

Article 35

Experiential Group Training: An Exploration of Student Perceptions

Paper based on programs presented at the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) 2013 Conference, Denver, CO, and the North Central Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (NCACES) 2012 Conference, Kansas City, KS.

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Abstract

The experiential group is a key component of many counselor education programs, with student learning outcomes related to group theory and concepts, personal and professional growth, and leadership skill development. This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological methodology to explore the perceptions of 10 master's level counselors-in-training who participated in a group experience as a requirement of a group dynamics course. Four primary themes (with corresponding subthemes) emerged from the data including: 1) Affective Dynamics, 2) Personal Growth, 3) Relational Dynamics with Group Members, and 4) Professional Growth. Implications of this study are discussed, along with recommendations based on the findings.

Keywords: counselor education, experiential group, student perceptions

Counselor education programs enlist a variety of training methods in preparing master's students to become effective practitioners, and an established, often required, component of training includes student participation in an experiential group (Anderson & Price, 2001; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) has emphasized the importance of group work by including this as one of the eight core curriculum areas considered fundamental to the counseling profession and by establishing experiential group work as a program

requirement. The CACREP (2009) standards state that counselors-in-training learn both theoretical and experiential understandings of group work and require students to participate as members in a small group experience for a minimum of 10 clock hours over the course of one academic term. Additionally, the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW, 2000) professional standards for counselor education programs include didactic, observational, and experiential components related to group work. The ASGW standards, consistent with CACREP requirements, include experiential group training for master's students for a minimum of 10 clock hours (with 20 hours recommended) of observation and participation in a direct group experience as a member and/or as a group leader. According to Yalom and Leszcz (2005), the purpose of the experiential group is to allow participants to focus on their own experiences while exploring their emotions, self-disclosing in the here-and-now, and striving for some change and personal growth.

The potential benefits for counselors-in-training have been discussed in the literature, with an emphasis on student skill development and learning about group process, stages of group development, leadership styles, and the therapeutic factors that often play out within the life of a group (Corey, 2012; Kline, Falbaum, Pope, Hargraves, & Hundley, 1997; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Arthur and Achenbach (2002) asserted that experiential learning might occur on both cognitive levels (i.e., counselor trainees' beliefs about self and how they relate to others), and affective levels (e.g., feelings, attitudes, values). The experiential group experience continues to be viewed by counselor educators as an important aspect of training, in furthering students' development of personal growth, awareness, and professional competencies (Cummings, 2001; Roach & Young, 2007; Rowell & Benshoff, 2008). However, limited research has been conducted on the actual experiences and processes that promote students' growth and development, and little attention has been placed on how counselor trainees actually view this form of experiential learning when it is required of them to complete within their respective graduate programs (Anderson & Price, 2001; Hensley, Smith, & Thompson, 2003; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010).

While counselor educators value experiential group training as offering learning that is not available in other aspects of a program, participation in such groups may bring about feelings of vulnerability for students (Anderson & Price, 2001; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Some cautions noted in the literature relate to how to incorporate experiential components into programs for counselors-in-training. More specifically, it has been asserted that experiential groups carry within them inherent ethical concerns that can arise with regard to power differentials between instructor and counselor trainee, problematic dual relationships, and the potential invasion of counselor trainee privacy (Anderson & Price, 2001). These concerns are particularly noteworthy in regards to mandatory participation in groups as a required component of counselor education programs (Davenport, 2004; Goodrich, 2008; Merta & Sisson, 1991).

Although few in number, some studies have explored factors related to experiential group training and students' perceptions of the experience. Early research in this area began with a qualitative study conducted by Kline et al. (1997), with a naturalistic investigation into what students perceive and experience when participating in experiential groups. Participants in this study were 23 first-semester master's students involved in a group experience, with 7 or 8 members to a group; the researchers gathered

their data from generating questions and administering an open ended questionnaire, and then generating a follow-up questionnaire to confirm and elaborate on conceptual categories. The results of the study included positive student perceptions regarding attitudes, behaviors, and emotions, along with perceptions of anxiety and interpersonal challenges that were nevertheless overcome, and resulted in stimulating interpersonal learning. Moreover, students in this sample reported having increased cognitive and emotional awareness. Positive student perceptions of the experiential group experience were also supported through a qualitative study conducted by Smith and Davis-Gage (2008). Participants in this study were 11 counselor trainees from two Midwestern universities; findings revealed that these counselor trainees reported an increase in interpersonal learning, an expanded worldview, a better understanding of the overall group process, and learning for future practice with clients.

Extending this line of research, Luke and Kiweewa (2010) conducted a study to explore 14 trainees' perceptions of their experience in an experiential group as part of an introductory group work course. These researchers utilized reflective journals for tapping into students' subjective experiences, and their results identified 30 interconnected themes that students reported as significant to their growth and awareness. The researchers then collapsed these themes as related to four levels of group work including the following factors: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group-as-a-whole, and supra group. The *supra* level referred to pedagogical influences on the group experience, with journaling being a predominant factor of this level. In a study to extend and refine these factors, Kiweewa, Gilbride, Luke, and Seward (2013) conducted research with 27 student participants enrolled in group courses at three CACREP-accredited counseling programs in the northeastern United States. The researchers concluded that growth factors occurred with varied frequency across the experiential groups. These factors included vicarious modeling, genuineness/authenticity, facilitator interventions, self-disclosure, validation/acceptance, and universality. In another study, Ieva, Ohrt, Swank, and Young (2009) explored the personal experiences of 15 counselors-in-training who participated in an experiential group as part of their group counseling course. The study looked at how the students made meaning regarding their personal growth and being members of the group. Results related to the key themes of perceptions of personal growth, professional growth, and the programmatic aspects of these groups. Their findings supported the value of experiential groups in promoting interpersonal learning, self-awareness, empathy for future clients, knowledge about group process and dynamics, and group leadership.

