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Psychoeducational Group Counseling For Academic Achievement Of Undergraduate Students In Thailand In The Southern Unrest Province

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Abstract

This study aims to study the effect of psychoeducational group counseling on academic achievement of undergraduate students who enroll in the university situated in the southern unrest area, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani campus. The sampling were 22 sophomores (Thai-Buddhists = 2 ; Thai-Muslims= 20) chosen from the perceived unsatisfactory GPA. The research instruments were 1) Psychoeducational group counseling 2) Scales which measured stress, coping strategies, and self esteem. The findings revealed that GPA, stress, coping strategies, and self esteem in the experimental group were significantly different after the intervention; but the significant differences were not found in the control group.

1. Introduction

Since 2004 when southern violence in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand (Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat) occurred, the university enrollments for Prince of Songkla university, Pattani campus, have been affected by the situation. The southern unrest has limited Thai Buddhists students from other provinces to apply for PSU admission. Even local Thai-Buddhist students are likely to apply to other universities to avoid the safety risk of unrest in their hometowns. This results in a lack of student diversity at PSU, Pattani campus. Diversity includes not only ethnicity, but also high school achievement, scores on a national standard test on Thai language, mathematics, science, and religion. The direct benefits of diversity in the university are the interactive, cooperative and modeling learning in the aspects of thinking, attitude, personality, and ways of coping. How can academic advisors help their students achieve in higher education amid monoculture cohorts after being admitted to university? We hypothesized that psychoeducational group counseling would enhance academic achievement of undergraduate students who were disappointed in their first year GPA. As previously mentioned, before 2004, students admitted at PSU were from different upper southern provinces of Thailand with s high school GPAs. The admission to PSU, Pattani campus used to be quite competitive among government universities. However, the ceaseless southern unrest has made the enrollment limited to mostly local Thai Muslim students whose high school GPA is generally lower than those of

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Thai Buddhists in other provinces. Since the PSU has maintained her standard in grading, fewer students have obtained a high GPA compared to those enrolled before the 2004 academic year.   Unquestionably, academic achievement is the important task for all students (Kongsomboon, 2010). However, attending a university for the first time can be a stressful experience for many college or university freshmen (Dyson & Renk, 2006). The authors, as well as the lecturers and counselors, felt their foremost responsibility was to help students adjust to studying in the university—a task for which their high school training had not prepared them. We selected the psychoeducational group counseling as the tool to reach the goal of enhancing study achievement. One of the implications of this intervention was to provide academic advisors with a model of psychoeducational group counseling to help their advisees improve their GPA.

Variables related to achievement.

The authors have added 3 measures of coping strategies, stress, and self esteem in after the intervention in addition to GPA since these variables were found to be correlated with academic achievement.

Coping strategies

Coping strategies are generally clustered into two broad categories: problem-focused and emotion-focused ways of coping. Problem-focused coping involves actively working to alleviate the stressful person-environment relationship by changing circumstances. On the contrary, emotion-focused coping, involves efforts to regulate the negative emotional consequences of stressful events rather than change them. In other word, the emotion-focused strategy involves thoughts and/or actions that relieve or lessen the emotional impact of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the correlation analysis, practical exam scores and satisfaction with practicals showed a positive correlation with problem-focused coping and a negative correlation with emotion-focused coping (Alimoglu et al., 2010).

Stress

A number of studies have found a relationship between stress and poor academic performance. For example, Struthers et al. (2000) reported that a high level of academic stress was associated with lower course grades. In a similar study, Felsten & Wilcox (1992) found a significant negative correlation between the stress levels of college students and their academic performance. In other word, stress tends to impact adversely on academic performance.

Self esteem

Research has consistently shown a positive correlation between self esteem and academic achievement. (Trautwein et al., 2006; Whitesell et al., 2009). Those who feel confident generally achieve more, while those who lack confidence in themselves achieve less. According to Malbi & Reasoner (2000), self- esteem and academic achievement seem to be most highly related between the years of about seven to fifteen. At a later age only a limited correlation was revealed between self-esteem and academic achievement (Pullmann &Allik, 2008; Naderi et al., 2009).

