

Experiential group training: Perceptions of graduate students in counselor education programs

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Abstract: Many counselor education programs use experiential groups to help students learn group leadership skills, group concepts and develop self-awareness. However, little is known about these groups from the students' perspective. Qualitative methodology was employed and eleven master's students were interviewed regarding their perceptions of participating in an experiential group. Participants believed they developed both skills and knowledge about groupwork. Recommendations for counselor educators are presented.

Key words: counselor training; experiential learning; groupwork

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Introduction

Counselor education programs strive to fulfill the role of preparing effective group counselors. Therefore, within counselor education programs, teaching focuses on the development of both didactic and experiential methodologies to enhance the level of counseling skills of the student. The process of becoming an effective group counselor not only involves the mastery of course content, but may also involve an experiential training component. An *experiential training group* is defined as a training component in which students self-disclose and work on personal issues relevant to their groupwork, but not at the expense of learning group process and skills in an ongoing group of several weeks' duration (Merta *et al.*, 1995). These groups tend to be time limited, focus on participants' own experiences, and operate in the here and now. Participants are encouraged to explore emotions, self-disclose, be honest and at times confront one another. The goal of experiential groups is for participants to strive for some change either explicitly or implicitly (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

The importance of group leadership training is reflected in the standards adopted by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) and the recommendations of the *Professional Standards for the Training of Group Workers* of the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW, 2000). The CACREP standards emphasize the need to understand group theory and dynamics, group leadership styles, group counseling methods, ethical standards, approaches needed for different kinds of groupwork, and relevant research. Both ASGW and CACREP standards emphasize the need for experiential group training for counseling students. In a recent change, CACREP has articulated that group training incorporate at least 10 hours of experiential training in which students participate as group members over the course of one academic term, thus emphasizing the value and need for these types of training groups.

Authorities in the field of counselor education place an emphasis on experiential learning as an adjunct to knowledge acquisition (Akos, *et al.*, 2004; Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Yalom, & Leszcz, 2005). The link between knowledge gained from didactic instruction and the experience of being a member of a group is an important aspect of training (Cummings, 2001). Further, Yalom and Leszcz (2005) advocated for

personal participation as important in the process of teaching and learning group process, noting that students profit from, '(1) observing experienced group therapists at work; (2) close clinical supervision of their maiden groups; (3) a personal group experience; and (4) personal psychotherapeutic work,' (Yalom, 1995, pp.512). Corey and Corey (2006) also discussed the importance of the experiential component of training, maintaining that group skills are best mastered through supervised practice and participation in a self-exploration group.

An experiential training group offers many types of learning not available elsewhere (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Students are able to learn at an emotional level what may have been exposed to them at only an intellectual level prior to the experiential training group. For example, through participation, students might experience what it feels like to be accepted by a group rather than simply reading about the value of acceptance. Also, student counselors gain an important arena to practise and solidify basic active listening skills, which may lead to increased confidence in being a group leader. Participation in an experiential group may also lead to experiencing feelings of vulnerability, which could help the student develop empathy and understanding of the experiences future clients may experience (Anderson & Price, 2001; Berg *et al.*, 1998; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Further, participation in such a group may assist students in improving their multicultural competencies by developing an understanding on a personal level of another's world view (Bemak & Chung, 2004). Finally, the student may learn experiential knowledge about the role of the leader (Stockton *et al.*, 2004). Counselor educators have widely supported the practice of experiential training groups (Anderson & Price, 2001; Bemak & Chung, 2004; Stockton, Morran, & Krieger, 2004; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). However, most of our knowledge in the literature about the benefits and efficacy of the experiential training groups comes from the perspective of counselor educators, which may be based upon their own personal experiences of participation in such groups and/or professional observations of students within their programs. Notably missing is the voice of the student.

