A STUDY OF THE EFFECT OF SHORT-TERM GROUP COUNSELING
ON THE SELF CONCEPT OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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A STUDY OF THE EFFECT OF SHORT-TERM GROUP COUNSELING
ON THE SELF CONCEPT OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

By

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Denton, Texas
August, 1969
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The study of man's self concept and its formation has been the subject of many authors in the past few years. One of the most important men in psychology today, Carl Rogers, bases an entire theory of personality and behavior on the idea that man is constantly seeking a means for self-actualization and improvement. Rogers says that the individual exists in a continually changing world of experiences, of which he is the center. Rogers refers to this world of experiences as the "phenomenal field" (13, p. 498). All that is experienced by the individual, whether consciously perceived or not, is included in this "phenomenal field." The individual reacts to this as he experiences and perceives it.

The individual exists in this world of changing experiences from his birth to death, perceiving things as they relate to him. Moving through his environment, interacting with others, he begins to form certain ideas and values about himself. These ideas and values are the substance from which the self concept is formed. Carl Rogers states:
As a result of interaction with the environment and particularly as a result of evaluation interaction with others, the structure of the self is formed—an organized, fluid, but consistent conceptual pattern of perception of characteristics and relationships of the "I" or "me" together with values attached to these concepts (13, p. 498).

While Rogers bases his personality theory on the above, it should be noted that other literature makes similar statements in regard to the self. Stanley Coopersmith was primarily interested in self-esteem; however, he refers to the self as

... an abstraction that the individual develops about the attributes, capacities, objects, and activities which he possesses. This abstraction is represented by the symbol "me", which is a person's idea of himself to himself. This concept is formed in the course of experience by the same process of abstraction employed in other areas of experience. Directed toward self-referent experiences, it results in abstractions about the physical and social world. The bases for these abstractions are the individual's observations of his own behavior and the way other individuals respond to his attitudes, appearance, and performance (3, p. 20).

In the most comprehensive survey of literature and studies relating to self concept up to 1961, Ruth Wylie refers to self as "... the individual who is known to himself" (16, p. 1). When Wylie began to cover the self concept she uses the following statements:

... the self concept or self structure may be thought of as an organized configuration of perceptions of the self which are admissible to awareness. It is
composed of such elements as the perceptions of one's characteristics and abilities; the percepts and concepts of the self in relation to others and to the environment; the value qualities which are perceived as associated with experiences and objects; and goals and ideas which are perceived as having positive or negative values (16, p. 7).

The preceeding statements about self concept are used by Wylie as a foundation for her book. The author of these statements is not Wylie but Carl Rogers (13, p. 136). The influence of others on an individual's self concept has been noted by each of the three preceeding authors, Wylie, Coopersmith, and Rogers. Rogers makes clear in his theory that as the individual interacts with others he begins to build up certain concepts about himself in relation to both his environment and the other individuals in it. As he continues to mature, the individual evaluates the behavior of others and of himself in relation to his own self concept. Behavior which is congruent with this self concept is adopted and that which is inconsistent or regarded as a threat is rejected. Lifton states (9, p. 58) that all of us determine our personal worth through the eyes of others. Under certain circumstances, where no threat to the self is perceived, new patterns of behavior and experiences may be examined and perhaps adopted by the individual. This constant evaluation and re-evaluation of others' behavior causes
the individual to have a continually changing system of values and beliefs, based on the world around him.

As the individual interacts with others in the world around him, he receives indications of how he appears to them. These indications may be communicated to the individual either verbally or non-verbally. If they are consistent with his self concept, then the information is reinforcing and is accepted. If they are not in accord with his self concept, he may react in numerous ways, depending on the other people involved. Backman (1) reported that the degree to which one person liked another strongly affected the way they both interact. A strongly liked person is perceived by an individual as attributing to him traits similar to those he attributes to himself. The more the individual interacts with this person, the more he will distort the other person's presumed perception of him. He does this to cause it to correspond with his own self concept. An individual reduces the threatening aspect of another's concept of him in this manner.

