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A Multipoint Qualitative Analysis of Group Training: Counseling Student Perspectives and Self-Efficacy

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, we explored 26 master's level counseling students' perceptions of their self-efficacy and group leadership development across three scaffolded group counseling experiences: (a) a first-semester membership in a counseling group led by a licensed counselor; (b) a third-semester membership, co-facilitation, and observation in a peer-led counseling group; and (c) a third semester co-facilitation of a counseling service group in a school or agency while participating in group supervision. Results revealed increased tolerance for ambiguity, appreciation for self-disclosure, an understanding of unique group facilitation skills, enhanced self-efficacy, and appreciation for observational learning coupled with supportive and constructive feedback.

Keywords

counselors-in-training, experiential group training, group counseling, supervision

It is widely accepted that experiential learning is an effective method for teaching group counseling (Association of Specialists in Group Work [ASGW], 2000; Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2014; McCarthy, Falco, & Villalba, 2014; Shumaker, Ortiz, & Brenninkmeyer, 2011; Yalom, 2005), and this commitment is reflected in accredited training programs across the country (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016; Shumaker et al., 2011). However, much of the research in the counseling field focuses on individual counseling skills as opposed to group facilitation skills (Markus & King, 2003; Ohrt, Ener, Porter, & Young, 2014), and CACREP, for example, provides counseling curriculum standards of group work (CACREP, 2016), but does not identify a best practice, or specific training method to employ.

One unique way to train group facilitators could include participation in multiple group facilitation experiences that are scaffolded to be progressively more challenging. Such an experience might include participating in the role of a group member, followed by the role of a facilitator of a peer group session in a classroom, and concluded with the role of a facilitator of a service group offered in a school or agency, thus providing a comprehensive training experience that builds on previous knowledge and skills. Based upon the theory of self-efficacy, participation in gradually more challenging experiences increases students' sense of mastery, thereby enhancing self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1995). Research on the nature and process of teaching group facilitation skills through scaffolded, experiential learning and its impact on self-efficacy is needed to expand knowledge on effective teaching strategies for counselor educators (Ohrt, Robinson, & Hagedorn, 2013; Shumaker et al., 2011; Springer & Schimmel, 2016).

Scaffolding theory can provide an avenue for conceptualizing and structuring learning experiences for students who are training to become group facilitators. Scaffolding is a technique

in which the instructor offers sequential levels of instruction and support to enhance a student's ability to build upon prior knowledge and perform new activities independently (Vygotsky, 1978). Direct instruction is decreased as students demonstrate increasing levels of mastery. Students are empowered to constantly build upon previous knowledge and to move more confidently into new areas of growth. When scaffolding, increasingly complex exercises are taught and practiced under the guidance of a more experienced and knowledgeable instructor. This fosters continued integration and understanding of complex concepts and practices like specialized group facilitation skills which are necessary for effective group facilitation (Marcus & King, 2003).

Scaffolding techniques include providing clear instruction, articulating the purpose of activities, keeping students on task, and providing on-going feedback. In addition, creating an environment safe for taking risks, identifying and addressing student needs, promoting self-responsibility for learning, and maintaining momentum is paramount. This approach provides a structure for students who desire achievement, on-going feedback, positive reinforcement, and real-life learning experiences that have a significant impact but can struggle with independent thinking, critical thinking, and comfort with ambiguity (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) is also relevant when training students to become group facilitators, and we propose that it may compliment scaffolding theory. The premise of SCT is that individuals have control and choice over their behaviors, emotions, and cognitions, and their level of control is influenced by their self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1986; Larson, 1998). Self-efficacy beliefs are defined as an individual's perception of his or her capabilities to perform or complete an action, and can be influenced by mastery experiences (direct learning), modeling (observations of others or vicarious learning), social or verbal persuasion (feedback), and affective arousal. SCT can be applied when using scaffolding techniques to teach group counseling skills.

For example, students' self-efficacy as group facilitators may be fostered through having sequential mastery experiences with on-going support and feedback, opportunities to learn from other students and the instructor who model group facilitation skills that create rapport, cohesion, spontaneity, risk-taking, self-disclosure (Riva & Korinek, 2004), intention setting, and opportunities to process affective arousal in a supportive group setting.

