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The Themes and Categories of the Students' Negative Thoughts and the Effectiveness of Group Psychotherapy in Reducing the Student's Negative Thoughts

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Abstract:

This study explored the effectiveness of group psychotherapy in reducing the negative thoughts of students. It also aimed to identify the themes and categories of the students' negative thoughts. Students were given group psychotherapy and the score before and after the group psychotherapy was collected. There were significant differences between the pre-test and post-test scores of the students. Hence, group psychotherapy is effective in reducing the negative thoughts of students. The findings of the theme analysis revealed that majority of the students' negative thoughts were in the area of intrapersonal problems of hopelessness, low self-esteem, negative mood, anxiety and general fear. Family relationships and academic problems were also reported.

Keywords: group therapy, negative thoughts, student problem, academic problem

Introduction

Psychotherapy is literally defined as caring for another person's soul or being. Group psychotherapy is a mode of psychotherapy where clients or participants share and express their feelings and concern and obtain feedback from group members. It is a great opportunity to offer support and care (Kleinke, 1994). Psychotherapy is normally conducted by a professional with expertise and training; however some studies have found that the use of para-professionals result in superior outcomes relative to professionals (Hattie, Sharpley, & Rogers 1984) and those

psychology trainees under staff supervision have better treatment outcomes than professional staff therapist (Lambert, Whipple, Hawkins, Vermeersch, Nielsen & Smart 2003). An effective therapist may not necessary be that person with the most training, experience and credentials (Plante, 2003). Research also indicates that the therapist's psychological health and skill, being sincere and helpful of others are qualities for being an effective therapist (Kleinke, 1994).

Group counseling is an efficient, effective and positive way of dealing with student's academic, personal, social, emotional, developmental and situational concerns. Students develop insights and learn to communicate and cooperate with others (Sink, Eppler & Edwards, 2011).

A meta-analysis of counseling and psychotherapy in school setting indicated that there was a strong evidence that those interventions have demonstrable beneficial effects on student's well-being but did not find significant improvement in academic achievement (Prout and Prout, 1998). Similarly, group-counseling interventions for academic success should include emotional and social components to be most effective (Schechetman, 2002).

Most qualitative reviews and meta-analysis showed that group therapy with children and adolescents produce positive results compared with no treatment or placebo and that individual therapy is no more effective than group therapy (Hoag and Burlingame, 1997).

According to Dr. Melgar (2013) a Filipino clinical psychologist, there are two areas of weaknesses in the field of counseling and psychotherapy in the Philippines: one, the practice of counseling in schools and the other, the lack of productivity in terms of research in counseling. Similarly, there is a slow but growing public demand for psychological services such as: psychological assessment and therapy for children with special needs; therapy for young people with presenting problems such as depression, suicide, trauma or addiction and therapy for couples as well as families.

Tuliao (2014) in his study on the mental health seeking behavior among Filipinos suggested that mental health services in the Philippines are inaccessible and monetary prohibitive. Shame, stigma and collective beliefs also discouraged Filipinos from seeking mental health professionals. Teh (2012) in her study on the practice of psychotherapy in the Philippines showed that the most common problems encountered by respondents were: school-related problems of children and adolescents; marital and family problems.

Beltran (2013) on the other hand, studied the contributions of negative thoughts to the development of depression among undergraduate students and results support that negative automatic thoughts can predict depression.

Negative thoughts about the self can be developmental and can originate from the child's early interactions with the environment or caregiver. The cognitive theory of depression by Beck (1987) states that when we are faced with stress, it activates a negative self-schema and it is based on a negative direction leading to a focus on negative thoughts that then causes depression. These negative thoughts about the self, the world and the future may become repetitive and automatic (Pennington, 2005).

