
Mark W. Huber
Wake Forest University
hubermaw@wfu.edu

Dr. Alan R. Dennis
University of Georgia
adennis@uga.cc.uga.edu

Abstract

This study examined the effects of a Group Support System on the communication process of one men’s counseling group that met ten times over a three-month period. The GSS appeared to facilitate two important forms of therapeutic communication present in most successful counseling groups: self-disclosure and feedback. Anonymity and group memory were found to be the most important features of the GSS. However, the physical environment of the GSS room coupled with certain GSS characteristics reduced the participants’ perceptions of intimacy, a negative outcome contrary to the expressed desires of most group members.

Introduction

Counseling groups, specifically men’s counseling groups, are groups which strive to create a safe place which supports the communication and resolution of deeply personal issues (e.g., frustration with the societal status quo, sexuality, etc.). Successful men’s counseling groups consist of members who effectively communicate their problems and exhibit openness to personal growth through important therapeutic behaviors such as self-disclosure and feedback [21, 38, 8, 27]. There is some indication that Group Support Systems (GSS) offer the opportunity to improve different types of counseling group interactions by promoting open and honest self-disclosure and feedback [15, 19].

GSS are computer-based information systems, which provide support for the communications and decision-making processes of groups [12]. Three characteristics of GSS that support effective and efficient group communication are anonymity, parallelism, and group memory [13, 29]. We know little about how a GSS can be used for counseling. However, a GSS may be less “rich” than verbal communication [29] and rich communication is important to counseling groups [21, 38]. The goal of this study is to better understand the role of a GSS in counseling groups engaged in the discussion of difficult and deeply personal issues.

This paper has four sections. Section 1 reviews relevant previous research. Section 2 discusses the methodology employed. Section 3 presents the analysis and discusses the findings. The last section concludes the paper with a discussion of the limitations of the study and a discussion of implications for researchers and for organizations.

Previous Research

Counseling Groups

Therapeutic groups may take many forms including counseling groups, self-help groups, personal-growth groups and awareness groups [8]. All of these groups focus on increasing individual self-awareness and awareness of others, helping participants to better understand the changes they want to make in their lives, and providing participants with new skills and resources to effect these desired changes. A successful counseling group challenges its members to engage in honest self-exploration and provides support for exploration and for personal growth [8, 38].

Researchers have noted a number of therapeutic behaviors associated with group therapy and group counseling [38, 5]. Among the most important behaviors are self-disclosure and feedback [27]. For a group member to engage in self-disclosure or feedback he or she must assume a degree of personal risk. Whether this risk is great or small is often a function of the level of trust a member feels for the other group members and a function of how open and supportive the group communication process has been.

Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is arguably one of the most important therapeutic behaviors. Simply defined, self-disclosure is
“The act of revealing personal information to the group” [4]. Yalom [38] states that “self-disclosure -- both feared and valued by participants -- plays an integral part in all group therapies” (p. 360). The reason for this fear is the personal risk of publicly revealing a highly personal behavior or thought [38, 8]. No member is certain, especially early in the life of the group, of how group members will react to his or her self-disclosure. Self-disclosure can be adaptive or maladaptive (too little or too much) and is considered a prerequisite for the formation of meaningful interpersonal relationships [38]. As groups progress, the occurrence of appropriate and meaningful self-disclosure increases and is one way to identify a counseling group that has made successful progress [8].

Feedback

Feedback is another important part of the counseling group process [22, 38]. Through feedback, group members can provide support for self-disclosure. This acceptance and support is part of the therapeutic process [38]. Feedback can also be an avenue to offer advice or suggest “correct” behaviors or thoughts. Feedback of this type occurs when one group member (sender) provides information to another group member (target) that certain changes should be made in the target member’s behaviors or cognitions. There is a high degree of personal risk assumed by the sender due to the uncertainty associated with the target’s response. This risk-taking associated with the giving of direct feedback often inhibits members from providing feedback, especially in the early stages of a group’s existence [34, 38].

Men’s Groups

Self-disclosure and the giving and receiving of open, honest feedback are particularly challenging for men [30, 33]. Men are socialized to be in control at all times [24] and to be emotionally restrictive and reserved [32]. Therefore, disclosing deeply personal information to others may be considered a sign of weakness [1]. Likewise, providing feedback on sensitive issues may cause negative reactions by others [1].

