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International Journal of Psychology and Educational Studies

Gestalt Group Practice for Increasing Awareness of University Students

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:
04.09. 2019
Received in revised form
26.09.2019
Accepted
28.09.2019
Available online
30.09.2019

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to increase university students' awareness and support their personal development through "Gestalt Group Program" that is predicated on Gestalt Therapy. Twelve university students in the second, third and fourth grades of the faculty of education participated in the study. Group study consisted of eight sessions. Each session was determined as 120 minutes. In this study, one of the qualitative research methods, content analysis method was used. To collect data for the study, researcher created "Personal Information Form" and "Gestalt Group Program Evaluation Form" and used on participants. Obtained qualitative data was examined via content analysis method. Finally, "Gestalt Group Program" was found to have a positive impact on raising university students' awareness.

Keywords:
Group, Gestalt, Awareness

1. Introduction

Gestalt Therapy is one of the humanist and existential therapy approaches and was developed by Fritz Perls, Laura Perls and Paul Goodman. In this unique approach, the primary focus is awareness. Gestalt Therapy suggests change can take place with improving people's awareness. It sees human nature such a positive organism and it believes the creative potential of human beings. The main focus in Gestalt Therapy is to raise human beings' awareness and fragmentation to integrity. Gestalt Therapy aims not analyse humans, but it targets awareness, integrity and contact with environment. In sum, Gestalt Therapy is a great harmony of body, mind and soul. Gestalt Therapy is such an experimental approach that encourage the exploring and living, it is based on experience and it is a lively approach. It emphases the importance of contact with environment. Gestalt Therapy approach is phenomenological. Phenomenology examines how people perceive and make sense of events and situations. It focuses on the question of "What is the reality one sees?". Therefore, it asserts the idea that subjective reality is important. It pays attention to what people perceive and how they make sense of out of things (Houston, 2003; Latner, 1986; Voltan-Acar, 2015; Wheeler, 1991).

Awareness, one of the main aim of Gestalt approach, is a state of one's being in contact with his sense organs in a specific time with his own existence. Awareness is a form of experience, can be defined as the relationship between the present and the person's own being. It is the sense of what a person spontaneously does, what he feels, what he thinks, what he experiences. It gives all attention to the "moment" (Perls, 1973; Latner, 1986; Daş, 2009). In the Gestalt approach, the concept of contact, which is considered important for psychological health, is seen as the source of life for survival, growth, development and change. Contact is seen as an inevitable part of living environment, personal change and maturation. Contact can be defined as the person interacting with others and the environment without losing their individuality. It is to meet the needs of the person by contacting and limiting himself/herself (Wheeler, 1991; Perls, 1973; Latner, 1986; Polster ve Polster,

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http://dx.doi.org/10.17220/ijpes.2019.03.001

1974). Furthermore, Gestalt Therapy adopts the "here and now" approach. It is important to focus on the present moment by staying in the present and focusing on the relationships and interactions established by the existing people. It is suggested that focusing on here and now increases the effectiveness of therapy groups, and this method will act as an energy source in the group (Perls, 1973; Yalom, 2002).

Gestalt therapy aims to raise one's awareness in group counselling. The Gestalt approach works through awareness and thematic experiments. A personal development group is a group activity carried out to support the psychological development of individuals; type of group practice involving psychological counselling and psycho-education; a group aims to gain knowledge, development and change in related subjects, meanings and skills. On the other hand, Gestalt approach sees personal development groups as groups where people can raise their awareness, support their own personal development, change themselves in certain areas, find opportunities to get to know themselves better and establish more functional relationships with themselves and their environment (Daş, 2009; Yalom, 2002).

According to this information, it was considered meaningful to conduct an eight-session group study with university students in order to raise awareness based on the Gestalt therapy approach. In this study, it was aimed to increase the awareness of university students and to support their personal development.

2. Method

In this study, as a result of the program applied, it was investigated how the awareness levels and personal development of university students were affected. The independent variable of the research is "Gestalt Group Program". The dependent variable is "awareness" levels. The research was planned in accordance with the qualitative research method. For qualitative research, content analysis method was used.

In the study, in accordance with the phenomenological approach, the question of "how" was sought from the eyes of the participants about the group work they experienced. The phenomenological perspective, which is one of the foundations of Gestalt therapy, is the way a person perceives and understands himself and his environment in a unique way. It emphasizes the subjective meaning for a person rather than the general meaning of something (Maher, Robertson & Howie, 2011; Das, 2009; Akkoyun, 2001). Therefore, content analysis method, which is one of the qualitative research methods, was used to reveal the experiences of the students who participated in the group work and the subjective meanings they attributed to these experiences.

