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THE EXPERIENCE OF PSYCHOLOGY PARAPROFESSIONALS: VIEWS OF PEER COUNSELORS AND PEER EDUCATORS

by

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The Experience of Psychology Paraprofessionals: Views of Peer Counselors and Peer Educators

Heather L. Edgel

This study was conducted to examine the experience of students as paraprofessionals in psychology. 102 peer counselors/educators from 10 universities across America were sampled. The research data generated was descriptive in nature. Paraprofessionals rated experience satisfaction and expressed opinions regarding their involvement in peer counseling and peer educating programs.
INTRODUCTION

Utilizing paraprofessionals is a growing trend in America. Today, paraprofessionals can be found in nearly every field (Cohen, 1976). This practice is on the rise for a number of sound reasons. Paraprofessionals have proven themselves cost efficient and result effective. The availability of paraprofessionals can compensate for a shortage of workers with higher degrees. Often a paraprofessional can be trained to carry out aspects of the professional's job which are time consuming and less specialized.

Psychology is a field in which the use of paraprofessionals has great promise (Grosser, Henry, & Kelly, 1971). Realizing their usefulness, many universities have begun using the resource of paraprofessionals. Psychological programming, educating and counseling have become areas in which students are involved. Students most frequently take on the role of a "peer counselor" or a "peer educator" when working in psychology.

A peer counselor serves as a trained yet empathetic ear to clients who may not warrant the time of a busy professional (Christensen, & Jacobsen, 1994). Often university counseling centers are flooded with prospective clients because of their free or low cost services to students. Peer counselors are therapeutic aides who assist clients with issues like social skills, adjustment, depression, coping, problem solving, behavior modification and eating disorders (Lenihan, & Kirk, 1990).

Peer educators prepare and present programming which informs and educates their fellow students. These paraprofessionals serve as educating liaisons regarding such issues as drug and alcohol awareness, rape prevention, stress management and mental health. Just as peer counselors do, peer educators provide a service that faculty alone would not have time nor resources to support. The peers' availability to the other students adds to the quality of help that can be given and knowledge that can be shared (Schoenfeld, 1974).
Clearly, paraprofessional students in psychology are effective for both the university and the students they serve. Student paraprofessionals in psychology can benefit a university's faculty and student body. Psychology paraprofessionals carry out a variety of jobs and services that the university's faculty and finances would not otherwise be able to cover (Harvey, & Passy, 1981).

Despite their usefulness, few peer counseling and peer educating programs exist in the university setting. Using students as psychology paraprofessionals is still a relatively new concept. Studies have described peer counseling/educating programs such as these, yet little is known about the paraprofessionals themselves. I searched extensively, but found no existing research regarding the student's experience in his/her capacity as a peer counselor/educator. As a result of this, my study describes students' experiences as paraprofessionals in psychology from their own viewpoint. The research generated is strictly descriptive because of the newness of this topic. This study is an overview of the peer counselor's and peer educator's experience.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The primary purposes of this study are: (1) to investigate students' paraprofessional experiences in psychology based on the following areas: <a> program, <b> peer group, and <c> personal experience; (2) to examine the relationship these areas have with paraprofessionals' satisfaction levels.

**METHOD**

_Sample_

102 college students working as peer counselors or peer educators through university programs participated in this study. The sample was gathered from the counseling and education programs of 10 universities which utilized peers in operation.
peer counseling programs and 5 peer educating programs were surveyed. 7 programs consisting of 12 students and 3 programs consisting of 6 students were considered in final analysis.

Due to the scarcity of these programs, sampling could not be random. In order to gather an acceptable sample size I worked with every school which had qualifying programs and would cooperate in having their paraprofessionals surveyed.

The surveyed students were reached through a variety of means. The Association of University and College Counseling Center Director's roster was reviewed and 200 directors were contacted. Several peer counseling and peer educating programs were located through those means. I was referred to Mr. Mark Thompson of Hamilton College who gathers information on counseling centers. He was able to search his data base and refer me to more programs which used students as psychology paraprofessionals. Finally, referrals from my numerous contacts through the AUCCCD led me to the remaining programs I surveyed.