A university student faces several issues ranging from academic life and personal life (Pereira, 1997) financial difficulties (Basco and Olea, 2012); low self-esteem, adolescent depression (Fonagy, Cottrell, Kurtz & Philips & Target, 2002); suicide ideation associated with substance use, physical activity, feelings of loneliness, hopelessness/sadness and worrying (Page, West, Hall, 2010; Page, Yanagishita, Suwanteerangkul, Zarco, Mei-Lee, and Fang-Miao (2006); making friends, problem behavior, siblings, school and parents (Monilla, 2013).

A study shows that majority of the students (75%) have not talked to or consulted a teacher or counselor about their problems because they don't feel they are helpful, they ignore the students, it was very impersonal or the guidance counselor was not in the office most of the time (Alcantara, 2013). Bringing group psychotherapy inside the classrooms can help a majority of the students who are experiencing life's problems.

Significance of the Study

Exploring the negative thoughts of students will give us an overview of the kind of negative thoughts that they have. Knowing or understanding the students' current problems and negative thoughts and determining ways to alleviate or lessen them can help them prepare for a greater problem ahead as future service-oriented people when the students graduate from the university. The results of the researches in the Philippines suggest that there is a need to provide assistance to adolescents facing problems and to measure its effectiveness.

Students are not exempted from having negative thoughts. The stress of everyday life with multiple roles as a student, son or daughter or even a parent can take its toll especially on our students.

Previous researches showed that group psychotherapy works in the school setting provided by the Guidance Office. Students in general, in the course of their stay in school may be dealing with feelings of depression, loneliness, anxiety and even suicidal tendency.

With this in mind, the researcher would want to explore the negative thoughts of graduating students and evaluate the effectiveness of group therapy in reducing the negative thoughts of students.

Theoretical Framework

Studies show that negative thoughts (Beltran, 2013) and student's personal problems are related to depression (Monilla, 2013). The cognitive theories of depression maintain that negative thinking is what leads to depression in many people (Feliciano & Arian, 2007). Theories show that what we think mostly influences what we feel and act. Students who are prone to having negative thoughts maybe susceptible to negative feelings and may manifest negative behavior or attitude in school toward classmates, friends or teachers. This negative thinking and behavior may also account for their academic problem.

Negative thoughts involving the self may signal a low self-esteem, feeling of inadequacy and low self-confidence which can also influence or affect how they deal with themselves in coping with problems in general and other people.

A practical value of conducting group therapy to students in reducing negative thoughts is that group therapy with adolescents produce positive results compared to no treatment or placebo (Hoag and Burlingame, 1997). Group treatment is more effective than individual treatment in children and adolescents in school setting (Prout-De Martino, 1986).

Applying a session of group therapy to students is beneficial than no treatment at all, group therapy may help in the reduction of the negative thoughts of students.

A reduction of negative thoughts in students may improve a student's view of himself, his social and interpersonal skills, his attitude towards academic stress, family and friends and may improve the overall well-being of the student.

Statement of the Problem

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the themes and categories of the negative thoughts of students?
2. How effective are the group therapy forms in reducing the negative thoughts of students?
3. Is group psychotherapy effective in reducing the negative thoughts of students?

Methods and Hypothesis

In this section, the study method, population, data collection procedures and hypothesis of the study are presented.

Research Method

The method used in this study is the mixed method of the qualitative approach using the phenomenological approach and theme analysis for the first problem and the quantitative methods of post test only and pretest and post-test quasi-experimental design for the second and third problem. Post-test only design involves the use of a single group of subjects to whom some treatments are given. The subjects are then assessed on the dependent variable. (Jackson, 2011). The pretest–post-test design involves obtaining a pretest measure of the outcome of interest prior to administering some treatment, followed by a posttest on the same measure after treatment occurs. The quasi-experimental pre-test post test design may or may not include control group. (Sage Publication, 2010)

Study Population

The students that participated in this study were eighty-four (84) fourth year students and forty (40) third year students enrolled in a Psychotherapy class at a state university in Pasig City, Metro Manila, Philippines. The students enrolled in the said state university came from low to lower-middle income families and most of the students were beneficiaries of the local scholarships sponsored by the city mayor and other civic organizations. The majority of the students are under the age of 22 and single. The economic and social challenges faced by the students may contribute to an increase in anxiety or worries that may be conducive for the students to undergo group psychotherapy.

