

IMPACT OF A RELATIONSHIPS DEVELOPMENT GROUP ON STUDENTS' INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

K. du Plooy

Division Student Support

University of Pretoria

Pretoria, South Africa

e-mail: Kobus.duPlooy@nwu.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Together with the increasing pace of modern society and technological improvements, it appears that students' psychological needs, complaints and methods of communication have also changed. At the University of Pretoria (UP) between January and October 2012 the most frequent problems presented at Division Student Support (DSS) were stress, anxiety and depression relating to academic, personal and particularly interpersonal relationships. Unsatisfactory interpersonal relationships appeared to have a detrimental impact on academic performance, which could culminate in the termination of studies. This highlighted the need for more effective psychotherapeutic interventions to improve communication and interpersonal relationships. Traditional psychotherapeutic approaches no longer appeared to be as effective. Increasing numbers of students suggested group intervention as opposed to individual psychotherapy.

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It was postulated that a semi-structured relationships development group (RDG) grounded in the inter-psychoic approach could address the contemporary needs of students. Such a group of seven UP students was formed in April 2013. Initial findings based on the feedback from these group members show the semi-structured RDG to be an impactful and effective short-term psychotherapeutic tool to improve the quality of communication and interpersonal relationships of students at South African institutions of higher education. This would allow students who may be at risk of academically underperforming to improve their academic results and in doing so improve the academic success and throughput rates at South African institutions of higher education. Further research is advocated to verify these findings at other South African institutions of higher education.

Keywords: semi-structured group, group psychotherapy, relationships, communication, intra-psychoic, inter-psychoic, university students, student support facilities, Interactional Pattern Analysis, Division Student Support, University of Pretoria

Think of your head as an unsafe neighbourhood. Don't go there alone
– (Augusten Burroughs).

BACKGROUND

Over the past few decades, the global landscape has undergone numerous changes. Few of these environmental changes appear to have had as much impact on modern society as the rapid advances in technology, especially during recent years. For some time now scientists have been warning the world about the potential hazardous effects these rapid advances in technology may hold for the mental health of human beings. In 1997 Arnetz (1997) noted that rapid changes such as information technology, mobile phones, computers and electronic equipment had been occurring globally in both social and work-related environments. These developments affected most people and many human beings believed they could no longer function in their current environment without such technological support.

Despite the comforts, luxuries, speed and higher economic productivity levels that advances in technology brought to the environment, it also brought significant implications for the mental health of all human beings. The pace of modern living has drastically accelerated and, along with it, the pressure on most people increased, for example the demand to meet ever closer deadlines (Arnetz 1997). This, in turn, has significantly heightened the stress levels among many people.

Literature indicates that young adults, including students at tertiary institutions, are among the most significantly affected and vulnerable in this respect. In a study that was done in the United Kingdom (UK), Niemz, Griffiths and Banyard (2005)

found that among a group of 371 British students 18.3 per cent of them reported to have used the internet excessively and that this use had caused academic, social and interpersonal difficulties among them. The results by Niemi et al. (2005) also revealed that excessive internet use (also referred to as pathological internet use) led to lower levels of self-esteem in combination with more social inhibition among the participants. In another study by Young and Rogers (2009), significant levels of depression were also identified among 259 participants in an international online survey whereby they had completed the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI). Furthermore, Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (2003) found that loneliness was strongly associated with increased internet use and that altered social interactional patterns were prevalent among excessive internet users.

Thomee et al. (2007) also conducted a study whereby they investigated whether a high quantity of information and communication technology usage placed young adult users at risk to develop symptoms of stress, depression and/or sleep disturbances. The results indicated that the frequent combined use of computers and mobile phones among female participants were associated with more symptoms of prolonged stress and depression. Frequent sending and receiving of short message service (sms) messages, email messages and online chatting in particular, were all found to have increased the symptoms of prolonged stress and depression among female participants. Among the male participants, high numbers of mobile phone calls and sms messages sent and received on a daily basis were also associated with increased symptoms of sleep disturbances and depression. Finally, excessive internet usage was also found to be related to sleep disturbances among all of the participants.

From the aforementioned examples, it is clear that environmental changes, particularly rapid advances in technology, had globally made a significant impact on the mental health of human beings. The manner in which individuals communicate, particularly those young adults and adolescents who grew up within this environment, also changed significantly with the advent of social media that has made an even further impact on the nature and quality of their communication and relationships. Furthermore, the young adult population – which includes students at institutions of higher education – appears to have been particularly vulnerable to its effects. This also seems to have led to an inevitable change in social interactional patterns between students. The use of social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter, coupled with an increasingly high paced life style, also led to a change in the profiles of contemporary students studying at institutions of higher education. This has left numerous young adults lacking important skills to effectively communicate and maintain interpersonal relationships within their environments, which was found to have a direct impact the quality of the mental health of human beings, as explained by Vorster (2011, 85):

In punctuating an interpersonal view of human behaviour an assumption can be made that the nature and quality of an individual's interpersonal relationships directly correlate with that particular individual's degree of mental health. Support for this assumption can be found in the writings of Carl Rogers who demonstrated that high levels of accurate empathy, genuineness and unconditional acceptance constituted an effective therapeutic relationship that would facilitate a client's growth and actualisation. It seems logical that the healing effects of these three variables cannot be exclusive to therapeutic relationships. Any relationship in which these three variables were present should be beneficial to the participants and should contribute to their healthy mental development and growth.