SCT provides a suitable theoretical framework for addressing Barlow's (2004) recommendations that group facilitation training should include a combination of academic instruction, observation, experience, and supervision. Qualitative analysis on counselor-in-training perspectives, skill attainment, and self-efficacy related to carefully scaffolded learning experiences addresses Shumaker's et al. (2011) recommendation that the field examine the optimal combination of group membership, observation, and leadership. Furthermore, in a seminal study examining the perceptions of practicing counseling professionals about their group skills learned in graduate school, Ohrt et al. (2014) found that experienced counselors most appreciated experiential group counseling practice, observation of group facilitators, and opportunities for group supervision. However, Ohrt et al. recommended that facilitator knowledge and self-efficacy be examined after participating in group counseling training, and Buser (2008) suggested that further research was needed to examine the transferability of group counseling skills to actual practice.

Purpose of Study

The current study was designed to investigate the effectiveness of using a scaffolded training framework for teaching group facilitation knowledge and skills, and to explore whether this method increased students' perceived self-efficacy as group facilitators. We, the authors, examined the training models within our own counselor education program, and found most

counseling courses focus predominantly on individual counseling skills. We also found that much of our supervision in practicum and internship is focused on individual counseling skills and case conceptualization. Further, in our counseling program, individual counseling skills training is already carefully scaffolded in multiple classes (e.g., helping skills, theories, crisis counseling and trauma therapy, etc.); however, our group facilitation training was encapsulated within one course.

According to CACREP curriculum standards (2016), students must obtain 10 clock-hours of direct group experience during one academic term; however, it is not prescribed how training programs should provide this opportunity. Counselor educators need a process and philosophical framework to guide their approach to teaching group work as well as intentional methods to determine its impact (Gillam, 2002). We became curious as to what is considered best practice for increasing students' knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy as group facilitators, which led to the design of an intentionally scaffolded group training experience. The aim of teaching group facilitation through the lens of scaffolding theory and SCT is to provide a rich group facilitation experience that culminates in co-leading a counseling group within a school or agency, while receiving supervision that is solely dedicated to group work.

Method

The guiding research question for this qualitative study was “What are students’ perceptions of their self-efficacy and their group leadership development across three scaffolded group counseling experiences?” A qualitative method was used for two important reasons: (a) qualitative research allows for vivid descriptions of participant experiences and captures a holistic sense of processes and change over time (Rubel & Okech, 2017), and (b) group experiences are highly dynamic and participants are influenced by multiple factors that violate statistical assumptions of independence (McCarthy, Whittaker, Boyle, & Eyal, 2017). We used the

consensual qualitative research (CQR) method to analyze the qualitative data gathered at three different points (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). CQR is philosophically constructivist in that it recognizes there are various, equally meaningful, socially constructed truths (Hill et al., 2005).

Participants

A purposive, criterion sampling strategy (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used to recruit participants for this study. Criterion for participation in the study included being a graduate student in one CACREP-accredited, master's level counseling program, completion of a first-semester master's level ethics course in which students participated in an external counseling group, and completion of a third-semester master's level group counseling course.

Once university institutional review board (IRB) approval was granted, a member of the research team met with potential participants to describe the study, invite questions, and discuss the informed consent. Potential participants were informed that there would be no penalties for those who decided not to participate in this study or chose to withdraw from the study at a later point. They were informed that no personal identifying information would be included in publications or presentations. Potential participants were also informed that participation or non-participation in the study would in no way influence their grade in either course (i.e., ethics course in which the first group experience occurred or group counseling course in which the remaining group experiences occurred), and the data would not be analyzed until participants had completed the group counseling course and grades were submitted. Additional safeguards for participants included opportunities to discuss their reactions to group experiences with the instructors or any members of the research team, and the option to file a complaint with the university IRB. Twenty-

six students agreed to participate in this study. Twenty-two identified as female and four identified as male. Twenty-two participants identified as Caucasian, one identified as African American, two identified as Latino, and one identified as Iranian.

Research Team

The research team included four faculty members in a CACREP-accredited counseling program: three Associate professors and one Assistant professor. All four members adhere to the American Counseling Association's (2014) Code of Ethics, and have experience and training in qualitative research and the CQR method of data analysis. All four researchers have extensive experience facilitating groups and three have substantial experience teaching group counseling courses. To enhance our objectivity, we discussed our varied general assumptions about group counseling and experiential learning strategies. We also discussed our assumptions about what the results would reveal about participants' perspectives of their experiences with groups, what they would learn from those experiences, and their reported self-efficacy beliefs as group facilitators. Those assumptions were noted and revisited during the data analysis process. Team members agreed to respectfully challenge each other to consider differing or contradictory findings. At times, conflicting ideas emerged, but all research team members remained committed and engaged in the process until consensus was reached.

