

Methodological Discussions on the Use of Tricky Topics Technique for the Focus Group Discussions*

Odak Grup Tartışmaları için Zor Konular Tekniğinin Kullanımına İlişkin Yöntemsel Tartışmalar*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of the Tricky Topics (TTs) technique in focus groups as a data collection method in qualitative research. This methodological study originated from a two-phase exploratory study that explored the perspectives of 23 senior Psychological Counseling and Guidance students on their online psychological counseling experiences. The data of the original study comprised in-depth conversations via focus group meetings using the TTs technique. The collected data sets were analyzed through thematic analysis using MAXQDA 2022. During the data collection with the TTs technique, each participant builds on the opinions of others as they investigate and analyze the issues covered during the focus group. The experiences of the senior Psychological Counseling and Guidance program students on the use of the TTs technique indicated that using this technique helped them explore the barriers that stop them from understanding a concept in greater depth. The TTs technique encouraged and motivated participants to further explore the issues of online counseling when they observed others struggling, hesitating, and pausing to conceptualize what prevented them from being more active and effective in their practices and learning. This study suggests methodological implications for the TTs technique. When used in focus group research, the TTs technique provides participants with additional time to analyze how others reacted to the main discussion points. In this study, participants engaged in collaborative discourse and co-created practical measures to strengthen online counseling practices. These interactions resulted in the enhancement of Psychological Counseling and Guidance students' perceptions of online counseling. This study explains the possible benefits of adopting the TTs technique in focus group interviews in terms of revealing the depth of the data. The implications of this methodology are further discussed, including how the findings could inform other studies that investigate specific concerns within a profession.

Keywords: Focus group, Tricky topics, Qualitative research, Online counseling

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ÖZ

Bu çalışma nitel araştırmalarda veri toplama yöntemi olarak Zor Konular Tekniği'nin odak grup görüşmelerinde kullanımını incelemektedir. Bu yöntem çalışması, Psikolojik Danışma ve Rehberlik programında son sınıf öğrencisi olan 23 öğrencinin çevrimiçi psikolojik danışma deneyimlerine ilişkin bakış açılarının incelendiği iki aşamalı bir keşif çalışmasından çıkarılmıştır. Orijinal çalışmanın verileri, odak grup toplantılarında Zor Konular Tekniği kullanılarak erişilen derinlemesine konuşmaları içermektedir. Toplanan veri setleri MAXQDA 2022 veri analizi programı kullanılarak tematik olarak analiz edilmiştir. Zor Konular Tekniği; zorluklar, etik konular ve olası çözüm önerileri gibi eşik kavramları içeren, katılımcılara ve araştırma ekibine çalışma hakkında daha fazla düşünme zamanı tanıyan bir keşif sürecidir. Bu teknikle yürütülen çalışmalarda her katılımcı odak grup sırasında ele alınan konuyu incelerken ve analiz ederken konuyu diğerlerinin görüşlerinin üstüne ekleme yaparak geliştirir. Bu çalışmada, katılımcılar odak grup çalışmalarında Zor Konular Tekniği'ni kullanarak, bir kavramı derinlemesine anlamalarını önleyen engelleri de keşfetme fırsatı bulmuşlardır. Katılımcılar bireysel olarak çevrimiçi psikolojik danışma ile ilgili deneyimlerinde daha aktif ve etkili olmalarını engelleyen durumları belirlerken, diğerlerinin de zorlandığını, tereddüt ettiğini ve duraksadığını görmüş, bu paylaşım yoluyla cesaretlenmiş, motive olmuşlardır. Bu çalışma, odak grup görüşmelerinde kullanılan Zor Konular Tekniği'ne ilişkin metodolojik çıkarımlar önermektedir. Zor Konular Tekniği odak grup araştırmalarında kullanıldığında katılımcıların her birine kendisi dışındaki katılımcıların tartışma konularına nasıl tepki verdiklerini analiz etmeleri için ek süre sağlar. Bu çalışmada, katılımcılar, çevrimiçi danışmanlık uygulamalarını güçlendirmek için işbirlikçi söylemlere katılmış ve birlikte pratik yöntemler oluşturmuşlardır. Bu etkileşimler Psikolojik Danışma ve Rehberlik öğrencilerinde çevrimiçi danışmanlık algılarının gelişmesine zemin hazırlamıştır. Bu çalışma, odak grup görüşmelerinde zor konular tekniğini benimsemenin olası faydalarını, bu tekniği kullanmanın verilerin derinliğine ulaşma açısından önemini açıklamaktadır. Elde edilen sonuçların farklı alanlarda benzer sorunları araştırmayı hedefleyen çalışmalara nasıl yol gösterebileceği de ayrıca tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Odak grup, Zor konular, Nitel araştırma, Çevrimiçi psikolojik danışma

