

# Analysis of Group Leader and Member Feedback Messages

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**ABSTRACT.** Two hundred fifty-two items of corrective feedback from seven counselor training groups were rated on personal versus task, behavioral versus emotional, and unqualified versus qualified dimensions. The prediction was that leader-generated feedback messages would be more personally focused, behavioral, and unqualified than member messages during Session 4 of the groups and that these differences would disappear by Session 9. This hypothesis was supported for unqualified versus qualified ratings. Leaders delivered corrective feedback that was more direct and less qualified than that delivered by members at Session 4 of the groups. At Session 9, leader corrective feedback messages had become relatively more qualified and member messages relatively less qualified so that significant differences were no longer present. The authors explain their findings in relation to theories of group development and discuss implications for group leaders.

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**INTERPERSONAL FEEDBACK** has been the focus of much research in the group field during the past 2 decades. Perhaps the most consistent finding of these studies has been the strong tendency of group members to be more accepting of positive feedback than of corrective (or negative) feedback (Jacobs, 1974; Morran, Robison, & Stockton, 1985; Robison, Morran, & Stockton, 1986). This tendency presents a challenge to both researchers and practitioners because the exchange of corrective feedback is theoretically important in unfreezing recipients from their rigid patterns of behavior and in providing motivation for changing unproductive behaviors (Miles, 1958; Stoller, 1968).

Some progress has been made in identifying factors that render corrective feedback more acceptable and useful to recipients. Research has shown, for example, that corrective feedback is more readily accepted when it follows, rather than precedes, the exchange of positive feedback (Jacobs, Jacobs, Gatz, & Schaible, 1973; Schaible & Jacobs, 1975; Stock-

ton & Morran, 1981). Other findings, though less consistently replicated, have suggested that corrective feedback may be more readily accepted when it is focused on observable behaviors (Jacobs, Jacobs, Cavior, & Burke, 1974) and when it is delivered after the early stages of group development (Stockton & Morran, 1981).

Although some progress has been made in terms of better understanding the factors influencing the exchange and reception of corrective feedback, significant gaps appear in the existing research. Very few studies, for example, have focused exclusively on corrective feedback exchange, and little effort has been made to examine the content of feedback messages generated and exchanged among group leaders and members. This study was designed to address these gaps by analyzing the content of corrective feedback messages generated and delivered by both leaders and members during the fourth and ninth sessions of the groups we studied.

In reviewing the research literature, we identified only two previous studies that have sought to analyze the content of feedback messages. In a study of four sensitivity training groups, Lundgren and Schaeffer (1976) found that, during early group sessions, leader-delivered feedback messages were more here-and-now focused, more negatively valenced, more interpretive, and more confrontive than those delivered by members. These differences diminished over time, so that leader- and member-generated feedback messages, by later sessions, were very similar in content. These findings suggest that, through imitation, member-generated feedback messages may have become more like those delivered by the group leaders. It is not possible, however, to generalize these findings specifically to corrective feedback messages because no attempt was made to separately analyze messages that were judged to be positively valenced separately from those that were negatively valenced.

Morran et al. (1985) analyzed the content of both positive and corrective feedback messages exchanged in nine personal growth groups. They found that corrective feedback given by leaders during the second session was less qualified and more observable (behavioral) than that given by members, but that these differences tended to diminish by Sessions 4 and 6, as member-feedback messages became less qualified and more focused on observable behaviors. Morran et al. concluded that member-generated corrective feedback messages more closely matched theoretical definitions of effective feedback as the groups progressed toward later stages of development.

In our study, we examined the content of corrective feedback messages generated and exchanged in counselor training groups that focused on the goals of trainee skill development and personal growth. Dependent measures included ratings of the extent to which messages were personal

versus task focused, behavioral versus emotional, and unqualified versus qualified. The personal-versus-task scale was developed to reflect the nature and purpose of the training groups studied, and the latter two scales were derived from previous research studies. The hypothesis was that leader feedback would be rated as more personal, behavioral, and unqualified than member-generated feedback during Session 4 but that no leader-versus-member differences would be present by Session 9.