There is extensive belief and acceptance that experiential group training is important and many benefits have been clearly articulated. Both quantitative and qualitative research supporting the use of experiential training groups has been conducted. Quantitative

research examining the effects of group participation on counselor training shows mixed findings. Early research has shown marginally positive findings (Barnett, 1989; Ritter, 1981) or inconclusive findings (Fenton & Krackowski, 1987; Gutsch & Holmes, 1974). More recent studies have found positive findings among many of the participants with a sizable subgroup that was dissatisfied with the experiential training requirement (Anderson & Price, 2001). While quantitative methodologies have abounded in the past, recent advances in qualitative methodology have begun to reveal the importance and impact of such experiences. While not specifically examining experiential groups, Furr and Carroll (2003) found that counseling students described courses that employed experiential learning to be important for their personal and professional growth. Qualitative inquiry examining the impact of participating in experiential training groups (Kline *et al.*, 1997) found that students viewed such an experience positively because it increased their awareness of interpersonal behaviors, provided opportunities to develop skills in giving and receiving feedback, and provided a chance to develop a clearer understanding of the client experience. However, the qualitative methodology employed by Kline *et al.* was limited and relied only on the use of two questionnaires (a pre-group and post-group survey) with no interviews. Also, they only surveyed one counselor education program in which they were involved.

Given the limited amount of recent research examining the potential value of experiential groups in counselor education training programs, and the lack of research examining the value of these groups from the students' perspective, this research study was designed to fill those voids in the literature through a qualitative examination of students' participation in such groups. This research study poses the question: What is counselor education masters students' perceptions of experiential training groups?

Methodology

Participants

Purposeful sampling strategy was used to recruit participants for this study. All participants were enrolled in master's level group counseling

courses from two Midwestern universities. At University A, students were recruited from a class of 21 master's level students from the school and community counseling programs. The students from University A were divided into three concurrent experiential training groups led by counseling professionals from the community. These three groups met 12 times for an hour and half each week. At University B, 12 students from the school counseling program were divided into two experiential training groups. These two groups were co-facilitated by counselor education doctoral students and a rotating member of the group. The experiential training groups at the University B met for eight weekly one and one half hour sessions. Participation in the experiential training group was a requirement at both universities.

The content of each group was developed naturally from the issues and concerns students brought to group discussions. All individuals within the groups were required to develop their own goals for the group experience and share the individual goal within the group setting. Participants reported discussing a variety of topics such as the personal use of a façade, the need for structure in one's life, family of origin issues, personal concerns, the use of confrontation within a group, the role of nurturer within one's personal and professional life, interpersonal style in working with others, the use of silence and monopolization within the group, learning about different world views from other members within the group, graduate student pressures, and role and use self-disclosure in a professional setting.

Of the 33 students invited, 11 agreed to participate in the study with the majority electing to decline due to time restraints. The majority of participants were female ($n=10$) and ranged in age from 22 to 37 years old. Ten participants self-identified as Caucasian and one self-identified as Latina. Although the majority of participants were Caucasian, participants reported the experiential groups they participated in were diverse in terms of gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. University A had four participants and University B had seven participants. Seventy-two percent of all participants were school counseling students, and 18% were clinical mental health counseling students. All five of the training groups eligible had at least one member who agreed to participate in this study.

Procedures

A pilot study examining students' perceptions of experiential group training was conducted the previous academic year to assist the researcher in formulating the semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix). As a result of this pilot, the researchers chose to collect data from written questionnaires at the beginning of the group experience and then individual interviews two weeks prior to the termination of the training group. This method also allowed the participants to use both written and verbal expression, which is an extension of Kline *et al.*, (1997). Prior to each individual interview, the researchers reviewed the interviewee's written responses to the written questionnaires and constructed follow-up questions in addition to the semi-structured interview questions. The researchers used the *interview guide approach*, which allowed the use of open-ended questions, but then enabled participants to direct and structure their own answers (Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

Data analysis

The intention of this research was to view students' perceptions of their learning within an experiential group. In order to ensure objectivity neither researcher was involved in the execution of the experiential training groups being conducted or the classes being taught. The participants' interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Hallberg (2006) describes this process as continued comparisons of the data in order to explore the variation, similarities, and differences. First, each author read all of the participants' responses to provide them with a general sense of the content. Several readings were necessary to become familiar with the perceptions voiced by the students. Next, the transcribed interview data were divided into 233 segments of information and assigned a code name to reflect the content. The segments were then reviewed and, when necessary, combined to reduce redundancy and overlap. Then, the segments were sorted into 19 categories. The categories were examined for similarities and differences, and then collapsed into three general themes. When disagreement occurred in the process of delineating categories and/or themes, dialogue continued until disagreements were resolved.