Although these studies have shed light on student perceptions while participating in experiential group training, research in this area is still lacking. While previous findings have provided much needed information regarding the seemingly beneficial aspects of the experiential group, much remains unknown regarding students' perceptions of the group experience and how they manage and negotiate this experiential component of their academic work. Counselor educators and scholars could benefit from additional research to further the understanding of what occurs from a student perspective when counselor trainees take part in an experiential group as a required component of their program. Although students are required to participate in experiential learning within their programs, further knowledge regarding their perceptions could serve counselor educators in assisting students in navigating these experiences, and also fostering students' professional growth and development. While current studies have contributed

knowledge regarding the student experience, most of these studies have limitations regarding methodology, and further research is needed to give voice to students' perceptions of this experiential training component within their counselor education programs.

Purpose of the Current Study

The purpose of this study speaks directly to students' perceptions of experiential learning, to provide rich, descriptive data that will have practical and academic implications for counselor education. The research question is "What were students' perceptions of their experience of participating in an experiential group as a required component of a group dynamics course?" While previous studies have explored the benefits and growth factors related to experiential group training, the focus of this study is to investigate and highlight the actual perceptions of counselors-in-training taking part in the experiential group as a required component of their program of study.

Method

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological methodology was used to address the primary research question and overall aim of this study. The primary goal of a phenomenological investigation is to describe what participants share in common as they experience a particular phenomenon in question (Creswell, 2007), which in this case is the experiential group component of a group dynamics graduate course. This methodology provides an appropriate framework for the purpose of this study, in that these researchers were looking to expound upon students' actual perceptions and provide a description of their overall experience. Phenomenology was especially fitting in that the researchers were interested in having counselor trainees articulate their experience, based on their participation in the phenomenon (group experience) being investigated (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the researchers collected data derived from the participants' verbal and written statements, which were then compiled and analyzed to describe the overall essence of their group experience.

Procedure

After receiving approval from the university's human subjects review board, participants for the study were recruited from two separate sections of the group dynamics and process courses taught by the first author. Strong precautions were taken to insure confidentiality for the students and to avoid any dual role concerns regarding their instructor. To do this, the doctoral student researchers (second and third authors, with no evaluative role in the courses) provided students with a verbal overview of the study, its requirements, and information regarding participation in the study in the students' final class of the semester. Students were given the option of providing their e-mail addresses directly to the student researchers to receive further information about participation, which would begin once the current semester was completed and final grades were submitted for their classes. The students were then informed that their instructor would be blinded to the identities of those students participating in the study. Additionally, they

were informed that students enrolled in a different class with the same instructor in the following semester would not be allowed to participate. Following the submission of final course grades, students that expressed interest in participating in the study were contacted directly by the doctoral student researchers to schedule a face-to-face meeting. During this meeting, a comprehensive informed consent process was explicitly conveyed and discussed, and those who agreed to participate were administered a demographic questionnaire and completed the research interview.

Once all 10 initial interviews were completed, the doctoral student researchers met with the first author to obtain participants' final reflection papers. As mentioned previously, steps were taken to ensure that the first author remained blinded to participant identities to protect the confidentiality of the students participating in the study. To do this, the first author placed cover sheets (with names only) on each paper, and the doctoral student researchers then retained the reflection papers and pulled the papers of the participants who had consented to the study.

Data obtained from the individual interviews was analyzed to identify themes and subthemes from the interviews and reflection papers, and to prepare for the focus group portion of the study. The focus group was a method utilized to provide further clarification of the themes and subthemes. The doctoral student researchers set up the focus groups by contacting all 10 participants via telephone, reminding them of the study's aim and requirements and inquiring as to whether they were still interested in continuing with the focus group portion of the study. The eight participants who wished to continue were scheduled to meet in a small focus group format, which was conducted utilizing a moderator's guide, to present the primary themes and subthemes from the initial phase of data analysis, discuss their reactions to the data, and obtain any clarifications and/or additions regarding the participants' overall experiences. The focus group data was then analyzed and utilized to further refine the themes and subthemes from the individual interviews.

Trustworthiness of qualitative research. Qualitative approaches to research have notoriously been challenged around issues of methodological rigor and overall generalizability of findings to broader populations (Hoyt & Bhati, 2007). Although a full discussion surrounding the overall benefits and potential limitations of utilizing qualitative methodologies (instead of more traditional quantitative approaches) extends beyond the scope of this article, it would be beneficial to comment briefly on the trustworthiness of qualitative research, in general. How researchers attend to the issues of trustworthiness in qualitative research has been discussed in the literature (e.g., see Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and this issue will be addressed in line with the general criteria outlined by Morrow (2005).

First, it is important to address the issue of subjectivity and reflexivity in qualitative methodologies. To do this, the researchers bracketed any perceived contributions, biases, or overall expectations at the outset (and throughout) the duration of the study that might have influenced their analysis and interpretation of data. The research team for this study consisted of two counseling psychology doctoral students (one male and one female), and one female assistant professor of counselor education; all three researchers were Caucasian. The male doctoral student was enrolled in one of the group dynamics and process courses sampled for this study; however, he did not serve as an individual interviewer for any of the participants from his course section. At the time

of data collection, all three of the researchers had previous academic training in qualitative research methodologies, were involved in other qualitative research inquiries, and had prior experience facilitating counseling groups. Moreover, the researchers held three fundamental beliefs about incorporating an experiential component into the master's level group dynamics and process courses. First, the groups could positively influence counselor trainees' personal and professional development. Next, the groups could create some element of risk, given the potential that participants might express personal vulnerabilities. Finally, the groups may give the illusion of dual relationships, both between the professor and the students, and between students as colleagues and group members.

