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The effects of vague vs. explicit communication on the ability to distinguish valid from invalid feedback statements.

Pamela Susan. Howitt
University of Windsor

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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ MICROFILMÉE TELLE QUE NOUS L’AVONS REÇUE**
THE EFFECTS OF VAGUE VS. EXPLICIT
COMMUNICATION ON THE ABILITY TO DISTINGUISH
VALID FROM INVALID FEEDBACK STATEMENTS

by
Pamela S. Howitt
Hon. B.A. Brock University, 1975

A Thesis
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1977
ABSTRACT

It was the purpose of this study to investigate the effects of vague vs. explicit communication on the ability to distinguish valid from invalid feedback statements. Fifty-six college students completed Forms A and B of the Personality Research Form (Jackson, 1967). Later, subjects were given individualized interpretations. Subjects were randomly divided into two groups. One group of subjects received vague feedback reports, while the second group received explicit feedback reports. All subjects received two true statements and two false statements, based on their PRF protocols. Subjects were asked to rate the four statements in terms of their accuracy as self-descriptions. Results indicated that: 1) subjects rated the clear true statements as more self-descriptive than the clear false statements; 2) subjects rated the true statements as more self-descriptive than the false statements, when the statements were vague; 3) sex differences did not significantly effect the ratings; and 4) subjects significantly preferred the explicit report over the vague report. Implications of these results for clinical practice were discussed, and suggestions for future research in this area were offered.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am especially grateful to Dr. William Balance for his guidance in the preparation of this thesis. His support and advice were greatly appreciated. In addition, I wish to thank Dr. Frank Auld and Dr. Marylou Dietz for the time and interest they devoted to this study. Their suggestions regarding the methodology were most helpful. I am grateful to the students who volunteered to participate in this experiment. Finally, I wish to thank Ms. Dorothy Adair, for her excellent typing of this manuscript.

This thesis is dedicated to two very important people who have offered their support and encouragement unfailingly, when it was most needed. They have urged me to strive for excellence, and taught me the importance of integrity and humility. These people are my parents, John and Vera Howitt, and to them I owe a debt of gratitude which cannot be adequately expressed in words, nor repaid by any conceivable gift. That I may always be worthy of their respect and pride, is my most cherished goal.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Psychological tests are currently used in a wide
range of clinical areas, such as pathological diagnosis,
educational planning, vocational counselling, and in-
dustrial placement. That this widespread use of assess-
ment procedures has significant social and cultural im-
pact, is a fact which cannot be denied, nor ignored by
professional practitioners. Sundberg and Tyler (1962)
noted that psychological assessment is both a response
to, and an influence on sociopolitical values. Further-
more, it may be that public perception of, and attitudes
toward, the function of psychology in our society, are
shaped to a large degree by this fundamental aspect of
clinical practice. Sundberg and Tyler (1962) commented,
"Ask any intelligent person to freely associate to the
word psychologist, and the chances are that before many
words are out he will mention tests" (p. 131). In the
report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Social Impact of
Psychological Assessment, published in 1965, it was noted
that the problems connected with the testing movement per
se, must be considered within the broader context of how
psychologists are viewed by educators and the public.
Thus, the recent criticisms which have been directed to-
wards the use of tests and testing procedures, call for careful scrutiny on the part of all involved personnel. According to Brim (1965):

Psychologists have the primary responsibility in this country for the development and use of tests in the national interest. Only by facing the existence of strong antitest sentiment in the population, by making a professional appraisal of its causes, and by taking effective action, will their responsibility be discharged. (p. 125)

A discussion of this "antitest sentiment" and related attitudes to testing will follow.

Public Attitudes Toward Assessment

In a review of popular literature reflecting the anti-test position, Barclay (1968) noted that the issues which are the basis of criticism include the following:

1. That counselling practice and the use of testing is a Communist-inspired plot to subvert and pervert the morals of American youth.

2. That testing is being misused by many so-called professionals and some individuals who are far from being professional.

3. That some tests are personally obnoxious to certain segments of the population and contain items which actually inform children of anti-social or law-breaking conduct.
4. That the prediction from some of these tests is nearly null for individuals.

5. That there has been a widespread "invasion" of personal rights through the use of certain types of tests and the dissemination of these test results. (p. 5)

Negative attitudes toward assessment have been sufficiently strong to inspire a kind of open revolt, as illustrated by the test-burning activities which took place in parts of the U.S. a few years ago. A more subtle, but equally negative reaction is exemplified by Whyte's (in Jackson, 1967) comments. This author advised aspiring business executives to cheat on personality tests, and offered pointers on how to proceed. This was recommended as a fair recourse against the increasing use, by personnel psychologists, of tests that, in Whyte's view, bear little relation to job performance.

To this growing list of criticisms, Brim (1965) has made an important addition. He suggested that the inaccessibility of test data to the testee, is another major source of public dissatisfaction. Sandberg (1969) speculated that the practice of withholding test results from clients may have contributed to the poor public relations of psychologists in contemporary North America. Fischer (1972) pointed out that a client who is confronted with a "mental health
expert" who presumably knows certain psychiatric facts about him, to which he, the client, has no access, must experience himself as under unfair scrutiny. In this circumstance, the client will remain anxious and guarded in his relations with the professional. Ebel (in Anastasi, 1966) stated:

...test makers have, I fear, sometimes given the general public reason to fear that we may be up to no good. I refer to our sometime reluctance to take the layman fully into our confidence, to share fully with him all our information about his test scores, the tests from which they are derived, and our interpretations of what they mean. (p. 25)

Besides instilling a sense of mistrust and fear of the activities performed by psychologists, this policy of secrecy has led to the development of a number of unrealistic expectations and misconceptions about the services which clinicians can provide. Goldman (1961) remarked that clients usually perceive counselors as authority figures endowed with mystical powers and wisdom. Sundberg and Tyler (1962) noted that psychologists are often expected to render judgements as if they were oracles, with special personal powers for seeing hidden meanings. As Cronbach (1970) observed:

Even when the tester has a much more limited aim, the patient may believe that his intimate desires and anxieties will be exposed by the tests. The popular literature on psychology and psychiatry being what it is, the subject may expect the psychologist to be pruriently concerned with tabooed areas, or he may view the tester as a modern magician from whom no truth can be hidden. (p. 71)
Clearly, a careful re-evaluation of current assessment procedures, and the problems arising therefrom, is in order, if psychologists hope to dispell non-productive myths, and maximize the effectiveness of their functioning.

A Theoretical Model of Assessment

Traditional assessment procedures have placed the testee in a passive role, with the psychologist fulfilling an active role equivalent to that of a technician, concerned with obtaining an "objective" diagnosis and prescribing a cure. Fischer (1972) suggested that this approach is grounded in the natural science foundations of the mental health profession. The prevailing attitude has been that it is the trained outsider, rather than the experiencing patient, who knows what is "really real." Therefore, from this perspective, it follows logically that the professional, who knows more than the client, must assume responsibility for him. As Dressel and Matteson (1950) stated:

At the present time, test administration and interpretation practices generally suggest a rather directive, authoritarian type of counseling. The counselor, in effect, says 'If you will unquestioningly fill out the forms and take all the tests I prescribe, I will be able to tell you what to do.' (p. 693)

Recently, a more "existential" orientation has been introduced into testing, with an emphasis on the client as
co-evaluator (Fischer, 1970, 1972). Fischer argued that the client's own perspective must be understood, if we are to understand the client as an individual. Brim (1965) stated, "Steps must be taken to establish a collaborative relationship between the tester and respondent, in which both gain information of value to them" (p. 126). Goldman (1961) suggested that the client should assume a decision-making role in every phase of the assessment process, including the selection of tests to be administered.

Sundberg and Tyler (1962) defined assessment in the following way:

Assessment can be seen as the way we go about understanding others; as the systematic development and communication of information about a person and his situation; as the description, prediction and explanation of individual behavior in natural living situations; and as the process used for making decisions and for developing a working image or model. (p. 98)

Cronbach (1970) stressed that assessment is an opportunity for the client to find out about himself. If, as these authors maintain, assessment is to be viewed as a tool to help the client make decisions, identify strengths and weaknesses, clarify problems, and pick out possibilities for action, then clearly information obtained through assessment must be communicated to the client. This is consistent with an "existential" orientation, with the client viewed as a "member of the tester's team" (Cronbach, 1970, p. 66).
Thus, test feedback becomes an essential aspect of such an assessment model.

