Verbal Interactions of Professional and Peer Led Group Counselling Sessions

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Abstract

Four counsellors were randomly assigned to lead four counselling groups for the duration of eight sessions during a three-day retreat of an adolescent student organization. Counsellors were classified into two groups according to their counselling status: professional and peer. An analysis of the verbal interactions of the sessions between groups indicates significant differences on the Hill Interaction Matrix HIM-G measures. Groups led by professional counsellors were more therapeutic, risk oriented, work oriented and less socially oriented than groups led by peer counsellors.

Résumé

Lors d'une retraite de trois jours pour adolescents membres d'une association d'étudiants, quatre conseillers ont été désignés au hasard pour diriger quatre groupes de counseling pendant huit sessions. Les conseillers étaient divisés en deux groupes selon leur statut, soit en tant que professionnel ou en tant que pair. Une analyse des interactions verbales au cours des sessions entre les groupes indique des différences significatives selon le "Hill Interaction Matrix HIM-G." Les groupes dirigés par les professionnels étaient mieux guidés du point de vue thérapeutique, prêts à prendre des risques et plus attirés par le travail, mais moins engagés sur le plan social que les groupes dirigés par les pairs.

Within the past decade, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of adolescent peer counselling programs. Studies have indicated that adolescent peer counsellors have been effective as study skill tutors (Vriend, 1969), information counsellors (Koch, 1973; & Lobitz, 1970), counsellors (Carr, 1981; Myrick & Erney, 1978; Varenhorst, 1974), and social support and outreach workers (Guttman, 1985; McIntyre, Thomas & Borgen, 1982; Carr, 1981; Rockwell & Dustin, 1979; and Buck, 1977).

One remaining question is how effective are peer counsellors in comparison to other counsellor groups? Durlak (1979), in an extensive review of empirical studies of this subject, found that peer counsellors were particularly effective with client populations who normally did not seek out professional counsellors. Furthermore, peer counsellors were found to be effective in organizing self-help and social support groups (in targeted problems, such as weight loss, for example), whereas professional counsellors were more likely to structure their assistance around traditional counselling approaches.

The literature reviews of both Sussman (1983) and Durlak (1979) indicate there are few studies which directly relate peer counsellor effectiveness with adolescent populations. However, in a related area of study in peer tutoring, research indicates that adolescent peer tutors can be as effective as professional teachers (Allen, 1976; Sarbin, 1976). Sarbin (1976) accounts for these findings by suggesting that peer tutors engage

in different tutoring behaviours than professionals. Peers engage in more one-to-one contacts and develop different role relationships with their pupils than professional teachers.

The results of the peer tutoring studies raise similar questions for counselling. Do peer counsellors engage in similar counselling behaviour as other counsellor groups? To date, there have been few studies to provide clear answers. One major study (Strupp, 1977) investigated this question by examining the counsellor interactions of professional therapists and paraprofessionals (college professors) working with college students. Strupp found that the two counsellor groups did interact differently. Professional counsellors engaged in more supportive interactions and were perceived to be more accepting than paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals gave more advice and asked more questions than professionals.

There is little published work involving the comparison of different sorts of counsellors which specifically relates to adolescent populations. Guttman (1985) surveyed the peer clients of an adolescent support group and found that students perceived peer counsellors to be effective group counsellors. She also found that adolescent clients were as likely to seek out peer adolescent counsellors as professional counsellors provided that peer counsellors were trained and supervised. In another study, Guttman (1987) found that the verbal interactions of group members led by trained peer counsellors did not significantly differ from the verbal interactions of group members led by relatively untrained peer counsellors.

The present study further examines the verbal interactions of counselling groups led by professional and peer counsellors. Specifically, it examines the counselling orientation, work style and content style of the interactions of these groups.

Background

This research is part of an evaluation project of a peer counselling program of Community Challenge, a community student organization affiliated with Laurier MacDonald Secondary School in Montreal, Québec. The group was organized to meet the social and religious needs of students by the chaplain of the school who also functions as the school counsellor; he serves as the director of the youth group and director of the peer counselling program. Membership is open to all students in the high school and community. Approximately 100-150 students take an active role. The weekly evening meetings provide students with (1) social, (2) religious, and (3) group counselling activities. In addition, this student group organizes weekend retreats in which students participate in extensive peer counselling group activities.