## **Method**

### *Subjects*

Forty-one beginning master's degree students in counseling and counselor education at Indiana University participated in the seven groups used for this study. These students were enrolled in pre-practicum laboratory classes, and all volunteered to participate in a group experience that was compatible with the broad class goals of trainee skill development and personal growth. Students were informed in advance that the group experience would include participation in interpersonal feedback exchange exercises.

Thirty-six group members were present for both feedback exchange exercises. Their responses made up the member-to-member feedback messages analyzed for the study. The 30 women and 6 men ranged in age from 21 to 49 years ( $M = 31.0$  years).

### *Group Leaders*

Seven advanced doctoral students (5 women and 2 men) served as leaders for the seven groups in the study. All leaders had completed a group counseling course and had led or co-led at least one group during their advanced practica. The mean age of the group leaders was 35.6 years.

### *Materials*

We provided an introduction sheet that explained the feedback exercise, defined interpersonal feedback, and listed helpful hints for making feedback messages meaningful. Two separate feedback forms were also provided, one for positive feedback exchange and one for corrective feedback exchange.

The corrective feedback form provided spaces for recording the first names of the feedback giver and receiver, instructions to the feedback giver, examples of corrective feedback, and the sentence stem, "Your in-

terpersonal effectiveness and attractiveness in the group seemed to be *hindered* by the following behavior.” This sentence stem was followed by blank lines for group members to write in the item of feedback they wished to deliver. The positive-feedback form was identical, except that examples of positive feedback were provided and the sentence stem read “Your interpersonal effectiveness and attractiveness in the group seemed to be *enhanced* by the following behavior.” It should be noted that positive feedback messages were not a focus of the present study and, therefore, were not included in the data analysis. However, both positive and corrective feedback exercises were conducted in order to provide members with the most natural and facilitative feedback exchange experience possible.

### *Procedure*

We sought group members from pre-practicum counseling laboratory classes at the beginning of the semester, and leaders were selected from the doctoral students with group leadership experience within the counseling psychology program. All volunteers signed consent forms.

We assigned group leaders and members randomly to seven groups that met for approximately 3 hours each week throughout the semester. The groups were designed to focus on the development of interpersonal helping skills and on the personal and professional growth of the counselor-trainee group members. The personal growth portions of the groups were designed to provide members with the opportunity to get to know each other and themselves better, to discover and work on blind areas that could hinder counseling effectiveness, and to learn about and experience the group process.

One week before the first feedback-exchange exercise, we trained group leaders, using simulation to conduct the feedback exercises for the study. The first feedback-exchange exercise was conducted during the last hour of the fourth meeting for each group, with positive feedback exchanged first, followed by the exchange of corrective feedback. The exercise itself required approximately 30 minutes, and we provided an additional 30 minutes for further processing of the feedback-exchange experience.

During the feedback exercise, members individually received both positive and corrective feedback items from all other members in their group and from the group leader. Members were first given the introduction sheet that defined feedback and suggested ways to make the feedback valuable. Each member then received enough positive feedback forms to write one item of feedback for every other member, and leaders received

enough forms to write two items of feedback for every group member (leaders were asked to deliver two items of feedback in order to generate sufficient leader-to-member messages for the analysis). After completing these forms, the leader and the members each took a turn at orally communicating each item of feedback they had written to the appropriate recipient. Members were instructed not to elaborate on what they had written but simply to read the feedback message to the recipient. Immediately after the exchange of positive feedback, participants repeated the same set of procedures for the exchange of corrective-feedback messages. During the last hour of the ninth session for each group, the entire feedback exercise was conducted again. Positive feedback was exchanged first, followed by corrective feedback. This sequence of exchange was selected on the basis of previous research findings that indicated that a positive-corrective order of delivery is preferable to a corrective-positive order (e.g., Schaible & Jacobs, 1975; Stockton & Morran, 1981).

