant’s gender and their attendance at a CACREP or non-CACREP accredited counseling program. Since no other variable was hypothesized to impact the ratings, no other demographic data was obtained.

### **Data Analysis**

A total of 36 participants (12 male and 24 female) were classified in the experienced condition and 38 (14 male and 24 female) in the novice condition (Table 1). The effects of the independent variable experience status on the dependent variable of CSS-R score were analyzed with a one-way ANOVA. According to Green and Salkind (2008), a one-way ANOVA with a sample size of 30 or more returns an accurate p-value and is assumed to have a normal distribution.

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations are shown in Table 1. The results from the one-way analysis of variance indicate statistical significance was set at the .05 alpha level. The effects of the halo effect were significant at the .05 alpha level,  $F(1, 70) = 4.18, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$ . The effect size is very small at .05, indicating a very small treatment effect.

Table 1

#### *Descriptive Statistics*

<b>Halo</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>N</b>
Novice	3.47	4.28	38
Experienced	1.64	4.27	36

The Halo effect—the condition that was placed by each video indicating the level of expertise and involvement in the intern’s training program. Novice—the student was described as being in Internship I and not involved in professional activities. Experienced—the student was described as being in Internship II and involved in many professional activities.

### **Discussion**

The accuracy of evaluation during the training process has implications that reach well into the future. The training provided in counselor education programs will ultimately affect not only the trainee, but also the prospective counselors’ clients and future employers. A range of studies suggest that the halo effect potentially impacts the

rating of practitioner competence across disciplines (Balzer & Sulsky, 1992; Goffin, Jelley, & Wagner, 2003; Palmer & Feldman, 2005). The evaluation of the halo effect, in addition to rater gender, operated as independent variables, with scores on the CSS-R operating as a single dependent variable.

In this study, the level of counseling experience was used as the halo. We conceptualized expertise as a halo because of the strong perceptions that occur when level of experience is a potential issue. The results indicate the halo effect does influence the evaluation of counselor performance ratings. The effect of the halo condition was supported at the .05 alpha level. This finding indicates when prior data is presented on counseling students before their evaluation occurs, the data can influence the rater's evaluation of the counselor's performance and perceived competence. The level of significance is compelling support that there is a potential halo effect, although in reverse. This "underdog" effect, in which the novice was rated higher than the experienced counselor, was not expected at the outset of the study. The expectation was that the experienced intern would be rated more favorably than the novice intern. The opposite of what would logically occur is evident, though more research needs to be conducted to verify such an event. The raters in the study evaluated the novice student higher than the more experienced student, which is the reverse of what was expected to happen in the study. Even with the low response rate and the logistical challenges involved, the results are still indicative of a significant effect.

The plausible explanation is that the additional favorable and unfavorable information had an effect on the ratings. Statistically, the halo effect was supported as influencing ratings of counselor performance utilizing the CSS-R. It is unclear why the counseling session with the novice student would be rated higher than the experienced student. The halo effect would logically lead raters to evaluate the more experienced student video higher than the less experienced (novice) student's video. The halo effect in reverse is indicative of the social psychological theory of the underdog phenomenon, which led to the opposite effect confirmed in the present study. The underdog phenomenon has been observed widely in the areas of sports and politics (Goldschmied & Vandello, 2009) and where perceived status as less capable or lacking in ability stands to influence a favorable potential outcome (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Many factors can influence the perception of competence, including ethnicity, personality, attractiveness, and perceived ability. When an individual or group is viewed as the underdog, that group has a tendency to be favored over the top-dog. The research design essentially primed the raters with the added information. One explanation for the reverse effect is that raters viewed the student's skills superior for a beginning student and inferior for an experienced student. Another explanation is that counselors in the sample lack the skills to accurately evaluate the skills of a student in training. If the latter explanation is true, more training may be needed in graduate counseling programs in evaluating interns.

