A Comparison of Natural and Professional Help¹

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The study investigated the process and effectiveness of three natural and professional groups who commonly provide help to persons experiencing the important critical life event of marital disruption. Subjects were 42 helpers: 14 mental health professionals, 14 divorce lawyers, and 14 leaders of mutual help groups. Analyses, based on variables derived from coded audiotapes of simulated helping interactions and from ratings of helper effectiveness, indicated many similarities between mental health professionals and mutual help leaders but considerable differences between these two groups and divorce lawyers. Lawyers did more talking overall, showed greater proportions of information giving and closed questions, and were more effective in the legal/financial domain. Additional analyses indicated that all helpers showed fewer information-gathering behaviors and more information- and advice-giving behaviors as the helping interaction progressed.

The majority of “psychological” problems people experience are never brought to mental health professionals or trained paraprofessionals. Instead, problems generally are shared with “natural helpers” who possess no mental health training (Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960; Veroff, Kulka, & Douvan, 1981). Studies have suggested the important helping roles played by a wide range of such natural helpers, including hairdressers (Cowen et al., 1979; Cowen, Gesten, Davidson, & Wilson, 1981), bartenders (Cowen, McKim, & Weissberg, 1981; Dumont, 1967), family practice lawyers (Doane & Cowen,

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1981; Felner, Primavera, Farber, & Bishop, 1982), industrial foremen (Kaplan & Cowen, 1981), and members of mutual help groups (Caplan & Killilea, 1975; Levy, 1976; Silverman, 1978).

Other research suggests some effectiveness for natural help. For example, the Vanderbilt Psychotherapy Project attempted a controlled comparison of natural and professional helpers (Gomes-Schwartz, 1978; Strupp, 1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1980d; Strupp & Hadley, 1979). Disturbed male college students were each assigned to an experienced professional therapist or to a college professor untrained in mental health. The major findings indicated that the professionally treated students did not differ from those seen by college professors on any of a wide array of outcome measures (Strupp & Hadley, 1979). However, both groups had better outcomes than a minimal-treatment control group. Further analyses (Gomes-Schwartz, 1978; Gomes-Schwartz & Schwartz, 1978; Strupp, 1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1980d) suggested that, while the professors were as effective as the professionals, they differed in their helping strategies, being more direct, folksy, personally revealing, talkative, and prone to asking specific questions and giving advice.

Several recent studies, all using similar survey methodologies and instrumentation, have investigated the types of problems handled, helping strategies, and effectiveness of various natural helping groups. Summarizing studies surveying four different helper groups (i.e., hairdressers, family practice lawyers, bartenders, and industrial foremen), Cowen (1982) concluded that (a) the types of problems brought to these natural helping groups did not differ greatly from the types brought to mental health professionals; (b) there were some similarities in helping strategies across groups (e.g., all reported using a lot of "support and sympathy") but also some differences (e.g., lawyers reported using more directive approaches such as asking questions, giving advice, and pointing out consequences of bad ideas); (c) family practice lawyers saw the fewest clients of all four helping groups but had many in-depth contacts with each client and spent more time fielding moderate to serious personal problems than any other group; (d) all groups had mostly positive feelings about helping and felt moderately effective; and (e) females tended to be more comfortable handling personal problems, to use more types of handling strategies, and to field more problems than males.

Though such survey studies have yielded some useful data and represent an improvement over earlier work which tended to be based on impressionistic reports and other uncontrolled methodologies, their exclusive reliance on helpers as the data source could provide biased information. Another shortcoming is that while these surveys give some general ideas of important helping strategies (e.g., "support and sympathy"), they fail to delineate precisely which helper behaviors constitute such strategies. Finally, with one notable exception (i.e., Cowen, 1982), few attempts have been made in these surveys