Stuffed Animal as a Source of Comfort in Group Psychotherapy

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to explore how the stuffed animal is used in a group psychotherapy and its perceived effectiveness or ineffectiveness of its utilization was also studied. Eighty three (83) psychology students participated in the group psychotherapy in three batches with 60 students who answered a post test on the effectiveness of the stuffed animal. Results suggest that majority of the psychology students utilized the stuffed animal as a source of comfort in the group psychotherapy. It was perceived to be effective by those who used and not used the stuffed animal. A minority of students perceived the stuffed animal as ineffective. This implies that the use of the stuffed animal in psychotherapy can be used as a source of comfort, displacement or tool for grounding skills. Implications for the use of stuffed animal in psychotherapy was also implied.

Keywords: psychotherapy, stuffed animal, defense mechanism, grounding skills

Introduction

Stuffed animals or stuffed toys are cute, cuddly and appealing not only to children but to adults as well. Oftentimes, a favorite stuffed toys or pillow are so special that children cannot sleep with it or part from it even if it gets unwashed. These stuffed toys serve as their anxiety absorber to calm them, or it serve as an imaginary friend in the absence of the parents. In the absence of parents, feelings for the parents can be displaced to these objects. Literature claims that the stuffed animal is a very natural and adaptive way for a child to cope when separated from parents (Guiffé & McKenzie, 1992). Stuffed animals are often used in therapy for children (Luber, 2009) it can even be used in the hospital to show to children who are prepared for suture removal; doctors would even ask the parents to dab some of the parents’ cologne to the stuffed animal in case of separation anxiety (Hart & Rollins, 2011).

Most of the literature deals in using stuffed animals to children and these are often mentioned in books in psychotherapy. The study on the effectiveness of the stuffed animal as a source of comfort is mentioned in these books but there is a shortage in this topic to measure its effectiveness. This research intends to determine the use of stuffed animal that serves as a displaced object, as a source of comfort or as a tool in grounding skills in a group psychotherapy conducted in a group of students in a psychotherapy class.

In therapy, clients can also be encouraged to bring to the therapy sessions an object of their own or a favorite stuffed animal for comfort. In times of discomfort, they may touch his familiar object or stuffed animal for comfort. A therapist may himself hold a stuffed animal or inanimate object with the client as witness. This demonstration of touch by the therapist can communicate comfort or concern, which the client may experience as himself being comforted (Struve, 1998).

Stuffed animals can also be used to restore calmness in psychotherapy. When clients are overwhelmed with affect especially from past traumas, grounding skills can restore calmness. These skills orient the client to the present time, place and situation and increase sensory awareness of the client, environment and therapist. Grounding skills are particularly effective in maintaining flashbacks in which clients experience traumatic memories as if they were recurring in the present. This would suggest noticing that they are safe, The therapist might seek eye contact or ask if they would feel more comfortable holding a stuffed animal or taking a break to stretch, walk around the block or have a snack or drink (Rosenfield, 2008).
In Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing, a kind of therapy, the child can be asked to bring a toy or stuffed animal so that the toy can be asked to look at the picture instead of the child. The toy can be asked instead of the child what it felt and if the feeling changed the second or third time it looked at the picture. This is a controlled form of dissociation by asking the pet toy instead of the child. (Luber, 2009)

Stuffed animal can also be used for a child who begins to engage in self-harm. A therapist or a teacher can intervene by placing his hand, a pillow or stuffed animal between the head and the wall/floor. When a child is trying to scratch, slap or hit themselves, the therapist may want to get a special stuffed animal just for this purpose and be sure to name it. The child can be encouraged to hug or cuddle (not hit) the stuffed animal as an alternative to their behavior. The idea here is for the child to learn a more positive way to express their emotions and needs. If a child becomes emotionally needy or clingy, the child can be asked to have a brief, regular “nurture” breaks for the child to cuddle a stuffed animal (Krillm, Mckennon & Volkman, 2011)

Displacement

Displacement can be described as a shift of emotion away from the person or object towards which was originally felt to a more neutral or less dangerous person or object (Burns, 1991).

Children under six who use special blankets or teddy bears is an example of displacement. These children do not want to part with the object even if it needs washing. It helps them to cope when they are unhappy or separated from their parents. One explanation for this phenomenon is that each child has displaced some of the feelings she has for the parent(s) onto the object either the blanket or the teddy bear. This is very useful because it allows the child to cope with upsetting feelings in the absence of the comforting parents. It allows the child to be separate from the parent and to keep the feelings of security associated with the parent close at hand by snuggling with the blanket or teddy. The child has taken the positive feeling of comfort and protection that originally arose in relation to the parent and displaced them onto the blanket or teddy. This is a very natural and adaptive way for the child to cope when separated from the parent. (Guiffe, 1992).