2.1 Participants

The research group of this study consists of university students who are enrolled in the faculty of education of a foundation university in Istanbul. Only second, third and fourth year students were accepted to the group practice. In the group study, since it is voluntary and motivation is required for the study, it was deemed appropriate for students to apply for participation in the group. For this purpose, an announcement was made to university students studying in the faculty of education for group practice. As a result of the announcement made for the group work, firstly a presentation form was sent to the students by e-mail and detailed information about the group work was given. A pool of students who applied to participate in the group work was created. Then, the students in this pool were grouped into three groups and an introductory meeting was held. In this meeting, students were informed about group work. Students were asked to fill out the "Personal Information Form". Individual pre-interviews were conducted with the students who wanted to join the group. As a result of the pre-interview, a list of the students who will join the group was formed. 12 participants were selected. The other 17 students who were not included in the group were invited to participate in the pilot study. A pilot group study was conducted with 11 students who accepted the invitation.

2.2. Instruments

In the study, a "Personal Information Form" and "Gestalt Group Program Evaluation Form" was prepared by the researcher and they were applied on group participants. The participants were asked to fill out the "Gestalt Group Program Evaluation Form" which consisted open-ended questions at the end of the group program. These group program evaluation forms were subjected to content analysis.

2.2.1. Personal Information Form

"Personal Information Form" was prepared by the researcher. It is a form designed to obtain some important information about the participants and to obtain the necessary information in order to include the participants to be included in the research groups. This form includes the information about participants' life and family information, whether they have received help before, whether they have a group experience and so on.

2.2.2. Gestalt Group Program Evaluation Form

The group participants were asked three open-ended questions prepared by the researcher about the eight-sessions group practice they participated in the "Gestalt Group Program" application. One week after the completion of the eight-sessions group program, the group participants came together on the same day and hour and completed this evaluation form in writing. The main purpose of this evaluation form is to learn from the participants' point of view how the group practice is and how it affects them. The open-ended questions in the "Gestalt Group Program Evaluation Form" are as follows;

1. "What did you gain awareness about from the eight sessions "Gestalt Group Program" in terms of awareness?"

2. "What kind of changes did you observe in yourself in the eight sessions "Gestalt Group Program?""

3. "What kind of experience was the eight sessions "Gestalt Group Program" for you? Please describe."

2.3. Gestalt Group Program

"Gestalt Group Program" is a life-based eight-sessions personal development group program that aims to raise awareness through experience, support personal growth, and develop contact patterns. The overall objective of the group program is to improve the level of awareness and contact of the participants and to support their personal development in this way. The group study included structured exercises, brief and instructional information, experiential learning opportunities and exchanges in each session. The duration of each session was 120 minutes. At the end of each session, participants were handed out a blank piece of paper and asked to write a letter entitled "letter to myself". The letters written by the participants about their experiences in each session were kept by the researcher during the program and distributed to the participants in the last session. Session titles of the group work are as follows; acquaintance and grounding, here and now, emotional awareness, contact boundary, contact, trust, awareness, assimilation and termination.

The objectives of the group program are; to make the participants aware of their needs and environment; improving the skills of participants to stay here and now; raising awareness by creating contact opportunities for participants; to develop participants' ability to recognize, discern and express emotions; to enable participants to raise awareness of the boundaries between themselves and their environment; to enable different (strict, permeable, semi-permeable) boundary forms to be experienced; to provide awareness about emotional, mental and physical dimensions.

2.4. Data Analysis

During the analysis of the data obtained from the "Gestalt Group Program Evaluation Form" by content analysis method, the data were coded, categorized and themes were created. The data obtained from the participants in writing was first subjected to coding process, then divided into categories and themes were reached from the categories. Gestalt therapy approach theory was used in the determination of categories and themes. Since the group program was developed within the scope of the research that is based on the gestalt therapy approach, coding has been performed based on the concepts of "awareness", "contact", "contact styles", "boundary" and "here and now".

Categories were formed by coding the data obtained from the responses of the group participants to the awareness they gained as a result of the group program. These categories are "emotional dimension", "mental dimension", "physical dimension", "relationship with myself" and these categories were identified as "awareness" theme; "boundaries" and "relationships with others" were established as categories and they

were identified as "contact" theme; the "focus on moment" category was created and identified as "here and now" theme.

As a result of the group program, categories of "physical dimension", "emotional dimension", "relationship with myself" were formed by coding the data obtained from the responses of the group participants to the changes they observed in them and these categories were defined as "awareness" theme; "boundaries", "relationship with others" were established as categories and they were identified as "contact" theme; the "focus on moment" was created as a category and it was designated as "here and now" theme.