It appears that the challenges and psychological needs of contemporary students have also changed as part of the aforementioned global changes, and that this was also reflected in the presenting complaints of students who sought assistance from student support facilities at South African institutions of higher education. The following section describes the most recent trends already mentioned that were identified at the Division Student Support (DSS) of the University of Pretoria (UP).

CURRENT TRENDS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

When considering the types of presenting complaints students brought to the DSS of UP, certain trends emerged in recent times. Some of the statistics presented in Figure 1 indicate that stress, anxiety and depression related to academic, personal and interpersonal difficulties have become the most prevalent presenting complaints among students who reported at the DSS of UP between January and October 2012.

In the light of the high incidence of interpersonal difficulties relating to feelings of depression indicated in Figure 1 and while considering that the DSS of UP has been tasked to impact on the lives of these students in such a manner so as to assist them to become academically more successful and to function more effectively within the environment on a holistic basis, a new psychotherapeutic approach to achieve this goal is proposed in this article. This approach involves the inclusion of students in semi-structured, inter-psyche based relationship development groups aimed at assisting its members more rapidly and effectively in comparison to some older and more traditional intra-psyche psychotherapeutic approaches. For the purpose of clarity the following section discusses intra-psyche and inter-psyche approaches in the field of psychology.

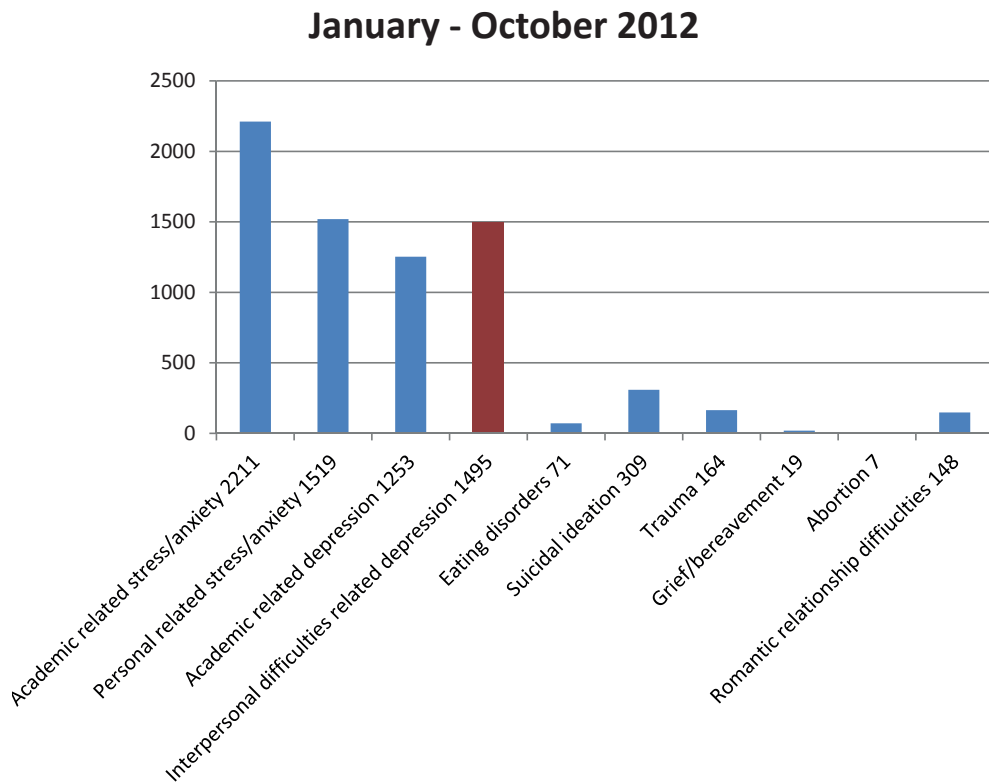


Figure 1: Reported complaints at the DSS of UP in the period January to October 2012

Intra-psychic and inter-psychic approaches

The traditional training that psychologists have been receiving from tertiary institutions in South Africa no longer appears to adequately meet the needs of contemporary psychotherapy clients, including students at tertiary institutions. This is mostly due to their frequent long-term nature as the majority of these older approaches focused on hypothetical occurrences that were speculated to have taken place 'within' individuals, also referred to as the intra-psychic perspective. One of the central limitations of the intra-psychic approach is that it is impossible to see the mind 'at work'. This inevitably renders all the conclusions drawn from another individual's subjective experience as speculative and hypothetical, as it is not open to verification (Haley 1963/1990).

In contrast to the aforementioned, another approach that focuses on what is taking place 'between' individuals within their environments, is referred to as the inter-psychic perspective (Watzlawick, Bevelas and Jackson 2011). This approach excludes speculation of what is taking place within individuals and rather focuses on what is observable between them. As such the focus of this approach lies on observable behaviour as opposed to the invocation of unverifiable hypotheses concerning the mind or another's subjective experiences (Watzlawick et al. 2011).

It is the author's view that the older and more traditional intra-psychic approaches have become outdated and inadequate to optimally meet the needs of contemporary psychotherapy clients. Interestingly, even some of the more contemporary approaches to psychotherapy such as Narrative Therapy, an approach informed by postmodernism, were also proposed by Phipps and Vorster (2009) to have in essence returned to the older, more traditional intra-psychic perspective.

