What is Group Process?: Integrating Process Work into Psychoeducational Groups

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Abstract

Process work has long been a tenet of successful counseling outcomes. However, there is little literature available that focuses on how to best integrate process work into group settings–particularly psychoeducational groups that are content heavy and most often utilized in a school setting. In this article, the authors provide an overview of the literature that is available on process work with an emphasis on clearly delineating the principles of group process. In addition, we also outline specific, process-based guidelines and techniques that school counselors can use to help integrate process work into their psychoeducational group practice.

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Psychoeducational counseling groups (PEGs) are a well known tool used by counselors working in a school setting. Moreover, there is ample research that supports the validity and effectiveness of PEGs in a school setting (see Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Brown, 2011; Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2010; Paisley & Milsom, 2006). These types of groups can help relay information to a larger body of clients (Borders & Drury, 1992), mesh with many individuals' experiences in a school setting (Corey et al., 2010), offer a developmentally appropriate venue through which to impart and discuss information (Akos, Hamm, Mack, & Dunaway 2006; Corey et al., 2010), and provide students with a safe environment in which to practise new skills (Drum 2006). In research conducted by Champe and Rubel (2012), they found that integration of process work into such groups has been linked to increased knowledge acquisition of the topic(s) covered. This outcome raises the question, What exactly is process work, and how does one best integrate this into time-sensitive, content-heavy PEGs?.

While process work is not a new term to the counseling field, we have observed that an in-depth understanding of process work and its integration into counseling settings is a challenge for many novice counselors. Furthermore, according to Champe and

Rubel (2012), while some process-based guidelines do exist, there is little literature available that outlines methods through which to integrate process into PEGs. As such, our main aims in this article are to review the literature on process work as a way of increasing understanding of this topic and to provide practitioners with guidelines and specific techniques on how to integrate process into a psychoeducational group counseling setting.

The Efficacy of Group Approache

Prior to exploring the literature on process work, it is important to address and provide support for group approaches. Gumaer (as cited in Margot & Warren, 1996) stated, "People are born in groups, live in groups, work in groups, become ill in groups, and so why not treat them in groups" (para. 7). According to Drumm (2006), group work is a powerful therapeutic endeavor that can result in an atmosphere of mutual aid. In this setting, members learn to identify and voice their own needs, realize similarities and differences, form connections with others, and practice new skills in an environment of inclusion and respect (Drumm, 2006).

To provide further evidence of the efficacy of group work, Yalom and Leszcz (2005) stated, "A persuasive body of outcome research has demonstrated unequivocally that group therapy is a highly effective form of psychotherapy and that it is at least equal to individual psychotherapy in its power to provide meaningful benefit" (p. 1). McRoberts, Burlingame, and Hoag's (1998) meta-analytic review supported this assertion. These researchers analyzed 23 outcome studies completed between 1950 and 1997 that compared the effectiveness of group therapy versus individual therapy. From their in-depth analysis of

these studies, they concluded there were no significant differences in therapeutic outcomes when group versus individual counseling approaches were used. As the most influential group in the lives of adolescents is often their peers (Akos et al., 2006), it follows that counseling with this population may be most effective in a group setting. Gumaer (as cited in Margot & Warren, 1996) supported this statement and noted that there is no better environment in which youth may learn than within their peer group. Consequently, counselors working in the school setting can maximize students' learning through group experiences.

Use of Process in Group Work

Process has been defined as the meta-communicational aspects of interactions between group members (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). The focus in group process work is to try to understand the nature of the relationship between members in a group (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). While content involves looking at what specifically was said, process involves looking at the how and the why behind what was said (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). At the heart of process work is "identifying the connection between the communication's actual impact and the communicator's intent" (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005, p. 143). According to Yalom and Leszcz (2005), when counselors utilize a process-based orientation they ask themselves, "What do these explicit words, the style of the participants, the nature of the discussion, tell us about the interpersonal relationship of the participants?" (p. 143).

Experts in the field discussed four essential components of process work: an in-depth understanding of the different stages of group development (Corey et al., 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), a focus on the

here and now (Corey et al., 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), the facilitation of process commentary (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), and the use of silence (Harris, 1988). The next section provides an overview of these essential components of process work.