As a result of the coding of the data obtained from the answers given by the group participants about how they defined the group program they experienced, three categories were defined as "emotion definitions", "thought definitions" and "awareness definitions". Emotion definitions category includes the definitions of direct emotions; thought definitions category includes the definitions of thoughts, awareness category includes the definitions of the participants' awareness of themselves and their environment.

3. Results

Depending on the general purpose of the study, as a result of the "Gestalt Group Program" which was applied to the group participants, it was evaluated through qualitative data whether the participants' written answers given in the "Gestalt Group Program Evaluation Form" which was prepared in relation to the expected goals to be achieved were consistent with the results expected from the group sessions. For this purpose, the following statements regarding the three open- ended questions asked to the participants in the group practice were examined;

1. The university students who participated in the group program defined their achieved awareness about the eight-sessions "Gestalt Group Program" in accordance with the aims of the group program and in a positive way.

2. The university students who participated in the group program defined the changes they observed in themselves in the eight-sessions "Gestalt Group Program" in accordance with the aims of the group program and in a positive way.

3. The university students who participated in the group program defined the group work they experienced in the eight-sessions "Gestalt Group Program" in accordance with the aims of the group program and in a positive way.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage table containing the answers of the group participants to the question of what did you gain awareness about as a result of "Gestalt Group Program?"

What did you gain awareness about as a result of "Gestalt Group Program"?				
			f	**%**
Awareness	**Physical Dimension**	"Sensory organs	2	4
		Body's reactions	2	4
	Emotional Dimension	Defining emotions	4	8
		Expressing emotions	2	4
		Emotion transitions	1	1
		Embracing all emotions	1	1
	Mental Dimension	Expressing thoughts	1	1

Continued Table 1. Frequency and percentage table containing the answers of the group participants to the question of what did you gain awareness about as a result of "Gestalt Group Program?"

		Regarding my own needs	4	8
		Emotion-mental-physical dimensions	3	6
	Relationship with Myself	Regarding aware of myself	3	6
		The relationship with myself	3	6
		The difference between defining and interpreting	1	2
		Total	**27**	**51**
		Boundary types	7	13
	Boundaries	Using over permeable boundary	3	6
Contact		Using over strict boundary	1	1
		How do I contact with others?	4	8
	Relationship with Others	How do I contact with environment	3	6
		Asking for help	1	1
		Total	**19**	**36**
		Staying here and now	5	9
Here and Now		Focusing on the "present"	2	4
		Total	**7**	**13**
		TOTAL	**53**	**100**

As can be seen in Table 1, themes were obtained from the participants as a result of the group program they participated in. 27 (%51) of the "awareness" theme, 19 (%36) of the "contact" theme and 7 (%13) of the "here and now" theme were obtained from the participants.

Table 2. Frequency and percentage table including the answers of the group participants to the question of "What kind of changes have you observed in yourself as a result of "Gestalt Group Program?"

What kind of changes have you observed in yourself as a result of "Gestalt Group Program?"				
			f	**%**
	Physical Dimension	I started to contact with my body.	1	2
		Awareness of my senses increased.	1	2
	Emotional Dimension	I express my emotions more clearly.	3	7
		My awareness of anger has increased.	3	7
		I started to focus on my emotions	2	5
Awareness		I started to separate my emotions and thoughts	1	2
	Relationship with Myself	I started to focus on myself.	4	9
		Awareness of my needs has increased.	2	5
		My anxiety level has decreased.	1	2
		I started to reconcile with myself.	1	2
		Total	**19**	**43**
		I started saying no.	4	9
	Boundaries	Awareness of my boundaries increased.	3	7
Contact		I started using a strict boundary.	2	5
	Relationship with Others	My contact with people has increased.	2	5
		Total	**11**	**26**
Here and Now		Staying here and now	7	16
		Improvement in attention and focusing	6	14
		Total	**13**	**30**
		TOTAL	**43**	**100**

As can be seen in Table 2, the data obtained from the group participants were 19 (%43) related to the "awareness" theme, 11 (%26) was related to the "contact" theme, and 13 (%30) was related to "contact" theme as a result of the group program they participated in.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage table including the answers of the group participants to the question of "How was the experience of the "Gestalt Group Program"?

