A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE EFFECT OF EMOTIONALLY-FOCUSED MENTORING

By

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Abstract

This honors thesis stems from a larger dissertation study (Manvelian et al., 2021) that pilot-tested a novel psychotherapeutic intervention called, Emotionally-Focused Mentoring (EFM). EFM is a 5-week program designed to promote emotion regulation skills for insecurely attached first-year college students. Using narrative interview data collected during exit interviews with 55 participants who completed the EFM program, this thesis used grounded theory qualitative methods to systematically identify the major themes participants discussed after completing the program. Three independent researchers collaborated to create codes to classify participant responses in cycle one coding, and then grouped the codes into larger themes in cycle two. The coding revealed that by completing the EFM program, participants felt they had a stronger sense of self-awareness, better interpersonal skills, and better emotion regulation capacity then when they started. Overall, this work contributes a deeper understanding of how participants understood their involvement in the EFM and points to areas for future growth for the intervention.

Introduction

This honors thesis stems from work on a larger dissertation study (Manvelian et al., 2021) that pilot-tested a novel psychotherapeutic intervention called, Emotionally-Focused Mentoring (EFM). EFM is a 5-week program designed to promote emotion regulation skills for insecurely attached first-year college students. Because attachment insecurity in adolescence is associated with long-lasting adverse relational as well as mental and physical health outcomes (Nada Raja, McGee, & Stanton, 1992; Maunder & Hunter, 2008), EFM aimed to promote attachment security with the hope that focusing on core attachment struggles might result in better psychosocial wellbeing down the line. EFM employed the use of "mentors" as lay therapists to create a scalable program that can be more easily implemented across institutions. Mentors were trained to teach and promote more balanced emotion regulation skills when faced with challenging interpersonal scenarios. EFM was provided over the course of five weeks and demonstrated preliminary efficacy during our open pilot trial ($N = 82$), including improvements in attachment security, emotion regulation, loneliness, depressive symptoms, and self-esteem (Manvelian et al., 2021). Although this quantitative analysis provides promise for EFM and suggests that interpersonal emotion regulation is an important target, a more qualitative understanding of the impact of EFM is needed to understand how participants feel EFM is impacting them over time. Thus, in this honors thesis, I set out to explore the following question using qualitative exit interviews: How were mentees affected by Emotionally-Focused Mentoring?

Theoretical Orientation: Attachment Theory

The target area of attachment security is rooted in attachment theory, initially proposed by John Bowlby (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment is defined as the emotional bond that humans create with close others. Children first form attachment bonds with their caregivers. The degree

to which a guardian then engages in nurturing behavior and is responsive or unresponsive with their child contributes to the formation of the child's attachment style (i.e., the way they learn to manage their emotions in relationships to maintain feelings of safety or connection). Through these repeated interactions, these attachment dynamics begin to solidify, setting up our attachment style with friends, family, and significant others as we age and interact socially.

Anxiety versus Avoidance: The Consequences of Emotion Dysregulation

Attachment styles can be categorized in a variety of ways. Attachment styles can be split into two umbrella categories, insecure and secure. Insecure attachment can be further broken into two subtypes, anxious and avoidant. These attachment orientations have been conceptualized as emotion regulation strategies, where those who are more anxiously attached may be upregulating and those who are more avoidantly attached may be down regulating their needs (Manvelian et al., 2021). For example, someone who ranks higher on attachment anxiety might rely on constant validation and reassurance from others to feel a sense of security in their relationships. They are often in search of validation and assurance, rely heavily on their relationships, and worry that people will leave them at any given time. On the other hand, those who may be more avoidantly attached tend to isolate and keep to themselves, pushing relationships away and keeping people at arms-length. Those who are more avoidant may often withhold their emotions and tend not to forge deep connections because they have learned to only rely on themselves, fearing that they may be let down or abandoned by those they love. Through these descriptions, it becomes clear that insecure attachment styles have the possibility of disrupting the quality of relationships.

Insecurely-attached adults tend to have worse mental, social, and physical health (Johnson, 2019; Nada Raja, McGee & Stanton, 1992). Those who report being more insecurely attached report difficulties with emotion regulation, higher rates of mental health problems, and

greater difficulties maintaining healthy relationships (Huntsinger & Leuckin, 2004; Maunder & Hunter, 2008). Thus, given the consequences of attachment insecurity, our lab decided to develop a pioneering intervention program called Emotionally-Focused Mentoring.

