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Peer Support and Solidarity Group Model for the Development of Psychological Counselor Candidates During the Coronavirus (Covid-19) Pandemic Process

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to introduce the Peer Support Solidarity (PSS) Group Model implemented by the YÖRET Foundation and to share the findings from the application of the model. PSS is a developmental and support group model developed for the professional and psychosocial support of psychological counselors and counseling candidates during the pandemic. The study group in this research consisted of 9 counseling candidates who participated in the PSS group. The research was designed as an action research model. In action research, the following stages were followed: Clarifying the vision, articulating theories, implementing action, and collecting data, and thinking and planning informed action. Students in the study group submitted their applications through an open call form, and PSS sessions lasting five weeks were conducted with the students. At the end of each session, participants' feedbacks and needs regarding the process, as well as the facilitator's observations, were collected, and subsequent sessions were organized based on this feedback. At the end of the implementation, focus group interviews were conducted with the participants, and the research

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results were analyzed. The findings obtained from the interviews were examined under themes such as the purpose of applying to the PSS Group, contributions of the PSS Group, most challenging experiences in the group, most beneficial experiences in the group, and experiences related to the facilitator.

Key Words: Peer; peer support and solidarity; group work.

Koronavirüs (COVID-19) Pandemi Sürecinde Psikolojik Danışman Adaylarının Gelişimine Yönelik Akran Destek ve Dayanışma Grubu Modeli

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ÖZET

Bu araştırmanın amacı YÖRET Vakfı tarafından yürütülmekte olan Akran Destek Dayanışma (ADD) Grubu Modelinin tanıtılması ve modelin uygulanması sonucunda elde edilen bulguların paylaşılmasıdır. ADD, pandemi sürecinde psikolojik danışmanlar ve psikolojik danışman adaylarının mesleki ve psikososyal olarak desteklenmesi üzerine geliştirilmiş bir gelişim ve destek grubu modelidir. Bu çalışmada çalışma grubunu ADD grubuna katılan 9 psikolojik danışman adayları oluşturmuştur. Araştırma, eylem araştırması modelinde geliştirilmiştir. Çalışma grubunda yer alan öğrenciler açık çağrı formu aracılığıyla başvurularını iletmislerdir ve öğrenciler ile beş hafta süren ADD oturumları yürütülmüştür. Her oturum sonunda katılımcıların sürece ilişkin görüş ve ihtiyaçları ile kolaylaştırıcının gözlemleri alınmış, sonraki oturumlar bu dönütlere göre düzenlenmiştir. Uygulama sonunda katılımcılarla odak grup görüşmesi gerçekleştirilerek araştırma sonuçları analiz edilmiştir. Görüşmelerden elde edilen bulgular ADD Grubu'na başvuru amacı, ADD Grubu'nun katkıları, grupta en çok zorlanılan deneyimler, grupta en çok faydalanan deneyimler ve

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kolaylaştırıcıya ilişkin deneyimler şeklinde temalarla incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Akran; akran desteği ve dayanışması; grup çalışması.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease, emerged in Türkiye and worldwide, affects humanity in many ways. The coronavirus pandemic has been anticipated to have a substantial impact on both the mental and physical health of individuals. These psychological consequences on society are expected to last for a long time (Aşkın et al., 2019). The literature highlights that, it is notable that psychological issues such as fear (Gencer, 2020), anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression (Günlü et al., 2021; Sood, 2020), and future anxiety (Horesh & Brown, 2020) are among the observed consequences. The presence of factors such as uncertainty, social isolation, and social distance necessitates the acquisition of new abilities by individuals, distinct from their current coping strategies. This may lead to the emergence of psychological issues (Horesh & Brown, 2020).

According to Kaya (2020), the psychological impacts of the pandemic are expected to appear in various forms and intensities for each person or group. Saladino et al. (2020) identified three primary demographic groups significantly affected by the pandemic: children, university students, and healthcare professionals. The pandemic has had adverse effects on students in both academic and psychosocial aspects. It is possible to state that students' stress levels have increased because of factors such as the transition to online education and abandoning their usual daily activities due to the coronavirus. The epidemic condition and uncertainties regarding the education system significantly contribute to the heightened anxiety levels experienced by university students. In addition, the likelihood of contracting the disease, fear of death, and the possibility of changes in future plans have also been indicated as factors that increase anxiety (Ceviz et al., 2020). Another study involving university students revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between their intolerance of uncertainty and their fear of the coronavirus pandemic (Duman, 2020).

The social lives of university students in Türkiye have undergone significant changes due to the transition to online education, the closure process, and living with their parents. Ergül-Topçu et al. (2021) have found that concerns about transmitting infections to family members, as well as the additional burden of managing household and academic responsibilities, have a detrimental impact on the psychological well-being of university students. In a study conducted by Öz Ceviz et al. (2020) on the anxiety factors experienced by university students during the pandemic, it was found that these factors include the uncertainty surrounding the progression of the pandemic, the uncertainty regarding the education system, the potential for loved ones to contract the virus, the fear of becoming infected, the fear of death, the disruption of future plans, the uncertainty surrounding course assessments, work and future anxiety, the inability to predict the future, the emergence of health issues due to the pandemic, and the fluctuation of the academic calendar. The study revealed a notable negative correlation between the extent to which university students engage with the media and their continuous anxiety level. According to Dönmez and Gürbüz (2020), university students primarily acquire information about the coronavirus from social media and television. The abundance and accessibility of information on social media, coupled with the potential for encountering false information, contribute to a negative effect on students' psychological well-being.

The transition to online education has had a significant impact on university students' lives in multiple areas. A study that analyzed the diaries of candidate psychological counselors and classroom teachers regarding their experiences with inclusive education revealed that the candidates expressed worries about online education and an overemphasis on theoretical lectures during the pandemic. Prospective teachers expressed that during the remote education process, they did not find online lessons as productive as face-to-face lessons. They mentioned experiencing difficulties in maintaining focus while engaging with content on-screen, and they expressed the need for experiential learning processes. Despite encountering challenges in their educational journey, it was noted that the students benefited from the psychosocial assistance provided by the course instructor, which enabled them to persist in the course (Eşici & Doğan, 2020). A study was conducted to gather the perspectives of psychological counselors on the coronavirus during the pandemic, all participating counselors stated experiencing emotions such as fear, anxiety, boredom, and concern regarding the coronavirus (Şahin, 2021).

In situations that challenge the human nervous system, such as a pandemic, social support can have a healing effect. Social support is defined as a concept that buffers the impact of stressful experiences, including physical illnesses, and makes a significant contribution to well-being. Social support encompasses a complex framework that includes the provision of emotional, cognitive, or instrumental support (Cutrona, 1990; Schaefer et al., 1981). At young ages, peer support constitutes an important social support mechanism. According to Dennis (2003), peer support can provide positive psychological effects based on its characteristics, such as mutual identity, shared experiences, and a sense of belonging.

Two distinct theoretical models have been suggested to elucidate the mechanisms through which peer assistance can enhance well-being. The direct effect model posits that peer support has a direct impact on health through the reduction of isolation, promotion of health behaviors, enhancement of positive psychological states, and provision of information (Dennis, 2003). The alternative model, derived from Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress theory, claims that social support mitigates the effects of stress on health by altering perceptions of difficult circumstances and enhancing coping strategies and behaviors. In practice, there are various approaches available for providing peer support, such as individualized (Power et al., 2016), group-based (Peterson et al., 2008), telephonic (Travis et al., 2010), and online programs (Alrobai et al., 2019). Peer support groups can be established in several fields and among diverse age groups, comprising individuals who possess shared experiences. When the relevant literature is reviewed, it is observed that peer support is utilized in various fields such as developing coping skills for bullying (Günay, 2018), teacher education (Aydın, 2017; Korhonen et al., 2017), the development of psychological counselors (Dupree et al., 2020), support for emergency service workers during the pandemic (Viswanathan et al., 2020), supporting university students on different issues (Horgan et al., 2013; Kaye et al., 2019; Moir et al., 2016), eating disorders (McVey et al., 2006), chronic diseases like cancer (Clark et al., 1992), grief groups to foster solidarity (Weaver, 2021), and reducing substance use and crime (Rowe, 2007).