Procedure

Qualitative survey data were collected at three different points about participants' experience, knowledge, and perceived self-efficacy related to three experiential group activities. Those three activities were as follows: (a) membership in a group facilitated by a licensed mental health provider; (b) membership, leadership, and observation of a peer group; and (c) co-facilitation of a service group in a school or agency while concurrently participating in a

supervision group. At the first data point, all participants were enrolled in an ethics course during their first semester of the counseling program, and participated in six 1.5-hour counseling group sessions led by a licensed mental health provider from the local community. The mental health provider who led the group had many years of experience both in group facilitation and in leading counseling groups for students in the master's level counseling program. Each group consisted of 12 group members. The purpose of this endeavor was to provide students with an initial group experience during which they could process the transition to graduate school and connect with members of their cohort. This offered direct learning, vicarious learning, and affective arousal associated with the experience of group counseling membership and observing the group facilitator's counseling skills, thus incorporating tenets of learning from SCT (Bandura, 1986; Larson, 1998). Upon completion, a survey was administered to gather information about what participants learned from being a member in their first group experience in the counseling program.

At the second data point, participants were enrolled in a group counseling course during their third semester, and all participants participated in eight peer group sessions about group leadership, where they experienced the role of group member, facilitator, and observer. Participants used the group experience to practice skills they were concurrently learning in the group counseling course and process their group membership experience. Topics of discussion included their discomfort with the ambiguity of the experience; what they needed to feel comfortable sharing in group; their needs, concerns, and desires about being a group facilitator; and how to relate their here-and-now experiences in the peer group to their professional development as group facilitators. Group members also practiced here-and-now disclosures about being in the group, setting personal intentions or goals, offering constructive feedback, using I-statements, speaking directly to each other, and exploring cultural similarities and differences.

This peer group experience was complimented by lecture, discussion, instructor modeling, and video demonstrations of group counseling skills. This group experience offered another opportunity for direct learning, vicarious learning, feedback, and affective arousal as group members, co-facilitators, and observers (Bandura, 1986; Larson, 1998).

Participants were required to co-facilitate one of the eight peer group sessions. As co-facilitators, they practiced group facilitator skills (e.g., informed consent, norming, inviting and balancing member participation, creating momentum, goal-setting, encouraging interpersonal communication, linking members, productive silence, conflict management, here-and-now communication, process reflections, time management, etc.). Co-facilitators submitted a session plan to the instructor who then provided students with written and verbal feedback. Immediately after each session, co-facilitators received verbal feedback from the instructor and group observers, after which, extensive written feedback was provided by the instructor. Participants were also required to observe one session of the group and provide feedback to facilitators. Once the peer group concluded, a survey was administered to gather information about what they learned over the course of the peer group.

After completing the peer group experience, the third data point included participants completing a direct learning experience in which students developed a group curriculum grounded in research, recruited and screened potential group members, and co-facilitated an actual counseling group (i.e., service group consisting of six to seven sessions) with a peer in an agency or school, while also participating in a supervision group that allowed for reciprocal learning, feedback, and affective arousal among participants (Bandura, 1986; Larson, 1998). All sessions were videotaped for quality assurance and supervisory purposes.

During six, weekly group supervision sessions, participants watched sessions of other participants who facilitated groups in various settings. This experience gave participants the opportunity to observe, process thoughts and emotions (affective arousal), and brainstorm about managing challenging group issues that may not have been present in their own service group experience. Participants solicited specific feedback/support from the instructor and members, and received verbal and written feedback/support from the instructor and group members. This training model was informed by the Torres-Rivera et al. (2004) recommendation that facilitator training includes components of lecture, discussion, role play, demonstrations, and video. At the conclusion of facilitating a service group and participating in the supervision group, a survey was administered to gather information about participant experiences and their perceived ability as group facilitators.

Instruments

The surveys given at the three data points were developed from extensive research on self-efficacy, vicarious learning, modeling, scaffolding, affective arousal, and feedback (Bandura, 1986, 2006; Freudenberg, Cameron, & Brimble, 2010; Larson, 1998; Mullen, Uwamahoro, Blount, & Lambie, 2015). The first survey had two open-ended questions about what participants learned about being a group member and facilitator which included: (a) what did you learn about being a group member; and, (b) what did you learn about being a group facilitator. At the second data collection point, participants completed a survey with nine open-ended questions after their peer-group experience. In this survey, participants were asked: (a) what was your overall experience in the peer group; (b) what are your perceptions of group dynamics, trust, group evolution, and group stages; (c) what did you learn about being a group member, group facilitator, and group observer; and (d) what was the impact, if at all, of feedback from and observations of

others on your learning as a group facilitator. At the third data point, open-ended questions asked participants about two concurrent learning experiences: group facilitation of the service group and participation in group supervision. The questions included: (a) what, if anything, did you learn as a group facilitator of a service group; (b) how did you learn it; and (c) what could have further contributed to your growth? In addition, they were asked: (a) what, if anything, was helpful in group supervision; (b) how did you learn it; and (c) what could have further contributed to your supervision experience?

