

## **The Inner Experiences Among Group Members Experienced Before and After the Group Sessions in Groups of Personal Development of Integrative Eclectic Type**

**PhD Miroslav Pendaroski**

*MIT University, Department of psychology, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia  
m.pendaroski@yahoo.com*

**Vesna Blazhevska, MSc**

*MIT University, Department of psychology, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia  
mailvesna.d@gmail.com*

**Nikolina Talevska**

*“Perfect circle” – school for integrative psychotherapy, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia  
nikolina.talevska@hotmail.com*

### **Abstract**

The present study investigates the inner experiences among group members, experienced before and after the group psychotherapy sessions. This research was conducted over two years. The sample comprised 27 participants who are members of psychotherapy group of integrative eclectic type. Each member of the group was writing down the inner experiences experienced before and after the group sessions. There were 48 group session. Analysis showed that there are differences in terms of inner experiences that members of the group experience before and after the group sessions.

**Keywords:** integrative-eclectic, group psychotherapy, inner experiences

There are many attempts for meta-analysis of different types of group support, especially in terms of psychotherapy groups with an emphasis to their impact on improving the health of clients who have been part of therapy groups. Robert J. DeRubeis and Paul Crits-Christoph collected the results of the most relevant scientific research in this field. They can point out the diversity of findings regarding the effect of the group treatment in terms of the final outcome in mental disorders. Namely, they cite findings that explore the effectiveness of group treatment for all eleven mental disorders and problems defined by Chambless and Hollon (Chambless, Hollon, 1998) They have found that all treatments can be reduced to three possible effects of treatment: efficient, efficient and specific and possibly efficient.

Fonagy and Roth (Roth, Fonagy, 1996) also suggest that there are hundreds of studies that measure the effectiveness of various psychotherapeutic group treatments in terms of different range of disorders - depression, PTSD, social phobia, generalized panic disorder, agoraphobia, schizophrenia, etc. De Rubis and Chris-Christophe say that one of the problems is that depression is the most researched issue, especially the cognitive approach in its treatment. In such studies scientifically valid instruments are often used. One of them is BDI - Beck Depression Inventory – BDI, which is a powerful tool. Some of these studies where BDI was used, showed 59% efficacy of treatment with psychotherapy of cognitive type.

In addition to the studies of the effectiveness of cognitive therapy, dominant position is taken by the research of behavioral therapy. Jacobson and colleagues (Jacobson et al., 1996) found that although behavioral therapy in the treatment of depression is less effective than cognitive therapy, yet it produces results.

Certain studies of interpersonal therapy show excellent results as compared with the pharmacy-therapeutic approach to depression and other disorders. These findings are closer to the present research because integrative-eclectic groups for personal development are close to interpersonal so called encounter groups of humanistic approach, empathy and high interpersonal interaction. These findings support the hypothesis presented in this study. Of course there is a range of meta-studies that explore the effectiveness of therapies in dealing with panic and anxiety, social phobia, obsessive – compulsive disorders, etc.

There are studies that explore common multimodal role of several group factors in terms of the efficiency of the groups and the group experience to the personal development of members of the groups. The study of Johnson Burlingame, Olsen, Davis and Gleave explores the statistical and terminological overlap between some of the major factors of the therapeutic relation: group climate, group cohesion, alliance/companionship and empathy in terms of

relation of the group member-group member, group member–therapy group and group member-group leader. Their study confirmed the hypothesis about the relation of these constructs in the overall effect and impact to the group members. These findings are significant for our study in terms of empathy, cohesion, alliance and group climate.

The study of Johnson, Burlingame and Fuhriman was investigating group cohesion in the treatment groups. They arrived at a result that there are six empirically supported principles inside the group cohesion: group pre-preparation, early structuring of group interaction leader, group feedback, modeling leader and emotional expression of members (Burlingame, Fuhriman, & Johnson, 2001).

In another study, Johnson and Burlingame Fuhriman were investigating the group cohesion in group therapy and announced the finding that there are six principles supporting the development and maintenance of group cohesion: pre-group preparation, early structuring of the group, leader interactions, group feedback, leader modelling and emotional expression of the members. It was shown that the preparation of the members before the start of the group contributes to greater cohesion in the group (Burlingame, Fuhriman, Johnson, 2001, p. 4). Also this study showed that maintaining the emotional climate is crucial for group cohesion and the final effect of the group experience. This is evidence in favour of the hypothesis about the emotional experiences in the groups for personal development presented in this research.