Obviously the amount of influence a person or group of people will have will depend on how important or significant they are to the individual. Important or significant people will have strong influence on an individual and his self concept. Backman (2) found this to be true in a study
concerning resistance to change in self concept. When a number of important or significant people differed with the individual on personality traits he felt he had, then he moved toward conforming with their concept of him. Both of Backman's studies offer strong evidence of the influence of others on an individual's self concept. Sherwood (14) also found that an individual's peer group strongly influenced his self concept. He found the individual made changes in his self concept when he felt it was not in harmony with the concept that the group help of him. Three factors were found to be significant in how much influence the peer group held for the individual. The first being the importance of the peer group to the individual; the second being the individual's degree of involvement in the group; and the third factor is the extent to which the peer's concept was communicated to the individual.

The importance of interpersonal relations, as they affect the formation of the self concept seems evident. Yet another aspect, the attitude of the individual toward others, needs to be examined. Rogers (13, p. 552) states that when an individual accepts himself, then his interpersonal relations will improve. This improvement will come from a greater understanding and acceptance of others. Research by McIntyre (10) attempted to find if this was true. Specifically, he
wanted to know if individuals who are accepting toward others are, in turn, well accepted. His findings tended not to support Rogers' statement. Three years later, Fey (5) did a similar study. Fey found that individuals who were self accepting tended to accept others. The peer group, however, did not accept these individuals more readily than others who were less accepting. This could mean that, for individuals who are satisfied with themselves, the peer group does not exert enough influence to cause changes in behavior.

While social interaction is extremely important in the formation of self concept, there are other sources of knowledge available to the individual. Holland (8) maintains that we have a good idea of how we actually are as well as how we appear to others. He calls this conception, either an inflated or depreciatory self image, and notes that problems may arise from either. An individual with a depreciatory self image may not make a real effort to reach goals which he could and needs to achieve. An inflated self image may force an individual to strive to achieve superior goals which he is not capable of reaching. These failures lead to rationalization and self-blame. In either case, the individual is behaving in accord with his self concept; to attempt to do otherwise is too threatening.
The individual is aware of some of the attributes that he possesses. This can be illustrated by observations of patients in therapy. When a depreciatory statement is made by a patient, he expects a response from those around him. When this statement is false, i.e., he states he is stupid when he knows he is not, then he becomes angry if others agree with him. The individual knows that he has, in some measure, the attribute which he has stated he does not have. The ability to accurately judge our own abilities must be considered with social interaction in the formation and maintenance of a self concept.

An individual may find major differences in his self concept and the self concept that others hold of him. He may make certain changes in his thought and behavior to correct these differences. The degree of change will depend on the importance of the other people involved. If the individual does not feel the other people are important, he may simply seek another group, hoping their concept of him will be closer to his own. A group of people important or significant to the individual will cause him to change. Change may be brought about independently by the individual, or he may join other individuals who are seeking change. Hare (7) states that a collection of individuals becomes a
group when they interact and when the following three things occur. First, the members of the group share one or more goals which determine the direction in which the group will move. Second, the group develops a set of norms within which personal relations are established and activities carried on. Third, a network of interpersonal attraction develops on the bases of the "likes" and "dislikes" of the members for one another.

As this group of people interacts, a number of things take place which are unique to groups. The people within the group begin to react to the actions and feelings of others in the group. The behavior of each person in the group is modified and affected by his relations with the entire group. Warters (15) states that one of the basic desires for joining a group is to find a means of self-actualization. As an individual moves toward self-actualization, he must also meet certain needs. Some of these needs are best satisfied through interaction with others. Lifton (9, p. 59) calls one of these needs "... the need for personal growth." He points out that a major benefit of being in a group is that it is soon obvious that other people have similar problems. This knowledge gives people courage to search for solutions to problems. Mussen (12) found that when the individuals who
make up a group are unknown to each other, their degree of effectiveness is closely related to the degree of personal adequacy or ego strength. Some members of the group will be more self-sufficient than others; this enables people to both accept and give help. The amount of help and support given will depend on the amount of communication within the group. The degree of communication achieved, both verbal and non-verbal, is an important measure of the success of the group. As Glanz (6, p. 56) says, "Communication is more than a simple understanding of language; it's tied to the perceptual field, the needs, values, fears, and feelings of the participants."

