

Cross Cultural, Bilingual Group Experience: Evidence that Process-Focused Groups Work

Louis L. Downs

California State University, Sacramento

Tan Joo Siang

New Era College, Kajang, Malaysia

Kung Shang Chun

Whole Brain Education Center, Nilai, Malaysia

A group of counselors, counselor educators and trainees convened a therapeutic group in Kajang, Malaysia, facilitated by a counselor from the United States. Although Malaysian counselors are accustomed to content-driven groups, this group adhered to process-focused protocols. A Delphi analysis on the outcome of the group was performed by a multinational team. Results suggested that the group followed the same stage development as described in the American literature and that the process-focused group appeared to facilitate the crossing of cultural lines more effectively than a content-driven group.

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Recently, multicultural issues have come to the fore as significant considerations for counseling in group settings (Anderson, 2007; Delgado-Romero, Barfield, & Fairley, 2005; Portman, 2003; Shechtman, & Halevi, 2006; Torres-Rivera, Garrett, Crutchfield, & Gillam 2004). Much has been written about competent, culturally sensitive multicultural group counseling (Delgado-Romero, Barfield, & Fairley, 2005; Portman, 2003;

Rubel & Kline, 2008). The question arises, how does leadership style affect these competencies?

There are two distinct styles of group leadership or facilitation. The first is driven by clear agendas that the counselor believes is critical to the good function of the group and so is highly structured (Corey & Corey, 2002). These types of groups may serve various functions such as psychoeducation or behavioral control, but they often invite autocratic group leadership. Research suggests that group members' perceptions of leadership style are highly correlated with group member satisfaction with outcome, and that autocracy tends to be seen as both disruptive to process and less satisfying as leader control increases (Savery, 1994). The second leadership style tends to result in what has been dubbed a democratic group process. This facilitation style has become known as process-focused group leadership. Studies have discovered evidence that group leaders who identify their styles as using the process-focused group model tend to actually not use it in practice (Chen & Rybak, 2004; Yalom, 1995).

Process-focused groups have the distinct disadvantage that they can contribute to a feeling of loss of control in the neophyte group counselor and so many counselors revert to a more controlling style. However, since most problems that occur in a group are related to interactive processes and dynamics, process-focused groups seem to be the most practical approach (Rose, 1989). The tasks of process-focused groups are to establish a safe environment, respond to members' needs in the moment, and to diagnose patterns of coping and respond with measures to enhance or adjust interactional dynamics (Chen & Ryak, 2004). These important conversations appear to be the most likely for adjusting group process across cultural responses to being in a group setting therapeutically.

Background

As part of a Fulbright Fellowship, some of which was targeted to enhance counseling skills of counselors in Selangor, Malaysia, a counseling group was formed to help study and integrate skills for group counseling among regional professional counselors and psychotherapists. The group consisted of nine members with seven females and two males. All members were either Chinese or Nionya (a distinct subculture with hundreds of years of history as a cross-cultural marriage of Chinese and Malay), and all spoke

Mandarin, Bahasa Malayu, and varying amounts of English. The instructor and experiential group facilitator was American and spoke only a few words in any of the native languages.

The Chinese population is socially quite traditional in Malaysia. Malaysian Chinese believe in little physical touch, are less emotionally expressive, still retain significant vestiges of “face saving”, and display a somewhat stoic social presentation until acquaintance is well established. One group member stated, “Having moved to Malaysia from Taiwan, I have found that the Chinese population here is very traditional. It is almost as if the culture froze in time when it moved from China some centuries ago. Taiwanese culture has evolved and taken on some more Western ways of functioning, but coming to Malaysia was almost like traveling back in time.”

The full day workshop began with a lecture and discussion regarding process-focused group design and skills. Participants at the workshop stated that therapeutic groups in Malaysia are not only autocratic, but the norm is communication between each member and the group leader with little interaction between members of the group. Advice giving on some issues and discussion of “external” issues rather than “internal” needs of the group are more common in Malaysian group counseling. Conversely, process-focused groups rely on the interaction between group members and sharing of deeper issues combined with immediacy.