Burlingame, Fuhriman and Mosier also investigated the differential effectiveness of group psychotherapy in a large meta-analysis of 111 experimental and quasi-experimental studies published in the last 20 years. There was investigation of range variables significant for group psychotherapy in order to discover common and specific aspects of the effectiveness of group psychotherapy work. Also, three separate dimensions of performance were investigated: comparisons between active members of groups and people who do not attend group therapy; active members versus clients who attend alternative treatments and comparisons between the differences in the state of clients before and after the group experience. The latter dimension is directly related to the hypotheses listed and researched in this study. For example, some of their findings suggest that members of more homogeneous groups showed greater improvement compared with the members of more heterogeneous groups (Burlingame, Fuhriman, & Mosier, 2003, p. 7).

Another group of meta-analysis still investigates the differences in the group effectiveness compared to individual psychological treatment. Generally, these meta-analyzes

indicate that there are no statistically significant differences between these two types of psychological treatments (McRoberts, Burlingame, Hoag, 1998). However, these generalizations do not give an accurate picture in terms of differences in efficiency because they do not take into account enough intervening and relevant variables that could change the findings. For example, a group phenomenon that is not present in the individual therapy and significantly influence the outcome of the psychotherapy (group cohesion, group support, feedback group, the so-called pressure groups, roles group and many others).

It is important to be noted that some studies and meta-studies for the effectiveness of treatment in group psychotherapy and personal development groups have come to the information for the criteria/methods for operationalization of the statistical findings that may be taken for the basic assessment of the success and effect of group work. Namely, Jacobson and Truax came to the conclusion that the following three methods give an opportunity for operationalization of the research problem from a statistical aspect:

1. The level of functioning immediately after treatment should be dropped out of the range of operation in dysfunctional population.
2. The level of functioning immediately after therapy should fall into the range of operation of the so-called normal population.
3. The level of functioning immediately after therapy should place the client closer to the mean of the functional population rather than the mean of dysfunctional population.

Jacobson and Truax in their study came upon the findings that 43% of the respondents who were group therapy members achieved full recovery; 23% of the members had progress, but not total recovery and 34% of members did not come to any change or progress.

Such determinations indicate only the crucial, essential and general effects of group work in terms of mental health. They are not covering the specific psychological effects of treatments such as: quality of life, positive experiences and emotions, improved psychosocial functioning and adaptation which in this present study are at least partially taken into account. This applies especially to the experiences experienced by the group members before and after group therapy treatment, which are a dependent variable and the main goal of this paper.

In our country, there is a need for such a research, both from a professional, as well as from a broader humane perspective. In the Republic of Macedonia there are many different forms and methods of psychotherapy applied for personal development. There are many organizations, associations and offices dealing with group psychotherapy and psychological activities. Their work aims to improve the quality of people's life, to improve people's psychological functioning in all fields and to promote mental health in these stressful times filled with countless challenges.

In the Republic of Macedonia the relevant research based on psychology, methodology and practice is very scant. Most often the relevant frame of reference for examination the efficiency of a method or practice in these areas is taken from older research or findings from foreign countries. These findings are not always referring to the Macedonian population because a large part of the studies refers to a population that differs in many psychological and sociological parameters from the Macedonians: temperament, habits, attitudes, socio-economic status, social order and many others. Over and above there is a lack of solid theoretical support to psychological practice that is often applied without appropriate research findings and/or well-developed methodology and theory. Although many of the psychotherapy schools comply with the principles of the basic theories and methodology, there is a lack of scientific findings that concern the Macedonian population. For these very reasons this longitudinal research was conducted, that provides certain information concerning the impact of the psychotherapeutic treatment.

#### Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

- To offer reliable data for the effectiveness of integrative-eclectic approach to group psychotherapeutic work and personal development;
- To provide new insights about the impact of group work for improving the quality of people's lives;
- To examine whether there are personal developmental changes among the members of such groups;
- To contribute to the improvement of the empirical findings in the field of personal development and psychotherapy in Republic of Macedonia

- To give feedback to the possible advantages and disadvantages of integrative-eclectic approach;
- To provide reliable data that would be used for examination in further empirical researches;
- To offer scientific, empirical and theoretical reading text in order to improve and promote the psychological and psychotherapeutic practice;
- To offer topics for further development of similar areas of interest and to encourage examination of the research data.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

For the purpose of this research a convenience sample was selected, composed of available population group members for personal development of integrative eclectic type. The sample comprised 27 participants and 11% of them is male and 89% is female. The average age of the participants is 29 years. In terms of occupation the group was heterogeneous.

### *Variables*

*Independent variable:* the inner group experience and personal growth within the groups for personal development of integrative eclectic type.

*Dependent variable:* Quantity and quality of the inner experiences as the result of the inner group experience and personal growth in groups of integrative eclectic type.

The method used was a measured manipulation of the independent variable by exposing participants to group inner experience and collecting the positive, negative and neutral inner experiences expressed by participants in two occasions: at the beginning of the group sessions and at the end of the group sessions.

The dependent variable was measured through analysis and statistical evaluation of the results obtained as recorded inner experiences of the participants on two occasions: the first occasion at the beginning of the group sessions and at the end of the group sessions.

### *Research Problem*

The research problem was to study the impact of group psychotherapeutic work expressed through inner experiences of the group members to the quantity and quality of inner experiences of the members before and after the group sessions.

### *Research Questions*

- What is the total number of inner experiences experienced by group members before the group sessions and after the group sessions?

- What is the overall representation of positive, negative and neutral inner experiences experienced by group members before and after the group inner experience?

- What is the overall representation of positive, negative and neutral inner experiences experienced by group members before the group sessions and differences between them?

- What is the overall representation of positive, negative and neutral inner experiences experienced by group members after the group work and the differences between them?

### *Method*

The research uses a method of content analysis. The unit liable to content analysis is the denotative and connotative meaning of the words, depending on the context of broader meaning. The analysis uses an approach that analyzes every word, whether the same word appears several times i.e. the frequency of occurrence of words is considered. The analysis includes all the words except auxiliary semantic units: pronouns, adjectives, prepositions, etc. All available written material was analyzed. For the analysis were taken 2435 words. That is the total number of words that designate an inner experience. Of the total number of inner experiences, 1395 words that designate inner experiences are registered and classified before the group sessions and 1040 words are registered after the group sessions. In this research, the term "inner experience" has meaning of any emotional, cognitive or connotative phenomenon that reflects the current situation, feeling or emotion, authentically presented by the participants of this research. The classification of positive, negative and neutral inner experiences takes as its starting point the denotative meaning of the word - when the meaning is clear and precise. The connotative meaning of the word was considered in the context of the broader meaning and it was necessary to take a certain interpretation of inner experiences.

### *Techniques*

This research uses data collected in the form of recorded inner experiences in two sets - once before the start of the group sessions and once more after the group sessions. For each group session, the data was collected in a proper notebook. Writing down the inner experiences was anonymous for the sake of honesty and discretion. The participants were given a choice to note down as many inner experiences as they wanted. A qualitative approach was used. The collection of the data took about two years, and the information was collected during each of the 48 group sessions. The collected data was classified in two data groups: data of the inner experiences collected before the group sessions and data of the inner experiences collected after the group sessions. In each group, the data was divided in 3 categories: 1. Positive inner experiences 2. Negative inner experiences 3. Neutral inner experiences.

### Results

#### *Distribution of Total Number of Inner Experiences Before and After the Group Sessions*

The total number of registered inner experiences before and after the group sessions is 2435. Before the group sessions are registered 1395 inner experiences and 1040 are registered after the group sessions i.e. 57% of the inner experiences are registered before the group sessions, and 43% are registered after the group sessions. The total number of inner experiences registered before the group sessions is higher by 14%.

*Table 1*

Total Inner Experiences Registered Before And After The Group Sessions

	Total	Percentage	Difference in number of inner experiences	Difference in percentage
Inner experiences before group sessions	1395	57%	355	14%
Inner experiences after the group sessions	1040	43%		
Total	2435	100%		

*Representation of Positive, Negative and Neutral Inner Experiences Before and After the Group Sessions*

From the total number of 2435 registered inner experiences, 1510 or 62% are positive inner experiences, 838 or 34% are negative inner experiences and there are 87 or 4% registered neutral inner experiences.

