

## Article 19

### **Novice Counselor's Group Skills Through Personal Reflection and Facilitation**

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#### **Abstract**

One requirement by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) is for counselors-in-training (CITs) to be able to perform group counseling sessions. Further, CACREP suggests a 10-hour group counseling facilitation experience. In order to assist students in improving their group counseling skills, novice CITs must practice being group facilitators and are asked to explore their skills through personal reflection. Thirteen CITs in a master's-level group counseling course at a historically black college and university (HBCU) explored and wrote their personal reflections after conducting a group session. Through using a grounded theory method, *empathy* was a recurring theme among the CITs. Implications for novice group counselors and future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* group facilitation, group counseling, personal reflection, empathy

Group counseling skills are necessary to become an effective counselor in the community and in other forums (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2013; Jacobs, Schimmel, Masson, & Harvill, 2016). As a part of its accreditation standards, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2015) suggests that novice counselors should develop and maintain effective leadership and group counseling skills. CACREP (2015) indicates that counselors-in-training (CITs) may be taught the different elements of group work, which is one of the major eight core curricular experiences. In addition, Corey et al. (2013) stated that "successful leadership requires specific group leadership skills and appropriate performance of certain functions . . . like most skills, leadership skills need to be learned and practiced" (p. 22).

Although CACREP encourages learning and practicing group counseling skills, limited research (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Reinhartz, 1992) has captured CITs' basic group counseling skills, such as cutting off, drawing out, and attending skills, especially through the trainees' personal reflections. Performing group counseling skills is required by CACREP-accredited programs in order to become an effective counselor. In order to assist students in improving their group counseling skills, novice CITs may practice being group facilitators. In individual counseling, reflection relies on the counselor being present with the client and establishing an understanding of what the client is feeling and experiencing. In group counseling, the reflection is made between the individual and other members of the group with the group facilitator reflecting on the experiences of each group member and the group as a whole (Jacobs et al., 2016). The use of reflection is a valuable tool designed to enhance the development of future clinical skills (Tsingos-Lucas, Bosnic-Anticevich, & Smith, 2016). Therefore, the primary purpose of this proposed study was to evaluate the personal reflections on group facilitation experiences of novice counselors in order to explore the use of reflection to further develop clinical skills. The two main research questions that guided and directed this study were:

1. What personal reflections result from a group facilitation experience in a group counseling course? What are the responses noted by different personal reflections of group facilitators in a group counseling course?
2. What is the overall recurring theme experienced by group counselors-in-training?

## **Method**

### **Overall Design of Group Counseling Course**

The design of this course meets the national standards for group counseling listed in Section II. G6 of the CACREP standards (CACREP, 2015). The overall objective was to help students understand the dynamics, process, and function of group work. In addition, students identified therapeutic factors through reading a novel and also actually being a group facilitator. Students typically must have successfully completed the ethics and theories counseling courses to be enrolled in the group counseling course.

The two-and-a-half-hour group counseling course held once a week was divided into two parts—pre- and post-midterm break. Pre-midterm break students focused on the first 11 chapters of the main textbook of the semester along with the presentation of *The Schopenhauer Cure* novel (Yalom, 2006). In addition to the students conducting their own group facilitation, the instructor conducted group sessions pre-midterm break, while the students conducted their group facilitations after the break. After the midterm break, the students facilitated their 1-hour group process. Students are not typically in practicum or internship, so they are not provided with actual groups. However, students are encouraged to be facilitators with their colleagues and are not only encouraged to use the *here and now*, but they are advised to choose topics related to graduate students in order to generate a group experience relevant to the CITs. Some examples of the groups are provided in the syllabus (e.g., family issues, time management, feelings of becoming a new counselor). Eight students were involved in the actual group process, and the other students were used as evaluators (observers) of the group process. The students were then provided with a written, 5-minute evaluation from the instructor about their group

experience. A formal written evaluation was provided to students with input from the observers. The pedagogical approaches helped significantly to achieve the group objectives and standards.

