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Enhancing Hope, Resilience, Emotional and Interpersonal Skills in Counsellor Trainees: A Controlled Trial

Seval Erden^{a*}, Department of Psychological Counselling and Guidance, Marmara University Ataturk Education
Faculty, 34722 Istanbul, Turkey

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Abstract

This study was aimed to develop the group psychological counselling programme for counsellor trainees to develop their ability to recognise, express emotions and establish healthy intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the effect of the group practices was also investigated. The experimental design included the pre- and post-test control group. The sample of this study forms third-grade students attending the Guidance and Psychological Counselling in Marmara University, Turkey. 24 students were randomly assigned to the groups. Integrative Hope Scale, The Need for Affect Scale, Resilience Scale for Adults, Emotional Expression Questionnaire, and Scale of Interpersonal Relationships Dimensions were used as instruments. The results indicate that the developed group counselling programme yielded differences between the experimental and control groups, and the pre- and post-test scores of the training group. The findings indicate that the group counselling programme contributed to improving the hope and psychological resilience by relying on healthy relationships.

Keywords: Counselling, hope, resilience, emotion expression, interpersonal relationship.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Seval Erden**, Department of Psychological Counselling and Guidance, Marmara University Ataturk Education Faculty, 34722 Istanbul, Turkey.

E-mail address: erdenseval@gmail.com / Tel.: +90 216 414 05 45

1. Introduction

Psychological counselling, as a process, builds upon the therapeutic relationship between the client and the counsellor as well as the nature of this relationship. In this context, psychological counsellors are expected to possess a set of personal and professional skills and competencies as specialists accompanying the individuals in their self-realisation process; such skills and competencies are acquired through university education in pursuance of a career. University years coincide with a developmental period termed 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2000), where an individual strives to build his/her private and academic life and is required to fulfil a number of developmental tasks.

At this point in life, while individuals find themselves seeking their own identity by trying to discover who they are, what they want or expect out of life and find out their own skills and limitations, they also experience a constant state of indecisiveness and instability at the same time. While having 'great hopes and high expectations' about their future and setting about acquiring the skill sets required for adulthood, the individual also has mixed feelings and thoughts about seeing themselves as an adult and therefore finds themselves on the horns of a dilemma (Arnett, 2007).

Due to their developmental stage, the counsellor trainees also occasionally experience difficulties, lose their hopes, develop negative attitudes towards oneself and life and also among themselves, and have some problems while going through this particular phase. However, it is emphasised that strengthening the positive traits of an individual (such as hope, psychological resilience, awareness, ability to see things from other people's point of view, empathy, effective communication skills, etc.) through the use of positive psychology will play a significant role both in their self-representation and their perceptions towards interpersonal relationships, and thereby in preserving their mental health (Sagkal & Turnuklu, 2017; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009).

Hope functions as a variable in maintaining one's balance between the present and future, and in finding a purpose in their life. According to Snyder (2002), hope is a goal-oriented thought process in which individuals perceive themselves as being capable of deriving pathways to desired goals, and motivate themselves via agency thinking to use such pathways. Eklund (1991), on the other hand, describes hope as a more comprehensive and complicated structure. He holds that the sense of self-confidence or doubts towards the outcome that one feels constitute the affective dimension of hope, whereas imagination, surprise, perception, reflection, recall and judgment constitute the cognitive dimension and the adaptive skills of an individual constitute the behavioural dimension. According to this perspective, hope – with its affective, cognitive and behavioural dimensions – may be evaluated as an element that positively contributes to the positive point of view and psychological well-being and therefore, affects a person's resilience.

