

Therapeutic Factors in Group Counselling Promotes Self Development

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Abstract

This qualitative study is aimed at identifying therapeutic factors in group counselling that encourage the development of self. A total of five counselling students voluntarily participated in this study. The participants had been involved in at least ten sessions of group counselling, which is also part of the learning activities, prior to this research. Data were gathered through interview and diary writing. During this semi-structured interview, the researchers provided questions as a guide before starting the interview. However, the interview was not based solely on the provided questions. Participants were also asked to keep a diary designed to help them express their thoughts, experiences or any other matter related to group counselling experiences. All research participants engaged in three interviews and three journal entries during the data gathering period. Writing a diary entry was done after each interview was held. The data gathering period, interviews and diary writing, occurred over a period of eight weeks. The results showed that unconditional acceptance and compliance with confidentiality by the group leader and the group members were the main therapeutic factors that contributed to the self-development of members. Other therapeutic factors that had an effect were the leadership style, counselling skills and knowledge of the group leader, as well as the commitment of the group members. The presence of therapeutic factors promoted the development of self-confidence, insight, relief and feelings of appreciation among group members. The implication of this unconditional acceptance and confidentiality must be understood, and can thus be practiced by counsellors or group leaders, to create an opportunity for group members to model those behaviours.

Keywords: group counselling, therapeutic factor, self-development, qualitative research and counselling students

1. Introduction

Group counselling provides an opportunity for group members and the group leader to interact with each other. This interaction helps the group members to resolve personal, social or career problems (Gladding, 2008). During the interaction, group members have opportunities to evaluate themselves as well as the situation, which helps them to change their attitudes and behaviours (Hansen, Warner, & Smith, 1980). Effective group counselling depends on many factors, however: the preparation of the group leader or facilitator, and an ability to plan and perform are important in creating a meaningful group experience (Gladding, 2008). Professional group counselling manages to create a positive short-term and long-term impact on group members (Zainudin, Zuria, & Salleh, 2008). Berman & Zimper (1980) noted that interpersonal changes occurred among members after they had more than ten hours' worth of group counselling sessions.

2. Literature Review

Corey, Corey & Corey (2007) discuss some of the factors that promote the dynamics of the group: e.g. acceptance by the group; expectation of other group members; and a sense of security. According to the author, absence of these factors in group counselling may create the possibility of participants not cooperating, or being mutually hostile towards each other. Yalom (1995) discusses therapeutic or healing factors in group counselling. He says that there are eleven factors that must be present to enable efficient group counselling, such as: hope; equality; convey information; to model the positive behaviour of others; cohesion between members; and several other factors.

Rogers (1951) states that relationships with others help individuals to understand themselves, which contributes to self-esteem. Every individual needs positive attention, and needs to be loved, liked, respected, admired and accepted by others, including family members. In real life, people do not always get positive attention as needed. They also receive negative attention that could cause tension and stress. Often individuals receive negative and positive attention at the same time. As a result of this, they are able to manage tension and stress despite the negative attention that they receive. Positive attention experienced by the individual contributes to the formation of self-concept. Human needs for love and acceptance are natural. If this cannot be met, then the individual's self-concept will also be distorted. Thus, relationships with others, including family members and members of the community, are very important in developing a sense of love and affection (Rogers, 1951).

Maslow (1970) suggests that humans are motivated to satisfy their needs. These needs include for basic physical requirements, safety, love, esteem and self-actualization. According to Maslow, every individual has one dominant need at a time. When one need has been satisfied, another need becomes significant to that individual. The need to love and be loved, and to have and belong, is important. Being able to meet this need helps individuals progress to the next need; that is a feeling of competence and confidence with oneself.

3. Purpose of the Study

Group counselling experience has an impact on the individual (Zainuddin et al., 2008; Hansen et al., 1980). Individuals need others when developing their potential (Rogers, 1951). Group counselling provides an opportunity for members to share their experience with others (Corey et al., 2007; Gladding, 2008). In relation to this, what kind of experiences were encountered by the group members while participating in group counselling?

