

Existence or Non-Existence of a Therapist in Group Counseling and Stages of the Group Development with Variant Characteristics Occurring Throughout the “Breakfast Club”

Mehmet Aslan

Faculty of Philology and Education Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature,
Bedër University, Tirana, Albania

maslan@beder.edu.al

Submitted: 2016-08-28 · Accepted: 2016-11-28 · Published: 2016-12-28

DOI: 10.26417/ejls.v4i1.p144-148

Abstract

The role of a therapist is a high stake issue in group counseling for its variant roles in providing safe havens, not only in regard with providing a secure setting but also for the overall development of all group members as they go through some certain stages until they reach a termination of meetings as in achieving the desired change in the behavior among the group members. One of the well-known roles tailored to a therapist in group counseling is being a moderator rather than being a therapist as well as being a counselor, and/or psychologist etc. Thus, the question of the need for existence or non-existence of a therapist in group counseling arises given that the group members take such roles instead. In this study, the inquiry of an answer to such a question is investigated together with developmental stages observed on a 5 membered counseling group in “Breakfast Club” that has no therapist; instead the members of the counseling group take the role of a therapist one for another to overcome their psychological difficulties, and moderate the 5 stages of the development together with an additional stage that can be called post termination stage or follow up of the development.

Keywords: Termination, therapist, counselor, developmental stages, counseling group

1. Introduction

Group therapy is known for its portrayal of people coming together for mutual benefits as they share some common grounds and/or problems, thus help each other to overcome with their difficulties by feeling the sense of belonging as well as feeding their needs to be listened or to listen to some extent. The types of groups

varies depending “...on specific aims, the role of the leader, the kind of people in the group, and the emphasis given to issues such as prevention, remediation, treatment, and development...” as a result “...the practice of group work has broadened to encompass psychotherapy groups, psycho- educational groups, and task groups as well as counseling groups.”(Corey, 2011)

The literature on group counseling, apart from the types of groups, emphasizes the importance of group counseling as it helps each person within the group to achieve goals as well as productivity and progress by relating himself\herself to the others (McClure, 1990). The literature also has a focus on the role of the therapist as they are supposed to make their plans beforehand and show sensitivity to the stages of development and most importantly they should be equipped with required knowledge (Gladding, 1994). One of the most important issues held by studies conducted on this field is the stages of the development as there have been different approaches their existence is primarily accepted. To some it's described as “*Life Cycle*” (Frances, 2008), however the names used for stages are variant depending on the approaches used by the researchers. Nevertheless, the stages are mostly named as; Forming, storming, norming, and performing also known as Tuckman's stage model (Tuckman, 1965). In this article, unlike other studies, six stages of development are studied, the last one being evaluation and follow up. As an intervention, group counseling is considered to be pivot for career, academic and social\emotional issues (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007; McGannon, Carey, & Dimmitt, 2005; Paisley & Milsom, 2007; Whiston & Sexton, 1998). Some other studies are more focused on motivation and its role in group counseling. Motivation is seen as the essence and heart of not only counseling but also psychotherapy as it helps for more stable and long lasting results and brings active engagement on client's side (Overholser, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2008). This article, different than other studies, is mostly concentrated on the role of the therapist, the need for his\her existence and the stages of the development through the lens of group members.

“*The Breakfast Club*” is a portrayal of a group coming together on a Saturday morning for school detention as they have to come together by forming a kind of counseling group of five members each of whom display different hidden and visible personality traits through which they try to find jointing points for understanding each other and common grounds for the problems they start to reveal to each other at different breakpoints throughout the warming climax of the four early and later stages of the development group. As the group members are teenagers from a high school, the counseling is somewhat related with school counseling as well, hence the absence of a school counselor is observed. The importance of a school counselor is related with responsibilities on monitoring group members, informing them when needed, elaborating on purpose of the group, goals, confidentiality, participation etc. as well as inclusion of parental consent and student agreement (Falco, 2011). The major difference from a traditional counseling group is that they don't have a

therapist to moderate their development, nevertheless they seem to replace the therapist one by one when needed as in doing it in shifts. In a normal group therapy or counseling; change or development - apart from values - is the key goal set to achieve by each member, thus indicating success for the sessions which is presented in the movie in a very professional way.