In an attempt to address this apparent gap between the traditional intra-psychic modes of psychotherapy and the needs of contemporary student clients as well as the ever increasing number of students that have been consulting DSS of UP, the semi-structured relationships development group (RDG) grounded in the inter-psychic perspective is proposed and will be described in more detail in the following sections. Given its important relevance to this article, it is necessary to take a look at group psychotherapy itself and note how it is incorporated into the semi-structured RDG.

THE ESSENCE OF GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY IN A SEMI-STRUCTURED RDG

In order to contextualise the development of the RDG that forms the focus of this article, a brief overview of group psychotherapy is first discussed in the following section.

Group psychotherapy

The value of groups was recognised many years prior to the initial formal development of group psychotherapy per se, starting in the aftermath of the First World War. Avery (1996) explains that some of these earliest examples include extended family gatherings and religious communities that have been in existence for hundreds of years. It was only in the early 1900s when a medical doctor by the name of Joseph Pratt started to bring groups of patients suffering from tuberculosis together to educate, encourage and guide them about their condition, that group psychotherapy truly started to emerge. Later, psychiatrists from the British army were tasked to assist soldiers with the emotional trauma of 'shell shock' as it was referred to at the time. They treated these soldiers in groups to achieve optimal results. As such, group psychotherapy in its true form was born and has undergone much development since

its earliest beginnings. Today groups are implemented within a range of contexts such as the corporate world to psychiatric hospitals for numerous purposes and with powerful impacts for its members (Avery 1996). In this article, the concepts 'group therapy' and 'group psychotherapy' will be used interchangeably.

When turning to what group therapy within the context of psychotherapy refers to specifically, Reber (1995, 324) describes it as a 'very general term used to cover any psychotherapeutic process in which groups of individuals meet together with a therapist/leader. The interactions among the members of the group are assumed to be therapeutic and in many cases more effective than the traditional client-therapist dyad.' Weinberg (2005, 01) states that 'group therapy like individual therapy, is intended to help people who would like to improve their ability to cope with difficulties and problems in their lives. But, while in individual therapy the patient meets with only one person (the therapist), in group therapy the meeting is with a whole group and one or two therapists. Group therapy focuses on interpersonal interactions, so relationship problems are addressed well in groups.' Following this broad description of group therapy, various types of psychotherapeutic groups are described in the following sections.

Types of psychotherapeutic groups

Within the context of group psychotherapy, the group often serves mostly as a setting for a therapist who operates from a particular theoretical paradigm or school of thought. As such, Avery (1996) explains that the group is often not the aim of the whole therapy in itself. How exactly the group process functions to be therapeutic differs from group to group, depending on the aims of each group. The aim of each group in turn is formed by the theoretical underpinning from which each group therapist/s operates (Weinberg 2005). Some of these types of groups, according to Avery (1996), include psychodynamic, analytic, transactional analysis and encounter psychotherapeutic groups.

Furthermore, Corey (2014) indicates that Adlerian Therapy, as based on the theoretical formulations of Alfred Adler, as well as Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy based on the ideas of Albert Ellis, both lend themselves to effective group therapy. An in-depth description of these various theories falls outside the ambit of this article. However, they can broadly be described as falling into different categories. According to Thompson and Kahn (1976), all the different theories and theoretical frameworks referred to above as well as others that inform group psychotherapy, could be classified into three broad categories, namely intra-personal, inter-personal and the trans-personal levels.

The intra-personal level

The intra-personal level refers to intra-psychoic theories mentioned earlier in this article and focuses on what is hypothetically occurring within the individual as the most relevant and significant in the group therapeutic process. Most theoretical frameworks involve this approach to group therapy. Analytic, post-modern and psychodynamic groups could all be said to fall within this category (Thompson and Kahn 1976).

The inter-personal level

The inter-personal approach involves theories that fall within the ambit of the inter-psychoic approach discussed previously and focuses only on the observable behaviour as it is taking place between individuals. Thompson and Kahn (1976) used the example of transactional groups here as based on the work of Eric Berne. The behaviourist paradigm could also be said to fall within this category.

The trans-personal level

Thompson and Kahn (1976) describe the trans-personal point of departure by indicating that the sum of all intra-personal and inter-personal transactions in a group will have meaning, which can only be grasped by considering the group as a whole. The total group situation is therefore considered at this level.

In my view, the previous three categories imply a point of punctuation. According to Watzlawick, Bevelas and Jackson (2011), punctuation entails the mental mark of the beginnings and end points of different interactions. Wood (2012) adds that punctuation plays a very important role in human communication as it is used to create meaning in communication. Explained by Vorster (2003) when one member of the group is considered alone, it would be like a microscope 'zooming in; on only that individual and therefore an intra-personal or intra-psychoic punctuation is made. When including two persons, an inter-personal or inter-psychoic punctuation is made as the microscope has 'zoomed out' slightly to include two individuals and the focus falls on their interaction. Finally, when a trans-personal or group punctuation is made, the microscope has 'zoomed out' even further to have included all the group members and the sum of their interactions and experiences.

The environmental-personal level

The focus of the RDG discussed in this article was on the interactions between all the group members as well as the significant others in their respective environments outside of the group. Therefore another level was proposed by the author in addition to the aforementioned described by Thompson and Kahn (1976). Because the RDG not only included group members but also indirectly the significant others in

their environment, it is proposed that when ‘zooming out’ even further to include significant others outside of the group, it falls within the level of environmental-personal interaction. At this level, group members are facilitated by the therapist to assist one another within the safe climate of the group and to provide one another with feedback on their interactions, enabling them to utilise this feedback and new skills in their interactions with significant others outside the group. This subsequently leads to improvements in their interpersonal relationships outside the group, hence this level being referred to as the environmental-personal level. The interactional perspective as discussed in more depth in the following sections of this article could be said to fit within this category.

