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## Effectiveness of the Counselor Feedback Training Model

Jacqueline M. Swank

*University of Florida*, [jswank@coe.ufl.edu](mailto:jswank@coe.ufl.edu)

Shannon McCarthy

*University of Alabama at Birmingham*, [smcc@uab.edu](mailto:smcc@uab.edu)

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## Effectiveness of the Counselor Feedback Training Model

### Abstract

The Counselor Feedback Training Model (CFTM) was designed to explore beliefs about feedback and develop feedback skills. This study examined the effectiveness of using the CFTM with beginning counseling students ( $N = 68$ ). The researchers found that students' self-efficacy and openness to feedback improved following participation in the CFTM.

### Keywords

counselor development, feedback, training, competency

### Author's Notes

Jacqueline M. Swank, and Shannon N. McCarthy, School of Human Development and Organizational Studies in Education, University of Florida. Shannon N. McCarthy is now at Department of Human Studies, University of Alabama at Birmingham. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to:

Jacqueline M. Swank, School of Human Development and Organizational Studies in Education, College of Education, University of Florida, 1215 Norman Hall, PO Box 117046, Gainesville FL 32611. Telephone: 352-273-4326. Email: [jswank@coe.ufl.edu](mailto:jswank@coe.ufl.edu)

Feedback “conveys information about a behavior that has occurred and influences the likelihood and nature of its reoccurrence” (Claiborn & Goodyear, 2005, p. 210). Counseling students continuously engage in the feedback process throughout their preparation program by exchanging ideas about professional growth and development. Specifically, students receive feedback from instructors and their peers throughout their training. Additionally, when entering their clinical experience (i.e., practicum and internship), students receive feedback from their supervisors and their clients. Counseling students are also expected to provide feedback to their instructors, supervisors, colleagues, and clients throughout their training experience. Therefore, it is crucial for counseling students to reflect upon their previous experiences with giving and receiving feedback, explore their thoughts and feelings about the feedback process, and develop knowledge and skills in giving and receiving feedback.

Developing skills in giving and receiving feedback may also assist counseling students in becoming reflective practitioners. Through the feedback process, students learn to identify their colleagues’ strengths and areas for growth and communicate this information to their peers. Additionally, students increase their self-awareness by reflecting upon feedback they receive and using it to critically analyze their own strengths and areas for improvement. Thus, students become engaged and take ownership in the learning process (McKimm, 2009).

### **Feedback Types and Preferences**

Feedback has four central features (descriptive, evaluative, emotional, and interpretive) that a sender can use separately or together to deliver feedback to another individual (Claiborn & Goodyear, 2005). Descriptive feedback involves an account or description of the behavior. Evaluative feedback critiques an individual’s behavior. Emotional response is related to the feedback sender’s feelings about the behavior demonstrated by the receiver. Finally, the interpretive aspect may help the receiver develop awareness and insight by providing an

interpretation of behavior (Claiborn & Goodyear, 2005). When engaging in the feedback process, it is also important to consider the integration of positive and negative feedback. Positive feedback focuses on identifying strengths, is used to reinforce behavior (Toth & Erwin, 1998), and communicates to the receiver that a behavior has met a specified standard (Claiborn & Goodyear, 2005). In contrast, an individual uses negative feedback to communicate that a behavioral standard has not been met (Claiborn & Goodyear, 2005). The term *corrective* or *constructive* feedback is often used instead of *negative* feedback to clarify that *negative* feedback does not mean that it is delivered with harsh intentions or that it will be received negatively (Claiborn & Goodyear, 2005). Within this article, we use the terms corrective and constructive feedback interchangeably, as this is the practice in the existing literature.

When presenting either positive or constructive feedback without the other, the receiver obtains a skewed view of his or her performance. A focus on only constructive feedback may create resistance to change (Claiborn & Goodyear, 2005; Toth & Erwin, 1998). Constructive feedback may reduce some unwanted behaviors; however, it also creates anxiety and may inhibit a student's ability to be open to feedback in the future (King, 1999). Additionally, an emphasis on only positive feedback fails to address concerns and is unlikely to lead to self-awareness and reflection on areas for improvement (Toth & Erwin, 1998).