Stages of Group Development
The importance of having an awareness of the different stages or processes that a PEG can go through is crucial to the facilitation of a successful group (Corey et al., 2010; Jones & Robinson, 2000; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Furthermore, having an in-depth understanding of group stages of development is an ethical responsibility of group facilitators, as noted in Ethical Standard B.2 of the Association for Specialists in Group Work: Best Practice Guidelines 2007 Revisions (Thomas & Pender, 2008, p. 115). One main reason for having such an understanding is that "group activities [and interventions utilized] must be appropriately timed in consideration of the group stage" (Jones & Robinson, 2000, pp. 356–357). Moreover, having such an understanding can also provide insight into the dynamics and processes that can occur in a group setting (Corey et al., 2010; Thompson, 2011; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), offer a framework for working with resistance and selecting stage-appropriate interventions (Champe & Rubel, 2012; Corey et al., 2010; Gold, 2008; Jones & Robinson, 2000), and provide insight into the underlying needs of members at different stages in the group's development (Champe & Rubel, 2012; Corey et al., 2010).

Here-And-Now Focus
A here-and-now focus involves encouraging group members to center in on what is occurring for them at the present moment in time within the group setting (Corey at al., 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). This can include a focus on members' thoughts, feelings, sensations in their body, atmosphere in the room, and the underlying reasons behind behaviors that have just occurred (Corey et al., 2010). Utilizing a here-and-now focus is a crucial aspect of process work, as this type of directed attention can result in increased (a) group therapy power and effectiveness (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005); (b) insight into how members behave in the outside world, as this will be represented by how they interact with other in the group setting (Corey et al., 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005); (c) emotional quality of interactions (Corey et al., 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005); (d) likelihood of improving members' interpersonal relationships outside the group (Corey et al., 2010); (e) ability to move the group process to the next stage (Corey et al., 2010); and (f) opportunities for all members to participate, regardless of what they may be experiencing (Corey et al., 2010). According to Yalom and Leszcz (2005), for a here-and-now focus to be therapeutic, reflections on these experiences need to occur (i.e., process commentary).

Process Commentar
Yalom and Leszcz (2005) discussed process commentary in terms of illumination. Process illumination occurs when group members are able to examine themselves in the here and now, study the transactions in the group, and then transcend the pure here-and-now focus to integrate that experience into learning outside of the group (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Stated more simply, after a here-and-now group interaction, the process commentary would consist of reflections on the interaction that had just occurred. According to Yalom and Leszcz (2005), ensuring that process commentary occurs immediately after a here-and-now interaction is a crucial aspect of process

work, as process commentary is believed to promote the transfer of learning from the group setting into life outside the group, help in the retention of learning gained from the group, and enable members to identify and alter their problematic behaviors.

The Use of Silence

Silence in counseling has been referred to as problematic by researchers and practitioners alike (see Corey et al., 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). However, in alignment with Harris's (1988) view, silence also has the potential to be a powerful tool and may be essential to the development of process work in a group setting. According to Harris, silence in a group can indicate important underlying group dynamics, such as conflict, group ease, and times of deep reflection.

Silence allows time for (a) group members to reflect on the topics that arise in a group setting, (b) group leaders to reflect on what has just happened and how to best proceed, (c) the processing of intense group interactions, (d) the grounding of group members, and (e) periods of well deserved rest from what can be an intense experience (Harris, 1988). As the focus in PEGs is usually on getting through a large body of information, the powerful use of silence may often be overlooked. Group leaders who allow for periods of silence, in addition to the previously mentioned benefits, can help promote the development of a healthy, more effective, well established group (Harris, 1988). In addition, Harris (1988) encouraged PEG facilitators to use silence as a means through which to amplify the connections between members. As Harris stated, "Feeling at one with others is a powerful experience, and the feeling is often most intense when we do not convey it with words" (para. 11).

Guidelines for Integrating Process Work into Psychoeducational Groups

Champe and Rubel (2012) eloquently described the balancing act that exists between process and content in PEGs as follows: "Too much focus on group process risks veering into the territory of therapy groups, while too much focus on content and conceptual learning risks merely teaching to people sitting in a circle" (p. 74). In Champe and Rubel's discussion of how counselors can integrate process work into PEGs, they identified four key counselor tasks: create a safe group environment, engage members in each other's learning, explore members' relationships to PEG content, and return promptly to the PEG content being covered.