The question, however, remains, regardless of what theory underlines the approach to a particular therapeutic group, what are the factors that make group psychotherapy therapeutic, whether forming part of the intra-psychic or inter-psychic perspective? This question will be addressed in the following section.

Therapeutic factors of group psychotherapy

Arguably one of the most influential writers on group psychotherapy was Irvin Yalom (1985), who indicated that therapeutic change within group therapy is a complex process. According to Yalom (2005), therapeutic change in groups comes about through the interactions of a number of different guided human experiences, which he referred to as therapeutic factors. Each of the 11 factors proposed by Yalom (2005) is briefly discussed next.

Instillation of hope

One of the paramount factors within individual and group therapy is that the client remains hopeful. This not only ensures that the client remains in therapy but also because a true belief in the treatment is in itself already therapeutic. A client may have lost hope that he or she could overcome a certain difficulty, for example divorce, and being introduced to someone who had managed to overcome it, this could serve as a great inspiration of hope to that particular individual.

Universality

Linking with the first factor, when entering psychotherapy numerous clients feel that they are alone and unique in the challenges that they face. The group can therefore bring about a great relief to these clients upon realising that others face similar difficulties as their own and thereby disconfirming their feeling of uniqueness and loneliness. As they share their worries and concerns, clients feel universally similar to other group members and so also benefit from their catharsis and empowerment within the group.

Imparting information

This factor refers to instruction for the purpose of teaching about topics related to mental health, also referred to as psycho-education by therapists and other group members. This provides members with both relevant information and the process of advice giving rather than simply the advice itself. It is beneficial for group members as it conveys a message of mutual caring and interest that is often seen as a gift by other group members.

Altruism

Altruism is considered vital in group contexts as members also receive through giving. Some members may be reluctant to join groups as they may believe that they have nothing to offer other members. However, through sharing experiences or giving advice, a member's self-esteem may be bolstered by the feeling of importance emanating from giving to others.

The corrective recapitulation of the primary family group

According to Yalom (2005), a group context in many ways resembles the family context from which the client emanated. In most cases members interact with the therapist and other members as they tend to act with their families of origin or have acted with them in the past. Family conflicts could therefore be relived, however correctly so within the group, providing members with a corrective emotional experience.

Development of socialising techniques

Social learning is regarded to be a therapeutic spin-off factor present in all groups. Members often obtain valuable interpersonal insight through feedback received by other group members on any maladaptive social behaviour that they might exhibit in the group setting. They may not have received such valuable feedback within any other context apart from the group.

Imitative behaviour

Within groups members tend to model themselves on certain behaviours of both other group members as well as the facilitating therapist, which can act as a highly effective therapeutic force. By observing how others maintain themselves within the group, members can model effective behaviours they have observed and apply it in other contexts outside the group.

Interpersonal learning

Related to the two aforementioned factors, through interpersonal learning members may gain more objective perceptions of their own interpersonal presentations and may gain more insight with regard to their patterns of behaviour in relation to others. This may assist them to obtain a clearer understanding as to how they have developed into the individuals they are at that given point in time.

Group cohesiveness

Within a group context characterised by trust, empathy, unconditional acceptance and warmth, group cohesiveness forms over time. Once formed it acts as a strong therapeutic influence on clients and some members have found their therapeutic groups as their only source of deep human contact. This, in turn, fulfils members' needs for validation, acceptance, approval, support and membership.

Catharsis

Within the psychoanalytic theory, this term refers to the release of tension and anxiety resulting from the process of bringing repressed ideas, feelings, wishes and memories of the past into consciousness. Within a group context, catharsis is, however, viewed as forming part of an interpersonal process as it was regarded by Yalom (2005), who said that no person could obtain long-term benefits from ventilating their emotions in total isolation.

Existential factors

Finally, this factor is rooted within the existential therapeutic approach, which emphasises awareness of topics surrounding death, freedom, isolation and the meaning of life. In emphasising these factors within group therapy, members are able to come to terms with the reality that there is a limit to the guidance and support they are able to obtain from others, and that ultimately the responsibility to live their lives is their own.

Within the context of the previous sections of this article, the next section will provide a description of the RDG itself.

THE RELATIONSHIPS DEVELOPMENT GROUP

The RDG as well as the environmental-personal level referred to in the previous sections are founded on a new mechanism of understanding human behaviour within the context of a dynamic person-environment relationship, namely the interactional perspective.

Interactional perspective

All the aforementioned factors described by Yalom (2005) are considered important within the RDG. However, the factors of imparting information – the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, development of socialising techniques, imitative behaviour and interpersonal learning – are regarded as of particular importance in this specific group, as it is based on the interactional perspective. Within this perspective, the emphasis falls rather on what occurs between people in their environments as opposed to what is being speculated on as occurring ‘inside’ them. It also follows an inter-psychoic as opposed to intra-psychoic view, described earlier in this article. In following such a perspective, one enters the realm of interactional therapy wherein, as the name implies, the focus falls on the patterns of interaction *between* individuals, in particular the circular patterns of behaviour (or communication) and the *impact* it has in the ‘here and now’. This approach was originally developed by Vorster (2003; 2011) and also led to the development of the Interactional Pattern Analysis (IPA). Vorster, Roos and Beukes (2013) explain that the IPA entails a form of analysis designed to serve as a psycho-diagnostic tool within the context of psychotherapy rather than relating to a theory in itself. It has also been found to promote effective short-term psychotherapy among students at South African tertiary institutions (Du Plooy 2014).