The second criterion for trustworthiness was that of quality, or adequacy, of the research data. Morrow (2005) discussed this particular criterion in terms of having "adequate amounts" of data, as well as having a "variety" of data sources, both of which contribute to a greater likelihood of legitimate and sound findings. For example, steps were taken to ensure that there were adequate amounts of data from enough participants to fully saturate the emergent themes in this study. At the end of the analysis, the researchers determined that the data was saturated because there was no new data that was not already explained by the existing themes. Additionally, the researchers triangulated data gathered from three separate sources (individual interviews, focus groups, reflective writing), which helped to confirm that the data was fully saturated. The third criterion explored the adequacy of the interpretive strategies used. During the entire analysis phase of the study, the researchers kept independent and ongoing notes about our thoughts and experiences; these notes were utilized in frequent and candid communications with each other to ensure that analysis decisions were strongly grounded in participant voice rather than researcher bias. In order to provide greater context to the themes, the researchers provided salient quotes from the collected data.

Participants

Participants for this study included 10 master's level counselor trainees who recently completed a course in group dynamics and process within a CACREP-accredited program, at a large Midwestern university. Of these participants, 7 were female, 3 were male, and their ages ranged from 22 to 49 years. All were enrolled in graduate programs representing a variety of academic tracks including school counseling ($n = 2$), marriage, couple, and family counseling ($n = 1$), college counseling ($n = 1$), clinical mental health counseling ($n = 2$), and counseling psychology ($n = 4$). The racial composition of the sample was as follows: Asian American/Pacific Islander ($n = 1$), Caucasian/White/Non-Hispanic ($n = 8$), and Hispanic/Latino(a) ($n = 1$). With regards to sexual orientation, 9 participants identified as heterosexual and 1 participant identified as a gay man. Prior to their course experience, 3 participants reported that they had been involved in providing some type of counseling-related services to mental health consumers. Additionally, 2 participants disclosed having taken part in their own personal or group counseling experience prior to, or during, their progression through the course.

All participants took part in a 12-week, 90-minute experiential group that was a required component within their graduate program. These mandatory groups were comprised of 5-8 randomly assigned individuals and were designed to provide students with a first-hand experience of a working group. Students were required to serve as a

group co-leader for 2 non-sequential sessions and as a group participant for the remaining 10 sessions. Within the syllabus and during class, the instructor clearly communicated to students that they would not be evaluated on their actual participation within group, but would rather be awarded participation points for their overall attendance as a member and completion of the two required group leadership experiences. The instructor for the course (and first author) observed all working groups by alternating her time spent observing each group that met concurrently during the same timeframe. The group co-leaders received instructor feedback after each group session, and the instructor intervened directly within each group, on rare occasion, when deemed necessary.

Data Sources

Demographic questionnaire. A number of demographic variables, as summarized above, were assessed for each participant involved in this study. These variables included: age, gender, race, sexual orientation, and previous counseling-related experiences.

Individual, semi-structured interviews. Our primary mode of data collection occurred via individual, semi-structured interviews; these interviews ranged from 35-45 minutes in length, were conducted face-to-face by either of the doctoral student researchers, and were digitally recorded. Due to the possibility of any current or future dual relationships with students and the first author, it was decided that the first author be blinded to participant identities related to this study. As such, the first author was not involved in data collection, but instead became active during the analysis phase. The predetermined set of interview questions that guided the interviews were constructed in line with suggestions asserted by Hill et al., (2005); all three researchers first considered their personal knowledge and experience surrounding the particular phenomenon in question, which was then compared with a review of relevant literature relevant to the current area of inquiry. The questions that emerged from this process were asked in a systematic way to all participants and probing questions were utilized across interviews for the purpose of clarification or to elicit more detailed information.

Focus groups. Following the completion of the individual, semi-structured interviews and the initial phase of data analysis (see data analysis section below), participants were invited to take part in a focus group facilitated by the doctoral student researchers. The researchers structured the focus groups whereby one researcher facilitated the group using a moderator's guide while the other researcher recorded process notes silently. The focus group format began with a structured PowerPoint presentation that guided participants through the initial study findings. Participants were invited to offer feedback, reactions, and suggestions around the initial data analysis in order to provide member checking and further clarification of their overall experiences. Due to scheduling difficulties, only 8 of the original 10 participants were able to take part in the focus group portion of data collection.

Final course reflection papers. One final source of data for the study involved the use of written reflection papers that originally served as a course requirement following participants' successful completion of their group course. The reflection papers asked participants to openly reflect on what it was like to be part of a working group, including sharing what they learned about themselves, along with their observations regarding the group process and any incidences and/or turning points that took place

within the group experience. The use of written reflection papers as a qualitative data source has been identified both conceptually and empirically as an excellent way of tapping additional subjective accounts of a participants' overall experience (Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006; Luke, & Kiweewa, 2010). Moreover, as noted above, utilizing supplemental data sources (i.e., reflection papers) allows for an additional means of data triangulation (Creswell, 2007).

Data Analysis

The analysis process for this study was guided by the phenomenological approach outlined by Creswell (2007) and informed by other scholars, such as Moustakas (1994), who have articulated step-by-step procedures for analyzing phenomenological data. First, all 10 individual interviews were carefully transcribed, making certain that all accounts of participants' stories were captured verbatim. The doctoral student researchers then divided the interview transcripts evenly for evaluation. Next, the process known as horizontalization occurred to extract significant statements, quotes, or sentences across the transcripts that spoke to how the participants experienced the group component of their course (Creswell, 2007; Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007).