In examining the use of feedback during group supervision, Coleman, Kivlighan, and Roehlke (2009) found that students preferred positive feedback. Students were also more likely to provide feedback that addressed the group leader's technical skills, instead of focusing on the leader's personal skills (i.e., ability to connect with group members). Additionally, Daniels and Larson (2001) found that positive feedback increased self-efficacy and decreased anxiety among counseling students, while corrective feedback decreased self-efficacy and increased anxiety. However, in assessing the effectiveness of the feedback sandwich (positive feedback, followed

by constructive feedback, and finally providing additional positive feedback) among medical students, Parkes, Abercrombie, and McCarty (2013) found that the use of substantial positive feedback may hinder students' ability to critically evaluate their performance by sending mixed messages regarding performance and minimizing the significance of the constructive feedback. Thus, it appears that the integration of positive feedback may assist students with being more open to the feedback process, including the use of constructive feedback (Coleman, Kivlighan, & Roehlke, 2009) by helping them increase their self-efficacy as a counselor and decrease their anxiety (Daniels & Larson, 2001); however, this may not improve performance (Parkes et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the best outcome may result from balancing positive and constructive feedback in order to promote satisfaction while also encouraging change (Boehler et al., 2006).

Heckman-Stone (2003) examined master's and doctoral level counseling and psychology students' feedback preferences and found that students wanted an open and positive relationship with their supervisor and agreed-upon goals. Additionally, students reported that they wanted balanced, accurate, frequent and immediate, and clear and specific feedback. Furthermore, in examining supervisor feedback, Hayman (1981) found that counseling students ( $N = 64$ ) learned counseling skills best when they received feedback from their peers and critically analyzed their own performance in comparison to supervisor feedback. Thus, receiving feedback from peers, in addition to supervisors, is helpful in fostering counseling students' self-awareness and promoting growth and development.

Although it is important for counseling students to engage in the feedback process with each other, students may struggle with giving each other clear and specific constructive feedback. Feelings of discomfort may relate to lack of experience with the feedback process. In addition, students' cultural, family, and religious beliefs may have taught them that offering constructive feedback is being "negative" and that they should instead be encouraging to each

other (Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1994). Therefore, counseling students need opportunities to explore their beliefs about feedback and to develop a level of comfort and confidence in giving and receiving feedback with each other.

### **Counseling Ethical and Accreditation Standards Related to Feedback**

The feedback process is a crucial component of counselor preparation that is emphasized within the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) *Code of Ethics*. The *Code of Ethics* addresses the importance of using the feedback process throughout the counselor preparation program, which includes feedback given by counselor educators (Standard F.9.a.) and supervisors (Standard F.6.a.). Additionally, the *Code of Ethics* addresses the importance of self-awareness (i.e., Standard C.2.a.), and the feedback process may assist with enhancing this area of development (Toth & Erwin, 1998). Thus, skill in giving and receiving feedback is essential for ethical counseling professionals.

The feedback process is also highlighted within the accreditation standards for counseling programs. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) *Standards* address the importance of the feedback process within counselor preparation. This includes feedback from counselor educators throughout the program (Section I: Evaluation AA.4.) and supervisors during the clinical experiences component (Section III: Practicum F.5.; Section III: Internship G.6.) of counselor preparation. Additionally, students are encouraged to provide feedback to the program about the faculty teaching their coursework and the supervisors of their clinical experiences (Section I: Evaluation BB.). Thus, counseling students need skills in giving and receiving positive and constructive feedback to assist them in their growth and development throughout the counselor preparation program.

The process of giving and receiving feedback is acknowledged within the literature (Coleman, Kivlighan, & Roehlke, 2009; Daniels & Larson, 2001; Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1994),