The peer counselling program was developed as the leadership and social service arm of Community Challenge by the director of the

program. In the leadership function, the peer counsellors provide the organizational power. They organize the weekly meetings, conduct group discussion sessions, provide a warm social atmosphere, organize the social events and recruit new members. In the social service function, they provide counselling services, social support and follow-up services.

Procedures

This research focuses on the group counselling activities of a Community Challenge group during a weekend retreat. Thirty-two adolescents (16 males and 16 females) were randomly assigned within sex to four counselling groups of eight members each. Group participants ranged from 14 to 19 years of age; all were members of Community Challenge. As members of this student organization, they were well acquainted with each other and many of them were close friends. The majority had extensive group counselling experience (40 hours) since they normally took part in informal group counselling activities as part of their weekly youth group meetings. This three-day workshop was an overnight retreat and presented students with an opportunity to become more intensively involved in ongoing group activities. It also gave students an opportunity to form more intimate friendships and reflect on their religious values.

The two peer counsellors were both student members of Community Challenge. They were two male students aged 18 and 19 years respectively. At the time of the research, they had completed a peer counselling training course which included three major areas of training: (1) communication skills, (2) counselling skills, and (3) group dynamics and leadership skills. Following this training course, the peer counsellors complete a nine-month practicum where they participated in group counselling activities for a minimum of 50 hours of experience. As a part of this training, the peer counsellors had participated in over 50 hours of group counselling activities and at least 30 hours of experience leading or co-leading groups prior to this retreat.

The two professional counsellors (one male and one female) were experienced school counsellors. Both were completing a full year of supervised internship in the second year of their master's program in counselling. The male counsellor, already mentioned as director of the peer counselling program and organizer of the youth group, was 40 years of age. He served as the high school counsellor and chaplain. The female counsellor was 28 years of age. She also worked full time as a counsellor in the same high school and volunteered her time with the youth group. Both counsellors had extensive group counselling experience. As a regular part of their high school counselling program, both counsellors led intensive (six to twelve weeks) personal group counselling sessions.

All counsellors were aided by assistant peer counsellors who had recently been recruited to the peer counselling training program.

Group Counselling Sessions

Counselling groups met for eight sessions for a duration of one and a half to two hours per session (12-16 hours total) during a weekend retreat. Group counselling sessions were defined as self-discovery groups rather than therapy groups. Prior to the retreat, all counsellors had been taught through extensive practice to regard group counselling as a process to assist members to identify personal concerns and emotional feelings and to develop problem solving abilities. In addition, they had previously discussed the objectives of this retreat. The themes of friendship, sincerity, commitment and commitment to God were chosen by the counsellors as the major issues which participants were to reflect on. Prior to the retreat, all counsellors discussed the general objectives of the group counselling. They agreed to assist group members to talk about their own ideas, to explore the themes of the retreat more fully, and to assist members in knowing and understanding each other more fully.

Analysis of Group Counselling Interactions

All eight sessions of each of the four groups were tape-recorded. These recordings were then analyzed by using the Hill Interaction Matrix Form G (Hill, 1965). This instrument classifies group members' verbal behaviour into four "work-style" categories (conventional, assertive, speculative and confrontive) and into four "content-style" units (topic, group, personal and relationship). Further details of this instrument are found in a related published study (Guttman, 1987).

In this study, cell data was summed, and only data for the eight content-style and work-style categories were analyzed. Six additional measures derived from the HIM-G, designed to assess the therapeutic product of group sessions, were also employed: the therapists' ratio, members' ratio, intragroup ratio, risk ratio, work ratio, and quadrant IV ratio. Details of each of these ratios are also found in the same published paper (Guttman, 1987).

Rating Procedures

In this study, two graduate students were trained on the use of the HIM-G. They received approximately eight hours of training prior to the rating task. An interjudge reliability coefficient of $r = .83$ was established between the judges prior to the rating task on six practice group sessions. For the purpose of this study, the entire group session was listened to, but only the last 30 minutes of the group session was rated. This method was employed to enable the raters to judge a smaller range of group interactions. This time segment was selected since it appeared to be the

most productive time of the group, allowing for a sufficient warm-up time period.

The following rating procedures were utilized: (1) all group sessions were audio tape-recorded, (2) all tapes were rated by both raters, (3) tapes were rated in random order, and (4) the raters were blind to the design and identifying factors of this study.

In employing the HIM-G in this study, some limitations should be noted. This instrument has had limited employment in rating the behaviour of adolescents. It has been employed primarily for use in therapy activites rather than counselling activities. Nevertheless, in employing its use, this investigator noted that it had been successfully used previously with adolescent counselling groups (Guttman, 1987) and that the categories of the HIM-G were appropriate for use in analyzing the interaction of intensive counselling groups.

