



## Evaluation in the Psychological Help: Psychological Group Counseling Experience from Members' Eyes

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### ABSTRACT

Psychological counseling groups are distinguished from other groups by their intense therapeutic effect. This study was conducted to address questioning and disclosing members' perceptions of the group counseling process which is considered a gap in the literature. The study participants consisted of eight members who completed the psychological counseling process (14 sessions) with dynamic-oriented individual-centered groups in 2019-2020. Data were collected through a focus group interview, with a phenomenological research design to define and interpret detailed descriptions of members' perspectives and specific meanings. The Thematic Analysis template was used to analyze the data. Six themes emerged from the results: Feelings and thoughts in the first phase of the process, feeling of being group, effects of the process, the leader and the influence of his practices, separation anxiety experiences, and suggestions. This study, which aims to reveal the experiences of the members at the beginning, middle, and end of the process and the meanings they derive from these experiences, can be useful for intern students, supervisors, leaders, and co-leaders who will conduct group counseling.

*“Loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself, or from holding certain views which others find inadmissible.” Carl Gustav Jung*

People voluntarily or involuntarily become part of many groups throughout their lives. The most important difference of psychological counseling groups, which are the subject of this study, is their intense therapeutic effect (Koydemir, 2016). When properly experienced, this effect provides members with a relaxing, improving, and healing environment. This environment allows the client to tell others what is important to them and to listen, observe, and understand what is important to others. As a result, the client has the benefit of overcoming loneliness and saving others from loneliness. In a therapeutic group, members receive a support service in which they explicitly or implicitly ask the leaders to provide them with these benefits. In addition, each member

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supports the others as a hero of the social environment in an effective social life laboratory. According to Yıldırım and Durmuş (2015, p.23):

*Group counseling is a professional practice in which members work on achievements such as change, development, awareness, and commitment to social life in a therapeutic environment using certain principles, techniques, methods, and theories and accompanied by a competent leader in the field of group counseling.*

Although there have been many studies on the experiences and effectiveness of group counseling, these studies have not looked in depth at the overall experiences of clients concerning their experiences with the group counseling process. Group counseling has been shown to be effective in the areas of respect for differences (Yalçinkaya & Yücel, 2022), internet addiction and life satisfaction (Odacı & Çelik, 2017), dissociation awareness, and individuation (Şahan & Akbaş, 2017), peer bullying (Arslan & Akin, 2016), anxiety, depression, and self-esteem (Koutra, Katsiadrami, & Diakogiannis, 2010), academic self-efficacy (Sohrabi, Mohammadi, & Aghdam, 2013), and self- and occupational self-esteem (Arıcak, 1999). Some other studies focus on the development of assessment tools in group counseling (Ristianti, Danim, Winarto, & Dharmayana, 2019), group counseling-oriented supervision models (Daşcı & Yalçın, 2018), cultural perspective on group development phases (Kağnıcı, Çankaya, & Pamukçu, 2018), skills of counselors in group counseling (Pamukçu & Kağnıcı, 2017), resistance in group counseling (Yıldırım & Durmuş, 2015), quietness in group counseling (Yıldırım, 2012), and psychological counselors' views of supervision received in courses on group counseling practices (Büyükgöze- Kavas, 2011). Qualitative studies that focused on clients' experiences in group counseling included the group experiences of individuals diagnosed with bulimia nervosa (Laberg, S., Törnkvist, Å., & Andersson, 2001; Proulx, 2007), the illness experience, and the group process in eating disorders (Ergüney Okumuş, Başer Baykal, Deveci, & Karaköse, 2018). On the other hand, there is no study in Turkey that deals with the group counseling process from the client's perspective. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to examine the common experiences of the members who completed the closed group counseling process (in which the process was started with the same members and ended with the same members, and the members who left the group were not replaced by new members) conducted in a dynamic-oriented-individual-centered, 14-session, based on their descriptions and evaluations of the entire process. Consistent with this goal, answers were sought to the following research questions:

1. What is the meaning of the experience of being a 'client' according to clients who experienced group counseling?
2. What is the nature and structure of the experience of being a client in group counseling?

This study aims to provide perspective to those working in the field of group counseling by showing the dynamics of the process from the members' point of view.

## Methodology

### Study Design

Ethical approval for the conduct of the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Scientific Research and Publications of Inonu University (document date and number: 12/06/2020-E.36208). In addition, the required informed consent was obtained from each of the participants. The study group of the study consisted of 8 female members who completed 14 sessions and approximately 28 hours of a dynamic-oriented-individual-centered group counseling process during the fall semester of 2019-2020 at a state university under the supervision of a leader and a co-leader.

Since this study aims to reveal, define and interpret the rich descriptions of the members who experience group counseling about their perspectives on group counseling and their unique meanings, it was conducted using the phenomenology design, one of the qualitative research designs. Table 1 below shows the research design.