When reviewing the literature on mitigating the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on individuals, it is found that mental health experts in China utilized social media and the internet to disseminate stress coping strategies to help individuals deal with the emotional distress caused by the coronavirus disease (Bao et al., 2020). Furthermore, Sood (2020) suggested the establishment of online support groups led by professionals as a potential strategy to alleviate the emotions of loneliness and anxiety that can emerge as a result of social isolation and social distance measures implemented during the coronavirus pandemic. A further study highlights the role of peer support in promoting the development of

individuals' coping mechanisms amidst the ongoing coronavirus epidemic (Fisher et al., 2020). A study investigating the correlation between depressive symptoms and perceived peer support availability among university students in China revealed a negative correlation between self-reported depressive symptoms and perceived peer support availability. The study emphasized the significance of peer support in promoting mental well-being during the pandemic phase (Sun et al., 2020). Examining instances of peer support practices throughout the pandemic, a peer mentoring program incorporating both theoretical and practical components was devised to be conducted virtually for Brazilian university students impacted by the pandemic. The program was executed with the assistance of a facilitator. The program emphasizes the significance of students understanding the hazardous actions of their peers during instances of emotional disturbance, enhancing their communication and self-regulation capacities in situations of high anxiety, and cultivating supportive behaviors towards one another (Arenas et al., 2020). In the United States, healthcare professionals participated in a comparable practice where they collaborated with a facilitator and received peer support through online videoconferencing. According to Viswanathan et al. (2020), participants reported that support groups were beneficial and provided them with support during this process.

In Turkey, face-to-face education at all universities ended abruptly with the pandemic, and classes continued online. Beyond just providing education, universities have various functions such as (1) ensuring that it remains a public responsibility, (2) seeing research as an integral part of higher education, (3) raising academic quality by establishing solid institutions, (4) developing mobility and social dimensions, (5) supporting the development of a policy framework for a Europe with quality assurance, and (6) being at the center of reform as universities (Erdem, 2013). With the closure of universities, most students who were confined to their families' homes were deprived of all these functions. YÖRET Foundation, which has adopted the mission of educating Guidance and Psychological Counseling (GPC) students well, also realized the need for these functions. Although GPC students continued their education to some extent, they felt deprived of sharing the emotional difficulties of the pandemic, developing careers, and having information about alternatives related to their professions. This information was presented by students who volunteered for YÖRET Foundation in meetings held during the pandemic. Having previously conducted peer support programs with psychological counselors working in the field, the foundation saw the need in this context and prepared to offer a peer support program to meet the stated needs of GPC students.

YÖRET Foundation has implemented the Peer Support and Solidarity (PSS) model, which is a program that draws inspiration from similar models conducted in Canada and has been adapted to the context of Türkiye. Since 1993, this concept has been tested by the foundation at multiple schools and institutions throughout Türkiye. YÖRET Foundation has conducted numerous initiatives to promote PSS projects. However, it was not until 2005 that a complete, assessable, replicable, and practical study was conducted, with the assistance and backing of the Dutch Consulate in Istanbul (YÖRET Foundation, 2022). In recent years, this method has been reintroduced with numerous groups, including primary and secondary education institutions, universities, and crisis intervention studies, to address distinct requirements. YÖRET Foundation is a non-governmental organization that seeks to foster social transformation by engaging students and graduates in the fields of Guidance and Psychological Counseling. Considering the student-centered programs can mitigate the adverse impacts of a crisis on psychological well-being (Grubic et al., 2020), peer support and solidarity groups were established for psychological counselors and counselor candidates during the pandemic. This was in response to the unique crisis faced by the students.

“Peer Support Solidarity Model” developed for university students in the Department of Guidance and Psychological Counseling aims to enhance their professional development and offer psychosocial support during the pandemic. In this context, the research question was prepared as: “How does the online peer support solidarity group contribute to psychological counselor candidates whose social, emotional, and career developments have been interrupted during the pandemic?”

Methodology

This section provides details regarding the research design, study group, data collection tools, data collection process, data analysis, credibility, data validity, and reliability.

Research Design

The study utilized action research, which is a qualitative research method. Kurt Lewin initially introduced the concept of action research in 1940, defining it as a systematic approach involving the formulation of plans, the collection of data, and the implementation of actions (Kemmis, 1988; as cited in Köklü, 2019). Action research is a study method in which individuals within a group actively engage in the process, with the goal of identifying and resolving their own problems, improving their condition, and collaborating with other group members (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). This research approach involves collaboratively determining the themes and questions that are necessary for the group's objectives with the participation of its members. The leader's function in conducting the group is primarily that of a facilitator, responsible for providing guidance and support over the group during the group process. This also includes describing the problem and attempting to address the concerns raised within the relevant literature (Marshall & Rossmann, 2006). Following Lewin's passing in 1947, action research emerged as a crucial component in the development of organizational theory and practice (Cunningham, 1993; Burke, 2002; French & Bell, 1999; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Weisbord, 2004). It also played a pivotal role in organizational studies (Gummeson, 2000), extending its influence across various fields such as commercial enterprises (Pasmore, 2001; Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002; Adler et al., 2004), education (Zeichner, 2001), community initiatives (Stringer, 1999), health and social care (Morrison & Lifford, 2001; Winter & Munn-Giddings, 2001), nursing (Waterman et al., 2001), and occupational therapy (Atwal, 2003). While the term ‘educational’ is featured in the journal's title, *Educational Action Research* welcomes submissions from researchers across various disciplines and aims to remain relevant to a broad academic audience. This issue, comprising 10 articles and two book reviews, showcases contributions from authors representing twelve countries and working across diverse sectors (Townsend, 2019).

According to Swann (2002), action research emerges in response to a problem or uncertainty perceived by the researcher and is conducted in a practical manner. It generally needs to meet three criteria: the first condition is that the subject or problem addressed must be related to social practices and require change; secondly, the researcher actively participates in equal collaboration; and finally, the research follows a systematic and documented approach that includes planning, implementation, observation, and reflection (Swann, 2002). Acquiring a solid comprehension of the fundamental principles of action research and conducting research in alignment with these principles will significantly assist and direct researchers. The following dynamics are mentioned: Primarily, in the context of action research, the focus should not be on demonstrating or establishing any certain outcome. Moreover, discussing processes such as the comparison of two data groupings is not feasible. Precisely

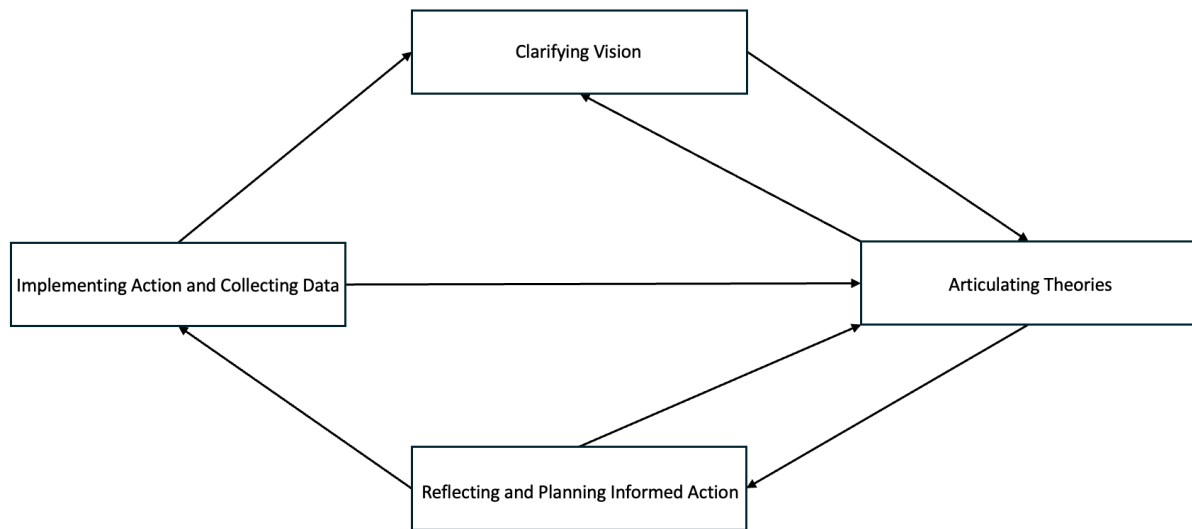
documenting the events that transpired throughout the action research process is of utmost significance. Action research is a methodical procedure that necessitates careful preparation. Nevertheless, there may arise circumstances that require renewal during the data collection phase. However, modifications may arise throughout the course of the research. Regardless of the level of structure in action research, it remains detached from a universally recognized method of gathering data. Ultimately, it is feasible to integrate action research into a theoretical framework and utilize quantitative methodologies and approaches when considered appropriate (Tüzel, 2012).