Feedback on Trial

Numerous objections have been raised with regard to the practice of giving clients feedback of test results. Of primary concern seems to be the fear that clients may find some information disturbing. Regarding the use of test scores for psychotherapeutic purposes, Harrower (1956) cautioned that the client must show sufficient ego-strength and adequate controls so as to handle anxieties which may be mobilized. Fischer (1972) noted that, in the view of some clinicians, "...it has seemed wiser not to risk frightening or discouraging him [the client] by the starkness of the 'facts'..." (p. 365). In response to these concerns, Richman (1967) observed that:

...the skillful sharing of test results with the patient is often beneficial, especially for the very disturbed, when conducted by a psychologist trained in both testing and psychotherapy. (p. 63)

He suggested further that patients and their families can actually tolerate a great deal more information and hard facts than is generally recognized. In discussing a particular case study, Harrower (1956) stated, "For this patient, as many others, the actual 'objectifying' of some accutely disturbing psychological experience, the fact that
such an experience could be registered in a tangible way by a test, served as a surprising relief, and a spur to further activity" (p. 84).

Goldman (1961) maintained that the communication of test results places the counselor in the "firing line", so to speak. He is in a position of having to justify or defend the assessment process and conclusions derived from test data, and this may foster some reluctance to share material with clients. Ulrich, Stachnik, and Stainton (1963) suggested that counselors receive positive reinforcement from clients when the feedback that is given is vague and general. Thus, an approval motive may be operating to influence feedback procedures.

Several authors (Anastasi, 1967; Bixler & Bixler, 1946; Brim, 1965) have expressed concern about the possibility of misinterpretation of test scores, and their too rigid use by the inexperienced, as for example, in the case of a client who may be labelled both in his own mind and that of his parents and peers, as a result of early test performance. However, Cronbach (1970) stressed that the potential for misinterpretation can be greatly reduced through skillful handling of the data and presentation of the material in a manner comprehensible to the client. Berg (1956) suggested that the sensitive counselor can take certain precautionary measures to prevent misapprehensions:
When it is necessary to transmit test scores to clients, the effective procedure for detecting misunderstandings about test information is to have the counselee tell the counselor at the close of the interview what the tests mean to him, the client. Then any misapprehensions can be corrected on the spot. (p. 578)

Contrary to predictions about the possible negative impact of test feedback, Flock and Saggar (1968) showed that feedback of test results to students resulted in superior academic performance. Goldman's (1961) extensive review of the literature revealed that, the majority of studies dealing with the use of test results in counselling have reported increases in the accuracy of clients' self-ratings with regard to intelligence, interests, and personality traits, following feedback procedures. For example, Johnson (1953) had clients fill out questionnaires indicating self-ratings with regard to intelligence, interests, and personality. Clients were then given a standard battery of tests, and the interpretation of test results were discussed with all clients. Following completion of the counseling sessions, clients filled out the self-rating questionnaire a second time. Results showed significant increases in accuracy of self-knowledge for intelligence and interests, with a small but positive increase in accuracy of personality self-ratings. Dressel and Matteson (1950) found similar results, with an additional finding that clients who actively participated
the most in the test-interpretation process, gained the most in self-knowledge.

In further defense of feedback, it has been suggested that client participation can improve processes of clinical inference and the clinical interpretive process. Super (1957) pointed out that sharing tentative interpretations with the client provides a safeguard against serious errors in the process. The client's comments and reactions to test data may provide new information and clarification, and thus could lead to more valid interpretations. Rudikoff and Kirk (1959) maintained that, in order to understand the meaning of the test results, the clinician needs to learn what the results mean to the client. It is necessary to know the client's reactions to the tests and his reasons for handling the material in the manner in which he did, in order to determine why the test results were as they were. Fischer (1970) stated that, "it is the client himself who is in the best position to confirm or clarify the evaluator's impressions" (p. 71). Furthermore, according to Fischer (1972):

...secrecy from the client limits the professional's own growth. It perpetuates his belief in the validity of his privileged perspective. In the absence of the client's challenge to his technical formulations, he is less likely to question and thus to alter, his interpretations or the operative paradigm. (p. 365)
From a somewhat different perspective, Brim (1965) maintained that clients want to receive feedback, and that it is callous of the psychologist to ignore the respondent's natural interest in his performance. Indeed, it seems that an increasing number of individuals are participating in testing programmes, such as national achievement competitions, for the primary purpose of self-assessment. With respect to the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test, Stalnaker (1965) has reported that:

In a recent survey made of a broad sample of participating schools, less than half of the students taking the test reported that they did so in anticipation of winning some financial award. Almost a quarter of the group sampled had taken the test to find out about their educational strengths and weaknesses. (p. 132)

Finally, to return to an issue raised earlier, concerning public attitudes to psychological practice in general, and testing in particular, Ebel (in Anastasi, 1966) commented:

If specialists in educational measurement want to be properly understood and trusted by the public they serve, they will do well to shun secrecy and to share with the public as much as it is interested in knowing about the methods they use, the knowledge they gain, and the interpretations they make...By the avoidance of mystery and secrecy, they can help create better public understanding and support. (p. 26)

Thus, the current issue becomes one of investigating those variables which make feedback most effective, the "mechan-
ics" of feedback, so to speak, rather than the previous issue of whether feedback should or should not be given. A consideration of the "what" and "how" of feedback communications will follow.

Feedback Research - The Pertinent Variables

In 1965 the Ad Hoc Committee on Social Impact of Psychological Assessment called for investigation of the variables effecting communication of psychological information.

It is urged that more emphasis be given to research on the effects of communicating psychological information to parents, teachers, and students. There should be extensive experimentation with different methods of communication of such information... (Berdie, 1965, p. 144)

Burger's (1974) comments are a timely and provocative statement on this issue:

It is apparent that all the major arguments against giving feedback stem from fears that psychologists do not have the ability to communicate their findings effectively and with sensitivity. Their fear is well founded, since to give the information effectively is an art and little effort has been made to systematically teach it... The ability to effectively communicate is an art that all psychologists must attempt to develop. (pp. 6, 7)

Sundberg and Tyler (1962), Klopfer (1960) and others have discussed different means of communicating assessment
results. Various styles of report-writing include the "P. T. Barnum" report, the "Aunt Fanny" report, the "Madison Avenue" type, "Pollyanna" reports, and abstract, theoretical, "Head-in-the-clouds" reports. The "Aunt Fanny" report is so labelled because it contains information that would be true of anyone. Klopfer (1960) is critical of the "Madison Avenue" type of report, which is designed to play up to the reader, or sell some point as if it were merchandise. "Pollyanna" reports contain only positively-toned information. "P. T. Barnum" reports are characterized by their ambiguity and generality. Tallent (1958) stated:

The essence of the Barnum method is to describe a personality using a few mildly negative generalities which are quickly neutralized in a matrix of acceptable, even flattering remarks, both types of comments being apparently applicable to almost everybody. (p. 243)

Although the above comments have been made largely in reference to reports written for the use of other professionals, feedback research indicates that report style is an important variable influencing the effectiveness of the communication between clinician and client.