**Table 1.** Research Design

Research Design	Phenomenon	Aim
Phenomenology	Psychological counseling experience with a group for 14 sessions	Understanding the members' Group Counselling experience

## Participants

The study group was selected using the homogeneous sampling method, one of the methods of purposive sampling. In homogeneous sampling, the goal is to go in-depth with small groups and participants with similar characteristics. Focus group interviews are usually conducted with groups of participants with similar characteristics (Patton, 2014). The fact that all participants were women was not the decision of the study team, but the result of the fact that almost all who applied for psychological support services were women. After the applications were announced, 22 candidates applied for group counseling. All of these candidates underwent clinical testing and anamnestic interviews. As a result, candidates who were suicidal, exhibited psychotic traits, had problems conforming to group norms, applied only to have a different experience (with an unclear behavioral goal), could not commit to regular attendance at sessions, and applied to gain work experience were not accepted as members of group counseling. Some of these members who met the exclusion criteria were referred to a psychiatrist, others to individual counseling and still others to the university's personality development department for psychoeducation. The ages of the 8 members of the group ranged from 19 to 21 years. Participants were given pseudonyms and these pseudonyms were used when mentioned in the results section.

## Data Collection

The data of the study was collected using the technique of "focus group interview" considering the purpose of the research. A focus group interview is an interview about a specific topic with 6 to 10 participants who typically have similar experiences and lasts an average of 1 to 2 hours (Patton, 2014). The focus group interview process consists of intertwined phases. In this study, these phases were conducted as follows: In the interviews conducted by the researchers, once the purpose of the research and the boundaries of the topic were determined, the phase of determining the questions began. Since the moderator of the study was an expert in the field of individual and group counseling, the questions were determined during the process according to the topics. The questions that were formulated according to the process of the interview can be found in Appendix 1. For the focus group interview, after informing the participants regarding about the purpose of recording the session and ensuring its confidentiality, the participants' consent was obtained that the information they would share can be used for the sake of the research by preserving their anonymity. At the beginning of the focus group interview, the moderator provided the necessary information about the purpose of the research, the use of the data to be collected, and the process. In addition, important conditions for guiding group processes were met, such as having all members speak equally, being empathetic and objective, encouraging participants to speak, summarizing, allowing participants to share their views, and staying centered on the topic. In addition, the co-leaders took notes during the session that they thought were important. Consistent with all of these criteria, the videotaped focus group interview lasted 105 minutes.

## Data Analysis

In this study, data were analyzed using the NVivo-10 program. First, the video recording and transcription data of the interview were uploaded to the corresponding program. The data were analyzed using the inductive thematic analysis method, in which the data were described in detail. Inductive analysis is a process of data coding that is independent of the researchers' analytic biases and is conducted without a predetermined coding framework. In thematic analysis, the researcher's aim is to draw readers' attention to important themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Due to the nature of qualitative research, it is not possible to clearly draw the boundaries of the phases. This is because these phases are interwoven and proceed in cycles. In this study, the thematic analysis template developed by Braun and Clarke (2019) was used because it was appropriate for analyzing the study data.

The researchers participated in both the focus group interview and the transcription of the videotaped data. The data obtained were read over and over again by the researchers and the necessary notes were taken in the process. According to Braun and Clarke (2019), this is the first phase of thematic analysis, as it allows for

familiarity with the data. While reading the data, the researchers considered what the data might mean from the general framework to the specific, taking into account the purpose of the research:

- How do members perceive their experience in group counseling?
- What was the impact of being admitted to group counseling?

The questions answered by the researchers and the notes taken formed the basis for the next phase.

Codes were created for the parts of the data that seemed important. From these codes, possible subthemes and main themes were created. As in the other phases, after this phase, the researchers went into an intense pace of work, checking if there was internal and external homogeneity and if there were unnecessary themes. The new codes that emerged in this context were included in the corresponding themes. In this way, the final theme map of the dataset was created.

### Results

From many codes related to the process of evaluating group counseling from the members' point of view, subthemes were formed to address the basic elements. From these subthemes, 6 main themes were identified. The themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** List of Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Feelings and Thoughts at the First Stage of the Process	Creating Therapeutic Tension Facilitating the Therapeutic Process
The Feeling of Being a Group	Sharing Painful Experiences of Members Transference
Effects of the Process	Intrapsychic Gains Interpersonal Gains Negative Effects
Leader and the Influence of His Practices	Raising awareness Activating Accepting the therapist as power
Separation Anxiety Experiences	Ambivalence Separation anxiety
Suggestions	Process oriented Leader oriented

#### Feelings and Thoughts at the First Stage of the Process

The two subthemes that make up this theme are as follows: *Creating therapeutic tension* and *facilitating the therapeutic process*. The sub-theme of creating therapeutic tension consisted of the codes for recording the interviews in the first session, difficulty in self-disclosure, not finding an opportunity to talk, and having familiar faces in the group. In the first session of the group counseling process, members expressed that they felt uncomfortable because the group process was a new and unique environment. The unique features of this environment, such as audio and video recording, were another issue that made participants uneasy. Gül described this situation in the following words:

*"When I first came here, I was very anxious because of the cameras."*

Another problem that troubled members in the early sessions was that members saw people they knew in the group. For example, Burcu said the following:

*"I was very eager to explain myself before, but when I saw them, I decided not to."*