Introduction to Emotionally-Focused Mentoring

There are many interventions that target specific mental health disorders; however, there are no interventions that aim to improve attachment security for adolescents or young adults, which may be one root cause of mental health problems in adulthood. Manvelian and colleagues (2021) designed a new intervention called "Emotionally-Focused Mentoring," to target the improvement of attachment security by fostering better emotion regulation skills through mentorship. Emotionally-Focused Mentoring is a 5-week psychotherapeutic program designed to try to promote attachment security. The program is designed such that the mentees meet with their mentors five times over the course of five weeks. They meet in a room one-on-one for an hour and mentors walk mentees through relational themes to help them identify primary emotions and help them express their emotions more productively, rather than suppressing their emotions or becoming overinvolved in them. Each session focuses on a relational theme, and the weekly breakdown is as follows:

Week 1 Welcome and Past Relationship History

Week 2 Maintaining Close Relationships

Week 3 Managing Conflict in Close Relationships

Week 4 Setting Boundaries (focus on hurtful/disrespectful relationships)

Week 5 Letting Go of Close Relationships

Surveys were administered during EFM three times over the course of five weeks. Using Bayesian growth curve models to study change over time, participants reported decreases in

attachment anxiety and avoidance, decreases in emotion regulation difficulties, decreases in loneliness, decreases in depressive symptoms as well as increases in self-esteem (Manvelian et al., 2021). Nonetheless, little is known about the qualitative effects of EFM on mentees. That is, what do mentees actually believe is happening through EFM? What are they taking away from this program?

Present Study

The present study aims to build on quantitative research from Manvelian and her colleagues (2021) to conduct a qualitative analysis of the impact of EFM on insecurely attached college students. Because it is not known what the participants of Emotionally-Focused Mentoring actually felt that they learned from EFM, I aim to investigate how the participants were impacted by Emotionally-Focused Mentoring. Using a qualitative grounded-theory approach (Saldaña, 2015), we conducted exit interviews with 55 participants who completed the program. Our research team then carefully transcribed these interviews to allow us to conduct a qualitative analysis.

Methods

Recruitment

This study was approved by a University Institutional Review Board. Participants have been recruited by the University of Arizona Psychology Department's mass survey given in introductory psychology courses that evaluated attachment security based on the 18-item Revised Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1996). Out of these people, a sample of 1,419 students was drawn and evaluated for eligibility to participate in the Emotionally-Focused Mentorship program. Participants who were younger than 25 years old and ranked high on

attachment insecurity were texted and emailed to inquire about their willingness to participate. They were provided with 4 research credits for participating in the program. 82 students completed session one, 72 completed three sessions, and 55 participants completed all five sessions, including their exit interview. The demographics for all 82 participants are described by Manvelian and colleagues (2021).

Participants

A total sample of 55 participants completed the exit interviews. The average age of participants in our sample was approximately 18 years old (m = 18.25, sd = .65), and the majority of participants identified as female (77.4%) and heterosexual (77.4%). Participants racial makeup was diverse, with 50.9% identifying as White/Caucasian, 17.0% identifying as multiracial, 13.2% identifying as Asian, 13.2% identifying as Hispanic/Latinx, and 5.7% identifying as other. Furthermore, a diverse range of household incomes were reported, ranging from 0-$9,999 to greater than $100,000. 21.2% of participants identified as a first-generation college student. Less than half of our sample (43.6%) noted that they had experienced therapy in the past, a minority (9.1%) reported that they were in therapy now, and 47.3% reported never experiencing therapy before. About a quarter of our participants had taken psychiatric medications in the past year (25.5%), and 27.3% reported experiencing thoughts about suicide in the past two weeks prior to starting the program.