Buss (1959) had subjects rate themselves on ten different behavior descriptions, with seven different variations in style of expressing the items. He found that item style effected both frequency of endorsement and ratings of social desirability. Buss concluded that how an item is
communicated is an important variable in endorsement, and that stylistic considerations are in need of further investigation. Edwards (1953) had a group of students rate 140 personality trait items in terms of their degree of social desirability. A second group of subjects responded to the same items in terms of whether or not they considered the items to be characteristic of themselves. Results showed that the probability of endorsement of an item increased with the judged desirability of the item. Price (1971), and Balance, Sandberg and Bringmann (1971) found that pathological vs. non-pathological orientation of the communication is a significant variable. These authors asked subjects to rank feedback statements taken from their MMPI and PRF protocols, in terms of self-descriptiveness. The results indicated that subjects endorse non-pathological, trait-descriptive statements over pathological statements. Burger (1974) varied the length of feedback reports given to subjects, based on their performance on the WAIS. He found that subjects preferred a more extensive report to a shorter one, and rated the longer report as more useful. Leenaars (1976) examined the effects of positively-stated vs. negatively-stated feedback reports. He found that subjects were more able to distinguish true from false feedback when the statements were positively worded.
Each of the above cited studies attempted to delineate some variable which was presumed to influence the effectiveness of the communication between clinician and client. Anderson (1968) has suggested three criteria for meaningful communication of feedback. These are:

1. The other person needs to understand what I am saying.
2. He needs to be willing and able to accept it.
3. He needs to be able to do something about it if he chooses. (p. 20)

It is the contention of this author that the client's acceptance or endorsement of feedback is directly related to his ability to understand the communication. These two aspects of Anderson's formulation will be the focus of the discussion to follow.

What Will The Client Accept - True vs. False Feedback

A number of studies have been done which suggest that, when clients are presented with "true" vs. "fake" feedback, they are able to accurately discern which statements are truly self-descriptive, i.e., taken from their own test protocols. For example, Bringmann, Balance, and Sandberg (1971) administered the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory and the Personality Research Form to a group of subjects. After a five-week interval, all subjects received six feedback statements: two each from their highest scales on the PRF and MMPI, and one randomly selected feedback
statement from each inventory. Subjects ranked all statements in order from most to least descriptive of them personally. The results indicated that subjects endorsed significantly more highly the feedback statements from their own profiles than the randomly selected statements. Price (1971) and Bellehumeur (1975) replicated this finding.

However, some research suggests that, at times, subjects will accept certain "false" feedback. Forêr (1949) administered the Diagnostic Interest Blank (an inventory of hobbies, interests, personal characteristics etc.) to a group of subjects. All subjects were subsequently given an identical personality sketch, and each subject was asked to rate the sketch in terms of degree of self-descriptiveness. Results showed a high degree of personal validation of this sketch. Thus, Forer claimed that subjects are gullible in the acceptance of universally valid personality descriptions. He concluded that, "validation...of a personality sketch by means of personal validation is a fallacious procedure which presupposes objectivity of self-evaluation and an understanding of other persons on the part of the client" (p. 122).

Ulrich, Stachnik, and Stainton (1963) replicated this finding, and found that it made no difference whether the interpretation was made by a prestigious person (professional psychologist) or a non-prestigious person (inexperienced student). Sundberg (1955) reported that college students
were unable to pick out their actual personality descriptions based on the MMPI, when their own was paired with a generalized interpretation. Apanasiewicz (1975) gave subjects an individualized personality description, based on their actual test scores on the PRF, and a stereotyped personality description, consisting of more general, vague statements. There was no significant difference in the degree of accuracy of self-description which was assigned by subjects for the two types of report.

These studies seem to suggest that clients will accept certain "false" information. However, more importantly, they demonstrate the "P. T. Barnum" effect (Meehl, 1956). That is, the stereotyped personality sketches are so general that they could be "true" of anyone. In this sense, they do not actually constitute "false" feedback. Tallent (1958) argued strongly in favour of the use of individualized clinical reports which contain specific information about the individual client. Richman (1967) stated:

> There are wide individual variations, indeed, in my approach to the patients, which scores I emphasize, and which interpretations I stress. Each session is tailor-made to the particular patient or his family... (p. 64)

As noted earlier, Bringmann, Balance and Sandberg (1971) utilized individualized feedback reports, and found that clients rejected "false" feedback. That is, they more
frequently endorsed descriptive statements derived from their own profile, than randomly selected statements. On the other hand, Balance, Sandberg and Bringmann (1971), and Price (1971) found that subjects rejected certain true feedback. Subjects in these studies endorsed non-pathological descriptive statements over pathological statements. Leenaars (1976) found that when feedback was negatively-stated, subjects accepted false feedback as highly as any true communication. He suggested that an element of confusion with respect to the meaning of the negatively-phrased statements, may have been responsible for this result. Thus, it appears that, under certain circumstances, the client's ability to distinguish between valid and invalid feedback is disrupted. Clearly, further investigation of the effects of "true" versus "false" feedback is warranted. This study attempted to clarify this issue. Specifically, the current investigation examined the possibility that lack of clarity of the message represents one condition under which the ability to self-validate feedback statements, breaks down.

The Clarity of the Message - A Critical Variable

Sundberg and Tyler (1962) reported that, "psychologists have denounced 'pseudo-reporting', a kind of writing which substitutes generalities, trivialities, and ambiguity for specific, clear, and practical communication" (p. 235).
The use of "jargon" in communicating psychological information has been sharply criticized by Klopfer (1960). He asserted that, "If the clinical psychologist really comprehends what he is attempting to communicate, a technical language level is really unnecessary" (p. 58). He has urged clinicians to communicate in a basic English which can be understood by any reasonably intelligent layman. Gustad (in Anastasi, 1966) suggested that psychologists have a passion for speaking scientifically, which often leads to a kind of "covering one's tracks" with intricate and extensive qualifications of the basic information being conveyed. Fischer (1970) noted that, "if the psychologist writes in everyday, descriptive language, he is forced to examine his assumptions and decline the safety of established theoretical constructs" (p. 74).

It has been argued that an "existential" model of assessment, with the client as co-evaluator, represents a viable alternative to traditional approaches to testing. Sundberg and Tyler (1962) pointed out that, in a client-centered approach to assessment, the information obtained is treated as a resource to be used by the client. Clearly, the client must first understand the information, if he is to use it effectively. The emphasis must be on things the client wants to know, and test results must be explained to him as clearly and explicitly as possible.
An important consideration is the inclusion of safeguards against possible misinterpretation of test data, on the part of the client. Principle 14, sub-sections b) and c) of the Ethical Standards Code of Psychologists (1972), speaks directly to this point:

b) Test results or other assessment data used for evaluation or classification are communicated to employers, relatives, or other appropriate persons in such a manner as to guard against misinterpretation or misuse. In the usual case, an interpretation of the test result rather than the score is communicated.

c) When test results are communicated directly to parents and students, they are accompanied by adequate interpretive aids or advice.

Berg (1956) examined various sources of confusion about test feedback, and found that clients tended to misinterpret the meaning of terms such as "aptitude", "percentile", and "intelligence". He cautioned that the alert counselor must institute safeguards to prevent misunderstanding.

Redlich and Freedman (1966) commented:

Providing information should not be equated with simply dumping information upon the hapless patient...Even when one physician, an expert gives information to another in consultation, clarification is involved; one supplies what needs to be known to plan, to cope, to act. (p. 812)

With respect to test feedback, the implications of the
comments made by each of the above-cited authors are clear. Communication between clinician and client must be specific and unambiguous and must be couched in terms comprehensible to the client, if it is to be maximally effective. The consequences of the failure to meet these criteria were the subject of investigation in this study. Recalling Anderson's (1968) formula for effective feedback, it has been stated that the person must understand what is being said, and must be willing or able to accept it. It was the aim of this study to show that if the first criterion is not met, the second will not follow. The expectation was, that the tendency to reject false feedback and accept true feedback, the ability to discriminate between valid and invalid communication, would depend upon the clarity of the communication, and hence, the client's comprehension of the information. A discussion of cognitive and perceptual discrimination theory and research, providing a theoretical perspective on the discrimination problem presented to subjects in the present study will follow.

**Discrimination Theory and Research**

Webster's Standard Dictionary defines "discrimination" as "the ability or power to see or make fine distinctions." Bartley (1969) has provided a somewhat more technical definition: "to discriminate is to make a choice reaction in
which contextual conditions play a deciding role" (p. 12).
Ellis (1972) noted that discrimination is an important opera-
tion in the formation and use of complex concepts. Accord-
ing to Ellis, "the formation of concepts refers to both the
selection of appropriate instances and the rejection or ex-
clusion of inappropriate instances" (p. 136). In the present
study, subjects had to discriminate between positive and
negative instances of the criterion concept "self-descript-
ive", under varying conditions of explicitness of the stim-
ulus items. That is, we were interested in the effects of
stimulus ambiguity on the subjects' ability to solve a dis-
crimination problem.