Resilience is described as an ability to recover oneself in the face of difficult life experiences (Garmezy, 1991), an ability to cope well with changes or setbacks (Wagnild & Young, 1993) or a process of adaptation (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004). In other words, resilience, in general, is a process of success or adaptation (Hunter, 2001). While psychological resilience is regarded as a personality trait (Beardslee & Podorefsky, 1998; Bonanno, 2004), it is also believed to be an acquirable quality through the development process as it involves the necessary skills to become aware of the facts and developing coping methods to deal with them (Masten, 2001). It is suggested that, in addition to various personal attributes such as physical strength, sociality, intelligence, communication skills, self-efficacy, talent (Olsson & Ark, 2003) and healthy family relationships (Fonagy et al., 1994; Hawley & DeHaan, 1996), one's efforts to receive help from other people such as friends, teachers and neighbours to overcome difficulties makes a positive contribution in the development of resilience (Baruth & Carroll, 2002; Brooks, 1994; Coutu, 2002; Garmezy, 1993; Werner, 1993).

When psychological well-being is low, a person loses hope, is found to be increasingly in a negative emotional state and he fails to deal with such emotions; he will experience interpersonal problems such as losing trust in other people and failure to establish close relationships with others (Masten, 2001; Souri & Hasanirad, 2011). On the other hand, based on the assumption that resilience is

something that can be acquired and developed, one can achieve personal and professional gains individually and socially by straightening and using their personal and interpersonal support mechanisms.

The importance of emotions and emotional expressions in one's relationship with themselves and others cannot be ignored. People reflects themselves and their inner world through such expressions. The skills necessary to realise, identify and appropriately express one's emotions are acquired during the socialisation process. Beliefs about relationships may relate to the emotional experience and its expression, in much the same way as the expression of emotion may shape the nature of a relationship (Clark & Brissette, 2000). The sharing of emotions serves to generate a sense of closeness and trust in the other (Kenndy-Moore & Watson, 2001). In contrast, there is evidence suggesting that the expression of emotions is unhealthy and may lead to harmful results for individuals as well as for their interpersonal relationships (Erden, 2015; Mongrain & Vette, 2003).

Numerous studies in the national and international literature indicate that resilience and despair are related to a person's well-being and life satisfaction (Celik, Sanberk & Deveci, 2017; Gundogar, Sallan-Gul, Uskun, Demirci & Kecici, 2007; Limonero, Tomas-Sabado, Fernandez-Castro, Gomez-Romero & Ardilla, 2012; Moran & Hughes, 2006). However, we are yet to come across a study conducted based on screening or experimental models using the variables of hope, emotional awareness, resilience and interpersonal relationships at the same time.

As mentioned before, the psychological counsellor is expected to be an appropriate personality structure, spiritually healthy and resilient and well equipped with the technical and theoretical knowledge that can integrate the personal, interpersonal and scientific competencies. Within the vocational training process, counsellor trainees should be given the opportunity to learn, acquire and experience these skills. Psychological counselling given as a group course provides the trainees with a suitable environment to experience these skills.

In this study, a psychological group counselling programme has been developed for the purpose of making contributions to the counsellor trainees' personal and professional development. The main objectives of the programme are to develop awareness and acceptance of self and others, to develop the ability to recognise and express emotions, to establish healthy relationships with themselves and others, to improve psychological well-being and, thus, to increase hope for the future. Testing the effectiveness of the applied programme constitutes yet another purpose of this study.

2. Method

2.1. Research design

This research is an experimental study with pre and post-test control groups. Members were randomly assigned to the training and control groups. Before starting the training programme, scales were applied as pre-test to both the groups, then ten sessions training were provided to the experimental group. The scales were also applied as post-test to both the groups.

2.2. Study group

The sample group comprised 24 students who have been studying third grade in Marmara University Guidance and Psychological Counselling Department in 2015–2016. In the experimental group there were 8 female and 4 male students, and in the control group there were 9 female and 3 male students; a total of 17 female and 7 male students participated voluntarily. Age ranges of the subjects were between 21 and 25 ($M = 22.25$, $SD = 5.42$).

2.3. Measurements

2.3.1. Integrative hope scale

This scale was developed by Schrank, Woppmann, Sibitz and Lauber (2011) and was adapted to Turkish by Akin & Saricam (2013). The scale has 23 items with four factors as trust and confidence, lack of perspective, positive future orientation, and social relations and personal value. Cronbach Alfa internal consistency coefficients were found to be between 0.65 and 0.80. The scale was significantly related to The Beck Hopelessness Scale ($r = -0.53$). Moreover, test-retest reliability coefficient was 0.89 and corrected item-total correlations ranged from 0.24 to 0.57.