Sevgi, who knew Burcu before, also had similar feelings, saying the following sentences:

*I noticed. When you had something to say, you looked at me. I experienced the same thing when I saw you."*

Another factor that created therapeutic tension in the first session was that members had no opportunity to talk and thought that the process would always be this way. In the first session, the group leaders informed the members about confidentiality, voluntariness, duration, and number of sessions, exercises, practices, goals, and termination. Burcu made the following comments about this informational phase:

*"There was an hour-long talk about the process. I was upset that it would always be like this."*

The sub-theme of facilitating the therapeutic process consisted of the codes of considering leaders and members trustworthy, sincere, and meeting with them. In the eyes of members, events such as leaders providing information about the process, leaders explaining ethical principles, group members promising confidentiality, and members and leaders meeting facilitated the therapeutic process. All of these procedures helped group members develop a sense of trust. The fact that members met each other in the first session and promised that what was said in the group would remain confidential was an important factor that created a sense of trust. Eslem expressed this situation as follows:

*"I was worried that what we were discussing here would leak out, but after we promised, I was relieved."*

In the first session, after the process of group structuring, the group leader divided the members into pairs and gave them time to meet and talk outside. It was observed that this introductory activity reduced members' anxiety. The statements of Songül and Zehra, who were paired with each other, are as follows:

*"I was also anxious at first, but then they brought us together. We talked and got to know each other. After that, I relaxed."*

*"When I was first called, I wanted to run away until I got here. When I arrived, I was as worried as my friends. After the leaders here explained the process, I was very relieved when I was assigned and came out. I warmed up even more."*

### **The Feeling of Being a Group**

This theme consisted of two subthemes: *Sharing painful experiences of members* and *transference*. If we look at the members' statements, almost all members stated that they felt they belonged to the group when they shared a negative experience about themselves (the crying wall exercise). On this topic, Eslem stated:

*"I think each of us here talked about the worst day we ever had. That's when I realized that we are a group."*

When a member trusts other members and tells them about a negative experience in her life, this strengthens the member's sense of belonging to the group, and other members who learn about the member's negative experience because they are trusted also feel a sense of belonging to the group. Sevgi commented on this situation as follows:

*"I remember a certain moment when I felt that we are a group. In what we did with Burcu, her father died and she never dealt with it, it was never talked about in her family. We went to her father's funeral and we were very affected, we even cried a lot. At that moment you want to support her, but of course, you cannot do anything. I think at that moment we were like a group, we felt close to each other"*

Apart from the moment when the negative experience was shared, it was observed that the transference made the members feel that they were a group. It can be seen that this transference event between members creates group belonging as members find a part of themselves in other members. Zehra commented on this issue as follows:

*"During the individual work phase, everyone was in the middle and as we listened, we found ourselves. The group seemed to be specially selected. We all had parts of ourselves. I associated Gül with my sister. She talked about her sister in the middle and I was very impressed. I do not remember exactly what she said, but it was like my sister was speaking. I was crying at that time. I never expected something like that."*

## Effects of the Process

This theme consisted of 3 subthemes: *Intrapsychic gains*, *interpersonal gains*, and *negative effects*. The subtheme of intrapsychic gains consisted of the codes of gaining awareness in social relationships, self-awareness, and problem-solving. When evaluated within these gains, it appeared that the group counseling experience primarily improved members' awareness of their social relationships. For example, Gül said the following:

*"When I talked about my relationship with my sister, I said that we could not have a sister-sister relationship and that it was because of me. After that, I approached my sister more sincerely as a sister. I realized this and improved it in my life."*

As in the example-statement above, many members indicated that they gained insight about themselves in their relationships with their sister, father, or friends and that after this insight, they fixed some of the negative situations in their lives and formed more positive relationships. For example, Eda stated that she always blamed herself when she had problems with the people around her and that this situation disappeared after she learned in the group to evaluate things objectively

Members indicated that they became aware of issues such as their weaknesses and strengths, criteria for choosing friends, and the character structure of the person they would like to marry. For example, Eflin said the following:

*"When I first came to this session, I brought the problem that I am not able to speak in public, but it turned out that I am very good at public speaking. I already love people and talk to everyone."*

Another intrapsychic effect of the process is that it motivates members to solve what they see as a problem. For example, Songül complained about her relationship with her father, and that she communicated more with her father afterward:

*"I complain so much, but what am I doing to change this situation?"*

In the sessions, when a member expresses a problem in her daily life, it motivates the member to solve the problem and enables her to take action. Similarly, Eflin explained that she used to cry in the face of minor problems. After addressing this situation in the sessions, she stopped crying by listening to music and started thinking logically to cope with the situation.