Psychotherapy researches in the Philippines

Self expression techniques, music therapy, play therapy and several other forms of therapy like psycho-spiritual approach are some of the topic of research in therapy in the Philippines.

In a study by Carandang and Martin (2011) on music therapy presents that it has been used to facilitate and enhance the healing process in therapy. In their case studies, they used self-expression techniques like journal writing, song writing and drawing. Similarly, the technique of story-telling using a book “Bituin and the Big Flood” where Ondoy survivor children in a certain elementary school in Pasig City were utilized and these children went through expressive arts therapy like drawing and group sharing after the story-telling (Ng, 2011).

Tarroja (2011) in her study on play therapy revealed that many play therapist admit the difficulty of explaining the process and the value of play therapy to parents. The therapist feel frustrated when parents do not seem to value play therapy and expect quick results.

The effectiveness of visual arts and poetry were utilized by Evangelista (2011) as intervention in alleviating post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and symptoms of depression and among adolescents with history of abuse. Results suggest that visual arts therapy is effective in alleviating PTSD and poetry alleviated depression. These techniques however should be used in caution since these evoke high emotions and memories can be overwhelming for the participants.

Arcemas (2011) studied the effect of psycho-spiritual approach to reduce the aggression among adolescents who self-harm. The researcher used a Self-Harm Questionnaire as a pre-test and conducted a four day retreat that incorporates Biblical Christianity concepts into discussions and activities about anger, inner hurts, conflict resolution and stress management. The participants were post-tested and results suggested that there was a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores on Self-Harm Questionnaire, however they conducted a delayed post-test after a month, the result was not significant.

In a study by Limbadan (2011) on angry adolescents, an Emotional Awareness Regulation and Transformation Scale (EARTS) were administered as pre-test prior to a 12 session intervention that
consisted of retelling difficult emotional experiences, expressing enactment of the emotion, empty chair technique to resolve past issues, unfolding, shifting attention, creating positive imagery, cognitively creating new meaning and personal action planning. Post-test with the same scale showed that there is a significant improvement observed after the therapy among the adolescents.

Majority of the literature deals with the use of stuffed animal as a source of comfort but there are limited researches in the use of stuffed animal in therapy. Most psychotherapy in the Philippines deals with play therapy or group intervention. There is also a need to explore these areas of interest in the field of psychology.

Theoretical Framework
This study is premised on the study of defense mechanism of displacement. All people including patients in therapy, employ mechanism of defense to keep painful feelings and memories outside conscious awareness. The defense mechanisms are specific, discrete maneuvers or ways of thinking that the mind employs to avoid painful emotional materials (Ursano, Sonnenberg, Lazar, 2004).

Displacement is a defense mechanism that occurs when we take energy intended for one object and direct it onto a substitute object (Conte, 2009). An example of displacement is when anger directed at a person is directed to somebody else even an animal or object. In the group psychotherapy, the stuffed animal serve as a substitute human where the students can displace some of the emotions to a neutral object and in this case the stuffed animal. Physical touch in therapy is prohibited and the stuffed animal can serve as an object to be hugged (Hunter & Struve, 1998).

The stuffed animal can also serve as a source of comfort that can relieve the experience of strong emotion or lessen the pain or ache experienced by the students. As a tool for grounding skills, it can help the students be calm and make them aware of the present through the stuffed animal.

Statement of the Problem
The study aimed to determine the effectiveness of stuffed animal in comparison with other activities of the group psychotherapy and it’s perceived effectiveness and use.

Specifically, this study sought answer to the following problems.

1. What is the students’ rating on the effectiveness of stuffed animal in psychotherapy in comparison to the other activities?
2. How was the stuffed animal used in the group psychotherapy?
3. Is there a significant difference between the perceived effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the stuffed animal in psychotherapy?

Hypothesis
Ho: There is no significant difference between the perceived effectiveness and ineffectiveness of stuffed animal by the students in psychotherapy.
Ha: There is a significant difference between the perceived effectiveness and ineffectiveness of stuffed animal by the students in psychotherapy.

Research Method
This research adopted the descriptive method and post-test only design with non-equivalent group method. The descriptive method was used to get the frequency of the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the stuffed animal in psychotherapy. The post-test design was used to collect the data after the psychotherapy session. The descriptive method was used to describe different aspects of a behavior or psychological phenomena (Wagner, 2008). It involves the collection of data in order to test the hypothesis or to answer questions concerning the current status of the subjects of this study.

The post-test-only design with nonequivalent group includes an experimental group that receives the treatment condition and a control group that does not receive the treatment condition or
receives some standard condition and both groups are post-tested on the dependent variable (http://www.southalabama.edu/coe/bset/johnson/lectures/lec9.htm).