Although the focus of this article falls on the RDG as opposed to the IPA, the same principles underlie both. Originally developed as a diagnostic approach within the context of psychotherapy, the IPA describes the observable behavioural patterns occurring between individuals systematically in order to provide the psychotherapist with a clear picture of where and how intervention is required and, in doing so, this method renders any speculation superfluous (Vorster 2003). Its development was also closely linked with the writings of Rogers, as Vorster (2011) explained: by punctuating an interpersonal view of human behaviour it was possible to make the assumption that the nature and quality of human beings’ personal relationships directly correlated with their degrees of mental health. As a result, it formed the most suitable foundation for the RDG, where the focus also falls on assisting students who specifically experience difficulties with communication and interpersonal relationships. Following this discussion on its theoretical underpinnings, the following section will focus on the practical application and proposed structure of the RDG.

Proposed structure of the RDG

The RDG is proposed to be a semi-structured group that focuses on combining interactional therapy described in the previous section in a group context in combination with basic psycho-education on communication and relationships. It aims to improve the communication and relationships of its participants particularly

within the environmental-personal level referred to earlier in this article. It is set out to span over five sessions and recommended that its facilitation should follow the following structure:

Session 1 topic: Introduction

Upon their arrival group members are to be introduced to one another. The facilitator makes use of an 'ice breaker' exercise with the aim to allow group members to come to know one another in a fun and friendly manner, while relieving any apprehension that usually coincides with initial group sessions. Furthermore, it assists the facilitator to establish rapport with the group members. One example of such an exercise is what the author refers to as 'name play'. In this exercise group members provide their names in turn in combination with a brief introduction of themselves. It is recommended that the facilitators start this process in order to set the tone and create the norm of this exercise. After each member had introduced themselves, the facilitator asks them to nominate each other by name. If another group member's name was accurately recalled, that group member must nominate other group members, and so it continues. If a group member incorrectly names another member, he or she is corrected by that group member on his or her name and must then nominate another group member.

Following this exercise the facilitator next provides an overview of the topics to be addressed in forthcoming sessions, while also ascertaining from the group members what their specific needs are from these forthcoming sessions. The session is then concluded by selecting the date and time of the next session in collaboration with all the group members.

Session 2 topic: Importance of communication in relationships

The session commences with a 'check-in' process whereby each member is requested to 'check-in' with the group by giving a brief account of the period of time since the last session as well as the emotional state where he or she finds him or herself at that moment. It is advised that the group facilitator begins with this process in order to set the norm. Group members are then provided with psycho-education in the form of a definition and description of communication, using the model by Vorster (2011) as an aid (see figure 2). A detailed discussion of the theory underlying this model falls outside the ambit of this article. It is, however, recommended that the model is studied in advance by any individual who aims to facilitate the RDG. A reading of the works by Vorster (2003; 2011) is advocated for this purpose.

The discussion further includes a description of effective versus ineffective communication and its emotional effects on others. A discussion of communication patterns, specifically destructive patterns such as conflict in relationships, should next be discussed by the facilitator. The group members are encouraged throughout

to participate in the discussion and to provide examples and personal experiences relating to the topic.

From the facilitator, a traditional classroom approach whereby the facilitator teaches students is to be avoided and instead an interactive process is to be encouraged throughout facilitation of the RDG. It is also important that the facilitator ensures optimal communication during the session even by interrupting a group member if necessary so as to avoid unwanted impacts on other group members. It is also advocated that, should such a situation occur, it be utilised within the group by providing that particular group member with effective feedback on the effects of that communication and to explore alternatives within the group on how to relay the intended message more effectively.

During communication there often exists a difference between what the message sender intends to convey and the actual effect or impact of the conveyed message on others. A typical example of such a case provided by Vorster, Roos and Beukes (2013) is where an individual excessively attempts to gain acceptance or to impress others, which in most cases elicits the opposite effect from others in the environment. By persistently conveying a message of 'Look what I can do' or 'Look at how important I am', people who receive these messages will most likely grow tired of its effects and will most likely avoid the message sender. It is therefore vital that the facilitator remains vigilant of such effects that group members may be having on one another during the session and to highlight them through effective feedback and group discussion.

In the aforementioned manner, group members learn to communicate more effectively by becoming more aware of the effects that, in most cases, they were not aware of having on others through their communication. This, in turn, allows them to experiment with other, more effective methods of communication within the safety of the RDG. In keeping with the interactional perspective, this allows group members to improve their communication and relationships outside the RDG. The session is concluded with a 'checking-out' phase whereby each member provides a reflection on their experiences of the group session that day.