Data Analysis

Data on each category for all eight sessions for each counselling group was tabulated and a mean (average for the eight sessions) was calculated for each of the eight HIM-G categories and ratios. Following this procedure, a preliminary analysis was completed on the data for the counselling groups of the same status to determine if scores were similar. Results from separate one-way analysis of variance on each of the eight HIM-G category mean scores between the groups indicate no significant differences on all eight HIM-G categories. Hence, data from groups of the same counsellor status were summed and employed as one group score for each of the categories. Following this procedure, separate one-

TABLE 1

*Mean Scores of the Categories of the Hill Interaction Matrix G
for Peer and Professional Counselling Groups*

Categories	Peer Groups	Professional Groups	F Tests	Significance Levels
Conventional	29.6	19.5	7.02*	$P < .025$
Assertive	11.6	15.3	0.80	
Speculative	28.6	35.4	4.77*	$P < .05$
Confrontive	18.8	28.1	10.88*	$P < .005$
Topic	27.6	27.8	0.001	
Group	17.0	20.9	2.95	
Personal	19.1	23.7	5.73*	$P < .025$
Relationship	22.9	23.7	0.08	

* Significant

way analysis of variance on the mean scores of the eight HIM-G categories between the professional and peer led groups were calculated. Results indicated there were significant differences between the groups' scores on four of the eight HIM-G categories. The means and F tests for these measures are presented in Table 1.

Inspection of Table 1 shows that the means differ significantly on the HIM-G categories of conventional, speculative, confrontive and personal. The mean scores of the groups led by the professionals is significantly higher on three of the categories than the groups led by the peers: speculative (35.4 vs 28.6), confrontive (28.1 vs 18.8) and personal (23.7 vs 19.1). Significance levels for the F tests of different categories are presented in Table 1. On the conventional category, the peer led groups obtained significantly higher means (29.6 vs 19.5) than the professionally led groups.

Next, HIM-G ratios were obtained for six ratios: therapists', members', work, risk, intragroup and quadrant IV for each of the counselling groups. Mean scores of the ratios were calculated for each of the eight categories of the HIM-G. Following this, one-way analysis of variance procedures of the scores of these ratios for each of the HIM categories between the two counselling groups were calculated. Separate analyses were completed for each of the six ratios. The mean ratios and F tests for the therapists' ratios are presented in Table 2.

As indicated here, there are significant differences on the mean scores of the therapists' ratio among groups in the HIM-G category, conventional and topic. On the conventional category, the therapists' ratio for the professional counsellors is greater (1.3881 vs .8425) than the peer therapists' ratio. For the topic category, the same trend held (1.1856

TABLE 2

Means of the Therapists' Ratio & F Tests of the Hill Interaction Matrix Categories between Peer and Professional Counselling Groups

Categories	Peer Groups	Professional Groups	F Tests	Significance Levels
Conventional	0.8425	1.3881	11.656*	P< .001
Assertive	0.5943	1.8218	2.258	
Speculative	1.1737	1.1581	0.014	
Confrontive	0.9212	1.0675	1.346	
Topic	0.9362	1.1856	4.4370*	P< .05
Group	1.0881	1.2362	0.803	
Personal	0.8143	1.1206	3.730	
Relationship	0.6925	0.9293	3.731	

* Significant

professional vs .9362 peer). Significance levels are presented in the table. For the members' ratio, the mean ratios and F tests are presented in Table 3.

As Table 3 indicates, there are significant differences on the mean scores of the members' ratios between groups on two HIM-G categories; conventional and confrontive. A greater ratio of members of the peer led group spent a larger percentage of time in the conventional category than did members of the professionally led groups (1.130 vs .6375). The reverse holds true for the confrontive category (.6993 peer vs 1.0562 professional). Significance levels are presented in the table.

The remaining ratios (risk, work, intragroup and quadrant IV) were obtained for each group. The means of these ratios and F tests are presented in Table 4. Table 4 reveals that there are significant differences on three of these ratios, the risk, work and quadrant IV, with the professionally led groups receiving higher mean score ratios than peer led groups. No significant differences were found for intragroup ratios.

