

TOWARD THE IDENTIFICATION OF VARIABLES FOR EVALUATING FAMILY THERAPY WORKSHOPS*

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If the field of family therapy is to improve the quality of its continuing education, a useful measurement of workshop quality must be developed. In a preliminary step towards this goal, 14 expert subjects from the field of family therapy were interviewed to identify variables and relationships that can be hypothesized to influence the quality—as assessed by participants—of family therapy workshops. This paper reports the opinions of the subjects, using counts and quotations to convey as much of the raw information as space allows, and presents the methods through which the information was organized by the authors into four categories and 58 (assumed to be interdependent) variables.

Every year, thousands of people study family therapy in a context that is commonly called "the workshop." Many get their basic training in workshops; others use them to expand their skills. Yet, in spite of the vital role that the ubiquitous workshop plays in the primary and continuing education of family therapists, and in spite of the fact that only through empirical investigation will our understanding of continuing education progress, no rigorous effort has been placed on understanding the educational processes occurring within workshops and no methodical effort has been taken towards their evaluation. This state of affairs stands in marked contrast to our colleagues who have studied the effectiveness of continuing education for decades in medicine (e.g., Bertram & Brooks-Bertram 1977; Purkis, 1982), nursing (e.g., Henschke, 1981; Floyd, 1982), dentistry (e.g., Hertzler, Randolph, Morris, Schuchman & Wiles, 1982), and education (e.g., Ellis, Hall & Schmelzer, 1975; Baskett, 1978; Milczarek, George & Schmuck, 1976).

This paper reports the results of an exploratory study, designed to identify variables and relationships that could be hypothesized to affect the quality of family therapy workshops. As part of an ongoing line of research into workshop evaluation, this preliminary study employed an interview method to collect expert opinions about characteristic factors and requisite presenter skills for "excellent" and "terrible" workshops. Interviews were deemed appropriate as a source of the detailed and qualitative data desired from

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this project (Patton, 1984), which ultimately will be used to develop a useful instrument for evaluating continuing education events.

METHOD

Sample

The subjects for this study represented three overlapping categories of people who seemed likely to have a significant level of understanding of the qualitative characteristics of workshops. *Expert presenters* included Jill Harkaway, Bill O'Hanlon, John Walter, and Michele Weiner-Davis. *Conference coordinators* included Charles Fishman, Harold Goolishian, Florence Kaslow, Richard Simon, Diane Sollee, and Froma Walsh. *Authors and editors* of significant MFT supervision and training literature included Alan Gurman, Evan Imber-Black, Howard Liddle and Karl Tomm. All subjects have granted their permission to be identified here.

Procedure

Each of the 14 subjects of this study were initially sent an outline of the topics to be covered in the interviews, to encourage forethought about the subject matter. Next, the second author called the subjects and completed the interviews in times that ranged between 20 minutes and 135 minutes ($x = 25$ minutes), following the standardized interview schedule described below.

The first author then listened to the audiotapes of the interviews, to perform a modest check on the interviewer's consistency and clarity, to double-check the notes taken during the interview, and to transcribe substantive sections of the tapes. This was done as part of an effort to assure that the interview notes were accurate and representative of the subjects' *apparent* meanings. The final check of the authors' understanding of the subjects' *actual* meanings was made by sending copies of the manuscript to the subjects and asking them to assure that their statements were accurately represented in context.

Instrument

The interview schedule developed for this study consisted of eight open-ended items which had been pretested to eliminate ambiguities and inadequate wording. The interviewer asked clarifying questions as deemed necessary to understand subjects' answers. Subjects were asked to define excellent and terrible workshops, to list and rank 5 characteristics of excellent and terrible workshops, and to list and rank 5 behaviors of excellent and terrible presenters. Subjects were also asked to state the extent to which they believed that each of the following factors influence the evaluation of a workshop, as judged by the participants: (a) content of workshop material, (b) process or delivery of workshop, (c) characteristics of the participants (e.g., age), (d) characteristics of presenters, (e) contextual influences (e.g., room size), and (f) other. The redundancy of the items was intended to help the subjects approach their answers from different perspectives, and thereby to provide fuller answers. Similarly, items about "excellent" and "terrible" workshops approached the same qualities from opposite extremes.