While there is no universally applicable and defined procedure for all action research, it can be stated that the stages of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection are universally applicable to all action research. Nevertheless, due to the inherent variability, freedom, and flexibility of the action research process, it is more appropriate to consider these stages as a flexible framework that may be adjusted to suit the specific circumstances of the research, rather than adhering closely to the stages of a specific model (Saracaloğlu & Eranıl, 2019).

Procedure

This study adopts the action research model proposed by Sagor (2005) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Action Research Cycle (Sagor, 2005).*



According to this model, the research process begins with identifying the purpose (Stage 1). Studies have shown that not only the educational lives of students, but also their psychosocial lives, family lives, family relationship structures, economic lives have been affected during the pandemic and these results show that students need various supports to solve the problems they face (Asıcı & Günlü, 2021; Çamur, et al., 2022). The YÖRET Foundation, a non-governmental organization in Türkiye, provides services to students pursuing education in the field of Guidance and Psychological Counseling (GPC). Within the scope of this study, the foundation aimed to organize activities to support the holistic development of undergraduate students affected by the pandemic. During the initial phase, an investigation was conducted to assess the needs of psychological counseling students, leading to the formulation of an appropriate plan to address these needs. Interviews with student volunteers affiliated with the

foundation revealed that engaging with peers, sharing experiences, and preparing for the future together could positively impact their development. Despite continuing their education online, students expressed significant gaps in their social, emotional, and career development. In the second phase, relevant literature was reviewed to identify the most appropriate method to achieve the study's objectives. Based on insights gained from this review, consultations were held with the YÖRET Foundation's volunteer experts and board members. The discussions concluded that establishing an online peer support group with a volunteer facilitator from the foundation would be the most effective approach. Considering the pandemic's constraints and to enhance accessibility for students nationwide, it was decided that the group activities would be conducted online.

The third phase focused on implementing and evaluating the activities. To initiate the online peer support group, an application form targeting GPC students across Turkey was prepared using Google Forms on June 15, 2020. The form aimed to assess applicants' eligibility by collecting demographic data and information about their expectations and reasons for applying. This form was shared on social media platforms to reach more psychological counselor candidates. Among the 49 psychological counselor candidates who responded to the form, 18 candidates from various universities across the country were found to meet the criteria. The program commenced with 18 participants, but only 9 candidates fully participated until the end of a five-week peer support program. The schedule for the sessions was finalized based on participant availability, which was determined via a pre-established WhatsApp group. This WhatsApp group became an integral part of the group process as a long-term, effective tool for peer support and solidarity. Through the WhatsApp group, members shared new knowledge and experiences related to the previous week's topic during the intervals between sessions, providing a platform for maintaining social interaction lost during the pandemic period. At the request of participants, the WhatsApp group remained active even after the group process was completed. This platform was utilized to collect participants' feedback on the research findings and to sustain their social interactions. Through this group, participants continue to share content that supports their personal and professional development and maintain their social interactions both online and face-to-face. The participants met biweekly for two-hour sessions, completing a total of five sessions.

The content of the peer support and solidarity group sessions was structured as follows:

Session 1: The facilitator introduced the implementation process, and participants shared their introductions and expectations. Following the session, a detailed evaluation was conducted, and the requirements and agenda for the subsequent week were determined.

Session 2: Addressing the participants' pandemic-related concerns, the facilitator provided a brief overview of the pandemic's impact. A "bridge activity" was conducted to help participants reflect on their pre-pandemic lifestyles, understand its impact, and reorganize their future.

Session 3: Participants engaged in an imaginative exercise, envisioning their lives five years into the future. Their perspectives were collected to guide activities for the following week, which focused on exploring academic career requirements in the GPC field.

Session 4: Participants shared and discussed content related to their academic research and findings.

Session 5: The focus shifted to developing skills as psychological counselors. Participants explored the qualities necessary for success in the field and the training opportunities offered by international institutions. They also decided to pause regular meetings during the summer. The session concluded with a comprehensive evaluation.

Participants provided verbal feedback on the week's activities, and the process was reviewed using the collected data. Content and methods were refined to better address the participants'

evolving needs. Initially, participants discussed their struggles in adapting to the pandemic. However, as the sessions progressed, the focus shifted towards their professional aspirations and development.

Study Group

The study group was formed using the criterion sampling approach, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods used in qualitative research. Criterion sampling involves examining all instances that fulfill many predetermined criteria for research. The criteria might be generated by the researcher or selected from a pre-established set of criteria (Baltacı, 2018).

In this study, the eligibility criteria for the participants were determined as follows:

- Being enrolled in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th year of the Guidance and Psychological Counseling undergraduate program,
- Having been in Türkiye during the pandemic period in 2020 and confirming their active participation in the sessions.

An announcement was created in accordance with these criteria and published on the social media of the YÖRET Foundation on June 15, 2020 (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBdYZBFDS29/>). In the announcement, it was stated that research would be conducted to improve the aspects of the pandemic that hinder the social, emotional, and professional development of psychological counselor candidates. The form aimed to determine applicants' eligibility by collecting demographic data and information on their expectations and reasons for applying. Among the 49 psychological counselor candidates who responded to the form, 18 candidates from various universities across the country were found to meet the criteria. The program commenced with 18 participants, but only 9 candidates fully participated until the end of a five-week peer support program. Presented below is the table containing the demographic data of the participants:

Table 1. *Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	Sex	Grade	City
1	19	Female	2	Istanbul
2	22	Female	4	Adana
3	19	Female	2	Istanbul
4	21	Female	3	Istanbul
5	21	Female	3	Denizli
6	21	Female	3	Istanbul
7	19	Female	2	Sakarya
8	21	Female	3	Mersin
9	22	Female	4	Kahramanmaraş

According to Table 1, all individuals in the study group are female. The age range of the participants in this study is from 19 to 22, with an average age of 20. The study included 4 participants from Istanbul, 1 from Adana, 1 from Mersin, 1 from Denizli, 1 from Sakarya, and 1 from Kahramanmaraş.

Study Environment

Between March 2020- September 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic prevailed in Türkiye, making it impossible for individuals to meet face-to-face. Therefore, online applications such as Zoom Meetings have formed the environment for this study. Participants who met all the criteria defined for the study group (these criteria are defined under the title of the study group) were informed that they were accepted to the group study. Before the study, they were informed about how the process would proceed. Meeting links created through the professional Zoom account of the YÖRET Foundation were delivered to the participants. The online meetings were facilitated by a full-time psychological counselor and a volunteer expert (PhD) working at the YÖRET Foundation. Individuals accessed the meetings by utilizing their Zoom credentials at the scheduled day and time. The study commenced in June 2020 and was conducted every two weeks and concluded in August with a total of five sessions. In the first months of the pandemic, university students had difficulties adapting to the process when they suddenly switched to online education, and students stated that they needed time to integrate new routines and responsibilities into their lives while adjusting to the new order brought by the pandemic. When the participants' opinions were taken during the sessions about when the next meeting would be, they stated that meeting every two weeks was more suitable for them for this reason.

Role of the Researchers

In action research, the researcher has two roles at the same time: researcher and practitioner. In research conducted by Trondsen and Sandaunet (2009) it has been argued that the role of the researcher as implementer of a program provides a unique possibility to explore the social and cultural context in which such new services are introduced. In this study, the researchers took on these two roles.

Two researchers/practitioners took part in this study. The facilitator who took on the main responsibility for the research and implementation in the action research is a university faculty member with a doctorate degree in Guidance and Psychological Counseling and who has been working with young people at higher education level for many years. This facilitator who has served as a volunteer expert in YÖRET Foundation for many years in subjects such as writing projects, conducting projects, writing project books, providing training and group work to psychological counselor candidates. Researcher, actively participated as both a practitioner and researcher in all stages of the action research, from the planning stage to the reporting stage. During the implementations, she was assisted by another psychological counselor who worked as a full-time expert in YÖRET Foundation. This second facilitator, who collaborated as a therapist-co-therapist also completed her undergraduate education in Guidance and Psychological Counseling and serves young people within the foundation. This researcher contributed during the implementation phase of the action research.

The researchers' prior areas of specialization and their receptiveness to studies on assistance and unity prompted them to undertake this study. The researchers' subjective study experiences served as a corroborating foundation for the analysis and interpretation of the data.

The Peer Support Solidarity Group concept necessitates the presence of a minimum of a facilitator who serves as the group leader. The study engaged a proficient mental health specialist as the facilitator, who possessed expertise in the practice of group psychological counseling. In the study, a psychological counselor from the YÖRET Foundation participated as a supportive facilitator to oversee the technical support processes in the online PSS groups.

