# CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HUMAN RELATIONS OF STUDENTS OF HELPING PROFESSION

Katalin BILLÉDI

Institute of Special Psychology
'Bárczi Gusztáv' Faculty of Special Education
Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest
H–1071 Budapest, Damjanich str. 41-43
Phone: 36-1-461-3700
Email: billedi@yahoo.com

## Abstract

Since the change of the regimes 10–12 years ago helping professionals have got more and more tasks in Hungary. The social and economic changes have caused changes in people's life and have also required existential adaptation so, that they could bear the stress and psychological strain. In this situation there has been more and more need for professional helping workers.

The basic conditions of qualifying for a helping profession are the possession and active usage of certain attitudes, personal characteristics, and interpersonal abilities.

This study examines some important factors concerning the effective realization of a helping profession among students preparing for helping and non-helping professions.

The study examines the characteristics of students' social and emotional intelligence to declare and compare their coping capacities, their opinions of human nature.

The goal of the study is to give information for higher education institutions to improve the education system of helping professions.

The article presents the main results and conclusions of the study.

*Keywords:* helping profession, social and emotional intelligence, coping capacities.

## 1. Introduction

In the academic year of 2000/2001 I carried out a study in several higher education institutes. The main goal of the study was to compare students preparing for some kinds of helping profession with other professionals, along certain characteristics that are usually needed in jobs involving interpersonal relations, especially in helping professions. We aimed at getting answers for questions as follows: how successful the measured population in solving social situations is; how differentiated their perceptions on the mental and emotional state of others is; what emotional patterns do they reply with to frustration and failure; what characterizes their opinion about human beings; how much can they be characterized by positive thinking, internal locus of control, self-confidence, perseverance. Is there any difference in the ways of solving situations; in understanding, comprehension; in handling emotions between students choosing a helping profession and other professionals?

The aims of the study are:

- to examine the students' characteristics of social intelligence,
- to describe the ways of the subjects' handling emotions and emotional states,
- observing the coping abilities, strengths and weaknesses,
- analyse the characteristics of the students' opinion of people and their nature,
- utilizing the results in the training programs.

## 2. Method

For the completion of the study and to fulfil our goals several complementary test-complexes were used. I chose the following four questionnaires:

- Social Intelligence Test developed by Moss, Hunt, Omwake & Woodward (1955), translated by Éva Farkas.
- Social and Emotional Intelligence Test developed by Attila Oláh (1998) for measuring the characteristics of emotional intelligence.
- Psychological Immune System Questionnaire developed by Attila Oláh (1996) for measuring the ability to cope with stress.
- Attitude scale examining the concept of human beings by Antal Bugán (1994) to measure the attitudes concerning the perception of others.

The questionnaires were filled out in a group setting. The people participating were volunteers and students of higher education institutes from Budapest and other cities.

Among the group of 383 people studying for helping professions there were 139 social workers, 22 qualified nurses and 212 special teachers, and reflecting the real life rate, the number of male students in the sample was only 30. The other group consisted of 240 people, 124 female and 116 male, studying technical management, economics, geography, law, finance and tourism.

## 3. Introduction of Results

Examining *social intelligence*, it can be stated that there is a significant difference between the students preparing for helping professions and the other professionals. (Appendix 1.)

Students had knowledge of human nature, they were the most successful in *observing human behaviour*, 57.1% of them was average in this, while 29.2 % of them appeared to be very good. The students are self-confident in characterizing the human nature and interpersonal relations. They are less confident in situations demanding a finer analysis of interpersonal relations. According to the questions answered without hesitation, they do not need experience because they can pick them up from the environment 'verbally' during socialization. Such knowledge is

e.g.: men do not like women to boss them around. At the same time it requires experience and the ability of deduction to decide e.g. what is a good method for persuading others. Therefore, students are aware of the stereotypes for the judgement of human behaviour and they express these independently of what kind of profession they are studying for. It is interesting that the students appeared to be least confident about questions concerning the psychological characteristics of human beings, which knowledge could improve the efficiency of interpersonal relations.