As the ideas, feelings, and attitudes of the members are made known to each other, an atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance becomes a part of the group. Inside this atmosphere the group members feel free to take a deep look at themselves, without fear of attack by others. As Rogers (13, p. 286) states,

It is believed that each member of the group, if he is to profit from therapy, must find in the therapist and other members of the group a genuine feeling of acceptance. He must find in the group situation increasingly less need for the defenses against anxiety which render him so ineffectual in living with others and so unhappy in living with himself.
When the individuals in the group interact, they can vent feelings of anger, guilt, resentment, and frustration without need for the defenses they have needed previously. The group could be thought of as a small society or culture, each member having attitudes, norms, and standards peculiar to himself. Within this accepting atmosphere the old standards may change and new ones emerge based on the feelings of the individuals involved. Members may not change their patterns of behavior, but the influence of the group may help them to accept the behavior of others. Mullan (11, p. 49) states that "the group offers a great scope of stimulating momentary and continuing experiences that enhance growth among its members." Driver (4, p. 25) mentions that "the group provides opportunities for developing an appreciation for the worthiness of the individual. . . ." One of the most meaningful aspects of the group, according to Rogers (13, p. 291), is "as a member of the group the person learns what it means to give and receive emotional support and understanding in a more mature fashion."

The individual interacting with others, without defenses, can both examine his feelings and those of others. As he accepts the honest feelings of others the individual begins to form a more accurate and realistic self-concept. The
The result of the group influence should be a stronger, more accurate and positive self concept. The problem of this study will be to determine if positive gains in the self concepts of college students can be achieved through group counseling.

Hypothesis

A significant change in the self concept of college students can be brought about through short term group counseling.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER II

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Description of the Subjects

Subjects for this study were fifty-two students enrolled in freshman psychology courses at North Texas State University. Subjects were asked to participate in weekly group counseling sessions over a period of eight weeks. The experimental group was composed of volunteers who agreed to attend all of the sessions. The control group consisted of students enrolled in another section of the same course.

Instrument

The Tennessee Self Concept Scale was developed in 1955 by W. H. Fitts to meet the need for a scale "... which is simple for the subjects, widely applicable, well standardized and multi-dimensional in its description of the self concept" (3, p. 1). In reviewing the instrument Crites (2, p. 330) states that the scale does fulfill this need to a considerable extent.

The instrument consists of one hundred self-descriptive statements which the subject reacts to on a scale from one to
five, indicating that the statement is completely true to completely false. The instrument is available in two forms, a Counseling Form and a Clinical and Research Form. Both forms use the same test booklet and answer items; however, the scoring and interpretation differ. The Counseling Form is easier to score and more appropriate for direct interpretation to subjects. The Counseling Form was the instrument used in this study.

The first step in development of the scale was to gather a large pool of self-descriptive items. To form this pool, items were taken from other self-concept instruments as well as from written self-descriptions by both patients in hospitals and non-patients. Then, based on content, ninety items were selected to compose the scale. These items were equally divided between positive and negative statements. The remaining ten statements, all midly derogatory in nature, were used to construct a self-criticism score (3, p. 2).

When the statements are scored they reflect the subjects' feelings in both an internal and external frame of reference. Areas shown on the scale include these aspects of the self: physical, moral-ethical, personal, family, and social. The subject's feelings about his behavior, self-identity and self-satisfaction are also revealed by the scale. While subjects
may attempt to produce a false impression on self-report instruments, Ashcraft and Fitts (1, p. 118) found that this scale "... does not lend itself to artificial portrayal by the client."

The most important single score on the **Counseling Form** is the total p, or total positive score. This score reflects the overall level of self-esteem, and is the best indication of how the individual feels about himself. As Fitts explains it,

*Persons with high scores tend to like themselves, feel that they are persons of value and worth, have confidence in themselves, and act accordingly. People with low scores are doubtful about their own worth, see themselves as undesirable, often feel anxious, depressed, and unhappy, and have little faith or confidence in themselves* (3, p. 2).