Coding procedures. Researchers independently organized information into general thematic clusters with corresponding subthemes; the emergent themes were then compared using an iterative, constant comparative method until consensus was reached and the final thematic structure was determined to be comprehensive and saturated. Participant reflection papers were then used to triangulate the data obtained from the individual interviews. Data triangulation is often used in phenomenological research to provide further complexity to emergent themes and to supplement the main data source (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The coding process for participant reflection papers followed the same procedure outlined above where significant statements within each were identified and coded against the original thematic structure as a template; any deviations from the original structure that required adjustments in the overall thematic structure were discussed until consensus was met between researchers.

After the doctoral student researchers finalized the initial thematic structure, the first author then entered the data analysis process by serving as an external auditor. This audit provided feedback in terms of structure (i.e., whether the thematic breakdown made sense), and provided feedback in terms of content (i.e., whether data actually fit the prescribed thematic structure without ambiguity or confusion). Following the full agreement of all three researchers around theme structure, focus groups were formed to allow participants an opportunity to check the data for accuracy and to provide participants an additional opportunity to refine or further clarify their experiences. The data obtained from the individual interviews, reflection papers, and focus groups were then combined to finalize the thematic structure.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of counselors-in-training as they participated in an experiential group as a component of a group dynamics course. Four main themes emerged across the individual interviews, final reflection papers, and focus groups. These themes include affective experiences, personal growth,

relational dynamics with group members, and professional growth. The major themes presented here capture the various dimensions of the participants' experience, and each theme is comprised of two to three subthemes, which highlight the specific components of a particular theme's parameters.

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1: Affective Experiences:

Subtheme 1: Rewarding Affective Experiences

Subtheme 2: Aversive Affective Experiences

Theme 2: Personal Growth

Subtheme 1: Introspection

Subtheme 2: Internal Change

Theme 3: Relational Dynamics With Group Members

Subtheme 1: Sense of Cohesiveness

Subtheme 2: Interpersonal Difficulties

Subtheme 3: Realization of Influence

Theme 4: Professional Growth

Subtheme 1: Professional Identity Development

Subtheme 2: Negotiation of Roles

Subtheme 3: Navigating Diversity Issues

Important to consider is that each individual participant might not have experienced every one of the components presented here. Rather, the themes presented are intended to provide an illustration of the overall collective experience of the students that participated in the experiential group process. Drawing from the data broadly, three of the major themes seemed to occur primarily on an individual and internal level, while the last theme was primarily concerned with interpersonal dynamics and processes that transpired during the group experience. Each one of the major themes and their respective subthemes will be discussed using participant excerpts to provide clarification.

Theme 1: Affective Experiences

The experiential component of the course elicited several notable affective dynamics from participants. Some of these affective experiences were pleasant and rewarding, while others presented more of a challenge.

Subtheme 1: Rewarding Affective Experiences. This subtheme describes the three major affective experiences that were generally offered by participants as being positive or rewarding; these affective experiences included relief, excitement, and feelings of affirmation. Participants conceptualized relief as the feeling that the actual experiential portion of the course was not going to be as difficult to manage as initially expected and the realization that everyone in the class was in the same process together. For these participants, *relief* tended to manifest near the beginning of the course, after an initial stressful or negative reaction to the experiential component of the course had occurred. The feeling of relief tended to be more common among participants who were taking this course in the first semester of their program and who had not had any previous counseling or group leading experience. As an example, one participant described the

relief they experienced with the realization that a majority of their peers were at a similar experience level as counselors-in-training:

But then I quickly learned that everybody else was in the same position I was. They hadn't really led that many groups or things hadn't been structured or anything like that. So they had just as little experience as I did.

Other participants felt a sense of relief that the experiential group experience would not be calculated in their grade for the course. This seemed to take a certain amount of pressure off participants in that they could still be part of the group process without any hesitation around whether their amount of disclosure or overall participation was enough to meet the academic standards of the instructor. Potentially, a group member could not actively participate as a group member, yet attend the group sessions and not have their lack of participation reflect poorly upon their grade. One participant commented on how relieved he felt after others had begun to share information within the group, which in many ways "broke the ice," so that he felt more comfortable to share himself. Although the feeling of relief could precipitate in different ways among group participants, it was a common affective experience for many of them.

Other participants described an eagerness and excitement around their participation in the experiential portion of the course. Multiple participants expressed an eagerness to participate in the group because it was a "hands-on" experience, which suited some participants' preferred style of learning. Due to the unique nature of this experience, students reported eagerness to participate. A significant number of participants also recalled a positive anticipation around how the group process and group interactions would play out over the course of the semester. Similar to the feelings of relief, described above, many participants felt these feelings of anticipation and excitement during the beginning portion of the course.

The final rewarding affective experience felt by participants was that of affirmation. Feelings of affirmation emerged as an overall feeling that the class was interesting, enjoyable, and manageable. Statements of affirmation arose frequently throughout the data across interviews, reflection papers, and focus groups. Some participant commentary highlighted the perceived usefulness of the course in the context of their academic careers:

My overall feeling of the group process is that it was one of the most valuable experiences that I've had in an academic setting. We have all gone through the traditional schooling where an educator gives you a book and you learn as much as you can from simply reading it. In this group experience, I was allowed to actually practice using the things I learned and gain practical knowledge of things to come. It gave glimpses of how things would/could work in the 'real world' and not a directive of an indisputable and cut-and-dry block of text.

Other instances highlighting affirmation touched upon some participants' belief that their involvement in an actual experiential group was more helpful than a role-played group:

So we heard other people who had taken this class that have been given pseudo-personalities, and they were supposed to go into their group with

this, this pseudo-personality and... I don't think you could get that internal feeling like you do when it's yourself. Your vulnerability wouldn't be exposed. Or the excitement. I mean, I saw every group member develop in our semester. In one way or another. We all kind of developed. ...I don't know if develop is the right word but... We saw the highs and the lows and the frustrations and their excitements and nervousness...

