The Impact of a Psychoeducational Group Intervention on Marital Discord, Adult Interaction Style, Projective Identification and Perceptive Identification

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Statement of the Research Problem

Marital discord is one of society's most common and urgent problems. The destructive outcomes of marital discord have been documented with the 50 percent (Cherlin, 1992) to 67 percent (Martin & Bumpass, 1989) divorce rate for first married couples. Evidence also exists that many couples, who do stay married, continue their marriages in distressed and abusive relationships (Smith, Vivian & O'Leary, 1990), so that marital discord is experienced by approximately 20 percent of all married couples at any given time (Beach, Arias, & O'Leary, 1987). Storaasli & Markman (1990) studying relationship problems in the early stages of marriage found that the progression through stages was marked by increasing problems with communication, intimacy and conflict management. Longitudinal research points to contempt/disgust and defensiveness in relational interactions as the two most corrosive negative marital behaviors leading to discord and dissolution (Gottman, 1994). These reactions or behavioral responses under stress are examples of destructive adult interaction styles in marital interactions.

From 1988 to 1993, thirteen marital discord studies evaluating 1392 participant couples and 428 control couples, and an article (Tolman & Molidor, 1994) reviewing 54 social work studies of group work over 10 years revealed that: (1) conjoint therapy using cognitive behavioral treatments for 10-18 hours has been the predominant mode of marital therapy; (2) group and/or psychoeducational treatments have been primarily used with premarital couples; and (3) every type of marital intervention was an improvement over no treatment with little difference shown between outcomes of the various treatments. For marital issues, thirty-eight studies from the meta-analysis were based on combinations of behavioral, cognitive and behavioral-exchange theories while only three studies included emotionally focused or affective treatments. Cognitive-behavioral time-limited, structured groups were preferred for all target populations, while psychoeducation was used for issues of divorce, pre-marriage, child abuse, substance abuse and parenting.

This study attempted to identify destructive processes contributing to marital discord and to assess the ameliorative impact of a psychoeducational couples group model. The study postulated that internal and external patterns of destructive relational reactions
developed in childhood are processes of adult interaction styles associated with marital discord. Each adult interaction style is comprised of three learned or internalized coping responses: the protective behaviors, the underlying cognitive framework, and the aversive emotions related to childhood experiences. Together they form a largely unconscious, integrated interaction style that emerges under stress in relationships.

Two processes in adult interaction styles were of particular interest to this study: perceptive identification and projective identification. Perceptive identification, a researcher-authored term, contains both external and internal properties explained by systems and psychodynamic theory and is a secondary defense mechanism associated with neuroses. In perceptive identification the person unconsciously responds to the partner as if the partner were an internal representation of the parent or caregiver in an earlier negative interaction. Projective identification is primarily an internal process explained by psychodynamic theory and denotes a primary defense mechanism associated with personality disorders. In projective identification the person attempts to induce in his or her partner the self-representation from the original negative interaction.

Research Questions

The study proposed that both the internal processes of intra-psychic personality development and the external processes of the social context of that development are important dimensions in the understanding of human behavior. Further, that destructive adult interaction styles, created during negative childhood interactions, could be ameliorated in a psychoeducational couples group utilizing cognitive, behavioral and affective techniques. Support developed in a group format may aid clients in the development, awareness and integration of behavioral changes (Toseland & Siporin, 1986). The psychoeducational group provides a social context for reconstruction of meaning and emotion with the practice of ameliorative or constructive adult interaction styles.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to evaluate and understand the possible decreases in destructive adult interaction processes leading to decreases in marital discord over treatment. While cognitive, behavioral, and affective techniques have been used in six to eight week groups, it became interesting to evaluate their benefits along with the social support aspects of a four month group format.

Quantitative Hypothesis: Controlling for age, gender, times married, education, marital status and attendance in therapy, mediated by increased social support inside and out of the group interaction format, individuals who participate in a psychoeducational group model will achieve greater decreases in destructive adult interaction styles and greater decreases in marital discord than will individuals who do not participate.
Qualitative Questions: Can destructive adult interaction styles, particularly those using projective and perceptive identification processes, be observed in a dyadic skill training session where couples use a conflict resolution technique? Does observation reveal the destructiveness of projective and perceptive identification as processes of adult interaction styles? Do these destructive processes decrease over treatment?