Data Analysis

In CQR, researchers use a rigorous data analysis process to flush out common truths shared by participants which are then tallied and reported as frequencies (Hill et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2005). At each stage of the data analysis process, the research team analyzed data individually before meeting as a group to reach consensus (Hill et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2005). A fourth team member served as an auditor who evaluated the data analysis processes and provided feedback to the research team. The data analysis process includes domain coding, core idea development, and cross-case analysis to reveal participants' response themes.

Domain Coding

An acceptable means of developing domain codes is by creating domains from the survey questions and research literature (Hill et al., 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). For each of the three surveys, the research team members worked independently to generate domain codes before meeting as a group to reach consensus. The domain codes provided the general conceptual frameworks for distributing segments of data (Hill et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2005). For example, the domain code in the first data point collection, *Learned About Group*, was derived from the first survey questions asking participants what they learned about being a group member, and what they

learned about being a group facilitator. Domain codes were emergent and continually re-evaluated to assure they adequately represented the core ideas derived from the data.

Core Ideas

Data was organized into categorical domains for each survey. Team members first worked independently and then together to capture the general essence of the data in each domain and generate concise descriptions of the data. With the intention of reducing personal bias, the original narratives were revisited and compared to the condensed descriptions of the data in each domain. For example, each team member explored participants' responses in the *Learned About Group* domain and identified responses that emerged most frequently among participants, such as how much influence a group facilitator has on the group process. The research team compared findings and participants' rich descriptions to support the core idea, in which the theme, *Facilitator Influence*, was developed.

Cross Case Analysis

Before meeting as a group, each team member identified core ideas that could be grouped into similar clusters. Tallies were generated to determine the frequency of similar clusters of data once team consensus was reached. Frequencies used to describe the data were referred to as general, typical, and variant. General included all or all but one of the cases. Typical included more than half of the cases. Variant included more than two but less than half of the cases (Hill et al., 2005). Categories with less than three cases were not included in the analysis. For example, for the core idea, *Facilitator Influence*, team members tallied frequency of responses that supported and defined this core idea, resulting in a frequency total of 12, which qualified as a variant category (Hill et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2005).

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study was enhanced by ongoing discussions about researcher biases and expectations. Feedback was provided to the research team by an external auditor. An audit trail of procedures, data collection, and analysis was maintained. For each step of the data analysis process, the research team worked independently before meeting as a group to reach consensus. Tallies were used to determine the frequency of cross-case occurrences. The findings were further illuminated through the provision of participant demographics, quotes supporting the data, and a clear description of procedures.

Results

Analysis of the data revealed themes in each of the three experiential learning opportunities referred to as point 1 (first-semester experience as a group member), point 2 (third-semester, peer-led group experience as co-facilitator, member, and observer), and point 3 (third-semester co-facilitation of a counseling service group and group supervision experience). Point 1 themes included: desire for structure, recognition of facilitator influence, appreciation of self-disclosure, and experiencing discomfort. Point 2 themes included: appreciation for self-disclosure, discomfort with disconnection, processing disconnection facilitates trust, experiencing group as both rewarding and scary, facilitator flexibility, understanding of group facilitation skills, and appreciation for feedback that is specific and supportive. Point 3 themes included: facilitator flexibility, understanding of group facilitation skills, application to children's groups, appreciation for watching peer group counseling tapes, appreciation for feedback that is specific and supportive, increased confidence, and increased self-efficacy. Presented in Table 1 are the data collection points, domains, themes, and frequencies. Hill et al. (1997, 2005) defined general categories as all or all but one of the cases ($n = 25 - 26$), typical categories as at least half of the cases ($n = 13$),

and variant categories as more than two and less than half of the cases ($n = 3 - 12$). Following, themes are presented with participants' responses for illustrative purposes at each point of data collection. Due to space limitations, only two or three responses from each theme or sub-theme are provided.