*Table 2*  
Positive, Negative And Neutral Inner Experiences Registered Before And After The Group Sessions

Inner experiences	Total	Percentage
Positive inner experiences	1510	62%
Negative inner experiences	838	34%
Neutral inner experiences	87	4%
Total	2435	100%

*Representation of Positive, Negative and Neutral Inner Experiences Before the Group Sessions and the Differences between Them*

The positive inner experiences are represented with 729 registered inner experiences or 52% of overall registered inner experiences before the group sessions. The negative inner experiences registered before the group sessions are 598 or 43%, and the neutral inner experiences before the group sessions are represented with overall 68 inner experiences or 5%. The positive inner experiences registered before the group sessions are greater than the total number of registered negative inner experiences by 9% or overall 131 inner experiences. The total number of positive inner experiences before the group sessions (729) is greater by 661 registered inner experiences than the number of the neutral inner experiences (68) i.e. the difference in rates is 47%.

*Table 3*  
Differences Between Positive And Negative Inner Experiences Registered Before The Start Of The Group Sessions

Inner experiences before group sessions	Number of inner experiences	Percentage from total amount of inner experiences	Differences (No. of inner experiences)	Differences (percentage)
Positive inner experiences	729	52%		
Negative inner experiences	598	43%	131	9%
Total	1327			

*Table 4*

## Differences Between The Positive And Neutral Inner Experiences Registered Before The Group Sessions And Differences Between Them

Inner experiences before group sessions	Number of inner experiences	Percentage from total amount of inner experiences	Difference (number of inner experiences)	Difference (percentage)
Positive inner experiences	729	53 %		
Neutral inner experiences	68	5 %	661	48%
Total	797			

*Positive, Negative and Neutral Inner Experiences Registered After the Group Session and Differences between Them*

The results show that the positive inner experiences registered after the group sessions are represented with a total of 781 inner experiences or 75% of the total number of inner experiences registered at the end of the group sessions. The negative inner experiences are represented with a total of 241 inner experiences or 23% and there are 19 registered inner experiences i.e. 2% of the total number of inner experiences registered after the group sessions. From the overall registered inner experiences after the group sessions, the positive inner experiences are more frequent i.e. there are 540 or 52% more positive inner experiences than negative and even 762 or 73% compared to the neutral inner experiences registered after the group sessions.

*Table 5*  
Differences Between Positive And Negative Inner Experiences Registered After The Group Sessions

Inner experiences after the group session	Number of inner experiences	Percentage from total amount of inner experiences	Difference (number of inner experiences)	Difference (percentage)
Positive inner experiences	781	75%		
Negative inner experiences	241	23%	540	52%
Total	1022			

*Table 6*  
Differences Between Positive And Neutral Inner Experiences Registered After The Group Sessions

Inner experiences after the group session	Number of inner experiences	Percentage from total amount of inner experiences	Difference (number of inner experiences)	Difference (percentage)
Positive inner experiences	781	75%		
Neutral inner experiences	19	2%	762	73%
Total	800			

## Discussion

Regarding the results that refer to the total number of inner experiences before and after the group sessions, it is supposed that the members of groups for personal development are coming to group sessions with expectations that refer to their assumptions about group work, expectations for personal growth, change, solving personal problems, answering personal questions of various kinds etc. Group members already have certain knowledge about the quality of work in groups, personal beliefs and they have a lot of questions, ideas and desires. That conclusion is also supported by the fact that before starting the group work, there were preliminary meetings for the so called Pre-Group preparing process which prepares members of group for their expectations, beliefs, outcomes etc. These findings of ours are supported by some recent studies on group cohesion and especially of the effect of pre-group preparation (Santasiero, Baker, & McGee, 1995; Couch, 1995; Bednar & Kaul, 1994, according to: Burlingame, Fuhriman, Johnson, 2001) In comparison with the circumstances before the beginning of the group sessions, the members of groups after the group sessions have experienced certain personal processes during group work. This allows them to have a clearer insight and therapeutic processing of the issues, which in turn causes less frequent reporting of inner experiences that are now somewhat integrated. These conclusions are supported by certain researchers. Lambert, Michael Burley and Dean (Lambert, Michael J.; Barley, Dean E., 2001) studied four areas of factors that are relevant to the success of the group psychotherapy work: *external factors* (beyond psychotherapy process); *expectation factors* (the client's expectations); *specific therapeutic factors* and *common factors* (the impact on the clients and therapists). This study showed that despite the importance of the so-called common factors (the impact on the clients and therapists) and specific therapeutic factors, the external factors and expectation factors have significant influence over the results in personal growth and change. It was exactly the expectation factors i.e. the expectations of the group members that were found as significant factors for development, as it was confirmed by the results of this research by the number of registered inner experiences before the group sessions compared to the number of expectations registered after the sessions. In addition to these results comes the conclusion of our study regarding the impact of the external factors beyond the group work i.e. the influences of the everyday life, inner experiences and life positions of group members that they experience when coming to group sessions.

