

Group Structure: A Review

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ABSTRACT. This article gives an overview of the concept of structure as it pertains to group counseling. It includes a summary of the history and theory of structure and a discussion of the types of structure and the interaction of structure with other variables.

THE ROLE AND EFFICACY OF STRUCTURE in therapeutic groups has been a question of some controversy for nearly 40 years. Most writers agree that structure involves the leader directly guiding or influencing the behaviors of the members. Zweben and Hammann (1970) defined structure as the leader prescribing roles and tasks in the group. Roark and Roark (1979) include a variety of components in their definition of structure (membership, physical structure, time, activities, norms, purposes, and goals) but reflect that "the activities a group performs are often what is referred to when people speak of structure" (p. 189). It is this definition of structure that will be employed in the present review.

History and Theory of Structure

Early writers on the topic discouraged the use of structure for fear that the natural development of the group process would be inhibited. Ormont (1957) felt that clients should enter group therapy free of preconceptions so that behavior in the group would be genuine and free of role-playing. He felt that pregroup preparation could actually foster misconceptions and that reassurances would need to be continually reinforced as well as promote untherapeutic expectations. He saw the exploring of resistance to group as having some merit but cautioned that "premature attempts to work through a resistance may lead to an impasse or seri-

ously affect the therapeutic progress” (p. 845). Whitaker and Lieberman (1964) felt that in order for a natural group culture to emerge, clients should be allowed to have their issues surface without interference. Interference includes “structure by suggesting procedures, providing definitions, and offering reassurances” (p. 208).

These early views on group structure were seriously challenged by Bednar, Melnick, and Kaul (1974). They suggested that the lack of structure in the early stages of the group “actually feeds client distortions, interpersonal fears, and subjective distress” (p. 31). These distortions and fears then interfered with group development and led to premature termination. They theorized that the therapeutic effects of structure are a function of the level of responsibility for behavior perceived by the group members and the subsequent amount of risk presumed to be associated with that behavior. In the early stages of the group, introducing structure shifts the responsibility for behavior from the member to the leader, thereby decreasing the amount of risk perceived to be associated with participation. This allows the members to feel freer in engaging in therapeutically relevant behaviors such as self-disclosure and feedback, which results in increased cohesion among the group members. The ensuing feelings of psychological safety then make it easier for clients to self-reflect and ultimately take personal responsibility for their behavior.

Whereas the work of Bednar et al. (1974) is based on a risk-reduction model, Neimeyer and Merluzzi (1982) hypothesize that a shift in the group members’ cognitive structure may be the mediating factor that allows the group to progress to the point of therapeutic interaction. Based on Kelly’s (1955) personal construct theory and Duck’s (1973) discussion of a construct with respect to level of abstraction, Neimeyer and Merluzzi (1982) propose that group structure provides a means of “systematic information exchange” (p. 157). Group structure provides a means to gain increased understanding of the group members by facilitating movement from the more concrete, physical constructs (e.g., height, weight, gender) to the more abstract, psychological constructs that usually define personal traits (i.e., sensitivity, intelligence). This increase in understanding and the feeling of being understood contribute directly to the development of cohesion.

Trotzer (1979) maintains that the efficacy of structure in the group depends on the facilitation of the group through the various developmental stages. The developmental tasks provide a focal point that guides the implementation and choice of structured experiences. Early use of structure would help members get acquainted, define boundaries, and build trust. The development of cohesion could be facilitated by structure that fosters self-disclosure and helps members give and receive constructive

positive and negative feedback. The working stages would be enhanced by exercises that encourage members to participate in self-evaluation, to accept personal responsibility, and to try out and evaluate new behaviors. In closing, structure would help to identify growth and change, express appreciation and regrets, and say good-bye. (Developmental theorists maintain that unless the group successfully masters the developmental tasks at each stage, a true working stage will not develop.)

Types of Structure

Structure has been incorporated into group treatment in one of two ways—pregroup training or ingroup structure. Pregroup training generally involves some type of activity before the actual participation that prepares the client for what he or she is about to experience. Pregroup training often incorporates either verbal or written instructions, videotaped instructions, or modeling (Kaul & Bednar, 1986).

Pregroup training

Research has demonstrated the efficacy of pregroup training on group process and outcome. Whalen (1969) compared groups receiving (1) minimal instructions, (2) detailed instructions, (3) film model and minimal instructions, and (4) film model and detailed instructions. He found that clients who experienced the film model of interpersonal openness plus instructions tended to also display interpersonal openness, whereas the clients in the other conditions did not.