Counseling men in groups, rather than as individuals, has been suggested as a less threatening means to provide positive therapeutic results for men [21]. Men’s groups provide members opportunities for increased interpersonal learning and help men to recognize, understand, and resolve issues of gender socialization and other deeply personal issues [18, 17]. When men feel safe, they are more likely to disclose information about themselves and provide honest feedback to others. The key challenge in men’s counseling groups is to create a safe environment that can promote open and honest self-disclosure and feedback [20]. One approach to this may lie in the use of a group support system.

GSS

A group support system (GSS) combines communications, computers, and decision-making technologies to support groups [13]. Researchers have shown that GSS affect the communication, development, and decision-making processes of groups [13, 7, 29]. Three characteristics of a GSS that may be especially important for counseling groups are anonymity, parallelism, and group memory [12].

Anonymity permits individuals to enter their thoughts with a reduced fear of attribution or retribution [15]. Simultaneous input allows everyone in the group to communicate at the same time. This reduces production blocking by permitting a greater number of ideas to be expressed by individual group members [37, 14]. Group memory is the repository for the information exchanged by the group. The group memory provided by a GSS enhances recall and reuse of information created or used by the group.

Our primary research objective was to understand how a Group Support System might affect the communication processes in a men’s counseling group. Based on previous research, we anticipated that a GSS, by facilitating anonymous and simultaneous communication, might help individuals engage in meaningful discussion and reduce the fear of self-disclosure [15]. However, the electronic discussion facilitated by a GSS is less rich than verbal discussion [10, 29]. We were unsure whether electronic discussion would seriously impair the ability of group members to discuss and understand the equivocal, confusing, and emotional issues, often present in counseling group discussions [9, 15]. Specifically this paper attempts to answer the following question:

How and why was the communication process for GSS-supported counseling groups different from the traditional (manual) counseling groups?

Methodology

Due to the lack of previous research in this area and the nature of the research questions, a qualitative approach seemed an appropriate methodological approach [31]. This study is a qualitative, longitudinal, single case study design [31, 39, 36]. This section describes the design of the study, the participants, the physical contexts
(including settings and technology), and the data collection and analysis procedures.

Participants

The men’s group was advertised on-campus and in the local community to generate interest and recruit members. The group leaders screened potential members prior to the first meeting. Individuals whose problems were inappropriate for treatment through group counseling or individuals whose interests did not match the plan for the group were referred to other licensed professionals or to another group. The screening of potential members is considered an appropriate part of the counseling process [8].

Following screening, a seven-member men’s counseling group was formed. This group consisted of five members and two counselors. All of the members had previously experienced either individual or group counseling or both. The first author served as the GSS facilitator, but was not considered part of the group and did not add input to the discussions except as discussed below. The counselors acted as co-leaders when necessary but stressed to the group that they were to be considered participants as well.

The men who participated in this study, including the co-leaders, came to the counseling group as a way to surface, discuss, and possibly resolve real-world issues and problems. Examples of the issues raised included societal expectations regarding the male gender role, emotional intimacy with others, relationships with parents, especially fathers, and a request for feedback from the group on how to work through the pain of a recent divorce. The age of the participants ranged from 25 to 52 years of age. The occupations of the participants included traditionally male occupations (e.g., farmer, scientist) and non-traditional occupations (e.g., nurse). Three of the members, including the two co-leaders, were graduate students.

Procedures

The men’s group met ten times: once a week for two hours over a ten-week period. The group followed a semi-structured group counseling model [18]. The counseling consisted primarily of unstructured sessions which focused on participant generated issues and interpersonal processes but included some structured, psychoeducational aspects as well (e.g., the counselors provided the members with articles about positive male roles). Sessions were held weekly in one of two locations described below.

The “traditional” counseling meetings were held in a meeting room located in the University’s counseling center. The room had several large windows, a large bookcase filled with books, ample lighting, plants, a few stuffed animals, and relatively comfortable chairs arranged in a tight circle on a carpeted floor. One wall contained a one-way mirror, which allowed counseling supervisors to monitor the group from an adjoining observation room.

