Empathy, Assertiveness and Professional Socialization in Library Education

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Abstract

This article reports a longitudinal study which contrasted the impact of professional socialization in library and counselor education on their respective students. The empathy and assertiveness of library students in one Mid-western university were compared with those of their peers in counseling, first in 1992 at the commencement of their programs; then in 1994 on graduation. In 1992, beginning library students were differentiated from their counseling peers on one dimension of the empathy sub-scale. By 1994, the cohorts were undifferentiated both in their empathy and assertiveness. The implications of these findings for library education are discussed.

Keywords: empathy · assertiveness · professional socialization · library education

Concerns have been expressed that the library profession attracts persons who lack appropriate service dispositions, preferring to work with things rather than people.¹ Such concerns are pertinent today in the light of the trend towards user-centered library services. Explorations in the user-centered approach have led to extensions in the normative patterns of interaction between librarians and users. Consequently, librarians' roles have been redefined to include information advising and counseling.² To play these roles effectively, however, librarians need more than
professional knowledge and technical skills. Empathy and assertiveness
have been implicated in the personal attributes perceived as essential for
success in mediating information seeking.3 What influence does library
education have in nurturing these dispositions in students?

This article reports a longitudinal study which contrasted the
influences of library and counselor education on the empathy and
assertiveness of their respective students. Drawing on professional
socialization and role theories, the study tested the hypotheses that
programs preparing professionals to play similar roles would homogenize
their relevant personal attributes. Beginning library school students were
differentiated from their counselor peers in 1992.4 The present study
ascertained whether the cohorts were differentiated by their empathy and
assertiveness skills at the end of their programs in 1994.

Background and Conceptual Framework

Professional socialization and the librarian personality

The popular image of librarians as introverted, reserved and
introspective.5 correlate negatively with assertiveness and social skills.6 To
play information advisory and counselor roles effectively, however, it is
apparent that librarians need strong interpersonal skills.7 Empathy-based
techniques similar to those of the counseling profession have also been
advocated for negotiating queries at reference encounters.8 Consequently,
many advertisements for librarians and library students today call for
candidates with outgoing and personable demeanors, as well as an interest
in and a flair for helping people.

Such advertisements however, assume, as the pioneers of library
education did in the last century, that "questions of character resolved
around events occurring before students ever got into the schools".9 Such
assumptions are informed by classical occupational choice theories which
suggest that candidates self select themselves into professions.10 This self
selection process whereby recruits match their attributes, skills and values
with those of incumbents in their chosen professions has been termed "
anticipatory socialization".11 Cognitive and social learning theories, on the
other hand, attribute personality profiles of professionals to interactions between their traits and career environments.\textsuperscript{12} The interactional process by which recruits are attracted to and subsequently acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for effective practice has been termed professional socialization. Professionals who play similar roles may therefore be socialized to share common dispositions and values.\textsuperscript{13} Educational programs are primary agents of professional socialization. Education reinforces desirable personal attributes and extinguishes less desirable ones in aspiring professionals through the use of cognitive and behavioral goals, competence standards and reward and punishment mechanisms. Longitudinal studies of counseling, medical and nursing students, for examples, attest to the efficacy of graduate programs in nurturing personal attributes deemed desirable for practice.\textsuperscript{14}

**Problem statement**

Studies of library schools’ impact on students’ attributes have turned up equivocal results. For example, Finks observed in 1973 that library education made no impact on students’ attributes towards such crucial professional issues as intellectual freedom.\textsuperscript{15} Two decades later, Agada observed, based on cumulative data from longitudinal studies that library education might socialize students into conformity with the unassertive librarian profile.\textsuperscript{16} He therefore called for investigations into the nature of assertiveness skills desired for library practice, particularly in the light of the correlation between the lack thereof and empathy.\textsuperscript{17}

Counselors like librarians, are helping professionals who also exhibit an unassertive professional profile. In the counseling profession, however, empathy is deemed a necessary attribute for practice. Moreover, counselors on the average, possess more empathy than the general population.\textsuperscript{18} Since empathy is implicated in the advisory and counselor roles advocated for librarians, does library education socialize students to be more like their counselor peers in empathy and assertiveness?

