

PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS OF PEER GROUP THERAPISTS IN ADOLESCENT RESIDENTIAL SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to identify personality characteristics of peer group therapists and to test the hypothesis that these characteristics differed significantly from the characteristics of workers who were involved in more traditional individual therapy. Cattell's Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire was used with a group of 48 workers in nine private agencies. Significant differences were found on 9 of 16 personality scales when compared with traditional therapists, and a scale for predicting temperament suitability for peer group therapists was developed.

Introduction

Certainly the treatment of adolescents alternately labeled "severely behaviorally handicapped," "conduct disorder," "delinquent," or "emotionally disturbed" has presented a significant problem to parents, schools, courts, and those agencies specifically assigned the task of remediation: it is one thing to provide treatment for those who request it; quite another for those who resist external control, demand but misuse privileges, and insist upon their own rights while infringing upon those of others.

In the late 1960s, peer group therapy emerged as extremely popular treatment modalities for these problematic youth. Among those was *Positive Peer Culture* (PPC), adapted by Harry Vorrath from the Guided Group Interaction (GGI) principles applied at Highfields, New Jersey. Vorrath's program received national attention at the State Training School for Boys in Red Wing, Minnesota, in 1968. As a result of its success in Minnesota, Michigan, and Missouri, an ever increasing number of residential programs, group homes, and public schools have adopted versions of PPC/GGI group treatment.

Research from Michigan (Shears, 1973-1983), Minnesota (Department of Corrections, 1974; Wasmund, 1977, 1980), Texas (Mitchell & Cockrum, 1980), Missouri (McKinney, et al., 1978; Brannon, 1981), and Virginia (Richardson, 1983) have attested to the effectiveness of this form of group treatment. (See Vorrath & Brendtro, 1985, for a more complete review of peer group effectiveness.) Nonetheless,

not all implementations have been successful. While a number of factors may have contributed to program implementation problems, one seems to have involved those selected to serve as peer group therapists.

Vorrath considered Group Leaders (group therapists) *the* "catalysts for change" – the sine qua non for effective peer group treatment. He insisted that the demands of group leading were different from those of individual casework or psychotherapy and that the personality characteristics of peer group therapists also differed. Since the approach was new, these statements could not be substantiated quantitatively. In fact, although fifteen years have passed, those statements remain untested. Nonetheless, many of Vorrath's contentions seem to have been tacitly accepted and implicitly applied by many peer group treatment administrators.

Program effectiveness is certainly influenced by the abilities and attitudes of those selected to conduct that program; selecting practitioners particularly suited to their roles might improve treatment effectiveness, minimize the incidence of abusive or neglectful treatment practices within the program, and reduce the significant expense and disruption associated with staff attrition. Placing employees in positions for which they are temperamentally suited would probably improve effectiveness and morale. The ability to define the attributes of those now serving as peer group therapists – to know better whom one supervises – and to establish a quantifiable method of predicting the temperamental suitability of applicants would also seem valuable to administrators.

The purpose of this study, then, was to preliminarily: a) identify the personality characteristics of residential peer group therapists; b) test the hypotheses that those characteristics differed significantly from those of the general population and from those others traditionally involved in individual therapy; and c) develop a scale which might predict temperamental suitability for peer group therapists.

Method

The author selected Cattell's *Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire* (16PF) because substantial industrial, counseling, and clinical research already existed; because its origin was multivariate; because it measured primary personality dimensions (e.g., "dominance," "boldness," "emotional stability," "warmth," "suspiciousness"); and because the 16PF provided actuarial scales to detect motivational distortion and to adjust factors if "Fake Bad" or "Fake Good" scores deviated excessively from the norm.

Nine private residential peer group agency administrators asked

their group therapists to complete Form A of the 16PF anonymously and voluntarily. None refused; 48 provided protocols, ranging from 2 to 14 from each agency. Of the 48 who responded, 69% were males and 31% females; 87% were white, 13% Black; the average age was 30.

Results

There was remarkably little variance among respondents' factor scores; in fact, the standard deviations of the subject group were smaller than those of the normative sample for 10 of the 16 primary scores. The group scored significantly differently from the general population ($p < .01$) on primary factors B (Intelligence), E (Dominance), F (Surgency), H (Boldness), L (Suspiciousness), N (Candor), and Q4 (Tension). Significant differences among the Second Order scales included: "Extraversion," "Independence," "Tough Poise," "Naturalness," "Prodigal Sensitive Subjectivity," and "Creativity."

Multivariate profile similarity coefficients (Cattell, 1970, pp. 311-313) comparing the overall profile pattern of group therapists with those of social workers, psychologists, school counselors, employment counselors, and policemen were 0.11, -0.02, 0.12, 0.01, and 0.05, respectively. No significant relationship was found between the peer group therapists' profile pattern and any of these groups' profiles.