In one way or another, each one of our participants frequently endorsed his/her experience in the class as being primarily positive.

Subtheme 2: Aversive Affective Experiences. Another subtheme that emerged included aversive affective reactions that were described as being unpleasant for participants to experience. Although initially perceived as difficult to manage, these aversive affective states challenged participants and often pushed them towards personal and professional growth. Five particular affective states within this categorization were described by participants, and included: nervousness, feelings of inadequacy, resistance, emotional discomfort, and reluctance to end. Generally, some affective states could be seen at different time periods during the class and group experience, which suggests that there was a developmental quality to these various affective states that related to the literature regarding the unfolding of stages within a group experience (Corey, 2012, Gladding, 2008). Specifically, experiences of nervousness, feelings of inadequacy, and resistance were experienced towards the beginning of the course; emotional discomfort was experienced around the middle of the course; and reluctance to end the group experience was felt at the conclusion of the course.

Among participants, nervousness was described as feelings of concern, anxiety, or fear about having to take part in the experiential aspect of the course. For some participants, this class was their first graduate-level course. These students were new to their program and the department, and many had not yet gotten the chance to become acquainted with their classmates. Other participants experienced worry about their own performance and competence. Some expressed trepidation about their ability to co-lead a group and effectively apply the theories they were learning about in class within their groups. This subtheme also encompasses the anxiety that some participants felt about participating in a real group experience and how this anxiety elicited feelings of vulnerability. Some worried about disclosing something personal that would not be well received by other group members; however, the nervousness that many participants felt normalized given the context and situation surrounding their required course experience.

Other participants described feelings of inadequacy, inexperience, and lack of confidence in their ability to successfully complete the experiential aspect of the course. This feeling seemed to be expressed more strongly among participants who had taken this course during their first semester in the program, as illustrated by this participant:

The first day of class, I was like, oh my gosh, there are PhD students in here and I can't compete with that. This is my first class as a master's student, and... I felt like a little guppy... in a tank of sharks.

Connected to this point is the context that some participants had not yet completed a counseling skills and techniques course. This status resulted in comparisons being drawn against students who were further along in the program. Some participants

also felt personally inadequate, which resulted in the tendency to disclose less during the group experience. One participant explained,

I think perhaps because some members in the group opened up so quickly in the beginning, the first session to be exact, I was a little intimidated. I am a reserved, quiet person in groups, so the degree of vulnerability was intimidating for me.

In this case, the participant felt intimidated because others were disclosing information about themselves more quickly than they were willing to disclose. As a result, this participant felt as if they were not performing well enough as a member of the group.

Some participants initially displayed concern about having to take part in an experiential group. These participants generally felt caution, reservation, or initial feelings of criticalness about the experiential portion of the class, which we are characterizing here as resistance. Again, many participants felt vulnerable approaching mandatory group participation, despite the fact that the instructor was not formally evaluating them on this course requirement. This group experience, by its very nature, encouraged students to disclose a deeper level of information about themselves—and with greater frequency—than they would normally engage in with their peers. Some participants had actually attended group therapy earlier in their lives and found these groups to be a negative experience, which subsequently contributed to their nervousness with the experiential portion of the course. Another participant noted worries surrounding the lack of structure of the group experience and how the groups did not work from a theme or focus each week. This participant felt that having a focus might have helped to create a common bond between group members, which would have ultimately helped strengthen group cohesion. This participant conveyed feeling that within this group experience, the group members talked about their issues and then left without further action or follow-up.

Next, participants described having a general discomfort with the level of emotionality expressed in the group and feelings of discomfort with specific group experiences that occurred. Additionally, some group members felt foolish or embarrassed after crying or expressing an intense emotion during the group experience. At times, participants also felt that they were holding things back from the group, which also led to some emotional discomfort. Many participants discussed how writing about these issues in their weekly course journals provided an outlet for them to express emotional reactions that were not overtly shared within the group (Howard et al., 2006; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010).

Finally, many participants expressed a strong reluctance to end the group experience as the class concluded. Specifically, they felt reservations about ending their respective groups due to the connections and relationships that they had forged through the experience. While not all participants expressed reluctance that their group had to end, others found the relationships that they had created within the group difficult to terminate. Also present was the idea that they would not have the opportunity to participate in anything like this again—said differently, participants believed that participation in the group provided a unique and special experience. Some group members conveyed that they had continued to have friendships with their former group

members after the class ended, thus continuing the relationships that were formed outside of the group context.

Theme 2: Personal Growth

This main theme highlights student perceptions of internal changes that occurred for them because of the experiential component of the course. Participants noted that the group experience promoted self-reflection and introspection and acted as a catalyst for behavioral and cognitive changes.

Subtheme 1: Introspection. This subtheme describes the internal reflection or contemplation about self and others. Participants engaged in a substantial amount of self-reflection and introspection throughout the group experiential process; many participants were surprised at what they learned about themselves, while others deepened their understanding about their own personality dynamics or how they functioned in their daily life. Other participants learned not only positive things about themselves personally, but also about themselves professionally. Some learned that they had characteristics that will aid them in their professional life, while others learned enough about themselves to gain confidence in becoming counselors. For many, these realizations about themselves led to a sense of accomplishment, pride, and satisfaction.

Subtheme 2: Internal Change. This subtheme describes the constructive internal movement that occurred for some participants. Personal changes experienced by some group members included cognitive or behavioral changes that were generally positive in that participant's life. For example, this participant related a cognitive change that occurred:

I learned that emotions are important and that you can't just push them away. That they are legitimate and when you feel something, sharing with someone else is okay too, because I've never been much of a sharing person. Like, I will work with other people and friends will talk to me about stuff and that would be fine, but not for myself.