Traditional sessions were held during weeks one, three, five, seven, eight, and ten. These group meetings usually began with announcements and other administrative tasks. The session was then begun by a counselor who opened the floor to any group member who wanted to start the discussion. The initial discussion was structured as a round-robin where members took turns: (1) talking about how they were feeling at the moment (“here and now:” [38]), (2) discussing key events and emotions which they had experienced since the last group session, and (3) describing their needs and wants for the current session. Following these introductions, group members selected topics for further discussion. If a member had a special need for that session, the group usually addressed it first. The discussion, which followed the introductory period, was largely unstructured and followed the desires of the group.

The GSS [29] meetings were held in a computer-equipped research and teaching room. The room was windowless except for a small window in the door. The walls and the carpet were neutral in color and a large white-board dominated the front wall. The computers were contained in glass-topped workstations arranged in a large “U” with two interior rows inside the “U.” The large, high-backed chairs faced the front of the room but participants could swivel, roll or recline them to get a better view of the other group members. The facilitator’s workstation was located in the front of the room and the GSS was controlled from there. The first author acted as the technical facilitator for the GSS sessions. An overhead projector displayed the results of the group’s efforts on a public screen located in the front of the room.

The GSS was used for four sessions: weeks two, four, six, and nine. During the first GSS session, the GSS facilitator discussed the technology with the participants and answered questions. Participants then brainstormed using the Electronic Brainstorming tool on the issues that they thought were important. Also during this session a list of issues was generated for use in subsequent sessions. Some of the issues included Sexuality, Father relationships, Societal expectations, Intimate relationships, Relationships with other men, Spirituality, and Guilt. At the end of this and all other GSS sessions, a
printout of the comments was given to the members so they could give more thought to the comments generated.

The remaining GSS sessions used the GroupSystemsV Topic Commenter tool. This tool allowed all members to comment simultaneously under one or many different topics. The counselors used the issues generated from the first GSS meeting to establish twelve broad topic areas. For example, one topic card was social expectations which could cover social expectations of being a husband, a man, a father, etc. In another session, the Topic Commenter tool was used to create a “named space” where each group member could receive direct feedback from all other group members. Topic cards were frequently displayed on a public screen and the members decided by vocal assent which topic card they wanted to discuss verbally. The facilitators instructed the members to verbally comment on any idea, solution, or comment, which concerned them.

Measures

Qualitative data was collected from three primary sources. The first source was the counseling sessions themselves. All counseling sessions, both GSS and traditional, were audiotaped and transcribed. Comments entered by participants through the GSS were printed out after each GSS session.

A GSS topic card was the second source of data. During a GSS session, participants were asked one open-ended question: What are your thoughts about the GSS? Participants then commented electronically and the results were printed out at the end of the session.

The third source of data was qualitative interviews [31] conducted with all participants after the termination of the counseling group. The purpose of these interviews was to capture each group member’s perspective in his own words. This perspective is helpful to researchers trying to gain a better insight into the effects of the sessions on the participants. The questions were open-ended (e.g., What do you remember? … Is their any part of the technology that you remember as being more or less helpful?). An interview guide was used to provide a general framework for questioning [31].

Results and Analysis

The primary purpose of the analysis was to discover and explain the effects of a GSS as experienced by the members of a men’s counseling group. The analysis followed a phenomenological approach, which emphasized understanding the experiences of the participants [31, 26]. Through content analysis [31] of the session and interview transcripts and the GSS printouts, important concepts, categories and themes emerged from the data [16].

Analysis began as we attempted to understand what we were observing in the sessions. Transcripts and printouts were read and re-read to gain a sense of the sessions. Following this, reflections and remarks were made in the margins and categories and themes began to emerge. This rough coding of the data was refined through subsequent iterations. Emerging themes were then compared to the data. Modifications to the emerging themes were developed through mutual agreement between the authors. Comparison and modification continued for several iterations. The insight gained from the analysis of the counseling sessions provided the foundation for the interview guide and subsequent interviews [31]. Interviews were conducted with all participants and transcribed. The interviews were coded and the data from the sessions was reexamined to incorporate the participants’ perspectives captured by the interviews. The themes and patterns discerned from this analysis are the results presented below [16, 26].

For the most part, the counselors and all of the other members, considered the GSS a useful part of their counseling process. This section examines several key issues which emerged from the data including two characteristics of the GSS which appeared to have the greatest influence on the men’s group and the counseling process: anonymity and group memory.

Process

Members perceived significant differences in the sense of intimacy they felt and the thoughtfulness of their feedback and disclosure between the traditional sessions and the GSS sessions. This appears to be due to the nature of the structure provided to group members, the physical environments of the two rooms, and the primary means of communicating with other group members.