2.3.2. Resilience scale for adults

The scale was developed by Friborg et al. (2003). The Turkish version study was done by Basim and Cetin (2011). It has six dimensions: perception of self, perception of future, structured style, social competence, family cohesion, and social resources. The Social Comparison Scale and Locus of Control Scale were used to determine the criterion-dependent validity of the scale. Alpha coefficients of the scale ranged from 0.66 to 0.81 and the test-retest reliability of the factors ranged from 0.68 to 0.81. The test-retest values ranged from 0.68 to 0.81. The results of internal consistency of the Turkish version for students' sample ranged between 0.66 and 0.81, for adults it was 0.68 and 0.79.

2.3.3. Emotional expression questionnaire

The scale was developed by King and Emmons (1990) and adapted by Kuzucu (2011). It has 16 items with 7-Likert type scale. The three factors were as expression of positive emotion, expression of intimacy and expression of negative emotion. The correlations were found to be between 0.06 and 0.59. Internal consistencies were 0.74, 0.67 and 0.63, respectively.

2.3.4. Scale of interpersonal relationships dimensions

The scale was developed by Erden-Imamoglu and Aydin (2009). It has 53 items and four factors as approval dependence, empathy, trust others and emotional awareness. They explained about 36.04% of the total variance together and these were related to each other moderately. The criterion validity was applied using the Social Skills Evaluation Scale, Social Anxiety Scale and Communication Skills Inventory. Cronbach's alpha values of scale were between 0.78 and 0.85 and test-retest reliability coefficients were between 0.62 and 0.96.

2.4. Procedure

The programme, based on a humanistic approach, includes cognitive-behavioural, gestalt, positive psychotherapy, psychodrama and creative drama techniques and applications. It has been prepared as ten sessions and each session took approximately 90 minutes, once in a week. The effectiveness of the programme was tested using the pre and post-tests.

The contents of the programme can be briefly summarised as follows for each session:

First session: Meeting and forming the group rules and giving information about the programme. The scales were applied as pre-test in this session.

Second session: Recognizing oneself and others, in terms of similarities and differences, awareness and accepting them.

Third session: Being knowledgeable about the relationship between feelings, thoughts and behaviour. 'Now and here'. Awareness of emotions and express them appropriately.

Fourth session: Accepting and integrating difficult feelings, and enhancing emotional awareness and self-regulation.

Fifth session: Awareness about controllable behaviours and choices. Discussing the factors influencing the evaluation of behaviours.

Sixth session: Recognising life goals, subjective thinking styles that make oneself feel inadequate, thinking mistakes and to be aware of those mistakes.

Seventh session: Setting goals in life domains to overcome existing barriers, to achieve goals through increase of emotional and mental understanding and discussing the characteristics of appropriate pathways to achieve their goals.

Eighth session: Discussing relationships of hope and resilience and their effects on stress, anxiety and depression (for e.g. sharing hopeless experiences in life which were successfully solved).

Ninth session: Effective communication, empathic listening and response skills, communication barriers, using the 'I' message to identify thoughts and feelings instead of 'you'.

Tenth session: Evaluation of all the sessions and programmes in terms of both individual gains and process.

3. Results

A two-factor variance for mixed measures was used to identify whether the scores obtained from the study variables led to a difference in the experimental and control groups based on the applied psychological group counselling programme.