For this particular participant, she experienced a shift in her understanding of what role emotions played in her life. Although it is unclear how much of this change in cognition will manifest itself in the context of this participant's professional life, or how long it will be maintained beyond the end of the course, it is clear that the group experience brought about a significant change in this participant's cognition during the course experience. For some participants, the group experience in many ways led to the closure of past, unresolved experiences in their personal lives. One participant noted how he pushed himself to be an active participant within the group and as a result was able to make progress on issues regarding a "tumultuous childhood." Other participants noted that they were able to work on their relationship issues within group. Although comprised only of students, the experiential group still seemed to culminate in a perceived real therapeutic experience. Most saliently, many participants stated that the group experience boosted their confidence and instilled a sense of thankfulness in them for their participation in the group.

Theme 3: Relational Dynamics With Group Members

This main theme encompasses how participants related to each other during the group process. It describes the level of bonding that occurred, how group members interrelated with each other, and how group members affected each other.

Subtheme 1: Sense of Cohesiveness. This subtheme describes the bonding that occurred between group members and expresses the idea that group members worked together to create a deep level of connection. One participant described the experience with fellow group members:

We celebrated achievements and lamented over disappointments together, no matter which one of us they pertained to. It was like we were a close-knit family and each individual's accomplishments affected the entire group.

Participants felt close to most of the group members they interacted with, particularly those who were more active with participation. Overall, the sense of camaraderie and level of bonding to fellow group members was salient across all participant experiences.

Subtheme 2: Interpersonal Difficulties. Some participants described tensions, either within the group co-leader and/or within group participant context. For example, tension arose due to differences in leadership style among co-leaders. For instance, one participant described difficulty in working with her group co-leader because of differences in personality, style, and group preparation. This led to the participant feeling frustrated towards his/her co-leader. Other participants described a frustration towards group members who were quieter or who were not disclosing; they felt some resentment towards these quieter group members for not participating as fully in the group. Although there was some difficulty in working with certain group members, participants seemed to have formed cohesive connections with most of the other group members, overall.

Subtheme 3: Realization of Influence. This subtheme describes the experience of feeling as if one's presence in the group had an interpersonal, emotional, or otherwise practical impact on another group member. For example, one group member explained how he came to understand that his participation in the group influenced group members:

I also learned from being in group that I actually do have a more profound effect on people than I may realize or choose to believe. Attending group each class session, observing other members of the group, and taking note of the effects of the things that I say to others in the group has led to certain members providing me with feedback that relate to how my participation has provided them with a new view or insight, way of living and approach to situations.

This participant gained an understanding of how his actions can have a positive impact on others. Because the group process included instances where this particular participant was able to be the recipient of feedback, he was able to gain a valuable insight about what effect his actions played within the group setting.

Theme 4: Professional Growth

This main theme describes the application of academic learning and real-life experience that provided movement towards professional growth among participants.

First, a majority of participants described an awareness surrounding the beginning formations of their professional counseling identities, specifically as a future practitioner that might implement group therapy and techniques within their practice. The negotiation of roles was also salient for participants, as the shifting between group leader and group member provided a certain set of challenges. Finally, participants noted the significance of grappling with issues relating to diversity within their group experiences.

Subtheme 1: Professional Identity Development. This subtheme describes the application of theories and techniques in the group setting, sense of growth as emerging counseling professionals, and a developing commitment to future use of group therapy techniques in future practice.

Participants, when serving in the role of group leader, were asked to implement strategies related to a particular group theory each week. As a result, participants gained experience translating conceptual and theoretical information—as it pertains to group counseling—into practice. The direct application of theory in a real group therapy setting helped participants to define and refine their respective theoretical orientations. For example, one participant noted that she initially thought she ascribed to a cognitive-behavioral orientation, but found that she was drawn to other theories because of her experience in the group process:

I would probably would have said that, um, you know, I see myself more of a cognitive behaviorist, maybe more of a short, solution-focused person going out of it, um, I'd realized that, you know, yes I could see myself doing that as a strategy in a short-lived session, but I found myself more drawn to different theoretical points of view.

For other participants, taking part in the experiential group provided first-hand knowledge of the complexities surrounding stage progression and group movement. Not only did participants witness what might occur during different group stages, but they also experienced how it felt to actually move in and out of these stages. Other participants made their own meaning about the group process, as this quote illustrates:

I learned that the initial stage is very important and that each stage builds upon the one preceding it. In group process, you must attempt to create or provide a strong foundation for the rest of the stages to follow, otherwise you can get stuck and simply fall apart.

Overall, group participants seemed to gain a greater understanding of group counseling theories and group process because of their participation in the experiential group. Participants were also able to experiment with the various group theories and techniques in order to see which ones suited their own professional orientation and style. The comments from the participants seemed to convey the perception that participation in a real experiential group was helpful for their professional development as beginning counselors.

Another major component of this subtheme was the mishandling of a group experience by the student group leaders. During the course of the class, the instructor of record observed each experiential group, but did not stay at any one group for the entire time. The group structure consisted of two student co-leaders (which changed each week) and the remainder of the student group members. There were no advanced students or other facilitators to monitor the progress of the group. Therefore, the responsibility of

facilitating and maintaining the group was the primary responsibility of the student group leaders. These inexperienced student co-leaders had little or no prior group experience. There were times when the instructor of record was not present and problems arose due to a mishandling of a group experience by the student co-leaders.

A participant described an incident in which they, as the group leader, did not feel competent enough to handle a situation that came up within the group. The participant explained that the group cohesion in their particular group had become so high that group participants were beginning to disclose things that were more serious. The group co-leaders were feeling increasingly responsible for how they were facilitating the group; however, they were still student counselors-in-training and not yet full counselors. A participant explained this difficulty: “The trust developed so well in our group that people were disclosing things that were, that could be harmful if they weren’t handled correctly, and the students, we didn’t know what we were doing.”