INTRODUCTION

As a qualitative data collection strategy, focus group discussion has unique characteristics (Kitzinger, 1995). This moderator-led small group discussion method aims to unpack participants' perspectives on particular cases or phenomena. Moreover, one of the most advantageous characteristics of the focus group interview is that it has the potential to be merged with other data collection techniques to enrich the data (Colucci, 2007). The other most salient advantage of the focus group discussions is that participants, data collectors, moderators, and observers can individually or collaboratively contribute to both the methodological and phenomenological development of the research by reflecting on the data collection process. These characteristics of reflection sharing enable participants to revisit their ideas about the data collection process and researchers with varying roles to improve the ongoing data collection and analysis process (Seal, Bogart, & Ehrhardt, 1998). Additionally, the group creates synergy, spontaneity, and collaboration by encouraging its members while each member expresses, remarks, and negates their opinions (Tausch & Menold, 2016). Focus groups can be considered a stand-alone approach, but they have also been combined with other techniques in a variety of ways (Morgan, 1997).

In our study, which investigated counselor trainees' perspectives on the obstacles, ethical issues, and potential solutions to online counseling, we used the Tricky Topics (TTs) technique for the focus group discussions to collect enriched data. TTs allocate additional time for participants and research team members with varying roles to reflect on the overall research experience. Each individual explores and examines the topic discussed during the focus group by building on others' per-

spectives. In other words, the TTs technique is basically an exploration process rather than a structured interview (Cruz et al., 2016). The TT aims to determine Threshold Concepts (TCs). Meyer and Land (2003) define TCs as obstacles that prevent students from acquiring a deeper understanding of a concept or moving on to the next phase of comprehending the other dimensions of the concept discussed. For a situation to be TC, it must have one or more of its transformative, irreversible, unifying, limited, and problematic features. The TTs technique, on the other hand, is a collective application used to determine the TCs on certain issues and identify possible solutions.

Given these advantageous characteristics of the TTs technique in focus group discussions, this study aims to provide insights into how to improve the quality of data collection using the TTs technique by exploring counselor trainees' online counseling experiences. The findings indicate that data collection strategies should be improved to better understand perspectives and issues experienced in novice practice environments or programs by taking into account each stakeholder's experience. In this study, the methodological implications of using the TTs technique for data collection in focus groups are further discussed based on the data collected on the experiences and perspectives of counselor trainees on problems relating to new techniques and challenges in conducting online counseling sessions during the abrupt transition due to the pandemic.

Literature Review

A focus group, generally speaking, is described as a small meeting of people with a shared interest or trait who are brought together by a moderator using the group and its interactions to learn more about a certain subject (Williams & Katz, 2001).

Focus groups are used to learn more about how people feel or think about a certain problem, concept, item, or service (Krueger, 2014). Thus, some of the advantages of a focus group in educational research include benefitting from focus groups for decision-making before, during, or after a specific planning process, such as a needs assessment, a pilot test, and/or an outcome evaluation, or using as a guide for program, policy, and service development.

In the field of counseling, focus groups as a qualitative research method have been a prominent strategy that counselors employ to gather data in a productive, useful, and practical way to understand the counseling process and clients' needs and experiences, and help support clients in counseling practices (Kress & Shoffner, 2007). Focus group methodology and counseling philosophy naturally align since the valued characteristics of counseling professions such as human growth, empowerment, and cultural sensitivity are also strongly emphasized in focus groups. The areas of application of focus groups in counseling include; needs analyses and determining client preferences for treatment, developing programs, evaluating their effectiveness, and conducting descriptive research (Kress & Shoffner, 2007). For example, Race, Hotch, and Packer (1994) used focus groups to evaluate support services related to mental health and counseling-related outcomes. The researchers employed a series of focus groups in a vocational training and rehabilitation environment to understand clients' perceptions of a rehabilitation program's strengths and drawbacks. The study underlined the emphasis on the client perspective and its empowering role in the focus group. Similarly, Boechler, Neufeld and McKim (2002) used a focus group incorporated with individual interviews in a multimethod approach to identify and refine a client satisfaction measure for their community mental health clinic. The researchers proposed using focus groups to assess client perspectives and provide valuable insights into client satisfaction.

In recent decades, online counseling has become increasingly popular with the advancements in information communication technologies due to its immense impact on how people interact, learn, communicate, and even heal (Zeren, 2017). Recently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online counseling has become a necessity rather than a choice for many counselors as well as counselor trainees (Situmorang, 2020). The unexpected nature of the transition from face-to-face to online counseling heightens the urgent need to develop new strategies and standardized guidelines to address the issues and challenges experienced during online counseling practices where the use of the focus group method could also be applicable. A number of authors have considered exploring the issues of online counseling from the perspectives of mental health professionals and clients (Aslan et al., 2021; Erzen, 2021). A few studies examined the online counseling experiences of counselor trainee students, who are both service providers and receivers (Kiye, 2021; Koçyiğit Özyiğit & Erkan Atik, 2021 Tomlin, 2021). The perspectives of counselors and counselor trainees identified through the studies support the existing research on online counseling prior to COVID (Baştımur & Baştımur, 2015; Tanrikulu, 2009; Zeren,

2017) in terms of counselors having mixed feelings about the use of online counseling in practice. The studies (Kiye, 2021; Koçyiğit Özyiğit & Erkan Atik, 2021) emphasize the need for further research to have an in-depth understanding of student counselor trainee experiences in online counseling and developing detailed instructions on the use of technologies required for consultation practices and supervision, as well as standard guidelines and technology support.