From the point of view of information theory (Fitts &
Posner, 1967), ambiguity can be expressed as the amount of
information conveyed in the stimulus, which is a function of
the number and probability of alternatives involved. The
probability of a correct response to the stimulus decreases
in proportion to the increasing number of possible alterna-
tives, i.e., the array of stimuli from which the present
stimulus is drawn. Ellis (1972) observed that the classi-
fication of events into concept categories is easier, the
more relevant redundant attributes there are available to
describe the events. "Relevant redundant attributes" refer
to features which are correlated so that either feature val-
didly predicts the concept. With respect to the current
study, then, it may be said that, for subjects in the "Vague" Feedback condition, the lack of precise description of the scale increased the number of meanings that the scale label could have for the subjects. That is, the single word may have suggested many alternatives to the subjects, so that the probability of correctly recognizing a given label as self-descriptive was decreased. On the other hand, subjects in the "Explicit" Feedback condition, had to respond to a stimulus which was much more circumscribed in terms of possible alternative meanings, by virtue of the clarifying descriptive terms which were provided. In Ellis' (1972) terms, relevant redundant information was provided, which should have made the discrimination between the categories of "self-descriptive" and "not self-descriptive", easier.

Although there appears to be little direct evidence for this line of reasoning in the area of test feedback validation, some studies involving perceptual discrimination tasks have relevance to the current problem. For example, Miller, Heise, and Lichten (1951) found that subjects' ability to discriminate speech sounds, was substantially improved by limiting the range of alternative stimuli from which the test stimulus was drawn. Hyman (1953) tested subjects' reaction time to stimuli, under varying conditions of the amount of information accompanying the stimuli. Reaction time can be seen as a measure of discrimin-
ination, in that the subject must distinguish between conditions of "signal" and "not signal", to make a correct response. Hyman's results showed that reaction time was slower, (that is, the discrimination was harder to make), when the array of stimuli from which the test stimulus was drawn, was very large. Hyman concluded that "when a stimulus is chosen to which S must make a discriminatory response, his reaction time seems to be a monotonically increasing function of the number of possible stimuli from which the stimulus can be chosen" (p. 188).

Some work has been done, in which the clarity of the stimulus item was directly manipulated, and the effects of ambiguity on perceptual discrimination were observed. In a series of studies (Ogle, 1960; 1961a; 1961b) Ogle examined the effects of blurring a stimulus on visual perception. The dependent measure of visual discrimination used in these studies was the contrast threshold for a point light source. "Contrast threshold" refers to the lowest intensity value of the stimulus needed for subjects to perceive a difference between two parts of a target, in this case, a point of light as distinguished from a white background. The results of Ogle's experiments consistently showed that, when the test target is defocused, when the image is blurred rather than distinct, the intensity of the point light source must be increased sharply, in order to be seen against the back-
ground. That is, when the image was blurred, subjects were unable to make the discrimination at a given level of intensity, but when presented with a sharply focused image at the same level of intensity, they could distinguish the target from its background.

As noted, the above-cited research clearly does not deal directly with subjects' discrimination between valid and invalid psychological communication. However, it certainly suggests the possibility that the manner in which an individual responds to a stimulus, any stimulus, is profoundly affected by the clarity of that stimulus. Let us return then, to a closer examination of the issue at hand - the validation of test feedback under conditions of vague vs. explicit communication.

**Vague versus Explicit Feedback**

Recalling Fitts' and Posner's (1967) discussion of stimulus information, Johnson's (1972) comments regarding modes of communication are noteworthy:

The usage of words by a speaker (or writer) and the comprehension of them by a listener (or reader) depends on the knowledge each has of the alternatives in the context. In domestic situations, 'cat' means an animal or class of animals; on a construction job, 'cat' means a caterpillar tractor, and if there are no alternatives in view, there is no ambiguity. But when there are alternatives in the listener's context...the speaker chooses his words so as to eliminate alternatives. (p. 31)
Cuadra and Albaugh (1956) examined the potential sources of confusion for the reader, in typical psychological reports. They gave a group of subjects four different psychological reports to read and evaluate. The subjects included staff psychologists, psychology trainees, psychiatrists, social workers, graduate nurses, and student nurses. For each report, a series of multiple-choice items was constructed, dealing with statements made or areas discussed in the report. Subjects were asked to respond to the questionnaire by selecting for each question the one alternative which they believed was either clearly stated or strongly implied in the report. The criterion for correct choice was established by having the authors of each report complete the same questionnaire. Results showed that the correspondence rate, consisting of the percentage of questionnaire items on which the readers' understanding agreed with the writer's intended meaning, was only 53 per cent, for all professional groups. Further analysis indicated that the primary source of error seemed to be in the variability in choice of alternatives for a given item. The greatest breakdown in communication occurred when the readers did not agree with the authors as to what was being emphasized, or as to the degree or amount of some personality characteristic discussed. Included in the questionnaires completed by the subjects were some items which referred to something not discussed in the report at
ali. Subjects had the option of choosing a response category labelled "Nonrateable or No Information Given". Interestingly, a large number of readers rated these items as if they had been discussed. Apparently they either felt that because the topic was not discussed, its absence was implied, or else had made enough inferences from what was discussed to gain a definite, though unintended impression. Cuadra and Albaugh concluded:

...report writers must be extremely explicit in their attempts to communicate the salient features or points of emphasis in personality formulations. This means, for example, that over-all or summary impressions should be stated directly and not left for the reader to construct on the basis of unintended cues or personal predilections. (p. 114)

Perhaps the research which bears most directly on the present investigation, is the study completed by Leenaars (1976). He investigated subjects' ability to distinguish valid from invalid feedback, when the statements were positively or negatively phrased. Subjects completed the Personality Research Form and each subject received four feedback statements, which they rated in terms of degree of self-descriptiveness. The subjects' reports contained two "true" statements, (based on their two highest scores on the PRF), and two "false" statements, (based on their two lowest scores). One of each of the two types of statements was
phrased negatively. Contrary to Leenaars' expectation, the false negative statements were accepted as highly as any of the true statements. Apparently, subjects were unable to discriminate between valid and invalid feedback, when the statements were negatively phrased. Leenaars suggested a possible explanation for this result in terms of the clarity of the statements. He speculated that false-negatively phrased statements were endorsed because they were not clear. Subjects may have been confused as to the meaning implied, and this resulted in mistaken interpretations. Comments solicited from the subjects concerning the feedback experience seem to support this argument. For example, some subjects wrote:

- All of the negatives made the interpretation of the statements difficult.
- Some of the statements were very ambiguous and could be interpreted the wrong way.
- The use of too many negatives obscures the meaning of the interpretation.
- I think the double negatives harm the value of the test because they can be misleading. If the student is mislead then the interpretation of the test would be inaccurate. (Leenaars, 1976, p. 59)

Leenaars concluded that "clear and distinct communication is very important, if assessment feedback is going to be beneficial... When communicating test material during a feed-
back session, the message communicated is of primary importance" (p. 60).

The present study was intended to explore this very important issue in test feedback. The literature dealing with the acceptance of true vs. false feedback is far from unequivocal. Therefore, this study attempted to clarify some conditions bearing on subjects' ability to validate feedback material. True versus false feedback constituted one of the variables which was manipulated. Problems relating to the "P. T. Barnum" method of reporting have been noted, and this study therefore utilized individual feedback reports. In addition, the clarity of communication was manipulated, by giving subjects "vague" versus "explicit" feedback. The operationalizing of these concepts was based on Ellis' (1972) discussion of the importance of relevant redundant information, with respect to concept discrimination. That is, subjects in the "Vague" condition were not provided with any redundant cues, while subjects in the "Explicit" condition received statements that contained relevant redundant descriptive adjectives. For example, in regard to the Affiliation scale of the PRF, one could write: "The scale which most applied to you is Affiliation." This would represent a "vague" feedback statement. An "explicit" statement might be as follows: "The scale which most applied to you is Affiliation. This trait is defined by the following
characteristics: neighborly, warm, good-natured, friendly, companionable, genial, cooperative, hospitable, sociable, good-willed." Thus in addition to the true vs. false variable, this study explored the effects of vague vs. explicit communication, on the acceptance of feedback material. An issue related to acceptance, is that of preference for feedback. Leenaars (1976) found that subjects preferred true feedback. Edwards (1953) showed that subjects more readily accepted assessment items which they judged to be socially desirable. Burger (1974) found that subjects preferred longer feedback reports over shorter ones, and rated the longer reports as more useful. Thus, the current study attempted to determine subjects' preference for vague versus explicit reports.