4. Methodology

This study was carried out using qualitative methodology. The main focus of this research was not to search for objective facts and objective truth about development, but the subjective experience captured in the individual stories of group members during participation in group counselling. As Grafanaki (2010) suggests, many studies on the experiences of counsellor trainees rely heavily on quantitative data, as well as often excluding the perspective of trainees in favour of external perspectives. Qualitative methods allow the experiences of study participants to be interpreted and explained in the context of a specific environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative findings generally disclose or reflect the language or words used in day-to-day life, and often incorporate words of the participants themselves to describe the psychological event, experience or phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Therefore, the stories of group members regarding their experiences while engaging in group counselling are the focus in this research.

A total of five university students participated in this study. All research participants have experienced a minimum of ten group counselling sessions prior to this research. Most importantly, their involvement in the study is voluntary. Data for this qualitative study involve interviews and journals. Interviews were face-to-face between the interviewer and the participants of the study. These semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to systematically ask questions, but the answers given by the participants had no limits and no special structure. Most of the questions asked allowed the researchers to explore more about the personal development of participants in the study. The interview process allowed the researcher to enter into the individual's experience and uncover their thoughts and feelings (Patton, 2002). Each interview took between one and one and a half hours, which included time for warming up, the interviewing phase and time for cooling down at the end of the interview.

The participants also undertook journal writing. Journal writing by the study participants assisted researchers in obtaining additional information in addition to the interviews. The participants can write further on their experiences during the group sessions in their journal.

Analysing the stories of the participants started immediately after completing the first interview. It was important to listen to the interview and read the transcript before engaging in the next interview. During this phase, it was necessary to try to make sense of the experiences of the participants and note down any themes emerging in their stories. The researcher drew on the six steps suggested by McLeod (2001) as a guideline in conducting an analysis of the participants' stories. According to the author, all six steps were based on work from previous writers (Colaizzi, 1978; Bullington & Karlsson, 1984; Wertz, 1984; Hycner, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1989; Moustakas, 1994).

5. Findings

The stories of five participants, Mas, Din, Iza, Fadhil and Hafiz will be presented in this section. These names are not their real names. The findings of this study indicate themes that contribute to the development of self, e.g.:

unconditional acceptance; confidentiality; group leader or facilitator skills; and counselling skills; and the commitment of the group members. The results also indicated the effects of group counselling on the research participants, such as a feeling of relief, confidence, feeling valued and having insight.

Theme 1: Unconditional Acceptance

Unconditional acceptance is an important issue that has been emphasized in counselling. Feeling accepted in the group will create a sense of comfort. Acceptance also allows members to feel they have the same rights as the other participants and will have the opportunity to participate in group sessions.

According to Mas, counselling allows each member to feel accepted. Mas noted that unconditional acceptance could affect her confidence:

“In this group session I really feel accepted by other members, I think I can accept them even there are some of them that I did not know. Each can accept each other. For me, this is the strength of the group, and it is has an impact on my confidence. I think I can learn something through this group. If I want to be accepted by others, first, I must accept others. After that I think the members mutually accept each other.”

Another participant, Din also had a similar experience regarding the importance of unconditional acceptance in group counselling:

“I feel accepted in the group. The group members helped me during sharing session. This acceptance gives confidence in me to exchange views on issues of other members and the other members shall assist in the sharing of the issues I experienced.”

Here is a statement written by Din in his journal:

“Unconditional acceptance helps me in feeling comfortable while expressing in the group. In addition, it also gives confidence in me to share about an issue that I have experienced and also respond to other members. Through this unconditional acceptance makes me feel free to give opinions and suggestions to other members.”