Table 1

Domains, Themes, and Frequencies of Participants' Qualitative Responses

Data Collection Point	Domains	Themes	Frequency	
Point 1: First Semester Group Experience as Member	Learned About Group	Structure	Typical (14)	
		Facilitator Influence	Variant (12)	
		Self-Disclosure	Variant (12)	
		Discomfort	Variant (9)	
Point 2: Third Semester In-Class Peer Group Experience as Facilitator, Member, and Observer	Learned About Membership	Self-Disclosure	General (26)	
		Disconnection Feels Uncomfortable	Typical (24)	
		Processing Interpersonal Disconnection Increases Trust	Variant (11)	
		Being a Member is Rewarding and Scary	Typical (18)	
		Learned About Facilitation	Flexibility	Typical (19)
	Appreciation for Feedback	Skills	Typical (19)	
		Rewarding	Typical (19)	
		Specific and Focused on Their Skills and Strategies	Typical (17)	
		Validates, Normalizes, and Acknowledges Strengths	Variant (10)	
		Point 3: Third-Semester Service Group and Group Supervision Experience	Learned About Facilitation	Flexibility
Skills	Typical (24)			
Application to Children's Groups	Variant (7)			
Group Supervision was Helpful	Watching Peer Recordings		Typical (18)	
	Appreciation for Feedback		Specific and Focused on Skills and Strategies	Typical (18)
			Validates, Normalizes, and Acknowledges Strengths	Typical (13)
		Increased Confidence	Variant (12)	

Point 1: First-Semester Group Experience as Members

Learned About Group

Structure. Fourteen participants responded that structure was necessary for a group to be effective. For example, one participant stated, “Our group counselor began our group with very little structure which was confusing for many of us and left us feeling lost in what to do. I found the lack of direction and purpose for our group highly frustrating.” Another participant responded, “I noticed that lack of structure or direction quite often led to cyclical discussions and a lack of progress.” And, one participant concurred, saying, “I learned what I did not like about [someone] facilitating a group, which was the lack of structure.” More than half of the participants preferred having structure and clear group participation expectations in their first group experience, which is common in early group stages of group development (Corey et al., 2014).

Facilitator influence. Twelve participants identified that group facilitators can influence the overall group experience. One participant stated, “Being flexible and adaptive is important because if something isn’t working, it probably won’t start working if you keep doing it....simply having a plan and being vulnerable isn’t all you need to be an effective counselor.” Another participant stated, “I noticed that group leaders could be too directive and distract from the group work by disclosing too much about themselves.” Thus, participants were learning vicariously by observing the facilitator’s actions and identifying what they found as effective during the group experience. While they were able to identify some of the broad ways that facilitators shape group experiences, they were not able to identify the specific skills that seasoned group facilitators use to promote the growth and development of the group. It was not until the second and third experiential learning opportunities that participants were able to clearly articulate intentional group facilitation skills that enhance group work.

Self-disclosure. Twelve participants identified self-disclosure as influential to their group experience. One participant realized, “I opened up and I started talking about how I was feeling and it was incredible to see how others started to open up and tell similar situations related to my situation.” While another stated, “I learned that when one person was courageous enough to share vulnerable information, the rest of us felt comfortable enough to share equally personal information.” As such, social persuasion appeared to influence participants’ self-disclosure in group; not all members, however, found comfort in sharing personal information.

Discomfort. Nine participants reported that being in a counseling group was uncomfortable for them. One noted, “I was really nervous to open up...I found myself holding back and monitoring my responses.” Another participant said, “I learned that participating in a counseling group can be quite nerve-wracking.” Finally, one stated, “I definitely felt alienated many times as a group member.” Thus, from their first group experience in the first semester of the counseling program, participants identified how influential structure, facilitators, and self-disclosure were on their group experience, while noting an overall discomfort with the experience.

Point 2: Third-Semester In-Class Peer Group Experience as Members, Facilitators, and Observers

Learned About Membership

Self-disclosure. All 26 participants identified the importance of self-disclosure: 23 stated that self-disclosure increased trust, 16 believed the use of group activities helped them to self-disclose, and 10 reported that disclosure was hard to do. For example, one participant said, “Trust was established by time and moments of self-disclosure from members,” and another participant stated, “I was nervous that sharing too much might make others judge me. But paradoxically, I noticed that many other times, I was wishing that I had the time and space to share even more.”

Participants also identified activities such as a meditation “...really seemed to open truthful and deep communication between the members.” As with their first group experience, social persuasion and vicarious learning influenced group participation.

Interpersonal disconnection feels uncomfortable. Twenty-four participants noted discomfort when group members were quiet and did not share their thoughts or feelings in group. One participant stated, “I found myself resenting people who did not seem willing to share and I felt guilty for feeling that way.” Another participant said, “It was obvious that there were participants who were less inclined to share and those who found it easier or were more eager to self-disclose. This seemed to create a division within our group.” And, one responded, “...some members were sharing more than others and feeling reluctant to share more because they did not notice their vulnerability being matched by others. This prevented the group from establishing deeper trust.” These responses are common in the transitional stage of groups where members test other members to determine if the group is a safe space (Corey et al., 2014). These responses also reveal how social persuasion affects the learning experience.