**Assertiveness and empathy constructs**

Both empathy and assertiveness were touted in the helping professions during the last two decades as necessary for personal and professional competence.\textsuperscript{19} They are defined as multidimensional
constructs with cognitive and affective components. They have also been conceptualized as personality traits and interpersonal skills which can be learned and relearned.

Assertive behavior has been defined as enabling people to act in their own best interests or stand up for themselves without undue anxiety. Such behavior promotes positive, direct, courteous and goal-oriented behaviors while maximizing the reinforcement value of social interactions. Consequently, assertive behavior is said to promote effective problem solving, positive self-concepts, self-actualization, and effective social skills.

Lack of assertiveness sometimes implies empathic understanding. Empathic understanding has been defined as the capacity to perceive and understand the feelings related to the verbal and behavioral expressions of another and to communicate this perception and understanding precisely. Empathy is a core component of the user-centered service philosophy and an indispensable attribute for the helping professions.

**Empathic-assertiveness**

Research suggests that although assertive behaviors are perceived competent and effective, they are less friendly or satisfying to the recipient. Empathic-assertiveness represents a compromise between the negative consequences of both assertiveness, unassertiveness or exaggerated concerns for the feelings of others. In social interactions, empathic-assertive behaviors show consideration for the needs of the other person and favors compromise in conflict situations. Consequently, they elicit more favorable interpersonal reactions than other communication styles. There is however scant empirical data on the impact of professional socialization in nurturing both attributes in student professionals.

It is speculated that advisory and counselor librarian roles call for empathic-assertiveness on the part of librarians. According to Kuhlthau, "counselors accommodate many different learning styles by suggesting a variety of approaches to gathering information, while encouraging the pursuit of individual interest. Counselors enable users to recognize their need for intervention in information seeking and to request a level of mediation appropriate to that need...The objective for education at the
Counselor Level (therefore) goes beyond obtaining skills for self-reliant library users. Consequently, the preparation of librarian counselors ought to socialize them to be more like their peers in the counseling profession with respect to their empathic-assertiveness.

Hypotheses

Both the library and counseling student cohorts were comparable in their assertiveness at the beginning of their programs. However, the library students were differentiated from their counselor peers on personal distress on the empathy scale. This finding suggests that the library students were uncomfortable in intense personal settings, including discussions of a personal nature with "strangers". Apparently, the counselor students were better prepared (through anticipatory socialization) to ask personal questions of clients in a bid to diagnose their needs.

It was expected that by the end of their programs, both groups would be undifferentiated in both their empathy and assertiveness.

Two hypotheses were tested:

1. there will be no significant differences between the empathy scores of recent graduates of the library program and those of their peers in the counseling program; and

2. there will be no significant differences between the assertiveness scores of recent graduates of the library program and those of their peers in the counseling program.

Methods

Subjects for the study

Participants were recent graduates of library (L), and Counseling (C) programs at a Midwestern university. Forty-six of them had been polled at the beginning of their programs in 1992. The same assertiveness and empathy instruments were mailed to their permanent home addresses in Spring 1994. Only 22 subjects responded to both the assertiveness and empathy measures (L = 10; C = 12), yielding a response rate of 47.8%. Non-respondents had moved from their 1992 residences and left no
forwarding addresses. Tables 1 and 2 below contain the relevant demographic information for subjects who responded to the instruments both in 1992 and 1994.

