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Self-Awareness Group Counseling Model for Prospective Counselors

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Abstract

The self-awareness group counseling model is aimed to promote intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness of counseling students. Since self-awareness is thought to be one of the most influential factors in affecting a counselor's profession, activities that promote personal-understanding needs to be a central component in counseling programs. This paper provides a rationale for the need of self-awareness group counseling, as well as the formal education of counseling skills, in national counselor-education programs. The model employs these scopes for the basic self-awareness group model; (1) the scope of self-awareness, (2) self and other perceptions, (3) the discovery of thoughts, emotions and behaviors, (4) the understanding of communication patterns, (5) the ability to give and receive feedback, (6) self evaluations and (7) experiential learning of counseling skills and processes. Each session of the group counseling is structured by psychodramatic activities. Based on the pilot experience, a discussion is made on the perceived effectiveness of the model. Preliminary findings indicate that the counseling students benefit from the group experience in terms of self-understanding.

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1. Background

Understanding oneself is defined as the awareness of individuals' own motivation, attitudes, values and perceptions (Gump, 1969). Similarly, self-awareness is also defined as the awareness of feelings, cognitions and behaviors (Oden, Miner-Holden & Balkin, 2009). Chin-Yen (1998) identify self-awareness as one's understanding,

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examining and make meaning of him/herself; and contemplating his/her feelings, thoughts, behaviors, relationships and personal characteristics. In other words, self-awareness can be defined as observing of ourselves. Oden, Miner-Holden & Balkin (2009) also described self-awareness in the context of counseling; as the capacity to bring feelings, thoughts and behaviors into consciousness within the counselor-counselee relationship.

Literature suggests that mental health professionals need to gain insight about their own prejudices, stereotyped beliefs and assumptions in order to serve diverse client populations. As counselors understand more about themselves, they will be able to control unconscious reflection of their own attitudes and judgments towards the clients (Gump, 1969). Renick (1976) proposed that gaining self awareness during counselor education is as vital as learning counseling skills, theory and techniques. He further asserted that counselors can only form effective communication through the awareness of their own selves. Likewise, Chin-Yen (1998) emphasized that as well as counseling theories and skills; self-knowledge and self-understanding also play critical roles in psychological support relations.

It is commonly proposed that self-awareness needs to be a central component of counselor education; however literature also suggests alternatives for self-awareness training (Lennie, 2007). For psychoanalysis training, receiving personal therapy is a basic requirement (McEwan & Duncan, 1993). The underlying rationale behind the necessity of psychoanalytic personal therapy is that in order to control countertransference during therapy and minimizing its negative effects on clients, counselors themselves should go through psychoanalysis (Oden, Miner-Holden & Balkin, 2009). There are also other approaches that require trainees to receive personal therapy (Lennie, 2007). Receiving personal therapy is believed to foster self-understanding, increase students' belief in the validity of therapy models and eliminating personal problems that may affect the process adversely (McEwan & Duncan, 1993). A study has found that professionals benefit from individual counseling by means of empathy development, role modeling the client, development of characters, understanding themselves, learning the ways of personal growth and preparing themselves of being counselor (McEwan & Duncan, 1993).

Apart from personal therapy, personal growth groups are proposed as an alternative self-awareness method for counselor education. Personal growth groups have two ways of benefits for prospective counselors; one is fostering counseling attitudes and skills; and the other is providing students' opportunity for personal development (Lennie, 2007). It has been asserted that personal-development groups provide student counselors a safe occasion to test themselves and realize their own communication and relationship patterns (Lennie, 2007). This growth groups are generally low-threat, high-trust and here-now; so that students will be able to develop their communication and relationship skills (Renick, 1976). The context of self-awareness groups is broadly defined by Chin-Yen (1998); which are the education of basic skills, thinking activities and experiential learning. In the initial step of groups, the term 'self-awareness' needs to be defined. Further, the connection among physical awareness, bodily reactions, feelings and cognitions needs to be emphasized during training. On the second step, it has been proposed that personal thoughts and values should be discovered via group activities. Also, receiving and giving feedback should be worked during group counseling.