Results

Reactions to the question guide were varied. Most students approached the interview with an eagerness to share their perceptions and experiences. Students expressed willingness to reflect and process their experiential training experience. The overall group experience seemed to be described as positive by those who participated in this study. Although a few participants initially reported having negative feelings and expectations about participating in an experiential group, many of those perceptions changed to positive as the group progressed. One member described her apprehension:

I don't think I was real excited about it. You know, I thought 'why?' and 'how beneficial will it be?'. I remember thinking 'nah, I'm not too excited about it'. But I am glad I did it.

Despite an initial hesitation overall, students appeared to have gained a greater appreciation of the group experiences. After analysis of the data, three general themes emerged: personal learning, group leadership, and group dynamics.

Personal learning

The strongest emergent theme was the intrapersonal learning throughout the group experience. Interpersonal learning seemed to be focused on their increasing knowledge of self. Each participant of the experiential training group was able to clearly articulate areas of where they had gained greater personal awareness of their thoughts and perceptions when interacting within the group. For some participants, this greater awareness was highlighted by the discussions and self-reflection within the groups. Specifically participants shared greater awareness about their personal discomfort with confrontation, while others struggled with allowing silence within the group sessions. Others shared a growing sense of their personal use of pace and timing of interventions. The group experience seemed to bring these personal characteristics into awareness and allowed the participants the opportunity to explore these issues that may impact on their effectiveness as a group leader. The participants often were able to express this increased awareness of

self within the group process, allowing for further exploration within the group setting.

Another area of increased personal awareness was the concern with the difficulty of self-disclosure within the group. Every participant within this study revealed this as an important consideration within their group experience. The level of self-disclosure participants chose to engage in while in the experiential training group was purposeful and was impacted by relationships created in previous courses within the program. As one would intuitively surmise, if these relationships were positive, group members felt more at ease with self-disclose. However, if the prior relationships were negative, participants remained more guarded, and thus were less likely to take as many interpersonal risks, which in turn may limit the depth of the experience students can have and learn from. Self-disclosure was openly discussed within many of the experiential training groups and became a topic that was revisited. One participant expressed her perceptions this way:

... people kind of have barriers about what they are going to disclose because they know they're with their classmates and they know it's for class. [The fact that this] group experience is for a class was very apparent in our group. Group members are not revealing what they would if they were in a true group setting because people have said, 'I would react differently if I was in a 'real' group'. I think it's because they go to class with these people. They're going to be their peers for the next year.

Greater awareness of an expanded world view was a benefit expressed by several of the participants. Participants felt they were able to personally expand their worldview as a result of participating in the group. Through the process of hearing about world views that were different from their personal experiences, participants gained a greater understanding of other cultures, values and experiences. One participant shared,

I am from another culture and I have been ... here for three years, so I think it was interesting to be in a group with people from a ... different country, with different beliefs and culture from my own. Group was like a big ... sharing house of cultural backgrounds and beliefs which was probably the most interesting ... part of group for me.

The theme of personal learning occurred in many varied ways for each participant within the experiential training group. While conducting the interviews, it was notable that each participant had gained a greater sense of their personal strengths and areas for their future growth as a counselor as a result of this group experience. Concerns of vulnerability, trust, and expanding their worldviews, were particularly salient for the participants.