### **Pedagogical Approaches Used in Group Counseling Course**

First, the traditional lectures included the use of the main textbook and PowerPoint slides to provide information that assists in guiding discussion and stimulation of students. Students were encouraged to read the chapters before class in order to do well on the quiz and to understand the concepts. Discussion surrounding the assigned reading was generated through the question “*What was the overall theme of the chapter?*” Students were encouraged, but not required, to read the other supplemental materials and textbooks that have information to assist CITs with improving their group counseling skills.

Second, in addition to the instructor’s presentation, the students were also asked to present *The Schopenhauer Cure* novel (Yalom, 2006). The novel has over 33 short chapters, so the students were assigned three chapters of the novel. They were encouraged to present Yalom’s (2006) main points, purpose and intent of the chapter, character development, and therapeutic skills, theories or techniques used in the chapter. These presentations were assigned pre-midterm break. At the end of the semester, the students were asked to write an analysis of the novel. The analyses included, but were not limited to, two different experiential activities that were incorporated in the novel to also assist in the students’ growth and development in group counseling skills. The students analyzed the content, the characters, and the therapeutic factors that were related to the group process from the novel. Yalom provided a real group process in the novel to assist group leaders in improving their skills as group facilitators.

Third, to enhance their learning outcomes for this course, students were encouraged to research a topic related to counseling. The CITs were advised to research the target population and type of group they will encounter in their internship or afterwards. The focus for this paper was also to discuss useful treatments, interventions, and contra-indicators for the specific population. These pedagogical methods not only helped with improving CITs’ group counseling skills but also assisted with formulating personal reflection messages.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design was used for this study to explore common themes of reflections among CITs as group facilitators. A demographic instrument questionnaire and a grounded theory analysis were used to determine the overall recurring themes of personal reflections of CITs. Two faculty members from the university conducted this study—one was the instructor of the group counseling course, and the other was another instructor in the department.

### **Sample**

The sample included 13 CIT students in a Principles and Procedures of Group Counseling course in spring 2015 at a historically black university in the Southeast region of the United States. The sample of CITs were mental health trainees (accounting for 69%

of the sample), career trainees (8%), and school counseling trainees (23%). More than 54% of the sample reported being Black/African-American, 38% White/Caucasian, and 8% indicated biracial. The sample age of the CITs ranged from 18–28 years (38%), 29–39 years (54%), and 40–51 years (8%). Sixty-two percent of the participants indicated completing one semester, 31% completed four semesters, and 8% completed two semesters in a two-year program (due to full-time or part-time enrollment). The course was a 14-week course that included lecture, reading, and active participation in class, video, and role-play simulations.

### **Qualitative Procedure**

A grounded theory study was used to “get close to [the personal reflections on group facilitation of counselors in training] know what is going on” (Patton, 2002, p. 125). Group counseling coursework may have a profound influence on the readiness and willingness of counselors to provide group counseling as a professional service to clients. Coursework serves as a frame of reference from which individuals base professional action or inaction. Without a working knowledge and framework for group counseling, professional counselors are left without the tools to be effective group counseling facilitators (Reinharz, 1992). This study's qualitative research goal was to explore the varying experiences of CITs through personal reflections following their group leadership facilitation exercises. A grounded theory approach offered an opportunity to better understand the group leadership experiences of CITs. Corbin and Strauss (2008) noted that a goal of grounded theory is “to develop knowledge that will guide practice” (p. 11). Qualitative results from this study may inform the development and implementation of group counseling coursework in order to enhance group counseling skills and efficacy in leading a group in professional practice.

Students were asked to conduct group facilitations and one week after their group facilitation, students were asked to write a personal reflection on their experience. The personal reflection on group facilitation assignment was collected and analyzed by the second investigator, who was provided with the reflections and student-generated pseudonyms were utilized to protect anonymity of participants. To analyze the qualitative information, the second author reviewed the qualitative information from the personal reflection. The second author who is not affiliated with the course and marking of the personal reflection analyzed the qualitative information.