DISCUSSION

The major findings of this study indicate that groups led by professionals are more therapeutically oriented, both in terms of their content and therapeutic work styles than groups led by peers. In content style, the group led by professionals engaged in significantly more verbal interactions on the personal category. Hill (1965) defines this category as one in which group members centre on the actions, problems and personalities of group members or their relationships with each other. In addition, the professional counsellors initiated significantly more interactions on the

TABLE 3

Means of the Members' Ratio & F Tests of the Hill Interaction Matrix Categories between Peer and Professional Counselling Groups

Categories	Peer Groups	Professional Groups	F Tests	Significance Levels
Conventional	1.130	0.6375	10.182*	$P < .005$
Assertive	0.4931	0.5887	0.619	
Speculative	0.8068	0.9499	1.080	
Confrontive	0.6993	1.0562	8.210*	$P < .01$
Topic	0.9456	0.9375	0.003	
Group	0.6175	0.8412	3.680	
Personal	0.7368	0.8050	0.412	
Relationship	0.8343	0.6837	1.817	

* Significant

conventional (social) and topic (themes of the retreat) content categories than the peer counsellors. In work style, the groups led by professional counsellors engaged in a work style identified by Hill as more highly therapeutic. These groups also engaged in significantly more interactions that were confrontive and speculative. In addition, they were more risk oriented (assertive and confrontive). In discussing the issue of work styles of groups, Hill indicates that groups' work styles can be categorized as "pre/work" or "work". Pre/work is defined by group interactions that are responsive (following leader's probes), conventional (initiating social amenities) and assertive (asserting one's independence from the group). In contrast, work is defined as group interactions that are confrontive (confronting members of the group about their behaviour) and speculative (meditating about the group's or members' behaviour). In this study, groups led by professionals engaged in a significantly greater proportion of behaviour classified by Hill as most therapeutic (speculative-personal, speculative-relationship, confrontive-personal and confrontive-relationship).

Another important finding of this study concerns the ratio of frequency of specific behaviours of group members. Members of the group led by professionals were more confrontive and less socially oriented than members of the group led by peers.

This study shows some parallels to Strupp's (1977) study regarding the behaviours of different kinds of counsellor groups. Both studies found that the two groups of counsellors engaged in different counsellor interactions. Professional counsellors were found to be more therapeutic in their interactions than peer counsellors, in terms of either their individual counselling cases or their interactions in group counselling cases.

The other major finding of this study regarding the social orientation of the work style of groups led by peers is also supported by related literature (Sarbin, 1976). Sarbin contends that the social relationship in the peer process is the most important factor in the efficacy of peer

TABLE 4

Means of the HIM-G Ratios & F Tests of the Hill Interaction Matrix Categories between Peer and Professional Counselling Groups

Ratios	Peer Groups	Professional Groups	F Tests	Significance Levels
Risk	2.4481	3.7760	14.597*	P < .001
Work	1.2926	2.0335	12.082*	P < .001
Quadrant IV	0.2487	0.3367	22.718*	P < .001

* Significant

tutoring. He found in studying the peer-tutor relationship among children that it is essentially a student-to-student relationship in contrast to the professional tutor relationship of teacher to student. In applying Sarbin's conclusions to this study, it is not surprising to find that members in peer groups were more motivated to engage and learn through social interactions than following the traditional therapeutic mode of behaviour (assertion, confrontation and speculation). Similarly, for the professionally led groups, it is not surprising to find that members interacted in the more expected traditional manner. This particular finding is further supported by previous research on the topic of peer counselling, such as Guttman's (1985) study, which found that peer clients evaluated peer counsellors in terms of their perceived sociability and perceived helpfulness in groups rather than in terms of specific therapeutic skills.

The finding that professional counsellors sponsored more interactions in the conventional work styles and topic content categories than peer counsellors is supported by role theory explanations. Professional counsellors are expected to take a direct role and initiate interactions in a group whereas peer counsellors are expected to play a more non-direct and participatory role and have more of an equal status to other peer members of the group. In this study, professional counsellors initiated more group interactions in all categories. In particular, in accordance with the stated objectives of the retreat, they sponsored more social interactions and more specific references to the themes of the retreat. In contrast, the peer counsellors allowed more social initiatives to come from group members.

Some limitations of this study must be noted. The results of this study depend on only one source of evaluation which has been pooled over eight group sessions. This type of analysis has the tendency to mask differences among scores across group sessions since the scores tend to regress toward the mean. Furthermore, single source evaluation gives global rather then specific information. For instance, in this study, it would be of interest to note specific interactions of these groups in each of the categories at different stages rather than being limited to a global measure. In further research it is important to relate specific interactions to evaluation and outcome data.

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