Among the studies that used the focus group method, Zeren (2017) explored how counselor candidates interpret therapeutic alliance in face-to-face and online therapy using focus group interviewing. Eleven volunteer counselor candidates in their fourth year of the Guidance and Psychological Counseling undergraduate program participated in the research. Content analysis showed that counselor candidates worked with clients to develop objectives, achieve them, and solve difficulties and form a personal relationship with them. Zeren (2017) points out that focus groups helped broaden the depth and scope of the participants' answers due to the group dynamic. In a more recent study, Urkmez et al. (2021) investigated counseling trainee students' experiences of participating in face-to-face and online experiential group counseling training. The study helped researchers identify the online-specific facilitation skills counselors need to gain in online training sessions. They also emphasized the need for further research on counselor training on online modalities.

When the sudden and unexpected nature of the transition to online counseling during COVID-19 is considered, analyzing the perspectives of all stakeholders in the process as a group becomes essential to gaining a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and developing guidelines and instructions accordingly. Therefore, the use of focus groups could be a promising technique to identify needs and make decisions on the content and procedures to follow (William & Katz, 2001). During a focus group, the main ways that information is gathered are by taking notes, recording the discussion on audio or tape, and listening to and taking part in the discussion (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Researchers who use a wide variety of data collection techniques may be able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon thanks to the fine-grained datasets they create (Nyumba et al., 2018). Besides the traditional data collection methods mentioned before, different tools can be used to get more organized and structured data, such as mind maps and concept maps. For instance, mind-mapping techniques might be convenient to represent concepts, ideas, or tasks that are interconnected and arranged radially around a central keyword or concept (Burgess-Allen & Owen-Smith, 2010).

While focus groups can be used as a stand-alone approach (Caillaud & Flick, 2017), in social science research, it has been incorporated with other techniques in many different ways as an exploratory tool, or as a follow-up method (Morgan, 1997). One use of focus groups is in conjunction with individual interviewing as complementary techniques through which either could be utilized for a preliminary or follow-up purpose. Another use is linking participant observation and focus groups

which allows researchers to gain a focused understanding of participants' thinking and exposure to the participants' experiences on a subject before actually observing them (Morgan, 1997). A combined method was used by Varga Atkins, McIsaac, and Willis (2017) for research on curriculum evaluation and enhancement purposes which utilized focus groups followed by a Nominal Group Technique. The research showed that the two-staged Nominal Focus Group combined Focus Group and Nominal Group Techniques were beneficial for formulating ideas, investigating challenges, integrating student questions, taking responsibility for the process, and providing high-quality feedback.

Given the advantages of the use of focus groups in counseling and with other data collection strategies, the Tricky Topics (TTs) data collection technique is used in a focus group design in this study to investigate counselor trainees' evaluations of obstacles, ethical issues, and proposed solutions to the challenges they encountered in their online counseling practices as part of their university's "Practicum in Individual Counseling" course. The study adds to the online counseling literature and provides heuristic values to counseling trainees by allowing them to reflect on their practices while using the TTs to recognize both their own and others' online counseling experiences. The originality of the study can be summed up as methodological contributions with the use of the TTs method as an engaging and self-reflective data collection technique, conceptual contributions to counselor capacity building and training programs, methodological contributions to the qualitative inquiry, and focus group designs.

METHOD

The design of this study is a qualitative focus group study with the TTs technique. This data collection procedure was originally developed from our two-phase exploratory study, which explored the perspectives of senior psychological counseling and guidance (PCG) students on online psychological counseling. The focus group meetings were conducted using the TTs technique because this technique had the potential to enrich the data collection process, as mentioned in the literature (Meyer & Land, 2003). Therefore, in our study of exploring (PCG) students, this combined strategy allowed the participants to collaborate closely, explore new ideas, and build

solutions that fit their requirements in online psychological counseling practice. Participants co-created practical measures specifically for online counseling by building on their own and others' lived experiences. As this study generated such enriched outcomes and group collaboration, we argue that combining focus groups with additional techniques such as the TTs allows researchers to gain more information about their research topic. In other words, this combination resulted in finding the actual problems and allowed participants to frame the most important issue for their profession regarding online psychological counseling.

