

Running head: EFFECT OF GROUP LEARNING ON FOSTER PARENT STRESS

Effect of Psychoeducational Group Learning on Foster Parent Stress

Troy Backhuus, Joe Cook, Denise Hirschlein, and John Kennedy

Regent University

Research Assignment

*Assignment instructions: You are to create a research project to explore the experiences of various clients that participate in three different types of groups. One group will meet only online. The second group will meet face-to-face. The third group is a combination of both online and face-to-face. The three groups will be facilitated by three different experienced LPCs and meet once a week. The groups are expected to run for 16 weeks. You are to design a research proposal using the three group presented above. In this research proposal, you are expected to include the following: *Appropriate grammar, spelling, and writing construction/style will be evaluated in your responses.*

Research Proposal

Taking on the responsibility of foster parenting offers many rewards, but it often increases stress for foster parents. For example, two common reasons given for terminating guardianship by foster parents are stress and emotional exhaustion. Support groups for foster parents can help in reducing stress levels through psychoeducation and face-to-face interaction, thereby decreasing the chance that the foster parents will give up due to overstress and fatigue; however, attending a face-to-face support group takes time and energy, and the scheduled meetings do not allow for flexibility. Advances in informational technology have made online facilitation of support groups an option, and the flexibility of online format may be an alternative method of nurturing community among foster parents. This research is needed in order to compare the effectiveness of online psychoeducational groups with that of traditional face-to-face groups.

In order to explore the effect of online delivery of group psychoeducational support for foster parents, the Division of Youth and Family Services in Dallas County, Texas (DYFS) plans

to offer three formats of psychoeducational support groups for first-time foster parents. The goals of the offerings are to provide education concerning the distinctive needs of foster parents and foster children, nurture bonding between foster parents and children, decrease associated stress, confusion, fear, and anxiety, and help parents prepare for the eventual separation process. Foster parents who have had between six to nine months experience with their first foster child will be randomly assigned to one of three groups, Group A, Group B, and Group C. The groups will meet weekly for 16 weeks. Group A will meet only face-to-face, Group B will meet only online, and Group C will meet both online and face-to-face. A different Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) will facilitate each group. An independent researcher will administer an assessment at the beginning of the first week of the course as a pre-test in order to determine the original stress/anxiety level of the new foster parents. The researcher will also administer the same assessment during the last week of the course as a post-test in order to determine the concluding stress/anxiety level.

Demographics and Sampling.

Researchers will go to DYFS offices in Dallas County, Texas and gather names of possible participants matching the study's demographic profile. Researchers will provide DYFS personnel with a demographic profile of qualified study participants that the staff will use in notifying and soliciting potential qualified study participants. Qualified participants will be 25 to 60 years of age, have no previous foster parenting experience other than a foster child between 11 and 19 years of age in their care for the past six to nine months, have access to transportation to the community center, be in overall generally good health, and have dependable internet access. Once the target sample size of 60 subjects has been obtained, DYFS personnel will provide a description of the study and obtain signed informed consent before participants are

randomly assigned to groups (n=20). Participant names will be written on slips of paper, placed in a container, and drawn at random to control for selection bias.

Instrumentation.

The *Stress Index for Parents of Adolescents* (SIPA) (Lambert, 2007) assessment instrument contains a series of subjective questions in Leichert-scale format for use with parents or foster parents of adolescents, male or female, between 11 and 19 years of age in order to identify potential stress areas in parent-adolescent relationships observed by the parents or foster parents. The SIPA can also be used as an aid for social workers and clinicians to assess normal and abnormal levels of stress.

1. Identify the best research design for this study and your justification for specifically using the design for this study.

The best design for this study is a pretest-posttest randomized control group design because the researchers want to discover if there is a difference between the traditional face-to-face delivery of psychoeducational support groups and either a fully online format, or a mixed online/face-to-face format. This study design provides a pretest to set up a baseline of the stress levels for each of the groups and provides a posttest to measure stress levels for each group at the conclusion of the study. By using the same participants from start to finish in each group, the researchers should be better equipped to determine whether the delivery format makes a difference in the effectiveness of the experience. In addition, the face-to-face group can serve as a control group, or baseline, to which the researchers can compare the effectiveness of the online only and mixed online/face-to-face mixed formats in reducing parental stress.

2. *Identify the independent variable(s) and the dependent variable(s).*

The independent variables are online delivery and mixed face-to-face/online delivery for conducting the support groups. The dependent variable is change in the level of parental stress.

3. *What are the possible confounding and extraneous variables?*

One possible confounding variable is the variability among LPC facilitators. Differences in skill levels, experience, and personality may affect efficacy of the program delivery and outcome. One way the researchers propose to control for variability in LPC facilitators is to have standardized instruction manual, materials, and training for the facilitators prior to the start of research.

A possible extraneous variable is the impact of personal characteristics of the foster parents. For example, a 25-year-old foster parent might be more skillful and comfortable with using a computer than a 60-year-old who might never have used a computer; therefore, the younger foster parent may perceive the online experience as positive, whereas the older foster parent may feel just the opposite. Related extraneous variables include the ethnicity and culture of the foster parents and the gender and ages of the foster children. Although these variables could potentially threaten internal validity of the research, stratified sampling techniques might minimize the impact of the variables. For example, researchers could set up selection criteria regarding gender, race, and socioeconomic background that would enable them to select a sample that demographically matched the population of foster parenting families in Dallas County, Texas.

4. *What are your research questions (minimum of 3; maximum of 5)?*

RQ1: Is there a difference in the stress reduction for foster parents attending an online support group compared to stress reduction for foster parents attending a traditional face-to-face group?

