Assignment 4.1:

Rationale for Counseling Group for Adolescent Offenders

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Rationale for Counseling Group for Adolescent Offenders

The issue of juvenile delinquency is both pervasive and longstanding within the United States, consistently yielding millions of criminal cases annually (Kadish, Glaser, Calhoun, & Risler, 1999). In committing their crimes, juvenile delinquents not only diminish their potential for a successful future, but also negatively impact the lives of their victims through the incursion of medical bills, emotional trauma, and property damage (Goldstein et al., 2018). Therapeutic intervention has been shown to positively influence the factors associated with the aggressive criminal acts committed by juveniles, reducing participants’ perceived levels of anger, improving their social skills, and reducing reactive aggression (Goldstein et al., 2018; Kadish et al., 1999; Quinn & Shera, 2009). Furthermore, group counseling has been shown to dramatically reduce the recidivism rates of juvenile offenders from 65% to 24% (Kadish et al., 1999). For this reason, I propose conducting a counseling group for aggressive adolescent offenders in which the causes of aggressive criminality are addressed through the development of self-awareness, emotional regulation skills, and improved social information processing (Smeijers, Benbouriche, & Garofalo, 2020).

The purpose of this counseling group will be to reduce the potential for criminal recidivism among group members (i.e. adolescent offenders). As such, group members must meet specific criteria for group inclusion. First, group members must have been legally remanded for prior aggressive criminality (e.g. assault, battery, etc.). Second, said aggressive criminality must not have been of a sexual nature as sexual criminality is not the focus of the group. Third, group members must be under the age of eighteen. Finally, group members will not be presently incarcerated. These criteria reflect the focus of the group: reduce the potential for aggressive recidivism through the development of emotional regulation and social information processing skills. Membership in the group will be mandated by the court as a measure of post-release rehabilitation.

The group will be structured in such a way as to provide each member an adequate opportunity for personal advancement with minimal distraction. The group will consist of six members. This number is small enough to facilitate ample interaction between group members and provide sufficient airtime within the group and is large enough to reduce members’ pressure to perform (Gladding, 2020). To further promote equal opportunity for involvement and acknowledgement, the group will physically be oriented in a circle with the leader sitting among the members (Gladding, 2020). The setting of the group will be a private meeting room in an accessible local community center. Finally, the group will meet for two one-hour sessions per week for sixteen weeks, following a timeframe similar to remedial dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) groups (Quinn & Shera, 2009). We will be meeting for this amount of time so that any necessary icebreakers and activities may be performed without sacrificing the group’s ability to discuss pressing topics (Gladding, 2020).

The group will aim to achieve certain goals in order to reduce participants’ potential for criminal recidivism. These goals are guided by the extant literature surrounding the potential causative factors of aggressive criminality and criminal recidivism. Research indicates that criminal aggression is a predictor of criminal recidivism (Swogger et al., 2015). Likewise, youth offenders typically demonstrate higher rates of aggressive and violent behavior than their non-offending counterparts; such behavior is, in turn, linked to higher levels of anger in such individuals (Goldstein et al., 2018). Anger can be managed through the implementation of emotion regulation techniques, reducing the potential for aggressive behaviors (Goldstein et al., 2018). Therefore, the first goal of this group will be to allow participants to garner the emotion regulation skills needed to deescalate their anger before they feel compelled to behave aggressively. A positive relationship also exists between impaired information processing and aggressive behaviors (Goldstein et al., 2018; Smeijers et al., 2020). Children and adolescents who engage in aggressive delinquent behavior often exhibit deficits in social information processing which affect their ability to encode social information, make social decisions, solve social problems, and behave in accordance with internally constructed social goals and guidelines (Goldstein et al., 2018). Such deficits indicate the presence of errors in cognition related to aggressive behaviors (Smeijers et al., 2020). Thus, the second goal of this group will be to improve group members’ social information processing to reduce aggressive behaviors. Both goals are interdependent as appropriate emotion regulation skills interact with correct social information processing with regard to the prevalence of aggressive behaviors (Smeijers et al., 2020).

The group will be conducted using an underlying cognitive-behavioral theoretical orientation, drawing techniques from the Coping Power Program (CPP), the Juvenile Justice Anger Management (JJAM) treatment, and DBT (Goldstein et al., 2018; Quinn & Shera, 2009). Within this framework, emphasis will be placed on improving group members’ abilities to encode, process, and appropriately react to social information in accordance with the social information processing training within JJAM and CPP (Goldstein et al., 2018). Within group discussions we will use cognitive restructuring to promote accurate appraisals of social situations (Goldstein et al., 2018). We will also employ DBT’s emphasis on mindfulness, distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness, and emotional regulation in order to decrease members’ emotional reactivity and promote social skills (Quinn & Shera, 2009). Finally, the group will utilize the process model of emotion regulation in order to help group members grasp the relationship between a situation, their appraisal of the situation, and their resulting emotional response (Champe, Okech, & Rubel, 2013). Such theoretical leanings offer a solution-focused framework to the group, providing empirically tested methods to produce constructive discussion and reduce aggressive tendencies. Thus, the group will work to reduce the members’ potential for criminal recidivism.

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