According to the results 48.6% of the students have average, and 31.5% have very good *sense of humour*. However, this result is not sufficient since the questionnaire does not cover those areas of humour that are more difficult to grasp and which are needed for noticing the comical, absurd side of situations with high tension, for finding the incidents in the situation which could ease the tension and thus overcome the conflict. The results of the questionnaire give no account of the ability of self-irony. My experience as a teacher points to the fact that students have these areas of humour to less extent. They seem to be self-biased, over-sensitive to feedback from others, easily offended and if there is tension in their relations they find it more effective to attack, to be aggressive than to ease the tension with humour.

The *recognition of the mental state of the speaker* grasps the ability to judge the speaker's inner processes, emotions that incline him for the certain statement. The majority of students are successful in determining the inner, emotional state of others. The students preparing for helping professions show in 40.5% average, and in 37.9% high achievement, the other professionals show in 41,7 % average and in 32,9% high achievement, the difference is significant. Students are confident in determining emotions (e.g. uncertainty, love, strong-mindedness, suspicion, envy) that are easier to identify. Problems appear in the case of emotions which cannot be so definitely determined. Students "mix up" ambition with determination; helplessness, regret and loneliness are often identified as disappointment; disgust and horror are difficult to differentiate and identifying detestation, rage and hatred seem to be the most difficult. Perhaps these results are due to the fact that the social environment itself does not differentiate intense emotions subtly. In the light of the results we need to notice that the determination of mental states with greater intensity of emotion causes difficulty for 50% of the students and indicates to a certain extent that identification and controlling of such states is not adequate even for the students themselves.

The *judgement of social situations* tests how adequate solutions are judged for given situations, and therefore it is the most exciting part of the test battery. It can be concluded that the results show shortcomings in the judgement of social situations. In solving situations the performance of 49.1% of the students preparing for helping professions and 62.1% of the other group is weak, and the difference is significant. Students gave the weakest performance in the case of strong inter-personal conflicts. They responded most correctly to the everyday social situations and simpler conflicts.

It appears that in spite of the fact that students achieved good results in their

knowledge of human behaviour and in the recognition of the mental state of others, they were not successful in turning this knowledge into behavioural responses. They are aware of the core of human nature and behaviour, and they can identify the mental state of others, yet they do not put their knowledge in action.

Concerning the analysis of *emotional intelligence* the comparison of the mean value of the students with the Hungarian average published by Attila Oláh (1999) [8] showed that besides the *ability of sensitivity* and *self-regulation* there are major significant differences. (Appendix 2.)

The students could be characterized by *emotional* and *social incompetence* and by the *tendency of self-punishment*, thus both groups showed a more negative self-evaluation, more worrisome behaviour, lessability to start interpersonal relations and greater tendency for self-blaming behaviour and an attitude characterized by external locus of control than the Hungarian average. Their tendency for self-ishness, emotional apathy (*lack of empathy*) and *offensive behaviour* is stronger as well. The group studying for non-helping professions can be characterized significantly more by egocentric and aggressive behaviour in comparison with the group studying for helping professions. It may be stated that the group studying for helping professions is better at handling frustration and hindrance (*weakness of will* and the *lack of impulse control* is not typical), but at the same time in difficult situations they show *escape-support seeking behaviour* more often, and they are weaker in problem centric behaviour and *constructive coping*. Therefore, students studying for helping professions may be characterized more by positive, more empathetic scope of emotions and a minimal amount of aggression than the others. It makes one think that the students choosing helping professions in stressful situations show a less problem centric, constructive behaviour and are less able to see obstacles as challenges.

Oláh [7] determined certain limit values for each of the scales. If the score of two or more scales are above or below the given limit values he assumes the probability of disorder of adjustment. Taking into account the fact that the students in the present study scored higher on almost all the scales, we assume the probability of difficulty in adjustment only with the students who scored over the limit values on at least four scales. 5.2% of the students of helping professions and 12.9% of the other group fall into this zone, in my opinion this percentage is quite high. With the students who had end values only in two or three scales, the probability of insecurity of adjustment can be assumed. Only 20-21.7% of the students show the lack of these problems.