Clearly, this participant felt that things came up in the group that reached beyond the competence of the student group leaders. This participant went on to explain the consequence of this situation. “We had a couple incidents where somebody disclosed something and we didn’t respond the way that she... had thought we would. And so everybody in our group was very upset.” The participant explained how their lack of knowing what to do to handle the situation resulted in negative feelings among group members. As one of the student group leaders, the participant felt responsible for handling the situation. However, because she was unsure of what to do, the situation was not resolved in a satisfactory way. This participant explained that as a group leader, she felt upset because she was unable to deal with the group experience appropriately, which led to the group member in question feeling hurt, which led to the other group members feeling upset.

Subtheme 2: Negotiation of Roles. This subtheme describes the participants’ experiences as a co-leader and the difficulties in shifting roles between client and counselor from week to week. First, some participants spoke about their experience as a co-leader. For some participants, this course provided them with their first experience of being in a counselor role. Another important aspect of being a group leader for the first time was also learning to work with a co-leader. Some participants learned how their emerging style as a co-leader either meshed or clashed with their co-leader, and while some participants struggled being a co-leader, others found that they enjoyed leading group.

Participants also noted difficulty in shifting between their group leader and group member roles each week. Each student was required to take on the co-leader role two times during the course of the semester. As such, participants were required to switch from the group member role to the co-leader role for a particular week. Some participants noted difficulties in having to switch from the role of a group member to the role of a group co-leader. For those that experienced this difficulty, the problem stemmed from being a group member for the majority of the time, and then having to assume a different role that required more advanced preparation and group facilitation. As participants worked through issues within the group as a group member, some found it difficult to transition into the co-leader role because it did not allow them the opportunity to continue working on their issues while they were leading. Many who experienced this difficulty described having to hold themselves back to the group as they tried to facilitate the group

as a co-leader. Others who had problems shifting roles described the difficulty in knowing how much disclosure to the group was appropriate while they were a co-leader. As a group member participant in previous weeks, some experienced their fellow group members wanting to check on their status for that week, which felt uncomfortable to disclose while maintaining a leadership role within the group.

Subtheme 3: Navigating Diversity Issues. Group members differed in terms of background, gender, age, racial identity, and sexual orientation. Participants in this study noticed how emerging cultural issues along these lines of diversity affected individual participants and the group as a whole. The differences in diversity among group members provided an important experience for many participants to learn about others who were different from them. Many participants described their group as “diverse,” although this was defined differently across participants. For example, some participants emphasized the racial makeup of their group while other participants spoke about how significant differences in age influenced their experiences in group. In any case, the cultural and diversity differences provided an opportunity for participants to learn about others who were different from them. For example, one participant described an instance that happened in the group that related to racial minority microaggressions:

Um, the one thing I can think of right away would be when there was kind of an eye opening experience in our group where [a group member] had said something kind of racist and then two African Americans in our group were like uh-uh, not having it. And so it was a learning process for me because I had never thought, because I hadn't had multicultural counseling yet and I didn't know about microaggressions, and it was just kind of like the start of that and now I can see more. I'm glad they brought it to group and I'm glad that I could learn from that and now after having multicultural too, I'm like, 'oh I get it.' ...That was definitely a learning experience and something that I will always remember.

Participants who belonged to a minority group experienced increased pressure about being a “spokesperson” for the group that they belonged to and experienced weariness towards redundant questions and potentially offensive questions about their minority identity. Overall, participants generally learned about the navigation of diversity issues within a group counseling setting while others found themselves in the position to personally manage their own multicultural identity within the group setting.

Discussion

Previous research has investigated counselor trainees' perceptions of their group experience, with a general focus on positive outcomes related to growth factors in areas such as interpersonal learning, expanded worldview, better understanding of group process, and learning/empathy for future clients (Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008; Ieva et al., 2009; Kiweewa et al., 2013). These studies have laid the groundwork of understanding the value of experiential groups, especially through the counselor trainees' perceptions of their experiences and outcomes related to personal and professional growth, learning, and meaning making.

The findings from this current study support former research, especially regarding student perceptions of the positive aspects of the group experience that served as catalysts

for increased personal awareness and professional learning and development. However, this study provides a more nuanced and somewhat different perspective, as conveyed explicitly by these counselors-in-training. The results of this study are more congruent with Kline et al.'s (1997) findings, in that participants expressed many positive aspects of the group experience and shared what they perceived as either difficult or challenging about the experience. These findings support the importance of understanding students' actual experiences with mandated groups as part of their program, given possible ethical concerns, as pointed out by Anderson and Price (2001), regarding the potential for increased vulnerability within an experiential group and the challenges of navigating the experience with inherent dual relationships.

Based on our methodology, which triangulated data from three separate sources (individual interviews, focus groups, and final journals), key themes emerged regarding students' perceptions of their group experience. These counselors-in-training reported perceptions of the group experience that were positive, negative, and mixed regarding their participation as both group members and group co-leaders. Positive perceptions included rewarding affective experiences, group cohesiveness, increased self-awareness, realization of personal influence, personal growth and internal change, and professional identity development. Experiences that participants considered either aversive or challenging included interpersonal difficulties with other group members and/or co-leaders, negotiating the changing roles of group member and co-leader, feeling overwhelmed or incompetent to handle critical incidents within the group, and difficulties addressing and navigating diversity issues within the group. While the results were somewhat surprising with such a mix of positive and aversive experiences, it is also encouraging to consider the participants' perceptions regarding how they learned and grew through both what they viewed as positive and challenging group experiences. It is interesting that student perceptions of the experience seem to align with the positive aspects and challenges generally understood to be part of most group experiences, with group members moving through the different stages of the group (Corey, 2012). While participants expressed a mix of feelings and attitudes regarding the experiential requirement of their group class, these students seemed to be empowered as they moved through the group process and navigated the experience. This seems evident in the participants' perceptions of themselves as taking on challenges and growing both personally and professionally through the experience. Participants articulated how they came through the experience with increased self-awareness, positive growth, and meaningful change.