The reliability of the total positive score is reported by Fitts to be .92 (3, p. 14). The content validity of the scale is high and correlations with other personality measures, such as the **Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale**, -.70, are shown in the manual (3, p. 27).

Norms for the instrument were developed from a standardization group of 626 people. The group included people from various parts of the country, with an age range from twelve to sixty-eight. There were approximately equal numbers of both sexes, both Negro and white subjects, and representatives
of all social, economic, and intellectual levels, from the sixth grade through the Ph. D. level (3, p. 13).

The group used to establish the norms is admitted by Fitts to be over-represented in the number of college students, white subjects, and persons in the twelve-to-thirty-year age bracket. He states that the norm group does not reflect the population as a whole in proportion to its national composition. There are data provided, however, to indicate that there is little relationship between such factors as age, sex, race, intelligence, and scores on the instrument (3, p. 13). In a previous study done with Ashcraft, Fitts also made no attempt to match control and experimental groups on age, sex, intelligence, education, or other variables, indicating that these variables do not significantly affect the scores on the instrument (1, p. 115).

In reviewing the *Tennessee Self Concept Scale*, comments are generally favorable, and it is concluded that the instrument "measures up" by traditional criteria rather well in regard to its psychometric attributes (2, p. 331). The review also states that it is not likely that many questions will be raised in regard to construction of the instrument.

The *Tennessee Self Concept Scale* was used in this study because it is simple to administer, score, and interpret,
has good validity, both in content and as compared with other instruments of the same nature, and because the standardization group and the subjects for this study had much in common. The nature of the instrument, plus the fact it was developed on a college-age population, more or less, made it a very suitable instrument for this study.

Procedure

The instrument was administered to the experimental group following the first and eighth group counseling sessions. It was administered to the control group during a regular class period of the first and eighth weeks of the study. In each case the experimenter first explained the instrument and answer form to the subjects. All subjects finished the instrument within one hour. Scores were analyzed by using a \( t \)-test on residual gain scores.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER III

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Raw data scores were analyzed by using a \( t \)-test on residual gain scores. Residual gain is the difference between the predicted score and the post-test raw score. The predicted score was obtained through regression analysis. This is based on the correlation between the pre-test and post-test scores, with the pre-test score being the predictor. The two groups, experimental and control, were compared on their gains as measured by the Tennessee Self Study Concept Scale. The level of acceptance used for the hypothesis was the .05 level. The results of the statistical analysis are presented in the following tables. Table I shows the pre-test and post-test means and standard deviations for both the experimental and control groups.
TABLE I

PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF TENNESSEE SELF CONCEPT SCALE FOR EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL GROUPS

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<tr>
<th>Group</th>
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<th>S.D.</th>
<th>Post-Test Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>349.73</td>
<td>36.36</td>
<td>359.42</td>
<td>39.93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>346.27</td>
<td>28.22</td>
<td>354.81</td>
<td>29.26</td>
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The differences are small between the pre-test and post-test means and standard deviations for the two groups. The pre-test means of both groups are close to the pre-test mean, 345.57, of Fitts' standardization group (2, p. 14). The pre-test mean of the experimental group is slightly above the fiftieth percentile on the profile sheet for the Tennessee Self Concept Scale. The initial mean for the control group is slightly below the fiftieth percentile. Post-test means show positive gains for both groups, the experimental mean rising to approximately the sixty-fifth percentile and the control mean to approximately the sixtieth percentile.
TABLE II
THE MEAN, STANDARD DEVIATION, AND T VALUE OF THE EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL GROUP ON THE TENNESSEE SELF CONCEPT SCALE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>t value</th>
<th>Significance</th>
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<td>.5824</td>
<td>14.4096</td>
<td>.3118</td>
<td>p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>-.5810</td>
<td>11.8463</td>
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Discussion

Interpretation of the data in the above tables indicates that no significant difference exists between the experimental and control group. No significant change occurred in the experimental group as a result of short-term group counseling. The original hypothesis that a significant change in the self concept of college students can be brought about through short-term counseling was not supported by the results of this study.