**Procedures**

After locating a suitable program I would confirm cooperation from its director. If the director would agree to distribute, collect and return the surveys, I would then mail the appropriate number of questionnaires to each program. The surveys were returned in a self-addressed stamped packet which I provided to each director.

A total of 235 questionnaires were sent out. The return rate was roughly 50%. At random I took 6 questionnaires from the 3 smaller programs and 12 questionnaires from the 7 larger programs. Final analysis is based on 102 completed and returned surveys. Data was entered and managed through the Excel spreadsheet program. All figures/graphs are based on N=102.

**Measures**

Appendix 1 is a copy of the survey administered. To understand the peer educator/counselor's relations with the group they worked within questions 1-3 were
asked. The paraprofessional's views of their program's structure were gauged with questions 4-9. The paraprofessional's personal experience, including satisfaction and opinions, was explored with questions 10-15. Appendix 2 displays the raw data.

RESULTS

Demographics

Figure 1 depicts the class make up of the 102 students surveyed. The class rank distribution shows that 31% of those sampled were juniors, making them the majority of participants. Seniors at 29% of the total participants were nearly as prevalent in peer counseling and peer educating programs.

Figure 1

![Class Rank Distribution](image)

Figure 2

![Gender Distribution](image)

Figure 2 shows the large majority of the 102 paraprofessional students to be female, at 73%. Males held only 27% of the positions surveyed.

From the 10 programs which consented to having their peer programs surveyed, seven were private and three were public.

Figure 3 describes how many hours per month were spent by the 102 students participating in these programs as paraprofessionals in psychology. It seems most of the students, 45%, spent between 6-10 hours per month working in their programs. 17% of the students spent 21 hours or more per month involved with psychology programming.
This was the highest category of time expenditure. On the low end of the time investment spectrum were 15% of the students surveyed. This group invested only one to five hours monthly into their programs.

![Hours Spent per Month Distribution](image)

![Overall Satisfaction Distribution](image)

To get a glimpse of what is to come in greater detail, Figure 4 illustrates paraprofessionals' overall satisfaction distribution. Students were given choices to rate their overall satisfaction. A scale from 1 to 5 was given; 1=unacceptable, 2=unsatisfying, 3=Neutral, 4=satisfying, 5=very satisfying. Apparently 50% of the students found their experience to be "satisfying". 45% of the other students rated their overall satisfaction as "very satisfying". The remaining 5% of the students rated their experience to be "neutral".

**Program**

Peer counseling and peer educating programs vary in structure from school to school. This section will examine how programs differed in organization and what relationship these variations had with the peer’s experience.

Each school’s program trained their paraprofessionals differently, based on the specific duties the peer counselor/educator would carry out. Only 1 school of the 10 surveyed did not have a training period for their paraprofessionals. Regarding the training that 90% of the peers surveyed did receive, the opinions were nearly unanimous. An overwhelming 99% of peers who received training reported it to be useful.
Two sizes of paraprofessional counseling and educating programs were sampled. Programs were considered to be large when having 8-15 students involved. Programs were considered to be small when having 2-7 students involved.

Figure 5 depicts average satisfaction ratings based on the program size at the school the subject attended. Small schools/programs had only 2.3% less satisfaction than large schools/programs. Clearly the program size had little relationship with the satisfaction level of the paraprofessional.

The selection process for picking peer counselors/educators differs from school to school. Some programs require extensive applications and interviews while others accept any student who volunteers. Figure 6 demonstrates most of the 102 peers surveyed (both public and private) felt prerequisites of their program to be "somewhat demanding".