The mean values expressing the students' *psychological immune system* were compared to the Hungarian average values given by Oláh (1996) [6] and there were definite differences in all cases. (Appendix 3.)

In two scales there are no differences between the two groups compared. They are similar in the measure of the anticipation of positive outcomes, *positive thinking* and also in the *capacity of social monitoring*, thus they are equally able to perceive and use the information coming from the social environment.

A positive difference is discovered in *social mobilizing capacity* where the students emphasized more their abilities to influence others. Moreover, students

studying for other professions show more *self-respect*.

A negative difference can be seen in the *sense of coherence*, thus the student group appears to be weaker at the ability of understanding correlation. The students are less characterized by the *sense of self-growth,* less motivated by the expectation of successful self-actualization. They score low in the area of *synchronicity*, less able to concentrate all of their energies on solving a problem. They are markedly behind in the ability of *goal orientation*, which is the ability to fight emerging obstacles in the sense of bearing the tension built up during the process. Their *social creating capacity* (i.e. the ability to mobilize their own and other people's hidden resources) is less sufficient. They are less characterized by thoughtful, intellectually guided behaviour, *impulse control*, they score low on *emotional* and *irritability control*, thus the students are less skilled at controlling their anxieties, impulses. Only those studying for helping professions can be described as believing less that things happening to them depend on them, their sense of control is deficient. They are less inclined to *change and challenge orientation* and appear to be weaker at *problem solving capacity* and *self-efficacy*.

Between the groups studying for helping and other professions, there was a significant difference in the three scales, which can be explained in relation to one another. In creative self-concept, problem-solving capacity and in the sense of self-efficacy the student group studying for non-helping professions surpass the group studying for helping professions. They tend to evaluate themselves more positively, they believe in fulfilling their goals, in problematic situations they think there is always a usable experience, idea, way to solve the situation. This seems to reinforce my experience in which students preparing for helping professions are often insecure about themselves, the basis for their self-esteem is not yet complete. Realistic self-esteem and the acknowledgement of one's achievement seem to them as self-conceit. They are often pessimistic about the possibilities for the solution of a situation, what may partly be explained by the fact that they are often exposed to very difficult, almost hopeless situations but also that they did not learn to notice and appreciate 'smaller' successes, achievements.

It is noticeable that both groups scored lower than average at goal orientation, mobilizing resources and energies, synchronicity, and also in controlling impulses and emotions. Those studying for helping professions lack in the personality traits involved in the coping capacity such as self-confidence, sense of self-efficacy and problem-solving capacity. These results should be thought over and more studies should be conducted in this direction.

The students' *concept of human being*, their opinion concerning people can be described by the six main factors of the questionnaire. (Appendix 4.)

A low score on the *self-assertion factor* shows that generally selfishness and defensiveness are not typical for the relationships of the students. They refuse negative presumptions of their peers. Concerning themselves, they refuse the possibility of an indifferent, dishonest, selfish behaviour in an even stricter way. They show insecurity in the judgement of how much they are able to recognize the emotions and characteristics of others. At the same time they have a negative opinion about the judgement of people, assuming they judge wrongly and have difficulty in getting

to know others. There is a significant difference between the two groups of students in articulating this opinion. Those studying for non-helping professions tend to be more negative in their opinions of peers, they accept their selfishness more, and emphasize the importance of self-assertion.

High score on the *altruism factor* expresses the altruistic, helpful, reliable behaviour of students. Concerning themselves they firmly stand up for an honest, fair, helpful behaviour, orienting towards others. There is a significant difference here again, those studying for helping professions emphasize their reliability, honesty and helpfulness more.

Clearly *mistrust* is manifested in the assumptions declaring that one needs to be careful with people because they deceive and take advantage of the others and they behave selfishly. Students assume that the majority of people is capable of lying, they do not like to do favours. The *trust* students show toward people is manifested in the assumption that people have self-confidence and they stand up for the things they believe in. Students studying for non-helping professions articulate their mistrust more, there is no difference between the two groups in their articulation of trust towards people.

