

The Unheard Voice in Group Counseling: QUIETNESS

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Abstract

Why do some members keep silent, although the group counseling is based on interaction? Is this a way of participation or is oral participation too difficult as a skill to actualize in a group? This study handles the issue of silence and its reasons, which group leaders frequently face and sometimes have difficulty coping with in non-voluntary training groups. The data for the study were collected from the reports of 61 members in four distinct counseling groups. The groups were led simultaneously by two leaders who are specialized in individual and group counseling. The data were analyzed using content analysis. As a result, it was found that silence because of personal characteristics was the major cause of silence, and that it appears to be there are reasons for silence other than the ones specified in the relevant literature.

Key Words

Quietness, Group Counseling, Resistance, Training Groups, Group Leader.

Counseling is one of the significant community and social services occupations aiming at providing maximum contribution to the development of human potentials while working with individuals, groups and societies; and targets to prevent and solve individuals' problems. In 1997, ACA defined professional counseling as, "counseling is the application of mental health, psychology and development principals in a way that individual wellness, personal, and professional development through cognitive, affective, behavioral and transactional intervention strategies and pathology will

be included" (Hackney & Cormier, 2008). All counseling/psychotherapy approaches target to change and develop individuals. Corsini (1989) defined all psychotherapeutic method and approaches as learning-teaching methods and described the purposes of counseling as: teaching individuals the things they do not know, or they have forgotten; or in a paradoxical manner, making individuals to forget the things they already know and perform, and leading them not to do the same acts.

In counseling support, individual and group works are both important. Corey and Corey (2006) categorized group works according to the content, purpose and expertise standards under four titles: task groups, psycho-education groups, counseling groups, and psychotherapy groups. Education and sensitiveness development groups that have social and clinical consequences were started by Kurt Lewin et al. in 1946 in order to analyze small-group dynamics (Carroll & Wiggins, 2008). However, in the course of time the purpose has changed into learning the ways how to recognize self-desires and aims through the interaction of group members. Mahler (1971) defines group

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counseling as an interpersonal and dynamic process that includes curative functions such as: support, acceptance, understanding, maintenance, mutual trust, catharsis, reality orientation, release; and focuses on conscious thought and behavior. According to Voltan-Acar (2009), a counselor candidate cannot be a group leader, unless he participates to the group counseling process himself because learning through experience is the most important form of learning in counseling process. Group counseling is a very effective method for low academic performance, behavioral adjustment disorder, self-acceptance issues and social competence development (Hayes, 2001). Counselors are required to experience those studies during their education processes in order to perform effectively.

Resistance occurs in counseling groups either its form is based upon voluntariness or obligation. Ohlsen, Home, and Lawe (1988) described resistance as being uncooperative in a therapeutic process; he further specified clients' symptoms of resistance as: arriving late to the counseling sessions, missing the sessions, not to determine the behavioral objective, questioning whether to be supported or not, talking about the previous experiences, asking for advice and advising, talking sophisticatedly, selected mutism, talking with people other than the group members, silence, and questioning trust within the group (cited in Voltan-Acar, 2009). If resistance within counseling groups cannot be noticed and overcome properly, it may be a damaging factor for development and progress of the process. Yalom (1999) claimed that a person who is quiet and not willing to self-disclosure rarely benefits from the group experience. Lundgren and Miller (1965) argued that more changes were determined in clinical charts of the members in their study groups, who were revealing more about themselves to others for whatever topic (cited in Sharry, 2007). In addition, Voltan-Acar (2009) addressed that the members revealing themselves and intimately talking about their problems are the ones who benefit most from the group counseling. A person who participates to the group in the first-phase encounters with an environment which leads this person: to feel that his personal boundary is under threat, to activate several needs, and as a result to be more anxious (İnce, 1998). In this phase, an anxious person in the group may act or refrain from acting in a certain way. For example, the group member may keep silent until he adjusts to the environment and builds up trust. Yalom (1995) asserted that although there is no consensus between group leaders on group dynamics and some perspectives of the group processes; still, they all agree on the fact that

group members should consent for self-disclosure. Literature reviews show that experts specify several characteristics regarding the causes of members not to reveal themselves within the group. These characteristics are: anger, fear, boredom, respect, shame, loneliness, sadness, disdain, defense, not to understand the language that counselor uses (Manthei & Matthews, 1989), fear of self-disclosure, conflicting on aggression, self-righteousness, feel uncomfortable with group members, fear of playing the role of the weak (Yalom, 2002), not to trust the group, the high amount of member numbers in the group, constituting the group mandatorily, being in the same social environment with other members and unequal distribution of gender (Voltan-Acar, 2009).