Population Frame and Sampling Scheme
Eighty four 4th year students in the Psychotherapy class for the second semester of the school year 2011-2012 participated in this study. From the 84 students 60 students answered the post-test questions.

Instrument Used
The researcher used two instruments for this study. The first consisted of a rating scale to evaluate the elements of the psychotherapy including the music, group session, member qualities and the use of stuff animal. The second is an open-ended question to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the stuffed animal.

Data Gathering Procedure
The psychotherapy session was conducted in each of the psychotherapy class participated by the students. The students were instructed to write in sheets of paper their negative and positive thoughts and they will have to share this to the group. The students were grouped selectively so that they will not be with their friends. The groupings and all the instructions were projected to the screen to make the condition similar. The instruction given were the following:

A. Forming of groups that consisted of 4-6 members (the groups were pre-selected to prevent friends to be in one group)
B. Awareness – the students should pay attention to their thoughts and feelings and the group. The students should be able to express what they notice to the group
C. Notice non-verbal behavior – Students were reminded that they have to tune in to the non-verbal behavior in the group
D. Honesty and Openness – Students were encouraged to tell the group whatever is in his or her mind or expressing negative emotions about others.
E. Acceptance – Students need not be articulate and perfect all the time. It is alright to make mistakes.
F. Ask for feedback- students were reminded to find out from others what is their blind spot on how they were experienced by the group
G. Take risk - Students were encourage to try out new ways of thinking and behaving. To let others know about the things that you normally keep hidden from others to allow for greater self-disclosure.
H. Be Direct – Students were allowed to be direct and open to the responses of others. Aim for dialogue and not monologue.
I. Emphasis on the Emotion – Students were encourage to try and take the risk to let yourself be emotionally available to others.
J. Being supportive and Constructive – they should avoid criticism and give constructive feedback
K. Equal time for all – all students should have the chance to talk and express themselves where one person talk at a time and no side conversations
L. Confidentiality- personal things should not be discussed with people outside of the group

The activity goes as follows:

A. Assembly
B. Opening Prayer using the song of Counting Crow “Who Am I”
C. Welcome Remarks/ Giving of Instructions/Ground Rules
D. Sharing of Negative Thoughts
E. Sharing of Positive Thoughts  
F. Debriefing  
G. Group Circle and Breathing  
H. Insight Writing  
I. Closing

After each session the class was given questions regarding their insights on the activity and recommendations to make the session more organized and successful. After a week, the students were asked to rate the effectiveness of the elements of the session namely the stuffed animal, song before the session, group circle/breathing, group mates qualities (active listener, empathy, genuineness), expressing negative and positive emotions.

The second data collection was administered after 6 weeks of the psychotherapy session. The questionnaire is answerable by yes or no if they used the stuffed animal and the second question was if the stuffed animal is effective in the psychotherapy session conducted. The questionnaire was given to all the students and was collected after. Only 60 questionnaire was returned and some students did not answer the short questionnaire. The open-ended question was content analyzed to know how the stuffed animal was used.

Statistical Treatment of Data

To compare the mean scores of the different elements of the psychotherapy session the mean was used. To compute for the significant difference of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the stuffed animal in psychotherapy the Fisher exact test was used. The Fisher exact test is useful for analyzing discrete data obtained from small independent samples that can either be nominal or ordinal. It is used when the scores of the two independent sample fall into one of the mutually exclusive classes of or one of the two possible scores is obtained. If the contingency table’s size is 2x2 and at least one expected cell count is less than 5, Fisher exact test can be used. If all cell counts are equal to or larger than 5, chi square can be used instead of the Fisher exact test. (Corder and Foreman, 2011).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The students rating for the effectiveness of the stuffed animal in comparison with the other activities in group psychotherapy is presented in the next table.

Table 1 shows the mean scores for the different activities in the group psychotherapy. The expression of negative and positive thoughts got the highest overall mean score of 8.97 followed by 8.61 for the group mates qualities, 8.58 for the group circle or breathing, 8.24 for the music before the session and the lowest mean score is for the stuffed animal with a mean of 6.51. This represents that the use of stuffed animal can be perceived as the least effective in comparison with the rest of the activity. The students perceived the expression of negative and positive thoughts as the highest which may be attributable to the context of catharsis. Catharsis would mean a venting or release of pent-up emotions or an expression or discharging of emotions behaviorally (Bushman, Baumeister and Strack, 1999). Polivy (1998) claimed that catharsis seems to reduce one’s level of emotional arousal surrounding a troubling event. The students experienced personal problems that sharing them with the group lessen their emotional arousal because it was released. The group mates qualities of being non-judgemental and empathic contributes to the high mean score of this factor. Listening encourages the member of a group to express his or herself without any fear of rejection or criticism.