Like Iza, the unconditional acceptance related to the experience of accepting herself. Here is an excerpt from her journal:

“Unconditional acceptance is about how I accept myself. Accepted in all aspects, including the physical self as body, colour and so on. This included internal aspects such as strengths and weaknesses. These aspects are accepted as they are and take weakness as a challenge to move forward.”

Theme 2: Confidentiality in Session

Confidentiality can help members feel free to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences without any reservation. The importance of confidentiality needs to be discussed in the early stages of group counselling. The results of this study showed that the issue of confidentiality affects the personal development of members.

Iza said that confidentiality is very important in safeguarding the rights of group members during their sharing session:

“More time in group increases my confidence level. At the beginning, I still have the feeling of distrust, and I feel less confidence. However, when members of the group started to share their experience, and at the same time, group leader gave an encouragement and support, as a result, I became more confident. Furthermore, the group leader mentioned about confidentiality that should be kept by each member.”

The importance of confidentiality in building trust and self-concept of members in this group was also mentioned by Din:

“I see cooperation among members depends on our confidence. If trust is high, then the commitment of the members will be more. If their trust is less, then the commitment would be less. Group involves many members, so it will have an impact on their trust. For me, the importance of confidentiality in group sessions is important.”

Theme 3: Skills of the Group Leader

Group counselling requires leaders that can lead, especially in ensuring that the group sessions run smoothly. The findings indicate the importance of the group leader in determining the success of sessions. As an example, Mas felt that the role of the group leader is very important and should be aware of all the verbal and non-verbal members:

“I think as a group leader, he was able to determine the effectiveness of group sessions, whether successful or not. The leader gave attention and focus on non verbal, movements and changes in the words of the members of the group. There was a member that felt sad and the leader gave appropriate response to that member. In that case,

the member felt understood and got moral support from other members as well as the leader himself. The unhappy member could feel that others understood her feelings. From that experience, I feel comfortable to share with the group. I felt the leader of this group was friendly with the members. When we are happy, the leader also smile with us. I think the use of skills, style, and voice intonation will help members improve confidence among the members themselves.”

This is Iza’s experience as result of the group leader’s skills.

“During the session the leader discussed problems of the family, and it was actually difficult to share about the family, but may be the leader was so much empathy, so I share much about myself, my family in the session. During that session, the leader also asked ‘what do you want to contribute to your family?’ At that time, I was truly touched, because all in my growing up, I have not contributed anything to the family. Started from there, I promised myself that I will make every effort in pursuing my career and help my family later.”

Theme 4: Responsibility of Group Members

The group member plays an important role in the group session. This is Mas’s experience on the members’ role:

“For me, the role of the two key parties, leader and members, is important in ensuring a successful group session. Group is not just a task of the group leader, but members of the group are also play a significant role in the success of the session.”

Mas also shared that the group members served as a catalyst to other members’ sharing. Commitment of others can help a member to engage in group session. Here is Mas’s experience in this matter:

“One of the factors that contribute to my sharing with members in this group, probably related to the participation of other members. Furthermore, I was encouraged by other members and the leader. Because of those, I wanted to share my experience in the group. For me, sharing in the group was not only involve discussion on the issues but also involved the exploration of feelings, which may cause insight.”

Fadhil mentioned his experience in group counselling that related to self-concept:

“As I said earlier, when we were engaged in this group, it is about cooperation, so we shared and I really make sure that I get useful input from other members. It sometimes gave me strengths that really useful in my life. Exchange views with others, so that we become better individuals in the future.”

Another participant, Hafiz, wrote in his journal about feeling accepted and how it relates to his strengths:

“I felt myself accepted during the group sessions, which I can share my stories with them, I can tell my experience. I really feel accepted by other members, and I think that I also accepted them although some of them I did not know. Each of us can accept one another. I see the strength of the group, and it has an impact on my confidence.”

Theme 5: Feeling of Relief

The results showed that most participants in the study experienced the impact of the group counselling during and after the sessions. Participants mentioned feeling more positive as a result of sessions in interviews and written journal.