The traditional meetings were primarily unstructured, process-oriented sessions which focused on the immediate or “here and now” concerns of the group [38]. A typical session began with a brief, structured introductory period where each member discussed his current state of mind and related any issues he would like the group to address. After all group members completed their introductions, the group came to consensus on which issues to address. The subsequent unstructured discussion afforded members the opportunity share their thoughts and to learn by listening to “self” and by listening to feedback from others.
In contrast, the GSS sessions were more task-focused. The primary emphasis was on the generation of information. A typical session began with announcements by the counselors, a short set of instructions and then 30 - 45 minutes of typing. Virtually no verbal communication occurred. Once all the members finished typing, the counselors solicited verbal feedback about the topics discussed. An unstructured verbal discussion ensued based on member-selected topics and lasted until the end of the session.

The overall process was similar between the GSS and the traditional sessions: a structured discussion process led to an unstructured discussion that was focused on topics or issues selected by the group. However, participants perceived important differences between the two types of sessions in two major areas: intimacy and thoughtfulness.

**Intimacy**

Intimacy was an extremely important issue to the participants. Some of the participants came to the men’s group specifically to learn how to share intimate thoughts and feelings with other men. As one member said

… I was trying to have more experiences where I was directly open with other men and kind of breaking down barriers and identifying yourself.

The participants reported that their perception of intimacy was different depending on whether they were located “here” (traditional sessions) or “there” or “in the Lab” (GSS sessions) and how they were communicating with one another. Participants were quite specific about their perceptions of the GSS Lab

… the whole setup was very much like a classroom … it mitigated, a bit, the intimacy required for revealing painful things.

One member’s comment captures the essence of the group’s feelings about intimacy in the GSS lab:

“Since the technology basically de-identifies yourself, it … for me at times was counter to what I wanted in that group.”

Perhaps this desire for intimacy offers insight into why the group members signed many of their comments rather than submitted anonymous comments. It is interesting to note that this lessened sense of intimacy and periodic escape from anonymity did not prevent group members from disclosing their thoughts about intimate matters nor did it prevent them from providing meaningful feedback to each other (discussed below).

**Thoughtfulness**

Like intimacy, group members perceived a difference in their responses between the traditional sessions and the GSS sessions. One of the counselors commented that it was

… [as] if that computer room had a different feel, … I think people responded differently in there. It seemed a little more cognitive process than the group [counseling center] room. And then it did get to emotional levels in there at times, … but more so here, away from the GSS lab.

One reason for this difference may be the GSS required participants to “type their minds” rather than speak them. This slowing of the communication process may have caused some participants to think and act rather than feel and react. For example:

I consider it more when it’s written. That slows me down and makes me go more conceptual rather than feeling … I talk [write] about my feelings rather than feel them.

Some members would cease typing, pause while apparently reading what they had typed, and then submit their thoughts. As one member related

I can’t speak and actively reflect at the same time. [The GSS] gave me time to make sure I worded it the way I wanted to … Like I don’t want to use that word because that might unnecessarily tick someone off.

This extra moment of reflection may be one reason members’ comments appeared more thoughtful in the GSS sessions. Table 1, below, summarizes the differences between intimacy and thoughtfulness relative to the GSS and the traditional (manual) environments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intimacy</th>
<th>Thoughtfulness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GSS</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Participant-Perceived Relative Differences Between Intimacy And Thoughtfulness In The GSS And The Traditional Environments.

**Self-disclosure and Feedback**

Perhaps because of the nature of this men’s group, the intimacy and direct communication of the traditional sessions was complemented by the considerate and reflective communication found in the GSS sessions. However one member wrote, “I have found the GSS to be
very helpful to express some opinions that I may not have expressed until later in the group.” The following sections give examples of self-disclosure and feedback recorded by the GSS. The examples from the GSS sessions encompass a broad range of types of self-disclosure and feedback as were found in the traditional sessions.