**Table 1**

1992 Data-Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Race (%)</th>
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<td>m SD M F</td>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counsel</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>8.15.2</td>
<td>84.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All foreign students were Asian

**Table 2**

1994 Data-Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender (%)</th>
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<td>10</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counsel</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>8.333.3</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All foreign students were Asian.
Measures

Empathy was assessed using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI); a 28-item questionnaire using a scale of 1 = "does not describe me very well" to 5 = "describes me very well".\(^{32}\) Four sets of seven questions produce perspective taking, empathic concern, fantasy and personal distress sub-scale scores. Perspective taking measures the tendency to adopt the psychological viewpoint of others, an ability indicative of high levels of cognitive and social development. Empathic concern measures the level of affective concern for those in misfortune.

The affective ability to transpose oneself into the feelings and actions of others (represented as fictitious characters in books, movies, and plays) is measured by the fantasy sub-scale. The affective and cognitive aspects of empathy are combined in the personal distress sub-scale which measures personal anxiety and unease in intense personal settings. Sub-scale scores were obtained by summing the responses to each set of seven items. Internal validity ranges from .71 to .77 and test-retest reliability from .62 to .71\(^{33}\). The IRI has construct and cross-cultural validity.\(^{34}\)

The College Self-Expression Scale (CSES)\(^{35}\) is a 50 item, self-report scale designed to measure assertiveness in college students. The items are behavioral in content and address positive, negative and self-denial assertiveness. Positive assertiveness consists of approval, admiration, and agreement. Negative assertiveness involves expressing justified feelings of anger, disagreement, and annoyance. Self-denial includes excessive interpersonal anxiety and exaggerated concern for the feelings of others.

The CSES is a Likert scale consisting of statements of interpersonal behaviors to which respondents indicate how often (0 = never to 4 = always) they would respond. The scale has construct and concurrent validity.\(^{36}\) Its test-retest reliability coefficients range between .89 and .90.\(^{37}\) The scale also appears to have cross-cultural validity.\(^{38}\)

Procedures

Both scales were mailed to the participants in the Spring of 1994. By then, most of them had recently graduated from their respective programs.

Two multivariate one-way analyses of variance with the two graduate program cohorts (library science and counselor education) as the factor
were performed on the four empathy sub-scale scores and the three assertiveness sub-scale scores. Because of missing data for one or more of the sub-scales, 9 library science and 8 counselor education students were included in the first analysis and 10 library science and 9 counselor education students were included in the second analysis.

**Results**

The demographics of the participants were similar in most respects to those of the 1992 study (See Tables 1 and 2 above).

There were no statistically significant differences between the groups on any of the four: empathy sub-scale scores: (1, 17) = .70 for fantasy, F(1, 17) = .09 for perspective taking, F(1, 17) = .86 for empathic concern, and F(1, 17) = .05 for personal distress. Means (and standard deviations) for the library science and counselor students were 15.1 (3.93) and 14.5 (3.50) for fantasy, 16.20 (3.83) and 16.00 (3.40) for perspective taking, 16.10 (2.38) and 15.11 (2.26) for empathic concern, and 12.80 (2.09) and 12.20 (2.82) for personal distress, respectively. The first hypothesis was therefore supported.

For the three assertiveness sub-scale scores, there were no statistically significant differences between library and counselor education graduate students: F(1, 15) = 2.11, p > .15, for positive assertiveness; F(1, 15) = .04, p > .80, for self-denial; and F(1, 15) = 1.47, p > .24, for negative assertiveness. Means (and standard deviations) for the library science and counselor students were 16.13 (3.98) and 18.20 (1.87) for positive assertiveness; 43.11 (5.88) and 42.60 (4.14) for self-denial, and 21.63 (4.10) and 22.90 (1.63) for negative assertiveness, respectively. The second hypothesis was therefore supported.

One reason for failing to reject the null hypothesis of no differences among our three samples is their small numbers. Using Steven’s (1992) suggestion of increasing alpha from .05 to .10 to compensate for small numbers, we still were unable to reject the null hypothesis.