The codes within the interpersonal gains subtheme are empathy and acceptance of differences. Within this subtheme, it appears that the most important interpersonal gain from this process was an increase in their empathy level. For example, Zehra said the following:

*"When I talk to someone after the words I said come out of my mouth, I started thinking about how the other person is affected. I said that, but I also thought about what he/she is thinking now. For example, when a friend tells me about an event, I started to think not only about what he/she told me, but also about what he/she thought, what he/she felt, and why he/she did it. I used to look at things only from my own point of view. Now I can think about why he/she did that because he/she has a life too."*

As can be seen from the sample statement, Zehra started to evaluate her actions in interpersonal dialogs from the other person's point of view. This acquisition also affected her acceptance of differences in interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Eda explained that she used to argue with her brother all the time, but then she realized that he is a different individual, that he does not have to be like her, and that she accepted him with his differences

The negative effects sub-theme is that members feel guilty, confront their past experiences, feel regret due to the over-sharing, and have new problems. Although the group counseling process was conducted for positive impacts, it can be seen that the process has both negative and positive impacts. Examining the members' statements, we find that the most negative effect of the process on the members is the confrontation with the past experiences and the feelings of guilt. For example, Burcu said the following:

*"Now I think of the moment of my father's death, which I myself never thought of. I keep asking myself. Why did I tell such a thing? I never thought about it before, and I was very uncomfortable about why I reminded myself of it."*

It turns out that the member, who lost her father as a child, experienced this mourning process years later and had difficulties in doing so. In the sessions, on the one hand, there is the completion of the unfinished works that the member has brought up, and on the other hand, the member recalls these experiences. In a similar example, Eflin explains that she used to have a stable life in which she suppressed things, but after the sessions, she became a person who constantly reflected and questioned. Another issue that members were negatively impacted by the process was their feelings of guilt. Members gained a certain amount of self-awareness during the sessions, thought they had made mistakes and felt guilty about it. For example, Gül stated that during the sessions she realized for the first time that her relationship with her brother was wrong and that she felt guilty for spending her time doing the wrong things. The same member stated that she had a bad relationship with her mother, that she was happy when she upset her mother, and that she then realized that this was very wrong and she felt guilty. The problem-solving attempts that members have made as intrapsychic gains from the process do not always turn out positively. If the member gains awareness during the session and takes action to resolve the problem, new problems may arise because the family system has changed. Eda stated that after the sessions she decided to reconcile with her brother, that she became very close to her brother in order to reconcile, but that in the meantime her relationship with her mother deteriorated.

### **Leader and the Influence of His Practices**

This theme reflects members' evaluations of the practices they participated in during the process and how those practices affected their perceptions of the group leader. According to the majority of members, the leader and his practices increased their awareness of their problems and personalities (*raising awareness*), activated members especially through active participation in the process and resistance-breaking qualities (*activating*), and enabled them to accept the therapist as a power because of the leader's therapeutic skills (*accepting the therapist as power*). The majority of members who participated in group counseling perceived the leader and his practices as a process of raising awareness. This awareness influenced the members' views of their own lives, problems, and personality traits. For example, Eslem said the following:

*"While I was telling something about myself, it was as if a mirror stood in front of me and asking me the same question again. This made me think out loud and raise my awareness a little. This technique was good because when they asked me again, I was thinking 'Ah! This is what I am saying' and I was analyzing it again."*

For Eslem, this situation changed her way of thinking and created an awareness that was strong enough to surprise her. On the other hand, some members indicated that when they realistically assess the personality traits that play an active role in solving their problems, they actually adopt a destructive style. For example, according to Sevgi, her temperament seems to solve her problems for a short time, but immediately causes feelings of loneliness and regret that compulsively destroy her energy:

*"Also, when I was sitting on the couch, he told me to put my angry personality on the couch and when I was sitting on the couch, I was really angry and that was very effective... I was afraid of myself and I wonder if other people were also afraid of me, of this state of mine. I realized that I could not take my angry personality any longer and I wanted the method to stop... I thought that in this state I was ahead in my arguments with other people, which created a brief feeling of happiness, but then regret and loneliness..."*

In addition, some members indicated that they take a more realistic view of their problems. For example, Zehra (in an activity where stools represented family members and leaders asked members to place family members according to their psychological distance from them) said that:

*"I thought my sister was too far away from me, but I did not put the stool that far away. I probably exaggerated this problem a little bit"*

As can be seen, she dealt with her problem more realistically as her awareness increased. Similarly, Gül commented as follows:

*"When we were explaining something, for example, when we were talking about our parents and brothers, they put a chair to make them concrete. I think it was very good that they did that. They measured the degree of our closeness, like sitting there. For example, how close the chair should be to you..."*

The subtheme of activating includes active participation, breaking resistance, and directing emotions. On the subtheme of activating, Sevgi said the following:

*"I was hesitant to talk about it because I was afraid that other members' opinions about me would change during the process, but although I felt very uncomfortable, it felt normal afterward... I talked about my relationship with my father. When I went to the center, I talked about my broken relationship with my father, and in the activity, I saw that I was using my mother as a bridge between me and my father... After the session I did something, I would not normally do, I went to my father and said, 'Dad, I am so far away from you, I cannot tell you anything, it makes me very sad, I really love you a lot, I am an individual now, I want you to respect my choices,' and I hugged him."*

Although Sevgi initially perceived the leaders and practices as uncomfortable, they broke her resistance both in the group and after the sessions, allowing her to take an active role in issues affecting herself. In support of Sevgi's statements, Songül stated that the leader and the exercises triggered something in her and she felt more comfortable with the process. However, for a small number of members, this situation did not occur outside of the sessions, although it broke resistance and allowed for active participation during the process. The following sentence from Zehra can be used as an example:

*"I say, okay, I will share what I have told here with my sister, but the closer I get to her, the less I am able to overcome the factors that prevent me from"*

In addition, this subtheme also includes directing emotions. This directing was sometimes handled in the group and sometimes individually. For example, Songül said that the whole group cried together during Burcu's activity. This shows the role of practices in determining the emotional atmosphere in the group. For some members, this emotional guidance function continued after the sessions. For example, Zehra said

*"After the sessions, I was still internally restless for hours and probably confronting myself... From time to time, my roommates were asking me why I was sad."*

Another subtheme is the acceptance of the therapist as a power. Members reflect this in terms of increased regard for the therapist and identification with the therapist. For example, in one practice where Burcu was at the center, she said the following:

*"It was very good that the leader was calm. Otherwise, I would have found it worse if the leader had been crying. I would have thought, 'Am I in such a bad situation?'. What they did seemed very extraordinary, I was very impressed, I even wrote it in my diary. The leader seemed superior in my eyes when he used the techniques... It was very impressive."*

When a small number of members saw the leader's composure in the processes that were difficult for the group, they identified with the leader and asked themselves some negative, troubling questions. Gül, a student in the Department of Psychological Counseling and Guidance, identified with the leader and reported that she was concerned that she would not be able to do this type of practice in the future. For several members, this identification resulted in a negative evaluation of themselves, but for some others, surprisingly, it was evaluated just the opposite. For example, Eflin (another counseling student) said:

*"When my friends came to the center, I thought about what I would say instead of our professors. It was like they would talk to me, what would I say here? Or I would notice something while something was being explained. I was hopeful, like I could see it, so I have expertise in the field, that's what I thought."*



### Separation Anxiety Experiences

This theme was composed of 2 subthemes: *Ambivalence* and *separation anxiety*. All participants indicated that the termination of the group had an impact on them, although to varying degrees and in different directions.

The ambivalence subtheme highlights participants' conflicting feelings about the end of the group process. Participants expressed the ambivalent feelings as the happiness of being rid of all or part of their problems, the peace of mind of continuing the process to the end, and the sadness of losing the opportunity to unburden themselves: for example, Burcu described this ambivalence as follows:

*"I left this process stronger. I solved the problem; it was an opportunity for me. If I look at it from this point of view, I am happy, but I do not know what to do if I won't come here every week and relieve myself... When I come to the group, filled with water drops, I feel relieved as if I have left the rain... I feel sad."*

While leaving the group is a source of privilege and joy for what it brings, Zehra's point of reference is the sadness of the emptiness that comes with the fact that the process of the group will never happen again. Gül expressed the conflicting emotions she felt as follows:

*"Although I couldn't completely solve my problem, I feel happy that I have completed this process... I feel like I have been reborn from ashes, I am stronger now... When I get out of here, good things will happen... It also makes me sad that an environment like this will never happen again."*

For some participants, the idea that group counseling will end is synonymous with separation anxiety, as this implies feelings of emptiness, sadness, and loneliness. For example, Sevgi expressed the following:

*"Separations are very bad for me beforehand, I mean I think it will never end and I feel very sad even when I see someone for a week, we saw each other for a long time, we shared many things... We learned things, we lived and now we are on our own, let us see what we will do, we are alone and we cannot come and tell them anymore, for example I stayed quiet this week but I cannot come and tell them that I am alone... I was really affected... I will not see the leaders again and that makes me sad"*.

Sevgi felt that the separation was a difficult and unpleasant situation to deal with. She experienced feelings of sadness and loneliness because she will not see the leaders again and lose the environment where she could pass on what she had learned. For some members, this situation is a fear of the emptiness that comes from having to leave their habits. For example, Songül said the following:

*"I was emptying my lava like a volcano... I feel like I have fallen into a void because I can never empty myself again."*

### Suggestions

This theme consisted of two subthemes: *Leader-oriented* and *process-oriented*. The leader-oriented subtheme consists of considerations the leader should make, such as being more natural and making members feel understood, and considerations the leader should not make, such as engaging in intense emotional exchanges. While the majority of participants agreed on what the leader should do, there was disagreement among some participants about what the leader should not do. For example, Zehra expressed the following:

*"It seems very disingenuous to me when a counselor talks to the client with learned words; hmm, well, how do you feel now, that seems very disingenuous to me... Those words seem very formulaic and insincere to me... They should be more natural. I felt that I was not understood"*.

This comment reflects the assessment that leaders should be more natural. Many of the members made statements in support of Zehra. Sevgi stated that she felt that the leaders did not listen properly because they always sat and reacted in the same way. As you can see, members said that leaders should be more natural so that they feel understood and cared about. Some members thought having intense emotional exchanges is a behavior that leaders should not do. Sevgi commented as follows:

*"What I said, yes, they are one of us, but I would not want them to explain it that way, I would not want to see them crying because they are leaders for me."*

The intense emotional exchange of leaders was viewed positively by some members, as opposed to others. According to Eslem, it was considered positive because there was no status like subordinates and superiors; according to Zehra, it was considered positive because it was relaxing.