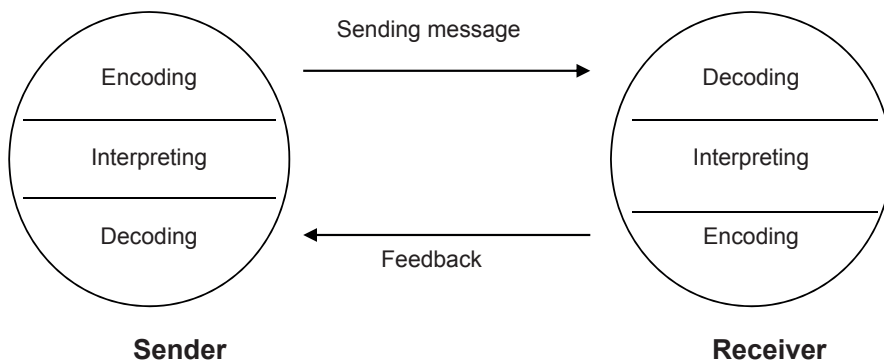


Figure 2: Model by Vorster (2011) on the process of communication

Session 3 topic: Communication in different relationships

After ‘checking-in’ at the start of the session in the same manner as described in session 2, a discussion is introduced by the facilitator on effective versus ineffective communication in various relationships, including family, friendship and romantic relationships. Group members are again encouraged to share their own experiences and the facilitator facilitates the process in the same manner as it was described in session 2 whereby group members provide effective support and feedback as facilitated by the facilitator, while simply adding his or her own inputs where deemed necessary.

In this way, group members are given the opportunity in a safe environment to become aware of their own contributions to difficulties that they may be experiencing in the various significant relationships in their lives, thereby allowing them the opportunity to experiment with alternative approaches. As they alter their communication in these relationships and impact differently as a result on others, their reactions towards them in return will also change, allowing members to meet their needs more adequately from these relationships. This process allows them to improve their communication in these relationships, thereby reducing their own subjective feelings of discomfort within these relationships while also improving their overall levels of psychological wellbeing and mental health as a result (Van den Bergh 2008). The session is again concluded by a ‘checking out’ phase in the same manner as described at the end of session 2.

Session 4 topic: Personal communication styles

In this session, the members of the group are requested following the ‘checking in’ phase to provide effective feedback on the effects of their communication styles on

one another in the group sessions, if not yet done so up to that point in earlier sessions. The facilitator facilitates this process to avoid impacts such as blame or judgement to be communicated between members, thereby ensuring that the feedback is effective and constructive. This offers insights into the impact that members have on others in their environment and offers them a safe environment wherein they can obtain inputs on how to alter their communication to avoid undesirable effects on others in future. Members are encouraged to apply these changes outside the group. The session is again concluding by the group members 'checking out'.

Session 5 topic: Conclusion

Following 'check in' the group process is concluded by reflecting on the sessions and the topics discussed up to that point. A summary of all of the topics is introduced and discussed again by the facilitator, and group members are requested to provide their personal reflections on their experiences inside and outside the group up to that point. Finally, the process is concluded by ending the group in the form of a final 'checking out' phase.

Additional important considerations of the RDG

The above proposed structure is regarded as still being developed and adjustments to it may be made in future. It is advised that the facilitator remains group centred throughout the entire process, implying a focus on the needs of the groups as well as remaining flexible to adjust to unique group dynamics as they surface. The author therefore proposes that as long as all of the relevant topics are addressed, the process can be adapted to meet the needs of each group. It is further advised that the group should not exceed nine members, so as to maximise participation by all members within the allotted time of two hours per session.

An additional facilitator may also be added, however, no more than two facilitators are recommended. Another important consideration is the training and experience of the facilitator: This is important as only effectively trained facilitators would be able to adhere effectively to the aforementioned considerations. At minimum a study of the texts cited under the reference list of this article is strongly advocated for this purpose.

INVESTIGATION INTO THE IMPACT OF THE USE OF THE RDG AS A PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC TECHNIQUE AMONG STUDENTS AT UP

In an attempt to evaluate the impact of this technique within the context of an institution of higher education in South Africa, I requested feedback from all the group members who had formed part of this RDG. The aim of this feedback was to

obtain an indication of how effective they had experienced this technique to have been? This was done only as an attempt to obtain an indication of the levels of effectiveness of the RDG within this context. The procedure that was utilised to collect this information, as well as the findings thereof, is discussed in the following sections.

Population

The population under investigation consisted of seven students from UP in the Gauteng Province of South Africa, therefore all the group members were registered students at UP at the time of their participation within the group. The students were selected only from those undergoing individual therapy at DSS at the time and who were referred to the RDG by their therapists.

Care was taken to ensure demographic representation of the student body, therefore the group included English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking male and female students who were at different stages of the completion of their studies. They were also studying various courses at different faculties and also differed in terms of their 'racial' and 'ethnic' backgrounds.

Ethical considerations

From an ethical perspective, all the group members were informed in advance by their therapists that their participation in the group would be voluntary. They had the option to decline participation without any detrimental consequences to any of them. They were further informed by their respective referring therapists that their participation in the group would be used for research and that their identities would remain completely anonymous at all times. During the first session, they were further requested by the facilitator, who is also a registered clinical psychologist, to complete an informed consent document before entering the group.