RESULTS

To shape the information obtained through the interviews into interpretable form, the partially transcribed interviews were sectioned into discrete thought units, each of which was transferred onto an index card. Each card was identified by a subject's initials and an interview item number.

The 431 resulting index cards were then sorted and re-sorted four times by the authors, abandoning any reference to the interview item number in order to allow the information to transcend the interview's structure. Working together, the cards were placed in stacks to identify similar thoughts, but no effort was made to force consensus. When questions about similarity arose, the authors discussed the issue until a consensus was reached. When questions about the meaning of a statement on a card developed, the authors returned to the transcript to clarify the meaning of the subject.

Just as similarity of thoughts gave rise to stacks of index cards, patterns of thoughts suggested an organization for the data. Again, working in successive approximations, the authors gradually sorted thoughts into clusters. Not surprisingly, the final organization of the information generally reflected the organization of the interview and included content of material and context of presentation. Presenter factors were sorted into perceptual/conceptual skills and executive skills (cf. Tomm & Wright, 1979), divisions not made in the interview schedule itself. This categorization was made for clarity's sake and to accommodate the volume of information concerning presenter skills. While only two of six relevant interview questions (i.e., items 1,2,3,5,6,7) asked the subjects to identify behaviors of presenters, 87% of all thought units concerned presenter skills.

Results of the analysis are reported in the following sections. It should be mentioned that a statistical comparison of the subjects' rankings of the factors that they considered important in items 1 and 2 was abandoned early in the analysis. Responses to individual questions were so varied as to make comparison meaningless.

Presenter Perceptual and Conceptual Skills

Excellent presenters, according to the subjects, have in mind several desired outcomes for their workshops. Expressed in general terms by the subjects, excellent presenters were seen to strive to open up new possibilities, expand professional options and leave their audiences thinking. In addition, several of the subjects spoke of the value of inspiring fresh and creative approaches to problems. This inspirational component is seen to leave participants excited about their work and ready to implement the new perspective or knowledge they have developed. In Liddle's words: "I think good workshops are memorable experiences that people can draw on for some time afterwards." Fishman commented that excellent workshops have a "cognitive and emotional appeal" to audiences.

The subjects also stated that excellent presenters have an intelligent, clear understanding of the material they present. While most of the subjects mentioned the importance of knowing one's material, Gurman was more specific, adding that presenters should show their understanding of and respect for the knowledge derived from clinical psychology and psychiatry that is relevant to the material presented.

Once excellent presenters begin their workshops, they attend to systemic processes in the presenter/audience relationship, the perceptual/conceptual skill most mentioned by the subjects. Sounding true to the theoretical foundations of family therapy, several of the subjects referred to workshops as "cybernetic systems" in which excellent presenters attend to verbal and nonverbal "feedback" from the participants and adjust their presentations to intersect with the interests of the group. While lineal-thinking presenters often consider workshops to be vehicles for the "transmission of information" (Liddle), excellent presenters use questions and comments to guide their presentations. In Liddle's words:

If you're reading feedback from the system that day, and there seem to be a lot of questions asking how the material is practiced, then you have to say to yourself, "Okay, maybe this is worthwhile feedback about my emphasis thus far. Perhaps I'm overemphasizing theory and not showing enough tape."

Imber-Black discussed presenter flexibility this way:

There are times when you arrive for a workshop and things are not as you had envisioned they would be. Either the group is much bigger or much smaller, the equipment doesn't work, the family doesn't show up or you have people in the audience who are hostile—you know, anything that is not part of your plans. I think an excellent presenter has the capacity to move with that and not get thrown off, angry or defensive. It's the characteristic of a good therapist, too.

Running throughout the comments on the value of presenter responsiveness is the sense that careful judgement must regulate one's responses. Fishman stated: "The good presenter should have the same characteristics as a good therapist. Join well and observe the process, but don't allow yourself to be inducted." Kaslow observed that excellent presenters are: "flexible while staying task focused; responsive to participants' goals and participation needs while conveying and expanding upon the content originally planned." Liddle stressed the importance of judgment when he stated that: "knowing when not to deal with process issues is just as important as knowing how and when to deal with them."