"How was the experience of the "Gestalt Group Program? Please describe."

		f	%
Emotion Definitions	Joyful	3	7
	Relaxing	3	7
	I came desirously	3	7
	Satisfying	1	2
	Enjoyable	1	2
	Exciting	1	2
	Riveting	1	2
	Total	**13**	**29**
Thought Definitions	I'm glad that I participated.	3	7
	Instructive	3	7
	Useful	2	5
	Different	2	5
	I can't forget the experience.	2	5
	Filled	1	2
	Effective	1	2
	Good	1	2
	Perfect	1	2
	Total	**16**	**37**
Awareness Definitions	I have developed self-awareness	4	10
	I met new people	3	7
	My personal development was supported.	2	5
	I accepted life with its better or worse.	2	5
	I had a contact with myself.	1	2
	It reminded me to love myself	1	2
	I could express my emotions and thoughts	1	2
	I could share the same emotions	1	2
	Total	**15**	**35**
	TOTAL	**44**	**100**

As shown in Table 3, 13 (%29) of "emotions definitions", 16 (%37) of "thought definitions" and 15 (%35) of "awareness definitions" were obtained from the participants about "how" they defined the group work they experienced as a result of the group program that they participated in.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In this research, the effectiveness of the "Gestalt Group Program" prepared by the researcher to support the personal development of the students by developing awareness and contact styles was investigated. The general purpose of the research is to examine whether the "Gestalt Group Program" is effective in increasing awareness and personal development of university students.

In Turkey, several studies based on the gestalt therapy approach to individual counseling practice were made (Korkut, 1991; Özhan, 2001); several screening and relationship studies aimed at contact styles (Bozkurt, 2006; Gürsoy, 2009; Gürdil, 2014; Balkaya, 2006; Akça, Şahin ve Vazgeçer, 2011; Kuyumcu, 2005); and a group study was practiced for working adults (Gülol, 2005). To sum up, when the studies on Gestalt contact styles are examined, it was seen that the functioning (harmony, balance) of the relationship between the person and the environment and the relationships between the concepts of psychological health especially attachment styles, coping styles, anxiety levels, anger levels, self-perception and interpersonal schemas, psychological

symptoms, defense mechanisms, coping with stress styles, life satisfaction, trauma and burnout were examined. There is no research on direct awareness based on the gestalt therapy approach. When the studies conducted abroad are examined, it was seen that in these research focus was varying such as; the anxiety levels, self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-concept, self-reference, interpersonal skills, eating disorders, ego defense mechanisms, incest, borderline personality disorder, perceived family environment and police stress. There are various results in the literature that studies conducted to support personal development can make a significant difference in subjects such as awareness, contact, contact styles, psychological well-being and sense of self (McGrath, 1989; Coffey, 1986; Maher, Robertson & Howie, 2011; Myers, 1996; Leininger, 1992).

According to the results of the studies, the group programs based on the gestalt therapy approach provide positive changes in areas such as self-awareness, decreasing anxiety, self-concept, self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-reference, developing interpersonal skills. "Gestalt Group Program" was applied to the participants and when the results of this program were examined, it can be said that the group program based on gestalt approach positively changed the participants' personal awareness (emotional, mental and physical dimensions), their awareness about themselves and interpersonal relationships, their social skills, positive sense of self and contact styles. Therefore, in terms of its content and results, the level of awareness and development of contact patterns are similar and the results of the above-mentioned domestic and international studies are similar.

According to the Gestalt approach, awareness and contact concepts are seen as important in terms of growth, individualization, development, maturation, psychological well-being and change capacities (Daş, 2009; Wheeler, 1991; Polster & Polster, 1974). In this study, it can be said that the results obtained by the content analysis method as a result of group practice in terms of awareness and contact concepts that are wanted to be examined have changed in these areas which are seen as important and the objectives of the group program have been achieved to a great extent. The group program applied in this study was prepared in accordance with the theory and methodology of the gestalt therapy approach and developed in accordance with the theories and methods suggested that the fields (dimensions of existence, sensory organs usage, staying in here and now ability, focus on the present time) needed to raise awareness should be developed. Considering that, it can be concluded that gestalt therapy approach and group program formed by this approach are effective in increasing awareness. The data obtained as a result of the content analysis can be read clearly from the tables in the results section. Instead of numerical data, it is thought that it is meaningful for the participants to indicate the changes and awareness they observe in their own words and thus the direct reading of the results obtained.

As a result, it was found that "gestalt group program" had a positive effect on raising awareness levels of university students. The conclusions of this research can be summarized as follows; The "gestalt group program" is effective in increasing awareness among university students; supports the personal development of university students; affects the experience of university students joining the group "here and now"; increases the awareness of the participants about their emotional, mental, physical dimensions and their relationship with themselves; affects the participants' awareness of the boundaries they use when making "contact", affects their awareness of boundary types and their relationships with others.

Finally, the qualitative research method used in the research has gained meaning by providing direct information from the eyes of the participants. For this reason, in accordance with the phenomenological point of view which constitutes the basic methodology of gestalt therapy approach, qualitative research methods can be used more in group practices and similar group practices applied in this research. In addition, the group program formed in this study was planned and implemented as eight sessions. The effectiveness of group practice for more than eight sessions can be investigated to improve awareness levels and contact styles; awareness of increasing the number of sessions and its role in influencing contact styles can be investigated.

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