The subtheme for the process includes the evaluations of the exchanges between the members before, during, and after the process. According to the participants, these evaluations include some elements that should be included in the process and some elements that should not be included in the process. Eda said the following about what should have happened before the process began:

*"If we had been informed about what theory we were going by, we would have been able to understand the process better, we would have been able to understand better why we were asked these questions."*

According to Eda, participants could have benefited more from the process if they had known the group counseling process centered by which theory of psychotherapy would be based on if participants had been informed before the process began. Some participants stated that they should also be provided with video recordings so that they could self-evaluate and see their own progress during the process. Gül wanted the recordings shared with them to see how she expressed herself during the sessions, and Eflin wanted the recordings shared with them to see the difference between Eflin on the first day and Eflin on the last day. Watching the recordings is seen by the members as a tool for self-evaluation and to concretize their development.

### Discussion

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this study is the first study to question and uncover the perceptions of members who participate in group counseling about how they experience group counseling. This study analyzed the statements of members participating in the group counseling process about their experiences and found six themes that reflect these experiences. These are: *Feelings and thoughts at the first stage of the process, the feeling of being in a group, the effects of the process, the leader and the influence of his practices, separation anxiety experiences, and suggestions.*

It was observed that members who had not previously received individual or group counseling experienced tension in the first session due to the unique environment and principles of group counseling. The presence of a video recording increased therapeutic tension among group members. However, for leaders to receive supervision, they must have audio or video recordings. Even if they do not receive supervision, it is an important requirement for the leader to work under recording as it is a requirement of accountability and professionalism (Dutar & Karataş, 2018). Apart from this, another advantage of the recording device that does not overlap with this research finding is its ability to keep the client alive and active. Socrates' phrase "Speak so that I may see you" shows the role of recording devices in the group counseling process (Aveline, 1992). If one examines the literature, one finds that recording devices have some disadvantages as in this study. The client who has come to receive psychological counseling may have to accept the leader's conditions to solve some of his/her problems. In some situations, when the client feels weak and helpless, he/she has to allow the use of the recording device even if he/she does not want it. This can be explained by the abuse of the helpless client by the counselor in a position of power (Aveline, 1990). Even if the client consents to the use of the recording device, he or she may feel tense during the process. Clients who were physically or sexually abused in childhood may not talk about such issues in the presence of a recording device. People who are paranoid and have trust issues may be unable to seek mental health services for the rest of their lives because of such recordings (Aveline, 1992). Clearly, the presence of a recording device in group counseling has advantages and disadvantages and is open to discussion. It seems reasonable to discuss with members in the first session whether a recording device should be used in group counseling, and if so, what type of recording should be made, and to make a joint decision.

If the members are forced to speak in the first sessions of group counseling, there may be resistance, and it would be better if the leader informed about the process in this stage (Voltan-Acar, 1991). In analyzing the research results, it was found that the structuring phase gave members confidence in the process and facilitated

the therapeutic process. In fact, the lengthy structuring by the leader and the fact that members did not have enough say led to an increase in therapeutic tension for some members. In the early stages of the process, there may be members who do not want to talk, who primarily observe and try to adjust to the process, and members who want to adjust to the process by talking and sharing. Therefore, it seems useful for the leader to pay attention to individual differences in the group counseling process and to allow members to speak.

According to the members' statements, the presence of familiar faces among group members increased therapeutic tension. This negative effect can be explained by the concern of violating the principle of confidentiality. Group members can share information about themselves with someone outside the group, but should not share information about other members (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2010). The risk of violating this rule is higher in groups with members who already know each other. Yıldırım (2012) studied silence in the group counseling process and concluded that members in the same social environment cannot open up easily. In order for group leaders to minimize this risk, they should not keep members who already know each other in the same group (Çınarbaş, 2015). In group counseling processes conducted in schools, universities, or small settlements, members are more likely to know each other because of their common social environment. For example, after the group counseling process conducted in different universities in Turkey, the leaders were asked about the difficulties they faced, and 53% of the leaders stated that they faced difficulties because the members in their groups knew each other (Büyükgöze-Kavas, 2011). To overcome this risk situation, which the leader may not be able to control when forming a group, it may be necessary to take measures such as putting the issue on the agenda in the first stage of the group counseling process, identifying members who know each other, having members who know each other speak in the first meeting, making decisions, and referring them to other groups.

The study concludes that it is useful for members to practice getting to know each other to reduce their tension at the beginning of the group session. This finding is also consistent with the literature. Morganett (2005) states that exercises and activities can be used at any stage of the group. In particular, introductory activities are important in the first session to promote member cohesion and build trust. Introductory exercises reduce members' anxiety and prevent them from leaving the group (Güçray, Çolakkadıoğlu, & Çekici, 2009). Looking at the behavior of the members who went through the group counseling process, we find that the majority of the members asked questions in the first session to get to know the group members. Thus, it can be seen that if the group leader creates an environment for members to get to know each other at the beginning of the group and conducts appropriate exercises, the therapeutic tension will be reduced.