Participants

In the first phase of the study, we administered a 15-item demographic survey to explore their characteristics (demographic, background, and experience) and determine which students would be our participants for the focus group discussions. The completion of the "Practicum in Individual Counseling" course was the criterion to select participants for the next stage. The sample of the first phase comprised 88 senior and junior students from the Department of Guidance and Psychological Counseling. Seventy-four (84.1%) of them were women, and 14 (15.9%) of them were men. Their ages ranged between 20 and 32 ($M = 22.74$, $SD = 1.57$). Thirty-seven (42%) of the students were juniors, and 51 (58%) of them were seniors. Fifty-one (58%) students reported that they took the Practicum in Individual Counseling course, which was the criteria for involvement in the second phase, whereas 37 (42%) of them reported not having taken it yet.

After determining that 51 students have taken the Practicum in Individual Counseling course, our research team communicated with those who expressed interest in participating in the focus group process. Those who consented were randomly assigned to one of the five focus groups with a maximum of five participants. Among these groups, only two groups included one male student, and the rest of the focus groups consisted of female participants. Although we limited each group to five individuals, one group had six and another group had four participants. Overall, 23 participants voluntarily participated in the focus groups. The demographics of focus groups along with their participant codes are presented in Table 1 with anonymity.

Table 1: Demographics and Participants Codes in Each Focus Group

Focus Group I		Focus Group II		Focus Group III		Focus Group IV		Focus Group V	
18/05/2022		23/05/2022		25/05/2022		26/05/2022		30/05/2022	
Participant Code	Gender	Participant Code	Gender	Participant Code	Gender	Participant Code	Gender	Participant Code	Gender
S1	Female	S1	Female	S1	Female	S1	Female	S1	Female
S2	Male	S2	Female	S2	Male	S2	Female	S2	Female
S3	Female	S3	Female	S3	Female	S3	Male	S3	Female
S4	Female	S4	Female	S4	Female			S4	Female
S5	Female			S5	Female			S5	Female
								S6	Female

Data Collection Process

For each focus group discussion, we assigned a moderator researcher and an observer researcher. Each session was organized into three 30-minute sessions with 15-minute breaks between each session. We voice-recorded the discussions. The main role of the moderator was to explain the key concepts of the TTs and TCs technique to participants, when necessary, whereas the observer needed to record the group dynamics and the non-verbal communication cues of the participants. In the first 30-minute session, participants were given preliminary information about the TTs and TCs techniques, and they were guided to determine a topic about online psychological counseling. These topics represented TTs. In the second session, they determined the threshold concepts. In the last session, they developed possible solutions and presented their solutions. During the first two sessions, participants created mind maps with the TTs and TCs they determined in their discussions. These end-products summarized their overall arguments and conclusions about the issues of online psychological counseling. At the end of the third session, we conducted two reflection sessions. The first reflection session included participants, moderators, and observers to talk about their overall experience of the discussion process using the TTs techniques. The second reflection session consisted of all research teams reflecting on their observation notes and preliminary perspectives on the main discussion points. Therefore, the collected data included focus group discussions, observation notes, and group reflections.

Data Analysis

The focus group discussions and group reflections were transcribed before the data analysis. The MAXQDA 2022 version was used to organize and analyze the data. Each data set was grouped and labeled accordingly as “focus group discussions,” “observation notes,” including the charts created by the focus group participants, and “group reflections” to differentiate them. After the data was organized, two researchers from the research team thematically analyzed the data about the use of the TTs technique in focus groups and reflection sessions. Two researchers from the research team separately coded the data sets and then debriefed their codes with the whole research team. The other data sets that were collected about the initial online counseling experiences of the participants were not actively used in the study because they were not about the methodological aspects of this study. However, the researchers sketch-coded the focus group meeting to revise whether the data set included supportive information about the method of this study. The researchers found that the participants reflected on the benefits of using TTs techniques, especially in the reflection sessions. In other words, when necessary, the research team revisited the findings of the actual research to understand when and where participants provided divergent and mutual responses about the online counseling process to see the effect of the TTs technique.

Findings

Based on our thematic analysis of reflection sets and obser-

vation notes, we found four overarching themes in relation to how the use of TTs and reflection sessions improves the data quality during focus group discussions: 1) the importance of the moderator’s guidance, 2) the participants’ adopted roles, 3) professional awareness and development, and 4) factors affecting their interaction.

The Importance of the Moderator’s Guidance

The moderator had an important role in monitoring the process and helping participants to continue their discussions. The observation notes showed that the moderator helped participants focus on their discussion’s main point and stay on task. The moderator’s short interactions and explanations also “direct(ed) them to think over micro-level...and identify the problems.” [Observation Notes_01-30.05.22] In order to ensure objectivity in the study, the moderator was not at the center of the focus group discussions. She did not have any conflict of interest with the participants as she was purposefully chosen outside of the field of Psychological Counseling and Guidance with an expertise in use of Tricky Topics Technique.

