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The effect of group counseling practices on trust building among counseling trainees: From the perspective of social network analysis

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Abstract

A sense of mutual trust among group members is one of the significant elements increasing the effectiveness of a group. The purpose of this study is to determine the effect of group counseling practices on the trust patterns among undergraduate counseling trainees. Forty-five undergraduate counseling students at Uludağ University in Bursa, Turkey, participated in this study. Participants were asked to rate a single item question on a five-point scale. This question was asked to participants before starting the group and after ending the group process. Students' trust patterns were analyzed by utilizing Social Network Analysis indicating the map of specified ties in the group. The results found that the group members' trust level increased through the group counseling process.

1. Introduction

The human being, having similar physiological characteristics to other animals, is a unique creature regarding affective and cognitive functioning and having insight. As Fromm (1996) mentioned, only meeting the physiological needs is not adequate for humans. Humans have some existential needs that require fulfilment such as relationship needs, self-definition, and giving meaning to life. Individuals may be able to handle their personal challenges within their social relation networks, but beyond that they might search for professional help throughout this process. In this respect group counseling is considered to be an effective intervention. Group counseling is a therapeutic process that is led by professionals trained in counseling or psychotherapy. This therapeutic process aims to enhance interaction between group members, provide insights, and foster self-confidence for each group member. Additionally, dealing with group members' emotional states, value, and attitude systems are important components of the group process (Voltan Acar, 1993). A group works with the interaction of group members and correspondingly appropriate self-disclosure of each member. Self-disclosing facilitates counseling and other beneficial processes. Unless clients or group members are willing to disclose themselves, the process cannot function well (Johnson & Noonan, 1972; Yalom, 2005). Although disclosing oneself to another person might be perceived as risk taking behavior by group members in a group, it is essential for change. If group members are not

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willing to take risks to make significant change in themselves, resist disclosing, they will get less benefit from the group process. One of the reasons why the group members resist disclosing themselves is low-level trust of other group members or in the power of therapeutic process. Supporting this, Pilkington & Richardson (1988) found that people who perceived intimate relationships as a high risk, reported low trust levels in their relationships. Throughout the group counseling process, establishing trust is a central task and the group leader needs to deal with members' issues related to trust. Particularly at the beginning of the process, clients have some concerns about being judged and criticized by other members. To overcome these feelings, the group leader's and other group members' attitudes and behaviors have a significant role. Trust can be lost or gained by how the leader copes with conflict or the initial expression of any negative reactions, and how group members react to this person's concerns (Chen & Rybak, 2003; Corey & Corey, 2006). During the process, if a client thinks that members listen to him/her nondefensively, genuinely and actively, respect and care about his/her personal experiences, it means that members are ready to disclose themselves and trust begins to build (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 2009). Members perceive the group as a trustworthy place, begin to throw off their masks and stop defending themselves. The group becomes a safe place and the expression of feelings becomes easier. In this manner, the group assists the members to narrow their blind spots (Voltan Acar, 2009). In other words, when clients begin to disclose themselves, the sense of trust and the level of awareness will increase also the sense of belonging will begin to develop.

The concept of trust in the group counseling process has been considered as an essential group dynamic beginning from the initial stage to the final stage of group process. Although the trust issue is the main concern at the initial stage of group counseling, it does not mean that trust has been built and it is stable during the group process. Members need different levels of genuineness in different stages, which is why new levels of trust must be built. Based on their experiences, clients want to be sure whether they still trust each other, which mean trust is tested repeatedly while the group is progressing (Corey & Corey, 2006). Evaluation of the trust level depends on the attendance of group members and the leadership skills of group leaders. The leader must create a safe atmosphere to facilitate trust building. As a person and as a professional, the group leader must have some leadership skills such as genuineness, caring, openess, self-awareness, active listening, confronting, supporting, and modeling to be able to lead the group effectively (Corey & Corey, 2006; Furr & Barret, 2000). Dies (1980; as cited in Furr & Barret, 2000) states that, a well-qualified group counselor entails specific group counseling training. These are academic training including readings and role playing, observation of recorded group sessions, having experience as a group member and being supervised as a leader. In line with this study, Ohlsen (1988; as cited in Voltan Acar, 1993) points out that group counselors must learn the principles and techniques of counseling, and also experience the group process as a member and as a leader to be able to lead a group whereas in Voltan Acar's (1986) study, was found that groups which are formed with the purposes of education, had some limitations in terms of disclosing themselves, having non-ideal sized groups and social relationships before and after group process effected group counseling process negatively. Nevertheless, it is expected from counseling students that they will practice counseling skills and receive supervision. Although there has been at least one group counseling class in each program of Guidance and Psychological Counseling in Turkey, the content of this class differs based on the requirements of the programs.