Methodology

Utilizing a multi-method approach of outcome embedded with process, this study included: (1) 75 participants with 45 controls and large scale quantitative methodology for the outcome study; and (2) coded video-tapes of three couples from the experimental group and qualitative methodology for the in-depth exploration of projective and perceptive identification associated with conflict resolution. Experimental subjects were drawn from a standard psychoeducational group model taught to ten groups in eight cities: Washington, D.C. (3 groups), Vancouver, Canada; Asheville, NC; Virginia Beach, VA; Lanham, MD; Maui, Hawaii; Cary, NC; and Boulder, CO. Control subjects were couples seeking treatment for marital discord issues with no psychoeducational class available in their area.

The quantitative instrumentation included the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) for marital discord, the Ways of Coping Scale (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) for adult interaction styles and the Social Support Scale (Telleen, 1985) to measure social support. All quantitative measures contained adequate reliability and validity. Projective and perceptive identification were operationalized with coded observations of three couples using a conflict resolution tool in video taped sessions from the beginning and from the end of the course. The researcher-authored coding measure, the Couple Interaction and Identification Coding Instrument, was adapted from the Revised Couples Interaction Scoring System, RCISS (Gottman, Notarius, & Markman, 1977), the Projective Identification-Collusion Index (Sheagren, 1987), and author-generated questions. The task analysis format developed by Greenberg (1992) was used to design the qualitative evaluation.

The psychoeducational program used in this project was PAIRS (Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills), (Gordon, 1992) which includes a 285 page manual and a 395 page curriculum guide. PAIRS classes are taught in 35 states and 16 countries with classes averaging 15 participants. Leadership training and certification includes 40 hours over two weeks with a lecture/experiential format for licensed therapists in social work, counseling, psychology, or psychiatry. Program reliability was monitored with a standard self-report measure administered to all PAIRS participants upon termination of the course.

Univariate, bivariate and multivariate analyses were calculated to determine socio-demographic distribution, group differences at pretest, changes in variables over treatment
time, relationships between variables, predictors of change in the dependent and mediating variables and testing of study theory using path analysis. Analyses examined relationships between the independent, dependent and mediating variables using pre and posttest scores and change scores.

Results

The effectiveness of the group intervention to change adult interaction styles as well as marital discord was supported with t-tests of pre-posttest and change scores comparing controls and participants. Reported perception of social support also changed significantly over treatment for participants compared to controls. However, the hypothesized correlation of changes in marital discord related to changes in adult interaction styles was not supported.

The experimental and control groups were similar in age, averaging early forties; gender slightly more females than males; religion, pre-dominantly Catholic or Protestant; education, more than three quarters with a BA degree or more; and times married, more than half married once and more than one quarter married more than once. The two groups differed statistically significantly at pretest in pre-marital and post-marital status with more participants dating or living together and more non-participants separated. Non-participants were also significantly less likely to have attended therapy during or shortly before the intervention time.

Quantitative results used independent samples t-test comparisons of group change scores as well as paired samples t-tests of pre-posttest scores. Analyses showed that the intervention had a statistically significant positive impact on marital discord, adult interaction style and social support for experimentals but not for controls. Independent samples t-tests comparing participant and control change scores showed statistically significant differences in marital discord subscale changes for consensus (t=2.433, p=.017), affection (t=3.063, p=.003), and total score (t=1.935, p=.056). Paired samples t-tests of participants showed statistically significant positive changes for the subscale consensus (t=2.222, p=.030) and not for cohesion (t=1.890, p=.064). Thus, participants showed statistically significant subscale improvement in marital discord variables for participants and not for controls.

Changes in adult interaction styles escape-avoidance and distancing improved statistically significantly for the participants but not for the controls over treatment time. Independent samples t-tests comparing participant and control group adult interaction style change scores showed statistically significant Ways of Coping subscale differences for subscales distancing (t=2.680, p=.009) and escape-avoidance (t=2.164, p=.033) but not for the other subscales. The social support generated in the group intervention was shown to cause statistically significant changes in positive social support reported by the participants. At the same time the controls reported statistically significant increases in
need for social support over treatment time. Independent samples t-tests comparing participant and control group social support change scores showed statistically significant differences in Social Support Scale subscales need (t=-2.366, p=.020), and network (t=2.360, p=.020). In addition paired samples t-tests of participant pre-posttest scores showed statistically significant improvement in Social Support Scale subscales network (t=-2.331, p=.023) and satisfaction (t=-2.260, p=.027). The same test for non-participants showed statistically significant increases in the Social Support Scale subscale need (t=-2.132, p=.039).