Research procedure and results

All group members were requested to provide written, anonymous feedback on their experiences of the RDG by answering the following two questions after the final group session:

1. Please rate below what impact your attendance of this group had made on your interpersonal communication and relationships:

It significantly worsened my interpersonal communication and relationships	It worsened my interpersonal communication and relationships	It made no impact on my interpersonal communication and relationships	It improved my interpersonal communication and relationships	It significantly improved my interpersonal communication and relationships
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2. Please indicate below the likelihood that you would recommend other students to attend this group:

I would definitely not recommend that other students attend this group	I am uncertain	I definitely would recommend that other students attend this group
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Results and discussion

All of the seven students who had been part of this group completed the feedback forms and the findings of their responses as well as their biographic details are portrayed below:



Figure 3: ‘Racial’ distribution of RDG population

Figure 3 indicates that the group members consisted equally of black and white students as well as one Indian student.

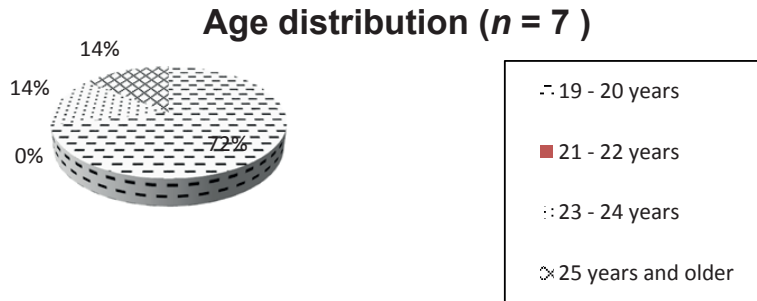


Figure 4: Age distribution of RDG population

Figure 4 indicates that the age of the members varied, with the highest number of members having been between 19 and 20 years of age. This information was obtained from the documentation that the students completed during the first session of the group process.

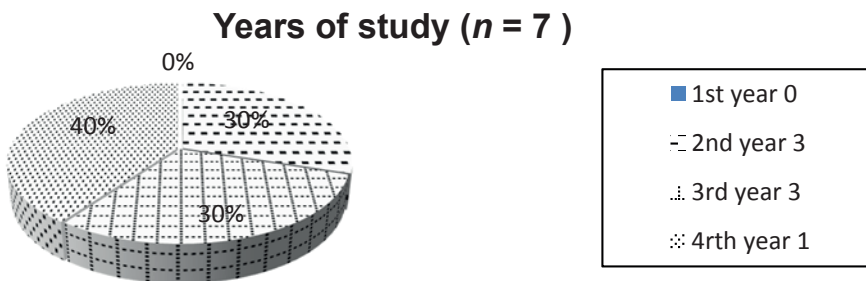
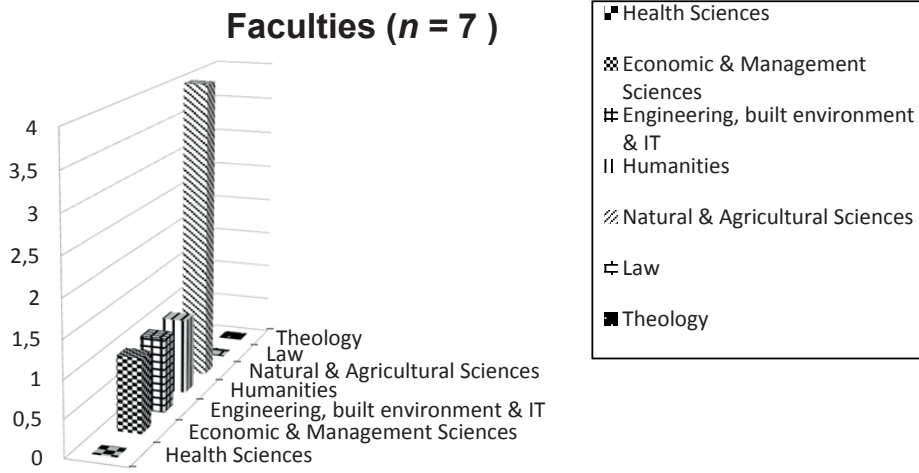


Figure 5: Year of tertiary study of RDG population

The number of academic years of tertiary study of the group members is shown in Figure 5, which indicates that they were spread relatively evenly between second and fourth year students.



Number of group members 7

Figure 6: Faculties represented in RDG population

The majority of the respondents were students registered in the faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences as indicated in Figure 6.

When turning our attention specifically to the feedback that had been requested from each of the group members, six of them indicated on question one that their participation in the group had significantly improved their interpersonal communication and relationships. Furthermore, one of them indicated the option that it had improved the member’s interpersonal communication and relationships. These results are depicted in Figure 7.