According to the requirements of the counselor education program at Uludağ University, this is a 3rd year compulsory class. Students are grouped in threes and each group receives a nine-week theoretical education. After completing the theoretical education, the students practice the group process as a member and alternately as a leader. In this process, the aim is to practice group counseling skills that have been previously learned. Although this is a kind of group process serving an educational purpose, it is expected that the trainees will follow group norms (e.g., confidentiality, participation, etc.). As can be seen in the relevant studies (Corey & Corey, 2006; Furr & Barret, 2000; Yalom, 2005), the theoretical framework of group counseling and the content of skill-based training are well defined. In line with these studies, the trust, as a group dynamic, theoretically was identified with some variables such as self-disclosing (Johnson & Noonan, 1972), and risk taking (Pilkington & Richardson, 1988). However, there is a scarcity assessment of trust building in the group process. In the current study, it was aimed to investigate the process of trust building among the counselor trainees. It was hypothesized that there would be a change in the trust level among the counseling trainees who participated in group counseling practices. It's expected to provide

information about how trust building function in group counseling process and to contribute the studies related to group counseling practices in counselor education.

2. Method

The notion of Social Networks was first introduced by Barnes in 1954 (Mitchell, 1974). Social Networks are networks that represent the interactions among a collection of social entities or actors (Kolaczyk, 2009). Actors are social entities (Wasserman & Faust, 2008) in a social system. Actors can be people, organizations and countries. Social Network Analysis (SNA) focuses on ties among people, groups of people, organizations and countries (De Nooy, Mrvar & Batagelj, 2007). The main goal of SNA is to detect and interpret patterns of social ties among actors. Network analysts concentrate on studying how the pattern of ties in a network provides significant opportunities and constraints because it affects the access of people and institutions to such resources as information, wealth and power (Wellman, 1983). There are some steps regarding the application of SNA in the literature. Cross and Parker (2004) discuss the steps of SNA in their work. The first step of conducting an SNA is identifying a strategically important group. The second step is assessing meaningful and actionable relationships such as communication, information, access, decision making and trust. Relations are important in that they build blocks of network analysis (Knoke & Kuklinski, 1982). In SNA, data are obtained with single item question that asks a respondent to enumerate those individuals with whom he or she has direct ties of a specific kind (Marsden, 1990). The third step is the visualization of the data. The fourth step is analyzing the network data in a quantitative manner. The last two steps create meaningful feedback sessions for the group and assess the progress and effectiveness of the group. The trustworthiness levels of actors in the social network can be measured on a scale (for example: five point-scale (1=very low, 2=low, 3=medium, 4=high and 5=very high)). The data of such friendships among people are studied using questionnaires or interviews (Wasserman & Faust, 2008) which used in current research. One of the important measures of a network is density which is known as a group measure (Marvin, 2006). Density is a global network parameter (Buskens, 2002). De Nooy, Mrvar and Batagelj (2007) define density as a percentage of all possible lines that are presented in a network. Degree is an individual measure. The degree of a vertex (vertex will be used for the singular of vertices concept, and also node will be used for the singular of nodes concept in the rest of the paper) is the number of lines incident with it (De Nooy, Mrvar & Batagelj, 2007). There are two types of degree of a vertex, in-degree and out degree. The in-degree of a vertex (in-degree centrality) is the number of arcs it receives. The out-degree of a vertex (out-degree centrality) is the number of arcs it sends. In addition to these, when the degrees of nodes is divided by the number of potential neighbors in the network, a new measure of degree "normalized degree of nodes" obtained. Usually, this kind of measure is more useful and effective in comparisons of networks.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether group counseling practices have positive effects on the trust patterns among undergraduate counseling trainees by using SNA with PAJEK Package. In addition to SNA, t tests were also performed with MINITAB Package. The participants of this study comprised 45 undergraduate students (the attendee of the course of Group Counseling students) enrolled in Guidance and Psychological Counseling Deparment in Uludağ University, Bursa, Turkey. SNA was conducted on three sections (A=16, B=16 and C=13) of these 45 students separately and also for the whole class (A+B+C=45). The same Ph.D. Lecturer teaches in all three sections. The data were collected at the beginning and at the end of the spring semester of the 2009-2010 academic year. As in all SNA studies, a single-item question was asked to all the participants. The question was as follows: "Who do you trust and at what level?" Below the question above, the names of the forty-five participants were written on the survey paper. Participants were asked to rate this question on a five-point scale on the names of participants. This question was asked to participants before starting the group (that is named "Before") and after ending the group (that is named "After") process.

3. Results

For the sake of simplicity, the visualization of the data (the 3rd step of the SNA) is not shown here. Moreover, in this study the quantitative analyses have much more valuable results than the visualization analyses of the data. So

network measures are computed for each of the networks. Table 1 presents the density measures of the Social Networks that are drawn below.