The positive impact of the group aspect of the intervention on marital discord was supported with multivariate analyses. Correlation and multiple regression analyses of change scores for participants revealed that positive changes in marital discord were statistically significantly related to positive changes in social support. However, the notion was not supported that the intervention would activate positive changes in adult interaction styles leading to decreased marital discord. Correlation and multiple regression analyses showed that statistically significant relationships were not established between changes in adult interaction styles and changes in marital discord or social support. It is possible that an untested intervening variable exists between marital discord and adult interaction style, and/or the measure for adult interaction styles is inadequate for the task, or that some components of adult interaction styles are unmutable functions of temperament.

Qualitative observations supported the notion that there was improvement during treatment in adult interaction styles and that this improvement was related to the intervention for couples evidencing the less pathological defense mechanism, perceptive identification. However, for those evidencing the more pathological defense mechanism, projective identification, there was no improvement over the time of treatment.

The Couple Interaction and Identification Coding Instrument appeared to be attuned to revealing self and object representations as well as identifying couple responses to issues and problem solving. The completed coding sheets showed that emotions and cognitions surrounding problem issues could be well described within the coding format. The phase sheets appeared well able to identify couple responses to issues and problem solving. Projective and perceptive identification were revealed in the coding instrument when self-representations and object representations created emotional reactions in the person or the partner. Treatment possibilities became evident for comparing the three couples in their use of projective or perceptive identification as well as their response to the intervention.

The solution for projective and perceptive identifications appeared to be the individual’s ability to see the problem as well as the solution belonging to both members of the couple partnership. Couples #1 & 2 who demonstrated perceptive identification were able to develop or maintain goodwill, see the problems as belonging to both partners and
seek solutions which would take into account the needs of each partner. The members of
couple #3 who displayed projective identification in both sessions were unable to maintain
goodwill, see themselves as having any part of the problem and therefore could not agree
on a solution which would take into account the needs of both. Instead, they continued
their emotional disquietude concerning the issues raised, continued projecting their self-representations to get relief, and ended both sessions seeing each other as the enemy with
only a little insight as to their own processes.

The study included threats to reliability and validity through lack of random sampling
and multiple measures as well as limited generalizability due to sample demographics.
Contamination effects were possible with control group exposure to literature and leader
addition of non-program material. In the qualitative exploration, small sample size limited
validity and lack of good inter-rater reliability among coders limited reliability of the
observations.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The study results demonstrate that psychoeducation can be appropriate for the
amelioration of marital discord and that the social support generated in a group format is a
contributive agent. Taking into account the constraints of managed mental health care, an
effective short term group treatment for marital discord provides a much needed model of
practice. The study results suggest the importance of developing psychoeducational group
treatments for other interactional interpersonal problems such as stepfamily issues,
adolescent issues and family issues. Psychoeducation interventions could be economically
placed in mental health clinics or be court ordered for families or couples in need of
ameliorative treatments concerning interactional issues. The further establishment of
criteria for constructive and destructive adult interaction styles is indicated. It might be
found that some components in adult interaction styles are the result of temperament,
existent at birth and unchangeable. Knowledge about inherent adult interaction styles
might aid couples in acceptance of differences as well as assist in teaching moderation
techniques for basic temperament styles.

Understanding projective identification and perceptive identification as separate
processses requiring different treatments may help clinicians to create a more appropriate
model in couples therapy. If further research shows that projective identification is related
to personality disorders while perceptive identification is related to neurotic disorders, as
hypothesized by the researcher, practitioners will have a fuller understanding of treatment
possibilities and limitations.

The use of video-taping and the Couple Interaction and Identification Index may
assist clinicians in marital therapy. Participant couples have asked to view their video-
taped sessions in order to understand their adult interaction styles. Clinicians, therefore,
could use the video-tapings as training tools in therapy sessions.
References