Psychoeducational group counseling

Psychoeducational group counseling has been used in both clinical and school settings. The American School Counselor Association has endorsed the group work as an important component in a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA , 2005). In psychoeducational groups, the sessions are more structured and members are provided with specific topics or modules to discuss and learn about. The intention is to provide members with more information about a topic. It is an ideal method of meeting the needs of at-risk students. Group counseling allows students to develop and maintain connections with others while exploring factors that influence achievement (Akos & Milsom, 2007).

2 The treatment

Psychoeducational group was conducted in 12 sessions once a week in the evening after participants were through with their class. Each session followed a similar format of a discussion of the session goal, a review of group rules and the previous session, a facilitation of members' involvement, a brief summary of member experience and group studying. The session objectives were as follows. Session 1 aimed to establish relationship among group participants, to provide information regarding the group goal and process. Session 2 was to explore the cause of low academic achievement. Session 3-6 emphasized study skills (reading skills and time management). Session 7-9 centered on participant personal problems, such as no friends, lack of confidence, internet addicted. Session 10-11 centered on developing self esteem and personal identity. Session 12 reviewed group learning, exchanged feedback and encouraged to maintain member connections after the group dissolved.

3. Methods

3.1 The sample

The sample comprised of 22 the sophomore counseling psychology and guidance students (Thai-Buddhists = 2; Thai-Muslims= 20) during the 2008-2009 academic year, aged 19-21 years old (Mean = 19; SD= 0.65,) selected through purposive sampling from the class of 40 students.   Criteria for participation in the study were students with unsatisfactory first year GPA and willingness to attend group meetings regularly in the evening for 3 months. All 22 participants were given pretests on measurement of self control, stress, coping strategies, and self esteem. Then we divided participants in 2 groups with the equal proportion of high, medium and low scores on all 3 measurements, and GPA. These 2 groups were randomly divided into the experimental and control conditions. The experiment group received intervention for 12 sessions, 1-1.30 hours per session, once weekly for 3 months. The data were analyzed by Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test and Mann-Whitney U.

3.2 Measurement

Academic achievement, stress, coping strategies, and self esteem were four major dependent variables, measured by GPA, Self – Analysis Stress Test (Department of Mental Health, Thailand, 2002), Coping Strategies Indicator (Amirkhan, 1990), and Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965).

Self – Analysis Stress Test (Department of Mental Health, Thailand, 2002), is a 20- item instrument to evaluate the perceived stress of Thais. The alpha coefficient was 0.86.

Coping Strategies Indicator (Amirkhan, 1990), originally a 33-item version, was modified to 21 items with a 3-point Likert-type scale to measure the three fundamental coping styles: problem solving, seeking social support, and avoidance. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for problem solving, seeking social support, and avoidance were of .89, .93, and .84, respectively.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) is a-ten item short version Likert scale with items answered on a four point scale –from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Rosenberg (1965) reported internal consistency reliability ranging from .85 to .88 for college samples.

4. Results

Both groups were tested for equivalence before the intervention on measures of GPA, Stress, Coping strategies, and Self-esteem by use of a Mann-Whitney U test. There were no significant differences on any of the five variables. (table1)

After intervention, Wilcoxon Signed Rank's Test was used to test whether there were significant differences in the scores of GPA , Stress, Coping strategies, and Self-esteem on each group. In the control, there were no statistically different from all four scores but in the experimental group, statistically significant difference were found at .01, .05, .005 and .05 levels for 4 variables respectively (Table 2)

When compared between groups, there were two variables significantly different: average GPA and scores on self esteem at the .05 levels using Mann-Whitney U tests**,** as displayed in table 3.

5. Discussion

The study revealed that after the experiment, the mean scores of GPA, coping strategies, and self esteem in the experimental group were statistically significantly higher than before the intervention, whereas the mean score of stress was significantly lower. These significant differences in all four variable mean scores were not found in those of the control group. There were three main possible explanations for the significant results. First, the process of the group helped create trust and group cohesion which has been shown to be an important factor to motivate members to adhere to their study goal. (Chongruksa, 2007) In the session one, group rules were introduced such as keep members' stories confidential, listen, with respect, no negative feedback, be on time, no sub-group allowed, and each member should talk.

