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RATIONAL GROUP COUNSELING WITH ANXIOUS UNDERACHIEVERS

ABSTRACT: Although the issue of academic underachievement is of considerable social significance, a survey of literature reveals a dearth of effective treatment procedures. The present study was designed to investigate the effectiveness of a rational group approach in the academic recovery of underachievers. Eighty-four anxious high-school underachievers were divided into four equal groups and were exposed to one of the following: rational group counseling, teaching of rational ideas, teaching of study skills, or no treatment. Immediately after the termination of treatments the underachievers receiving rational group counseling showed significantly greater reduction in irrational beliefs and, five months later, they showed significantly greater improvement in school marks.

With the increasing importance that our society is placing on education, the problem of underachievement in schools has come to take on considerable social significance (Raph, Goldberg, & Passow, 1967). Students whose academic achievement is not commensurate with their capacities have been the recipients of much concern and study. A survey of relevant literature reveals academic underachievement to be a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Factors such as negative self-concept (Payne & Farquhar, 1962), poor relationships with parents (Jackson, 1968) and with peers (Tannenbaum, 1962), and fatalistic attitudes toward performance and reluctance to postpone immediate gratification (Hummel & Sprinthall, 1965), have been known to characterize students in academic difficulty. In addition, a high level of anxiety appears to provide some important clues to the disparity between ability and performance (Sarason, Davidson, Lighthall, Waite, & Ruebush, 1960).

Shaw and Brown (1957) believe that:

. . . underachievement on the part of bright students is not a surface phenomenon easily modifiable, but rather is related to the basic personality matrix of the individual (p. 199).

Numerous attempts have been made to rectify the kind of irrational factors which help prevent a young person from meeting one of society's first demands — that of satisfactory school performance. However, in

spite of a variety of programs which have been tried, a clearly defined "treatment of choice" does not yet exist (Rand, 1970). A successful treatment technique presupposes an explicit theoretical rationale which can account for the given phenomenon. Ellis (1963) has provided such a rationale — Rational-Emotive Therapy.

The most basic feature of the rational-emotive approach is an accurate identification of underlying irrational beliefs and their subsequent replacement with more realistic concepts (Ellis, 1963). Irrational conceptions are culturally conditioned confusions which are often sustained through verbal self-indoctrination. Prototypes of unsound and irrational ideas that most underachievers come to uphold are:

"one should always be approved by everyone,"

"one should never be frustrated in anything,"

"it is easier to avoid life's difficulties and self-responsibilities than to face them,"

"one has little or no control over oneself," and

"school should be . . ."

It is the self-defeating nature of such highly irrational beliefs which a rational therapist directly identifies and then challenges. The therapist concentrates on the elements of *confrontation* and *encounter*.

There are several reasons to suspect that a group setting has inherent advantages over individual therapy (Stieper, 1963). Because individual functioning is firmly grounded in the group to which one belongs, the use of group support for personality change almost becomes a necessity. When placed within the context of a group, i.e. when exposed to the process of group interaction, a student is confronted with others' perception of himself. Furthermore, adolescents are, in general, more receptive to interpretations coming from their peers than from the therapist alone.

PROBLEM

The primary purpose of the present investigation was to determine whether or not high-school underachievers who are exposed to rational group counseling would show a significantly greater reduction in their irrational beliefs at the conclusion of the treatment period and a significantly greater improvement in school marks five months later, than would subjects not so exposed.

PROCEDURE

Selection and Assignment of Subjects

The source of data for this study was limited to 539 students enrolled in grade 10 of a large city high school during 1968-69. An underachiever was defined as a student whose T score for aggregate achievement (in four major courses) fell 8 or more standard points below the T score for his ability (SCAT). The number 8 was arbitrarily used to provide an adequate sample size. The criterion arbitrarily established for the identification of anxious students required an individual to score 51 or above on the Alpert and Haber Scale (AAT). Eighty-four

students, 57 boys and 27 girls, met the combined anxiety and under-achievement criteria. All those who met the selection criteria were invited to participate in a voluntary "academic recovery program."

The 84 subjects selected were divided into 12 subgroups of seven each. Administrative and scheduling difficulties prevented complete randomization. However, the three counselors involved in the study picked three sub-groups each, at random. Furthermore, the treatments were assigned at random. Thus, a partial randomization of subjects was achieved. Nine subgroups, i.e. 63 subjects, were thus assigned to treatments. The remaining three sub-groups, i.e. 21 subjects, were pooled together and labelled "control."

The pre-treatment scores concerning actual academic achievement, test anxiety, and irrational beliefs for all the subjects of this study were used to ascertain the comparability of the four treatment groups formed. These groups were found comparable on the said variables.

Treatment Conditions

The whole study was conducted within the framework of the guidance department of the city high school. The three counselors who took part in the study were qualified and experienced. The investigator discussed the treatment methods with the counselors over two sessions of approximately two hours each.

Group A was counseled according to rational group orientation.

Group B was taught the rational replacements of the 11 major irrational ideas by Ellis.

Group C was taught study-skills, and

Group D was not given any treatment.

Nine weekly sessions of approximately 50 minutes each were conducted over the period April-June, 1969. All meetings were held during school time. Some of these sessions were recorded on tapes. Two qualified and independent judges were asked to listen to the audio tapes. These independent auditors confirmed the validity of the three treatment methods.

Criteria Measures

School marks in four major courses (English, social studies, mathematics, and science) provided the principal criterion against which effects of different treatments were evaluated. The differences between the pre-treatment aggregate marks and aggregate marks obtained five months after the completion of treatment were used in order to assess the delayed reaction to the treatments.

Another measure adopted to evaluate the relative success of the different treatments administered under this investigation was the Irrational Ideas Inventory (I-I) by Zingle (1965). This instrument is based on the eleven major irrational ideas (beliefs) which Ellis (1963) suggests are basic to, and sustain maladaptive behavior.

RESULTS

The pretest — posttest gain (difference) scores on the I-I Inventory for each group were used for statistical tests of significance.

An analysis of variance was performed on the difference scores in order to ascertain the significance of differences among the four group means.

TABLE 1

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PRE- AND POST- TREATMENT SCORES ON THE I-I INVENTORY FOR ALL FOUR GROUPS

Group	A	B	C	D
Mean.....	-14.19	-12.57	- 7.67	+ 2.48
SD.....	20.86	27.25	15.71	16.05

The use of the Newman-Keuls procedure indicated that, using an alpha level of .05, the difference between means for group A and group D achieved statistical significance. Thus, the hypothesis that group A would show the greatest reduction in the degree of irrational beliefs was partially upheld.

Analysis of variance of the pretest — posttest aggregate achievement score differences revealed that the group means were not significantly different from each other at this time.

TABLE 2

SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PRE- AND POST- TREATMENT SCORES ON THE I-I INVENTORY FOR ALL FOUR GROUPS

Source	df	MS	F
Between.....	3	1183.57	2.81*
Within.....	80	420.45	

**p* < .05

The difference between pre- and follow-up treatment aggregate achievement scores for each group were used for statistical tests of significance.

TABLE 3

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PRE- AND FOLLOW-UP AGGREGATE ACHIEVEMENT SCORES FOR ALL FOUR GROUPS

Group	A	B	C	D
Mean.....	+30.79	- 1.39	+ 6.37	+ 5.56
SD.....	36.56	24.12	21.59	35.31

An analysis of variance was performed on the difference scores in order to ascertain the significance of differences among the four group means.

TABLE 4

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PRE- AND FOLLOW-UP AGGREGATE ACHIEVEMENT SCORES

Source	<i>df</i>	MS	<i>F</i>
Between.....	3	3709.99	4.09**
Within.....	70	907.69	

Note: Ten subjects were lost due to school leaving or school transfer.

** $p < .01$

Using the Newman-Keuls procedure and an alpha level of .05, it was found that group A showed change which was significantly greater than the changes in groups B, C, and D. Thus, the hypothesis that group A would show the greatest improvement in school marks was fully supported.

DISCUSSION

The finding that, immediately after the termination of treatment, the underachievers exposed to rational group counseling showed a significantly greater reduction in irrational beliefs than the subjects in the control group, and that five months later, the underachievers exposed to rational group counselling showed significantly greater improvement in school marks than the subjects not so exposed, support the main contention of this study.

Perhaps the delayed reaction to rational treatment can be attributed to the "time lag" that usually exists between one's thinking and one's responses. An individual needs a thorough examination of, and considerable practice with, new rational formulations such as, "It is *not* easier to avoid life's difficulties and responsibilities than to face them," before the implications become noticeable. It is suggested that the underachievers might have continued repeating rational ideas to themselves for months before the results were reflected in their school performances.

An important implication of this study is, that given rational group counseling of even brief duration, the academic achievement of high-school students can be enhanced substantially. Since the conditions of the present study were the ones under which school counselors usually operate, the outcome of this study might be considered especially encouraging to practising counselors. It is hoped that the present study takes "minimum change" (Tyler, 1960) a step further by demonstrating that such a phenomenon is also associated with the use of the rational group counseling procedure.

Further research should address itself to the identification of both client and counselor characteristics which may maximize the outcome of rational group approach.

RESUME: Bien que le sous-rendement scolaire ait une portée considérable sur le plan social, un relevé de la documentation révèle qu'il existe très peu de méthodes de traitement efficace. Cette étude a été conçue pour explorer l'efficacité d'une approche de groupe rationnelle dans la récupération scolaire d'étudiants sous-productifs. Quatre-vingt-quatre (84) étudiants sous-productifs et anxieux ont été divisés en quatre groupes égaux. Ils ont été exposés à une des méthodes suivantes: counseling de groupe, enseignement magistral, enseignement de méthodes d'étude, aucune méthode. Immédiatement après la fin des traitements, les sujets ayant participé au counseling de groupe ont manifesté une diminution significative de croyances irrationnelles, et cinq mois plus tard on a noté une amélioration marquée dans leur rendement scolaire.

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