To Summarize

Psychological tests are currently used in a wide range of clinical areas. Assessment procedures thus have a significant social and cultural impact, and psychologists must be sensitive to public attitudes toward testing. It was argued that one source of public dissatisfaction, has been the failure of professionals to communicate test results to clients. A theoretical model of assessment, stressing the role of the client as "co-evaluator", (Fischer, 1970) was discussed. Feedback was conceptualized as an integral part
of this "existential" model, and various advantages and disadvantages of giving feedback to clients, were examined. The need for investigation of the variables affecting psychological communication, as stated by Berdie (1965) and others was noted. Various studies dealing with variables influencing the effectiveness of feedback were reviewed. It was argued that the client's acceptance of feedback is directly related to his ability to understand the communication. Research was then discussed to introduce the first variable in this study: "True" versus "false" feedback statements. The issue of clarity of the message was raised and the second variable was introduced: "vague" versus "explicit" feedback statements. A discussion of perceptual discrimination theory and research was offered, to provide a theoretical perspective on the current research. This was followed by an analysis of a previous study (Leenaars, 1976) which suggested that clarity of the feedback is a critical variable. Finally, the issue of clients' preference for various types of feedback was raised, and was included in this research.

Statement of the Problem and Hypotheses

This study was concerned with the problem of communicating assessment material to clients. The specific focus was on variables that may influence the clients' acceptance of feedback statements as self-descriptive. The variables
were: 1) the effect of "true" versus "false" statements; 2) the effect of "vague" versus "explicit" statements. The dependent variable was the ability of subjects to discriminate between valid and invalid feedback. This was defined in terms of the degree of acceptance of the feedback statements as self-descriptive.

This research is significant because it addressed itself to the problem of how to effectively share test results with clients. Berdie (1965), Brim (1965), and others have stated that investigation of this issue is urgently needed. Inasmuch as some professionals (e.g., Richman, 1967), Harrower, 1956) are already using feedback for therapeutic purposes, the results should be important to clinical psychology, and may provide some guidelines for this practice. This study represented an attempt to further investigate, under controlled conditions, a "serendipity" result obtained in a previous study, (Leenaars, 1976) i.e., the problem of client confusion, and this fact alone should make the study interesting. For the people involved in feedback research.

The hypotheses investigated in this study were as follows:

1. Based on the findings of Bringmann, Balance and Sandberg (1971), Price (1971), Bellehumeur (1975), and other available literature, it was hypothesized that subjects would significantly more highly
accept clear true feedback statements as self-descriptive, than clear false feedback statements.

2. Based on the arguments proposed by Fitts and Posner (1967), and Ellis (1972), and on the findings of Ogle (1960, 1961a, 1961b) and Leenaars (1976), it was hypothesized that subjects would be relatively unable to distinguish true from false feedback statements, when the statements were vague.

3. Based on Burger's (1974) work, it was hypothesized that subjects would prefer more explicit feedback over vague feedback, when they had a basis for comparison.

Finally, the author hoped that subjects would generally express positive feelings regarding the assessment and feedback experience.
CHAPTER II
METHOD

Subjects
Fifty-six undergraduate students at the University of Windsor, who volunteered to participate, served as subjects (Ss) in this study. The Ss ranged in age from 19 years to 50 years. There were 21 males and 35 females. Half of the Ss were randomly assigned to the group which received "explicit" feedback, and half were randomly assigned to the group receiving "vague" feedback.

Materials
Following Bringmann, Balance and Sandberg (1971), Leenaars (1976); and others, the Personality Research Form (PRF) Forms A and B (Jackson, 1965, 1967) was used as a source of trait variables for feedback statements. The reliability and validity of the PRF have been adequately demonstrated by Bentler (1964), Jackson and Guthrie (1968), Kusyszyn and Jackson (1967), and Kusyszyn (1968). The traits which the PRF measures are: achievement, affiliation, aggression, autonomy, dominance, endurance, exhibition, understanding, harmavoidance, impulsivity, nurturance, order, play, social recognition, and infrequency. All of these scales, with the exception of infrequency, which is the validity scale, were used in this study. The table of scale names
and defining trait adjectives, proposed by Jackson in the PRF Manual (1967), was used to generate vague and explicit feedback statements. Vague feedback reports simply contained the names of the scales purported to be representative of the S's test scores. Explicit feedback reports gave the names of the scales, and a list of the trait adjectives which define the scales, as suggested by Jackson (1967). A table of word frequencies (Thorndike and Lorge, 1944) was used to eliminate adjectives from Jackson's (1967) list which are infrequently used. In addition, those adjectives which are not strictly synonymous with the primary definition of the trait, were excluded from the list. See Appendix A for the "Vague and Explicit Interpretation Guide to the PRF."

Procedure

The experiment was conducted in two sessions. In the first session, Ss completed the PRF. In the second session, Ss received feedback reports, and evaluated the assessment. A three week period intervened between the two sessions.

In the first session, the experimenter (E) presented Ss with a brief introduction into the nature of the study. See Appendix B for instructions given to Ss completing the PRF. These instructions were based on those used by Apanasiewicz (1975), and Leenaars (1976).

The PRF forms were then scored and interpreted, using
the "Vague and Explicit Interpretation Guide to the PRF."
Ss were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Group 1 received vague feedback reports and Group 2 received explicit feedback reports. True feedback statements were based on the Ss' two highest scores on the PRF. False feedback statements consisted of statements based on the two lowest scores obtained by Ss. This procedure was adopted successfully by Leenaars (1976). Thus, four statements were obtained for each S. Ss in Group 1 received two True-Vague statements (TV), and two False-Vague statements (FV). Ss in Group 2 received two True-Explicit statement (TE), and two False-Explicit statements (FE). See Appendix C for sample reports received by Ss in the two feedback groups.

During the second session, E presented Ss with a brief introduction into the nature of the feedback session. See Appendix D for instructions given to Ss receiving test feedback. These instructions were based on those used by Apanasiewicz (1975), and Leenaars (1976). Following these instructions, Ss were given their individualized feedback reports. See Appendix E for instructions and rating materials for Ss evaluating the assessment. Based on the format used by Ulrich, Stachnik, and Stainton (1963), and as adopted by Leenaars (1976), Ss received their reports, and a rating form designed as follows:

"Rate the four interpretative statements of your per-
sonality that are given below, according to the following scale.

I think that the accuracy of the interpretation was:
1 - Very Poor
2 - Poor
3 - Average
4 - Good
5 - Excellent

After completing the rating for the first feedback report, Ss were informed about the nature of this study, and individually debriefed. That is, they were told which of the statements actually represented their two highest scores on the PRP.

Following this procedure, all Ss received a second feedback report, written in the opposite style from that of the first report. That is, Ss in Group 1 received an explicit feedback report, and Ss in Group 2 received a vague report. The following instructions accompanied the second report:

"Some subjects in this study received a more vague/explicit report of their test scores. In the case of your own two highest scores, the vague/explicit report would be as follows:

Statement 1
Statement 2"
Of the two types of report, which would you prefer to receive:

a) the vague report?

b) the explicit report?

Please indicate your preference by circling the appropriate letter above. Briefly, please state the reasons for your choice.

Finally, Ss were asked to respond to some open-ended questions regarding assessment. These questions were used by Apanasiewicz (1975) and Leenaars (1976), and were as follows:

"Please make any additional comments about the test interpretation that you feel would be appropriate."