When the participants either paused longer or kept repeating similar arguments, the moderator encouraged participants to think about their experiences in online counseling. Although encouragement was important for carrying out the focus group interviews, participants also needed meaningful pauses to reflect and think over their personal experiences.

“Moderator: You may think about the things that disturb you. I mean, the things that bother you. If you have difficulty talking about counselors’ competencies. S4: Voila! I was thinking about whether we should include the clients’ education or the counselors’ education. (Observer Note: Everyone pauses for a couple of seconds. The moderator waits if the others begin reflecting on the S4’s comment. Later, she tries to break the silence by reexplaining S4’s sentences.)” [Transcription-Group 1]

Participants expressed the difficulty of talking about online counseling issues because of not having specific training about online counseling. Therefore, they felt motivated when they received praise, encouragement, or affirmation from the moderator. This process often helped participants generate new ideas. For example, when participants were talking about how to improve the therapeutic relationship during online counseling and their ideas resembled the interaction in virtual platforms. After the moderator said “metaverse” and gave “second life”, they exclaimed “wow” and began talking more about how to improve interaction during online counseling [Observation Notes_01-30.05.22] “This cheered up the others and S1 asked further questions.” [Observation Notes_02-25.05.22]

In addition to seeking encouragement and affirmation from the moderator, they also need the moderator to correctly apply the steps of TTs and TCs techniques. Participants asked the moderator to repeat the instructions and help them reposition themselves around the table for maximum efficiency. After spending 5-10 minutes with the others, the participants reduced the number of questions about how to use the

technique and increased the number of questions related to their discussion points. For example, when participants asked whether “technology is a stumbling block”, based on their discussion flow, the moderator explained how to name their discussion point:

Now the stumbling block is something like this: For example, I will give a completely different example, I will try to give it from my own field. I do not have a tendency to use technology in my field, that is, in the field of educational technologies. It’s a problem that someone doesn’t have a tendency to use technology. Everything you just said was a problem. But what does it cover? Use of technology. If we cross this, -this threshold concept also has certain things, it has problems under it; lack of technology use, the generation gap, and so on. These are the problems related to it. Actually, you will write a topic there again, did you notice?” [Transcription-Group 1 - 18.05.22]

Participants found the guidance of the moderator useful as the moderator helped them focus on the discussion, clarify the questions related to the use of the TTs technique, and ignite new ideas about their arguments on online counseling. The moderator also increased the level of interaction among participants as she also took on the role of summarizing the main points of participants’ explanations and encouraging them to further their discussion points by praising and elaborating on participants’ responses.

The Participants’ Adopted Roles

Each participant began the discussion with a certain role based on their manifested personality, such as engaged, disengaged, critical, sarcastic, leader, or conformist. When the participants were engaged, they were in harmony with the group and tried to find answers that aligned with the responses of others. They were also attentive to the responses that the other group members provided. The engaged role also led participants to develop positive feelings about their learning and interactions. The observer noted that: “The participants were proud of what they came up with in the second session. They said they were waiting for such an opportunity to talk about.” [Observation Notes_01-30.05.22]. However, a few participants manifested disengaged behaviors from the task because of the distractions, such as mobile phones, their dislike for the discussion point, and the long pauses while the group was transferring their responses to the paper:

“Second life” issue is opened by the moderator. This cheered up the others and S4 asked further questions for a short time... After this short interaction, S4 began playing with her hair for a while as if she had difficulty staying on task. She looked bored and disengaged in other subjects. [Observation Notes_02-25.05.22]

The other most observed role combination was being critical and sarcastic. Some of the participants preferred to begin their discussion by questioning other people’s responses: The observer noted that participants “spoke with each other in a critical manner when the main discussion point was con-

centrated on curriculum content and courses.” [Observation Notes_02-18.05.22]. When some of the participants tried to reinforce their ideas or insisted on their perspectives, the questioning role adopted by some of the participants slowly changed to sarcasm.

“S1 and S2 are actively suggesting subthemes. Only S3 is masked. Others do not use a mask. S1 remembers an example... They giggled. S1 suggests another theme. But S2 reacts and directs her to another theme. She is very dominant in the way she talks... She is the one taking notes and talking the most.” [Observation Notes_01-23.05.22]

A few participants claimed leadership roles in different discussion scenarios such as persuading others, opening new conversations, and getting appreciation from others. For example, in a moment of silence “... while they were all quiet and S1 brought one more topic to discuss. S gazed at others and also read through what they wrote.” [Observation Notes_01-26.05.22]. Sometimes, the leadership was sought through “looking at others one by one to get their confirmation” [Observation Notes_02-18.05.22]. However, the roles they manifested, including leadership, in the beginning slowly changed. They all became engaged and collaborative due to the increased interaction within the group and rapport built as a result of sharing personal experiences. In the beginning, only a few were interested in leading the group discussion, but the participants created different categories of leadership as they observed that each had different skills in online counseling and contribution to their discussion. Observers also noted, “The participants were more involved in the second session. The first session was more brainstorming and less engaging... In this session, they all actively produced and wrote on the schema.” [Observation Notes_01-26.05.22]. As a result, dominant leadership roles or timid behaviors were eradicated as they noticed the similarity of their experiences in online counseling.

