Adolescent Girls and Group Counseling: A Literature Review

Final Project

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Abstract

In our world of ever-present technology and social media, we are constantly bombarded with messages about the key to having a “perfect” life, body, job, wardrobe, material possessions…and the list goes on. As adults, most are able to sift through that rhetoric and absorb only those messages that inspire us to be our best selves. Adolescents, on the other hand, are just beginning to define themselves and have not yet developed a sense of self. To the confident teenager, those powerful messages can be a positive influence; of greater concern is how the same messages are received by teenagers lacking self-worth – specifically adolescent girls. This paper will look at current studies on how group counseling interventions can help adolescent girls begin to identify who they are, understand their place in the world, and effect change in how they think about themselves.
Importance of Research

Research is essential to the counseling profession and our success as counselor practitioners. It has been said that counselors have historically been at odds with research in the scientific community because they have often viewed studies as irrelevant to actual clinical populations (Sexton, 1996; as cited in Sheperis, Young, & Davis, 2010). However, research has become more prevalent in an effort by counselors to become accountable to the profession, as well as provide statistical evidence of the effectiveness of their services. Specifically, increasing accountability, changes in research methods and designs, and a better understanding of the role research plays in the provision of counseling services have attributed to the this shift in thinking (Sheperis et al., 2010).

We also conduct research in order to develop new knowledge about a particular phenomenon. We apply the scientific method as a strategy to develop this knowledge. The ultimate goal is for the results of our research to affect and improve our ability to describe, predict, or explain characteristics, actions, and/or interactions within or between the subjects of observation (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006; as cited in Sheperis et al., 2010). In essence, counselors conduct research in order to facilitate effective clinical practice with the populations they serve (Sexton, 1996; as cited in Sheperis et al., 2010).

Finally, other studies have suggested that counselors have the same moral obligation and commitment as other healthcare professionals do to stay informed and apprised of the latest trends and practices in the profession in order to best serve our clients’ needs (Buckroyd, 2005; as cited in West & Byrne, 2009). Perhaps this statistic alone is what drives counselors to now consider research as a key component to our practice.

Keywords
The words I used to explore the idea of group counseling centered on the needs of adolescent girls were: group counseling, adolescent girls, self-worth, identity issues, conflicts.

Research Methods

**Resource 1.** Demir, M., & Urberg, K. A. (2004). Friendship and adjustment among adolescents. *Journal of Experimental Psychology, 88*(1), 68-82. This study investigated the relationship between friendship and emotional adjustment in adolescents. Both quantitative (popularity, mutual friendships, and number of friends) and qualitative dimensions (perceived positive friendship quality and conflict) of friendship were used to gauge the opinions of 618 participants, mostly 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-graders. Likert-type questionnaires and established studies (e.g., questions from the Adolescent Peer Influence Project, Center for Epidemiological Studies scale, etc.) were used to gather the data.

**Resource 2.** Freyberg, R. J. (2009). Quantitative and qualitative measures of behavior in adolescent girls. *Adolescence, 44*(173), 33-54. This study examined how an emphasis on social behavior would be reflected in both quantitative and qualitative measures. To do this, 57 adolescent girls (aged 11-19 years) completed questionnaires about their achievements and social and relaxation activities. They also composed a sample of a personal experience. Results demonstrated that social activities were among the most time-consuming and enjoyable activities of their day and were engaged in voluntarily.

research explored whether there are broader social costs and feelings of low self-worth. The original sample collected quantitative information on a stratified, random sample of 7th-, 9th-, and 11th-grade adolescent boys and girls with a final sample size of 1,316 total youths, which included 678 girls. Forty-six female respondents were interviewed at a later date to provide an in-depth portrait of each respondent’s romantic relationships and sexual behavior history.

**Resource 4.** Newman, B. M., Lohman, B. J., & Newman, P. R. (2007). Peer group membership and a sense of belonging: Their relationship to adolescent behavior problems. *Adolescence, 42*(166), 241. In the article presented by Norman, Lehman, & Norman (2007), quantitative research methods were used to examine the relationship of group belonging to behavior problems for boys and girls, and to determine whether the experience of group belonging plays a different role in protecting girls and boys from internalizing and externalizing problems. Surveys and questionnaires were completed by 733 adolescents ranging in age from 11 to 18 years.