Based on the analysis of the *rationality factor* it can be concluded that according to the opinion of the students, people like to control events, their fates and they do not like others to intervene in them. Students think that people trust their abilities, they are self-confident, accumulating experience is important for them and they are able to admit their mistakes.

The mean value of the *factor of independence* reflects the insecure, changing nature of students' judgement on how much people are faithful to their principles, whether they are basically good, and it is really moral life that leads to success.

We can conclude that students in helping professions express their altruism more than the other group, they emphasize their negative opinion about people, their selfish behaviour and the importance of success.

With the help of the cluster analysis of the answers about people and schoolmates, it can be stated that 28.1% of the students' attitudes can be characterized by pessimism. They regard themselves to be altruistic and helpful but they have a negative opinion about the helpfulness and care of others, and they do not believe that people take responsibility and fight for their rights. They do not believe in the goodness of people, in the power of pure, moral life and the importance of autonomy. They suppose that people lie, take advantage of each other and deceive one another. This group has a *mistrusting* and *pessimistic* approach towards others.

The most positive picture is reflected in 42.3% of the students' opinion. They show definite altruism, trustworthiness and helpfulness. They strictly refuse the selfish, self-interest seeking behaviour. They preclude the possibility of their own or their schoolmates' selfish, deceitful, dishonest behaviour. They see people as autonomous, helpful, honest and caring about others. They believe in the goodness of humans. This group is characterized by *trustful, altruistic* attitude.

29.6% of the students express the importance of selfish interests and the negative opinion about their mates the most. They do not deny the possibility of selfish, deceitful behaviour of their peers either. At the same time they believe

in people being straightforward, self-confident, that they firmly stand up for their rights, are able to accept their faults and they control the events in their lives. They are uncertain in their faith in people's helpfulness, goodness, morality and consistency of principle. They describe themselves as helpful and thoughtful. The opinion of the members of this group shows a *distrustful, self-prevailing* attitude.


## 4.  Summary

It is predicable that the majority of the students examined possess at least an average level of social intelligence and adequate capacity of coping. 40% of the students are characterized by openness towards others, trust and a positive concept of people. At the same time 25% of the students can be described by weak social intelligence and coping ability and a pessimistic, distrustful relation to others. The emotional intelligence of students is low and the results presume the possibility of difficulty in adjustment.

Concerning social intelligence, students preparing for helping professions are more successful, even though they show insufficiency in solving social situations. Those with non-helping professions tolerate frustration less, are more impulsive, irritable and tend to be more selfish and offensive in their behaviour than the other group. The students preparing for helping professions are described by more positive, empathetic scope of emotions and a minimal expression of aggression, they express their altruism more than the others. The students studying for other professions emphasize their negative opinions about schoolmates, their selfish behaviour and the importance of success. They also presume an active, aggressive behaviour from people. The psychological immune system of the students is weaker than average. The students preparing for helping professions show constructive behaviour in stressful situations to less extent.

The analysis of the insufficiencies draws our attention to the areas which need to be changed. The education programme should include a practical programme targeted to take a survey of the deficiencies, to raise awareness and to collect practical experience about them.

One of the important training points is indicated by the low achievement of students in solving social situations, especially those with strong conflict. Solving different conflict situations, analysing the alternatives and trying them out in action may loosen the inadequate problem solving patterns. Students need to know about the possibilities of solutions for interpersonal conflicts given by their tendencies for predominance and co-operation. This would lay basis to the improvement of the *ability of managing conflicts*.

Students preparing for helping professions are often insecure about themselves, are pessimistic lot of times, and give up the solutions of the situations. The development of a realistic, positive self-image, the realistic evaluation of successes and failures can be achieved first by deepening the *self-knowledge* and by a *change of attitude*. It needs to be enforced that there is 'no success without failure' and

that we need not to emphasize mistakes, judge failures but to emphasize strengths instead.