### **Qualitative Method**

#### **Research Design**

Creswell (1998) stated, “The best studies have a strong inquiry procedure, and this procedure can be gained through engaging in field studies” (p. 27). Qualitative researchers recognize that no single method can ever solve a problem. Creswell suggested that researchers engage in different procedures to produce findings deemed both credible and trustworthy. In order to gain access to information-rich cases, the present study was conducted using a purposeful sample of CITs enrolled in a group counseling course (Patton, 2002).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection and data analysis are seamless processes designed to increase conceptual density with the achievement of saturation of reoccurring categories or themes. Reflections were submitted in cycles of time allowing for the emerging theory to be continuously tested against data that had been systematically collected, reviewed, and analyzed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glasser & Strauss, 1967). According to Patton (2002), a general guide can be used to provide a common set of topics from which the data may be collected. The course syllabus provided a suggested set of questions based on logistical and emotional responses as topical areas to address in order to complete the reflection assignment (Umbach, 2005). The list of questions was not inclusive, and students were able to freely respond and organize their reflection based on their individual experiences as group leaders. Personal reflections support the qualitative approach of research design by offering flexibility to pursue emergent themes that allowed for the development of theory.

First, the researcher interacted with the data and the data collection process, asking questions of the data, generating additional questions to explain and generate insight and lead to theory development related to group counseling skills. The second researcher reviewed collected data as it arrived. Each assignment was reviewed twice before themes were highlighted and noted in the paper margins. Hand coding was used to analyze data gathered from the reflections with a focus on capturing essential concepts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As noted, a hallmark of the grounded theory approach is its constant comparative data analysis processes, coined constant comparative method, which calls for a continuous and simultaneous interaction between data collection and data analysis. The process of hand coding involved coming up with the codes and then the emerging themes.

Second, was the use of theoretical sampling that led to filling in gaps in the emerging theory. Third, the use of a systematic coding procedure and organizing the codes was used to demonstrate a relationship between the codes and emergent themes, creating an integrated theory. Analyzing data included the use of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The final feature was continuously seeking answers to questions in the data that allowed for conceptual saturation of the central phenomenon being studied by the second author (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Coding and themes.** This study utilized the coding and thematic analysis method presented in Creswell (2007), Corbin and Strauss (2008), and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). Using conceptual ordering allowed the second researcher to make comparisons in order to tie lower level concepts together to create discrete categories for broader application in the development of group leaders (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Upon receipt of all reflective assignments, the second author used a graphic organizer to organize large amounts of data, including direct quotes, in order to analyze the data while seeking emergent major categories and comparing results of participants' experiences as group leaders (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Grounded theory is developed through the concept of conceptual density and is concerned with achieving a basic framework of understanding in order to "develop each category/theme fully" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 195). After seven reflections had been

analyzed, it appeared that data saturation had been achieved; however, to affirm category development, the researcher continued to test categories through number 12.

**Trustworthiness.** This study utilized multiple sources (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Patton, 2002). There were two data sources used to inform this study: the written reflection, and the second researcher's reflective journal with notes from each reflection and graphic organizers designed to create a foundation for the grounded theory. Multiple data sources (e.g., demographic instrument, second author's reflective journal, graphic organizers) allowed the researchers to strengthen the validity of the study's findings (Merriam, 2002).

### **Results: Experiential Empathy as a Core Category**

A grounded theory study provides the researcher theoretical categories during the data analysis process. Concepts and themes that emerge during the open coding stage of data analysis are organized under theoretical categories during the axial stage of coding. Selective coding moves the data from description to theory by integrating the categories to form a grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The resulting substantive theory accounts for the interaction of each of the categories. Grounded in the data, the theory emerges from constant comparative coding and a rigorous data analysis process.