Fadhil commented on his experience, in particular the changes that he encountered at the beginning and later on:

“Feeling, at first I really felt nervous, very unsure what to do during those sessions. However, after certain time, group members talk to each other, we share our stories. I felt very happy, and those feeling came naturally. At the beginning, I never thought that I could share those stories with other people. I felt relief and very happy because I could share my experience during those sessions.”

According to Iza, sharing during group sessions help her in searching for ways out from a situation that she faced. Sharing made her feel happy, comfortable, and relieved. This is Iza’s story:

“After sharing, maybe I have a problem, then I noticed that other members helped me, probably because I share the things that have something in common with the other members in the group. They have got experience and they helped me, from there I feel more happy, comfortable and relieved, maybe I could not find ways out, but with other members help me.”

That feeling of relief was also experienced by Hafiz. He said sharing his experience with others created a feeling of relief and thus he was able to forget about his issues:

“After I shared in the group, I expressed that thing, feeling of relieved occurred within me. So, then I would no longer think of that problem.”

Theme 6: Confidence

Confidence is an important aspect in an individual's character. Confidence with oneself contributes to the capability of interacting with others. Related to this, Din mentioned his experience of sharing and expressing his feelings promoted his strength and courage in order to face the real situation:

"After the session, I could feel a relief when I can share and I can express my feelings to the item that used during the group work. This means that I need to find strength to express the matter to that item. After that expression, I feel more confident, and even more courage to face real situations."

Din continued to explain about his confidence:

"After my sharing in group sessions I felt better, furthermore I received useful inputs from others. I felt more confident after group counselling. I believed that my self-confidence during the group contribute to changes of my confidence outside the session. Sharing in group sessions provided an opportunity for me to get an awareness and build confidence in the future of my life."

Fadhil also had the same experience when going through group sessions. According to Fadhil, sharing in group counselling sessions contributes to feelings of confidence within himself:

"Like I said earlier, when we share problems or things, it indirectly helps to increase self-confidence. I could feel my confidence increased after the group session."

Another participant, Mas, explained that her confidence was related to her being accepted by members of the group. Mas was aware that the group members did not know each other previously, but they were willing to accept one another. According to Mas, this acceptance promoted her confidence. This is Mas story:

"After the group sessions I felt myself accepted by the group. I can share my stories and I can tell my experience. I think I can also accept them although I did not know some of them. Each can accept one another. I can see the strength of the group, and it has an impact on my confidence. At the beginning, I thought that acceptance would be hard, however thing was different when the session started. After that, I feel more satisfied, happy because I can share and can express what is inside me."

Theme 7: Feeling Appreciated

Appreciation can encourage individuals to improve themselves. According to Hafiz, sharing in group counselling sessions and having others listen to his stories made him feel appreciated. This is his experience:

"They listened to my stories, I feel my confidence getting better, I feel appreciated, I feel relieved because they understand me. I want to be heard. When I shared that, the members listen to what I am trying to share, I can see from their facial expression, they are trying to understand me. So I feel very appreciated in group sessions."

Din expressed a similar experience,

"Group counselling is different from individual counselling. Group counselling was more on the sharing of all members. From there we could see development, and members would updates on their development. I feel more appreciated because they want to share things that happen to them."

Theme 8: Insight

Insight provides an opportunity for an individual to understand his or her lifestyle and be aware of his or her goals, as well as their behaviour. According to Iza, her group counselling experience created an opportunity for her to think differently on the issues that she is encountering.

"I also had an experience in a session where the group leader was facilitated group discussion by using certain technique. I did not realize that I was in tears as I shared my experience in the group. I did not realize that was a problem for me. Then I know what need to be done. That group session provides an opportunity for me to create positive thinking about my experience which I could make a change about myself. Now, I can think more positive about many things."