Table 1. Density Values of Social Networks

Network Measures Network Graphs	Density		
	Before	After	Change
Whole (N=45 node for each)	0.908	0.969	↑
Section A (N=16 node for each)	0.875	0.933	↑
Section B (N=16 node for each)	0.929	0.991	↑
Section C (N=13 node for each)	0.923	0.980	↑

Note: ↑ symbol implies an increase of the density value of after as compared to before.

The densities of all networks show that there exists a change when it is compared between the two situations (before and after). For instance, the density value of a trust network of Section A increases in situation "After" (0.933) when compared to situation "Before" (0.875). The same changes are also seen for the other social networks (Whole, Section B and Section C) in Table 1. There seems to be a positive effect of group counseling practices on trust building among counseling trainees.

Table 2. Normalized In-degree Distribution of Whole

Network Measures Nodes	In-degree Distribution			Network Measures Nodes	In-degree Distribution			Network Measures Nodes	In-degree Distribution		
	Before	After	Change		Before	After	Change		Before	After	Change
1	0.886	0.977	↑	16	0.909	0.977	↑	31	0.909	0.954	↑
2	0.931	1.000	↑	17	0.931	0.977	↑	32	0.886	0.954	↑
3	0.909	0.931	↑	18	0.909	0.977	↑	33	0.909	0.977	↑
4	0.931	0.977	↑	19	0.909	0.977	↑	34	0.909	0.977	↑
5	0.909	0.977	↑	20	0.909	0.954	↑	35	0.909	0.977	↑
6	0.909	0.977	↑	21	0.909	0.977	↑	36	0.909	0.977	↑
7	0.909	0.977	↑	22	0.909	0.954	↑	37	0.909	0.977	↑
8	0.909	0.977	↑	23	0.909	0.977	↑	38	0.909	0.954	↑
9	0.909	0.977	↑	24	0.886	0.954	↑	39	0.909	0.954	↑
10	0.909	0.977	↑	25	0.909	0.954	↑	40	0.909	0.977	↑
11	0.909	0.977	↑	26	0.909	0.977	↑	41	0.909	0.977	↑
12	0909	0.977	↑	27	0.931	0.909	↑	42	0.909	0.977	↑
13	0.909	0.977	↑	28	0.909	0.977	↑	43	0.886	0.977	↑
14	0.886	0.931	↑	29	0.909	0.977	↑	44	0.909	0.977	↑
15	0.909	0.954	↑	30	0.886	0.954	↑	45	0.909	0.977	↑

Note: ↑ symbol implies an increase of the in-degree value of after as compared to before.

Our approach is moving from beyond a global perspective to an individual perspective, to focus on more results about the changes that were determined in density analyses. The input degree distribution of the social networks are computed and represented respectively as shown above. The normalized in-degree distribution (NIDD) of the whole network shows that there is a change. All the computed values for each node increases in situation "After" when compared to situation "Before". This means there is a positive effect of group counseling practices on trust building among counseling trainees.

The NIDD of Section A network shows that there is a change (an increase) in all nodes except nodes 2 and 5 in Table 3 above. No change was detected for nodes 2 and 5. The NIDD of Section B network shows that there is a change (an increase) in all nodes except node 2 (no change detected) and node 5 (decrease detected) as shown in Table 3 above. The NIDD of Section C network shows that there is a change (an increase) in all nodes except nodes 3 and 7 (no change detected) and node 4 (decrease detected).

Table 3. Normalized In-degree Distribution of Section A, Section B, Section C

Network Measures Nodes	In-degree Distribution		Network Measures Nodes	In-degree Distribution		Network Measures Nodes	In-degree Distribution	

	Before	After	Change		Before	After	Change		Before	After	Change
1	0.93	1.00	↑	**1**	0.86	1.00	↑	**1**	0.916	1.000	↑
2	0.93	0.93	-	**2**	0.93	0.93	-	**2**	0.916	1.000	↑
3	0.86	0.93	↑	**3**	0.93	1.00	↑	**3**	0.916	0.916	-
4	0.86	0.93	↑	**4**	0.93	1.00	↑	**4**	1.000	0.916	↓
5	0.86	0.86	-	**5**	0.93	1.00	↑	**5**	0.916	1.000	↑
6	0.86	0.93	↑	**6**	0.93	1.00	↑	**6**	0.916	1.000	↑
7	0.86	0.93	↑	**7**	0.93	1.00	↑	**7**	0.916	0.916	-
8	0.86	0.93	↑	**8**	0.93	1.00	↑	**8**	0.916	1.000	↑
9	0.86	0.93	↑	**9**	1.00	0.93	↓	**9**	0.916	1.000	↑
10	0.86	0.93	↑	**10**	0.93	1.00	↑	**10**	0.916	1.000	↑
11	0.86	0.93	↑	**11**	0.93	1.00	↑	**11**	0.916	1.000	↑
12	0.86	0.93	↑	**12**	0.93	1.00	↑	**12**	0.916	1.000	↑
13	0.86	0.93	↑	**13**	0.93	1.00	↑	**13**	0.916	1.000	↑
14	0.86	0.93	↑	**14**	0.93	1.00	↑				
15	0.86	0.93	↑	**15**	0.93	1.00	↑				
16	0.86	0.93	↑	**16**	0.93	1.00	↑				

Note: ↑ symbol implies an increase of the in-degree value of after as compared to before, and – symbol no change.