The experts listen to two things during counseling process: first is the content, in other words, the things what client brings; and second is the things that he does not bring forward, which is absence. Sometimes clients talk so much so that about nonissues, they bring the counseling session to a deadlock. Client may put forward plenty of issues during counseling process; however, those may be the defense mechanism and resistance against his own change rather than contributing to reveal and solve the problem (Mozdzierz, Pelusu, & Lisecki, 2009). According to Voltan-Acar (2009) these members, whose behavior can be described as 'monopolistic', do not participate to the group soulfully, and they become more anxious and talkative as the tension within the group increases. Somehow, these members are skilful in taking the role of 'person who talks too much'. In group counseling process quiet clients are on the agenda as much as the talking clients. During counseling process leader's correct attribution to the meanings of speech and quietness is a very important professional ability for healthy counseling processes.

Silence has got challenging aspects in communication. Because interaction is an important dynamic in group counseling process, this effect is felt much more. As Conte (2009) puts, when a person is on his own, he can sit there with his thoughts and reflections. However, with others, one needs to communicate and in such a case it is more difficult to sit quietly. Counselors make different assessments based on the periods of quietness. A large psychotherapy group stated that they do not permit quietness more than two minutes. When counselors deal with silence between them and clients, what they stated is, they try to break silence when they think it is no more efficient and clients are disturbed (cited in Ladancy, Hill, Thompson, & O'Brien, 2004). Counselors break the silence in order to figure out

client's situation. They generally ask a client for his cause to be quiet (Ladany et al.). Quietness should not be seen as an absence of interaction, it should be seen as a part of it. During silence client has time to think how he feels and to make a sense of his feelings. Counselors should accept this period as a vital flow of the process and allow for it (Sharpley, Munro, & Elly, 2005). Not all moments of quietness are irritating processes for counselor and client.

Quietness is not only a situation preventing quiet clients in the counseling groups to benefit from the process. Especially in the counselor education oriented groups, considering the formation processes; it becomes harder to perform because students do not aspire to take part in this experience in line with any behavioral objectives and requirements, groups are formed compulsorily; members participate to the groups non-voluntarily, there is an unequal distribution of gender within group members, members accompany with each other before and after the group study within the academic framework (Voltan-Acar, 1986), and members perceive counseling educators who also lecture on theory courses as lecturers rather than perceiving them as group leaders.

Purpose

This study aims to focus on quietness, such a condition that group leaders have always difficulty to cope with, and its main causes in non-volunteer based education groups comprised of counselor candidates. For that purposes following questions have been asked:

1. Why do some members keep quiet, although they participate to the group and do have knowledge about therapeutic process and therapeutic powers within the group?
2. Do they know the reasons why they are quiet?
3. Is quietness their preferred participation method, or is it a difficult condition to get over?
4. What are the factors of quietness related to them and their environment?

In this study, the unheard voice of quiet members and their reasons to be quiet have been questioned and classified by using the data obtained within determined scales.

Method

This research is a descriptive study in which the data were examined according to content analy-

sis method. The study was conducted under the framework of 'Human Relations and Communication' undergraduate course coordinated by the department of Labor, Psychological Counseling and Guidance. Students who took this course (61 students), were divided into four groups. Group members were composed of 30 girls and 31 boys. Age range of the participants was between 19-25 years old. These two groups were led by two leaders both expertise in personal and group counseling methods. In the first session, the phase of determination of the group policies, members were assigned to prepare weekly reports that they evaluate the process as well as their quietness during the sessions. Research data were obtained by using 61 members' 435 reports that they brought throughout 12 sessions. The coding form, which was used for analysis, was designed in compliance with the basic principles of content analysis method (Tavşancıl & Aslan, 2001). Frequency and percentages were calculated according to the causes of quietness that members indicated.