counseling ethical code (ACA, 2014), and accreditation standards (CACREP, 2009) as a crucial area for the growth and development of counseling students. Additionally, researchers emphasize the importance of balancing positive and constructive feedback (Coleman et al., 2009; Daniels & Larson, 2001). Therefore, a need exists for having an effective method to teach counseling students how to give and receive feedback and to offer them opportunities to practice the feedback process. Thus, the purpose of this article is to examine the effectiveness of the Counselor Feedback Training Model (CFTM). The training model is grounded within three theories: (a) Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, (b) developmental theory drawing from Stoltenberg's (1981) Integrated Developmental Model (IDM) for supervision, and (c) behavioral theory. It is designed to help students (a) develop self-efficacy with giving and receiving feedback through learning feedback skills, and (b) examine their beliefs and values about feedback. There were two research questions in this study. The first research question was: Is there a difference in beginning counseling students' self-efficacy with the feedback process following completion of the CFTM? The second research question was: Is there a difference in beginning counseling students' beliefs about the feedback process following completion of the CFTM?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The targeted population for this study consisted of counseling students from a CACREP-accredited program who were enrolled in their first semester of courses in a master's level preparation program. Students were selected for the study at this point in their preparation program because the researchers advocate for teaching feedback skills early in the program to assist students in their growth and development throughout their training. Additionally, the students who participated in the study attend a counselor training program that requires students

to take a counseling skills class during their first semester of the program and feedback skills are considered crucial when developing basic counseling skills.

The 68 participants were from a large state university located in the southeastern part of the United States who were admitted to a CACREP-accredited master's level counseling program during a two-year period. There were 57 females and 11 males who participated in the study. The age range of the participants was 20-35, with 81% being in the 25 or younger age group. The reported race or ethnicity was 5 (7%) African American, 2 (3%) Asian, 1 (2%) Biracial, 49 (72%) Caucasian, 9 (13%) Latino/a, and 2 (3%) Other. Of the students indicating program specialty area, 25 (37%) marriage and family, 28 (41%) reported mental health, 13 (19%) school, and 1 (2%) both mental health and school.

## **Procedures**

Following approval from the institutional review board (IRB), the researchers facilitated the CFTM intervention with new master's level students who were enrolled in their first semester of a counselor preparation program. The training was conducted three times during a 2-year period. During the first year, the new students were divided into two groups (depending on their course schedule) and received the training in these groupings. The training was offered only once during the second year; and therefore, all the new students in the second year attended the training together. Students were required to participate in the training workshop; however, they had the opportunity to decide not to participate in the study and therefore not complete the assessments, except for the CFI-R that was used to facilitate a discussion on beliefs and values about feedback. All the students agreed to participate in the study. The researchers administered three instruments (demographic questionnaire, CFSI, and CFI-R), as described below, prior to the training and then administered the assessments again following the training, except for the demographic questionnaire.



## **Instruments**

**Demographic questionnaire.** At the beginning of the research study, the counseling student participants were given a demographic questionnaire that included items related to gender, age, race or ethnicity, and program area specialty. Additionally, participants were asked if they had ever received feedback in a professional setting and if they had, to explain the setting. They were also asked to define feedback and identify whether they preferred to receive verbal or written feedback. Finally, participants had the opportunity to identify whether they thought positive or constructive feedback was most helpful, or if they viewed both as equally helpful.

**Corrective Feedback Self-Efficacy Instrument (CFSI).** The CFSI (Page & Hulse-Killacky (2008) was developed to measure counseling students' self-efficacy in giving corrective feedback within a group context. The instrument has 16 items with a 6-point Likert response format. The instrument has two factors: (a) therapeutic efficacy (.77 - .86), and (b) fears efficacy (.73 - .88). The internal consistency for the total instrument was .84 - .93. The test-retest reliability for the total instrument was .74. Finally, the total instrument demonstrated strong convergent validity with the microskills factor (.44) and the process factor (.30) of the Counselor Self-Estimate Inventory (COSE, Larson et al., 1992). The entire instrument was used for data collection in this study. The internal consistency, for this study, was .82 for the total instrument, .79 for the therapeutic efficacy factor, and .85 for the fears efficacy factor.

**Corrective Feedback Instrument-Revised (CFI-R).** The CFI-R (Hulse-Killacky, Orr, & Paradise, 2006) is a 30-item instrument with a 6-point Likert response scale. The instrument was revised from the CFI, which was developed to assist counselor educators in facilitating discussions about giving and receiving feedback with counseling students. There are six factors within the CFI-R: (a) leader (.92), (b) feeling (.85), (c) evaluative (.89), (d) childhood memories (.91), (e) written feedback (.91), and (f) clarifying (.87). The internal consistency reliability for

the total instrument was .92. In regards to validity, the researchers engaged in various processes when developing the CFI (e.g., observations, interviews, and factor analysis procedures) and there was a strong correlation (.92) between the original 55-item CFI and the 30-item CFI-R (Hulse-Killacky et al., 2006).