2. Methodology

"The Breakfast Club" as suggested by the name itself is very much related with counseling and its design in getting the utmost benefit out of a counseling group, thus the observation of the movie in regard with understanding formation of the group, stages of the development and most importantly the role of a therapist is subject of study in this article together with the movie as the main source of data as well as secondary data collected through written literature are used for the analysis of above mentioned aspects of group counseling. Stages of development are mostly accepted to be 5 by the literature; nevertheless follow up and/or post group issues is added as the sixth stage of the development in this article. One of the major aims of this article is to use the movie as a device for understanding the need for a therapist as well as analyzing some scenes to discover developmental themes through formation of the stages. As suggested by Kaye, D. L., & Ets-Hokin, E. *"...the movie is rich for engagement and learning about adolescent development and psychotherapy."* (Kaye, D. L., & Ets-Hokin, E., 2000), which also gives a synopsis to the methodology used in this article as well. Although Tuckman's four stage model is taken as the base model in this study the number of the stages, names used are major differences. The four stage model is as follows: *"Forming, storming, norming, performing"* (Tuckman, 1965).

3. Early Stages in the Development of a Group

3.1. Stage 1: Pre-Group Issues—Formation of the Group

The formation of the group happens through a compulsory detention resulted from different infractions of each member as they show up with different personalities. Alison, the encourager, comes in a dark reflection as in trying to hide herself from the world; Claire, the standing figure, comes in by a BMW emphasizing her economic status; Brian, the harmonizer and the brainy one, shows up with a dialogue with his mother, meaning that he won't be doing anything for studying as it is just for staying the whole day; John or Bender, the dominator, comes in with his shabby wearing and non-matching shoes; Andrew, the other dominator, comes in with his father's SUV indicating his father's expectation from him as a former bully. The group members are also given nicknames as; "the criminal, the athlete, the brain, the basket case and the princess."

Each of them indicate behavior for the desire of being accepted by the others, and they seem to be comfortable by the image or mask they have in the others' eyes. *"This stage would be roughly equivalent to Tuckman's 'forming', which is usually*

described as a tentative testing of the boundaries of interpersonal and task behaviors"(Frances, 2008). They start to gather information about each other, and try to avoid conflicting behavior at the beginning. Formation of the group happens either formally or informally, although the group here is informal, there is a compulsory participation due to detention. At this stage, the group needs a facilitator to help members feel safe and lead them for the coming stages and steps to be taken on the process. *"...members may be looking to facilitators for a fairly strong lead, and for guidance about what might happen and how things might work"*(Frances, 2008). Although the group doesn't have an assigned counselor or therapist for guidance at this stage, Bender seems to be taking the initiative in facilitating the other group members.

3.2. Stage 2: Initial Stage—Orientation and Exploration

This stage complies with Tuckman's 'storming' in which members start to have conflicts and show some polarizations around the conflicts especially on interpersonal issues, thus they may start to shape some sub-groups depending on reactions, conflicts affections, emotions etc. *"Since the group may be relatively unaware of what is core for each member, the levels of volatility and strength of reaction to each other's contribution may be difficult to make sense of and accept"*(Frances, 2008). At this stage the group starts to find some common grounds on which they can relate with each other, and maintain unity against common threat or problem. In the movie, the group reflects unity against Mr. Vernon and shows some little subgroups which may later change as Andrew and Claire seem to form a relation of unity against Bender. On the other hand, the other members keep their images preserved by not being on any side. Nevertheless, they start to reveal some truths behind their images as Bender starts to force the others to reveal themselves. Although Bender seems to be taking most of the role of therapist, especially at this stage, it's observed that group members are taking turns figuring out ways off the conflicts.

3.3. Stage 3: Transition Stage—Dealing with Resistance

At this stage the members start to force each other in order to gain power or knowledge about each other. Andrew and Bender fight to dominate the group, Brian gets anxious and assumes others are friendly; Bender is hostile but also engaging. Important issues that break their resistance start to emerge, minor confrontations occur as they start to show implications of bursting initial hidden problems, on the other hand some members try to go back to their images.

This stage is crucial in group counseling as it can be either a breakthrough or a total failure in regard with the desired change in the behavior. In a normal group therapy the therapist play a key role in helping members overcome their difficulties at this stage and have them ready to face their problems by avoiding their previous images to gain control over them. However, this key role is distributed among the members

of “The Breakfast Club”. As Tuckman’s model suggests “*storming*” occurs among the members as they resist in keeping their images.

4. Later Stages in the Development of a Group

4.1 Stage 4: Working Stage—Cohesion and Productivity

At this point the members start to challenge the confrontations they have faced, and start to show implications of little changes or development. The sub-groups start to change and replace with real relations amongst the group as Andrew’s relation with Claire shifts to Alison; Bender starts to have concrete changes as he forms a new developmental relation with Claire. Brian, on the other hand, takes the matters in his hands and decides to write the essay in the name of the group. These are little steps toward change and development of each member as important issues start to emerge. They also start to work together as they escape from Mr. Vernon and help Bender hide himself from him.

The group is very close to termination as they no longer show resistance and/or tendency in hiding behind their previous images which were mostly like masks worn to hide their true identities as well as to be seen by the others with the face they wanted to be seen.