On the more practical side of the subjects' responses can be found a tip on how to acquire useful feedback from the audience. Liddle reported that he has been experimenting with asking people he knows in the audience for critical input during breaks. While he considers "reading the feedback" during the workshop to provide the more reliable information about his presentation, he has found his new method a useful adjunct.

Fishman's analogy between the presenter and the therapist makes overt a pattern that generally remained silent in the data. Surprisingly, when considering how much has been written about the isomorph between training and therapy (e.g., Liddle & Saba, 1983; Liddle, in press a, b), only he and Liddle overtly discussed their beliefs that therapy can be used as a model for conducting workshops. Imber-Black alluded to the connection once, in the quote cited above.

Presenter Executive Skills

The relatively concrete executive skills of excellent presenters were detailed by the subjects in 72% of the relevant (i.e., items 1,2,3,5,6,7) thought units. Here they are divided into group leadership and teaching skills, entertainment skills, structuring skills, preparation and organizational skills, focusing skills, and other skills.

Group leadership and teaching skills. Five factors were identified as representing the skills of an excellent presenter.

1. *Clarity.* The word "clear" was used by 6 of the subjects to describe excellent workshops. This term was used to refer to enunciation, articulation, coherence, and organization of the material by the presenter.

2. *Communication of content.* Excellent presenters convey their content effectively. In Goolishian's words, they: "devise multiple ways of presenting or stating the content in terms of the variety of participants in the workshop." The subjects said little else about this issue. Perhaps they shared Liddle's view, expressed below:

Many presenters spend too much time with the content [of their workshops]. As the event approaches the less you should be oriented to the specific content and the more you should be back at the level of visualizing your overall map for the whole workshop. As in therapy, you should just be clear about your organizing principles.

3. *Inclusion of theoretical material.* Excellent workshop leaders were said to be capable of interesting their audiences in theoretical or conceptual material relevant to the practice of family therapy. In Fishman's words, this includes the "teaching of pat-

terns." In addition, theoretical and pragmatic material are best presented as connected in a "seamless" manner (Liddle), avoiding a dichotomous presentation. Harkaway, in discussing behaviors of terrible presenters warns:

One of the things I think some presenters are guilty of—particularly at this point in the development of the field—is becoming enamored of abstract concepts and not being able to make them comprehensible to the average participant. I've seen presenters improve themselves dramatically just by introducing concrete examples to illustrate complicated concepts.

4. *Presenter—audience rapport.* Excellent presenters establish and maintain rapport in the workshop room, avoiding tension between themselves and the participants and among participants. In Goolishian's words, excellent presenters "handle group process in a gentle way" and "join with their audiences rather than talking at them." Tomm adds that excellent presenters promote genuine "mutual respect which is evident in the pattern of interaction" in the workshop.

The subjects further specified that it is essential for presenters to assume a warm, polite, humane, emotionally committed, and respectful position in relation to participants. Eight of the subjects stressed the importance of humility, honesty and thoughtfulness. Such self-confident presenters are open to disagreement, invite challenges and demonstrate that they "assume that the average practitioner is experienced and can think" (Gurman).

One aspect of rapport which was specifically discussed could be termed "responsive interaction." Excellent presenters are attentive, interested, concerned, and "responsive to the needs and priorities of the audience" (Walsh). Goolishian summarized with an analogy. Excellent presenters, he said, are like great actors in that they "work the audience; move in and out with the audience."

5. *Management of questions.* Excellent presenters "invite questions and comments and respond thoughtfully and authentically" (Tomm), demonstrating their respect for the workshop participants in a nondefensive manner. The potency of this deceptively simple skill shows through in Harkaway's recollection:

I saw someone present recently who is famous—a "star" in the field—and somebody asked him a question. He stopped and he looked and he said, "You know, you're absolutely right and I never thought about it that way. It was a terrible mistake. I never realized it was such a mistake." In that moment he not only had the group with him but he was also able to use that moment to teach them both the particular content at hand, and, by analogy, how to take your mistakes and use them in therapy. It was one of the best moments I've ever seen in a workshop.