Students, especially those studying non-helping professions show a greater than average tendency for offensive behaviour, as well as for blaming themselves and being passive, while those with helping professions for an escape-support seeking behaviour. Unfortunately the possibility, and the necessity of aggressive solutions to obstacles emerge promptly with the students. This needs to be brought down and at the same time the possibility for building positive alternatives for solutions shall be given. Otherwise, the result may be that the tendency for aggressive behaviour decreases and will be replaced by escape-support seeking behaviour pattern. The behaviour of the students moves on to the subordinate, passive and violent, aggressive dimension. Our experience is that self-assured, assertive solutions are also missing from the behavioural repertory. For this reason great emphasis should be given to and training is to be done for the development of *assertivity*.

In order to be successful in practising a helping profession, one needs a constructive attitude towards problems and assignments as well. According to the results, it seems important that students preparing for helping profession should have problem centric, constructive behaviour, to be reinforced in viewing obstacles as challenges and it seems inevitable that the *problem solving ability* of students should be developed. Observing the creating-executing ability of coping, students preparing for helping professions do not possess the methods for elaborating ideas, alternative solutions; for the transformation of studied materials; the surfacing of their own and other people's resources and utilizing them. A flexible approach to problems the enforcement of divergent ways of thinking, and the development of *creative thinking* are needed.

The strong absence in comparison with the average of self-regulating ability needed for coping indicates the insufficiency of regulation over the attention, conscious and emotional states. Students need to learn to focus their energies and to handle tension emerging in stressful situations. This learning process may be promoted by the analysis of the possibilities of problem-centric and emotion-centric coping identifying their advantages and disadvantages, the exercising of handling *coping with stress*.

It needs to be emphasized that the improvement of these characteristics would require not just the introduction of them one or two times but a well-built training session for a semester. The joint effect of the above may result in a training programme which will promote more success in the practice of a helping profession. Time and energy have to be dedicated to this, especially when not only quantity but quality education programmes become important as well.

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# Appendix

*Table 1*. Social Intelligence – Comparison of 'Professions'

|  | Helpers $N = 383$ | | Others $N = 240$ | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Mean | Std. Deviation | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig. |
| Judgement of Social Situations | 4.37 | 2.48 | 3.48 | 2.35 | *** |
| Recognition of the Mental State | 5.97 | 2.53 | 5.50 | 2.63 | * |
| Observing Human Behaviour | 6.01 | 2.46 | 5.76 | 2.34 | |
| Sense of Humour | 5.62 | 2.37 | 5.72 | 2.65 | |
| Social Intelligence | 5.51 | 2.56 | 4.95 | 2.70 | ** |
|  | $*p < 0.05$ | | $**p < 0.01$ | | $*** p < 0.001$ |

*Table 2.* Emotional Intelligence Scales – Comparison of 'Professions'

| | Hungarian Mean $N = 1600$ | | Helpers $N = 383$ | | Others $N = 240$ | | Helpers/ Others |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | Std. deviation | Mean | Std. Deviation | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig. |
| Sensitivity | 5.24 | 2.96 | 5.28 | 2.99 | 5.60 | 3.20 | |
| Weakness of Will | 3.82 | 2.70 | 3.14*** | 2.31 | 3.55 | 2.45 | * |
| Emotional Incompetence | 5.70 | 3.25 | 6.38*** | 3.12 | 6.51*** | 3.02 | |
| Lack of Empathy | 4.08 | 2.31 | 4.40** | 2.33 | 4.81*** | 2.72 | * |
| Social Incompetence | 4.22 | 2.79 | 4.82*** | 2.94 | 5.00*** | 2.90 | |
| Constructive Coping | 4.61 | 2.62 | 3.95*** | 2.44 | 4.59 | 2.83 | ** |
| Escape-Support Seeking | 4.54 | 2.38 | 4.97*** | 2.30 | 4.65 | 2.34 | |
| Offensive Behaviour | 2.05 | 2.04 | 3.04*** | 2.19 | 3.75*** | 2.67 | *** |
| Self-Regulation Ability | 6.17 | 2.90 | 5.96 | 2.62 | 6.23 | 2.97 | |
| Tendency of Self-Punishment | 2.16 | 2.01 | 2.71*** | 2.16 | 2.67*** | 2.19 | |
| | | | *$p < 0.05$ | **$p < 0.01$ | | ***$p < 0.001$ | |