Processing interpersonal disconnection increases trust. Eleven participants recognized that once group members verbalized their discomfort of others not sharing equally, it helped build trust. One participant revealed, “At the point that we talked about our styles of processing....this understanding seemed to set us on the path of beginning to reconcile the two styles of processing and sharing.” Another agreed, saying, “This conversation helped group members understand the quieter members’ experiences, which fostered a sense of appreciation and trust.” Thus, discussion (i.e., feedback) helped members begin to shift into the working stage of group.

Being a member is rewarding and scary. Eighteen participants identified that being a group member creates feelings of vulnerability, but ultimately the experience is gratifying. One

stated, “While the process was difficult and rather frightening at first, I ended up feeling more connected to the group after I shared.” Another reported, “I felt unsure of how much to share about my interpersonal and life concerns but my experience participating in group was a powerful personal and professional learning venture.” And, one participant said, “...it was very intimidating to sit in a circle and stare at each other, not knowing what to expect....Witnessing member-to-member interactions was powerful....I appreciated this experience, more than I could have ever imagined.” As such, participants were influenced by their affective arousal, social persuasion, and modeling provided throughout the group experience, which also influenced their self-efficacy as facilitators.

Learned About Facilitation

Flexibility. Nineteen participants realized the importance of remaining flexible when leading group. One participant stated, “...even the best laid plans can go awry and you can never fully predict group members’ responses....Rolling with resistance and letting things happen as they happen is one of the most beautiful parts of running a group.” Another responded, “I learned I will not always get it right, and that is okay....there is no one-size-fits all approach....and the key is to be open, genuine, and to listen to and connect to members.” Increased comfort with ambiguity, a skill with which many students struggle, was demonstrated by their ability to be more flexible.

Skills. Nineteen participants identified learning facilitation skills as influential to their self-efficacy. Commonly cited skills by the participants included being fully present, facilitating and modeling here-and-now communication, using silence productively, promoting inter-member communication, managing time, inviting participation from all members, not rescuing members from discomfort, and setting limits. For example, one participant stated, “During my first session

as a facilitator I was afraid to appropriately challenge others to participate. I learned that this is an important skill to become comfortable with in order to help others express and share important aspects of themselves.” Also, a participant noted, “I learned how valuable it is to be aware of multiple voices in a room,” while another said, “time management is very important as a group facilitator, because if time slips away too quickly, the group or certain members may feel ‘cut off.’” Thus, the direct experience of practicing skills (i.e., mastery experiences) was important in increasing their self-efficacy as group facilitators, and resulted in positive emotions.

Rewarding. Nineteen participants reported feeling that the group was a rewarding experience, with one saying, “Being in a group was much harder than I anticipated. Making myself vulnerable felt risky....On the other hand, the closeness I feel to other members and the clarity I gained about myself was well worth the discomfort.” Another stated, “I learned so much about being a member, facilitator, and observer...I learned a lot about myself too. Because of this experience, I am more confident, more open to feedback than I ever was before, and more assertive.” Further, a participant reported, “I acquired a greater degree of understanding, compassion, and knowledge regarding the potential feelings, thoughts, and actions of my current and future group members through my own personal experience as a group member.” As such, participants identified how affective arousal, feedback, and mastery experiences influenced them as group facilitators.

Appreciation for Feedback

Specific and focused on their skills and strategies. Participants appreciated receiving feedback during their peer group experience. Seventeen participants preferred receiving feedback from the instructor and peers that was specific and focused on skills and strategies used in group. For example, one participant stated, “I really appreciated the detailed and concrete feedback I

received.” Another participant added, “The instructor gave amazing feedback, pointing out specific quotes from myself and what techniques I used....which was helpful to my development.”

This finding is reflective of students’ desire for specific feedback.

Validates, normalizes, and acknowledges strengths. Ten participants emphasized their appreciation for feedback that was validating, normalizing, and acknowledged their strengths. One participant noted, “The most helpful aspect of receiving feedback from our peer-observers was being validated in my experience.” Another participant stated, “Being validated from my peers...that I was somewhat effective was very welcome, and also lessened (to some degree) my fears about leading a group in the community.” Thus, social persuasion, affective arousal, and mastery experiences were influences on participants’ experience as group members and group facilitators. This finding is also congruent with the belief that students value learning in collaboration their peers.