A phenomenon rarely researched in the literature is the concept of a reverse halo effect. The reverse halo effect, also referred to as a negative halo, occurs when "ratings tend to be influenced by bad impressions of the examinee" (Drummond & Jones, 2010, p. 36).

The current study provides valuable information to the counseling community regarding the halo effect and the influence of the effect during the evaluation of counselor

skills. Information provided from this study and future studies could assist in the reduction of deficient counselors completing their training and improve the feedback those counselors receive during the evaluation process. The study provides an awareness of potential bias during the evaluation of counseling skills and opens the door to further research in the area of the halo effect or reverse halo effect.

### **Limitations and Future Directions of the Study**

Several limitations, typical to online research, must be considered for future research to further the evaluation of counselors. Those limitations included: a) technology, b) response rate, c) time limits, and d) lack of training for the CSS-R. First, technology limitations occurred that may have impacted the number of participants. The video was placed on a Web site as a .mov file that could be played with a downloaded video player. Some potential respondents reported an inability to download the video player to a work computer while others reported that the video did not work properly with their technical equipment.

Response rate was a significant limitation in the study. Over 75% of the initial e-mails were unopened, possibly due to bulk e-mails blocked by servers, firewalls, or additional security measures. Recipients may not have opened the initial e-mail due to lack of interest or time constraints. The increased use of e-mail to send survey type studies to a large number of recipients has become increasingly common, and the recipients in the field of counseling have become saturated with this type of research delivery. The overall response rate was small and a significant limitation in this study. The low return rate resulted in unequal cell sizes and a smaller than desirable sample size. The sample size for the study was small, and a sample size of 74 should be increased to increase the power of the study. An alternative design for sampling may yield a sufficient sample size and increase the generalizability of the results.

Another limitation of the study is the lack of training available for the Counseling Skills Scale. The scale is comparable to other inventories that do not require training for use. We chose the CSS-R because of its length and the reliability and validity of the instrument.

The final limitation arose due to time limits. The CSS-R is a unique inventory used to evaluate a counselor's performance during single counseling sessions of 20-40 minutes. The video session examined lasted a total of 5 minutes in order to accommodate the time constraints of potential participants. Is 5 minutes long enough to form an accurate evaluation of a person's performance? This video was a sample of a counselor's performance and the results should be carefully analyzed due to this limitation. Due to the demands of the study, few demographic questions were asked of the potential participants.

Future studies may find more adequate response rates from research conducted in person, such as at the American Counseling Association annual conference. This format would alleviate the need for updated technology and time constraints and could offer longer segments of video if the participant desired, which could increase the reliability of the evaluation results. Researchers should consider several videos representing both genders. Meanwhile, further research is needed to conduct a factor analysis of the CSS-R to (1) determine whether each subscale is a factor that can be used as predictor variables

and (2) isolate any specific characteristics that are rated lower or higher by different raters. Additional research may include using another formal scale evaluating counselor performance to determine if a different assessment would obtain similar results. Possible assessments could include the Professional Counselor Performance Evaluation (PCPE), the Professional Performance Fitness Evaluation (PPFE), or the Counselor Interaction Analysis (CIA).

While measuring the halo effect or halo in reverse remains elusive, the present study offers credence to the idea that a significant effect is possible when a halo effect occurs during the evaluation of counseling skills. This information can assist in the improvement of current and future counseling practices ensuring better evaluation procedures for counselors evaluating students participating in Internship I, Internship II, and those still participating in their counseling degree programs.

### **Recommendations for Training**

University counseling programs prepare counselors far more than they prepare counselor supervisors. One recommendation is to devote 3 to 6 hours to evaluating the counseling skills of other interns or counselors in training. Inventories have been developed that include the Counseling Skills Scale, the Professional Counselor Performance Evaluation, and many others. Students in training programs would benefit from identifying the micro and macro counseling skills and identifying and sources of bias they may have when rating professional competence.

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