The CFI-R was designed to facilitate a discussion about beliefs and values related to feedback. However, in addition to being used in this study to facilitate a discussion with counseling students, it was also used to measure whether changes resulted in their beliefs about feedback following participation in the CFTM intervention. A total of 10 CFI-R items were removed from the analysis within three areas: (a) group process, (b) childhood experiences, and (c) preference for type of feedback. The group process items were eliminated because the training focused on a general understanding of feedback and practice giving and receiving feedback within an individual context, instead of giving feedback within a group context. In addition, the childhood experience and preference for type of feedback items were addressed during the discussion about beliefs and values related to feedback. However, they were not included in scoring because it would be unlikely that they would change after completing the training. For example, the following childhood memory item was not used in the analysis, “I remember corrective feedback delivered as a child to be critical and painful.” Thus, 26 of the items on the CFI-R were used for the discussion and 20 items were used in scoring and analyzing the data. In regards to factors, the following items were removed for the analysis: all four items encompassing the written feedback factor, two of the seven items within the leader factor, three of the six items within the childhood memories factor, and one of the five items within the feeling factor. Because the CFI-R was modified for this study, the psychometrics cannot be assumed to be the same in this study. The internal consistency was calculated for this study in

regards to the total 20-item instrument (.92) and each revised factor: leader (.74), feeling (.84), evaluative (.91), childhood memories (.92), and clarifying (.80).

## **Intervention**

The CFTM and the training components are discussed in detail by Swank and McCarthy (2013), while a brief overview is provided here. Within the CFTM, the facilitators integrated an experiential learning approach by offering students opportunities to engage in experiential activities (i.e., engage in role plays and then practice giving and receiving verbal and written feedback) and discussions (i.e., beliefs and values about feedback). Within a developmental context, the facilitators focused on meeting students where they were developmentally, providing support while also challenging students throughout the training experience. Finally, the trainers used components of behavioral theory to reinforce positive feedback, while balancing it with constructive (corrective) feedback.

The training consisted of a single session lasting two and a half hours and included three main components: (a) examining beliefs and values about feedback, (b) acquiring knowledge about feedback, and (c) developing skills in giving and receiving feedback. Following an icebreaker activity related to feedback, the facilitators assisted students in examining their beliefs and values about feedback through the completion of the Corrective Feedback Instrument-Revised (CFI-R; Hulse-Killacky, Orr, & Paradise, 2006) and an in-depth discussion about students' reactions to topics addressed by the assessment. Then, the students obtained knowledge about feedback through the didactic component of the training, which included strategies for giving and receiving feedback effectively and the importance of feedback skills for counselors and counselors-in-training. Finally, role plays were conducted and all the students had the opportunity to practice giving and receiving positive and constructive verbal and written feedback to each other. The students did not practice giving self-feedback during the training

experience. The training concluded with a final discussion with students about their experiences conducting the role plays and their overall perceptions of the feedback training.

### **Data Analysis**

The data obtained from the demographic questionnaire regarding experience with feedback, preference for feedback type, and helpfulness of feedback type were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The research questions were quantitatively examined using the data collected from the CFSI and the CFI-R. The researchers conducted a repeated-measures analysis within SPSS (Version 21.0) to analyze the data (total scores and subscale scores) for each instrument to address the two research questions. The results from the analyses are reported below.

### **Results**

The counseling student participants were asked to answer a few general questions about feedback. There were 41 (60%) participants who reported having experience with feedback in a professional setting. When asked about preference for type of feedback, 43 preferred verbal, 21 written, 3 both, and 1 did not respond. Finally, when asked about what type of feedback they thought was most helpful, 2 reported positive, 3 constructive, and 63 reported a balance of both positive and constructive feedback.

A repeated-measures analysis was conducted to examine the two research questions. Means and standard deviations are shown in Table 1 in the Appendix. The results demonstrated a significant difference between counseling students' self-efficacy related to the feedback process,  $F(1, 67) = 29.14, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$  following completion of the CFTM intervention. The results also showed that there was a significant difference between counseling students' beliefs about feedback,  $F(1, 67) = 19.05, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$  following completion of the CFTM. However,

there was not a significant interaction effect between self-efficacy and beliefs about feedback,  $F(1, 67) = 3.11, p > .05$ .