When compared with the profile of male social workers, residential group therapists scored significantly differently ($p < .01$) on 9 of the 16 primary personality factors: they were more aloof or detached (A-), more assertive (E+), more enthusiastic (F+), tougher-minded (I-), harder to fool (L+), more candid and forthright (N-), more self-sufficient and independent (Q2+), less controlled, socially precise, or conventional (Q3-), and more tense (Q4+) (Cattell et al., 1970, pp. 81-109).

Cattell developed a linear adjustment specification equation which may be characterized as a "multiple point-biserial regression equation, or two-group discriminant function ... differentiating the [group studied] from 'everyone else' in the general population" (ibid., 1970, p. 149). In effect, the equation produces a subscore "renormed" with respect to the intercorrelations of the test's subscales and the scores of the group under study. The resulting subscore represents the degree of membership or of temperamental suitability for the subgroup identified. The adjustment specification equation established from the scores of the residential group therapists in this study was: $-4.43 - 0.09*A + 0.40*B + 0.07*C + 0.53*E + 0.31*F - 0.02*G + 0.24*H + 0.15*I + 0.18*L + 0.18*M - 0.29*N - 0.04*O + 0.04*Q1 + 0.07*Q2 - 0.15*Q3 + 0.20*Q4$ (Mean = 9.43).

Another specification equation which excluded 10 significantly distorted profiles is described in the appendix; however, its correlation with the equation above was 0.97.

Discussion

One purpose of this pilot study was to test the "folk concept" that therapists in residential, adolescent peer group treatment facilities possessed unique personality characteristics. The 48 who participated constituted a reasonable sample of those occupying that position in the private sector; their scores did differ significantly ($p < .01$) from the mean for 7 of the 16 primary scales and 3 of the 4 best established secondary factors.

When compared with the general population, residential group therapists could be described as very bright and insightful, imaginative, creative, enthusiastic, candid and forthright, independent, assertive, altruistic, extroverted, alert, and enthusiastically prepared to respond objectively to problems. People with this profile enjoy managing others and meeting personal challenges. They are effective with groups because they feel free to participate and to identify and discuss group problems openly and candidly. Furthermore, they possess the emotional stamina to face the wear and tear associated with dealing with people and grueling emotional situations (Behrens, IPAT, 1983).

They are energetic, unrestrained, and sometimes impulsive individuals who are tough minded, reject illusion, and prefer their own decisions. Because they tend to be unpretentious, forthright, and direct, they are generally well liked and trusted by others – particularly children. The profile shows a strong need for control and may suggest attention getting and a desire to be at the center of things. People with this profile pattern are likely to have good social presence but may be perceived as exhibitionistic: their motives may occasionally be suspected by others, and they risk appearing as "laws unto themselves" (Ibid).

Occupationally, these individuals are likely to find satisfaction with careers which allow them to direct the efforts of others but which tolerate some undependability and inconsistent habits. They could do well in settings which provide flexibility, reward interpersonal and persuasive skills, and provide an opportunity for creative expression (Krug, 1981, p. 167). When dealing with recalcitrant adolescents who have been confined against their will and have failed in less restrictive, more traditional "helping" environments, the tenaciousness, resourcefulness, creativity, and assertive candor of residential group therapists

may hold them in good stead. In fact, these traits may indeed be necessary for "survival" in treatment facilities for these exceptional children.

No significant relationships were found when the peer group therapists' profile was compared with other social service occupational group profiles. This would surely seem to confirm the declaration that those serving as group therapists do have unique personality trait configurations. When compared specifically with social workers, residential group therapists differed on 9 of the 16 primary personality scales: they were significantly less accommodating or solicitous, less socially precise or controlled, more assertive and stubborn, more self-sufficient and independent, more enthusiastic and impulsive, harder to fool, and more internally driven.

Employing the specification equation provided for social workers, group therapists scored within the low average range. When applied to other specification equations, peer group therapists' median scores predicted above average aptitude for therapy, teaching, and counseling. Since psychology and social work are diverse professions with clients ranging from neonatal through geriatric, it is quite probable that individuals from either of these groups would possess the attributes ascribed to peer group therapists; however, considered as discrete professional samples, the "typical" psychologist or social worker possessed personality characteristics different from the 48 peer group therapists sampled.

An adjustment specification equation was derived to differentiate group therapists from the general population. However, no attempt was made to select only "exceptional" or "above average" group therapists. As with the rest of the study, the specification equation simply defined the population "as it exists." Consequently, neither the group's profile nor the resulting specification equation was based upon an ideal; each simply described the group and, in the case of the specification equation, predicted membership and potential effectiveness within that group.