**Resource 5.** Pipher, M. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls.* New York: Ballantine Books. This book is a qualitative, single-subject case study focusing on a young girl whose 15-year-old life has spun out of control. Pipher generalizes her findings, which suggest that girls facing mounting cultural pressure often cope by splitting into two selves: one that is authentic, and one that is culturally scripted.

identities. The sample for this study included almost the entire population of girls in the 6th through 8th grades in a single, year-round middle school. There were 491 girls in the study, which consisted of three parts. First, researchers followed appropriate steps to gain access to the participants. Next, a Likert scale and open-ended questionnaire was used to assess early adolescent girls’ achievement, well-being, health, social support, activity involvements, and identity representations. Finally, two 1-hour, individual follow-up interviews were conducted with 27 of the original participants who met study criteria.

**Resource 7.** Smith-Adcock, S., Webster, S.M., Leonard, L.G., & Walker, J.L. (2008). Benefits of a holistic group counseling model to promote wellness for girls at risk for delinquency: An exploratory study. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development, 47*, 111. This study examined a group counseling intervention developed to promote wellness in adolescent girls at an alternative school. The qualitative study focused on 9th and 10th grade girls who were attending the school for one of various reasons: academic underachievement, status offenses, delinquency, being expelled or suspended from school, dropping out of school, mental health issues, teen parenting, pregnancy, or substance abuse.

**Resource 8.** Zinck, K., & Littrell, J. M. (2000). Action research shows group counseling effective with at-risk adolescent girls. *Professional School Counseling, 4*(1), 50. Data in this project were obtained using qualitative, action research methods. Thirty-five adolescent girls involved in one of four small groups on their high school campus participated in the 10-week study. Two designs were employed to answer the five action research questions: a pretest-posttest and one group design.

**Application**
The primary reason I chose the themes of adolescent girls and group counseling is because I would like to offer this type of support system to the young girls I will serve and possibly mentor. The group I hope to create would be psychoeducational in nature. “The overarching goal in psychoeducational group work is to prevent future development of debilitating dysfunctions while strengthening coping skills and self-esteem” (Conyne, 1996, p. 157; as cited in Gladding, 2012, p. 11). Furthermore, developmental psychoeducational groups focus on common concerns of young people, who “join these groups out of a sense of need and a desire to gain knowledge and experience that will help them better handle their concerns” (Gladding, 2012, p. 256).

The group would meet once a week over a 10-week period. Items up for discussion could include building and managing healthy relationships; dealing with social pressures and stresses, explaining and identifying self-talk and how it affects the way we perceive ourselves; deciphering who we want to be and how we want others to see us; discovering values and beliefs that drive our decision making; recognizing attitudes that help and hurt us; the importance and impact of serving others; how the media can affect our self-esteem; physical activity and eating right; and, goal setting.

These topics could also be used in individual counseling with girls who demonstrate specific needs in anyone of the above areas listed.

Research Summary

It was discovered after careful examination of current studies that, adolescents (particularly girls) have many identity conflicts and low self-esteem that may affect school success and development of a healthy identity (Powell, 2004). It has been shown that “group work positively affected girls’ attitudes and their relationships with others and decreased
negative, attention-seeking behavior” (Zinck & Littrell, 2000; as cited in Smith-Adcock, Webster, Leonard, & Walker, 2008, p. 112). However, girls represent a small portion of school-age youth who commit delinquent acts, which means counseling and other appropriate services are often limited for them. Because of this, gender-specific intervention programs that focus on girls’ healthy attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles are desirable and needed (Smith-Adcock et al., 2008, p. 112).

Adolescence is the period of growth between childhood and adulthood and is experienced from 10 to 19 years of age. Research shows that this is a tumultuous time of life because of the conflicts that emerge as a result of biological, emotional and psychosocial development. While adolescents are learning to cope with change, they may also find themselves concerned with self-image, self-esteem, social expectations and academic achievement. In fact, this is a precarious time in which teenagers “are trying to figure out: (1) who they are, separate from their families; (2) what they are about, their interests and personalities; and (3) where they are going, in order to discover their place in adult life” (Santrock, 2001; as cited in Powell, 2004, p. 77). In other words, this is the time in a young person’s life she begins to form her own identity. Steps to determine this identity include making choices and resolving conflict, among other things. Powell (2004) contends that in order to establish identity, become independent and overcome conflicts, teenagers must have a strong self-concept and self-esteem. “Self-esteem in this context refers to self-worth, self-respect or how one regards or feels about oneself; self-concept refers to perception about identity and achievements” (p. 78).