4.2 Stage 5: Final Stage—Consolidation and Termination

At this stage the norms within the group start to shape, the roles of each member becomes clear, and they act in an harmonized way, because they understand each other much better. The group whistles all together, they raise their hands and close their eyes in a unity, they accept Bender’s leadership as he sacrifices himself for the sake of the group. Group feels comfortable in moving into private, intimate topics as trust is established, group identity, morale, and loyalty reaches its peak. They also start with self-disclosures in order to reach termination as the final stage.

Although termination is the final stage in most of the studies and in Tuckman’s models, in this group we have the following stage as well.

4.3 Stage 6: Post-Group Issues—Evaluation and Follow-up

The group members start to accept the self as the way it is, and they withdraw from projected images presented at the beginning. Trust reaches its summit through feedback and disclosures. They reflect higher self-esteem. The group members dance all together, and they trust Brian in writing the essay for all of them through which he becomes the voice of the group’s change and development as he writes: “...we accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention...” and they discover the self when he says: “...each one of us is a brain; an athlete, and basket case, and a princess, and a criminal...” (Hughes, 1985).

This stage is an addition to Tuckman’s both models as in 1965 he proposed his four staged model of forming, storming, norming, and performing and in 1977 he

updated his four staged model into a five-staged model by adding “adjourning”. Development models in group counseling as well as in therapy of so far conducted in other studies followed the same pattern in general. In “The Breakfast Club” the pattern is also followed and kept with a sixth stage as an addition that can be named as “Evaluation and Follow Up” which is quite vital in keeping the change in the behavior stabilized and strengthened by providing the group members the opportunity of continuity and further progress. They have been through a tough journey and reached the peak of the mountain, on the other hand, they need to make sure that they won’t fall back and keep staying on the peak.

5. Conclusion

The research conducted on group counseling and/or therapy has gone through two trends of group development. One has been dealing with dynamics within the group and the other has been focused on phases of the development and thus problem solving throughout stages (Gersick, 1988). In this study the first stream is mostly emphasized as the development occurred through stages in which members could face their hidden problems and reach termination by gaining control over their fears and realized the desired change in the behavior with a difference of not having an assigned therapist or school counselor. On the other hand, the members were successfully able to go through six developmental stages.

As seen throughout the film, each group member starts to become a propeller in forcing each other for change and development. The way they come out of the school is also quite significant as each of them reflect higher self-esteem even through their wearing styles.

“The Breakfast Club” in regard with above mentioned features conveys unique elements for group counseling and its format. Thus, featuring movies are worth to further studies in clearing the questions on the role of a therapist as well as his/her necessity.

Bibliography

- [1] Corey, G. (2011). Theory and practice of group counseling. Cengage Learning. Eight edition; chapter one, page, 7.
- [2] Falco, L. D. (2011). Why groups? The importance of group counseling in schools. School Counseling Research and Practice, A Journal of the Arizona School Counselors’ Association, Inc, 3, 17-23.
- [3] Frances, M. (2008). Stages of group development—a PCP approach. Personal Construct Theory & Practice, 5, 10-18.
- [4] Gerrity, D. A., & DeLucia-Waack, J. L. (2006). Effectiveness of groups in the schools. The journal for specialists in group work, 32(1), 97-106.
- [5] Gersick, C. J. (1988). Time and transition in work teams: Toward a new model of group development. Academy of Management journal, 31(1), 9-41.

- [6] Gladding, S. T. (1994). *Effective Group Counseling*. ERIC/CASS, School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 101 Park Bldg., Greensboro, NC 27412-5001.
- [7] Hughes, J. (Director). (1985). *The Breakfast Club* [Motion picture]. United States: MCA Universal Home Video.
- [8] Kaye, D. L., & Ets-Hokin, E. (2000). *The Breakfast Club*. *Academic Psychiatry*, 24(2), 110-116.
- [9] McClure, B. A. (1990). The group mind: Generative and regressive groups. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 15(3), 159-170.
- [10] McGannon, W., Carey, J., & Dimmitt, C. (2005). *The Current Status of School Counseling Outcome Research*. Research Monograph, Number 2. Center for School Counseling Outcome Research (NJ1).
- [11] Overholser, J. C. (2005). Contemporary psychotherapy: Promoting personal responsibility for therapeutic change. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 35(4), 369-376.
- [12] Paisley, P. O., & Milsom, A. (2006). Group work as an essential contribution to transforming school counseling. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 32(1), 9-17.
- [13] Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2008). A self-determination theory approach to psychotherapy: The motivational basis for effective change. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*, 49(3), 186.
- [14] Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological bulletin*, 63(6), 384.
- [15] Whiston, S. C., & Sexton, T. L. (1998). A review of school counseling outcome research: Implications for practice. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 76(4), 412-426.