When it comes to the total representation of positive, negative and neutral inner experiences registered before and after the group sessions, the results confirm that the positive inner experiences dominate, suggesting that before and after the group sessions, the members of the group are reporting more positive inner experiences i.e. they feel mostly positive. This can be supported by the fact that the group members are experiencing the group psychotherapy work as positive inner experience and they express it by positive expectations before the group sessions and as a positive inner experience after the group session. These findings are supported in some recent studies on group cohesion and positive emotional climate which have shown that good emotional climate in groups, high group cohesion and good relationships between the members have strong positive impact on effects of the group experiences (Burlingame, Fuhriman, & Johnson, 2001 and others). Some other meta-analysis has shown similar findings reporting that nearly three fourths (71%) of the client diagnosis categories demonstrated reliable improvement (Burlingame, Fuhriman, Mosier, 2003, p. 8). This means that the group experience improves the mental health condition of client-members of psychotherapy groups and brings more positive feelings and thoughts.

The positive inner experiences are registered more often than the neutral. This suggests that the group members before and after the group session have more specific perceptions expressed as positive and negative sensations versus neutral sensations. In this case, the positive inner experiences are dominant as it was expected due to the previous conclusions. This conclusion leads to the results which show that the negative inner experiences are more common than the neutral. This is another confirmation of the conclusion that compared to the neutral and undifferentiated inner experiences; the positive inner experiences are dominant. In more general terms, these findings confirm that through psychotherapy, the inner experience in groups when it comes to the personal development of integrative eclectic type, the group members develop specific inner experiences, emotions and insights. They differentiate their phenomenal world that is influenced by the psychotherapeutical process in the group.

In terms of representation of the positive and negative inner experiences before the group sessions and the differences between them, the results presented above indicate that participants have a certain intuitive confidence in the outcome of group session. They are coming to the group sessions with desire and belief that they will achieve personal development. Consequently it can be concluded that people often have more positive than negative expectations, which is reflected in the more positive inner experiences before the

group session. Relatively large number of registered negative inner experiences before the group sessions may be explained by the assumption that the negative inner experiences are present mostly due to the impact of the external factors coming from the actual inner experience in life of the group members, i.e. before the group sessions, the group members are influenced by certain issues, questions and personal conflicts. From another perspective, negative inner experiences may be caused by the realistic lack of knowledge for the quality of group inner experiences and certain level of stress and anxiety before the group sessions.

Regarding the presence of positive and neutral inner experiences before the group sessions and the differences between them, the results indicate that the difference between the positive and neutral inner experiences is due to certain specific factors among members of groups. They are: familiarity with the type of group work and the possible positive effects, any previous experience with this type of work (many group members are psychologists and psychology related professionals), positive expectations, focusing on group work and the need for specific, operationalized attention focused toward the psychotherapeutical experience in the group.

Regarding the presence of positive and negative inner experiences after the group session and the differences between them, the results show that after the group session, the group members feel better compared to the inner experiences registered before the group session where the number of registered negative inner experiences was 598 compared to the number of 241 negative inner experiences at the end of the group sessions. The number of registered positive inner experiences has increased by 52 compared to the number of registered positive inner experiences before the group sessions. Thus, it can be clearly concluded that the group psychotherapy work had an effect on the events, there are more registered positive inner experiences and at the same time the number of registered negative inner experiences has decreased drastically.

In relation to the presence of positive and neutral inner experiences after the group sessions and the differences between them, it can be concluded that the group therapy work of integrative eclectic character not only increases the positive inner experiences and causes personal development, but also significantly specifies and differentiates the inner experiences of the group members.

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