With a closer look we can see a difference in prerequisite difficulty rating based on school type. Using a 100% basis for both the total public and private samples, a disparity can be noted in their assessment of prerequisites. Figure 6 demonstrates that proportionally speaking, more public students consider prerequisites to be "very demanding" than do private students. 13% of peers attending public schools reported the prerequisites of their program to be "very demanding" while only 5% of peers attending private schools indicated likewise.
Another comparison of peers' viewpoints based on public and private schools can be made on the basis of overall satisfaction rate. Figure 7 depicts average satisfaction by school type. The average satisfaction levels were based on the 1-5 satisfaction scale which was previously mentioned. The average satisfaction level for peers involved with private schools was at 4.35%. This level was at 4.61% for peers involved with public schools. Public programs turned out slightly more satisfied (6%) paraprofessionals than did private programs.

In continuing the examination of the program's relationship to paraprofessional's satisfaction levels, a number of relationships will be explored. Psychology paraprofessional's overall satisfaction levels will now be compared to faculty rating (Figure 8), length of commitment (Figure 9), hours invested per month (Figure 10) and prerequisite difficulty level (Figure 11).

By comparing the same subject's overall satisfaction level and their rating of faculty, a sectioned bar graph could be formed (Figure 8). This graph shows 59% of paraprofessionals who rated their faculty as "excellent" also reported themselves to be "very satisfied" with their experience. Only 24% of the students who rated their
faculty as "good" rated their themselves to be "very satisfied" with their experience. As the ratings of faculty go downward, so does the percentage of "very satisfied" overall experience reports. Hence there is clearly a positive relationship between paraprofessional's ratings of faculty support and their overall satisfactions levels.

Psychology paraprofessionals commit to programs for different lengths of time. The length of a peer counselor's/educator's commitment seems to impact satisfaction levels. Figure 9 demonstrates that the majority of peer counselors and peer educators (80 of the 102) were committed to their respective programs for one year. 51% of the one year commitment samples reported themselves to be "very satisfied" concerning their overall experience. Only 33% of the students committed for 2 years reported themselves to be "very satisfied" with their experience. The majority of students with the commitment lengths of 2 years, 3 years or 1 term (quarter or semester) reported being merely "satisfied" with their experience. The paraprofessionals with a one year commitment were the most satisfied overall with their experience.

Extending on the time investment facet, average satisfaction rating was compared to hours spent per month. Figure 10 shows that psychology paraprofessionals in the 16-20 hours spent per month category were the most satisfied, averaging 4.67 on a satisfaction scale of 5. Those peer counselors and educators who expended the most time were included in the 21 hours or more per month category. These more involved
Paraprofessionals 9

Average Overall Satisfaction Rating by Hours Spent per Month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hours Spent</th>
<th>Average Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-5 Hrs</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 Hrs</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 Hrs</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20 Hrs</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21+ Hrs</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10

Paraprofessionals experienced 8% less satisfaction than those peers spending 16-20 hours per month. Therefore, more time invested does not increase the peer's satisfaction level. Proving this point, the satisfaction level of peers spending 11-15 hours per month was roughly equivalent to those peers spending 21 or more hours.

A program's criterion for accepting students varies. This comparison examines how the difficulty of prerequisites is related to overall satisfaction levels. Figure 11 demonstrates that a paraprofessional program with "somewhat demanding" prerequisites also renders the students with the highest levels of satisfaction. 51% of the students who reported their programs to have "somewhat difficult" prerequisites also reported themselves to be "very satisfied" overall. Only 30% of the students from "not demanding" and 37% of the students from "very demanding" prerequisite categories reported themselves to be "very satisfied". So it can be said programs with prerequisites which are not demanding turn out
the fewest “very satisfied” peer counselors/educators. Surprisingly, programs with prerequisites which are “very demanding” turn out the highest percentage (13%) of peers reporting “neutral” experiences.

**Peers**

Peer counselors/educators who work within the same program often influence each other’s experiences. This section will investigate how paraprofessional peer groups, coworkers of sorts, are related to satisfaction levels of the peer counselor/educator.

The frequency of interaction among paraprofessionals has an unexpected effect on their cohesion. Naturally one would assume that more interaction in a group would result in higher levels of cohesion. This research does not support that assumption. Figure 12 shows that the highest cohesion levels are found in peer groups that interact "sometimes" rather than "often" or "always". In fact, not a single student of those who report interaction frequency to be "always" also reported group cohesion to be "high".