In addition, the subjects stressed the necessity of regulating the number and timing of questions. "It shouldn't be the tyranny of the few," said Fishman. Through such control, excellent presenters accomplish other ends, as described by Liddle:

I find that I try to challenge the whole group's way of thinking through one person. There are several points in a day when I will try to have an extended interaction around a question that I think is particularly common or generic. So even though you're interacting with one person, in a sense you're interacting with a lot of them. That's the same thing as therapy.

Entertainment skills. Thirteen of the subjects considered entertainment skills to be characteristic of excellent presenters. While not all the subjects shared Sollee's view that "a presenter's abilities as an 'entertainer' who will go on with the show no matter what the conditions or complications, is the most important factor," the subjects repeatedly used the words "engaging" ($n=7$), "humorous" ($n=6$), "stimulating" ($n=3$), "energetic" ($n=3$), "enthusiastic" ($n=3$), "entertaining" ($n=3$), to describe excellent presenters.

ters and "boring" ($n=9$) to describe terrible presenters. O'Hanlon, who ranked "engaging/interesting" and "humorous/fun" as the first two characteristics of an excellent workshop, explained his position as follows:

I've gone to see other people with whose content I totally disagree and if they deliver in a nice way, in a very coherent way, in a convincing way, in a humorous and entertaining way, and in an engaging way, I like the workshop even if I don't love the material.

Kaslow agreed:

Someone who is brilliant and has a dull delivery style will not get ratings as good as someone who is not so bright but has an engaging delivery style and interjects humor and provocation into the presentations.

Walter, who stated his belief that humor should not be used "at the expense of content," described his approach:

I would like to think of myself and I would like to go into a workshop as being not just humble but in some ways—I don't know—"charismatic" is too strong—but someone who can be somewhat entertaining.

When asked for the rationale behind his approach, Walter drew on communication theory, and in doing so seemed to summarize the beliefs of the subjects:

If we assume that the meaning of the message is the response we elicit, then we have to entertain and involve our audiences. Our content has to be packaged for the response.

Structuring skills. Considered important by all of the subjects, this category of skills represents the subjects' beliefs that excellent presenters manipulate the structures or formats of their workshops to improve their quality. Beyond this generalization, however, dozens of different considerations about structuring were expressed.

Sequencing of excellent workshops never begins with introductions of large audiences. Sollee offered this warning: "If there's more than five people in the room, don't go around and ask people why they're here and what they want to get out of it. It drives them insane. It wastes so much time." Instead, excellent presenters begin with a presentation of an overview of the workshop. Weiner-Davis observed that excellent presenters "first tell the audience what they're going to tell them, then they tell them, and finally they tell them what they told them." In the "tell them" segment, subjects observed that excellent presenters begin with general concepts and build on them, using specifics and examples to illustrate. While unnecessary repetition is avoided, excellent presenters keep an "overall sense of purpose" and "at most two or three broad themes" (Liddle) for each workshop. Walter stated:

[Excellent presenters have] a few things they're trying to get across to people which they rework in a variety of ways. [They] bring things down to a few basics so when people leave they say, "This is what I learned" and it is the same thing the presenter planned.

One way excellent presenters "rework" their themes is through the use of a variety of teaching methods, a factor mentioned by 5 of the subjects. These methods include lecture, discussion, experiential exercises, distribution of handouts, enactments, small group tasks, and the use of a variety of audio-visual media. Reading of papers was identified as toxic to a workshop's success by 5 subjects. People "learn by doing," reminded Walter.

Timing and pacing of workshops were mentioned as important by 3 subjects. Too much or too little material for the time frame, late starts, failure to allow time for questions, and dwelling too long on one part of the material were all considered factors that negatively affect workshop quality.

Preparation and organizational skills. All of the subjects stated that preparation and organizational skills are characteristic of excellent presenters. They disparaged those who try to "wing it" (Imber-Black), those who "come in and say, 'Well, I don't really have anything prepared, I wanted to see what you needed to know'" (Kaslow), and those who "count on their own personal charisma to carry it through" (Walsh).