Data Collection Tools

Evaluation of the Sessions

Action research is a research method that offers resources throughout the entire process, including during the weekly planning stages and while evaluating the overall impact of the process. The facilitator kept notes throughout the process, as well as interview data and semi-structured focus group interview data at the conclusion of the procedure. During the weekly sessions throughout the process, participants were asked the questions: "What insights or lessons have you gained from this week?", "Which task provided the most favorable results for you this week?", "Which task posed the greatest challenge for you this week?", "What are your anticipated outcomes or desired results from the peer support and solidarity group?" and "What topics and methods would you prefer to be discussed in the upcoming session?"

Written Outputs from Sessions

Various activities were offered to participants in weekly peer support and solidarity sessions. In these activities, efforts were made to meet the social, emotional, and professional needs of the participants that were prevented during the pandemic. At the end of each activity, small and large group sharing was made, at the end of the activities, written documents such as drawings, lists and notes were obtained regarding the impact of the activity on the participants. This data was used to assess the stage in line with the initially designed purpose.

Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview

Two weeks after the 5th session of the action research was conducted, the researchers conducted a semi-structured focus group interview to test whether the data for the purpose set forth at the beginning of the research had reached saturation. The participants in the semi-structured focus group interview were asked the following questions: "How did the peer support and solidarity group process assist you?", "What were the difficulties you encountered in the peer support and solidarity group?", "How do you assess the facilitator's contribution to the implementation of the peer support and solidarity group?" and "Which experience in the peer support and solidarity group process was the most advantageous for you?"

Data Collection

The focus group discussion was conducted virtually using the Zoom platform in response to the Covid-19 pandemic circumstances. All participants attended the meeting. The duration of the meeting was 82 minutes. The questions were posed sequentially. If it was observed that there were duplications in the obtained responses, it was deemed that enough number of responses had been received for the respective question, and the subsequent question was proceeded with.

Data Analysis

In action research, data collection and analysis are not usually confined to distinct phases but are instead integrated into an iterative process. A well-established method for collaborative analysis involves using collected data as a foundation for continuous reflection on shared themes, patterns, differences, root causes, or potential opportunities. For example, methods

such as body mapping, photography, or video projects often unfold through a series of workshops, each incorporating small-scale cycles of training, data collection, and data analysis. In these workshops, participants create or collect materials based on a specific prompt and then engage in critical discussions to interpret and evaluate the significance of their work (Cornish et al., 2023).

In this research, the analyses were handled in two parts: process analysis and outcome analysis. The evaluation of the sessions and the outputs obtained from the sessions were analyzed within the framework of process analysis, while the semi-structured focus group interview was analyzed within the framework of outcome analysis. Thus, while the progress and change of the action research in each session was monitored, data analysis was also carried out to obtain definitive information about the end of the research.

Process Analysis

Inductive analysis involves examining a dataset or field to identify patterns and establish order by organizing observations into meaningful groups. This process begins during data collection, as recurring elements, themes, or patterns are identified. Similar observations are coded and grouped into preliminary categories, forming the foundation for further analysis (Johnson, 2014).

In this study, firstly, the feedback received from the participants and the session outputs as a result of the weekly sessions were evaluated. At the end of the sessions, a detailed session summary was written and the outputs obtained at the end of the session were brought together. These notes were reviewed by the researcher several times and a table were created regarding the recurring themes. Then, the subcategories of these categories were obtained. This analysis was repeated after the sessions held every week and the changes on the same categories were analyzed (Johnson, 2014) and the process analysis was reported.

Outcome Analysis

Content analysis method was used to analyze the focus group interview conducted to evaluate the results of the research. Krippendorff (2013) describes content analysis as a research method designed to produce replicable and valid conclusions from texts or other meaningful materials in relation to their contextual applications (p. 24). While conducting the analyses, the content analysis steps put forward by Schreier (2012) were taken into consideration:

1. Formulating the research question (Was the purpose set for the action research achieved?)
2. Choosing appropriate materials (Interview questions were prepared, the interview was conducted, and the resulting video recording was transcribed.)
3. Developing a coding framework (A first draft of the themes was created.)
4. Segmenting materials into coding units (Themes that emerged in the text were noted.)
5. Testing the coding framework (The themes that emerged in the sessions were compared with the themes obtained from the interviews.)
6. Revising and refining the coding framework (The resulting codes were reviewed.)
7. Conducting the primary analysis
8. Analyzing and presenting the results

Credibility, Data Validity and Reliability

To ensure the credibility of the research, strategies such as long-term presence in the research environment, continuous and careful observation, in-depth knowledge acquisition, data diversification, video and audio recordings, expert opinions, reflection of the views of all participants and detailed description were used.

In the study, all processes and stages were tried to be explained in detail. In this context, how the data collection tools were developed, how the applications were made, how the data were analyzed and interpreted were clearly stated. In addition, the data obtained as a result of the analyses were tried to be described by supporting them with direct quotations. This study aimed to establish internal validity by employing long-term interaction, in-depth data collecting, expert review, and participant confirmation. After the research data were coded separately by two field experts, the resulting code list was finalized. External validity was maintained using precise descriptive and intentional sampling methods. Furthermore, the study assessed the internal validity by examining consistency, and the external validity by examining confirmation (Koşar, 2018).

Findings

Through the analysis of conducted interviews and the opinions of participating psychological counselor candidates, the main themes, and sub-themes regarding their experiences in the peer support and solidarity group during the Covid-19 pandemic were identified. The findings are elaborated upon below, with direct quotations from participants.

Expectations from Peer Support and Solidarity Group

Both action research and peer support and solidarity groups involve group members, with the assistance of a facilitator, in determining the suitable material and methodology for the participants. The first research question of this study focused on the needs and expectations of the participants from the group. Additionally, their expectations from the group were assessed. The responses obtained in this regard are deliberated about within the subcategories of healing, need for peer support and sharing, coping with uncertainty, and building social network.

Healing

Considering the escalating impact of the pandemic in Turkey between March 2020 and June 2020, university students were predominantly compelled to reunite with their families and pursue their education through online platforms. The profound transformation has posed challenges in adjusting to the daily routine known as the new normal. During the second session, in the activity where they reviewed the pre- and post-pandemic period, the members realized that the pandemic had both negative and positive aspects. This awareness contributed to their healing by making it easier for them to adapt to the present day. Participant 5 expressed her experience of the incident as overwhelming as follows: "I am very overwhelmed and feel like I have no purpose in these new conditions." P9 simply expressed her objective of addressing the challenges she encounters in adapting to daily life by means of the peer support and solidarity group, stating: "I feel very overwhelmed and have had difficulty adapting to the changes brought about by the pandemic. I thought this [group/support] might be of assistance. It offers an environment where I can express how the process has affected me and helps me understand how to adapt and cope with these changes."

Participants expressed their desire to transform their negative emotional state into a positive one within the pandemic restrictions.

The statements of the participants, specifically P1's "Seeing people around me, including myself, who are students, feeling unhappy, tired, and hopeless about their futures, I applied to this group both to feel that I am not alone and because I want to put an end to this situation," P7's "I applied to turn my negative mood into a positive one," and P8's "To reduce the stress and anxiety created by the pandemic, to improve myself in the psychology field, and to experience the group dynamic," support their desire to reduce feelings of stress and anxiety and transform their current emotional states into positive ones.

Need of Peer Support and Sharing

Pandemic restrictions, distancing from peers, and predominantly leading an isolated life within the family during the pandemic period have led to intense feelings of loneliness among university students. In the first session, during the activity designed for the members to get to know each other, they shared personal experiences about themselves. During these interactions, they realized that they had faced similar problems and supported one another. P1, who explains that this loneliness has further driven young people into unhappiness and hopelessness, has expressed the purpose of joining the group in this context as follows: "I applied to this group because I saw that people around me, including myself, who are students, were unhappy, tired, and felt hopeless about their futures. My reason for joining was to feel that I was not alone and to put an end to this situation. Psychologically, I wanted to regain some composure and know that I was not alone."

P6, who believed that sharing the sense of isolation during the pandemic period would ease it, expressed with the following words that peer participants experiencing similar experiences could understand them and that talking without any pressure would be beneficial for them: "To share feelings and thoughts with my peers who are also going through the same period as me... A quest for a platform where we can share our emotions and thoughts with each other... To be able to talk freely and without restrictions on various topics and to listen to others." P3, expressing the need for a sense of belonging due to the feeling of rootlessness caused by isolation, has defined her goal as "creating a sense of belonging."