It was found that telling a negative experience about oneself in front of the group was the most important factor in creating belonging. It is known that group cohesion is one of the most important factors in the group counseling process (Yalom, 2005). In this study, it was found that this very important factor can be realized by "sharing a negative experience in front of the group". In line with this finding, Yıldırım and Durmuş (2015) concluded that the 'Crying Wall' exercise, which involved sharing negative experiences in the group counseling process, improved group affiliation. Similarly, Voltan-Acar (1991) found that the 'Sharing the Secret' exercise contributed to group cooperation.

It was observed that another important factor that increased group membership was transference. Some members of the group compared other members to their own sisters and transferred to these members. This made the members feel like part of the family and reinforced their belonging to the group. According to Yalom and Leszcz (2005), consistent with the findings of the current study, the same level of education, gender, and similar age of members paves the way for them to transfer to other members and feel a sense of belonging to the group.

Members indicated that through the group counseling process they gained more awareness about themselves and their relationships, found the motivation to solve problems, and increased their empathy. Although members come to group counseling to achieve their own specific goals, the process is a therapeutic one in which members gain awareness, develop self-confidence, and engage in social interaction (Voltan-Acar, 1993). Considering that psychological counseling is a process in which individuals gain awareness, it is clear that these goals are achieved and the process contributes to them. In fact, in a study consistent with the findings

of the present study, it was found that group members benefited from the group process (Ergüney Okumuş et al., 2018).

Although psychological counseling is a process designed to benefit members, it can also have negative effects on members. By its very nature, members gain some awareness, face events they have ignored, and experience negative emotions. In our study, some members expressed regret and guilt for bringing their suppressed emotions to the surface. Consistent with this study, Strauss, Schleu, and Frenzl (2021) found that the most common negative impact of mental health care was the resurfacing of unpleasant memories at a rate of 57.8% and unpleasant emotions at a rate of 30.3%. It is not surprising that some of the negative consequences that can occur with any treatment, from taking aspirin to having brain surgery, also occur with psychological treatments (Scott & Young, 2016). In a study conducted with 14,587 participants who had undergone psychological treatment, 5.2% of participants reported that the process had a lasting negative impact on them (Crawford et al., 2016). Of clients who underwent compulsory treatment, 29% exhibited new symptoms, and about a quarter suffered from labeling anxiety (Moritz et al., 2015). Whether members need to undergo these experiences, which are perceived as negative, is an important point of discussion. However, Crawford et al. (2016) found that individuals who were unsure of the type of treatment they were receiving had high rates of negative affect, while individuals who were adequately informed about treatment before it began had low rates of negative affect. Based on these findings, it is necessary for leaders to educate members about the potential advantages and disadvantages of the group counseling process at the very beginning of the sessions and to provide detailed information about the process in terms of professional ethics.

Another problem that negatively affects members is that solving one problem in the family causes another problem. In this study, one member improved her relationship with her sibling, but her relationship with her mother deteriorated. Such effects emanating from the family system are also found in the literature. For example, Don Jackson, who worked with a depressed woman, reported that the better the woman got, the more complaints came from her husband. When the sessions ended and the wife had fully recovered, her husband first lost his job and then committed suicide. This shows that the husband's equilibrium was based on having a sick wife (Fisher & Mendell, 1958, as cited in Polat-Uluocak & Bulut, 2011). Thus, even if the problem-solving phase of a member going through the group counseling process is successful, it may lead to other problems.

The leader's practices were found to be awareness-raising, supportive, activating, and accepting. In group counseling, the leader, with his personality traits, the techniques he uses, and his expertise in creating therapeutic conditions, is an effective therapeutic force that creates a therapeutic environment, clarifies members' behavioral goals, and helps them learn to give and receive help. This therapeutic force is also a factor in bringing about change in group members. Although all therapeutic forces in group counseling are influenced by each other (Voltan-Acar, 2015), the critical role of the leader and his practices in this interaction was noted by group members in this study. Consistent with the findings of this study, Bedi (2006) found that the leader is an important factor in the therapeutic alliance from the client's perspective.

Group members felt privileged, happy, and peaceful because they had achieved all or part of their behavioral goals and successfully completed the process. At the same time, however, they also felt sadness, grief, emptiness, and loneliness because they had not been reunited. While some participants were affected by the separation process in a normal way, others felt extreme anxiety. This finding is consistent with the literature. In the termination phase of group counseling, members may experience confusing negative emotions such as dissatisfaction, depression, unhappiness, and anxiety (Yalom, 2005; Corey & Corey, 2002). However, according to Öksüz and Voltan-Acar (2013), group termination has a positive effect on some members. It is hypothesized that the occurrence of such an outcome in this study is due to the individual characteristics of the members, their previous separation experiences, the importance they attribute to the group, their coping mechanisms when they separate, and whether or not they get what they want from the group.