Mean scores and standard deviations are reported in Table 1 for all the measures at pre- and post-test for both the experimental and control groups.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviations for study variables

	Experimental group				Control group			
	Pre-test		Post-test		Pre-test		Post-test	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<i>Integrative hope</i>	41.58	7.00	45.00	5.20	39.92	9.11	41.33	4.46
<i>Resilience scale</i>								
Perception of self	22.91	2.74	24.83	3.68	18.25	5.44	20.04	4.98
Structured style	12.83	2.79	15.50	3.28	14.66	2.57	15.08	2.91
<i>Emotional expression scale</i>								
Expression of positive emotion	30.66	5.31	35.00	4.39	31.75	4.45	33.00	3.35
Expression of intimacy	26.08	2.87	28.08	3.11	26.50	3.75	27.25	3.04
Expression of negative emotion	19.50	3.06	20.50	3.42	21.00	4.55	21.08	3.67
<i>Scale of interpersonal relationships dimensions</i>								
Approval dependence	44.00	11.14	36.41	10.49	42.25	9.63	40.20	11.27
Empathy	16.00	3.90	18.91	5.77	17.75	6.73	17.33	3.96
trust others	34.41	7.91	39.16	7.70	32.91	9.44	32.16	7.90
Emotional awareness	37.16	10.47	37.33	7.47	33.41	7.15	33.58	6.51

As a result of the variance analysis, it was found that time main effect was statistically significant in hope scores ($F_{(1,47)} = 4.15, p < 0.05$). However, no statistically significant difference was identified in terms of the main group effect ($F_{(1,47)} = 1.25, p > 0.05$), and it was concluded that the result of the interactional effect of group and time was not statistically significant either ($F_{(1, 47)} = 0.67, p > 0.05$).

When the results are examined in terms of resilience, in scores of perception of self, it was gained that the effect of group ($F_{(1,47)} = 10.68, p < 0.05$) and time ($F_{(1,47)} = 5.495, p < 0.05$) was significant.

However, the interaction between group and time was not significant for this sub-scale ($F_{(1,47)} = 0.50$, $p > 0.05$). The results show that the applied counselling programme has differences between the experimental and control groups as well as in the experimental groups before and after the application. For another sub-scale of resilience which is structured style, the results indicated that main time effect was statistically significant ($F_{(1,47)} = 4.16$, $p < 0.05$), whereas the group main effect ($F_{(1,47)} = 1.13$, $p > 0.05$) and interactional effect of time and group were not significant ($F_{(1,47)} = 1.09$, $p > 0.05$). There were no significant differences in the perception of future, social competence, family cohesion, and social resources sub-scales.

ANOVA results for emotional expression showed that the main effect of time yielded statistically significant differences ($F_{(1,47)} = 4.78$, $p < 0.05$), but the group main effect ($F_{(1,47)} = 0.12$, $p > 0.05$) and time and group common effect ($F_{(1,47)} = 1.45$, $p > 0.05$) were found not to be statistically significant for expression of positive emotion. For the other sub-scale, the expression of intimacy, the result indicated that the time main effect ($F_{(1,47)} = 4.98$, $p < 0.05$) was significant however not the main group effect ($F_{(1,47)} = 0.15$, $p > 0.05$) and the time and group common effect ($F_{(1,47)} = 0.92$, $p > 0.05$) were not statistically significant. For the expression of negative emotion, there were no statistically significant differences, even though there were differences in between and within means.

The two-factorial ANOVA results in terms of interpersonal relationships indicated that the differences occurred in approval dependence scores. It was gained that the main effect of group was significant ($F_{(1,47)} = 5.72$, $p < 0.05$), whereas the main effect of time ($F_{(1,47)} = 3.11$, $p > 0.05$) and the common effect of time and group ($F_{(1,47)} = 0.11$, $p > 0.05$) were not significant. The results represent that the differences occurred between the experimental and control groups were in favour of the former.

4. Discussion

As a profession, psychological counselling requires that the person pursuing this line of work, in addition to being mentally healthy and possessing the personality traits that are consistent with the profession, is equipped with the necessary professional skills, techniques and theoretical knowledge. Such skills and knowledge are acquired through theoretical and applied courses during the education process. In this respect, it was intentioned to contribute to the personal and professional development of the counsellor trainees by enabling them to experience such knowledge and skills as a 'counsellor' in addition to pursuing their 'counselling' courses.