"On this sheet, please write some of your reactions to the experiment; how did you feel about taking the personality test; what were your feelings about receiving the results?"

Statistics

Ss' ratings of the accuracy of the feedback were analyzed. The two independent variables in the study were: true vs false; and vague vs explicit. The dependent variable was the ratings of accuracy which the Ss assigned to the statements. This design required a 2 x 2 Analysis of Variance with repeated measures on one factor, and minimum significance set at $\alpha = .01$ (Winer, 1962). Further analysis, us-
ing a Newmann Keuls range test was undertaken.

In order to investigate the effects of Ss' sex with respect to accuracy ratings, a 2 x 2 x 2 Analysis of Variance, with repeated measures on one factor and statistical adjustment for unequal cell frequencies, was completed (Winer, 1962).

Subjects' preferences for types of feedback (vague vs explicit), under the various conditions of the experiment, were tested using a Binominal Distribution test (Siegel, 1956).

Finally, a content analysis of Ss' comments about the feedback experience, was completed.
CHAPTER III
RESULTS

The accuracy ratings which Ss assigned to the feedback statements are contained in Appendix F. Subjects were given both true and false statements, under two conditions of clarity, and the dependent variable was Ss' ratings for the accuracy of these descriptions. The relevant means of the ratings data are given in Table 1, and presented figuratively in Figure 1. These data were analyzed using Winer's (1962) ANOVA procedure for a 2 x 2 design with repeated measures on one factor. Table 2 presents the summary of results of this procedure. As Table 2 indicates, there was a highly significant difference between true and false communication, with respect to accuracy ratings (F (1, 54) = 56.10, p < .01). Figure 2 presents Ss' mean accuracy ratings as a function of true vs. false communication (vague vs. explicit factor collapsed). The ANOVA presented in Table 2 demonstrates that Factor A (Vague vs. Explicit communication) was not a significant factor, and there was no significant interaction for Vague vs. Explicit x True vs. False communication. Since Factor B (True vs. False communication) proved to be a highly significant factor, further analysis, using a Newmann-Keuls test for differences between means, was undertaken. The results of this...
Table 1
Mean Accuracy Ratings as a Function of True-False and Vague-Explicit Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
<th>Sum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vague</td>
<td>(\bar{x} = 4.16)</td>
<td>(\bar{x} = 3.14)</td>
<td>(\bar{x} = 3.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>(\bar{x} = 4.3)</td>
<td>(\bar{x} = 3.14)</td>
<td>(\bar{x} = 3.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>(\bar{x} = 4.24)</td>
<td>(\bar{x} = 3.14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Mean accuracy ratings as a function of true-false (T-F) and vague-explicit (V-E) communication.
Table 2

Summary Table of ANOVA for Vague-Explicit (V-E) and True-False (T-F) Communication

- Accuracy Ratings -

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>SSs</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Between Ss</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A (V-E)</td>
<td>176.71</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>.576</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ss w. Groups</td>
<td>176.14</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Within Ss</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (T-F)</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A x B</td>
<td>137.28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>137.28</td>
<td>56.10***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B x Ss w. Groups</td>
<td>132.15</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2.447</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01

---

* *** * p < .001

---
Figure 2. Mean accuracy ratings as a function of true (T) vs. false (F) communication.
procedure are summarized in Table 3. Table 3 indicates that true statements were rated significantly more highly than false statements \((p < .01)\) for Ss in both the vague and explicit feedback conditions.

It will be recalled that the first hypothesis of this study predicted that Ss would significantly more highly accept clear true statements as self-descriptive, than clear false statements. Hypothesis I is supported by the results presented above.

The second hypothesis of this study predicted that Ss would be relatively unable to distinguish true from false statements, when the statements were vague. Results of the ANOVA presented in Table 2, indicate that the type of report had no appreciable effect on Ss' ability to discriminate between true and false statements. Table 3 indicates that vague true statements were rated significantly more highly than vague false statements. Thus Hypothesis 2 is not confirmed.

Table 4 presents Ss' mean accuracy ratings as a function of sex, vague vs. explicit communication, and true vs. false communication. These results are presented figuratively in Figure 3. Inspection of Table 4 reveals that there was very little difference between males and females, with respect to the mean accuracy ratings assigned to vague and explicit communication. These results are confirmed by the
Table 3:
Results of Newmann-Keuls Test; Differences Between Means of Ss’ Accuracy Ratings of True and False Statements for the Vague and Explicit Reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Report Type</th>
<th>Statement Rated Higher</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Critical Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vague</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>1.04**</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>1.16**</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p < .01.
Table 4
Mean Accuracy Ratings as a Function of Sex,
Vague-Explicit, and True-False Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
<th>Sum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Males</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vague</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 3.94$</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 3.13$</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 3.53$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 4.12$</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 3.19$</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 3.66$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 4.03$</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 3.16$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Females</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vague</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 4.28$</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 3.15$</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 3.71$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 4.50$</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 3.10$</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 3.8$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 4.39$</td>
<td>$\bar{x} = 3.13$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3. Mean accuracy ratings as a function of sex (M-F), vague vs. explicit (V-E) and true vs. false (T-F) communication.
ANOVA, summarized in Table 5. This table shows that Factor A (Sex) was not a significant factor, and there was no significant interaction for Sex x Vague vs. Explicit communication (Factor B). Thus, sex had no appreciable effects on Ss' responses to the vague vs. explicit communication. As indicated in Table 4 both males and females assigned higher accuracy ratings to the true statements, than to the false statements. These results are presented figuratively in Figure 4. The ANOVA summary given in Table 5 demonstrates a highly significant difference between true and false communication (Factor C), with respect to accuracy ratings ($F(1,108) = 47.18, p < .01$). However, there was no significant interaction for Sex x True vs. False communication. Thus, sex had no appreciable effect on Ss' ability to discriminate between true and false statements. Finally, Table 5 indicates that Factor B (Vague vs. Explicit communication) was not a significant factor, and there was no significant interaction for Vague vs. Explicit x True vs. False communication. Hence, males and females, in both experimental groups, were able to discriminate between true and false communication.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that Ss would prefer explicit feedback over vague feedback, when they had a basis for comparison. Table 6 presents the frequencies of preference for vague vs. explicit reports, as a function of type
Table 5

Summary Table of ANOVA for Sex, Vague-Explicit, and True-False Communication

- Accuracy Ratings -

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Subjects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A (Sex)</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Vague-Explicit)</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ss w. groups</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[error (between)]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>173.45</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>56.15</td>
<td>47.18**</td>
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** p < .01
Figure 4. Mean accuracy ratings as a function of sex (M-F) and true-false communication (T-F).
Table 6

Frequency of Responses to Preference Questions

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<th>( P ) (Binominal)</th>
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<td>Explicit</td>
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<td>~Explicit</td>
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** \( p < .01 \).**
of first report given. These data were analyzed using Binominal Distribution tests for significance (Siegel, 1956). Data presented in Table 6 indicate a highly significant preference for the explicit report, for Ss in both experimental groups. Chi-Square tests revealed no significant associations between preference and experimental group, or preference and sex. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported. Subjects were asked to state their reasons for choosing one report type in preference to the other (see Method). The comments elicited from Ss regarding this question will be discussed below (see Discussion).