**Self-Disclosure via GSS**

Although no specific GSS tool was originally designed to encourage self-disclosure, the use of issue-specific Topic Cards during the GSS sessions may have facilitated self-disclosure for some members. Self-disclosure occurred in several forms including a direct comment posted by a member, as part of feedback to another member, as a question, or in the form of a request to discuss an issue. Example of each of these forms of self-disclosure include:

… Last week i [sic] realized for the first time that i am angry at my dad for not being there when i was young. *(Direct comment)*

… I am beginning to figure out, with the help of you guys, that what is really happening with my feelings regarding my father may not so much be anger, but grief! *(Feedback to other members)*

… why can’t i tell my dad how i truly feel? *(Question)*

… do any of you men feel at ease in discussing personal topics outside of a relationship with other women but close that door to a loved one. why? *(Request to discuss an issue)*

**Feedback via GSS**

The feedback provided during the GSS sessions took various forms: a general comment made in direct response to a comment, a comment directed at a particular person, or a comment directed at the group. Examples of these include:

The last comment of the last [GSS] session was interesting [sic]. Why is there this perception that … I don’t think it’s an all or nothing proposition. *(Direct response to a comment)*

Hey [Name], It’s great having you in the group, really great! Signed Member X *(Comment directed at a particular person)*

I dare anybody in this room to be really honest with themselves, for even one minute, scare the s--- out of yourself *(Comment directed at the group)*

An important use of the GSS to provide feedback to one individual was demonstrated during the last session in the GSS lab. Due to time constraints during the previous traditional session, the group was unable to provide one member with individualized feedback. He felt it would be valuable and timely for him to complete it as a part of the upcoming GSS session. When the group met for GSS session #4, the group created two Topic Cards, titled, “Member A - What I thinks of meself [sic]” and “Member A - What the group thinks.” Member A’s thoughts of himself included:

Once upon a time I was a happy go lucky kid, … I really am searching … searching for hapyness [sic] …that condition of knowing and feeling in place and full.

Another member responded:

… Member A, I thinks [sic] that you focus too much on what others think of you. Take the risk of trusting your inner voice, follow that.

The GSS appears to have become accepted as a part of the group’s counseling process. This acceptance implies the group felt that the member would not receive less meaningful feedback from the GSS session than from a traditional counseling session. However, the group member had mixed feelings about the process:

I like up there with the machine in the sense that it gave you a record for future cognition but the general … the immediate was stronger here [non-GSS room] in the group … It was nice having them both but if I had to choose, I would go for the face on.

His thoughts seemed to echo the group’s thoughts on their perceptions of the level of intimacy and thoughtfulness present in the GSS sessions (discussed above).

The most significant use of GSS to generate direct interpersonal feedback for the entire group involved the Topic Commenter tool. During the third GSS session, each group member had a Topic Card with his name at the top. The members were instructed that this was an opportunity for them to say whatever they wanted to say to other group members. They were also told that they were free to sign their comments or to remain anonymous.

This “all-give-and-all-receive-at-once” feedback method was not possible without the GSS. The results of this session provided a wealth of feedback to individual members and to the group itself. The group generated about eight pages of feedback. One member thought that the feedback he received on his card prompted him to deal with his own issue:

…that’s when the technology helped because some people were writing [on his card] you’re very closed
off...how come you seem like you have a shield of armor...do you ever let it down? ... So in the sense of
did the technology help me deal with my ... deal with the issue directly, no. But it prompted me to deal with
the issue.

Self-disclosure and Feedback - A Synthesis

During most sessions, traditional and GSS, self-disclosure of a personal perspective, issue or problem preceded feedback from other group members. Although this sequence of events was typical for this particular men’s group, a final example supports more of the “chicken v. egg” cycle of self-disclosure and feedback found in many on-going groups.

During the feedback-focused GSS session described above (the third GSS Session), one of the counselors decided to take a risk and try to move a member to confront an issue which the counselor felt the member was avoiding. The room was quiet except for the sound of typing. The members were using the GSS to provide feedback to each other. One of the counselors anonymously typed in the following comment on the member’s “feedback card:"

“Sometimes I worry that you have bought into the cultural expectation of what a “man” “should” be. Get married young [sic], house, dog, kids, etc. Is this what you really want or is society dictating to you and you are buying. When you’re 40, will you look back and say, this isn’t my beautiful wife, this is not by [sic] beautiful car, how did I get here.” [sic]

Upon reading this comment, the member became visibly upset, quietly crying. The counselors intervened, called for everyone to stop typing, and focused the group’s attention on helping the member. The member began to relate how he was unsure of his life’s current direction:

I’m scared s---less ... not knowing or sort of knowing that there might be someone else out there better. You know it’s getting there, and yelling, the house, the kids, the dog, there something called ... (pause)...but I don’t know if I really want it.