Point Three: Third-Semester Service Group and Group Supervision Experience

After completion of their co-facilitation of a service group in an agency or school and their concurrent group supervision, participants reported what they learned about being co-facilitators and what they appreciated about group supervision. Three themes emerged from being a group facilitator: skills, flexibility, and application to children’s groups. Similar to previous group experiences, participants learned the value of flexibility and skill acquisition; however, now their efficacy had increased with the mastery experience of working with clients rather than peers. In addition, three themes emerged specific to their group supervision experience: watching video, appreciation for feedback, and increased confidence. These are examples of how mastery, modeling, social persuasion, and affective arousal can be influential on facilitator efficacy beliefs.

Learned About Facilitation

Skills. Twenty-four participants identified skills they felt more capable using in groups, such as staying in the here-and-now ($n = 12$), promoting member inter-communication ($n = 11$), and setting limits ($n = 4$). For example, one participant reported, “I learned how to set limits in a way that still felt permissive. I learned that by setting those limits, I was creating an environment of safety and trust,” and another stated, “I learned the value of process comments, silence, linking members, encouraging inter-member communication, and facilitating movement from the there-and-then to the here-and-now.” Also, one participant noted, “I learned the value of setting clear boundaries, emphasizing group norms, and focusing on the here-and-now.”

Flexibility. Sixteen participants identified learning to be more flexible when facilitating group, such as “...expect the unexpected and to do the best I could with the information available at the time. This was an incredible learning experience and I feel much more prepared to handle unpredictable group experiences in the future.” One participant stated in order “to trust the process I had to learn to trust myself,” and another added, “being able to go with the flow....being able to create a session plan and then completely disregard the specific question and activity if need be. Meeting members where they are.”

Application to Children’s Groups. Participants initially practiced counseling skills with adults in the peer group, therefore it was a growth experience for those 10 students who chose to facilitate their service groups with children and adolescents. Seven of those 10 participants described this by saying, “It was helpful to see how to apply group counseling skills in a children’s group,” and “I learned a lot about how to take adult concepts of group and apply them to children.” Also, one participant noted, “I learned how to increase my knowledge regarding how to work with children in developmentally appropriate ways.” In addition to the direct experience of facilitating

groups in the community, participants reported on the influence of the group supervision they received with their instructor and peers.

Watching Peer Recordings in Group Supervision was Helpful

Eighteen participants noted how watching their peers' recordings was beneficial to their learning experience. One participant stated, "I valued getting to watch tapes....facilitators had different populations and were in different environments. It was a learning experience to see what worked for them and what troubles they faced. It was my absolute favorite part of the experience!" Another participant stated, "Watching other people's facilitation experiences was helpful because it opened up another world to me: a different population, a different setting, a different topic." Also, one participant added, "Reviewing and consulting about tapes was the most helpful experience in supervision." Evident in this finding is participant appreciation for the opportunity to learn from others and give and receive feedback in the process which is consistent with the notion that students prefer hands-on, real-world learning that is collaborative.

Appreciation for Feedback

Specific and focused on their skills and strategies. Similar to the peer group experience but with an increase in responses, 18 participants wanted feedback from the instructor and peers that was specific and focused on their skills and strategies. For example, one participant stated, "What was most helpful to me was the way my peers and supervisor gave me realistic, constructive ways to handle situations in group." Another participant explained, "It was helpful to get constructive feedback from my professor and peers because it helped me see that there is no one right way of doing things."

Validates, normalizes, and acknowledges strengths. Thirteen participants wanted feedback that was validating and identified their strengths as group facilitators. One participant

reported, “The most helpful aspect of receiving feedback from my peers was being validated in my experience.” Another participant added, “A lot was normalized for me...others feel the way I do and not everyone knows the right answer all the time!” Finally, one participant stated having the instructor “reinforce the things we did well was therapeutic and helpful.”

Increased confidence. Twelve participants described supervision as helpful in building their confidence as group facilitators. One participant stated, “Another vital thing I learned was being true to my personality and listening to my inner voice. I am capable...and I can have confidence in myself.” Another participant added, “I learned to trust the process, be patient, and be confident in myself and my skills that I have learned throughout this class.” Also, one responded, “I feel more prepared to create, implement, and facilitate groups due to instructional, observational, experiential learning and supervision in this course.” Thus, what participants learned about group facilitation, watching recordings of peers in group supervision, and an appreciation for feedback appeared to enhance participants’ perceived self-efficacy as group facilitators.

Implications

The purpose of this research was to illuminate counseling students’ perceptions of their self-efficacy and group facilitation development across three scaffolded group counseling experiences, thereby identifying aspects of what might constitute an effective training method for group counseling. Findings revealed several noticeable learning progressions that occurred over the course of this study. Those shifts involved greater comfort with ambiguity, increased flexibility, an understanding of and appreciation for unique group facilitation skills, appreciation for self-disclosure, and enhanced self-efficacy. Findings also revealed participant appreciation for

the experience of viewing the group counseling tapes of their peers and for feedback that is specific and acknowledges strengths.