*Table 3*. Psychological Immune System – Comparison of 'Professions'

| | Hungarian Mean $N = 1667$ | | Helpers $N = 383$ | | Others $N = 240$ | | Helpers/ Others |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | Std. deviation | Mean | Std. Deviation | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig. |
| Positive Thinking | 14.30 | 4.31 | 14.15 | 3.50 | 13.90 | 3.37 | |
| Sense of Control | 13.87 | 3.98 | 13.22*** | 2.59 | 13.55 | 2.57 | |
| Sense of Coherence | 15.97 | 3.98 | 14.02*** | 2.33 | 13.73*** | 2.50 | |
| Sense of Self-Growth | 16.51 | 3.82 | 15.67*** | 2.82 | 15.33*** | 3.06 | |
| Self-Respect | 13.55 | 4.43 | 13.47 | 3.20 | 14.00* | 3.35 | * |
| Change and Challenge Orientation | 14.03 | 4.33 | 13.48** | 3.63 | 13.98 | 3.73 | |
| Social Monitoring Capacity | 13.82 | 4.16 | 13.95 | 3.05 | 13.90 | 3.26 | |
| Problem Solving Capacity | 13.06 | 3.95 | 12.52*** | 3.02 | 13.18 | 3.21 | ** |
| Self-Efficacy | 14.67 | 3.95 | 14.02*** | 2.76 | 14.52 | 2.93 | * |
| Social Mobilizing Capacity | 13.37 | 4.40 | 14.38*** | 3.30 | 13.93*** | 3.18 | |
| Social Creating Capacity | 12.67 | 4.21 | 12.24*** | 2.47 | 12.21** | 2.49 | |
| Synchronicity | 14.79 | 4.09 | 13.25*** | 2.86 | 13.41*** | 3.07 | |
| Goal Orientation | 17.62 | 6.15 | 13.68*** | 2.38 | 13.35*** | 2.36 | |
| Impulse Control | 15.01 | 3.92 | 14.26*** | 3.11 | 14.25*** | 3.05 | |
| Emotional Control | 13.78 | 4.56 | 11.49*** | 3.12 | 11.78*** | 3.23 | |
| Irritability Control | 13.93 | 4.55 | 12.92*** | 3.57 | 12.85*** | 3.65 | |
| Psychological Immune System | 230.99 | 21.14 | 216.69*** | 26.91 | 217.88*** | 29.17 | |
| | | $*p < 0.05$ | | $**p < 0.01$ | | | $***p < 0.001$ |

*Table 4.* Concept of Human Being – Comparison of 'Professions'

| | Hungarian Mean $N = 623$ | | Helpers $N = 383$ | | Others $N = 240$ | | Helpers/ Others |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | Std. Deviation | Mean | Std. Deviation | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig. |
| Self-Assertion | 2.42 | 0.36 | 2.38 | 0.35 | 2.49 | 0.38 | *** |
| Altruism | 3.41 | 0.35 | 3.44 | 0.35 | 3.38 | 0.37 | * |
| Mistrust | 3.64 | 0.40 | 3.62 | 0.40 | 3.69 | 0.40 | * |
| Trust | 3.41 | 0.48 | 3.42 | 0.48 | 3.41 | 0.49 | |
| Rationality | 3.47 | 0.37 | 3.45 | 0.37 | 3.50 | 0.37 | |
| Independence | 2.83 | 0.57 | 2.85 | 0.58 | 2.82 | 0.58 | |

$*p < 0.05$  $**p < 0.01$   $***p < 0.001$