This study was aimed to strengthen the counsellor trainees' hopes, resilience and interpersonal relationships through the psychological group counselling programme that was prepared for this purpose. The results indicated that the programme yielded differences between the experimental and control groups, and the pre- and post-test scores of the training groups in terms of hope, emotion expression, resilience and interpersonal relationships dimensions.

At the end of the programme, it was observed that the hope scores of the trainees increased over time. The variable of hope has been studied by many studies in the literature, conducted based on screening model (Celik, Sanberk & Deveci, 2017; Karatas, 2015; Marques, Lopez & Pais-Ribeiro, 2011; Yerlikaya, 2014; Zeidner, 1998). The studies conducted based on the experimental model, similarly, suggested that the programmes reduce the hopelessness (Karatas, 2014) and increase their hopes (Cheavens, Feldman, Gum, Michael & Snyder, 2006). The finding obtained from this study leads one to believe that such preventive and awareness-oriented studies and education make a positive contribution to the participants' hopes being pursued in the course of getting a vocation.

When the result was examined in terms of resilience, the findings suggest that the applied programme has yielded differences in the perception of self and structured style dimensions of resilience. While such differences were observed in both the experimental and control groups, they were also seen in the pre- and post-test scores of the experimental group. Resilience is the complex interplay between an individual and his/her environment, in which the individual can influence a

successful outcome by using the internal and external protective factors, defined as the personal qualities or contexts that predict positive outcomes under high-risk conditions (Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993; Richardson, 2002).

The programme of this study consists of positive emotion, hope, awareness, focus of control, emotional self-regulation and social support. These personal and interpersonal factors may constitute a source of resilience. For this reason, it has been observed that the programme applied in this study contributed positively to the resilience and flexibility of the counsellor trainees.

The findings related to emotional expression scores suggest that the applied programme yielded differences in the trainees' 'positive emotion' and 'proximity' expressions over time. There are studies suggesting that realisation and expression of emotions affect personal and interpersonal relationships in a positive way (Erden, 2015; Kervanci Ustun & Topbas, 2014), improve well-being (Herrero, 2012; Kuzucu, 2006; Otlu, Ikiz & Asici, 2016) and increase hope (Uzun-Ozer & Tezer, 2009). On the other hand, the literature has also studies suggesting that the difficulties experienced in expressing emotions result in negative emotions, depression, anxiety and interpersonal problems (Erden, 2017; Hemenover, 2003). The data obtained from this study once again underlines the fact that emotional expressions can be learned and this, in turn, makes a positive contribution to psychological well-being.

When the applied programme is evaluated in terms of its effects on interpersonal relationships of the counsellor trainees, it can be observed that there are differences among the approval dependence scores of the experimental and control groups. Culturally, assessment and approval of others function as a significant variable in self-perception (Kagitcibasi, 2005). However, this may also lead individuals to have problems in acting, deciding and orienting themselves independently (Erden-Imamoglu, 2013; Whiffen, Aube, Thompson & Campbell, 2000). It is observed that the applied group counselling programme led to differences in the interpersonal dependency of the participants which manifested itself in the form of seeking approval from others. This finding is highly significant in that the participants are counsellors who are expected to possess self-integrity, ability to establish healthy relationships and personal competencies required for the profession.

As a conclusion, and in the light of the above findings, it can be claimed that the psychological group counselling programme has made a positive contribution to the hopes, resilience, emotional awareness and expression and interpersonal relationships of the counsellor trainees. The awareness developed in the course of the group study is believed to have a positive effect on the individuals' self-perception and social relationships. For this reason, this study is important because it offers significant insight for counsellor trainees to live through their developmental stage in a healthy manner and experience a group interaction for their professional development.

In conclusion, at the end of the programme, trainees were educated to act as therapists themselves and to apply hopeful thoughts in their everyday life, so as to be able to determine the goals and their barriers themselves. They learned to form and maintain the needed factors to be resilient. All of the skills enable them to improve healthy relationships with others. On the strength of the findings of this study, it is recommended that such programmes that enable counsellors to gain experience that is beneficial to their personal and professional development be extended.

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