Finally, Ss were asked to comment on the assessment procedures, and invited to express their feelings regarding the personality testing and feedback session (see Method). The Ss' responses to these questions will be considered below (see Discussion).
CHAPTER IV
DISCUSSION

This study was concerned with the problem of communicating psychological assessment material to clients. Several authors (Brim, 1965; Cronbach, 1970; and Fischer, 1970, 1972) have suggested an approach to testing which would treat the client as co-evaluator. The assessment would thus be viewed as a collaborative process, which can provide a mutual exchange of information between client and professional. Clearly, communication of the information obtained via assessment, to the client, can be conceptualized as an integral part of this model. Super (1957) pointed out that the sharing of test interpretations with the client would provide a safeguard against errors in the processes of clinical inference. The client's reactions to test data may provide new information and clarification, and this could lead to more valid interpretations. Thus, it becomes important to explore whether or not, and under what conditions, clients are able to make accurate judgements regarding the validity of test interpretations, which the professional may offer. The primary purpose of the present study was to investigate the ability of Ss to distinguish valid from invalid feedback, under varying conditions of the clarity of the communication.
A number of studies (Apanasiewicz, 1975; Forer, 1949; Sundberg, 1955; and Ulrich, Stachnik and Stainton, 1963) have been done which suggest that, at times, Ss will accept certain "false" feedback. In these studies, Ss were given stereotyped, general test interpretations, and results showed a high degree of personal validation of these personality descriptions. Thus, Forer (1949) concluded that "validation...of a personality sketch by means of personal validation is a fallacious procedure which presupposes objectivity of self-evaluation and an understanding of other persons on the part of the client" (p. 122). However, this research made use of "P. T. Barnum" (Meehl, 1956) reports, which were so general that they could be "true" of anyone. In this sense, the personality descriptions did not actually constitute "false" feedback. The results of studies which utilized individualized feedback reports (Bellehumeur, 1975; Bringmann, Balance & Sandberg, 1971) indicated that Ss were able to accurately discern which statements were truly self-descriptive, and which statements were false.

In the present study, Ss were given individualized reports which contained true and false statements, and asked to rate the statements in terms of accuracy of self-descriptiveness. The results showed a highly significant effect for the true vs. false variable, and supported the hypothesis that Ss would rate clear true statements as more
self-descriptive than clear false statements. This finding is in agreement with results obtained by Bellehumeur (1975) and Bringmann, Balance, and Sandberg (1971). Further, these results lend support to Fischer's (1970) contention that "it is the client himself who is in the best position to confirm or clarify the evaluator's impressions" (p. 71). On the basis of this study, this author cannot concur with Forer's (1949) claim that clients are gullible in the acceptance of personality descriptions.

According to Anderson (1968), one important criterion for effective feedback is that the recipient must understand the message being communicated. The focus of the current study was to explore the possibility that the clarity of the message, and hence the client's comprehension of the information, would effect the ability to discriminate between true and false feedback. As previously noted, Leenaars (1976) found that Ss were unable to discriminate between valid and invalid feedback, when the statements were negatively phrased. That is, false negative statements were accepted as highly as any true communication. Leenaars speculated that false-negatively phrased statements were endorsed because they were not clear. Subjects may have been confused as to the meaning implied, and this resulted in mistaken interpretations.

In our study, Ss in one group received feedback reports
which were vague, and which contained two true statements and two false statements (see Method). From the point of view of information theory (Fitts & Posner, 1967), it was postulated that, for Ss in the vague feedback condition, the lack of precise description of the personality traits contained in the feedback reports, would increase the number of meanings that the scale label could have for the Ss. That is, the single word would suggest many alternatives to the Ss, so that the probability of correctly recognizing a given label as self-descriptive, would be decreased. It was expected, therefore, that Ss would be relatively unable to distinguish valid from invalid feedback, due to lack of clarity of the communication. The results of this study did not support this hypothesis. Subjects were able to accurately discriminate between true and false feedback even when the feedback was only one word. A close examination of Ss' mean accuracy ratings reveals that the Ss in the vague feedback condition were slightly less discriminating than Ss in the explicit feedback condition. That is, the difference between accuracy ratings assigned to the true and false statements by the vague group, was slightly smaller than that for the explicit group. However, this trend is not statistically significant.

One possible explanation for this result lies in the fact that the manipulation of the true vs. false variable
in this study was very powerful. Subjects were given statements based on the extreme scores from their PRF protocols. That is, true statements were based on their two highest scores, and false statements were generated from their two lowest scores. This may have simplified the discrimination task to the extent that other experimental manipulations would have negligible effects.

Perhaps a distinction exists between "confusing" information, and information which is simply rather truncated and therefore ambiguous. Thus, while Ss in Leenaars' (1976) study may have been confused by the wording of the negatively-phrased feedback, Ss in the present study apparently were able to extract sufficient meaning from, and formulate some understanding of, the ambiguous statements. Perhaps they experienced some doubt or uncertainty, rather than actual confusion. Berg (1956) noted that Ss tended to misinterpret the meaning of terms such as "aptitude", "percentile", and "intelligence", in response to feedback information. It should be noted that these are rather technical terms which may require the expertise of the professional for accurate interpretation. In the case of the present study, however, it seems that the names of the PRF scales themselves were sufficiently free of specialized connotation, to allow the Ss to form a fairly accurate judgement about their intended meaning. Furthermore, this reasoning
is in concurrence with Jackson's (1967) contention that the PRF is an instrument which measures personality traits broadly relevant to the functioning of individuals in a wide variety of settings. Apparently the scale names themselves are characterized by a high degree of specificity. Thus, the "vague vs. explicit" operations utilized in this study might have been more accurately conceptualized as "explicit vs. more explicit".

Although the hypothesis regarding the effects of vague communication on the discrimination task, was not confirmed, it is worthy of note that S's comments did lend support to the theoretical framework developed on the basis of information theory. For example, some S's commented the following:

- "A single word can be very ambiguous; it may indicate many things to different people. An explicit report enables us to get a handle on something."

- "'Play' means different things to different people. The list of adjectives helps the individual to focus on the highlights of the report."

- "The explicit report let me know exactly how the traits are defined. My definition of 'impulsiveness' may have been different from the tester's."

- "A vague report is of no value because it confuses people."

An important consideration in this study was the investigation of S's preference for type of report. Brim (1965) has argued that S's want to receive feedback, and that it is callous of the psychologist to ignore the respondents' na-
tural interest in his performance. Our study has shown that Ss have specific preferences for the type of feedback which they want to receive. It was predicted that Ss would prefer explicit over vague reports, when they had a basis for comparison, and this hypothesis was clearly confirmed. Comments elicited from Ss regarding the reasons for their choice are of particular interest, in light of the arguments presented above (see Introduction), in support of the practice of giving feedback. For example, some Ss stated that they felt entitled to explicit feedback, since they had invested their time to complete the personality test.

Others suggested that the vague reports were "blunt and unfriendly", and did not satisfy their curiosity regarding the assessment process. The implications of these comments for clinical practice are clear: Precise, unambiguous feedback must be incorporated as an essential part of the assessment process, if psychologists are to meet their responsibilities for the safeguarding of the clients' welfare; furthermore, the fact that an overwhelming majority of Ss were critical of the vague reports, is significant in that it stands in contrast to Ulrich, Stachnik, and Stainton's (1963) claim that clients positively reinforce counselors when the feedback given is vague and general.

Subjects were asked to indicate their reactions to the
experiment, describing their feelings about taking the personality test and receiving the feedback. Most Ss felt that the test was interesting, and enjoyed this phase of the study. A few expressed some frustration about being required to make a forced true-false choice on the PRF. Since they felt that some of the test items required qualified responses, they questioned the accuracy of the test interpretations. Most of the Ss indicated that they were pleased to receive feedback. Some comments were:

- "Seeing the results made me understand what the experiment was about, and not that it was just time consumed."

- "Feedback gave me insight into the structure of the test and testing process."

- "I felt hesitant about taking the test - worried that the results might show some weird behavior. I felt relieved when I saw my results."

In conclusion, it has been argued that a model of assessment, in which the client acts as co-evaluator (Fischer, 1970) represents a viable alternative to more traditional approaches to psychological testing. This study was undertaken to explore whether or not, and under what conditions, clients are able to make accurate judgements regarding the validity of test interpretations which the professional may offer. It was contended that lack of clarity of the interpretation would constitute one possible condition under which the ability to discriminate between true and false feedback, would break down. The major conclusion from this study is that Ss are able to distinguish valid from invalid
psychological communication, even when they must make this
judgement on the basis of a single word. As Bringmann,
Balance, and Sandberg (1971) concluded, "individuals volun-
tarily participating in psychological evaluations are the
best judges of the accuracy of descriptive statements about
themselves " (p. 734). It seems likely, by extension, that
clients are probably the best judges of the accuracy of a
psychological report about themselves. Our results seem to
suggest that Ss and probably clients are objective and
discerning enough to be treated as co-evaluators in assess-
ment processes. This is significant, inasmuch as some pro-
fessionals (e.g., Harrower, 1956; Richman, 1967) have already
introduced feedback procedures for therapeutic purposes, and
hopefully, this is a practice which will be increasingly en-
dorsed by clinicians.