Results also related specifically to professional development, with participants feeling a mix of anxiety and excitement as the groups began and expressing concerns about their level of experience or inexperience and competence to co-lead the group. As they moved through the group process, they had opportunities to experiment with the application of different theories and group leadership skills. Students shared about finding their way as group members and co-leaders, and coming through the experience with increased clarity about theoretical orientations and leadership styles, a better understanding of the challenges and rewards of the co-leader role, their levels of perceived influence, and increased awareness of diversity issues that can play out within the group.

As reflected in the themes and subthemes from the findings, student participants perceived the group experience very similarly to how group theory depicts movement through the stages of the group process (Corey, 2012; Gladding, 2008). From the findings, the students' experience of the experiential group appeared to align with group members' experiences with group work, generally. The themes and subthemes served to highlight the group members' shared perceptions as they moved through the stages; for example, the anxieties related to the beginning stage with the primary tasks of inclusion and establishing trust; resistances and difficulties among the members during the transition stage; cohesion and productivity through the working stage; and the mixed feelings and reluctance associated with termination during the final stage of the group experience (Corey, 2012). A central goal of the experiential group is that students will experience the stages of the group process (Corey, 2012), and results of this study indicate that students did, in fact, perceive this as their actual experience.

The stages unfolded for these students as they moved through the process, and the therapeutic group factors, as defined by Yalom (1985) also became evident. The therapeutic factors, such as instillation of hope, universality, imparting information, altruism, interpersonal learning, and group cohesiveness were reflected within the themes and subthemes. A theoretical underlying assumption is that, in order for these factors to become active, the interpersonal experiential process must take place in the here and now (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), and the findings support that these factors seemed influential in promoting growth and development for these counselors-in-training. These findings also highlight the challenges related to diversity that may arise among group members and working with cultural worldviews that have the potential to impact relationships, behaviors, and the willingness to participate in the group (DeLucia-Waak, Donigian, & Hernandez, 2004).

Implications

The implications from this study for counselor education are meaningful, especially in regards to furthering the understanding of the perceptions of counselor trainees as they experience and navigate the group experience. This study supports the value of the experiential group as a unique learning opportunity, with students coming away from the experience with perceptions of increased personal growth and professional development. However, our study also suggests that, as a required component of counselor education programs, the experiential group may elicit a mix of positive and negative perceptions and reactions from students, with associated feelings of anxiety, vulnerability, and self-doubt. It is important for counselor educators to be mindful and sensitive to these issues when introducing, preparing, supporting, and challenging students through the experiential group process. From our findings, we came away with an increased understanding of the importance of how groups are structured. For example, the first author now structures the experiential groups to include a doctoral level co-leader to provide consistency and modeling of group leadership skills and to manage critical incidents that may be encountered during the group experience. Another implication for counselor education programs is a consideration of where students are in the course of their respective programs when taking the group class. From our data, it seems that students who are new to their programs tend to experience greater anxiety and

self-doubt going in to the group experience. A recommendation would be that students would have completed a course in counseling techniques as a pre-requisite to taking the group class within their programs of study.

Another implication from our research is the importance of addressing issues of diversity, and this cannot be stressed enough. Student responses from this study highlighted how issues related to multiculturalism and diversity may be challenging for students and also influence their perceptions of the group experience. Based on the results of this study, the first author adapted further group courses to address diversity through a multitude of methods and approaches. For example, the first author now includes a “group immersion” assignment to sensitize students and enrich classroom discussion regarding diversity issues in groups. For this assignment, students must go outside the classroom environment and immerse themselves in a different cultural experience, and these experiences are then shared and processed in class. Diversity issues continue to be addressed through didactic, observational, and experiential methods, allowing ample space for processing and discussing the implications for group work with the students.

Counselor educators continue to face many challenges as they strive to meet accreditation standards and structure group classes that include experiential components for promoting students’ professional competencies in group work. Conclusions and implications from our findings serve to underscore the importance of structuring group experiential components to both challenge and support counselors-in-training as they navigate the various stages and aspects of the group experience. It is our hope that our study has extended previous research shedding light on students’ perceptions of a key experiential component of their training.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of our study must be considered with the limitations in mind. Limitations include those that are normally associated with qualitative studies, such as our limited sample size. Therefore, our findings may not be generalizable to other counselors-in-training. Another limitation is the voluntary nature of the participation in the study; students who volunteered may have had a bias or an unknown motivation for participating. Despite efforts to insure confidentiality for participants and conduct the study after the conclusion of the group dynamics course, the fact that the principle investigator was also the instructor of the course could also lend itself to some bias regarding the content that was shared by the participants.

As with other studies of counselors-in-training and experiential course components, this research study has both furthered the understanding of student perceptions and brought about more questions. Future studies could include more participants and include more sections of group courses in order to compare and contrast the results. Although not a focus of this study, it would be interesting to compare group classes taught by different instructors to expand the knowledge of instructor influence and student perceptions of their experiences. Quantitative methods may also be useful in future investigations to compare students’ perceptions and outcomes related to increased group skills development and professional competency.

Although previous studies have provided much needed information regarding the seemingly beneficial aspects of experiential course components, and our findings support

these factors, more could be known about student perceptions regarding how they actually manage and negotiate the experiential group component of their academic programs. Further studies that highlight the nuanced and often mixed experience, without a particular emphasis on positive outcomes, could be helpful in advancing the understanding of what can be a complex and valuable learning experience for counselor trainees.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm