



Four- and ten-month lagged effects of individual counseling on the prosocial behavior of young people

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ABSTRACT

Promoting the prosocial behavior of young people is desirable. The individual counseling sessions held in schools and in youth centers can effectively promote prosocial behavior among the youth. Given the lack of relevant research on this topic, this study aims to examine how individual counseling in a natural setting contributes to the formation of prosocial behavior among the youth after four and ten months. Data from 1735 and 1490 young people came from a two-wave panel survey. The individual counseling sessions held in both schools and youth centers demonstrated significant positive effects on the prosocial behavior of young people after four and ten months. However, such an effect was weaker on those young people recruited from youth centers. These results indicate that the contributions of individual counseling are both generic and attenuated because of the abundance of functions provided in youth centers.

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1. Introduction

Many young people undergo individual counseling to solve their problems and guide their behavior (Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001; Luk-Fong, 2006). Prosocial behavior, which refers to helping, supporting, or collaborating with others in the community, is of paramount concern especially among the youth (Flouri, Buchanan, Tan, Griggs, & Attar-Schwartz, 2010). Many young people tend to display antisocial behavior rather than prosocial behavior (Mahoney, Stattin, & Lord, 2004). Such behavior is valuable not only for the personal development of the youth, but also for the well-being of society (Matsuba & Walker, 2004). Therefore, prosocial behavior can result from individual counseling (Nucci, 2001). Individual counseling has demonstrated its effectiveness in addressing many mental problems, sustaining mental health, and reducing antisocial behavior (Boulton et al., 2001; Erford et al., 2011). Nevertheless, only few studies have verified the contribution of individual counseling to the prosocial behavior of young people. This verification is vital because of four concerns. First, prosocial behavior is a by-product rather than a planned outcome of individual counseling. That is, individual counseling may be effective only in promoting a specific targeted outcome (Marquis, Douthit, & Elliot, 2011). Second, individual counseling may restore rather than increase prosocial behavior. This restoration implies that at some prior stage, prosocial behavior is equally high between an individual who has received counseling and another individual who has no need to receive counseling (Marquis

et al., 2011). Third, individual counseling may not generate a lasting effect on sustaining prosocial behavior (Erford et al., 2011; Marquis et al., 2011). Fourth, the effect of individual counseling sessions in youth centers may be different from those in schools (Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006). To address these concerns thoroughly, a single panel study is necessary to demonstrate the effects of individual counseling from youth centers and schools. The present study achieves this goal by examining the effects of individual counseling on prosocial behavior after four months and ten months.

Individual counseling refers to sessions that are personally conducted between a professional and a young person in either youth centers or schools to help the counselor address the problems of the counselee or to achieve specific goals. Youth centers refer to general-purpose units that are open to all young people who are aged below 25 years in the community. Individual counseling precludes vocational counseling, family counseling, and group counseling (as stated in the survey). Individual counseling has demonstrated its efficacy in solving specifically planned problems, such as distress, or achieving specifically planned goals, such as academic or career achievement (Fox & Butler, 2009; Turner & Conkel, 2010). However, the contributions of individual counseling in promoting the prosocial behavior of young people in a natural setting remain uncertain (Dik, Duffy, & Steger, 2012; Lee, Tilly, & White, 2009). The issues that are involved in such uncertainty include the specific and short-lived effect of individual counseling administered in a well-controlled setting (Barber, 2009; Erford et al., 2011; Marquis et al., 2011). On the one hand, the issue of specificity suggests that individual counseling can effectively solve specific problems of specific people in specific settings. As such, individual counseling may not be generally effective in promoting prosocial behavior (Dik et al., 2012). Accordingly,

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individual counseling is preferable for enhancing prosocial behavior even though such behavior is not the planned outcome of the counseling. On the other hand, the issue of the short-lived effect alternatively suggests the limitation of individual counseling and casts doubt on its genuine effectiveness. That is, the efficacy of individual counseling may be attributed to the short-term motivation and interpersonal relationship that are maintained during the session (Barber, 2009; Fall, Holden, & Marquis, 2004; Marquis et al., 2011). In other words, individual counseling may not be generally effective or its efficacy is illusionary (Erford et al., 2011; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Conversely, individual counseling needs to demonstrate its merit over time in a natural, unmonitored setting.

2. Contribution of individual counseling to prosocial behavior

Prosocial behavior is supposed to be a by-product of individual counseling to young people because of the potency of individual counseling and the amenability of prosocial behavior.

Individual counseling can be influential in many ways and can operate in many modes, such as behaviorist, cognitive-behavioral, cognitivist, emotion-focused, humanistic, psychoanalytic, and rational-emotive-behavioral modes (Fall et al., 2004; Gray, 2000; Izzard, 2000; Wampold, 2007). The behaviorist mode includes therapeutic strategies such as reinforcement, modeling, diversion, and desensitization. The cognitive mode involves Socratic questioning, the humanistic mode involves life guiding, the psychoanalytic mode involves dream work, and the rational-emotive-behavioral mode involves goal setting. Individual counseling can also effectively reinforce several personal characteristics, such as potential or desire for control, responsibility, attribution, connectedness, love, direction, and reality (Brodsky & Stanley, 2013; Dryden, 2003; Fall et al., 2004; Grawe, 2004; Wampold, 2007). The potency of individual counseling also stems from the general viability of social influence, which in turn rests on the credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness of the counselor (Li & Kim, 2004). Consequently, the influence of counseling does not need to be specific as designated in the counseling plan (Marquis et al., 2011). In particular, individual counseling is capable of raising motivation and expectancy, which are conducive to nonspecific change. Therefore, the contribution of individual counseling does not need to depend on its specific content (Erford et al., 2011; Marquis et al., 2011). Given its potency, individual counseling has exhibited contributions to prosocial behavior (Lee et al., 2009; Turner & Conkel, 2010). Nevertheless, the specificity and endurance of such contributions remain unknown.

Prosocial behavior is amenable to individual counseling that fosters cognitive functioning or reasoning and emotional attachment (Aquino & Freeman, 2009; Bergman, 2002; Nucci, 2001; Wentzel et al., 2004). The development of empathy, identity, and interpersonal closeness can enhance prosocial behavior (Flouri et al., 2010; Kayser, Greitemeyer, Fischer, & Frey, 2010; Ma, Shek, Cheung, & Lam, 2000). These factors in turn are amenable to individual counseling (Dryden, 2003; Fall et al., 2004). Individual counseling that sustains self-esteem or pride will be conducive to prosocial behavior (Krettenauer, Jia, & Mosleh, 2010). Conversely, distress and anxiety are obstacles to prosocial behavior (McCarroll, Lindsey, MacKinnon-Lewis, Chambers, & Frabutt, 2009; Wentzel et al., 2004) that tend to be removed by individual counseling (Fox & Butler, 2009; Minami et al., 2009). Therefore, prosocial behavior can emerge from individual counseling.

2.1. Sustained contribution

The durability of the contribution of individual counseling to prosocial behavior remains uncertain considering the questionable sustainability of the effects of individual counseling (Erford et al., 2011; Marquis et al., 2011). Therefore, the effect of individual counseling tends to decline because of the removal of surveillance, control, attachment, alliances, allegiance, engagement, reinforcement, and general atmosphere that are

associated with the counseling (Barber, 2009; Fall et al., 2004; Grawe, 2004; Marquis et al., 2011; Parker, 2002). These factors are conducive to the sustenance of prosocial behavior (King & Furrow, 2004; Nucci, 2001) and are necessary in ensuring adherence to the changes that are demanded by individual counseling (Beale, Bradlyn, & Kato, 2003). New risks, problems, and disruptions may also emerge after the individual counseling, which will weaken its effectiveness (Parker, 2002) in forming prosocial behavior (Kayser et al., 2010; Ma, Shek, Cheung, & Tam, 2002). The events that follow an individual counseling can also influence the effectiveness of the counseling (Grawe, 2004). According to the social constructionist perspective of individual counseling, any meaning that is generated from the counseling is fluid and subject to changes after the counseling (Simon & Whitfield, 2000). Such effects may also diminish because of memory loss (Wood, Read, Mitchell, & Brand, 2004). Given these effects, repeated individual counseling may be required to restore its effects (Fall et al., 2004). Consequently, this research examines the sustained effect of individual counseling.

2.2. Greater contribution of individual counseling in youth centers than in schools

The individual counseling sessions in schools and youth centers are both efficacious in promoting prosocial behavior (Lee et al., 2009; Turner & Conkel, 2010). However, individual counseling in youth centers may engender a stronger effect than that in schools (Larson et al., 2006) because of the autonomy, democracy, motivation, initiative taking, and holistic development that are present in youth centers as opposed to the compulsion, passivity, hierarchy, and academic emphasis that are present in schools (McLellan & Youniss, 2003; Schwerin, 1995). These factors in youth centers account for the effectiveness of individual counseling in these centers (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

2.3. Lesser contributions of individual counseling to youth center recruits than to school recruits

The recruits from youth centers tend to engage in various activities that are available in these centers. Youth centers typically offer various recreational, remedial, and developmental activities apart from individual counseling (Ngai, Cheung, To, Liu, & Song, 2013), which implies that the recruits from youth centers are more likely to experience the overload, overcrowding, abundance, or satiation of these services. Such an experience may reduce the contributions of individual counseling with respect to the law of diminishing marginal return, the principle of satiation in exchange theory, or the principle of overload in role theory (Akers, 1998; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2006; Rose-Krasnor, Busseri, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2005). These laws and principles state that an increasing number of services are decreasingly influential because of the capacity constraint of the service user. Specifically, the law of diminishing marginal return originates from the observation that a field is becoming less productive with increasing yields. The principle of satiation in exchange theory refers to decreased appetite after finishing a sufficient meal. The principle of overload in role theory emphasizes the ambiguity, conflict, and strain that result from role overload.

3. Hypotheses

The following hypotheses evolve:

1. Receiving individual counseling in schools and/or youth centers engenders a positive effect on the prosocial behavior of young people after four and ten months.
 - 1.1. The individual counseling in youth centers generates a more positive effect than those in schools.
 - 1.2. The effects of individual counseling on the youth center recruit are less positive than are those on the school recruit.

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