The researchers further examined the data by analyzing the subscales (factors) within the two instruments to determine if a significant difference existed between specific factors. In examining the two subscales within the CFSI, the researchers found significance within both of the factors: (a) therapeutic efficacy,  $F(1, 67) = 13.97, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$ , and (b) fears efficacy,  $F(1, 67) = 29.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .31$ . Additionally, within the five factors of the CFI-R, there was a statistically significant difference between four of the five factors: (a) Leader,  $F(1, 67) = 4.47, p < .05, \eta^2 = .06$ , (b) Feeling,  $F(1, 67) = 5.48, p < .05, \eta^2 = .08$ , (c) Evaluative,  $F(1, 67) = 11.07, p < .05, \eta^2 = .14$ , and (d) Clarifying,  $F(1, 67) = 7.01, p < .05, \eta^2 = .10$ . However, the effect size for these factors was very small.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the CFTM. The results provide initial support for using the CFTM with beginning counseling students to assist them with learning about the feedback process and to begin developing skill in giving and receiving feedback. Ninety-three percent of the student participants reported that having a balance of positive and corrective feedback is most helpful, which was consistent with Heckman-Stone's (2003) findings from a pilot study with 40 counseling and psychology students examining preference for feedback. Additionally, students' openness to the feedback process may have been increased through the emphasis on balancing positive and corrective feedback during the training. Coleman and colleagues (2009) reported that balancing positive and corrective feedback may increase students' openness to feedback. Furthermore, Daniels and Larson (2001) found that positive feedback increased counselor self-efficacy and decreased anxiety. Therefore, the

emphasis on balancing positive and corrective feedback during the training may have contributed to the significant change in the participants' self-efficacy.

Counseling students reported a significant increase in self-efficacy following completion of the feedback training. Additionally, significant differences were evident in the two subscales (therapeutic efficacy and fears efficacy) within the CFSI. The training appeared to decrease fear about the feedback process and support strategies for giving feedback that would promote learning, and thus be therapeutic. It is difficult to determine what aspect of the training may have contributed to the significant changes in these areas. However, in considering Daniels and Larson's (2001) findings, the changes may have been partially related to the emphasis on balancing constructive with positive feedback.

Significant differences were also found regarding counseling students' overall beliefs about feedback, as measured by the total score on the CFI-R. In addition, significant differences were found in four of the five subscales; however, the changes had small effect sizes. These findings should also be interpreted with caution because the CFI-R was modified for use in this study. The largest subscale change was within the evaluative factor. Hulse-Killacky and Page (1999) noted that students may have difficulty with corrective (constructive) feedback because they may consider this criticism. During the training, the authors addressed this area by facilitating a discussion with the students about feedback as an evaluative process. The training included addressing students' concerns about viewing feedback as criticism by emphasizing the use of feedback to promote professional and personal growth and the importance of not considering constructive feedback as a personal attack against the person. Additionally, the childhood memories factor was related to experiences from childhood affecting an individual's use of corrective feedback (Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1999). Despite the training's including a discussion related to this area, there was no significant change in this subscale. Thus, the results

support the continued need for challenging long-standing beliefs and experiences with feedback throughout the preparation program to facilitate students' skill and level of comfort with giving and receiving feedback.

### **Limitations**

There are a variety of limitations associated with this study. First, the participants were from one institution and there were a limited number of males who participated in the study. Additionally, the participants were young graduate students with the oldest student being 35. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to other geographic regions of the United States, nor be representative of counseling students who have advanced beyond their first semester in their counselor preparation program, older students, or male students. Participation in the training was also a requirement; however, students had the option to not participate in the research process. In regard to instrumentation, the CFI-R was designed to serve as only a discussion tool. However, it was used to measure change related to beliefs and values about feedback because there was no other assessment found that addressed this area of feedback. Nevertheless, modifying the CFI-R could affect the psychometric properties of the instrument.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

To address sampling limitations, future research may focus on replicating this study with a larger, more diverse sample that would include a representation of students in counseling programs across the United States. Additionally, studies may involve examining the long-term effectiveness of the CFTM, which may include modifying the study design to add a control group to distinguish changes resulting from the training compared to developmental changes that result from progressing through the counselor preparation program. Researchers also may focus on examining students' behavioral changes, in addition to the students' report of change that was measured in this study. Another area to examine is the effectiveness of the modified training

model used in this study compared to the full length CTFM training that occurs during two training sessions. Furthermore, researchers may study the effectiveness of offering the entire training at different points throughout the counselor preparation process, as well as offering training refreshers at key points in the training program.