### *Raters*

Group members first wrote their items of feedback on the forms provided, then orally delivered these feedback messages to recipients. The feedback forms were collected and subsequent ratings were based upon the written items of corrective feedback. Three doctoral-level counseling professionals were trained to rate corrective feedback messages on the following 7-point message-content scales: personal versus task; behavioral versus emotional; unqualified versus qualified. The anchors for these scales are described in Table 1.

Raters were trained in four 2-hour sessions at which the rating scales were reviewed and practice ratings were conducted on feedback messages collected from groups not involved in the present study. After their training, the three raters independently scored each corrective feedback message on each of the three rating scales. Zero-order product-moment correlations between the raters ranged from .73 to .83 for the personal-task scale, .75 to .84 for the behavioral-emotional scale, and .90 to .92 for the unqualified-qualified scale. The three judges' average ratings on each scale made up the dependent measure scores for the study.

### **Results**

Group leaders and members generated 619 items of corrective feedback. These included 159 leader-to-member messages, 380 member-to-member messages, and 80 member-to-leader messages, although we analyzed only the leader-to-member and member-to-member messages for the study.

**TABLE 1**  
**Description of Message-Content Rating Scales**

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Personal versus task

- 1—Describes behaviors, feelings, or events that refer specifically to personal attributes of the receiver
- 7—Describes behaviors, feelings, or events that refer to the training component of the group

Behavioral versus emotional

- 1—Makes observations and documents how the recipient is behaving
- 7—Consists of an emotional reaction that took place in the deliverer or an inferred emotional reaction of the recipient

Unqualified versus qualified

- 1—Contains no qualifying words to minimize the impact of the feedback
  - 7—All portions of the statement are qualified by words that minimize the impact of the feedback
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*Note.* The midpoint for each scale was defined as an equal balance between the defined anchors.

The smallest design cell—Status  $\times$  Time (leader versus member deliverer  $\times$  Session 4 versus Session 9)—was 63 feedback messages. To provide for equal cell sizes, we also randomly selected 63 feedback messages for analysis within each of the other three design cells and provided for a total of 252 feedback items in the analysis. These individual feedback items were used as the unit of analysis for the  $2 \times 2$  (Status  $\times$  Time) factorial analysis of variance.

Means and standard deviations for the three message-content scales across all design cells are shown in Table 2. Intercorrelations among the three dependent measures were all .31 or lower, indicating that the three scales were relatively independent of each other. Thus, we conducted a separate analysis of variance for each measure.

Analysis of variance results revealed no significant effects for the personal versus task and behavioral versus emotional scales. For the unqualified versus qualified scale, we found no main effects. A significant Status  $\times$  Time effect was found, however— $F(1, 248) = 4.45, p < .05$ . A follow-up simple main-effects analysis indicated that a significant leader versus member difference was present in the Session 4 feedback-exchange condition,  $F(1, 248) = 7.28, p < .01$ , and that this difference was no longer present by Session 9. An examination of mean ratings revealed that group leaders ( $M = 3.11$ ) delivered feedback messages that were significantly less qualified than those delivered by group members ( $M = 4.16$ ) during Session 4 feedback exchange. By Session 9, leader feedback had become more qualified ( $M = 3.84$ ) and member feedback

had become less qualified ( $M = 3.73$ ), so that the earlier leader-versus-member significant difference had disappeared.

### Discussion

The hypothesis that group leader feedback messages would be relatively more personal, behavioral, and unqualified than member-generated feedback items for feedback exchanged in Session 4, with these differences disappearing by Session 9 was supported for ratings of unqualified versus qualified but not for the other two dependent measures.

During Session 4 of the groups in this study, leaders generated and delivered corrective feedback items that were more direct and less qualified than those delivered by members. This finding is consistent with the reports of Morran et al. (1985) and suggests that group members may tend to veil their corrective messages in a cloak of minimizations and qualifications during the early stages of group development. Early group stages are generally characterized as a period of relative uncertainty and defensiveness (Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Tuckman, 1965). Group members may thus have been less willing to risk themselves by giving open and honest feedback. Group leaders, on the other hand, may have been more willing to risk themselves because of such factors as the expectations placed on them within the leadership role, their greater knowledge of group dynamics, and their previous experience with groups.