The manipulation of the clarity variable in this study
clearly presented some problems, and further research, incor-
porating alternative methods of operationalizing this vari-
able, seems warranted. Perhaps the use of personality tests
other than the PRF, to evaluate this issue, would prove in-
teresting. Subjects in this study were college students.
It seems possible that they were therefore particularly ad-
cept at performing a discrimination task involving semantic
subtleties. Future research, including Ss from non-college
populations, might produce differential effects.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

VAGUE AND EXPLICIT INTERPRETATION GUIDE

TO THE PRF
VAGUE AND EXPLICIT INTERPRETATION GUIDE
TO THE PRF

Achievement:
- V - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "achievement."
- E - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "achievement." This trait is defined by the following characteristics: accomplishing, capable, purposeful, attaining, achieving, self-improving, productive, driving, ambitious, competitive.

Affiliation
- V - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "affiliation."
- E - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "affiliation." This trait is defined by the following characteristics: neighborly, warm, friendly, companionable, genial, cooperative, hospitable, sociable, good-willed.

Aggression
- V - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "aggression."
- E - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "aggression." This trait is
is defined by the following characteristics: aggressive, quarrelsome, irritable, threatening, attacking, pushy, hot-tempered, easily-angered, hostile, blunt.

**Autonomy**

- **V** - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "autonomy".

- **E** - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "autonomy". This trait is defined by the following characteristics: free, self-reliant, independent, autonomous, individualistic, self-determined, non-conforming, resistant, lone-wolf.

**Dominance**

- **V** - On the basis of your test scores the scale which most applies to you is "dominance".

- **E** - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "dominance". This trait is defined by the following characteristics: governing, controlling, commanding, forceful, leading, directing, dominant, authoritative, powerful, supervising.

**Endurance**

- **V** - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "endurance".

- **E** - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which
most applies to you is "endurance". This trait is defined by the following characteristics: persistent, determined, enduring, tireless, dogged, energetic, has stamina, sturdy, durable.

Exhibition
- V - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "exhibition".
- E - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "exhibition". This trait is defined by the following characteristics: colorful, entertaining, exhibitionistic, conspicuous, noticeable, expressive, flashy, dramatic, showy.

Harmavoidance
- V - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "harmavoidance".
- E - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "harmavoidance". This trait is defined by the following characteristics: fearful, withdraws from danger, self-protective, pain-avoidant, careful, cautious, seeks safety, avoids risks, attentive to danger, stays out of harm's way.

Impulsivity
- V - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "impulsivity".
- E - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which
most applies to you is "impulsivity". This trait is defined by the following characteristics: hasty, rash, spontaneous, reckless, quick-thinking, impatient, hurried, impulsive, foolhardy, excitable.

Nurturance
- V - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "nurturance."
- E - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "nurturance". This trait is defined by the following characteristics: sympathetic, helpful, encouraging, caring, protective, comforting, supporting, aiding, consoling, assisting.

Order
- V - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "order".
- E - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "order". This trait is defined by the following characteristics: neat, organized, tidy, systematic, disciplined, prompt, consistent, orderly, clean, scheduled.

Play
- V - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "play".
- E - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "play". This trait is de-
fined by the following characteristics: playful, jolly, pleasure-seeking, merry, laughter-loving, joking, fun-loving, gleeful, carefree.

Social Recognition

- V - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "social recognition".

- E - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "social recognition". This trait is defined by the following characteristics: approval seeking, proper, well-behaved, seeks recognition, courteous, makes good impression, socially proper, seeks admiration, socially sensitive, desirous of credit.

Understanding

- V - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "understanding".

- E - On the basis of your test scores, the scale which most applies to you is "understanding". This trait is defined by the following characteristics: inquiring, curious, exploring, intellectual, investigative, probing, logical, theoretical, rational, inquisitive.
APPENDIX B

INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN TO SUBJECTS COMPLETING
PSYCHOLOGICAL TEST
INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN TO SUBJECTS: COMPLETING PSYCHOLOGICAL TEST

The purpose of this testing is for psychological research. It is concerned with personality characteristics. There will be two parts to this study. Today I will be giving you a test to complete that is called the Personality Research Form. Please read the instructions printed on the front cover of the test booklet. Inside the booklet, you will find an answer sheet on which to mark your answers. When you have completed the test, please bring all materials to me at the front desk.

The tests will be scored and then an interpretation will be made from the scores. The interpretation may or may not be accurate. You are the best judge of that. In approximately two weeks, your test results will be returned to you during a regular class time. You will be asked to rank the accuracy of the interpretation.

Your participation in this study is, of course, voluntary, and is very much appreciated. Test results will be kept absolutely confidential.

Are there any questions?
APPENDIX C

SAMPLE REPORTS FOR Ss IN THE TWO
FEEDBACK CONDITIONS
SAMPLE REPORTS FOR Ss IN THE TWO FEEDBACK CONDITIONS

1. A Sample Vague Report

On the basis of your test scores, the scales which most apply to you are:

1. Dominance
2. Social Recognition
3. Understanding
4. Affiliation

2. A Sample Explicit Report

On the basis of your test scores, the scales which most apply to you are:

1. Understanding - This trait is defined by the following characteristics: inquiring, curious, exploring, intellectual, investigative, probing, logical, theoretical, rational, inquisitive.

2. Endurance - This trait is defined by the following characteristics: persistent, determined, enduring, tireless, dogged, energetic, has stamina, sturdy, durable.

3. Aggression - This trait is defined by the following characteristics: aggressive, quarrelsome, irritable, threatening, attacking, pushy, hot-tempered, easily-angered, hostile, blunt.

4. Dominance - This trait is defined by the following characteristics: governing, controlling, commanding, forceful, leading, directing, dominant, authoritative, powerful, supervising.
APPENDIX D

INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN TO Ss RECEIVING TEST FEEDBACK
INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN TO Ss RECEIVING TEST FEEDBACK

As you know, the tests that you completed last session were scored and interpreted. The interpretation may or may not be accurate. You are the best judge of that. You will be receiving four statements which you are asked to evaluate. Please rate each of the four items on the paper from 1 to 5, according to the criteria that is provided.

Please read the instructions on the page.

Are there any questions?
APPENDIX E

INSTRUCTIONS AND RATING MATERIALS

FOR Ss RECEIVING TEST FEEDBACK
INSTRUCTIONS AND RATING MATERIALS
FOR Ss RECEIVING TEST FEEDBACK

Name:
Age: 
Sex: 
Education:
Sample Rating Form

Please rate the four interpretative statements of your personality that are given below, according to the following scale:

I think the accuracy of the interpretation was:

1 - Very Poor
2 - Poor
3 - Average
4 - Good
5 - Excellent

Please place the appropriate number in the space provided to the right of each statement:

"Statement 1"  
"Statement 2"  
"Statement 3"  
"Statement 4"  
APPENDIX F

MALE AND FEMALE Ss' ACCURACY RATINGS FOR

THE TWO TRUE (T) AND TWO FALSE (F)

FEEDBACK STATEMENTS
MALE AND FEMALE Ss' ACCURACY RATINGS FOR THE TWO TRUE (T) AND TWO FALSE (F) FEEDBACK STATEMENTS

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VITA AUCTORIS

Pamela Susan Howitt, daughter of John and Vera Howitt, was born June 29, 1953, in Guelph, Ontario. Following graduation from Grand River Collegiate, Kitchener, Ontario, she attended Brock University, in St. Catharines, Ontario, where she was the recipient of the Rose Horne Insurance Scholarship. In 1975, she graduated from Brock University with an Honours B.A. in Psychology, and was awarded the Governor General's Medal. Since then, she has been a graduate student in clinical psychology, at the University of Windsor, and has held a University of Windsor Scholarship and an Ontario Graduate Scholarship.