Data Collection

Two groups participated in this study. One group was for the fourth year and one group for the third year. The basis for the theme analysis and post-test only design was for the fourth year students and the quasi-experimental group pre-post test was for the third year students.

Prior to the conduct of the study, the fourth year students were asked to write down their negative and positive thoughts on a piece of paper. It is instructed that each student place his or her negative thoughts in a bowl to make the written thoughts anonymous. In the next session of the psychotherapy class, the students were grouped randomly to make sure that they are not grouped with their close friends. The instruction given in the last session was modified and that they had to share the negative thoughts to their group mates. A guideline for group therapy was explained and some house rules on what to do and not to do. The activity was structured and was timed with students given five (5) minutes to share their thoughts. Any of the students can react, give suggestions or uplift the mood of their classmates. After sharing the negative thoughts they had to share their positive thoughts to counter any negative effect of talking about the student's negative thoughts. After the session, the students were asked to answer essay questions and rate the effectiveness of the activity. At the end of the class, the students were instructed to give a small token to their group members to make the therapy more memorable. The results of the written negative thoughts for the fourth year students were analyzed for themes and the results of the effectiveness of the group therapy were tabulated for frequency and percentage.

The third year students were asked to reflect and write their negative thoughts in a sheet of paper and were asked to score the level of negative thoughts prior to the group psychotherapy. The third year students shared their negative thoughts and after the session they were asked to score the level of the negative thoughts. The scores were collected for computation and analysis.

Hypothesis

The study tested the hypothesis that:

There is no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test level of negative thoughts of the students.

Analysis

After the group psychotherapy, the rating of post-test was collected and analyzed using frequency. The pretest and post-test were gathered and analyzed using mean and paired t-test using the Excel statistical spreadsheet. The negative thoughts that were written on the paper were collected and were transcribed into text format. Not all papers were collected since some were too small and some were thrown away. The researcher analyzed each statement and identified themes or areas that are appropriate for the statement. Initially, the researcher created a list of themes and categories and asked two fourth year students to categorize the statements into the initial themes and categories, instructed them to create a new theme if appropriate and indicate uncategorized if they cannot find the appropriate theme. Another set of students, three third year students analyzed same data and another theme category emerged and was also revised by the

researcher. A second year student analyzed the output per category and was instructed to eliminate items that do not belong together. Lastly, the researcher finalized the theme and categories presented.

Findings and Discussion

The themes that are most common in the group are in the category of intrapersonal conflict or maladjustment, problems relating to personal problems like controlling moods, emotions and feeling of low self-esteem, inadequacy, sadness, hopelessness and suicidal tendency. A number of negative attitude also emerged in the responses of the students, negative attitude towards other people, most especially friends or classmates. A general fear of objects or phobia is included; these responses are not of inner source of fear but something external to the students. Anxiety in anticipation of future events or anxiety caused by something that has occurred in the past is also a concern. Lastly, managing time effectively is reported to be a source of frustration to a minority of students.

What is most bothersome in the results of the negative thoughts of the students is their feeling of hopelessness and suicidal tendency. A number of students (3) explicitly wrote that they have suicidal tendency and another number reported that they feel hopeless and close to giving up. Page, Yanagishita, Suwanteerangkul, et.al. (2006) in their study hypothesized that hopelessness and loneliness would be related to suicide attempts, and that hopelessness would continue to be associated with suicide attempts when controlling for loneliness. Some results of this study have several instances of feeling hopeless and loneliness among the students though it is inconclusive to connect the two constructs. Negative attitudes directed at classmates were also numerous, the goal of having a close and cohesive group for the graduating class were not present in some of the class.