Group leadership

Understanding the group leadership role was a central theme that emerged from the data. Participants within this study reported that they had gained an understanding of the leadership role, the application of counseling theory through observation of the group leader, and reported the modeling of effective leadership. All of this tended to result in a positive impact on participants, especially when the group leaders displayed empathy and authenticity. One participant who observed her group leader shared: *'...when I become a leader, I will be more empathetic or at least understand the leadership process from the inside out.'* Participants also found it helpful to watch group leaders' applications of theory in practice. The students were very aware of the actions of the group leader. In short, the facilitator's verbal and non-verbal actions were being carefully scrutinized by the members of the group.

One of the most commented upon aspects of the experiential group was the development, application and reflection of using active listening and counseling techniques as a member of a group. Many students felt that developing these skills within an experiential training group was 'more real life' than practising analog situations within their microskills courses. For many, this was the first time these skills were used in a more professional setting. Some of the skills mentioned by students were confrontation, attending to non-verbal communication, active listening, and being authentic. One participant shared her thoughts about confrontation:

I am more comfortable with confrontation than I was before. I used to believe I would sound mean, but I won't sound mean. I will just be showing a discrepancy between what they are doing and what they are saying. [For me] this is one of the most important things I learned in group.

Tactfulness was mentioned by several of the students as an important skill. These participants described tactfulness as knowing what to say and more importantly, when and how to say it. The students implied that knowing what to say to each other was initially a concern, but later timing and phrasing was considered more important. One participant shared that she had learned the importance of linking.

As a [future] leader, I want to really be able to listen, be empathetic, and when I lead, I want to help clients who have similar stories talk to each other and share their similar experiences.

Many participants reported their confidence in their abilities as a leader increased as a result of their experience. These participants, after watching an experienced group leader through the lens of a member, felt that they would be able to co-lead or lead a group under supervision. Overall students gained in confidence in their ability to potentially lead groups in the future. Just the process of watching an experienced group leader, paired with increased skill development, appeared to increase the students' confidence in themselves as future group leaders. The training group experience appeared to demystify the leadership role with a group.

Group dynamics

Participants also shared that they increased their understanding of group dynamics and process. When discussing their group experience, students anchored their discussion through the identification and examination of the stages the group went through. Participants were able to apply knowledge learned in class and apply it to the training group. One participant shared,

Talking about the stages that a group goes through and then actually seeing it ... really helped. For example, during the working stage, I saw very specific characteristics that were not present in the forming stage. The group made the learning more concrete.

Group process and dynamics were highlighted by the very nature of

the type of group the participants experienced; given the very open-ended and group directed content, some members had a more difficult time initially. For some participants this was expressed as anxiety and uncertainty. Overall, many participants found they needed to 'trust the process of the group.' Participants learned that they were not solely responsible for the group, but had to trust others. For example, one participant shared: '*... learning that as a facilitator sometimes you've got to hang back, you can't jump in and rescue the group-- you've got to let the group find their own legs.*' Another added, '*... the group is responsible for carrying the group forward...and you have to believe that it's going to work out because it does.*'

Many participants were able to transfer their learning and apply it to how future clients might feel or react to group counseling. One participant shared '*I thought we needed to be in group because it would help us understand what clients would be going through and experience the anxiety they feel.*' Another participant agreed: '*We would be able to put ourselves in the client's shoes and develop an understanding of what we as leader will be asking clients to do.*'

Participants also expressed that many of Yalom's (1995) therapeutic factors were present in their groups. They found changes in the group usually occurred slowly but recognized that most of the progress centered on the facilitator establishing a trustworthy environment and creating group cohesiveness. One participant expressed the ease of their connection with others:

...when I was there, I really felt involved in the group. Everybody was very genuine and they put themselves in it, so it made it very easy for the group to connect, share and experience support from the group.

The theme of universality was also present as members shared how they found other graduate students struggling with personal issues.

It's amazing to me how people would bring up certain issues or certain problems with their families or in their life, there was always somebody else who had a very similar experience. Not exactly, but [it] was very similar in every situation that came up. I think that was really powerful to see ...

Discussion

The results of this study are consistent with those from Kline *et al.*, (1997). While the Kline *et al.* study used different qualitative data gathering approaches than the present study (i.e., participant surveys vs. personal interviews), both found that students felt they had increased their interpersonal awareness and developed a clearer understanding of the client experience. It was significant that participants believed the experiential training group was an important aspect of their group education. Student perception should not be discounted within counselor education programs. The experiential training group was discussed by the participants as important for vicarious learning of the leadership role, modeling behavior, increasing their awareness of self, practising important counseling skills, developing empathy for their future clients through the experience of feeling vulnerable and learning to trust others. The participants within this study indicated that experiential training groups are perceived to be valuable learning experiences in terms of content knowledge and skills. The experiential training group appears to affect the students' perceptions of group and increase their understanding of themselves as potential group leaders.

The authors expected to have more negative comments about the mandatory nature of the training group experience; and while students initially approached the experiential groups with caution, this caution was replaced with enthusiasm for group counseling and the experiential group. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) stated that an experiential training group is always more effective if the participants engage voluntarily and view it not only as a mandatory training exercise but as an opportunity for personal growth. The students interviewed for this study appeared to feel that it was important to participate in the experiential training group, which indicates that they felt more invested in the experience even though they were required to attend. Interestingly, it was the participants' preconceived beliefs and prior personal experiences that influenced some of the students to approach this type of group with caution, but once they had engaged in the training group, all participants interviewed stated it was a positive experience. The participants of this study did not remain focused on prior negative group experiences or preconceived beliefs about participation in a group, but instead experienced a paradigm shift as a result of their group experience. It is

unclear how these participants' prior negative experiences would have affected their roles as counselors had they not participated in these groups.

One aspect unique to experiential training groups, which many of the participants mentioned, was their prior relationships with students within the counselor education programs. While all of the participants responded positively to their involvement in the group sessions, prior relationships established in previous courses appear to have an impact on the level of trust, and how comfortable individuals felt within the group environment. Positive prior relationships helped with an initial feeling of trust and camaraderie. However, the most salient reaction was among those who had had negative prior relationships within the cohort: there is the potential for such experiences to restrict the emotional freedom within the group, lower perceptions of trust and create reluctance to share, resulting in a less than optimum group experience. The participants within this study were all aware of the fact that cohort relationships played a role in their choices of what to share about their personal life. This filtering effect was very conscious and deliberate.

Results of this study reveal the importance of the careful selection of group leaders and preparation before the group begins, as these factors may impact on the quality of the experience for the students. Preparation and screening for experiential groups may assist students in the examination of previous experiences and prepare them for the group experience (Laux *et al.*, 2007). Careful and purposeful preparation was conducted at each university prior to the start of the training group experience. Laux *et al.* recommend that face-to-face screening is more effective than screening involving the reading of paperwork. Additionally, the participants within this study all noted purposeful observation of the group leaders. This highlights the notion of careful selection of experiential group facilitators and the importance of preparation of the students for the experience.

Another important aspect of the training group experience is the potential for expanding the worldview of students. The ASGW Principles of Diversity-Competent Group Workers (1998) state counselors need to increase their awareness of their own identity as well as learning and understanding others' worldview. Participants within this study specifically mentioned that the diversity encountered within their

experiential training group provided an opportunity for them to explore and develop an understanding of those with different ethnic origins, value orientations and family systems. It is yet another way for students to gain multicultural experiences in an environment where they can explore their understanding of differing world view, and emphasizes the need for continued recruitment and retention of diverse students into counselor education programs.

Limitations

As with any study, some limitations exist and must be considered when interpreting the results of this study. Although qualitative methodology allowed the researchers to gain an in-depth exploration of the student experience in experiential groups, the results are not transferable to the larger populations. It is important to emphasize that this was a study of students enrolled in two Midwestern universities in the United States. Since only one of the participants was male and only one was Latina, transferring these findings to males or other minority students in other areas of the United States cannot be assumed. Thus, the transferability of these findings is limited, and future studies might draw participants from more diversified cultural backgrounds. In addition, students' self selection to participate may have also influenced the results. Although most students who declined to participate in this study stated busy schedules as the reason, it is possible they declined due to negative perceptions of experiential group training.