Group Process

After an introductory lecture and discussion, a series of experiential groups was held throughout the afternoon and evening with breaks between each session. The facilitator assumed at the outset that the whole experience would take place using the English language because all participants spoke some English

The first group began with an adventure based counseling exercise called “Birthday Lineup” as a warm-up activity. The advantage of adventure based exercises is that they heavily engage participants with each other and they help orient group members to working with each other without the interference of the counselor. A debriefing group phase follows that helps the group understand its interactional patterns, discuss group roles, and implement better interactive norms to enhance future process. With an adventure based counseling exercise, the facilitator can concentrate on

increasing communication skills between members rather than brokering communications between participants.

The rest of the group experiences involved a less structured group process with a stated, universally acknowledged theme: Stress related to work. This portion of the experience utilized a process-focused group. Throughout the initial stages of the group, the facilitator concentrated almost exclusively on encouraging, linking skills, directness, ownership, feedback, confrontational skills between group members and helping participants develop awareness of their dynamics through occasional process commentary.

Analysis of the Group Experiences

A Delphi panel (Akins, Tolson, & Cole, 2007) of two Malaysian Chinese group participants and the American facilitator was formed to develop exploratory research questions and to exchange observations and insights into the process and experiences of the group members. The panel developed questions to assess: 1) the dynamics of the group; 2) the cultural issues that arose during the group process; and, 3) the differences between the process-focused group and the autocratic group model traditionally used in Malaysia. These questions guided the interviews and discussions between the researchers. Results of the interviews were repeatedly triangulated between the panel members until consensus was reached on each research question.

Directly following the group sessions in Malaysia, the experience was debriefed and several group members expressed the need to work beyond traditional cultural restrictions surrounding touch and the need to develop their nonverbal communication styles. Three group members identified that the roles they assumed in the group were directly related to skills needed in their daily lives which they had not integrated. These included the lack of assertiveness, saying “no” to others, being less perfectionist when handling responsibilities, and the need for coping skills.

According to participants, in Southeast Asian Chinese culture, the role of everyone is usually quite clear. Confucian philosophy, which is the core of much of the Diaspora of Chinese culture, suggests that a leader should behave like a leader; a follower should behave like a follower. Everyone’s role is fixed and predictable. During the experience, group members did not

get much instruction from the leader regarding how to run this activity. One group member stated, "If this activity was done with Americans or Taiwanese, a leader would emerge sooner than it did in this group." She felt that no one seemed to take the initiative in leading the group. She finally stepped forward to lead the group herself, an unusual reaction on her part; she identified herself as normally passive in group settings.

At the beginning of the process-focused groups, participants appeared uncomfortable and remained quiet. Finally, one group member stepped forward and tentatively made a statement about her work frustrations. Alienation from other workers, guilt and overwhelming expectations were her theme. These themes were then picked up and resonated by other group members, either as supportive feedback or as common themes personally identified by other group members.

The group appeared to be making progress, but after initial contributions by all members, a pattern of nonparticipation began to develop from two members. A process comment by the facilitator focused the group on a discussion of why participation was no longer universal and it was discovered that at least one member did not have adequate command of English to participate. The group leader asked this group member if she needed to revert to Mandarin, and she responded immediately by beginning to self-divulge in her native language. Quickly, the group member began to cry as she spoke about her circumstance. The group again established a norm of full participation, but this time most people who spoke did so in the Chinese language. The facilitator was only able to understand about one fourth of what was said, adequate to follow the idea of the conversation, but no longer adequate to facilitate or to influence content. In Southeast Asian and Southeast Asian Chinese cultures people are accustomed to listening and following instructions by a leader. Although excluding the group leader, the change of language by participants helped the process focus more on the interaction between group members. At this point, participants remained engaged and animated and the group exceeded its allotted time.