Second, the structure of psychoeducational group on study skills and time management on the second stage of sessions 3-6 helped members overcome their study obstacles. As previously mention, in session two, we had members share their reasons for earning a low GPA. Their reasons clustered around four weaknesses: study habits (not attentive in class, little reading), study skills (can't understand the lecture, can't keep the main idea of reading, afraid to ask questions) time management (too many extracurricular activities, spend much time on TV or the internet, can't catch up with reading for examination), and stress (worry about parents, didn't get along with friends). Session 3-6 were spent on time management and improving study habits and skills. Regarding the study habits and skills, we first asked them to share their ideas for improving themselves. We then gave them the tips that they might overlook: plan a specific time to study for each class, study the difficult subjects first, schedule shortly, frequent breaks during study, study at their best time of the day, establish a special study area, and study in a quiet place. On time management, we had them keep a record every week of the total time they spent in socializing, in-class time, homework, phone call, commuting, watching television, listening to music, eating and errands. Research indicates that when individuals keep the record of their poor habits, they will unintentionally monitor their behavior (Martin &Pear, 2007). Similarly, group members learned to reduce their unproductive time since they had to share their timetable in groups, because, as suggested by research, group pressure breeds conformity (Chongruksa, 2007). Group norms can be extremely powerful, bending members' behaviors in ways they would never expect. In addition, group process reinforced members' high commitment to their study goal. Third, the group also was structured to reduce members' stress and increase self esteem. During sessions 7-9, the group focus centered on members' personal problems using person centered approach. According to Rogers, clients will find their own solutions to their problems when they are provided with a nonjudgmental environment, positive regard, genuineness, and empathetic understanding (Rogers, 1957). Thus, we had members share their troubling stories of family or friends. In sessions 10-11, the structured theme was about self esteem. We had members recall positive memories of their early childhood for at least 3 stories. Then, we had them list 4 things they accomplished during primary school years, four achievement during secondary school years, three major accomplishments during high school, and finally three successes from freshman to present. They took turns sharing their stories. On the last session, besides following the traditional format of group termination, we had members form study buddies and offered suggestions of things to do in study group such as test each other by asking questions about materials from lectures and reading assignments; compare and contrast notes, and brainstorm test questions as a group (Bleuer, et al., 1993).

After the intervention, there were no significant differences in mean scores of coping strategies, and stress reduction between the experiment and the control group. The nonsignificant difference on these two variables might result from the structured theme that focused on a person centered approach which relies on members finding their own solutions of which generally takes time.

In conclusion, the process of psychoeducational group proved to be a moderately effective means to enhance academic achievement. Group intervention uses peers as a support group to motivate academic success by reducing stress, increasing positive self esteem, and improving time management and study skills. In short, it promotes the approach of studying smarter not actually harder.

6. Tables

Table 1 <u>Comparison of Mean, standard deviations of scores on GPA, stress, coping   strategies and self esteem of both groups before the intervention using Mann-Whitney U test.</u>

Variables	Experiment		Control		Z	Asymp. Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
GPA	2.33	0.38	2.22	0.25	1.248	.212
Stress	28.81	7.30	27.54	7.77	.561	.575
Coping strategies	45.81	3.34	46.36	3.84	1.223	.221
Self-esteem	27.63	2.39	27.72	2.65	.265	.791

Table 2 <u>Compared pre and post scores on GPA, Stress, Coping strategies, and Self- esteem by Wilcoxon Signed Rank's Test on each group</u>

Variable	Experiment		Control	
	Z	Asymp.Sig.	Z	Asymp.Sig.
Pre - Post GPA	2.585*	.010	.311	.721
Pre - Post Stress	2.018*	.044	.119	.905
Pre - Post Coping strategies	2.943*	.003	.357	.721
Pre - Post Self-esteem	1.969*	.049	.256	.798

Table 3 <u>Compared of Mean, standard deviations of scores on GPA, stress, coping   strategies and self esteem of both groups after the intervention using Mann-   Whitney U test</u>

Variables	Experiment		Control		Z	Asymp. Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
GPA	2.59	0.36	2.44	0.98	2.270*	.023
Stress	23.72	6.27	27.81	10.77	.465	.642
Coping strategies	48.90	4.74	46.54	4.10	1.222	.222
Self-esteem	29.09	2.66	27.63	3.50	2.052*	.040

Acknowledgements

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