Procedure & Measures

Participants came into the lab once a week for five weeks to meet with their mentors. After completing their fifth and final mentoring session, participants were greeted by a research assistant, who was not their mentor, and asked if they would be willing to provide us feedback for our mentorship program. After consent was obtained, participants completed a brief and

semi-structured exit interview. Participants were read the following script. “Thank you so much for helping us out. We are really interested in getting your feedback about our mentorship program. We really want your feedback to be genuine, whether it is positive or negative, so we can improve the program for future mentees.” Participants were then asked the following three questions:

Exit Interview Questions

1. First, we are curious how this program may have affected you? Anything else?
2. What was it like to have a mentor for 5 weeks?
3. Since being in the program, have you noticed any changes in yourself or in your life? If so, what changes did you notice?

Data Analysis

The purpose of grounded theory as a qualitative analysis approach is to develop a theory (i.e., to create categorical codes) that can provide a way in which to analyze and answer a defined research question. Using a grounded theory framework and a two-cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2015), a team of three research personnel analyzed the data using *NVivo* (Nvivo Version 10, QSR International Pty Ltd.). The research personnel included the author of this manuscript and two doctoral students in clinical psychology.

Precoding. Within the precoding phase, the research team randomly selected one-third of the participant exit interviews to create an initial set of codes from which we can analyze the remaining interviews. The purpose of the creation of these initial codes was to group responses based on similarity and quantify the responses across all participants. For example, if one participant reported that they found they had a great capacity to be open with others, we created the code “Open Up” for categorizing responses related to having a greater capacity for opening up with others in the participant’s interpersonal relationships.

Cycle 1. After the creation of the initial codes during the precoding phase, the research team went back through all of the participant interviews to code relevant quotes using the coding system established in the precoding phase. Additional codes were added as needed if new ideas emerged. Quotes ranged in size, but generally captured an entire thought.

Cycle 2. During cycle two coding (i.e., theoretical coding), we sorted through cycle one codes to create a theoretical framework that could address our research question, "How were participants impacted by Emotionally-Focused Mentoring." The findings from this study are organized in terms of the theoretical codings resulting from the work completed in Cycle 2. For instance, items related to self-awareness including "Better Understanding of How I Deal," and "Confidence" were grouped together under the large umbrella theme of "Self-Awareness" to categorize participant responses that related to awareness of the self. Three total themes emerged from the coding process as follows: Self-Awareness, Interpersonal Skills, and Emotional Regulation Capacity. These three themes are each key psychosocial skills related to attachment security.

Results

After all participant interviews were coded, we identified three types of psychosocial skills that participants developed over the course of the program: self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and emotion regulation capacity. Below, we describe each theme and the number of times each theme was endorsed by each participant (see Tables 1-3).

Table 1. Self-Awareness Theme and Sub-themes	
Better understanding of how I deal	8 quotes
Understanding myself better	5 quotes
Realize who I am	2 quotes
My gestures influence others	2 quotes
Identify coping	4 quotes
Identify wants	1 quote
Noticing	12 quotes
Self-reflection	25 quotes
Process things	4 quotes
Affirming how I deal	4 quotes
Think about things I hadn't before	2 quotes

Table 2. Interpersonal Skills Theme and Sub-themes	
Understanding how to build and salvage relationships	3 quotes
Understanding how I deal with relationships	4 quotes
Think about improving relationships	7 quotes
Understand why things go wrong	2 quotes
Why other people are doing what they're doing	1 quote
Open up	21 quotes

Table 3. Emotion Regulation Capacity Theme and Sub-themes	
Feelings awareness	8 quotes
Aware of others emotions	1 quote
Communicate feelings with others	10 quotes
Okay to be emotional	2 quotes
Feelings are valid	3 quotes
Handle feelings better	3 quotes
More in balance with my emotions	1 quote

Respond in a healthy way	4 quotes
Better mood	7 quotes

Self-awareness. A number of participants reported that they gained a better understanding of themselves, learning how to self-reflect, and learning how to recognize how they cope with challenging situations. We identified eleven sub-themes centered in self-awareness: better understanding of how I deal, understanding myself better, realize who I am, my gestures influence others, identify coping, identify wants, noticing, self-reflection, process things, affirming how I deal, and think about things I hadn't before. The most endorsed sub theme was self-reflection.