Create a Safe Group Environment

In creating a safe group environment, the techniques used by counselors should vary depending on the stage of group development. In the forming stage, activities should be low risk (e.g., facilitator-selected dyad activities and round-robin check-ins) and aimed at assisting members in getting to know each other and in expressing their fears and concerns about the group (Corey et al., 2010; Jones & Robinson, 2000). In the storming stage, activities should be more intense, high risk (e.g., member-selected partners and popcorn check-in rounds or activities), and aimed at facilitating member-to-member interactions that directly and respectfully address conflict (Corey et al., 2010). In the norming stage, activities continue to be more intense and high risk and are intended to encourage the open exchange of applicable interpretations of self and others in the group, to continue to support appropriate conflict resolution, and to involve the demonstration

of respect for differences in the opinions of group members (Fall & Wejnert, 2005). In the performing stage, activities continue to be more intense and high risk and are intended to encourage member self-disclosure, to involve more than one member or the entire group, and to focus mainly on here-and-now group interactions (Jones & Robinson, 2000). Finally, in the adjourning stage, activities should return to being low risk and less intense in nature, with the intention of reviewing the learning gained from the group and helping members prepare for the group's ending (Corey et al., 2010; Jones & Robinson, 2000).

It is important to note that not all group members may progress through the these stages at the same time (Corey et al., 2010). Thus, group facilitators need to reflect on the stage of group development as an entire entity when planning group activities in advance and to be prepared to adjust activities or interventions in the moment based on the stage of development of individual group members.

Engage Members in Each Other's Learning

The following approaches may help the facilitator engage members in each other's learning: utilize a here-and-now focus, facilitate process commentary, and utilize silence. A here-and-now focus can help facilitate member-to-member learning and interactions, as all members can participate regardless of their experience (Corey et al., 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Moreover, the focus is on what is occurring for everybody in the room, not on the different experiences that have occurred for members in their pasts, which can result in storytelling and the subsequent disengagement of other members (Corey et al., 2010). Silence can be used as a

basis through which to explore dynamics occurring between members in a group and allow for the processing of these interactions to occur (Harris, 1988). Corey et al. (2010) highlighted the importance of looking for opportunities to link members' work. In PEGs that are typically characterized by a focus on an overarching topic, using activities appropriate to the current group stage (i.e., dyad, triad, and entire group activities) that facilitate interactions between members regarding the topics at hand can also help to deepen the connections among group members.

Explore Members' Relationship to Psychoeducational Group Content

Yalom and Leszcz (2005) noted that it is critical for group facilitators to reflect on the host of factors that may underlie an interaction in the group setting. In a PEG, this will also involve the consideration of the ways in which what is occurring in the group relates to the topic (or topics) being covered (Furr, 2000). Once again, allowing for periods of silence may provide much needed opportunities for members to reflect on their relationships to the topics being discussed (Harris, 1988). PEG facilitators should ask themselves the following crucial questions when deciding which interaction (or interactions) to bring to the group's attention and dissect further (i.e., engage in process commentary): What are the group's immediate needs (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005)?, How does this relate to the content of the group (Furr, 2000)?, and How can it be used to further members' learning of this content (Furr, 2000)? When taking into account the group's immediate needs, reflection on the stage of group development and the usual member needs at that stage can provide a helpful guideline for facilitators when asking themselves these questions. Allowing for silences in a

group setting can enable group leaders to adequately reflect on these questions.

Return Promptly to the Psycho-educational Group Content Being Covered

As the main focus of a PEG is on content (Brown, 2011; Champe & Rubel, 2012; Corey et al., 2010; Furr, 2000), it is important to have strategies in place to integrate process work that assists in further facilitating members' understanding of the concepts being covered (Furr, 2000). Furr (2000) recommended that PEG facilitators think through the purpose of the exercises they have planned and preplan process-based questions prior to the start of each session. The overarching goals of these process-based questions should be to help facilitate the members' understanding of the topic being covered and their experiences related to that topic (Furr, 2000).

Kees and Jacobs (as cited in Furr, 2000) recommended that processing questions start at the concrete level before proceeding to the more abstract level. For example, facilitators can first ask what happened during the activity itself and then ask what the experience of completing the activity was like for members (Furr, 2000). This line of processing questions can then be followed by a discussion of how completing the activity affected the group as a whole and how the insight or learning gained from the activity could be applied to members' lives outside the group (Furr, 2000). The guidelines discussed in this section provide a way for group facilitators to integrate the benefits of process work into a PEG, without losing sight of the main aim of the group (i.e., teaching content related to a specific topic).

Process-Orientated Techniques to Integrate Process Work into PEG's

Ruth Middleman (1978), a well known and extensively published author in the field of group counseling theory and practice, proposed the following process techniques: amplifying subtle messages, reaching for feeling and information links, redirecting and toning down strong messages, and scanning. Group facilitators can use these techniques to assist them in achieving the key tasks outlined by Champe and Rubel (2012). To better exemplify these techniques, we provide examples based on a PEG geared towards adolescents with low self-esteem.