During Session 9 of the groups, leader feedback became more qualified and member feedback became less qualified, so that no difference was present. Members, in fact, delivered feedback in Session 9 that was less qualified than that delivered by leaders, although the difference was not statistically significant. It seems likely that members became increas-

**TABLE 2**  
Means and Standard Deviations for Message-Content Ratings

Deliverer status	Time	Message content					
		Personal		Behavioral		Unqualified	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Member	1	3.48	2.21	4.28	1.82	4.16	2.14
Member	2	3.62	2.22	3.87	1.90	3.73	2.24
Leader	1	3.78	2.56	4.02	2.35	3.11	2.14
Leader	2	3.44	2.40	4.44	2.12	3.84	2.18

*Note.* The rating scales are all labeled by their left-hand anchor. Time 1 = Session 4; Time 2 = Session 9.

ingly willing to deliver more direct and honest feedback as the groups progressed toward later stages of development, which were characterized by increasing levels of trust, cohesion, and psychological safety. Theories of group stage development would predict such a shift over time (Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Mills, 1964; Tuckman, 1965). It is also likely that modeling effects influenced members to generate feedback items that were more in line with those previously delivered by the leaders.

That leader corrective feedback tended to become more qualified over time is interesting, but this was only a tendency and not a statistically significant difference. It may be that, as members took on more and more responsibility for the therapeutic work of the group, leaders were less inclined to view themselves as the sole therapeutic force. As a result, they may have felt it less necessary to deliver feedback of a more direct and confrontive nature.

The lack of significant differences in relation to the personal-task and behavioral-emotional rating scales is somewhat surprising, in light of previous research. Both leader and member feedback ratings tended toward the midpoint for both of these scales, and the dual purposes of personal growth and counselor skill development may have contributed to the lack of significant differences on these scales. The personal growth goals of the groups would tend to call for feedback that was more personal and emotional in nature, whereas the training goals would tend to call for more task and behaviorally oriented feedback. The feedback exercise was structured to encourage feedback related to the personal growth aspects of the group experience, but leaders and members may have felt obligated to direct their feedback toward both objectives. Such a balance in the focus of the feedback would explain the tendency toward the midpoint of these two scales.

Our findings should be considered in light of certain limitations. The dual purposes of personal growth and building counselor skills are unique to the groups of this study. These findings, therefore, may not automatically generalize to groups that are conducted for different purposes. A structured feedback exercise was also used in order to obtain the sample of feedback messages. Further research will be required to determine whether or not these findings are applicable to more naturally occurring feedback exchange messages. Finally, it should be noted that the group leaders for the study had previous leadership experience, although they could not be accurately characterized as highly experienced leaders. Thus, the nature and magnitude of leader-versus-member differences may be altered for groups with more experienced leaders.

Although certain recognized limitations exist in the present study, the findings suggest that group leader and member feedback messages be-

come more similar over time. Following the early stages of group development, members may be able to deliver feedback that is as direct and effective as that delivered by leaders. This suggests that, if leaders can recognize the point at which member feedback becomes more effective, they may be able to use the therapeutic potential of the group more effectively. Appropriately direct and confrontive feedback is particularly useful in unfreezing recipients from ineffective thought and behavioral patterns (Stoller, 1968). When such feedback by the leader can be validated by equally effective feedback from other members, the potential for recipient change is greatly increased.

It may be useful for future studies to examine the message content of naturally occurring corrective feedback in groups and to relate qualitative message dimensions to members' acceptance and use of the feedback received. Sociometric analysis techniques may also prove useful in future studies of corrective feedback exchange. The exchange of such messages represents an intense personal interaction that is probably influenced to a great degree by the existing set of interrelationships among members of a given group. Future studies might productively use sociometric techniques to examine how member roles or positions within the informal group structure influence the nature of corrective feedback messages and the eventual acceptance and application of such messages.

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