When participants were asked to talk about their online counseling experiences, they slowly began listing up the challenges and problems of online counseling that required them to use online platforms for engaging with their clients. As they started forming a list, participants began using expressions such as “I feel the same; I agree with you; me too” to indicate that they had similar experiences during online counseling. This realization helped the group members adopt a conformist position and support each others’ comments:

“S5: It’s because of that (technology), but I guess it’s more than this (DN: He says this by showing another title among the ones he wrote on the paper, but I couldn’t understand which one he connected with just sound because there is no image)

S2: Right. There is actually something like a combination of the two.

S3: After all, we teach them something, here we can evaluate technology in terms of learning.

S1: I think the use of technology is two-sided as we discussed.

S3: Exactly

S1: Both sides... (DN: S1 did not finish his sentence here and then S3 continued)

S3: There were people that I could not interview even because of this. Because they don't know. For example, they did not want to learn. It's gone.

S5: Oh, or something happens. I think online counseling is difficult with older people (DN: S3 confirms "yes" here and S5 continues to speak).

S1: That's another thing... (DN: Here, before S1 could finish his sentence, S5 continued his speech)

S5: They want to come face to face, I've experienced that too." [Transcription-Group 2 - 18.05.22]

Participants addressed that using the TTs technique enabled them to connect with the other participants when they were asked to reflect on their overall discussion experiences in the focus group. They said that they developed a sense of solidarity after observing and hearing that they experienced similar problems and obstacles. S3 in Group 5 summarized the benefits of TTs techniques:

"T3: So, our friends also expressed that. We are the first group to experience this. Now, the biggest contribution of this study to us is knowing that we had difficulties in the online psychological counseling process. We were more or less aware of these problems. I think that when I talked with my friend and realized:, "Yes, we have had such problems, there are such things, but we are still carrying out this process." At least, when I encounter a problem I will always be thinking about how they (my friends) were looking at this situation. Also, I am a person with a strong visual memory, so I can learn better with techniques like this. Therefore, this is a study that I liked a lot." [Transcription-group 5]

Participants mentioned that they intentionally changed their behavior during the discussion because the TTs method enabled them to build rapport with the other members of the group. They stated that TTs caused them to stretch the limits of their thinking and be open to learning from others. They finally shared that reflecting on their experiences also helped them revise their recent group discussion experience and encouraged them to learn more about how to be open to changing their roles in any discussion scenario. Participants were also motivated to continue their discussions about the issues of online counseling when they began forming their end-products.

Professional Awareness and Development

Participants mentioned that they were partially aware of the problems in online counseling based on their experiences and self-studies. However, during the reflection session, they indicated that TTs enabled them to think about how their roles were destined to change when there was a significant cause such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

I think that the contribution of this study will be really great if something is done to address these problems. Because, as S2

said, we were the victims who made the first online psychological counseling implementation during the pandemic. We had difficulties because our teachers had always done face-to-face practice before. Of course, our teachers helped during the pandemic, but I think it is a very different experience for them too. I think there has been online psychological counseling for about three years. In this context, of course, we had problems and blockages. But I think it has become easier by seeing the issues and thinking about the solutions through this practice. At the same time, I think that seeing the problems experienced in this online psychological counseling process with the stakeholders also contributes to the normalization of the situation and saying "I am not the only one who has these problems, everyone is experiencing it". [Transcription-Group 5 - 30.05.22]

All participants in each group mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic as the beginning of their online counseling experience. Although they were aware that they needed to conduct online sessions, TTs enabled them to understand that their instructors also experienced similar obstacles to generating an online counseling guideline for the counselor candidates. They highlighted that when they were given enough time to think about online counseling and engage with others, who experienced similar obstacles and challenges, they became aware that their professional roles and behaviors should be more open to evaluating the situation from the others' perspective. They also mentioned that the TTs technique helped them think about alternative ways of developing their self and professional identity.

Its contribution to the field. Apart from this, its contribution to me. As I said, I lack many things [in online counseling]. I don't know, attention, distractions, the tendency to watch oneself, it's not just something that I experienced, but I am aware now that the psychological counselor also experienced this. You know, the client may have difficulty concentrating, watching himself on the camera, and maintaining his attention, especially if his camera is turned off. This is something that I may not experience today, but it is something that I can experience tomorrow. In this sense, this [TTs technique discussion] has become a preliminary preparation. [Transcription-Group 3 - 25.05.22]

When participants completed their focus group discussion guided by the TTs techniques, they noticed that they developed a form of guideline that summarizes the issues of online counseling. All groups mentioned that the charts they created not only helped them understand their obstacles and challenges but also made them aware of how they developed coping strategies to overcome the obstacles of online counseling. Therefore, they mentioned that the end-products of their discussion could contribute to the literature and the online counseling practice.