The emergence of a core category was essential in generating theory that appeared to have the "greatest explanatory relevance and highest potential for linking all of the other categories together" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 104). It is important to define theory as a "set of well-developed categories (themes, concepts) that are systematically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some phenomenon" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 55).

Once the major categories (i.e., confidence, logistical planning, empathy, practice), were developed and linkages were made, the analysis turned to the development of the core category. Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggested the following questions to guide core category development: What theme is reflected over and over again in the data? What does the researcher think are the main issues that counselors in training are facing in providing group counseling? What do all of the other categories seem to lead to? Returning to the experiences of each participant regarding group counseling skills, retelling his/her story around the categories led to the development of *experiential empathy* as the core theme category.

Reflections contained multiple responses with related themes of *experience* as the notable category. Eight of the nine participants specifically noted the role of "practice" in their reflection. All participants mentioned that counseling skills were areas for improvement (e.g., summarizing, reflecting, supporting, direct eye contact.). One participant (Mary) noted working with a co-leader or an experienced counselor that may offer constructive feedback as a goal for improvement. It may be inferred that further practice would enhance competence in these areas, thereby improving group facilitation skills. Despite the perceived need for practice, eight of the nine participants felt the session went well.

*Empathy* was a recurring theme. As group leaders, participants seemingly felt comforted by a perceived connection with their group members. Eight of the nine had responses related to empathy in their reflections, and, interestingly, only one of the

participants (Hines) did not mention that the session went well despite noticing “the feeling of relief from the look on their [group members] faces of knowing they were not alone.” The range of empathic responses ranged from Elaine’s surprise at how common a selected topic of discussion (i.e., test anxiety) was among group members to Mary noting that “members interacted well over common themes.” Shirley noted there were no areas he/she could not relate to, and the shared experience of group members was noted by heavy exhalation and head nodding among group members. Whether spoken or experienced, group leaders were able to experience and promote empathy through the discussion topics selected in their simulated group sessions.

Theoretical sampling was used throughout the coding process to identify, develop, and relate emerging concepts from the data. Theoretical sampling is about sampling concepts and not participants. “Data collection leads to analysis. Analysis leads to concepts. Concepts generate questions” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 144). The use of a reflective journal allowed for the researcher to never “get too far ahead of analysis” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 145). Certain concepts proved relevant because they were repeated in the experiences of the group leaders. Theoretical sampling guided the data analysis until each category and then the core category had depth and a clear relationship.

Data analysis was complete when the interview data did not produce any new information to describe the CITs’ work as group leaders. At this point, theoretical saturation had been reached, and the categories were considered complete. The *experiential empathy* core category had theoretical saturation when the data clearly described the context and conditions of the group facilitator’s work.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate and analyze the different personal reflections of novice CITs after a group facilitation and teaching of group skills through lectures, videos, and readings. It also identified the multiple responses the trainees noted and the overall theme that emerged after leading a group session with other graduate students.

Thirteen CITs in a master’s level group counseling course at an HBCU completed personal reflections after conducting a group session and participating in a Principles and Procedures of Group Counseling course. Some participants noted that if they improved basic counseling skills and had a co-leader, this could assist in improving their group counseling skills. Through using a grounded theory method, *experiential empathy* was a recurring theme among the counselors in training.

In the present study, CITs noted that improvement is needed in basic counseling skills, such as summarizing, reflecting, supporting, and using direct eye contact, to become effective counselors. In agreement with the present study, Toth and Stockton (1996) encouraged training of basic counseling skills to improve group counseling skills. Although differences were noted in the ways individual counseling and group counseling are delivered, the basic counseling skills are essentially the same. Further, previous research encourages CITs to continue to develop and improve on basic counseling skills such as active listening, reflecting, summarizing, clarifying, encouraging, supporting, providing self-disclosure, and use of eye contact (Jacobs et al., 2016).

Empathy was named as one of the factors group leaders must address to help “enhance the level of trust in a group” (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2013, p. 179). Preston and de Waal (2002) described empathy as the ability to help others in their present state, which also increases familiarity. In this present study, students may have found being empathic to be an emerging factor in this group because, as a course requirement, all of the students became a group member at some time. Therefore, as group members, the graduate students in the present study may have demonstrated empathy, which is “an avenue of demonstrating support” (Corey et al., 2013, p. 181). Corey et al. (2013) also indicated that when leaders experience empathy, their members will eventually feel a sense of non-judgment and will deepen their concerns because they believe their group leaders are understanding. Capuzzi, Gross, and Stauffer (2010) and Larson (1993) noted that as group leaders display empathic traits, the group members disclose more and feelings are expressed quite readily. Therefore, as this present study found *empathy* to be a recurring theme, this is a positive revelation in the right direction for research of novice group counseling students.

### **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, the study used CITs attending a single counselor education program of 89 students at an HBCU. This participant group may have been small as a result of the voluntary nature of the study and the relatively small number of students completing the group counseling course in the spring of 2015. This limitation may have been minimized by using CITs across an academic year rather than one semester. A larger number of participants from other universities would allow the researchers to maximize comparative data and enhance the richness of data collected.

Second, six of the nine participants planned to pursue a career in clinical mental health counseling. Three of the nine planned to work as professional school counselors. As a result of this experience, Mary, a future school counselor, saw group counseling as more than “an ancillary part of the counseling practice” and was left thinking of ways to incorporate more group work as a practicing school counselor. While Elaine, a future school counselor, noted that even with years of practice, a leader will struggle with group dynamics. The small number of future school counselors and absence of career counselors may serve as a limitation in this theory’s application to those professional counselors.

Third, the topics for discussion were self-selected and approved by the first researcher. Elaine, a future school counselor, selected test anxiety. Hines and Shirley discussed self-care topics. Latashida and Shirley discussed graduate school stressors, including time management. Linda reviewed self-concept. Diane, Sheri, and Linda, all future clinical mental health counselors, covered topics related to counselor professional development, including feelings of fear associated with being a professional counselor. Lois noted that the role of the facilitator is to create a safe and respectful environment to encourage members' sharing their “knowledge and insight with each other.” Varied topics may have led to increased feelings of competence by group leaders and participants due to experience with topics in previous life experience, interest in topic, and previous coursework.



Finally, all of the participants were classmates. While the participants' counseling program does not adhere to a strict cohort model for new students, it may be assumed that many of these students were familiar with each other as a result of previous coursework. Sheri noted that being a facilitator and classmate made "it easy to relate to most of the group members' feelings." This level of comfort and empathy may be a result of previous experience with group members. Within close proximity of the university are two other universities with counselor preparation programs. Expanding this study to other universities and including their CITs may result in varied responses on comfort in leading a group.

### **Implications**

While CACREP requires a 10-hour experience, the data collected demonstrated the need for additional experiences within the training program in order to increase the comfort level of CITs. With increased exposure, it may be posited that counselors will turn to group counseling as a means for serving clients regardless of their setting.

Utilizing a multi-session group may not be possible within a semester course, but it is worth exploring in order to deepen the understanding of the group counseling experiences of CITs. In this study, one counselor simulated the working stage of the group experience while the CITs assisted in their own group skill building by being either group facilitators, group members, or observers.

In exploring opportunities for future research, empathy was a prominent theme in student responses. Whether empathy was a result of comfort level with peers or self-selected topic it may be worth exploring simulated groups with non-classmates in order to provide an opportunity to experience the group dynamic with an unfamiliar population.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that the use of a reflective assignment may increase the empathy of the CITs post-graduation as they develop and facilitate group counseling as a therapeutic tool. As previously stated, reflection may be used to enhance counseling skills. As noted from their personal reflections, the CITs in this study placed themselves in their group member's shoes, thus increasing their empathy for future clients (Capuzzi et al., 2010).

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