Mas perceived that interaction among members during the group counselling created an awareness, as well as a learning experience, for herself. This is Mas' story:

"Sometimes I do not understand about my own experience and what I learn from that, however being in the group sessions make me to realize on certain thing. I know that I am not much different from the thing that has been discussed in the group. From that discussion, I know what need to done, to change to move on or many other things. For me, experience of other group members creates such opportunities for learning about life."

6. Discussion

Unconditional acceptance means acceptance of others without judgment. The results showed that unconditional acceptance by the group leader or facilitator and group members are of the utmost importance. Experience of acceptance by the facilitator and group members encouraged the research participants to feel comfortable being in the group. Feeling comfortable in the group then contributed to feeling confident with themselves. The study also showed that feeling accepted contributed to participants gaining courage to share their experiences and stories with the group members. This study described the ideas that have been previously stated by Rogers (1951) on the need to be respected, loved and accepted by others, and thus contributing to self-confidence.

The results also showed that confidentiality is one of the most important factors for group members. Stories of the research participants indicated that confidentiality developed slowly. The research participants were also aware that confidentiality in the group involved the responsibility of many individuals. Related to this, Corey et al. (2007) stated that confidentiality is an important factor in forming effective groups. The implication of these findings is that the group leader should promote confidentiality among members. Also, confidentiality cannot occur without the effort of the group leader. In other words, the group leader is responsible for promoting confidentiality. However, there are certain exceptions in respect of confidentiality. Group leaders are required to contact certain people when a client attempts to hurt themselves or others. According to Corey et al. (2007), counselors or group leaders who leaked confidential information about a client without a good reason, will damage client confidence towards him, and thus damage the therapeutic relationship. A secure group atmosphere allows members to get support in dealing with the emotions that arise, face with challenges, and get involved in the interaction among members (Corey et al., 2007).

The results also showed that leadership skills among group leaders contribute to the quality of group counselling. Stories of the research participants indicated that the counselling skills of the group leader promoted their cooperation in the group. The study also showed that the group leader requires listening skills as these are the most basic and most important skills. Listening effectively requires hearing skills and a high level of concentration. In the context of counselling, there are many things that need to be heard, e.g.: the spoken content; feelings expressed by non-verbal behavior; and the feelings expressed. The skills used by the group leader have an impact on the development of group counselling. Experiences of the participants indicated that the leadership skills shown by the facilitator encouraged sharing in groups. Related to this, Yalom & Leszcz (2005) emphasizes the importance of the role of the group leader in developing therapeutic experience among group members. The author also states that the relationship between the group leader and the members should be built and developed. Referring back to the findings of this study, the relationship can be built and developed through the skills used by the group leader.

The results showed that the responsibilities of each member are very important and have an impact on the achievement of group goals. Group members are responsible in promoting cooperation among them during group counselling sessions. Cooperation during group counselling allows for adjustment or development of members' experiences, such as feedback from others helps them to face adjustment issues positively. Group counselling allows for interaction among group members, which is also intended to help members enhance their self-development. Adjustment and personal growth among group members can be seen in the modification of behaviour, the development of a personal relationship, values or attitudes. In addition, the counselling group members interacted with each other. This interaction allows individuals to understand themselves and their personal situation better. Thus, this interaction creates opportunities for clarification and understanding of own goals and values, and can help in determining appropriate future actions. The experiences encountered by the students supported the idea put forward by Tudor, et al. (2004) on the importance of relationships with other people in fulfilling individual needs.

The findings also show that there are many positive effects for students who undergo group counselling. Most of the study's participants reported positive effects of group counselling after the sessions. The feeling of relief is an aspect that is often mentioned by research participants. The study also showed that sharing in group counselling contributes to feelings of confidence, being valued, and self-insight among the members.

7. Conclusion

Group counselling provides a therapeutic experience to its members. Therapeutic experience is partly related to unconditional acceptance, confidentiality, leadership and commitment of the group leader. The therapeutic experience contributed to self-confidence, gaining insight into past experiences, feeling valued and the feeling of relief.

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