Ratings of group cohesion appear to be positively related to ratings of peers, as shown in Figure 13. Considering those who gave a "very high" peer rating, 68% in turn rated group cohesion...
level to be "high". With diminished ratings of peers came diminished ratings of group cohesion. 60% of those paraprofessionals who rated their peers overall as "high", (4 on scale of 5) also rated group cohesion to be "average". The cohesion of a peer group appears to be related to how students rate their peers.

Satisfaction of the paraprofessional is positively related to his/her ratings of peers. Figure 14 depicts peer counselors'/educators' overall satisfaction levels compared with their rating of peers. Of those who rate their peers "very high", 75% are also "very satisfied" regarding their overall experience. Of those paraprofessionals who rate their peers as "high", The majority (59%) also report themselves to be "satisfied" with their experience overall. The percentage of students who reported being "very satisfied" with their paraprofessional experiences declines consistently with each lower rating category of their peers.

**Personal**

The third aspect of the peer counseling/educating experience to be examined is the personal experience. Psychology paraprofessionals have different personal experiences, characteristics and opinions. Each peer's service will be different as will be the various aspects of it. This section reports on the individual differences and feelings regarding the experience of a peer counselor/educator.
Gender is an important variable in this study. This research has recognized a significant correlation between overall satisfaction levels and gender. As demonstrated in Figure 15 the average satisfaction level is considerably higher for the female paraprofessional than the male paraprofessional. Overall satisfaction was averaged to be 4.49 on a scale of 5.0 for females. This rating averaged 4.21 for males, manifesting a 6% lower satisfaction than females.

Class rank is another characteristic of peer counselors/educators which varies from person to person. Data generated for this research indicates class rank has a relationship with satisfaction levels. Figure 16 shows the majority of freshmen (67%) and sophomores (54%) to be "very satisfied" overall with their experience as peer counselors/educators. Comparatively speaking, the majority of juniors and seniors were not as satisfied. 63% of juniors and 50% of seniors reported themselves to be merely "satisfied" with their
paraprofessional experience. Graduate students proved to be more satisfied with peer counseling/educating, 50% stated being "very satisfied".

Peer counselors/educators dedicate many hours of effort into their programs. One may ask why they do what they do. When paraprofessionals were asked their favorite aspect of being involved with the peer counseling or peer educating programs a variety of answers ensued (Figure 17). 42% of peers reported some "social" factor to be their favorite aspect of involvement with peer counseling/educating. Meeting people and working with faculty and other peer counselors/educators was the favorite single aspect of psychology paraprofessionalism. The next most popular answer to paraprofessional's favorite aspect of involvement was "altruism". 25% of paraprofessionals reported helping others to be their favorite part of the program. Very few students (4%) indicated the organization they worked within to be their favorite aspect of being a peer counselor/educator.

Every position has its downfalls and paraprofessionalism is no exception. Peers were asked their least favorite aspect of being involved with the counseling or educating. Figure 18 illustrates the answers given. 37% of students did not report a least favorite aspect of their experience. The remaining 67% of students did state an aspect which was unfavorable. Time related demands accounted for 49% of the unfavorable aspects mentioned. Apparently the programs psychology paraprofessionals work in demand lots
(perhaps too much) of their time. Other least favorite aspects that were named were concerns about program effectiveness, interpersonal problems and program organization.

Peer counseling/educating offers the psychology paraprofessional many benefits. Diagrammed in Figure 19 are some of the most valuable things peer counselors/educators report gaining from their experience. The most popular answer was "knowledge." 28% of the peer counselors/educators reported knowledge to be the most valuable thing they gained from their experience. Learning information or facts and gaining new awareness was rated as "knowledge".

"Skill" was the second most popular answer to this question, at 24%. The "skill" category includes acquiring people skills, conducting educational presentations, learning how to listen effectively and other such abilities.

15% of peer counselors/educators saw "experience" as the most valuable thing they gained from being peer counselors or peer educators. Working in psychological services
and programming was viewed as the major advantage of being a paraprofessional for these students.