The conversation continued as group members gave feedback and asked questions. For example:

It’s simple. Just don’t do it. If you're not sure don’t go, you know. Maybe by not going you’ll find out something else.”... “Why do you think you are marrying her?”... “Are you in love with her”

This led to further self-disclosure by Member Z:

Yeah, I just started questioning things. Can I really be faithful. Can I be trustworthy, am I going to be
this, you know? ... She’s, we are great together. She’s my best friend...

The self-disclosure-feedback cycle continued and during this period, many suggestions were made. The member stated that he wished he could take all of the ideas and comments home but he would never remember them. At that point the GSS facilitator suggested a separate Topic Card titled “Things that Member Z might consider/talk about.” The members began typing in their thoughts and ideas. Member Z silently read the comments and did not type in any responses. In a few minutes, the group generated over two pages of thoughts and suggestions. Comments included suggestions and questions:

Stick to your guns, stick to your guns, stick to your guns. I don’t really care what you say, but once you decide what it [sic] is you, and I do mean you, think is important stay with it until you feel you have made your point. Don’t let her dismiss it! - Signed Member P.

Please ask her what she fears most...loosing [sic] you? -- Unsigned

Member Z thanked the group for all the help and suggestions. He was given a printout of the collective wisdom of the group and took these thoughts home with him. The group moved on to a different issue and then adjourned for the evening.

In summary, the two types of communication, GSS and verbal, combined to create an overall environment that appears to have facilitated self-disclosure and the give and take of interpersonal feedback. The following section discusses two important GSS characteristics, anonymity and group memory, and discusses how these characteristics interacted with the counseling process.

Important GSS Characteristics

In this study, the GSS was used as an integrated package of features so it is somewhat difficult to identify the separate effects of the individual components. Nonetheless, in this section we attempt to better understand two important components of the GSS and their impact on the group and on the counseling process.

Recent GSS research reports that three important characteristics are present in most GSS: anonymity, simultaneity of input, and group memory [12]. Additional related research attributes positive effects to the public display of results [15]. While all four of these characteristics were evident to some extent in this study, the two most important characteristics were anonymity and group memory.
Anonymity

Anonymity seemed to both help and hinder the group. In the example above, an anonymous comment triggered a significant self-disclosure. Although confrontation occurs frequently in counseling groups [38, 8], the counselor who made the triggering statement considered the anonymity provided by the GSS critical to his ability to challenge other group members. In fact, the counselor emphasized that he would not have similarly challenged the member in a traditional session.

The participant who was the recipient of the counselor’s anonymous comment concurred with the counselor’s opinion that the GSS facilitated self-disclosure and feedback:

Sure, well that’s a perfect example [the incident above] of how it [the GSS] was able to open up and bring out comments that … I know I wouldn’t say just for fear of discomfort.

Another member commented:

… The technology allowed for the expression of “vulnerable” material in a confidential manner.

On the other hand, one member’s written comment summarized a somewhat common feeling in the group:

Since this group is [was] already good at talking to each other and letting themselves be identified I feel that the technology got in the way at times by keeping us anonymous.

This comment highlights the members’ belief that their group was a therapeutically mature group [8] and that the members themselves were open to the giving and receiving of honest, direct feedback. However, three sessions later, the members exhibited a retreat into anonymity. During the final GSS session, one member received feedback from all (described above in the Feedback section) yet no one signed any of the comments. It is unlikely that this was an accident of omission. This movement away from their therapeutically mature practice of promoting open feedback [8] by electronically signing their names to comments, stands in contrast to their generally-practiced judicious use of anonymity. This behavior hints that even relatively mature groups may avoid direct conflict through a therapeutically dysfunctional use of anonymity.

Group Memory

Unlike the traditional sessions, the GSS sessions provided each member with a printout of all the comments entered into the GSS. This affected the counseling process in two ways. First, the group memory provided by the GSS strengthened the members’ sense of continuity regarding the counseling process. The printouts served as a bridge between the end of one session and the beginning of the next. This idea of using the GSS printouts to provide continuity between counseling sessions prompted one member to begin a traditional session by referring to the previous week’s GSS printout; he asked the other group members to identify and explain some of their comments.