RQ2: Is there a difference in the stress reduction for foster parents attending an online support group compared to stress reduction for foster parents attending a mixed online/face-to-face group?

RQ3: Is the online format more effective than the traditional face-to-face format for reducing parental stress? (Is Group B more effective than Group A)

5. *What are your hypotheses (minimum of 3; maximum of 5)?*

H₁: It is hypothesized that there will be a statistically significant difference in the reduction of parental stress between participants in the traditional face-to-face group format and participants in the online format.

H₀: There is no difference in the reduction of parental stress between participants in the traditional face-to-face group format and participants in the online format.

H₂: It is hypothesized that a statistically significant difference will be found in the stress reduction for foster parents attending an online support group compared to stress reduction for foster parents attending a mixed online/face-to-face group

H₀: There is no difference in the reduction of parental stress between participants in the stress reduction for foster parents attending an online support group compared to stress reduction for foster parents attending a mixed online/face-to-face group.

H₃: It is hypothesized that a statistically significant increase will be found in the effectiveness of the traditional face-to-face format as compared to the effectiveness of the online format for reducing parental stress.

H₀: The traditional face-to-face format will not be more effective than the traditional face-to-face format for reducing parental stress.

6. *What do you anticipate as the potential threats to external validity? Explain.*

Sampling bias due to ethnicity and culture of the foster parents and the gender and ages of the foster children may threaten the external validity of the study. Stratified sampling techniques might minimize the impact of the variables. For example, researchers could set up selection criteria regarding gender, race, and socioeconomic background that would enable them to select a sample that demographically matched the population of foster parenting families in Dallas County, Texas. The levels of pretest stress may be widely varied among participants; however, researchers might specify a minimum and maximum value on the SIPA given pretest to weed out any candidates experiencing extreme stress or lack thereof.

Multiple-treatment interference due to differences in feedback styles of the different facilitating LPCs could threaten the study's external validity because of the impossibility of generalizing the experience of specific facilitator/member interactions to the general population.

A difficulty arises when making generalization about all foster-parents. For example, should the post-test results of the online group indicate a decline in stress, researchers could not generalize that all parents would benefit from an online psychoeducational group because all foster parents are not new foster parents, as are the participants in this study.

7. What do you anticipate as the potential threats to internal validity? Explain

Because of the potential for participants to drop out, one threat to internal validity is mortality. Parenting involves an enormous investment of time and energy, and foster parents may decide that the group experience takes too much time away from their other responsibilities, resulting in their dropping out of the study.

Internal validity is also threatened by the possibility that participants may engage in alternative simultaneous methods of stress reduction such as family support, church activities, or self-help from books and Internet sources. History may threaten internal validity because some participants may select additional stress reducing materials to use in addition to the group experience; otherwise, the true experimental nature of the research design strengthens internal validity of the study.

8. What statistical analysis would you specifically use for this study? Defend why the statistical analysis you selected is appropriate to use for this study.

The appropriate statistical analysis for this research study is the One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) because this test allows the researchers to determine if a difference exists among the three means of the pretest-posttest scores from the SIPA assessment. The ANOVA analyzes degrees of freedom (df), and a probability factor (p) which determines if the results are statistically significant. To determine if the null hypotheses should be rejected, a One-way, two-tailed ANOVA will be used. Multiple T-tests would not be appropriate because such a technique increases the chance of Type-I error.

To determine the amount of difference among the three study groups, a post hoc test, Tukey's Honest Significance Difference test, will be calculated. The analysis would involve arranging the means in ascending order and calculating the difference between each pairs of

means. Next, researchers would calculate the minimum pair-wise difference needed, using Tukey's formula and then compare the difference between the means and the minimum pair-wise difference. Those larger than the minimum are the paired means that are significantly different, which means that the null hypothesis would be rejected.

9. Give another research design, how research conducted, and how data analyzed for this alternate research project.

Researchers want to determine if online psychoeducational training is at least as effective in lowering stress for foster parents as the traditional face-to-face format. By treating Groups A and B as a true experimental study, researchers will explore how an online psychoeducational group experience compares to a traditional face-to-face experience in lowering stress.

Group C provides a unique opportunity to study a homogenous group utilizing a hybrid online/face-to-face format. This alternate research design treats groups A and B as a pretest posttest randomized control group design, and treats Group C as a quasi-experimental design (equivalent time-sample design). Group C is receiving alternating face-to-face and online formats of the psychoeducational program. At the completion of the two studies, researchers will conduct a meta-analysis allowing them to synthesize the statistical results of the two studies (i.e., the true experimental design using groups A and B with the quasi-experimental design of Group C). The study of Groups A and B serves in effect as a control group study to which researchers can compare the results from the study of the hybrid Group C.

The sampling and demographic criteria remain the same as in the primary design proposal. Due to the nature of the design, mortality would be more of a threat to the study because participants who leave Group C are leaving the control and experimental groups.

The statistical analysis proposed for this design is the same One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) because this test allows the researchers to determine if a difference exists among the various means of the scores from the SIPA. Tukey's Honest Significance Difference test will be used to determine the amount of difference among the three study groups.

References

FosterParentNet. (2007). *Frequently asked questions*. Retrieved September 23, 2007, from

<http://www.fosterparentnet.org/faqs.aspx>

Lambert, S. (2007). *Test review: Stress index for parents of adolescents (SIPA)*. Retrieved

September 22, 2007, from <http://aac.ncat.edu/newsnotes/y99fall2.html>