Apparent organization of workshop material indicates to audiences that the presenter is well prepared. Specifically, Harkaway suggested that organization includes: "clarity of points, good transitions and a logical progression from one part of a workshop to another." Liddle, advising flexibility in organization, said that conducting an excellent workshop involves "having a structure with an ability to improvise and change the structure, not necessarily at the drop of a hat, but there must be some give and take." O'Hanlon seemed to expand on Liddle's approach concerning organizational flexibility when he stated:

I have an overview, a sense of coherence, and an outline usually. I just follow that and make it up as I go, but it looks coherent. I think it's important to present as if you actually know what's going to come next.

Focusing skills. Focusing skills are here defined as the "collective abilities to tailor a workshop for a particular audience." In Sollee's definition of an excellent workshop, she stated that presenters must "gear their workshops to the level of the audience." This feat seems to imply focused preparation, organization, and presentation skills. Fishman seemed to appreciate the difficulty of focusing a workshop for an audience when he noted that he finds "a completely heterogeneous audience a real challenge."

A corresponding skill, which is not the exclusive responsibility of presenters, involves the marketing of workshops. Here Sollee's and Kaslow's comments converged, with Sollee emphasizing that excellent presenters "do what they said they were going to do—as advertised" and Kaslow, stressing that conference coordinators must see that advertising is conservative, precise and that it identifies the target market as "general, beginning, or advanced." Not surprisingly, the image that emerges here is of a workshop that "fulfills what it is publicized to cover" (Kaslow) because of the cooperation between the presenter and the workshop's publicist.

Other skills. Included here are the various presenter skills that the authors could not fit into the above structure. These can be listed as follows: Excellent presenters fulfill their commitments to workshop sponsors, arrive on time to workshops, make themselves available for after-hours contact with sponsors and participants, correspond with sponsors in a timely manner (O'Hanlon), never start their workshops with excuses and/or complaints about time constraints, equipment, or scheduling (Sollee), and do not present methods that dehumanize clients (Gurman). Presenters offer evidence that confirms the systems paradigm (Fishman), and provide audience members with "an opportunity to clarify their clinical epistemologies" (Liddle). Finally, in Fishman's words:

In the same way the therapy that is presented (in the workshop) needs to show characters in change, the workshop itself has to have characters in change. There needs to be increasing complexity. In other words, in the same way you want to see family members change in therapy, there must be a change in the audience and in the presenter in terms of increasing complexity.

Content of Material

While the subjects spoke more about what presenters should *do* than what they should *say*, they discussed several aspects of the content of excellent workshops. The content should be practical, relevant to the audience, and should include concrete examples and case illustrations. The subjects described excellent content as featuring

new, well thought-out ideas, and as being informative, challenging, original, and innovative.

The majority of the subjects discussed the inclusion of videotapes in the content of excellent workshops. At a time when "too many presenters use videotapes in ways that are superfluous" (Harkaway), the subjects insisted that videotapes be of good technical quality, carefully and not overly edited, appropriately introduced, and be shown for a specific reason. Sollee stated a common sentiment as follows:

The mere presence of video is not a characteristic of a good workshop even in this discipline where we are so dependent on video. Workshop evaluations discriminate very strongly between those who just show a lot of videos and those who use videos to illustrate. Not having A.V. is better than having poor A.V.

In Liddle's words, "workshop leaders have to have a very clear sense of why they are showing that particular tape, in that workshop, on that day, to those people."

Several of the subjects also discussed the inclusion of live demonstration interviews of clients in workshops. Tomm warned that therapeutic issues must always be given priority over training issues to prevent exploitation and "to minimize issues of showmanship" whenever live interviews are used. Imber-Black shared Tomm's concern but resolved it differently:

One of the things that makes me very nervous about live family interviews within a workshop context is the lack of understanding that it is a training context and not a therapy context. You have to know how to let the family and the audience know that. It's a different kind of intervention with people that has to do with performance and with training.

Fishman seemed to take the strongest stand on live interviews when he stated that they can be "both disrespectful and even harmful to families." Fishman accepts live interviews only when they provide consultation to on-going therapy.