Most of the in-degree analyses performed above with some exceptions show that there is a positive effect of group counseling practices on trust building among counseling trainees. To determine whether the changes that were found in SNA are statistically significant or not, t tests were applied to the social network measures (in-degree measures). In this sense, the null hypothesis is H0: µ1= µ2 which means that the mean of the first population is equal to the second. The alternative hypothesis is H1: µ1≠ µ2 which means that the mean of the first population is not equal to the second. t test results for each section and for the whole network separately are given below in Table 4.

Table 4. In-degree t test results of Social Networks

Statistics **Network Graphs**	Mean		Changes	t value	d.f.	p value
	Before	After				
Whole (N=45 node for each)	0.9079	0.9688	↑	-20.97	76	**0.000***
Section A (N=16 node for each)	0.8688	0.9300	↑	-7.00	29	**0.000***
Section B (N=16 node for each)	0.9300	0.9913	↑	-7.00	29	**0.000***
Section C (N=13 node for each)	0.9225	0.9806	↑	-4.81	20	**0.000***

Note: * symbol implies that H0 hypothesis is rejected. This means the averages of two samples are not equal. d.f. is degrees of freedom. ↑ symbol implies an increase of the mean in-degree value of after as compared to before.

All the statistical t tests in Table 4 show that the averages of the related samples are not equal. The inequality can be clearly seen by looking at the mean values. All in-degree mean values of each network are found to be increased in Table 4. So, a positive effect of group counseling practices on trust building among counseling trainees can be concluded from these findings.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, the level of trust among counseling students who received theoretical education in group counseling prior to attending the practices of group counseling was investigated. During the formal education of Turkish counseling students, it is expected that they will practice counseling skills for a short term in order to gain knowledge about individual and group counseling practices. The current investigation was conducted to understand the impact of group counseling practices on the trust level of counseling trainees among each other. During the counseling process, in order to benefit from the counseling process, it is a significant necessity to build trust among the group members and group leaders and then to provide an opportunity for self-disclosure. Corey and Corey (2006) stated that during the counseling process where there is no climate of trust, clients talk at an abstract level or intellectual level and do not display any commitments to their goals. In the group process, the manners of group members as nonjudgmental, non-pejorative, and respecting confidentiality play a crucial role in the establishment of trust. The findings of the network analysis showed that there was an increase in the level of trust among the students. The participants reported that they trusted their classmates and other group members more after they had

participated in a group counseling class. The results of the t test for pre- and post-tests also supported this finding. It is known that the reasonable expectations of group members of willingness, the feeling of belonging, participation, acceptance of responsibility and openness are therapeutic forces that play a significant role in the establishment of trust and the progress of the effectiveness of the group. However Voltan Acar (1986) mentioned groups focused on training have some limitations; these research findings inconsistently showed that there is a relation between group practices and trust building. The students participated in the groups with an awareness of having a theoretical background about the group process. It is considered that counseling students are more sensitive to group rules and have good communication skills because of their educational background and counseling experience as a member or leader. In other words, when counseling students are compared to ordinary group members, they know what is expected from them during the process. Therefore, they are willing and accept their responsibilities, and have meaningful participation in the process. Although the groups had some limitations in terms of being short-term and compulsory groups, having more group members, and a change of group leader(s) in each session, it is assumed that the characteristics of counseling students may contribute to the establishment of trust. The findings indicate that the trust level increased not only among the group members but also among classmates. This could be explained with the social microcosmic characteristic of the group. The context of group counseling is a small model of the world where the client lives. The group member interacts in the group how he/she interacts outside the group. Similarly, group members transfer the new behaviors learned in the group to the real world or social life. Thereby, the social macrocosms of the member, in other words the life of the member outside the group changes (Voltan Acar, 2009). It is considered that the group members who were able to establish trust in the group process transferred this feeling to their class environment.

Considering the findings of this study, the use of training groups in practicum based classes is suggested in order to enhance knowledge, skills, and attitudes of counseling students and also to contribute to their personal development. In addition, these groups could be long-term and led by experienced leaders as role models. Moreover, counseling students could be provided with the settings to undertake group counseling with real clients and the trust level among the group member could then be evaluated.

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