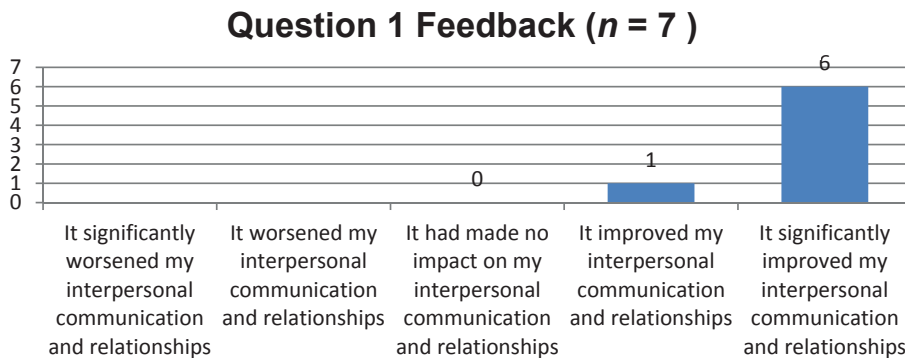


Figure 7: Question 1 feedback responses

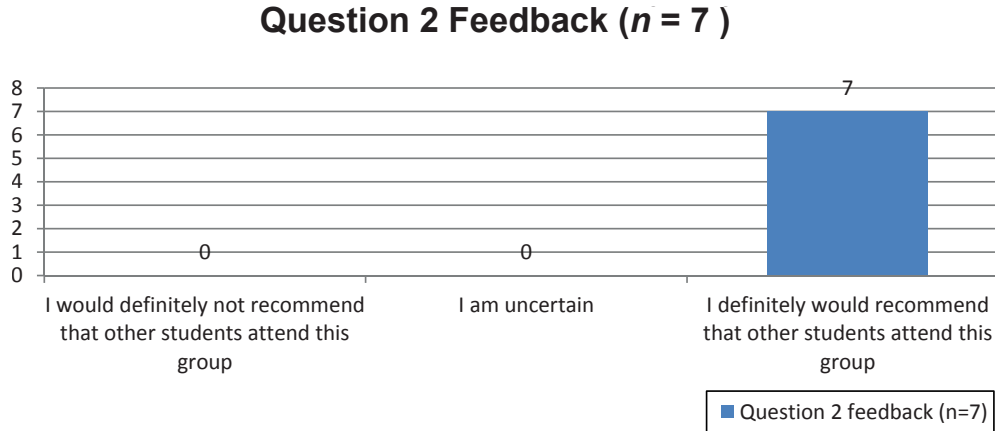


Figure 8: Question 2 feedback responses

The responses to question two indicate that, based on their experiences during the relationships development group, all the members would definitely refer a friend to join such a group in future, as displayed in Figure 8:

SUMMARY OF INVESTIGATION RESULTS

Based on the findings displayed in the aforementioned sections, it appears that the majority of the group members responded favourably to the inputs that they had been exposed to. What further appears particularly significant is that six of the respondents indicated that their participation in the group had significantly improved their interpersonal communication and relationships. Furthermore, one participant indicated that it had improved his or her interpersonal communication and relationships. This appears to indicate that all the group members felt that their participation in the RDG had improved their interpersonal communication and relationships within five sessions.

On question two, all the members indicated that following their own experiences during this group process, they would definitely refer a friend to join such a group in future. This further appears to indicate, in conjunction with the responses from question one, that the RDG has been highly impactful on their personal development with regard to interpersonal communication and relationships. It further appears to provide a strong indication that the use of the RDG is an effective tool for short-term psychotherapy aimed at improving interpersonal communication and relationships among contemporary students at UP, and thus possibly also in other South African institutions of higher education.

LIMITATIONS OF THE INVESTIGATION

Research in the field of psychotherapy has proven to be challenging for numerous researchers in the past and this investigation was no different. As a result, the aforementioned findings also have limitations that expose the study to criticism. Among these possible shortcomings is the possibility that certain extraneous variables impacted on the clients who had participated in this investigation during their treatment periods, which may have influenced their responses.

According to Gravetter and Forzano (2009, 116), an extraneous variable refers to 'any variable in a research study other than the specific variables being studied'. Struwig and Stead (2001) also identify a number of extraneous variables that may impact on research findings, including maturation, history, testing, instrumentation, regression towards the mean, selection, attrition and the diffusion of treatment. It is considered that any of these extraneous variables could have influenced the responses of the group members who had taken part in this investigation.

Furthermore, the sample size could also be regarded as relatively small and as a result not be completely representative of the population under investigation, namely that of students from UP. Also, the sample comprised black, white and Indian students and included no other 'racial groups'. This raises the question whether the RDG would also be effective for student clients from other 'racial groups' as well?

CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations of this investigation, the results obtained provide an indication that the semi-structured RDG as a psychotherapeutic technique could be effective and impactful in treating some of the most common presenting complaints of contemporary students at UP, particularly those requiring improvement in communication and interpersonal relationships. This conceptual article mainly aimed to investigate the impact of a new approach to group therapy and subsequently expose readers to it. Therefore the investigation set out only to obtain an indication of how effective the RDG appeared to be when utilised in the psychotherapeutic treatment of student clients at South African tertiary institutions. It was not aimed to serve as an in-depth research project.

Further research at different South African tertiary institutions is therefore required and advocated to verify the findings reported in this conceptual article. At this stage, its findings nevertheless appear to give a clear indication that the use of the semi-structured RDG as an effective short-term psychotherapeutic technique to improve interpersonal communication among students at South African institutions of higher education appears to hold significant promise, as it proved to be highly effective within a relatively short period of time among the sample of students investigated for this article.

In this article, it was highlighted how research has shown that individuals who maintain optimal interpersonal relationships experience high levels of overall psychological wellbeing or mental health (Van den Bergh 2008). In light of the aforementioned, South African institutions of higher education at present find themselves under ever increasing levels of pressure from various sectors to improve the academic success and throughput rates among their students. As such this form of psychotherapy is suggested to hold promise of greatly enhancing the academic performance of those students whose academic performance is being hampered by interpersonal relationships and/or communication difficulties. The value of this therapeutic technique is therefore that it provides, in particular, the student counsellors and psychologists from student support divisions of these institutions with an effective method of addressing a psychological difficulty that appears to affect ever larger numbers of students within a brief period of time. It is advocated that more counsellors and/or psychologists utilise and research this technique at various other tertiary institutions within South Africa in the future.

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