Amplifying Subtle Messages

Middleman (1978) described the skill of amplifying subtle messages as observing and calling attention to inconsistencies in a member's actions, body language, and thoughts when other members do not appear to notice these inconsistencies. In a PEG for adolescents with low self-esteem, this could involve pointing out inconsistencies between the way a member says a positive affirmation and his or her body language. This could also involve a group discussion of members' reactions when another member shares his or her experiences with issues related to self-esteem (which can also help to engage members in each other's learning and maintain a content focus). For example, the group facilitator may say,

> Susie, I noticed that when you said, I am good enough, your voice was low and quiet, and you were hunched over in your chair. I am thinking that you might not really believe this? I am wondering if you could say this again with a focus on what your body and tone of voice might be like if you really believed that you were good enough?

Alternatively, the facilitator could say,

> I noticed that when Katie shared that her self-doubt tells her she can't do something or shouldn't try something other group members appeared to have a physical reaction to this. Some of you nodded your heads and others tensed their shoulders. I am wondering if we could discuss as a group what was going on for everybody when Katie shared about her self-doubt?

Reaching for a Feeling Link

Middleman (1978) described this skill as focusing on normalizing members' experiences through facilitating the connections of similar feelings among group members. In a PEG for adolescents with low self-esteem, this could involve the use of feeling-based activities, such as an interactive group discussion in the performing stage of a group in which members discuss different feelings associated with their experience of low self-esteem (which also engages members in each other's learning, maintains a content focus, and explores members' relationship to the topic at hand).

Reaching for an Information Link

Middleman (1978) described this skill as inviting other members to relate to and connect with the ideas, beliefs, or opinions that another member has expressed. In a PEG for adolescents with low self-esteem, this could involve highlighting the similarities that arise surrounding the thoughts, beliefs, and opinions associated with members' experience of low self-esteem. Again, this type of a strategy can help to engage members in each other's learning, maintain a content focus, and explore members' relationship to the content at hand.

Redirecting a Message

Middleman (1978) described this skill as asking members to directly address each other, instead talking about one another to others in the group setting (i.e., facilitating the use of "I" statements). In a PEG for adolescents with low self-esteem, this could involve asking members to tell other group members how their actions or words have affected their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, or level of self-esteem–either positively or negatively..

Scanning

Middleman (1978) described this skill as paying attention to the whole group through the use of one's eyes. In a PEG for adolescents with low self-esteem, this could involve scanning the room and paying particular attention to how other members are reacting to the topics being discussed or other members' sharing. The focus would be on identifying the needs of the group (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), as well as identifying opportunities to further members' learning of the content (Furr, 2000), in this case self-esteem. Group facilitator scanning can be used as a vehicle to bring attention to members' here-and-now interactions and facilitate process commentary on those interactions, which may help to further members' learning about self-esteem.

Toning Down Strong Messages

Middleman (1978) described this skill as "verbalizing the essence of a highly affective message so that the strength of the affect is reduced and message can be 'heard'" (p. 24). In a PEG for adolescents with low self-esteem, many members may believe that they cannot accomplish something and that they are not worthy or are lacking in some way (Young, 2009). As such, members in this sort of a group

may be particularly sensitive to perceived assaults pertaining to their sense of identity. Thus, focusing on toning down strong messages through encouraging an I versus other focus can help support the development of an internal locus of control over members' self-esteem as opposed to an external locus of control.

Conclusion

Counseling in a school setting offers many unique challenges, such as a large number of clients, limited counseling time, and balancing the educational and psychological needs of clients. Offering PEGs in a school setting is one method through which school counselors can work to meet the needs of a larger number of clients, create new relationships among peers, and convey important information.

Process work has been identified as an integral factor contributing to successful group therapy outcomes (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). One reason for this is that process work has been found to increase knowledge acquisition of the topics covered in group therapy settings (Champe & Rubel, 2012). As such, having an in-depth understanding of process-based guidelines and specific techniques counselors can use to help them achieve these guidelines may help contribute to more successful PEG outcomes.

It is our hope that readers and users of the information contained within this article will gain a better understanding of process work. Moreover, by outlining process-based guidelines and specific process-based techniques, we hope that practitioners working in a school setting can readily incorporate process work into their group practice. Finally, as process work has been identified as such a valuable counseling

tool (Champe & Rubel, 2012; Corey et al., 2010; Harris, 1988; Middleman, 1978; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), it is our hope that further learning and research into this important area will be stimulated.

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