P2 has expressed the belief that people who have experienced similar difficulties can understand each other with the following words: "A community where we can come together with people facing similar challenges, share our experiences and feelings, support each other during this process, and feel understood." The belief that sharing feelings of loneliness and pandemic experiences under appropriate conditions could also provide a solution to the challenges faced during this period has been considered. P4, who is also among the young people expressing the needs of university students at the YÖRET Foundation, has expressed how they can collectively build this path to a solution with the following words: "We realized during a meeting at the YÖRET Foundation that we all needed a group study where we could generally share our feelings. Discussing our common problems and brainstorming how to approach them together." P5 has stated that in this process, seeing the ways used by her friends in seeking solutions to what they have experienced will inspire them with the words, "To meet regularly to understand what others who shared the same period experienced, whether we went through similar things, and how they responded to these situations."

Coping with Uncertainty

The initial months of the pandemic were characterized by numerous uncertainties. The Ministry of Health issued statements based on the weekly death and infection rates and explained the measures implemented by the Scientific Board of the Ministry of Health to the public. These measures include curfews, immunization requirements, changes to work schedules, and limits on intercity travel. They have been identified as significant factors that profoundly alter people's living arrangements. The fluctuating nature of these weekly assessments has engendered an atmosphere of unpredictability, particularly during the early months, for individuals who struggle to anticipate upcoming events. University students have also experienced the impact of this uncertainty, both in their roles as citizens and as students. In the third session, an activity was conducted where members were asked to envision themselves five years into the future. During the activity, feedback provided by the facilitator and other members highlighted thoughts and emotions related to the uncertainties of the future. As a result, the intense anxiety stemming from these uncertainties shifted, contributing to the members' ability to cope with them more effectively. P2 expressed her anxiety due to uncertainty as follows: "The anxiety I felt was due to the uncertainties of the pandemic period." During this process, the uncertainties experienced, and the lack of a predictable future have also led to outcomes such as future anxiety and a sense of purposelessness for university students making career plans. P3, who wanted to strengthen her coping mechanisms in the uncertain environment within the peer support and solidarity group, used the words, "The difficulties I experienced during the adaptation process to the pandemic period, the emptiness that came with the sudden end of social life, coping with future anxiety." P8, on the other hand, expressed that the uncertainty she was in had left her completely immobilized and that she joined this group in order to take action with the following words: "I am in a state of not knowing what to do. That's why I thought I needed a group like this."

Building Social Network

Due to the pandemic, traditional in-person university education was paused, leading to a significant increase in the number of students accessing online courses. The education primarily emphasized the formal aspects, resulting in a considerable drop in student interaction due to the sudden transition to online settings. Due to the absence of communal spaces on campus, the level of social engagement among students has significantly declined. Nevertheless, students started experiencing a sense of detachment from the external world and were required to reestablish connections. The participants, who displayed a strong focus on their careers, had an anticipation for the peer support and solidarity group to provide them with a new social network environment.

P3, with the statement "To build a network and make new friends...", P4, with "To establish interactions among university students and to promote these groups to other universities. To interact with my peers in the same department...", and P7, with "To meet new people...", expressed their expectations from the group in relation to their need for socialization.

Benefits of Peer Support and Solidarity Group

The study's second research question focused on the specific benefits that participants received from the peer support and solidarity group, which was developed using the action research approach. The findings in question were categorized into sub-themes, including the building of sustainable social networks, professional sharing, a sense of not feeling lonely, unconditional acceptance, and relief.

Building of Sustainable Social Networks

The curfews implemented during the pandemic period had a particularly significant impact on the youth population. These restrictions were particularly enforced on individuals under 20 and over 65, making it more challenging for these age groups to maintain their social interactions. This situation had a similar impact on the university students who participated in this study, and they decided to cut themselves off from their social networks. During the group process, the activity in the first session encouraged members to open about themselves. Additionally, the same activity involved asking members to make predictions and interpretations about other members, which contributed to fostering sustainable social networks among them. P3 recalled the presence of social interactions during the pandemic era and expressed the following: "This process has demonstrated that social life can still exist during the pandemic period. I have made many friends in the virtual environment whom I wanted to meet and embrace, and I have come to see them as siblings. After every meeting, I have felt relaxed, healed, and safe."

In the networks established through this study, one of the key issues frequently emphasized by group members was the importance of sharing current situations naturally and the resulting sustainability of the network through these established connections. P6 summarized this circumstance with the subsequent statements: "It was a group that made me very happy, and I'm glad I joined. Thanks to this group, I made friends from many different cities. The fact that we still meet and the discussions on many topics that are not normally talked about in every social setting, have brought us closer, making it an unforgettable group."

P8 emphasized the importance of building diverse networks different from their usual ones with the statement, "First and foremost, thanks to this group, I got to know YÖRET and became a volunteer for YÖRET. This has given me networks in many ways. I have made wonderful friendships." Additionally, the joy of encountering new people was supported by P9's words, "I have met wonderful people, each of whom is precious." and P7's statement, "I have met new people."

The statements of P5, "In the middle of the session processes, I went through a challenging family period emotionally. During this time, I had a period of disconnection from the group, but when I started attending again, I easily adapted with the help of my group friends. Being able to meet with these people, whom I felt understood by, really provided a valuable and easy-to-win communication network." and P1, "Thanks to this process, I have added people I can always be in touch with in both my future career and social life. This group has enabled me to have an environment where I can be myself and experience unconditional acceptance and respect, and as a result, I feel very special and happy. I believe it is crucial for everyone, especially those working in the field of psychology, to have such a group experience in some way because, through this experience, they will confront themselves and accumulate valuable memories." also support the idea of establishing sustainable networks.

Professional Sharing

In this Peer Support and Solidarity Group (PSS) study, the priority is to protect university students against the crisis in pandemic conditions, but the issues are to be addressed every week due to the nature of both action research and peer support and solidarity groups determined by participants. University students also brought up career-oriented themes with future concerns during this period; they noted that they are interested in topics such as being an expert in various fields in the discipline of psychological counseling, academics, and

postgraduate education. It was recorded that one of the sub-themes of the findings obtained in this direction was shaped by the professional sharing title. In the fourth session, career-focused discussions supported members in sharing professional insights related to their own professions. P9 briefly expressed the activities that took place under this heading as follows: "We shared information about our profession in the ongoing process."

The statements of P4, "I have cultivated professional friendships that I can consult and seek support from. I believe we have built mutually beneficial strong bonds." and P8, "I have identified the appropriate contacts to reach out to when facing challenges or when I have inquiries related to my department." support the idea of establishing networks that can serve as a guide for knowledge sharing and mentorship within the sub-theme of professional collaboration.

Sense of not Feeling Lonely

The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as an event of global significance, almost a once-in-a-century experience for humanity in the 21st century. During this challenging period, people encountered difficulties adapting to the pandemic conditions. Loneliness was among the foremost contributing factors to this adaptation problem. The experiences of the solidarity and peer support groups in this study served to serve as a reminder to the participants that they were not the only ones suffering from the pandemic conditions. From the very first session, the encouragement for members to express themselves helped them recognize that they were not alone and that others might share similar experiences. P7 articulated this perspective with the following remarks: 'I established connections with new individuals. Throughout the pandemic, it made me realize that everyone shared similar feelings, dispelling the notion that I was the only one with distinct experiences.' P9 similarly noted that the turmoil of the pandemic had a widespread impact and shared her sense of loneliness with the following statements: 'I discovered that I was not alone. The pandemic didn't disrupt not only our household but also my life, other people experienced that as well. Conversing with individuals in similar circumstances helped me come to terms with the situation. We listened to each other, shared our emotions, and sometimes recognized that we were experiencing the same feelings.' P5 conveyed that the support and solidarity within the group increased their desire to participate further, expressing their thoughts as follows: 'I was undergoing a period in which my life expectations socially decreased, and I became more withdrawn. However, as time progressed, being in the company of individuals with whom I could engage in discussions related to my field and share similar academic and social experiences rekindled my enthusiasm for attending more sessions.'

Participant P8 emphasized that the feeling of loneliness decreased during the group with the statement, "We had a very nice harmony with my group mates and my sense of loneliness has been greatly reduced. It was a great group process that everyone should experience. It was very relaxing to be with many people with whom I spoke the same language." Additionally, the statements from participants P2, "With the support of my friends, I recovered myself in a short time and it was good for me to hear the message that I was not alone." and P4, "I observed that we were experiencing similar journeys. I realized that each member of the group mirrored a different aspect of myself. When I embarked on this journey, my cousin had been diagnosed with leukemia, and the medical prognosis appeared bleak. However, the group, alongside the medical treatments, persisted, and my cousin ultimately recovered. It felt as though the group provided support for me throughout this challenging period." also support the notion that the feeling of loneliness decreased thanks to the group's sharing.

Unconditional Acceptance

The participants stated that the most healing side of the peer support and solidarity group provided unconditional acceptance. Stating that this supportive environment works both to know herself and to feel better, P1 expressed this experience: "This group provided an atmosphere where I could be myself. It made me have an environment where I received unconditional acceptance and respect, so I felt special and happy. I think it is important for everyone, especially people working in the disciplines of psychology, to have such a group experience in some way because they will face themselves with this experience and accumulate valuable memories."

P3 highlighted that the group's practice of unconditional acceptance allowed her to authentically express herself and readily open up: "I faced no obstacles because everyone greeted me with unconditional acceptance... The most exquisite aspects were the liberty to be entirely myself, to express and experience my emotions, the assurance that I was not alone, and the knowledge that I would not face judgment." In a similar state of mind, P9 initially harbored concerns about sharing within the group; however, her worries subsided as she experienced the power of unconditional acceptance. She shared, "Being part of this group was truly delightful. Our togetherness was underpinned by the unconditional love we held for one another. Initially, I was concerned about revealing my true self, but over time, I overcame this feeling."

Relief

University students have encountered the challenge of feeling disconnected from life during the pandemic. The bonds established and the experiences gained in the peer support and solidarity group have contributed to overcoming this disconnection and readjusting to life. In the second session, through the activity conducted, members reflected on the pre- and post-pandemic periods and, despite negative experiences, felt a sense of relief in the here and now. P5 described the transition from disconnection to reconnection as follows: "I was in a period when my social expectations from life were diminishing, and I was becoming more withdrawn. In this process, being in the company of individuals with whom I could discuss my field and who had experienced similar academic and social processes encouraged me to participate more eagerly in the sessions as time progressed."

P9 stated, "I felt a sense of calm. Before each session, I sat with curiosity, wondering, 'What will we do?' It added vibrancy to the monotonous turmoil in my life." P1, "After each session, I found myself much more relaxed and felt supported by those around me. For these reasons, every meeting was overall very beneficial to me." and P7, "One of the positive aspects was the sincerity of the people, which was comforting." support the idea that participants felt more relaxed and that their lives gained a sense of vibrancy as a result of this adaptation.

Challenges Experienced in the Peer Support and Solidarity Group

Peer support and solidarity groups involve sharing subjective experiences within a group setting. Participants, with the dual responsibility of personal disclosure and active group participation, may face occasional challenges during the process. The following subsection explores sub-themes related to the difficulties experienced by participants in the Peer Support and Solidarity Group organized by the YÖRET Foundation, including the exposure of negative experiences, anxiety experienced initially in the group, and external conditions affecting the group process.

The Exposure of Negative Experiences

In the peer support and solidarity group study based on unconditional acceptance, the positive and negative subjective experiences of the participants were also shared by the group. Although the sharing of fragile experiences in the group seems to be challenging for the participants at the beginning, the negative experience revealed by the group dynamics was shared by P2, where the feeling of support came at the end: "The difficult aspect for me was that I suddenly cried unplanned in the group due to my anxiety. I was not in a good mood and I felt really bad when I cried in the group but then again with the support of my friends. I recovered myself in a short time and it was good for me to hear the message that I was not alone."

P1 stated that it is challenging to face herself rather than share some experiences with group members. Notwithstanding this difficulty, P1 accentuated the transformative dimension of this process by stating: "To me, each group meeting held immense significance and importance. In each of these sessions, I grappled with inner conflicts, confronted myself, and oscillated between moments of melancholy and elation. I encountered some profound confrontations, particularly concerning my personal life, which proved to be exceptionally demanding."

Anxiety Experienced Initially in the Group

Participants, who were previously unacquainted with each other, acknowledged facing difficulties in opening when the group activities commenced. In the first session, the activity designed to help members get to know each other reduced the anxiety of those who were hesitant to open to the group or within the group. P2 summarized this situation with the following statement: "I began the group with great enthusiasm, yet I harbored concerns about revealing myself because I was going to share my innermost feelings with people I had just met."

The statements of P6, "I was apprehensive about sharing myself, fearing that I couldn't authentically represent who I am. I was also concerned about the emergence of domineering group members. I'm glad it did not happen like that." and P9, "At the start, I was anxious about revealing myself, but as time passed, I successfully conquered this feeling." highlight that the initial anxieties they experienced at the beginning of the group were temporary and alleviated through the group dynamics.

External Conditions Affecting the Group Process

The peer support and solidarity group, conducted remotely and online due to pandemic restrictions and the participants' different locations in various cities, presented external challenges to the participants beyond its content, operation, and group dynamic features. Expressing the difficulties encountered in meeting the group's requirements in online environments, P4 articulated this as follows: "Participation in online sessions was occasionally challenging for me, especially when my home environment was complicated. The online format posed some challenges for me in terms of the environment."

P5, on the other hand, expressed that she had a hard time managing some matters in the family and keeping her bond with the group, regardless of the group: "I had a challenging family period during the group processes. In this process, I had a breakaway time from the group, but when I started to join again, I adapted easily thanks to my group friends."

Experiences with the Facilitator in Peer Support and Solidarity Group

It was noteworthy that one of the issues frequently emphasized during the evaluations of peer support and solidarity groups was the experience of the facilitator. This theme was shaped by

the sub-themes of ability to apply therapeutic conditions and techniques, facilitator's competence according to participants, personality traits, and time management.

Ability to Apply Therapeutic Conditions and Techniques

The most emphasized aspect of the participants' experiences with the facilitator was that the facilitator provided the fundamental therapeutic conditions for the group. In all sessions conducted during the group process, the facilitator's verbal and non-verbal behaviors helped members gain more benefit from the group. With the establishment of unconditional acceptance, participants reported feeling unique, as exemplified by the following statements:

P3: "Our facilitator leader was incredibly understanding, caring, and compassionate. When I was talking to her, I always felt like I was in a therapy session. Above all else, I realized that I was unique."

P1: "The unconditional love and respect of our facilitating leader for each and every one of us..."

Moreover, the facilitator's skill in making connections within the group and recalling participants' previous statements was considered significant for fostering the participants' sense of uniqueness.

The statements of P8, "The facilitator was sincere, listened to us very well, and did not forget what was said in the group. She was someone who I always felt was there for us and supported us." and P2, "The facilitator was so much one of us that we felt comfortable while talking. She had a structure that took care of us, accepted us, and summarized the subject very well. Our group dynamic was established on such an understanding, accepting, comfortable, and trustworthy basis that I could feel comfort and trust and continued in this flow. Especially the effect of our facilitator on the formation of the group dynamic was very great, because she both listened to us, remembered what we said, and approached us with a very understanding and respectful communication based on unconditional acceptance. This makes us feel very good. I can say that she was fundamental in the formation of group belonging." summarize the facilitator's ability to build connection effectively.

Additionally, as stated by P4, "I was very impressed by the fact that she was always supportive and equidistant from each member, and also the feedback that she was giving to the group was pretty impressive." the importance of the facilitator being equally supportive to all members was emphasized.

P5 highlighted the facilitator's empathetic skill, expressing, "I was impressed by the way she made us feel like she was a part of the group and simultaneously showed that she understood us, was one of us, and was empathetic."

Facilitator's Competence According to Participants

Participants assumed dual roles within the group, both as group members and as psychological counselor candidates.

P1, "One of the main reasons why this process has been so effective is the competence of our facilitator and her close approach to us." P9, "I lost track of time, and I liked the group. This was thanks to the facilitator. It was a process where everyone could express themselves comfortably." and P6, "She has been one of the most valuable facilitators I have added to my life. She is one of the biggest chances in the group. Her perspective on various topics had a significant impact on me, and she has been a competent role model for me." all highlight that the facilitator not only served as a facilitator but also as a skilled mentor.

P2 highlighted that the facilitator became a role model for her, attributing this to her role throughout the process. She expressed this sentiment as follows: "When I consider all that I've mentioned previously, I found the facilitator to be highly competent both during and after the process. She was like a complete psychological counselor. What impressed me the most was her unwavering commitment to her goals, her persistence, and her ability to achieve them. I hold deep respect and admiration for her, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to have gotten to know her."

Personality Traits

The participants stated that the facilitator is understanding, caring, and humble. Thanks to the facilitator's empathetic and understanding behavior toward the members throughout all the sessions, their experiences with the group were positively affected. P3 remarked, "Our facilitator was incredibly understanding, caring, and empathetic." P2 expressed her surprise that the facilitator's personal qualities did not align with the characteristics she typically associated with academics based on her prior experiences: "I was taken aback when I discovered that she was an academic, as she was such a humble, unassuming professor. It was truly surprising."

Time Management

The participants found the punctuality of the facilitator to be an important aspect of the group. The facilitator's commitment to starting sessions on time without postponement contributed to a sense of reliability. The adherence to the information provided about the group process in the first session, as followed by the facilitator throughout the sessions, was positively received by the members. Expressing that time was effectively managed, P9 shared her thoughts with the following words: "It was a process where time was managed very effectively." P7's "Our facilitator was very relaxing. One of the things that impressed me was that she was always on time for the sessions and never skipped." and P2's "The facilitator... was group-oriented, organized, and planned, summed up the topic very well." support the effectiveness of the facilitator's time management.

Memorable Experiences During the Peer Support and Solidarity Group

In this section of the study, the participants' findings regarding their memorable experiences during the peer support and solidarity group process are presented. The sub-themes under this theme were addressed as introductions, structuring and reintegration.

Introductions and Structuring

The first session of the peer support and solidarity group focused on introductions and structuring. In this session, the introductory activity was streamlined using games, considering the participants' anxiety. In this introductory activity, each participant received the following instructions: "Take a moment to scan the room you are in with your eyes. Within this room, find an object that reflects your current emotions and situation. Something you feel a strong connection to. You can choose this object deliberately or even randomly. If feasible, pick up the object and bring it with you." After the participants selected their objects, the instructions continued as follows:

- i. First, please display your chosen object on the camera without providing any explanation. (At this stage, each group member was requested to show their selected object on camera one by one, with the next person proceeding after each display)."
- ii. Group members observed the object and shared their associations with it, along with their thoughts on why the person who chose the object might have picked it. (During this stage, after the person who chose the object displayed it, other group members provided comments regarding the emotions or ideas the object evoked in them. These comments occasionally aligned with the person who selected the object, while at other times, they mentioned that it was a fitting choice, or sometimes, they stated they hadn't considered it at all. Adequate time was allotted for these remarks before redirecting attention to the person who selected the item.)
- iii. Which of these comments agrees with you? Can you share your reasons for selecting this object?
- iv. Could you please provide a brief self-introduction (with your name, surname, university, class, and city?)

As seen in the previous findings, participants who initially had difficulty opening noted that this activity left a lasting impression even after the session ended. P5 found the activity effective in terms of fostering mutual understanding: "In the first session, we selected objects that represented aspects of our lives. It was a great activity to get to know my groupmates."

P2, "We were choosing an item from our room, the item we liked the most, the one that reminded us of good things. We did it at the very beginning of the process, and it was my favorite activity." P3, "What we did in the first session was the activity of expressing ourselves by choosing an object." and P9, "The event where we selected an object from our surroundings and then discussed it." all highlight that this activity was their favorite.

Reintegration

During the second session, to create a supportive and united atmosphere for GPC undergraduate students and address their negative experiences during the pandemic, a bridge activity was implemented. The subsequent procedure unfolded as follows:

- 1) In the first stage, the facilitator summarized the experiences and challenges the group had faced since the onset of the pandemic in mid-March and how they had reached the present day. Participants were instructed to bring papers to the group, which they would later divide into three parts.
- 2) The participants who had divided their papers into three sections were given the following instructions:

"The first section of the paper symbolized the participants' lives before the pandemic, encompassing various aspects such as health, body, writing ability, hobbies, daily routines, relationships, mood, economic situation, and more. Participants were encouraged to express their thoughts, memories, or emotions related to that period through writing, drawing, or any creative means they preferred."

After this instruction, participants were given 10 minutes.

- 3) The participants who have completed the first stage will now receive the second stage of the paper, which includes the following instructions:

"The second section of the paper represents a river, which can symbolize the pandemic. The pandemic entered our lives and took some things away. In this section, I would like you to write or draw what went away from your life with the pandemic."

After this instruction, the participants were also given 10 minutes.

- 4) In the third stage, participants were given the following instructions:

"The river has been crossed, and you have transitioned into a new way of life. Here, you have elements from your pre-pandemic life and new additions. Would you kindly create visual representations of these?"

Participants were given 10 minutes for this stage too.

5) In the concluding part of the Bridge Activity, participants were guided to sketch a bridge spanning the river, symbolizing their adjustment to the present circumstances. On this bridge, they were encouraged to illustrate or write down the elements that had eased their transition to this stage. This segment enabled participants to contemplate the assistance and influences that aided their acclimatization to their current state. The sharing phase commenced once all participants had finished this task.

6) During the sharing phase, participants displayed a high level of enthusiasm for sharing their experiences. They shared in detail for each section of the bridge activity. The facilitator took notes during this sharing, and it was noted that participants agreed on several common themes related to what they had gained and lost.

Gains from the pandemic

- a) searching for meaning
- b) self-acquaintance
- c) health
- d) empathy
- e) rest, pause, and slow down
- f) unity, similarity, and equality
- g) reevaluating goals
- h) desire to stay at home and introspection
- i) Spending more time with the computer
- j) Reconnecting with family roots
- k) Questioning the meaning of life
- l) Plant cultivation
- m) Uncertainty
- n) Spending more time in the kitchen

What the Pandemic Took Away

- a) Rush and hustle
- b) Sense of security
- c) Friendships
- d) Traveling
- e) Freedom
- f) Happiness
- g) Sense of usefulness
- h) Disruption of home and previous routines
- i) Graduation ceremonies
- j) Sports activities

P1 and P6 expressed that this activity was unforgettable for them with the following sentences:

P1: "In one of the first meetings, our facilitator made us draw a picture with a bridge about where you see yourself in your life during the pandemic. I never forgot this activity."

P6: "Pandemic-Bridge activity. We all said, drew, and explained where we were on the bridge."

P4's "We made a time bridge with the facilitator. I made a bridge to connect me before, during, and after the pandemic. During that time, I realized that I was affected more by my cousin's leukemia than the pandemic. Even after the pandemic, I realized that I made my life busier. I got so emotional that I could never forget that moment when I talked about my drawing. I am keeping that drawing paper." and P8's "I saw my yesterday, today, and tomorrow with the bridge activity. I saw what I did, where I am, and what I want to do. It was an activity that increased my awareness." highlight both the positive and negative effects of the pandemic on their lives.

Result and Discussion

This article introduces the Peer Support Solidarity (PSS) Group Model, designed for the development of psychological counselor candidates during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Following the model's implementation, the study identified both primary and subsidiary themes within group experiences. These themes derived from participant responses, encompass expectations from the peer support and solidarity group, benefits received from the peer support and solidarity group, difficulties encountered in the peer support and solidarity group, experiences related to the facilitator in the peer support and solidarity group, as well as unforgettable experiences within the peer support and solidarity group.

In the scope of the first research question, answers have been sought regarding the needs of the participants and their expectations from the group. According to the responses obtained in this direction, four sub-themes have emerged: a) healing, b) peer support and need of sharing, c) coping with uncertainty d) to establish new social networks.

Infectious disease outbreaks play a critical role in the emergence of emotional distress and social disorders in the community, and individuals have had difficulty adapting to everyday life activities as a result of the compulsory changes they experienced in the pandemic process (Cullen, Gulati, and Kelly, 2020). People often tend to cope by creating a group or joining a group when they find themselves under stressful and difficult conditions (Dooley & Catalano, 1984; Forsyth, 2010). P9 expressed her feelings: "I am overwhelmed, I cannot adapt to the changes brought by the pandemic, the feeling of being overwhelmed, and the purpose of living under the conditions brought by the pandemic. I thought it might help...."

Considering the impact of isolation measures on mental health during the pandemic, peer support is generally effective in improving mental health, although it is not a therapeutic intervention (Suresh et al., 2021). Given that participants collectively face a shared challenge like the pandemic, the group experience fosters the awareness that others may have similar feelings and thoughts regarding individual challenges, fostering the realization that they are not alone (Koydemir, 2019a). It makes it easier for future psychological counselors to get the support of their peers within the group, especially with the feeling of universality they hear, to reduce their anxiety and interact (Siviş Çetinkaya & Karairmak, 2012). Previous studies indicate that students manage the stress of entering university by forming broad peer networks (Hays & Oxley, 1986). In this direction, the need for universality in joining the group and the need to establish new social networks for improving mental health, peer support, and sharing P6 stated, "I like to share the thoughts and feelings with my peers who have gone through the same process" Uncertainty when suppressed has potential to create emotional negative effects on individuals. (Koffman et al., 2020). During the pandemic, although we were informed about the details such as what the disease is, how it spreads, how many people are seen, and

how many people have been killed in the pandemic, the continuity of the isolation measures, information on the safety of vaccines and the future effects of the disease have not been clarified. Accordingly, it was observed that future psychological counselors wanted to join the group to reduce their anxiety caused by uncertainty.

In addressing the second research question, the study aimed to uncover the benefits that participants gained from their group engagement. The responses yielded five distinct sub-themes: a) establishment of sustainable social networks, b) professional experience sharing, c) cultivation of a sense of companionship and shared experiences, d) experiences of unconditional acceptance, e) support for re-adaptation to life.

Along with the pandemic's influence on our physical health, it has given rise to a social crisis in fundamental aspects of social life, notably in interpersonal interactions (Mondada et al., 2020). A commonly employed strategy to manage the stress resulting from this social crisis is the pursuit of emotional or social support (Luo et al., 2022; Park et al., 2020). In a study conducted by Çetin and Anuk (2020), university students revealed a significant need for socialization during the pandemic period and reaffirmed their desire for increased social interaction once the pandemic subsided. In this context, P1 underscores that one of the benefits of group participation is the establishment of enduring social networks post-pandemic, as they express, 'Thanks to this process, I have connected with individuals with whom I can maintain communication in both my future career and social life.' As emphasized by P1, a notable benefit of group participation was the mutual support provided by participants, not only in their social lives but also within their career domains.

In alignment with trait-factor career theories, it is well-documented that psychological counselors predominantly exhibit typical behavioral characteristics associated with the social personality type. Consequently, psychological counselors tend to gravitate towards problem-solving through communication and teamwork, finding satisfaction in their extroverted behavior when engaging with others (Bacanlı, 2018). Extroverts have a tendency to learn and engage in problem-solving through communication with their surroundings (Hellriegel & Slocum, 1975; Pişkin, 2018). It is posited that the heightened significance of professional sharing as a benefit may be attributed to the fact that the participants are pursuing careers as psychological counselors.

The restrictions and physical distancing measures enforced during the pandemic have led to an increase in social isolation and loneliness (Ernst et al., 2022). Feeling a sense of companionship and shared experiences is one of the advantages of group counseling. In this context, it is evident that individuals who are new to group participation may initially experience a sense of isolation, perceiving the challenges they face as unique to themselves (Koydemir, 2019a). Research indicates that individuals who belong to social groups compared with those who do not tend to report lower levels of loneliness (Forsyth, 2010). In this context, within the peer support solidarity group, P9 expressed, "I realized that I was not alone. The pandemic brought chaos not only to our home but also to my life. Engaging with individuals in similar situations helped me in come to terms with the situation. We engaged in open dialogue, shared our emotions, and often discovered our experiences." The necessity for individuals experiencing loneliness to experience unconditional acceptance by a group is underscored (Tuna, 2019). P1 highlights, "This group provided me with an environment where I could genuinely be myself, where unconditional acceptance and respect were extended. Consequently, I felt a profound sense of uniqueness and happiness." P1 emphasizes that the supportive atmosphere within the PSS group facilitated participants' self-discovery and well-being. As students cope with shared problems, peers support one another (Forsyth, 2010). Individuals who felt they were not alone and experienced unconditional acceptance in the group's life expressed that they overcame the difficulties they experienced in the pandemic

process due to their departure from their normal routines and living conditions and that they adapted to life.

The third question of the research is directed towards an exploration of the challenges confronted by participants during their engagement in the group process. A thorough analysis of the responses provided by the participants has unveiled three sub-themes: a) the disclosure of negative experiences, b) the initial anxiety experienced at the commencement of the group, c) external factors influencing the group process.

As an example, P2 articulated her apprehension regarding the initial phase of sharing with individuals she had not previously known, stating, "I was enthusiastic when I started the group. I was anxious about sharing my personal life with people I had just met." Group cohesion is a concept that reflects the level of unity and solidarity within a group, underscoring participants' self-acceptance and their sense of belonging (Koydemir, 2019a). Given that the pandemic conditions persisted throughout group engagement, some members faced challenges in maintaining their participation due to the difficulties they encountered outside the group. These participants expressed that their reintegration into the group was facilitated through group cohesion. Observations revealed that group members who shared their subjective experiences in the later stages of the group reported difficulties, particularly when discussing their negative experiences. However, P2 underscored that the factor contributing to the emergence of negative experiences within the group was the profound sense of unconditional acceptance. P2 explained, "Because of my anxiety, I had a bad day, and I suddenly cried. After I cried, I felt bad. My friends supported me. They told me I was not alone. this made me feel good."

The fourth research question investigates participants' experiences related to the facilitator. According to the responses obtained in this direction, four sub-themes have emerged: a) the ability to apply therapeutic conditions and techniques, b) facilitator's competence according to participants, c) personality traits, d) time management.

The facilitator tries to use its techniques and leadership skills effectively to support the personal development of leading participants in the psychological counseling process with the group (Koydemir, 2019b). In addition to the use of techniques and skills, the high empathy and warmth of the psychological counselor in providing therapeutic conditions are associated with positive changes in the client (Garfield & Bergin, 1971). In the PSS group, the facilitator's ability to apply therapeutic conditions and techniques positively affected the participants, as described by P3: "Our facilitator leader was incredibly understanding, caring, and compassionate. I always felt as if I was in a therapy session while talking to her. First, thanks to her, I realized that I am unique." In addition, it has been observed that the binding skills used by the facilitator make members feel special. The effective usage of the facilitator's skill was expressed by P8 with the words "The facilitator was absolutely sincere, a good listener, and she did not forget what was said". Participants' competence as a candidate psychological counselor by taking role models shows the maturity that the facilitator has achieved in fulfilling her duties and responsibilities. (Gizir, 2019). P1, thanks to the facilitator's competence that the group has been effective she said " One of the main reasons for this process to be so effective is the competence and close approach of our facilitator leader.". In addition to being professionally competent, the facilitator must have healing personality traits such as unconditional acceptance, sincerity, transparency, and empathy (Kağnıcı, 2019). In the Peer Support Solidarity Group, participant 3 expressed the facilitator's qualities as understanding, caring, and humble, stating, "Our facilitator was incredibly understanding, caring, and empathetic." The effective combination of a psychological counselor's competence and personality traits, coupled with the possession of self-management skills for improved time organization, proves to be effective in maintaining

control over events (Güçlü, 2001). Participants acknowledged that the facilitator's effective time management contributed to the group progressing in an organized and planned manner. The fifth research question was designed to investigate the lasting impressions and significant experiences of participants within the PSS group. In response to this question, two distinct sub-themes emerged: a) meeting and b) reintegration.

Group activities play a crucial role in advancing the group's developmental process and guiding it toward a specific objective (Çakır, 2019). During the initial session, the primary goal is to acquaint the participants with each other and foster a positive group dynamic and atmosphere (Gizir, 2019). Within this context, it was evident that the planned introduction activity was widely regarded as an unforgettable experience by the participants. Similarly, the Bridge activity, which aided in the participants' reintegration, was also described as another unforgettable experience. This emphasis on activities, rather than interpersonal interaction, in the participants' accounts of their memorable experiences related to the group is believed to be a characteristic of future psychological counselors. It is presumed that these future counselors engage in group participation to gain valuable personal experiences.

While the PSS group was initially established as an intervention in response to the crisis, its role in fostering developmental aspects also became evident. It can be asserted that the PSS Group not only aids the emotional and professional growth of psychological counselor candidates but also alleviates feelings of isolation and facilitates adjustment to their daily lives during the pandemic. Additionally, peer support practices have proven to be significant and contribute to students' development. Consequently, the applicability of PSS group interventions at all levels of education, particularly in times of crisis (such as a pandemic or natural disasters), holds great importance in supporting students' emotional and social development. In this research, the PSS group was conducted online. It is suggested that, especially for groups with similar needs, like the students in this study, the program be conducted in face-to-face settings as well, and its effects be evaluated through both qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings of this program underscore the importance of supporting students' developmental aspects, emphasizing the need to establish support groups and conduct research during these periods while considering developmental tasks that cover various growth stages.

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