The studies that are conducted on group counseling experience on counselor education programs focus generally on experiential activities (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010). Experiential learning, which is defined as learning by doing (Anderson, 2001 & Armstrong, 2002); is proposed as the vital educational experience for therapeutic work and not only self-awareness but also basic skills need to be attained by this method (Rogers (1957). Experiential learning in counselor education can be accomplished by role-play activities, case studies, observation of professionals, games or comprehensive group counseling activities (Anderson, 2001). Experiential group works helps counselor students to increase their self-knowledge and their awareness about their defense mechanisms in self-expression and to develop their skills in receiving and giving feedbacks (Armstrong, 2002). Luke & Kiweewa (2010) also asserts that self-awareness itself is the component of counselor education, so experiential group counseling that increase personal growth needs to be a part of this education. As well as increasing personal awareness of one's own feelings, thoughts, beliefs, interests, values and culture, experiential group counseling also provide a safe environment for understanding of self and other perceptions, and realizing the effects of one's behaviors on others (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010).

Psychodrama, which is based on spontaneity, creativity and action (Altnay, 2000), can be thought as an appropriate method for the nature of experiential group counseling. Kipper (2000) also defined psychodrama as an experiential group therapy of role playing. The ultimate aim of psychodramatic activities is to provide awareness by re-experiencing the reality in group work, providing changes in attitudes and testing new behaviors (Hamamcı & Esen Çoban, 2009). For these reasons, psychodramatic games can enrich experiential group counseling for

counselor awareness.

United States counselor education programs require students to have personal and group counseling and the literature broadly covers the need for self-awareness in counselor education programs (Hansen, 2009). Since 1988, Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) in US request counselor students to experience group counseling during their education. However, studies are concerned about the issue of ‘obligation of receiving therapy’ (McEwan & Duncan, 1993). It has been questioned whether making the group counseling obligatory is ethical. Renick (1976) argued that personal awareness groups need to be based on voluntary participation in order students to benefit from it. The other concern about the structure of experiential groups is about who is going to lead the groups. McEwan & Duncan (1993) suggests that in order to avoid dual relationships with children, instead of academic staff, a practitioner outside of the university needs to give the service.

2. The rationale of self-awareness groups in national context

The greatest tool of the therapist is said to be ‘own self’ (Yalom, 2002). Counselors use themselves in extracting clients’ feelings, forming a therapeutic relationship and being a good role model for their clients. Apart from theory and skill education, counselors need to involve in activities to know themselves more. When counselor education programs implement self-awareness counseling groups in their schedule, all prospective counselors can benefit from groups during their education.

In Turkey, counselor education programs have students both in undergraduate and graduate levels. However, neither individual therapy nor group counseling is the requirement of these programs (Ulanir, 2005). So, alternative self-awareness activities need to be put into practice. Even for undergraduate levels, students generally come into counseling department without any knowledge about their profession. Self-awareness group counseling method seems to be a feasible alternative for time and money restrictions. Majority of prospective counselors have the opportunity to engage in self-awareness processes via group counseling.

In this study, all counselor students are hypothesized to be in need of personal awareness groups in Turkish context. This group counseling activities should be articulated into academic programs. The service should be provided by the professionals in universities’ counseling centers.

3. The characteristics of the self-awareness group model

The self-awareness group implements the basics of self-awareness concept within the limited time period. This tentative model can be described as the initial self-awareness group for beginner counselors. This model includes various literature findings in its program. The basics of the model includes;

- Activities that foster self-knowledge, realization and expression of strengths, weaknesses and blind spots and understanding other and self perceptions (Yalom,2002),
- Since counselor problems potentially affect the counseling process, the activities that enable learning coping mechanisms (Meier & Davis, 2009),
- Since clients come into sessions with deep feelings, activities that is related with the understanding of one’s own and other’s feelings; realizing the annoying feelings (Meier & Davis, 2009).
- In order to form effective communication with clients, activities of communication styles and the awareness of own communication gaps (Yalom, 2002).

3.1. The sessions of the self-awareness group

The group is a pilot model that is structured as 5 group sessions, with each session focuses on different aspects of self-awareness. Each session is scheduled as 70 minutes. After each session, students require to complete their own reflections about the session. This reflection is about what they learn/ gain/ aware/benefit from the session.