As the group experience came to a close, the facilitator summarized from the beginning of the sessions and added some general comments about direction of the group after it moved to participants primarily speaking Mandarin. The facilitator added that he had always told his counseling students to trust the process but that he had never had opportunity to discover how far one might have to go to do that. This unique experience

empowered group members to express deeper emotions and thoughts and to learn to be less dependent on the group leader. There was quiet laughter from members and then they turned their attention to wrapping up the group process, again speaking mostly in Mandarin.

At the end of the group experience, participants were thanked by the facilitator for the encounter. As equipment was put away, group members began to hug each other as they chatted softly. Some members of both genders then hugged the facilitator, a gesture outside the context of the culture. Some members expressed how life changing the group experience had been.

Discussion

Qualitative evidence from each of the members of the Delphi panel suggested that the process model was a significantly more effective model of cross cultural, multinational, and cross-linguistic group counseling than the more traditionally practiced autocratic model. It appeared to have allowed not only more autonomy for the group, but an environment in which members could mutually explore their own reactions to the set agenda and learn to interact directly and honestly with each other without immediate directives from the facilitator.

Delphi panel members also concurred that the initial reaction of process group members was uncomfortable and tenuous, but that the facilitator's comfort with silence, and the added process commentary, helped group members reflect on their discomfort and begin to interact naturally without being directed to speak. Participants were therefore able to engage naturally, without feeling pressured to speak or to emote insincerely.

Furthermore, Delphi panel members agreed that it appeared easier for members of the process group to explore their own concerns and to receive and give feedback to each other without direction to speak from the facilitator. There was agreement that the group could express its own needs and direct its own course toward productive ways of communication. There was also agreement that at times the process was clumsier for participants than an autocratically directed group process.

Conclusion

The experiential group and the subsequent exploration of the experience by the Delphi panel proved to be a slow and interactive process, sometimes mirroring the communication difficulties of the group itself. It also proved to require significant patience, uncomfortable discussion and reflection on different communication patterns. However, the reflective process allowed each Delphi panel member to express, reflect and respond to the input of others.

It also required giving direct feedback and discussing how to adapt the process of reflective writing so as to produce the representative manuscript. But agreement was formed around common themes, and writer roles were developed to adapt to communication and writing process styles of Delphi panel members.

This group experience provided qualitative evidence that the process-focused group model satisfied the needs of group members and provided a safe environment for effective member participation and resolution of individual life problems. The Delphi panel methodology provided no statistical evidence of significant improvement of effectiveness of leader generated models of group counseling but experientially supported that the model is a valid process for cross-cultural group counseling. One group member reflected, "This, particularly, encouraged group members to speak in their own mother tongue (some Mandarin and others English) and so encouraged mutual respect of individual differences in the group. It also enhanced group acceptance and encouraged group members to gradually be more open with each other and to themselves."

Qualitative methodology is limited to the immediate experience of the studied group process. However, the qualitative study provided a model for more quantitative study of the differences between the two articulated models of group counseling. There is also substantive need for further comparative research into effectiveness of group counseling delivery models. Nevertheless, the Delphi panel was satisfied that this group provided the professional members of the group with an improved environment for self growth over previously experienced autocratic models of group counseling delivery models.

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Louis L. Downs is an Associate Professor in the Department of Counselor Education, California State University Sacramento, and the Academic Consultant to the Department of Guidance and Counseling Psychology at New Era College, Kajang, Malaysia, as well as a Clinical Consultant to Psychcn Counseling Agency, Beijing, China. **Tan Joo Siang** is the Chairperson of the Department of Guidance and Counseling Psychology at New Era College. **Kung Shang Chun** is the Principal of Hidden Gem Kindergarten as well as of the MRC Whole Brain Education Center in Nilai, Malaysia.

Correspondence regarding this article may be sent to Louis L. Downs at: ldowns@saclink.csus.edu