It appears that eight weeks is too short a period of time for any significant change in self concept to occur. In a similar study by Johnsgard and Muench (3), the period of time involved was thirteen weeks, with three hours per week spent in the group. Ashcraft and Fitts (1) held a therapy session on the average of once a week for six to
eight months. In work with normal college students, the study should be longer than the present one.

The nature and selection of the subjects deserve more consideration. The hypothesis of this study was that a significant change would be made in the subjects' self concept. This implies that the subjects were interested in changing their self concepts prior to participation in the study. The fact that subjects volunteered for the study does not mean they were interested in changing their self concepts. The pre-test mean of the experimental group, shown in Table I, is slightly above the fiftieth percentile on the profile sheet. This would seem to indicate that the subjects in the experimental group had stable self concepts prior to the study. Therefore, if the subjects did have stable self concepts prior to the study, this could have been partially responsible for the small degree of change. If the experimental group had been composed of subjects requesting counseling help through the university, then it could logically have been assumed that each had some desire or need for change. This factor, desire for change, could motivate the group to significant improvement. A research design with two experimental groups, one of subjects requesting counseling and the other of subjects who did not,
could demonstrate the effect of this desire or motivation. Johnsgard and Muench (3) worked with "normal" college students, those not receiving counseling or psychological help, and had inconclusive results.

The use of additional instruments in the study seems appropriate. Fitts states (2, p. 13) that variables such as age, sex, and intelligence do not affect the results of the Tennessee Self Concept Scale. It might be wise, however, to use more precise and more diagnostic measuring instruments to supplement it. Several measuring instruments, not including the Tennessee Self Concept Scale, were used by Johnsgard and Muench in their study (3). In reporting the results of their study, additional measuring devices were suggested.

Studies of this nature could also be strengthened by the development of a rating or progress scale to be used by the group counselor in judging progress of the individuals in the group. Some consideration should be given to developing and correlating a scale of this nature with an established instrument. This would be a valuable supplement to the primary self rating instrument in any study such as this.
The counselor working with the group is an important aspect of any group counseling experience. The more experienced and better qualified the counselor, the greater chance of progress and change in the group. The present study could have been improved by using more experienced group counselors. It is logical to assume that an experienced counselor could produce more positive change than an inexperienced counselor. A research design utilizing more experienced counselors, several measuring instruments, and a longer period of time might show significant results.


CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of short-term group counseling on the self concepts of college students. The measuring instrument used was the Tennessee Self Concept Scale. The specific hypothesis was that a significant change in the self concept of college students can be brought about through short term group counseling.

Subjects for the study were fifty-two students enrolled in freshman psychology courses. The twenty-six subjects in the experimental group were divided into three groups of eight to ten people for group counseling purposes. Each of the three experimental groups met weekly, for one hour for a period of eight weeks. Data regarding changes in self concept as measured by the Tennessee Self Concept Scale were analyzed by a t-test on residual gain scores.

Results of the study indicate that a significant change in the self concept of normal college students cannot be obtained through short term group counseling. Statistical analysis of the pre-test and post-test data showed no
significant change in the subjects. The hypothesis in regard to change in self concept was not supported by the results of the study.

The results have been discussed in their relation to group counseling with college students. A number of items were discussed as they related to the study with suggestions for strengthening future studies of this nature. The basic implication is that the various aspects of the research design, rather than the experimental method, could be responsible for the lack of results. A stronger research design is recommended for future studies.

The results of this study indicate that a significant change in the self concept of college students cannot be attained through short-term group counseling. This result can be applied in counseling college students.

It is felt that a desire for change must be present in the subject before significant results can be accomplished. The fact that subjects are present in the experimental group does not mean they have this desire. Without this basic factor the subject may not become involved or motivated, thus yielding no change in his self concept. Counselors involved in group work should recognize this fact and utilize it.
It is further concluded that the time involved in group counseling is an important factor. While the objective of this study was to investigate counseling effects over a short period of time, other studies were cited involving much longer periods. The degree of success in regard to change seems to be related to the length of time involved in the process.

While the present study indicated no significant results, it is possible that this may have been the result of variables in the research design rather than in the method. Future studies involving greater control of experimental variables could produce different results.
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Books


Articles