Recommendations and implications

Educating future counselors for groupwork involves a complex interaction among knowledge, skill, and clinical experience competencies. It is clear from this study as well as the studies conducted by Furr and Carroll (2003) and Kline *et al.*, (1997) that experiential learning is perceived by students as important for their development as professional school counselors and community mental health counselors. Students appear to place value on experiential group learning. Within this study, this perception was consistent among the participants, even considering

the participants were in different groups, with different leaders, had various levels of self-disclosure and had different course instructors. However, providing the experience is only the first step; encouragement of reflection upon this experience is an important component of experiential learning.

Counselor educators may want to consider the results of this study when developing their group counseling course or constructing an experiential group. When constructing this experience, counselor educators may want to incorporate the following suggestions. First, when designing a group course, particular attention to orientation of the experiential nature of the training group as well as articulating the goals of such a group are important considerations. This preparation of the students for the experience was employed by the counselor educators prior to the experience and has been supported by Laux *et al.*, (2007).

Second, since participants of this study often mention the vicarious learning experiences that took place by watching the leader, the instructor will want to carefully select the leader or co-leaders of the group. The results of this study suggest it may be important for leaders to be highly skilled group facilitators who are comfortable with silence and conflict, as well as issues related to sub-grouping, because members will have prior relationships with one another coming into group. Another aspect of leader selection within training groups is the level of multicultural competence. The results of this study suggest that this type of group may provide members with an opportunity to increase their cultural self-awareness and build their cross-cultural knowledge and skills, which provides an important tool for self-knowledge.

Third, in addition, results of this study suggest students learn about group dynamics such as group developmental stages and therapeutic factors through the experience of participation. The authors suggest counselor educators assign students to keep a reflective journal throughout the group experience. In this journal, students can apply concepts learned in the course by describing the development of their group as well as how they saw the therapeutic factors operating in their course. (Counselor educators may want to instruct students to use pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the group members.)

Further research on experiential group training is an important area of inquiry. Previous research (e.g., Kline *et al.*, 1997), along with

this study, provide student self-reports regarding perceptions of the experiential training group. What remains unclear in the literature is the presence or lack of a connection between perceived benefits and the observable effects on skill development. Researchers should begin to determine if experiential training groups in fact have measureable and observable increases on students' professional development. Further inquiry on the structure of the training group and potential change upon the perceptions of the students is needed. Areas for future research include: examining student perceptions over time within an experiential training group from the initial group to the latter sessions; exploration of the variables that may contribute to the change in perceptions; examination of the number of sessions for experiential group training; the influence of the type of leaders selected; and further inquiry on paradigm shift from the initial introduction of participation in an experiential group to the perceptions at termination.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine the perception of master's level students participating in an experiential training group. Because of the widespread practice of using experiential groups as a component in training future group leaders, research on this aspect of counselor training is important. Lastly, while it is likely that some of the experiences described by participants are unique to the universities in which the training occurred, it also appears that there was a commonality of the experience across universities. Clearly, this study revealed the complexity of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of the participants regarding their participation in an experiential training group. The present study represents another step in the investigation of student perceptions of the training group experience and supports the work of researchers such as Kline *et al.*, (1997). Future research should continue to build on the discoveries of this study and further the investigation of the use of experiential training groups.

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Appendix

Semi-structured interview questions

- What is your understanding for the purpose of the experiential training group?
- What has been the most positive aspect of participating in this experiential training group?
- What has been the most negative aspect of participating in this experiential training group?
- What were your expectations for this training group experiences?
- Were those expectations of questions #4 met? Explain
- What skills do you feel the training group helped to develop?
- What skills do you feel the training group helped to develop?
- What impact has your interpersonal style and behaviors that will affect your relationship with counselors?
- What insights did you gain in the training group that will affect your relationship with clients?
- Do you feel an experience within a group is necessary before you lead groups as a professional? Explain
- Is there anything I have not asked that you would like to respond to concerning the training group?