1. Session: ‘I’ as a psychological counselor

This session is aimed to warm students up and introduce each other as the group of counseling students who will be together for their entire education. Their questions and predictions about the group need to be analyzed initially in order to form realistic expectations. Further, their motives behind the counseling profession are questioned in order to make them more conscious about their profession. Empathy activities are used in this session for students to

understand themselves and others. The games ‘Meaning of name’, ‘2truths-1lie’ is used for ice-breaking reasons; and expectations tree is used for understanding students motives about the group and giving accurate information about the nature of group counseling. In addition, two psychodramatic games is also implemented in this session; doubling is for emphatic understanding and morning dream is for realizing instant feelings and leaving the group in good sense.

2. Session: Self-Knowledge and Expression

Second session is dedicated to the awareness of students’ characteristics including strengths and weaknesses analysis, and perceptions of others. The core idea behind this session is providing prospective counselors to more think about themselves. The activity ‘My strengths and weaknesses’ is used for students understand their own strengths and areas for development. This activity also gives idea about how each of them is perceived by their classmates in terms of strong and weak points. The other activity enables students to think about their characteristics in terms of being counselor. They analyzed themselves about the areas that they can use for being a good counselor and the areas that are needed to be changed. This activity helps student understand core counseling skills. Spectrogram is implemented in this session for students give themselves realistic goals for the group work. They also understand how they stand among others. Group sculpture activity is used as a closing game. This game enables students to tell their ideas and feelings about the group process and themselves.

3. Session: Understanding emotions

Understanding emotions in this session includes the understanding of one’s own here& now feelings; identification of basic emotions and understanding of others’ emotions. Bingo game is used firstly for realization of the dominant feeling that students have right now. This game also helps students to understand other’ feeling by guessing. Students learn to use facial expressions, body posture and previous knowledge to better estimate others’ state of emotion. Basic primary emotions such as anger, fear, disgust, contempt, joy, sadness, surprise are dramatized by groups for better understanding of their bodily reactions and facial expressions. In addition, in order to find mutual feelings, group itself try to find out the ‘Feeling of the group’. This last activity helps students to focus on their own emotions and their emotional standing within group.

4. Session: Communication Skills

At the beginning of the session, students are provided with a ‘Communication Booklet’ for the reason of giving basic information about communication types and elements. This session targets at both learning and experiencing different communication patterns. Additionally, the role of body language in communication is emphasized. For these reasons, interactive discussion about the communication based on the given booklet is initially made. Further, nonverbal communication skills are tested via role playing. This will provide an understanding about which emotions are easy or difficult to define by body language. The role of posture and the physical standing are also important for communication, so ‘Talking from different positions’ games is used. At the end of this session, ‘Pillow’ game is played for analyzing group experience about ‘What to bring’ to group and ‘What to take’ from group. Students critically study their own selves in terms of development.

5. Session: Evaluation

The last session of the group is for students’ understanding about their own developmental process within group and their own awareness about the personal growth in general. It is aimed that students objectify their own need for further self-awareness for counseling profession. Leaving the group happy is also important for further group participation. Collage work is used for students express students’ imagination of a good counselor in the future. This activity helps them to understand conscious and unconscious motives behind this. The group also discussed what they understand from collage and what the person tries to express by his/her collage. Lastly, in order to leave the group with good feelings, an entertaining activity is used as the termination. ‘Group song’ activity requires students to write the lyrics of the song that they have in their mind right now, and all the lyrics generate the song of the group. This activity also helps to understand if the members have positive or negative feeling dominantly.

3.1. The evaluation of the self awareness group and further suggestions

Pilot group was conducted on May, 2012 with 10 counseling sophomore students. According to the

reflections of students, they thought that they have benefited from group in understanding about themselves and how they perceived by others. Majority of them noted that they have never experienced such feelings so that they understand they are in need of such activities. They also told that they sometimes feel threatened because they have never engaged in self-awareness. They realized that they need to develop themselves much more. Most of them noted that their belief into counseling has increased. Such activities prompt students to think more about themselves.

This pilot experience is only an initial step for counselor students in the way of self-awareness. However, even the preliminary reflections show that group counseling prompts students towards self-questioning and self-understanding. The content of the group needs to be broadened in order to cover self-awareness entirely. Also, such group experience needs to be generalizing to all levels.

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