It certainly contributes to the field. If this is a study that will take its place in the literature, it will be useful both in planning the next training sessions and in preparing resources for the students. These results will enable the process to progress more systematically. We started out somehow and it was like

“let’s do it and see what happens on the road.” We had to hit the road suddenly, and this process progressed with the contributions of everyone on the way. But this study is a roadmap.” For example, you will not have set out on the road without a saddlebag and you will have set out with something in your saddlebag. You know, if you have some food with you, the journey is easier. It will be easier to move forward without fear. I think it will contribute to the field in that aspect. Sorry, I spoke too metaphorically. *[Transcription-Group 3]*

Focus group discussions with the TTs technique forced participants to evaluate their experiences and capabilities for conducting online counseling sessions. Through this practice, they mentioned that they realized their weaknesses in conducting online sessions. As one of the participants of Group 5 mentioned, participants understood that they were challenged in using the appropriate counseling technique:

The problem I have chosen is the difficulty in applying techniques and skills. Again, as my friends have stated, all problems are interconnected and it is really difficult to choose one. Because the lack of one creates another problem. We know certain techniques and exercises during the application and we think it will work if we apply it. But we do not apply it at that moment or we are not sure if we will get the effect that we expect if we do. So I see this as a weakness for me and a huge problem of online counseling. *[Transcription-Group 5 - 30.05.22]*

When the participants finalized their charts that included both issues and solutions for online counseling, they also developed strategies for continuing online counseling sessions. Many participants mentioned that they would revise their behaviors during sessions, ethical approaches, and professional counseling techniques:

After this study, I think I will be more attentive if I continue the session online. At least, I am more aware of the problems and I will think of a solution for every problem I notice or approach the problem by asking myself how I can solve it. I will always remember what we talked about online counseling today such as, how my friends shared their experiences with me, and how they perceived the issues. Also, I am a person with a strong visual memory, so I always write and prepare tables while studying. My brain can perceive these things. Therefore, as I mentioned before I liked the technique we used. *[Transcription-Group 5 - 30.05.22]*

Discussing the issues of online counseling helped participants develop positive attitudes about it because, as they stated, learning that the others, who conducted online counseling experienced similar issues encouraged them and helped them developed a sense of professional awareness about their roles as candidate counselors.

Factors Affecting Their Interaction

Some factors affected the quality of interaction between participants. In each group, it was observed that at least one participant drifted away from the topic due to checking his/her mobile phone. However, the moderator’s reminder to help

participants stay on task reduced the time spent on mobile phones. The participants were also distracted when they were not sure how to carry their conversation to the next level. The moderator “interrupts summarizing what they discussed.” *[Observation Notes_01-18.05.22]* when participants spent time providing examples on the same discussion point.

As reported earlier, participants felt engaged as they interacted more time with each other. The level of engagement was found to be related to the equal participation of the participants. “By the end of the conversation they become more and more comfortable and S1 noted down the consensus reached out of their discussion. *[Observation Notes_01-26.05.22]*. In groups, where there were male and female participants, building a consensus was difficult as the participants from different gender challenged each other. For example, male and female participants tended to “raise their voices when they talk all together” and occasionally “prevented each other from taking the lead.” *[Observation Notes_02-18.05.22]*. The other observer took similar observational notes about how the gender-related existential fights affected the conversation:

“S3 and S1 dominated the first session and the others listened and agreed. The others corrected S1’s point on defining and categorizing the problem she suggested... They had brainstorming on different experiences after they were given some directions by the moderator. S1 and S3 talked a lot about it. Others listened.” *[Observation Notes_01-26.05.22]*

During the discussions, there was no clear gender-related discussion pattern, but the findings showed that reaching consensus, ensuring the equal participation of the participants, and building harmony among participants took more time than the same gender groups spent. Body language was also important in the group dynamics. Female participants were more aware of the body language and they situated themselves in the group by responding to the other participants’ body language. However, the observers did not observe significant responses to body language by the male participants. They were more engaged and responsive when they received verbal messages. The most observed examples of body language were leaning back and forth to the speaker to encourage or discourage talking, tone of voice, and gestures. Most of them were used to understand the content of the discussions. However, there were a few occasions when female participants used gestures in a sarcastic manner.

Participants were also affected by the venue used for the focus group discussion. The focus group meetings were carried out in a psychological counseling laboratory and the place had no direct connection to the main hall and square of the university. Although the venue was chosen to create a quiet environment for the meeting, it received “the music from the campus” and “the call to prayer from outside.” As the participants were familiar with and got used to these external sounds, “they don’t seem to be disturbed.” *[Observation Notes_01-18.05.22]*. Participants were more concerned about the number of people in the venue. When the research team noticed that the participants were not comfortable with the number of people in

the venue [*Observation Notes_02-18.05.22*], the moderator introduced the observers and the research assistant to relax the participants. However, after this realization, the research team reduced the number of observers and observed that the participants were more engaged with the tasks.

CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION

Situmorang (2020) explained that online/cyber counseling was introduced almost two decades ago, but it was not preferred by clients and counselors due to privacy, security, and consent issues. He cited the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak as a driver for using online counseling in his study of the history of online/cyber counseling. Our participants also discussed the COVID-19 pandemic as the beginning of their online counseling experience and mentioned that this practice was not part of their curriculum. When participants were asked to talk about their online counseling experiences, they began listing the challenges and problems of online counseling that required them to use online platforms for engaging with their clients. The problems they listed, such as privacy, consent, and therapeutic relations with clients were aligned with the ones mentioned in the literature (Baştumur & Baştumur, 2015; Tanrıkulu, 2009; Zeren, 2017).

The TTs technique enabled them to understand that their instructors also experienced similar obstacles when generating an online counseling guideline for the counselor candidates. Their inquiries about their experiences in online counseling enabled them to see the problems in their curriculum. Therefore, our combined data collection strategy helped participants reduce their professional anxiety, which originated because of the imposed but not structured regulations for online counseling (Arnout et al., 2020; Liebreuz et al., 2020). When they completed their focus group discussion guided by the TTs techniques, they noticed that they had developed a form of guideline that both summarizes the issues of online counseling and suggests solutions to the issues they listed on the chart. The final product, which was created with their joint effort, motivated them to continue online counseling and trust the skills they developed during their counseling experiences. As Colucci (2007) mentioned, focus group discussions became advantageous and enriched the data when merged with other techniques because participants not only found the issues of online counseling but also had the opportunity to gather solutions to those issues.

Colucci (2007) mentioned that one of the advantages of focus group discussions when combined with other data collection techniques is that participants, data collectors, moderators, and observers can individually or collectively contribute to the methodological and phenomenological development of the research by reflecting on the data collection process. In this study, the TTs technique helped participants identify the issues of online counseling and also allowed us to understand how counselor trainees prioritize their experiences of online counseling. In addition to the questions about issues in online counseling, the participants debated which issue in online counseling was more important. For example, participants

expressed that not having specific training was the most significant issue with online counseling. For example, participants stated that the main issue with online counseling was a lack of specific training.

In the literature, it is found that the focus group creates synergy, spontaneity, and collaboration by encouraging its members while each member expresses, remarks, and negates their opinions (Tausch & Menold, 2016). The use of TTs techniques in focus group meetings encouraged and motivated participants when they observed others struggling, hesitating, and pausing to conceptualize what prevented them from being more active and effective in their practices and learning. The TTs technique helped them generate new ideas, particularly in the areas where they were challenged to categorize the issue. This aspect of the TTs technique enabled participants to revisit their ideas about the topics they discussed, their role in the group, and factors that affected the quality of the discussion. During this challenging moment, they all expressed that they needed the moderator to correctly apply the steps of TTs. As stated earlier, the aim of TTs is to determine threshold concepts (TCs), which are obstacles preventing students from acquiring a deeper understanding of a concept or moving on to the next phase of comprehending the other dimensions discussed (Meyer & Land, 2003). Participants needed the help of a moderator to cross-check whether they used the technique correctly. Although the moderator did not provide a direct explanation about the topic discussed, she helped participants find the transformative, irreversible, unifying, limited, and problematic features of online counseling.

Finally, the literature did not have any information about how focus group discussion improves participants' professional awareness and develops their sense of belonging to their professional community. However, in this study, participants said that using the TTs technique enabled them to connect with the other participants when they were asked to reflect on their overall discussion experiences in the focus group. Participants mentioned that they developed a sense of solidarity after observing and hearing that others experienced similar problems and obstacles. When the participants were engaged, they were in harmony with the group and tried to find answers that aligned with the responses of others. Only a few participants manifested disengaged behaviors from the task because of the distractions, such as mobile phones, their dislike of the discussion point, and the long pauses while the group was transferring their responses to the paper. Yet, they mentioned that they intentionally changed their first behavior patterns to a more moderate pattern during the discussion to form a synergy. They stated that TTs caused them to stretch the limits of their thinking and be open to learning from others.

In summary, the TTs technique, when used in focus group research, gives individuals more time to consider how others reacted to the main discussion points. In this study examining senior PCG students' perspectives of online counseling, we observed that the TTs technique improved their understanding of online psychological counseling issues because participants engaged in collaborative dialogue and co-created actionable

steps to advance online counseling practices. Therefore, the TTs technique could enable future psychological counselors and stakeholders to collaborate closely, explore new ideas, and develop solutions that can meet their needs while conducting online psychological counseling practice. This strategy could also be used in other studies that explore particular issues in a profession.

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