The linear specification equation is a weighted composite of the 16 primary scales, which predicts the "degree of belongingness" to the group studied. Since it is a composite score, its reliability for some other groups is reported in the 0.90's, considerably higher than the reliability of any single 16PF factor score (Krug, 1981). To employ it, one multiplies each of the individual's sten scores by the corresponding coefficient (*beta* weight) specified for each factor. The sum of these 16 weighted scores and the constant would form another sten score with a mean of 5.5 and standard deviation of 2.

The higher the specification equation score, the greater the degree of temperamental suitability for peer group therapy. Since the sample

from which this equation was formulated was composed without respect to judged ability, the mean specification equation score would describe the average group leader. Since any such sample probably contains members whose performance is below average, the mean residential peer group therapist specification equation score (9.43) should probably be considered the minimum acceptable score (Cattel, et al, 1970, p. 153).

Summary

The purpose of this pilot study was to investigate the personality characteristics of those who had primary treatment responsibility for "conduct disordered" or "severely behaviorally handicapped" adolescents in private residential group therapy settings. The sample of 48 represented those currently fulfilling that role in nine agencies. Results strongly supported the hypothesis that group therapists possessed unique personality characteristics: the sample differed significantly ($p < .01$) from the norm on 7 of the 16 primary factors and 9 of 16 when compared with social workers.

No significant nor substantial relationship was found between the sample profile and those established for similar, but typically nonresidential, occupational groups; but results did suggest a penchant for treatment, counseling, and teaching effectiveness. It may not be surprising that people who have chosen to work with exceptional children in exceptional environments would possess exceptional characteristics.

There was remarkable homogeneity in the private residential peer group therapists' scores, suggesting that agencies do employ some implicit, consistent criteria and that they value certain personality characteristics. A linear adjustment specification equation was formulated to predict an applicant's "degree of belongingness" and potential effectiveness empirically. That equation might be used to estimate applicants' temperamental suitability for the position of peer group therapist.

The primary hypotheses of this paper seemed overwhelmingly supported: the 48 private residential peer group therapists did possess personality traits which distinguished them significantly from both the general population and others working in the social service field at large. Although geographically scattered, the sample for this pilot study was reasonably small; so additional research involving the public sector would help validate the generalizability of the data presented.

Furthermore, it is quite possible that the *setting* rather than the *treatment modality* (peer group treatment) determined the personality attributes of successful therapists; so future research might well inves-

tigate characteristics of residential therapists in general. In fact, since selection and retention of those employed as primary residential "child care" workers has been an historic problem, another study identifying personality characteristics of that much larger group may offer significantly valuable information to an even broader range of residential facilities.

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Appendices

I. Peer Group Therapists' Scores vs. General Population

Var.	Mean*	Std.Dev.	<u>t</u>	Sig.
Fake Bad	5.04	2.32	-1.8764	.2
Fake Good	5.60	1.91	0.2887	NS
A	5.10	1.84	-1.3712	.2
B	7.29	1.70	6.2065	.001
C	5.83	1.78	1.1547	NS
E	7.88	1.75	8.2272	.001
F	6.90	2.21	4.8353	.001
G	5.42	2.03	-0.2887	NS
H	6.65	2.04	3.9693	.001
I	6.21	1.97	2.4537	.02
L	6.33	1.74	2.8868	.01
M	6.25	1.54	2.5981	.02
N	4.17	2.19	-4.6188	.001
O	5.33	1.93	-0.5774	NS
Q1	5.67	2.10	0.5774	NS
Q2	5.83	1.89	1.1547	.2
Q3	4.81	1.88	-2.3816	.05
Q4	6.44	2.03	3.2476	.01
Extraversion	6.86	1.65	4.7220	.001
Anxiety	5.68	1.67	0.6127	NS
Tough Poise	6.90	1.81	4.8461	.001
Independence	7.13	1.98	5.7338	.001
Discreetness	3.96	2.18	-5.4314	.001
Subjectivity	6.87	1.73	4.9832	.001
Superego Stg	5.06	1.74	-1.4959	.2
Neurosis	4.89	1.97	-2.0705	.05
Leadership	6.00	1.56	1.6786	.1
Creativity	7.01	1.91	5.3766	.001

* Means are expressed in "stens."

II. Linear Adjustment Specification Equation Excluding MD ≥ 8 -3.96
 $-0.09*A + 0.44*B + 0.48*E + 0.25*F + 0.02*G + 0.21*H + 0.18*I$
 $+ 0.16*L + 0.16*M - 0.25*N + 0.02*O + 0.07*Q2 - 0.08*Q3$
 $+ 0.25*Q4$

Note: This specification equation was developed from 38 respondents whose "Fake Good" or "Fake Bad" scores did not exceed a raw score of 8. However, its correlation with the equation developed from all 48 respondents was 0.97, so the latter is recommended.