### **Implications for Counselor Education**

The ACA (2014) *Code of Ethics* and the CACREP (2009) *Standards* emphasize the importance of feedback within counselor preparation programs. In addition to the responsibility that counselor educators and supervisors have in giving feedback to students, a need also exists for helping students develop skill in giving feedback to each other. Additionally, students need to develop skill in being able to accept feedback and use it to further their self-awareness and facilitate their continued growth and development. Researchers have identified openness to feedback and skill in giving and receiving feedback as areas of counseling competency (Bradey & Post, 1991; Duda, Paez, & Kindsvatter, 2010; Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; McAdams, Foster, & Ward, 2007; Swank & Lambie, 2012; Swank, Lambie, & Witta, 2012). Hayman (1981) also reported that students learned best when they received feedback from their peers and when they critically evaluated their own performance. Therefore, students need opportunities to learn about the feedback process and practice developing skills in giving and receiving feedback, such as within CFTM. This process includes experience with giving and receiving both positive and constructive feedback in written and verbal formats. Furthermore, feedback skill training may boost students' self-confidence with participating in the feedback process; and increasing self-efficacy is important in counselor training (Toth & Erwin, 1998).

The CFTM intervention was provided at the beginning of the counselor preparation process in this study. Offering feedback training early in the training program provides an opportunity for students to begin developing skill in giving and receiving feedback that they can



use throughout the program. Feedback skills are especially important within experiential and clinical experiences courses (Swank & McCarthy, 2013). In addition, feedback training early in the preparation program is important when counseling skills are taught early in the curriculum because peer feedback and self-evaluation is crucial in developing counseling skills (Hayman, 1981). Furthermore, this provides students with an early opportunity to begin reflecting upon their beliefs, values, and previous experiences with the feedback process and how these experiences may affect their future work with clients.

When providing feedback training early in the counseling curriculum, it is crucial to continue to reinforce key components of the feedback process throughout the training experience. In addition to having opportunities to continue practicing giving and receiving feedback, students need opportunities to observe the feedback process. Furthermore, it may be helpful for counselor educators to continue facilitating discussions with students about their beliefs and experiences with feedback. Through continued exposure to feedback training and practice, counseling students are supported in developing greater self-awareness and skill in giving and receiving feedback.

In summary, this article provides some initial support for using the CFTM to train counseling students in giving and receiving feedback. Feedback training is crucial in assisting counseling students with their growth and development as counselors. Additionally, feedback is an integral part of the counseling process with clients. Thus, counseling students develop skill and openness to engaging in the feedback process with colleagues, supervisors, and future clients through continued exposure and practice with feedback throughout the counselor preparation program.

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Appendix

Table 1

*Mean CFSI and CFI-R Scores*

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Mean Difference
CFSI					5.77
Pretest	70.26	8.08	48	86	
Posttest	76.03	7.57	61	96	
Therapeutic Efficacy					2.73
Pretest	39.76	5.40	21	53	
Posttest	42.49	4.68	30	54	
Fears Efficacy					3.04
Pretest	30.50	4.96	18	41	
Posttest	33.54	4.27	25	42	
CFI-R					3.84
Pretest	86.88	14.56	59	120	
Posttest	90.72	15.11	63	120	
Leader					.71
Pretest	25.25	2.97	17	30	
Posttest	25.96	3.00	18	30	
Feeling					.82
Pretest	16.01	4.04	5	24	
Posttest	16.83	4.22	8	24	
Evaluative					1.32
Pretest	18.93	5.52	8	30	
Posttest	20.25	5.62	10	30	
Childhood					.29
Pretest	13.06	3.78	3	18	
Posttest	13.35	3.90	3	18	
Clarifying					.69
Pretest	13.63	2.97	7	18	
Posttest	14.32	2.86	5	18	