The second way the GSS affected the counseling group occurred when members were not together in a session. The GSS gave the members a means to take the group home with them and reflect on what was written during the previous group session. The printouts also prompted some members to anticipate the next session and provided a means for them to remain actively engaged in the counseling process without being physically present in the group. Most group members thought that the printout was an exceptionally important benefit.

One member who “read them [the GSS printouts] over and over again” also used them in a very interesting way: to engage his partner in discussion about his issues. He took the printouts home and invited his partner to read the comments. He said:

… And it was really kind of a pop quiz to her. It was a selfish thing to me… I said, “can you pick me out?”

and that sort of thing.

While in a traditional session, this member commented on the age difference between his partner and himself (13 years). He sometimes felt that she and he were speaking and listening in different languages. By using the GSS printouts, he was beginning a dialog with his partner while simultaneously continuing a dialog he began with members of the group. In a sense, he was bringing his partner into the group and applying the potential therapeutic benefits of the men’s group to his own relationship.

Discussion

Overall, the GSS appeared to have helped group members disclose personal information and provide feedback to others. Two GSS characteristics, anonymity and group memory, were primarily responsible for the effects experienced by the participants. Anonymity was both help and hindrance to the group. Anonymity helped create a safe place where members could communicate openly without fear of attribution or retribution. This open communication is a hallmark of the successful counseling
group [38]. However, anonymity also reduced the feelings of intimacy for some members because it prevented members from relating to the author of a comment rather than the comment itself.

Group memory, in the form of the GSS printouts, was a positive addition to the counseling group process and gave members new options within the existing counseling framework. Group members were able to take the group home with them and were able to use the printouts to maintain a sense of continuity between sessions. In general, these printouts provided a reference for additional reflection and extended the boundaries of the group.

This study is a first step toward greater understanding of how an advanced information technology can support groups of individuals engaged in understanding and resolving difficult and deeply personal issues. In this section we draw implications for practice and future research.

Implications for practitioners

The first and arguably most important implication of this study is, relative to their prior personal experiences with counseling, the counselors and the participants felt that the use of the GSS enhanced the overall counseling process. Use of the GSS appeared to facilitate two important therapeutic behaviors: self-disclosure and feedback. We recommend that counselors and others who attempt to facilitate the discussion of sensitive and emotional issues consider using a GSS.

The integration of a GSS and traditional verbal techniques is especially important. The GSS should not be used to the exclusion of face to face verbal interaction due to its apparent negative effects on intimacy. The GSS appears well-suited to creating a shared space for raising issues safely and to supporting the generation and discussion of relevant topics. Verbal discussion seems most appropriate for working through issues, discussing topics in depth, and creating a sense of intimacy.

Although we studied a men’s counseling group, business practitioners may want to consider an integrated counseling methods-GSS approach. Situations where individuals are reluctant to discuss or provide feedback on important issues (e.g., following a downsizing, survivors are reluctant to talk - c.f. [6, 28]) may be particularly amenable to such an intervention.

Implications for researchers

This study examined the experiences of one men’s group over ten counseling sessions. While this enabled us to understand the rich interaction that occurred, the study suffers from the traditional weaknesses of case study research. This results from this study, however rich, should not be broadly generalized. Interpretation of qualitative data opens the window to possible subjective biases on the part of the researchers. Realism was maximized at the expense of generalizability and precision [25]. Despite these limitations, the results of this study suggest that this may be a rich area for future research.

Another limitation was due to the single-gender nature of the group. Men are socialized to be less open about their feelings and this may account for some of the positive results attributed to anonymity. This research needs to be extended to other types of counseling groups (e.g., women’s groups, at-risk children, etc.) and to other, more heterogeneous groups, such as the survivors of a downsizing.

Another direction for future research lies in understanding the pace of development of counseling groups. Several participants commented that the use of the GSS, especially early in the group’s life, acted as a “foot on the accelerator” relative to the group’s development. Members felt that through the GSS they were able to disclose feelings and give feedback to others earlier than expected. Research is needed to better understand this phenomenon.

Much work remains to be done. We believe that the combination of GSS capabilities with effective group counseling methods can help individuals cope with life’s challenges. Perhaps the best summary of the project comes from one of the participants:

… I think the technology promotes a certain kind of differential response … There may be more freedom to just say what’s on your mind…and also be playful.

References