For example, one participant stated, "It helped me get a better understanding of how I deal with those things and whether I could improve on it or if what I was doing was already okay and ways to make it better." Another participant reported, "I gained some confidence in myself and [in] how I handle things. I think that helped me when other things would come up in my relationships." A third participant stated, "I've been a little bit more aware of my relationships and how I'm handling them and why I'm doing the things I'm doing and why other people are doing the things they're doing and how that affects our relationship." Many participants described a greater ability to self-reflect. For example:

> "I'm a lot more reflective on how I deal with things because before I would do a lot of self-reflecting and be okay […] like could have done this differently but from this program it made me realize how important it is to self-reflect and how I should probably do it a little bit more often and be like […] how can I handle this in a healthier way."

Interpersonal Skills. A number of participants also endorsed enhanced interpersonal skills. We identified six sub themes: understanding how to build and salvage relationships, understanding how I deal with relationships, think about improving relationships, understand why things go wrong, [understand] why other people are doing what they are doing, and open up. For instance, one participant reported, "I started opening up more. I was able to talk to the person I was having a conflict with about my feelings [rather] than just holding them in. This is the kind of thing I improved on during this whole thing." A second participant noted, " I feel like I'm more willing to communicate with friends around me. Usually I would just bottle up but then this has shown me it's actually ok. I think that was a very useful skill to develop." A third participant noted, "I talk about things that maybe wouldn't always feel comfortable."

Emotion Regulation Capacity. Participants also reported a greater ability to identify and regulate their emotions, specifically in the context of their relationships. We identified nine sub-themes centered in emotion regulation capacity: feelings awareness, aware of other's emotions, communicate feelings with others, okay to be emotional, feelings are valid, handle feelings better, more in balance with my emotions, respond in a healthy way, and better mood. For example, one participant reported, "I feel like I've been more open, like if I'm feeling upset, instead of just being grumpy or angry about, trying to express my being upset in a calm, straightforward manner." A second participant reported, "I've noticed to be more aware of how I'm feeling and that my feelings are valid." A third participant noted, "I'm a lot more reflective on how I deal with things […] this program made me realize how important it is to self-reflect and how I should probably do it a little bit more often and how I can handle [things] in a healthier way."

In addition to the three major themes to emerge from the coding analysis, we identified two additional categories of participants' reports. I describe each of them with some illustrative quotes below. The categories below focused more on how participants experienced the program (versus their reports of intrapersonal change, which are reported as the major themes above).

Program Acceptability/Likability. Although we did not initially seek to understand how acceptable this program is for participants using qualitative methods, many participants endorsed enjoying Emotionally-Focused Mentoring (Table 4). They noted that the program was a positive experience and enjoyed various aspects of the therapeutic relationship with their mentor. The majority of participants found the program to be fun and likable. For example, one participant noted, "I think it affected me positively because after the session, it kind of really made me reflect on the topic that we were talking about for that week." Another participant noted, "Definitely very helpful. I loved it. It was just nice to be able to talk to someone. I definitely told all my friends about it."

Table 4. Program Acceptability/Likability Category and Codes

Positive experience	46 quotes
Fun	3 quotes

Therapeutic Relationship. Participants described enjoying the process of creating and having a therapeutic relationship (Table 5). They noted feeling pleased to have someone to talk to who was reliable and consistent, presented like a counselor, and helped them think about things in a different way. Participants also endorsed feeling comfortable, understood, and cared about. For example, one participant reported, "It was kind of like therapy. And I need a lot of

therapy." Another participant reported, "I quit counseling because this was so much better." And another participant noted,

> "It was honestly kind of like my own little therapy session so it was honestly a good feeling of thinking like oh I'm gonna go talk about my feelings and figure out how to manage certain things like it was easy to talk about. The energy in the room, too. It was always positive and welcoming that I never felt like oh I can't talk about this. I kind of basically told her a whole life story."

Table 5. Therapeutic Relationship Category and Codes

Communicate with someone with a different perspective like a counselor	20 quotes
Someone to talk to	31 quotes
Perspective taking	5 quotes
Think about things in a different way	6 quotes
Talk things out	1 quote
Formulate thoughts before I speak	1 quote
Feeling understood and cared about	9 quotes
Comfortable	3 quotes
Reliable and consistent	1 quote
Talk about feelings	4 quotes

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore how a new psychotherapeutic intervention program called Emotionally-Focused Mentoring (EFM; Manvelian et al., 2021) impacted participants. EFM was designed to increase attachment security through the promotion of emotion regulation skills in the context of a safe, secure mentoring relationship. To identify what participants learned from EFM, which is a 5-week program, I used a grounded theory approach to qualitatively analyze and create various themes using participant reports during exit interviews.