Other most valuable gains peer counselors/educators mentioned included responsibility, teamwork, campus involvement, leadership, altruism and social interaction.

Overall, the peer counseling and peer educating experience was reported favorably by the paraprofessionals involved. A negative experience was not reported once among the 102 peer counselors/educators surveyed. To recap, 45% of these peer counselors/educators found the experience to be "very satisfying". Half of the paraprofessionals surveyed rated their experience to be "satisfying". Only 5% of peer counselors/educators viewed their involvement as a "neutral" experience. No peer surveyed reported their experience to be "unsatisfying" or "unacceptable". These disparaging ratings were offered, yet not a single student chose them

**SUMMARY/CONCLUSION**

The data collected from this research tells us something about the peer counselor/educator profile. The majority of sampled students working as peer counselors/educators through university programs were women. The most common class rank was found to be junior status. On the majority peers were committed for one year and spent from 6-10 hours per month involved with paraprofessional activities.

Views of these peer counselors and peer educators collectively pointed to a few helpful aspects for faculty to consider when assessing their program's structure. Overwhelmingly, peers found the training they received to be useful. A program's size had no significant relationship to the peer's overall satisfaction level. Paraprofessionals involved with programs run through public schools reported their experience slightly more favorably than did students involved with private programs.

Faculty was found to play a key role in the experience of a peer counselor/educator. Students' assessments of their supervising faculty were related to their overall satisfaction.
The more favorably a paraprofessional rated his/her faculty the higher satisfaction he/she experienced.

The most peer counselors/educators reported being satisfied in programs which had "somewhat demanding" prerequisites. More competition and difficulty in acquiring positions does not equate to more satisfaction for the psychology paraprofessional.

A psychology paraprofessional’s rating of his/her peers was found to be related to his/her overall satisfaction level. Satisfaction peaked for peer counselors/educators who viewed their peers the most favorably.

Most peer counselors/educators reported their favorite aspect of involvement to be for social and altruistic reasons. Their least favorite part of the paraprofessional experience was the high demands on their time. Finally, the most valuable things peer counselors/educators saw themselves gaining from their experience was knowledge, skill and experience.

This research indicates that many factors can influence the experience of a peer counselor/educator. It can be concluded that paraprofessionals’ satisfaction levels are related to various aspects their program and peer group. Peer counselors/educators had a variety of experiences, but overall they found their experiences to be satisfying and beneficial.
Bibliography


Sex: Female Male
Class Standing: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate
Type of College: Public Private

1. How would you rate the level of cohesion among the peer group you worked in?
   A) High B) Average C) Low

2. How often do you work together with the other peers?
   A) Always B) Often C) Sometimes D) Seldom E) Never

3. Please rate others in your peer group based on the following factors by circling a number.
   None--- Little---Acceptable--High---Very High
   a) Enthusiasm 1 2 3 4 5
   b) Cooperation 1 2 3 4 5
   c) Friendliness 1 2 3 4 5
   d) Competence 1 2 3 4 5
   e) Participation Level 1 2 3 4 5
   f) Overall 1 2 3 4 5

4. How would you rate the faculty support in this program?
   A) Excellent B) Good C) Average D) Poor E) Unacceptable

5. How demanding were the prerequisites necessary to hold a position in this program?
   A) Very Demanding B) Somewhat Demanding C) Not Demanding

6. What is the length of your commitment to this program?
   A) One Quarter/Semester B) One Academic Year C) Other

7. Do you feel the training you received was useful?
   A) Yes B) No If no, why?

8. How many hours per month do you spend involved with this program?

9. How many hours of training did you receive?

10. Estimate the number of clients/students you help per month through this program.

11. Do you have any suggestions regarding this program’s use of peers?

12. What is the most valuable thing you are gaining from your involvement in this program?

13. What is your favorite part of being involved with this program?

14. What is your least favorite part of being involved with this program?

15. Overall, how would you rate your experience in this program?
   A) Very Satisfying B) Satisfying C) Neutral D) Unsatisfying E) Unacceptable