Context of the Workshop

The final category of factors that affect the quality of workshops includes a variety of contextual influences that have been known to frustrate and challenge the best presenters. Generally, the subjects seemed to relegate contextual influences (e.g., room size, temperature, audibility) to the bottom of the list of influential factors with statements like these:

After monitoring a thousand workshops and reading the evaluations, I know that the context just doesn't make that much difference. A great presenter with great content can override water coming through the ceiling, overcrowding, or malfunctioning equipment. (Sollee)

I did a workshop recently in the dark; the power at the hotel failed. So we divided into small groups and held part of it with 20 people crowded into my hotel room. The evaluations—I saw them at the end of the workshop—said "This is the worst facility I have ever been to, I'd never come to another workshop here again and the content was great, I loved it." (O'Hanlon)

Other subjects seemed to focus their concerns about contextual influences on the manner through which they are best controlled. As Kaslow stated:

It is the conference coordinator's responsibility to see that workshops start and end on time, audio-visual equipment corresponds to the presenter's needs, seating is comfortable, and that the room is the proper temperature and is properly illuminated.

Audience size also concerned the subjects, several of whom expressed their opinions that workshops should be kept small enough to allow active involvement of the participants; others thought that optimal size depends on the topic and the presenter.

The final contextual influence on workshop quality discussed by a subject suggests that a wider lens is necessary to see the nature of contextual influence on workshop quality. Some contextual issues affect the presenter, said Kaslow:

The conference coordinator should always extend a personal welcome to the presenter. Making the presenter comfortable in the community where the workshop will occur can have a considerable impact on the presenter's mindset and mood.

Thus, context factors that directly relate only to presenters can be seen to impinge on workshop quality.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The study described here was conducted to identify variables which can be hypothesized to interact with the quality of family therapy workshops. The qualitative information that resulted from the interviews, and was subsequently organized by the authors, suggests that perceptual and executive skills of presenters, content and context all must be considered when evaluating these essential continuing education events. More specifically, the authors identified 58 variables from the responses of the experts who served as subjects in this investigation. In general, the authors observed an unexpected degree of consensus among the subjects, in spite of their different perspectives on workshops, and their varied theoretical orientations, work settings, and experience levels as workshop presenters. Perhaps even more—and certainly more measurable—consensus would be obtained with the use of a more structured type of inquiry (e.g., fixed alternative items on a questionnaire).

It must not be assumed that the variables identified through this study are independent. In Liddle's words: "They're interdependent; they should not be hierarchically ranked, but seen as conceptual subsystems that are related to each other." Similarly, when asked to rank five characteristics he had just listed, Fishman said:

I really don't want to rank them. They all describe what's essential for a good workshop. Any one of them if sufficiently inadequate, could cancel out the others. It's like baking a cake with one bad ingredient.

Additionally, several of the subjects argued that the relative importance of variables is contextual, while others stated that such factors as the goals of the presentation and the size of the audience affect the relative importance of the variables.

Nevertheless, it seems to the authors that further investigation of the interdependence and context dependence of the variables identified through this study is warranted. A lengthy pilot instrument for assessing workshop quality, as seen by participants, is being developed. When it has been administered to a sufficient number of people in a variety of situations, a standard factor analytic sequence will be followed to distill increasingly succinct and useful evaluation instruments. A second instrument, which assesses workshop quality as seen by presenters, is also in development. In time, these tools will allow for the cautious assessment of continuing education events and will provide information which may be used for the improvement of presenters' skills. According to Walsh, family therapy workshop audiences—which many believe to be diminishing in size—are ready for this development:

Until recently, if the main reason an audience attended a workshop was to see a superstar, they would sit in a hot room without doughnuts and coffee—or even significant program

content—and not complain. Now, however, there are signs that this is changing. Audiences are demanding high quality presentations from every presenter.

Indeed, as audiences change in their expectations, the leadership of the field of family therapy is increasingly aware of the central role that workshops play in the advance of our discipline. When this awareness is combined with an improved understanding of the processes working within workshops and tools for their evaluation and improvement, a qualitative improvement in our profession will have been made.

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