It’s clear to see that adolescence is a critical time of development for both boys and girls. However, studies show that adolescent girls’ self-esteem is twice as low as boys (Santrock, 2001;
as cited in Powell, 2004, p. 78). With this in mind, I present the following literature review to support the creation of a gender-specific group.

**Literature to support a gender-specific group.** While building self-esteem is important for both boys and girls during the adolescent phase, there are reasons why researchers have paid special attention to the lasting effects low self-esteem may have on girls. Pipher (2004) asserts that girls today are coming of age in a more dangerous, sexualized, and media-saturated culture. They face incredible pressures to be beautiful and sophisticated, which can lead to risky behavior choices (p. 12). Unless they are given the opportunity to develop a positive self-worth based in reality, many girls set themselves up for failure by aspiring to unattainable goals and self-criticism.

Another factor contributing to poor self-esteem in adolescent girls is quality of relationships. It has been found that adolescents lacking in peer relationships had greater levels of anxiety and depression, lower self-esteem, and less effective coping styles than did adolescents who were involved in peer relationships (Notaro, Miller, & Zimmerman, 1998). Group membership is one of many ways counselors can help adolescent girls build self-esteem and self-worth. One study (Zinck & Littrell, 2000) found that providing group counseling to at-risk students (specifically girls) initiates a reduction of negative, attention-seeking activity. The same study also provides evidence that group counseling for female at-risk students “fosters effective and lasting change, and meets participants’ needs and expectations” (p. 14). Yet another study asserts that group membership is more important to girls than to boys. This confirms earlier reports that found girls rate peer group membership as more important to them than do boys, and that their friendships are more intimate than friendships among boys (Hart & Thompson, 1997; Keisner et al., 2002; as cited in Newman, Lohman, & Newman, 2007).
Literature to support group content. Many girl-centered empowerment groups already exist. These groups have developed gender-specific curriculum and sessions that focus on building self-esteem and self-worth in adolescent girls. One such group is North Star Girls (www.northstargirls.org). According to the Overview section of the group’s website, its curriculum is designed to “give girls a sense of competency and empowerment through education, support and connecting with others.” Sessions address issues that all adolescent girls face including relationships, identity questions, body image and thoughts about the future.

PEARLS for Teen Girls, Inc. is another empowerment group providing girl-centered curriculum designed to build such leadership skills as self-reflection, critical thinking, sound decision making, goal setting, clear communication and personal accountability (www.pearlsforteengirls.com). These classes have been effective in helping girls improve their outlook on themselves and their future. According to the Outcomes page on the organization’s website, 100% of the senior girls who participated in the program in 2011 graduated high school and all of those same girls were accepted into at least one college. Perhaps of even greater interest is that 99.6% of all girls involved in the PEARLS program in 2011 avoided pregnancy.

It’s clear to see that empowerment groups, focused on the issues affecting adolescent girls, can have a positive influence on the self-esteem and self-worth, which fosters their personal success.

Reflection

This course has been enlightening and informative. At the outset, I had very little firsthand knowledge of the many different types of methods used to conduct research. I had heard and have known a little about the differences between quantitative and qualitative research, but felt very intimidated by and unfamiliar with the jargon and vernacular of any other designs. The past few weeks have been spent reading, reading, reading and reading some more. I’m glad
to say that I can now understand and explain in very general terms the various methods used to conduct data in professional counseling. Now that our learning of research has concluded, my hope is that the information continues to take root and not be lost.

Another surprising outcome of this class is that I feel excited about research in a way I have never felt before. In fact on this week’s discussion board, after reading the article by West & Byrne (2009), I found myself getting a bit defensive for our profession and the work of colleagues that needs no justification in most cases; in my mind, the ends (data that drives effective interventions) justify the means (research process). Rather than allow myself to become agitated at the notions presented by the authors however, I began to appreciate the opportunity to defend what I now understand to be a very important aspect of our profession. Four weeks ago, I wouldn’t have had an opinion at all about research and how it impacts counseling; clearly, I feel differently today. This change in thought has me wondering whether my future as a professional school counselor entails research in some way, shape or form; time will tell. If that does indeed come to pass, I feel better prepared to take on that role because of all that we have learned in this course.
References