Another finding of this study was that members wanted to know about the theory that the group would be based on before the process began. Members felt that this would allow them to benefit more from the process. This finding of the study is consistent with the literature. In fact, according to Corey (2005), it makes more sense for members to know the counseling theory they are being counseled on. In order to understand the

meaning of the questions asked by therapists, in other words, to be able to clearly answer the question "Why did the therapist ask me these questions?", members want to know what theory they are being counseled under.

Regarding the suggestion that leaders should act naturally/spontaneously, Deffenbacher (1985) states that for therapy to be good, the counselor must communicate effectively with the client and attach meaning to the work. According to Corey (2005), who concurs with the findings of this study, authenticity, sincerity, and honesty are among the characteristics of counselors. For a counseling relationship with young people to be successful, a genuine, non-imposed relationship and an appropriate level of sincerity, warmth, and empathy are essential (Geldard & Geldard, 2013). If this is not the case, clients may perceive the counselor as superficial and out of touch. The results of this study are consistent with this information.

One of the most unusual findings of the study is that members indicated that sharing video recordings made during the process would have a positive impact on the process. The reason for this finding could be that members want to track their own development during the process, reevaluate their own behavior and that of others because they are in their youth, or view themselves as a third eye from the outside. Consistent with the findings of this study, Beck (2001) suggests that clients can be made to look at the recordings as homework to reinforce what they have learned, but in group counseling, this could pose some problems in terms of protecting confidentiality.

### **Limitations**

The members of this study were women aged 19-21 years studying at university. This limitation of the results obtained should be considered. In reviewing the literature, no information was found about group counseling from the perspective of male and female group members. Another limitation is that the group counseling in which these data were collected included the experiences of members who had a group experience conducted by doctoral students under supervision. Although the doctorate represents a higher level of training in therapy/counselor education, it may be necessary to question its authenticity due to the evaluation and performance concerns of the leaders.

### **Suggestions**

The results of this study indicate that more research is needed. Conducting the study with participants with different cultural and sociodemographic characteristics could provide additional information about group counseling from the members' perspective. At the same time, studying how group counseling is experienced from the perspective of male members could contribute to this topic. The study shows that members perceived participation in group counseling as an opportunity to increase their awareness, take action to solve their problems and achieve interpersonal and intrapsychic benefits. Thus, the therapeutic power emanating from group counseling provides positive changes in individuals' lives. In order to support the individual's psychological well-being, growth, and development, studies can be conducted to facilitate access to such services and raise awareness of their importance. One of the criteria for selecting members when forming a group is that acquaintances, relatives, and friends should not be in the same group. However, when these studies are conducted at universities, it may be difficult to inquire about the acquaintance of applicant members with other members because of common social areas such as dormitories, libraries, and departments. Therefore, it will be useful to ask the question in the first meeting, "Are there members in this group who know each other and are concerned about this?" and address this situation at the outset. If you identify members who know each other before the group, it is useful to move one of these known members out of the group into another group or to work immediately within the group to overcome this difficulty (technical application, getting them to talk to each other at that moment, getting them to make decisions, etc.).

In the first meetings, members perceived negatively that the leaders kept the structuring too long and focused too much on the members' goals. It is common knowledge that the first sessions (initial phase) in group counseling are determined by the leaders, regardless of what theory they are based on. In these initial sessions, it is clear that the members focus on the leader and accept him as the object of attachment rather than interacting with each other. Also, in the first step of these initial sessions (Session 1), the leader has some work to do: he explains the purpose of the group, the rules, the process, commits the group aloud that the members will abide

by the rules and processes, introduces himself, and introduces the members to each other. Sometimes, due to the inexperience of the leader, this process can be very didactic and one-sided, leaving members feeling as if they are listening to a lecture or remaining passive during this first step. Because of this realization, during the first session the leader should be careful that the part where he explains the group process, how it works and the rules, does not become the "figure" and the group members do not become the "ground".

It is recommended that future group leaders pay attention to these points. Some members want to immediately apply what they have learned in group counseling to social life. This means that some members expect a quick and concrete change. During sessions, members should be informed that changes in the therapeutic environment may not occur immediately and that they may experience feelings of disappointment and ambivalence when they come to sessions because of the expectation of magic or fairy tales. In other words: When addressing your clients' behavioral goals in the first few sessions, ask the question, "What time do you give us and yourself to see or not see concrete changes in this regard?" In the therapeutic process, very painful things are being worked on, individuals may be hurt in ways they never expected, their attention and focus on daily life may deteriorate, and even their performance may decline. Information about this should be included in the structuring from the beginning. It is ethical for therapists to inform their clients, who perceive counseling and therapy as a relaxing process, as a miracle, and as the only positive change, and who come with this expectation, about these disadvantages as part of the structuring process.

This study determined group members' feelings and thoughts about ending the group, the importance they placed on the group, their methods of coping with such separations prior to, and whether they benefited sufficiently from the group. Future leaders of group counseling sessions can consider these factors when working with separation anxiety. Members felt that knowing what counseling theory they were being guided on would have a positive impact on the process. In the session, leaders should inform members what theory they are working from and what the requirements of that theory are. Finally, in future studies, a focus group interview involving both the group leader and group members can be used to discuss how group counseling is experienced from the leader's and members' perspectives.

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