Results

When the reports, through which research data were obtained, were analyzed; expressions that were assessed as causes of quietness were collected under fourteen categories. Table 1 shows frequency and percentage distributions of these categories.

Table 1.

<i>Causes of Quietness</i>		
Causes of Quietness	Frequency	%
Causes regarding perceived personality traits	150	40
a. Lack of social skills	54	14.4
b. Fear of being evaluated negatively	36	9.6
c. Not being able to speak unless asked	31	8.2
d. Excitement	29	7.7
Disregarding/ condescending the group process and members	71	18.9
Perceiving other members reluctantly and unseriously	26	7.0
Giving other members the chance to benefit from the group	21	5.6
Causes related to time and member numbers	20	5.3
Other experiences than the group experience	18	4.8
Traumatic Experiences	13	3.4
The group process is a new and original experience	13	3.4
Therapeutic tension within the group	11	2.9
Members are coming from the same social and academic environments	10	2.6
The fear of violation of confidentiality	8	2.1
Strictness in world views	8	2.1
Feeling insignificant	4	1.0
Members act non-voluntary for the group process	3	0.8
TOTAL	376	100

Table 1 show that causes regarding 'perceived personality traits' (%40) is the first most referred category among the frequency and percentages of other categories. This category includes subcategories in itself such as: lack of social skills (%14.4), fear of being evaluated negatively (%9.6), not being able to speak unless asked (%8.2), and excitement (%7.7). Following sentences are typical samples of this category: "I did not want to talk at all because I knew that I will choke up", "Today I felt sorry for myself, I wonder whether I have problem with communicating because I cannot talk", "I feel nervous when a person look at me and ask question". The second category is 'disregarding/ condescending the group process and members' (%18.9). This category was based on members' expressions: "I already have friends and I talk everything with them, why would I talk here?", "I do not need to talk within the group". The third most referred category is: perceiving other members reluctantly and unseriously (%7.0). Sentence sample for this category is: "I get annoyed of people who behave like they do not care about the group and find it ridiculous, I do not want to join when they act like this", "Some members refrain from participation this situation bothers me, too". The other category is 'giving other members the chance to benefit from the group' (%5.6). Sample expressions are: "The reason why I keep quiet is not to distract my friends because they were excited about talking in front of a group for the first time", "I was quiet this week for my friends". The next category is 'causes related to time and member numbers' (%5.3). Following sentences can be given as example: "In each session time falls short; at a certain moment when I feel warm to the group and intend to talk I realize that time is up", "Because of the member number my turn never comes", "I could not talk because of the large group". Another most referred category is 'other experiences than the group experience' (%4.8). Following expressions: "Unfortunately my mother was ill, this affected me negatively and I could not talk", "I was quiet because I was in bad mood, when I came to join the group I left my joy outside and I reflected this situation by keeping quiet" are typical sentences. Traumatic Experiences is another category (%3.4), which is not referred as much as others. For this category: "I did not participate to the group process fully because I do not know the right words and I am not strong enough to tell that event", "I do not want to rebel but I feel very helpless when I think what I experienced; I want to escape from everything and hide in a place where no one exists, I want to get rid of everything, I cannot explain what I am experiencing I must live in this nightmare" expressions are