The grounded theory coding of the EFM exit interviews revealed that participants gained three overarching psychosocial skills: self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and emotion regulation capacity. In EFM, mentors aim to help participants develop greater awareness around their emotions and behavior during difficult interpersonal scenarios. Participants reported a greater capacity to self-reflect and understand themselves and others better in their relationships. The specific target of EFM was to promote healthy emotion regulation skills which is reflected in participants' reports of better being able to regulate their mood and how they communicate with and think about relationships.

I found that participants endorsed a greater capacity to identify how they deal with relational challenges, how to respond in healthier ways in the context of their relationships, a greater understanding of how their actions affect relationships, and how to work on improving relationships. These findings are important because EFM is a new program, and it was necessary to identify what participants are taking away from mentorship. As discussed below, self-awareness, sharp interpersonal skills, and the ability to regulate one's emotions in difficult relational situations are three important factors that help create the foundation of attachment security. These factors are also represented in participant's responses about what they took away

from EFM. As discussed in Goodvin and colleagues (Goodvin et.al., 2008), one of the core skills that make securely attached individuals so adept at navigating the world is their self-awareness. It is also argued that secure attachment is associated with a more positive concept of the self. The present study reveals a strong report from participants of a better understanding of one's self in the areas of emotional awareness, and relationship dynamics. This illustrates that EFM allows participants to improve their self-awareness, thereby bringing them closer to a secure level of attachment. Interpersonal skills include being able to effectively communicate with others. As illustrated in Anders and Tucker (2000), it is argued that a deficit in being able to communicate with competence in both delivery and understanding could account for having a much smaller social support network. This study has illustrated that EFM promotes interpersonal communication and understanding, thereby promoting a strong social support network for individuals with these skills. A social network is inherent to the foundation of secure attachment. Another key component is emotion regulation skills which was strongly represented in this study under the sub themes of feelings awareness and mood regulation. Mikulincer and Shaver (2019) reinforce the idea that more effective emotional regulation is important for a secure attachment style in relationships. They expand on the implications of emotional regulation as a direct factor of attachment style, thereby indicating that stronger emotional regulation skills are helpful in promoting secure attachment. In a qualitative analysis done by Manvelian and colleagues (2021) EFM promoted attachment security and related outcomes. Examples include, "decreasing attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety, loneliness, depressive symptoms, and difficulties with emotion regulation. [EFM] also improved self-esteem, potentially promoting more positive models of the self and greater confidence in one's communication skills." These qualitative

results are corroborated by participants' direct quotes illustrated in the present study indicating improved sense of sense, better communication skills, and better understanding of emotions.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although our study has many strengths it also has a few limitations. For example, our results may not generalize to other populations as we only focused on 55 individuals from the University of Arizona. Their demographics were not representative of the greater population and consisted of 77% female, 77% as heterosexual and over half identified as White/Caucasian. Another limitation of this work is that qualitative research can be subjective, meaning that specific participant quotes could have been coded into different categories had we had a different research team.

Future research would benefit from asking participants to go into more detail about the three categories of self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and emotional regulation capacity to understand how they are affected in a deeper, and more specific way. It may also be beneficial to have a more diverse population of participants with more extensive recruitment in order to better determine the generalizability of the results.

Conclusion

The present study provides important insight in the development of Emotionally-Focused Mentoring, a novel psychotherapeutic intervention program designed to promote attachment security for insecurely attached participants. Using a grounded-theory qualitative coding approach with exit interview data from 55 insecurely attached mentees, EFM has shown to be effective in making mentees (participants) feel they have improved self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and emotion regulation capacity. Results indicated that EFM promotes foundational aspects of attachment security, thereby having the effect of promoting attachment security itself.

I also found that participants really enjoyed EFM as they noted that the experience was helpful, positive, and fun. This research is a noteworthy contribution to the field because it provides greater evidence and foundation for the use of qualitative research in understanding how novel interventions impact participants by analyzing their direct quotes.

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