Anxiety over graduation is common among students (Kim, 2012) who may have experienced a failing grade or difficulty in any of the subjects. Anxiety over looking for a job after graduation is also reported. Still, a minimum only reported this worry as some may be too occupied with the responsibilities and obligations of academic requirement that these are thoughts of by the end of the school year (Jaffe, 2013).

The general academic concerns include problems relating to academic difficulty and worries. It also constitutes a number of negative thoughts and complaint about their subjects, teachers among others. Student's fear of failing a subject, unpreparedness in lessons, tardiness, and anxiety over the board examination is also manifested. Some concerns with their on-the-job training were also reported.

Another important theme that emerges is related to the student's family. Family problem like financial problem is common to married students who have to take care of the household expenses, education expenses for their children and other health problems of family members. Responses under the category of family problem mostly relates to problems of student-mothers. The theme of family relationship can be described as negative relationships with members of the family (to quarrel with my friends and family), failure to meet expectations of parents, therefore,

students may disappoint their parents, the family not being available to the students (I can't feel the presence of my family when I had a problem), no attachment to family members and feelings of loneliness because the family is away or is an only child.

Included in this theme is the category of friendship problem, these are mostly relationship problems with friends, guilt feelings, irritation, feelings of being used and being angry with friends. According to Tverskoy (2009), having close friendship in adolescence has been shown to be crucial for future emotional and relational well-being and the family environment that surrounded them at birth influences that teenager's behavioral and emotional well being. Having a good environment at home may foster a good relationship with friends. For some teenagers, they are more open and closer or attached to their friends than to their parents. Though we cannot conclude that those students who reported an unhappy family are the same person who reported an unhappy friendship.

In general, the therapy was perceived to be effective in reducing their negative thoughts. Nineteen (19) percent of the respondents expressed that the group therapy was very effective with a perfect score of 10. There were 31 students who rated the therapy as 9, 24 students rated it as 8 and 6 students have rated it as 7 with only one student who rated a low score of 4. There were 6 students who were not able to give a rating of the effectiveness of the group therapy.

The result of the study is similar to the previous studies (Prout and Prout, 1998, Prout and De-Martino, 1986, Hoag and Burlingame, 1997 and Schechtman 2002), that group psychotherapy is effective in school setting. This result may suggest that group psychotherapy may reduce the negative thoughts of students. Cognitive therapy is a common technique in reducing negative thoughts in therapy but this may or may not be present in this study since the contents of the conversation and discussions of the groups were not documented. There may be other factors contributing to the success of this therapy in reducing negative thoughts like group cohesion, caring attitude, openness and trust.

The result of the pretest and posttest showed that the computed t-value using the t-test for paired means samples is greater than the critical value that leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis of no significant difference.

A significant difference exists between the pretest and posttest mean scores of the student's evaluation of their negative thoughts that further indicates a significant reduction in the students' negative thoughts after the group psychotherapy. Hence, the conducted group psychotherapy helped the students in the reduction of their negative thoughts.

Conclusions

The students' negative thoughts in this study were focused on intrapersonal conflict or personal problems mostly dealing with negative emotions, negative attitude and negative self- concept that may contribute to their experience of hopelessness and to a few suicidal tendency. The reported effectiveness of group psychotherapy may be utilized as a brief intervention especially in instances where the Guidance Office cannot accommodate individually their clients in a

school setting. Similarly, as literature suggest (Plante, 2003), an effective therapist may not necessarily be the person with the most credential, being sincere and being supportive may also be helpful.

The following recommendations were drawn from the study: (1) Group activity similar to a group therapy will be conducted regularly to monitor and alleviate student problems dealing with their personal and academic life. (2) Assessment of students for depression to identify high-risk students who may develop the disorder. (3) Psycho-educational activities to inform students of proper mental health hygiene. (4) Provide a venue for students to vent out their negative thoughts by using music and the arts. (5) Improve the quality of the research results by improving and controlling methods and data gathering procedures.

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