typical. The group process is a new and original experience (%3.4) is ranked at the eighth and following expressions are classical for this category: "I was not in front of a group for the first time, it was pretty surprising to be asked to talk, rather than keep quiet", "I am shy, timid and strange because it is my first time to take part in such a group", "I was told that quiet people are better and smarter, but it is not the case for this group". Therapeutic tension within the group is a category in the lower rank (%2.9). "I feel more nervous in group sessions, compared to lecture environment", "Whenever I decide to talk, the tension in the air affects my thoughts, I forget what to say and I change my mind" are sample sentences for this category. Towards the end of the ranking the next category is: members are coming from the same social and academic environments (%2.6). For this category; "It has been nearly two months since I started to participate to the group and I could not have revealed myself yet, there are people with whom I do not talk at all, this is the main reason for me not to reveal myself", "I cannot reveal myself, no matter if trust is built or not we still have two more years with our friends in the group" are the sample sentences. The fear of violation of confidentiality (%2.1) is one of the least referred categories and it was classified according to the members' following expressions: "I know that there are some friends talking about in-group discussions at the outside of the group, for this reason I do not think to reveal myself", "I am quiet because I do not trust to the group and I do not think that revealing myself will provide any benefit". Strictness in world views (%2.1) is at the lower part of the ranking. The sentences: "Majority of people who are of the same mind increase the number of groups within the group", "I do not prefer to establish a dialogue with the opposite sex"; are the examples for this category. Feeling insignificant is one of the least referred categories (%1.0) and represents the following expressions: "I am quiet because my friends may be bored as I speak", "I did not tell because I thought my points might be found simple". The last and 14th category is 'members act non-voluntary for the group processes. For this category following sentences are typical examples: "In fact there is nothing to be told", "I am among those who never talk in the group, and I want to quit the group".

Discussion

In primary phase of group counseling, it is expectable and natural for members to have trust issues. Being in such an environment, either it is familiar or not, that there are different therapeutic experi-

ences not to know what to say and how to act, katalephobia; and to have the fear of rejection, misunderstanding, or feeling of not being understood, are all natural states. However, in the group it is of vital importance to build trust and get rid of resistance. As mentioned before, group members should express and reveal themselves, and take risks in order to provide benefit from the group (Mahler, 1971; Voltan-Acar, 2009). Findings of the study have revealed that the causes of quietness, according to the expressions of members of counseling groups, are mainly related to personality traits such as: lack of social skills, excitement, and fear of being evaluated negatively. Ohlsen et al. (1988) also describe this type of members in group counseling under the title of: "quiet and shy people." Manthei and Matthews (1989) refer to the existence of shy and lonely members within group counseling. Also, Yalom (2002) defines these group members as "members who are experiencing pervasive fear of self-disclosure within the group."

At the end of the study it is revealed that "causes regarding personality traits" is the most referred category of the causes of quietness. Being quiet during the group process due to the states of this category (including: excitement, not being able to speak unless asked, fear of being evaluated negatively, and lack of social skills) is accepted as an undesirable situation for counselor candidates who should be solved before becoming professional counselors. Group counseling methods give counselor candidates the opportunity to cope with these difficulties. Literature supports the findings like: trust in the group, member numbers of the group, time limitation, unwillingness stemming from compulsory nature of the group formation, and members coming from the same social and academic environments with similar research results (Voltan-Acar, 1986; Yalom, 2002). On the other hand, unique findings have been revealed in this particular study. Some of the categories, which were expressed as the causes of quietness including: disregarding/condescending the group process and members. Giving other members the chance to benefit from the group, other experiences than the group experience, traumatic experiences, strictness in world views, and feeling insignificant, are the causes of quietness obtained through this study. These findings showed that members sometimes keep quiet because they give chance to other members, they perceive other group members negatively, they are under the influence of their other experiences, and they feel insignificant. Also, it is revealed that individuals' traumatic experiences lead to the difficulties in

self-expression and cause them to be quiet during group processes. Another result shows that 'strictness in world views is a factor hindering interaction in daily life and speech in group processes.

In light of this discussion following suggestions can be made: (i) It is not the case that each and every member who is quiet/silent may not be eager to cooperate. Quietness may change its meaning according to the leader's approach. (ii) Leader should notice that there is no single reason for being quiet in the group, and he should be well-equipped on special methods and techniques to remove quietness. (iii) The quiet member of the group should not be forced to speak unless known his motive, and leader should keep in mind that traumatic experiences as well as other life experiences can also be causes of quietness. (iv) With reference to the facts that most of the 'quiet members' are quiet because of lacking social skills, and they do want to overcome this situation; hence, such occasions that quiet members can develop their social skills should be offered. (v) Despite all efforts there may be some members who have difficulty in overcoming these issues; they should be oriented to the personal counseling. (vi) This study revealed that quietness in training groups is a therapeutic factor. Next studies should analyze whether this factor is a therapeutic factor and power.

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