**Comparison of 1992 and 1994 scores**

Although the same subjects were tested in 1992 and the current study,
the data from the earlier study were not identified to permit matching subjects’ test and retest scores. Consequently, performing a paired t-test to see what changes might have occurred from the first to the second testing is not possible. This is unfortunate as the paired t-test is more powerful than the independent sample t-test. Thus, doing the more conservative independent sample t-test risks committing beta or Type 2 error where the researcher fails to reject the null hypothesis when it should be rejected.

In the current analyses, there is only one situation where a t-test from the 1992 to the 1994 testing is warranted. In the first testing, library (M = 14.80, SD = 2.22) and counseling (M = 12.44, SD = 2.37) graduate students significantly differed in their personal distress scores. As reported above, the difference between library (M = 12.80, SD = 2.09) and counseling (M = 12.20, SD = 2.82) after the second testing was not significant. It appears that the amount of personal distress of the library graduate students decreased from the first to the second testing. The more conservative independent sample t-test revealed statistical significance between the 14.80 and 12.80 means, t(21) = 2.21, p < .05, confirming that the library graduate students’ personal distress decreased from the first to the second testing.

Discussion

Although the size of the sample calls for caution in interpreting the results of the study, the lack of differentiation in the empathy of the cohorts by 1994 is noteworthy. Since the demographics of the cohorts were almost identical (being largely American, female, white and in their early to mid-thirties), this result may be attributed largely to professional socialization. Apparently, the cohorts had been homogenized by their programs into a transcendent professional ethic of empathy and assertiveness.

Library education

Professional socialization is said to vary from program to program, depending on the efficacy of such socialization agents as the faculty,
reference groups, curriculum and espoused theories or paradigms. A review of some features of the program on which the study was based reveals that the attraction-selection-attrition model of professional socialization was at play. Admission involved a two tier process. Students were interviewed before being admitted on probation into the program. After twelve credits, they were reassessed by the faculty and admitted to degree candidacy or denied admission. At both exercises, students were assessed for their interpersonal skills and attitudes.

The curriculum also had a user-centered focus. Some core courses were devoted to analyzing user needs and customizing information products to match those needs. Behavioral approaches were also adapted in instruction. For example, students were required to practice communication and social skills utilizing empathy, cognitive flexibility and proactive marketing in class activities and assignments. Apparently, these techniques socialized them accordingly.

This finding supports Agada’s previous findings that library education impacts on students’ personal attributes. Although both studies were set in different cultural milieu and based on students at different educational levels, it is noteworthy that the direction of impact was in agreement with the goals and intentions (implicit or otherwise) of the faculty or program. More research is needed to analyze the processes involved in library school socialization.

**Empathic - assertiveness**

The study also suggests that assertiveness and empathy are not mutually exclusive and may be inherent in the personality profiles of helping professionals. Although the two cohorts may possess comparable levels of assertiveness and empathy, their behavior modes and contexts of practice vary. This finding attests to the multidimensional and situation-specific natures of professional socialization in general, and the constructs of assertiveness and empathy in particular. Empirical research is needed to analyze the modes and contexts of empathic-assertive skills required of librarians at different levels of mediation. Also their relative effects on information mediation and in enhancing resolution of user needs.
Conclusion

The combined results of the 1992 and the present studies indicate that the library students were socialized to be more like their counselor peers by the end of their program. Based on professional socialization and role theories, changes in the students' dispositions could be attributed to the selective reinforcement of their empathy and assertiveness skills by their educational programs. Research is needed to ascertain the nature of the empathic-assertiveness attribute and the socializing roles of the curriculum and faculty. The appropriate contexts and modes of assertiveness and empathy in librarian/client interactions also need to be investigated.

Notes


17. Ibid., 94.


29. Jeffrey M. Kern, "Predicting the Impact of Assertive, Empathic-


33. Ibid, 126.


36. John P. Galassi and Merna D. Galassi, "Validity of a Measure of