Table 1- Mean Scores of Activities in the Group Psychotherapy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Stuffed Animal</th>
<th>Group Mates Qualities</th>
<th>Music Before</th>
<th>Group Circle/Breathing</th>
<th>Expressing Negative and Positive Thoughts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.52</td>
<td>8.88</td>
<td>8.48</td>
<td>8.64</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 shows the frequency result on how the stuffed animal was used in psychotherapy. A total of 33 students viewed the stuffed animal as giving them comfort; followed by the uncategorized response of “yes it is effective” with a frequency of 17, the uncategorized responses were generic responses that states the group psychotherapy was effective and no explanation on how the stuffed animal was used; stuffed animal used as displacement has a frequency of 8 and the last is the grounding skills with a frequency of 2. From the responses of the students, they used the stuffed animal as a displacement where one student claimed that “I can squeeze pooh I can release my problem very easy” it was clear that by squeezing the stuffed animal it helped the student in the release of tension. One also claimed that it is a “best substitute for relieving pain”. From the literature, a stuffed animal can be very useful because it allows the child to cope with upsetting feelings in the absence of the comforting parents, for the student who reported this, having the stuffed animal may help her or him to cope with the anxious or upsetting situation in the absence of a parent or a close friend. Some students used it to calm themselves from too much crying or from being too emotional. It may serve as a grounding object where they can be oriented in the present and not caught too much in their emotional outburst or catharsis. Majority claimed that it gives them comfort because the stuffed animal is very soft and is very huggable. Since stuffed animals are created to be cute and cuddly it can naturally give comfort when hugged or touched. There were 17 students who said that it was effective, no explanation was made it could be concluded that they used the stuffed animal or observed from the group that it was effective. Once a student cried so hard, one of their group mates would ask for the stuffed animal and once it was given to the student who was crying, they would calm down.

### Table 2- Use of stuffed animal in group psychotherapy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Used as</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Used as</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Used for</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Uncategorized</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>comfort</td>
<td></td>
<td>Displacement</td>
<td></td>
<td>Grounding Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pooh bear can be hugged</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Best substitute for relieving pain</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>It was helpful for those who used it because it helps them to calm down</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes it is effective</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pooh bear gives comfort</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Comforted by the pooh bear, though it won’t hug you back, it will not let go</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Able to relief the tension and after hugging the pooh bear they stop crying</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel safe and free to cry</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Transferred my emotion</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Relief</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bear feels like he sympathized with me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes me feel better</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Object to overcome the hurt feelings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessen my burden/pain</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>It felt like you’re leaning to someone that helps you to</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 shows that all 21 students who used the stuffed animal reported that it was effective. Those who did not use the stuffed animal also reported it effective with a frequency of 34 and those who did not use the stuffed animal and reported it as not effective had a frequency of 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 – Frequency of perceived effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the use of stuffed animal in group psychotherapy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Used stuffed animal and reported</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not use stuffed animal but reported as effective 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Used stuffed animal and reported</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not use the stuffed animal but reported as not effective 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows the result and interpretation of the computation for the Fisher’s exact test. The computed p value of 0.0305 is less than the 0.05 level of significance therefore the null hypothesis is rejected. There is a significant difference between the perceived effectiveness or ineffectiveness of stuffed animal used in group psychotherapy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4 - Result and Interpretation of the Fisher’s exact test</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fisher’s exact Test computed value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P value = 0.0305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject null hypothesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a significant difference between the perceived</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effectiveness or ineffectiveness of stuffed animal in group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>psychotherapy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION
The utilization of stuffed animal in group psychotherapy was explored in this study. The effectiveness of the stuffed animal was compared with several activities in the group psychotherapy. The use of stuffed animal is an effective source of comfort for a group psychotherapy. Students who used the stuffed animal perceived it to be effective. There is a minority of students who viewed the stuffed animal as ineffective. The students reported how it was used as a source of comfort or used as a grounding object. The significant difference was also computed between the perceived effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the stuffed animal in group psychotherapy using the Fisher exact test. The expression of negative and positive thoughts was rated as effective compared to the rest of the activity in the group psychotherapy. It is recommended that this study be replicated to control confounding variables affecting the result of the study. Conditions like a conducive place for psychotherapy and the schedule of the activity should be considered. It is recommended that the number of stuffed animal in psychotherapy be increased so that anyone who needs it can use it and not wait for one student to
finish and use it. It is recommended that a different condition with only a subject and the stuffed animal be used instead of the group psychotherapy. The presence of another person may also be a source of comfort and confound the result of the study. Survey questions should be specific and revised to measure the effectiveness of the stuffed animal in psychotherapy.

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