Pregroup training seems to have a positive impact on member interactions. Yalom, Houts, Newell, and Rand (1967) found that a preparatory lecture strengthened clients' faith in the therapy process and fostered here-and-now interaction among the members. D'Augelli and Chinsky (1974) showed that pregroup training helped members to engage in significantly more personal communication. Bednar and Battersby (1976) showed that clients who had received specific behavioral instructions with respect to self-disclosure and feedback had more positive attitudes toward the group, higher perceptions of cohesiveness, and more "task-oriented behaviors" than control groups who received only general information about goals. Hilkey, Wilhelm, and Horne (1982) found that pretrained clients had clearer ideas of what was expected of them, showed more desirable behaviors during the early stages of the group, and eventually made more progress toward their goals.

Ingroup structure

Ingroup structure involves incorporating structure into the therapy process itself, generally involving some type of participation by the client in the structuring activities (Kaul & Bednar, 1986). Much research has demonstrated the efficacy of incorporating structure into the group process. Levin and Kurtz (1974) showed that clients in structured groups “reported greater ego involvement,” more cohesiveness, and perceived more change in themselves than clients in unstructured groups. Crews and Melnick (1976) showed that group members participating in a structured group made significantly more self-disclosures than did group members in other conditions, but feedback and cohesion were not affected. Ware and Barr (1977) in a 9-week study of self-concept and self-actualization in structured and unstructured group experiences found that subjects participating in the structured groups had higher feelings of self-worth and were more open and less defensive than subjects in either the unstructured group or a control group.

Rose and Bednar (1980) found that cohesion increased more in those conditions providing structured feedback as compared to structured self-disclosure, and Caple and Cox (1989) reported that attraction to group was higher in later sessions for those groups that began their group experience with a structured exercise. In some more recent research, Rohde and Stockton (1992) showed that clients who received structured feedback during each group session about what they had done to help them attain their goals or hinder them from attaining their goals had higher ratings of perceived goal attainment as measured by self-ratings and member-ratings. Leader ratings of goal attainment showed no differences. Stockton, Rohde, and Haughey (1992) showed that structured exercises tailored to the developmental task needing mastery at specific group stages have a significant impact on outcome. Results showed higher order trends in the control condition than in the groups incorporating structured exercises for the variables cohesion, engagement, avoidance, and conflict. This may indicate less recycling back to earlier developmental levels in the groups incorporating structured exercises. Clients in the experimental condition were also significantly more satisfied with their group experience.

Some group therapies (such as psychodrama) can be seen as structured interventions in and of themselves. Kellerman (1991) saw the main function of structure (in this case, psychodrama) as technical—to create specific interventions to help clients attain predetermined goals. Kane (1992) echoed this idea when she said that psychodrama was “responsible for

helping clients 'play out' their roles to accomplish positive or constructive outcomes" (p. 181).

Interaction of Structure and Other Variables

Some studies indicate, however, that structure may have differential effects based on the characteristics of the group member. Kilman, Albert, and Sotile (1975) looked at the relationship between locus of control and structure using 16-hour marathon groups and also traditional groups that met twice weekly. Results indicated a locus of control by treatment interaction; this finding suggests that clients who have an external locus of control may obtain maximum benefit from "structured therapist intervention." Evensen and Bednar (1978) showed that the impact of structure depended on the risk-taking disposition of the group member. They reported that behavioral structure facilitated interpersonal communication, cohesion, and perceived depth of communications for high risk takers, but this same structure appeared to inhibit low risk takers as they exhibited the lowest levels of communication and cohesion. Much research has demonstrated the efficacy of incorporating structure into the group process. Kivlighan, McGovern, and Corazzini (1984) studied the interaction between content and timing of structured interventions. In their study, the content areas of anger and intimacy were matched or mismatched with the developmental stages of storming and norming. Matched content and timing interactions produced more appropriate expressions of intimacy and anger.

Conclusions

Although the efficacy of incorporating pregroup training as well as in-group structure into the group process has been well documented in the research literature, significant cautions need to be addressed by the group facilitator. Ribner (1974) demonstrated that although self-disclosure contracts increased attraction to the group, group members' "mutual liking" decreased. Lee and Bednar (1977) showed that higher levels of structure tended to be associated with more negative evaluations of the group experience, in particular for low risk takers in high structure conditions. Higher levels of structure also tended to result in lower levels of group cohesion.

Bednar and Langenbahn (1979) suggest that ambiguity and structure do not present a bipolar concept in which ambiguity decreases as structure increases (or vice versa). Rather, structure must be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that encompasses personal risk and respon-

sibility, types of structure and their impact on clarifying expectations, and the interaction of structure and client personality variables.

Bednar, Melnick, and Kaul (1974) warn that the goal is for the group to become independent and self-directed and that for group leaders to facilitate this process, they must provide learning experiences that result in independence for the members.

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