In this study, participants reported feeling more comfortable with ambiguity and experienced increased confidence in their ability to adapt to the ever-changing group climate and structure. In their first group experience, participants reported feeling uncomfortable with the ambiguous nature of the group experience, and occasionally frustrated. They expressed a desire for more structure and direction from their facilitators. However, upon completion of the third group experience, participants reported feeling more comfortable with the ambiguous nature of groups. They reported an appreciation for structure combined with a flexible style of running groups which included having a solid plan and a willingness and ability to adapt or abandon their plans to meet the groups' emergent needs. The majority of the participants reported that their learning experiences helped them "trust the process."

This is an important implication for counselor educators, because learning to embrace ambiguity and respond flexibly to ambiguous situations is a necessary component of counselor effectiveness (Granello, 2002). Like Granello (2002), we find that counselors who more readily embrace ambiguity tend to be more patient, more accepting of the process, less likely to personalize, more empathic, and more optimistic and realistic about change. These attributes empower facilitators to respond to ever-changing group dynamics and to balance the delivery of psychoeducation content and the facilitation of here-and-now process with flexibility. It is noteworthy that in this study, it was not until the third group experience in which participants' appreciation for the process and ambiguity in group work emerged. For this reason, we believe it essential to have counseling students facilitate actual counseling groups in schools or agencies while in the group counseling course and receive supervision specific to their group work. While

many of our students run groups in practicum and internship, we find that the majority of our time in supervision is spent on skills, conceptualization, intervention, diagnosis, and referral with individual clients rather than with group work.

Another notable shift occurred in participants' ability to clearly articulate group counseling skills. Upon completing the first group experience as members, participants reported a realization that group facilitators have a strong ability to influence the nature and direction of a group, but they could not articulate specific skills that facilitators used to influence the group process. After completing the second group experience, many participants were able to articulate specific skills that facilitators use; however, it was not until completing the third group experience, that all but two participants discussed the crucial role of specific group facilitation skills in influencing group process (e.g., being fully present, facilitating and modeling here-and-now communication, using silence productively, promoting inter-member communication, managing time, inviting participation from all members, not rescuing members from discomfort, productive silence, and setting limits).

As emphasized by CACREP (2016) and ASGW (2000), as well other professionals who train group counselors, the understanding of specific skills unique to group leadership is essential for efficacious facilitation (Corey et al., 2014; Furr & Barret, 2000; Orht et al., 2014; Yalom, 2005). Group counseling is not the same as individual counseling. Yet many of our students initially assume that group counseling entails the application of individual counseling skills to groups of individuals. We believe that this faulty assumption sets students up for failure as group facilitators. Our findings reveal that the peer group experience, followed by the service group experience and concurrent supervision group, solidified participants' understanding of unique skills needed for effective group facilitation (Markus & King, 2003). Participation as a member

in the first group experience did not yield this kind of understanding. Participation as a member, co-facilitator, and observer in the second group experience heightened this awareness, but in this study, the pinnacle of awareness occurred in the service group which provides support for the use of sequentially more challenging learning experiences in group counseling courses.

Greater appreciation for self-disclosure was also evident as students progressed through the three group experiences. After finishing the first group experience as members, less than half of the participants discussed the importance of self-disclosure and the impact it had on building trust and creating cohesion between and among members. Upon completing the second group experience as members, facilitators, and observers in a peer group, all participants discussed the importance of self-disclosure. They reported that it is challenging and produces vulnerability, yet they stressed that it ultimately creates more cohesion and they recognized the role facilitators have in creating opportunities for deeper levels of personal sharing. This is reflective of McCarthy's et al. (2014) commitment to the belief that students are capable of overcoming their hesitation to share and trust other members in experiential growth groups. It may also be reflective of the shared power in their second group experience where participants were encouraged to assume ownership through shared facilitation and the provision of feedback to their peer group facilitators about what was helping and what was limiting their engagement. This is an important implication for counselor educators because self-disclosure is considered an essential element to the development of trust, cohesion, and risk-taking which are conducive to the practice of new behaviors within the safe context of the group (Corey et al., 2014; Yalom, 2005).

An additional illuminating aspect of this study was that participants experienced two different types of counseling groups as members: one with an outside facilitator who was not a faculty member and one with peer-facilitators who rotated between roles of member, facilitator,

and observer. An instructor was present for the peer group experience, offered direct feedback to facilitators, and facilitated a brief, 30-minute process group about the session immediately following the session's conclusion allowing for members to articulate what they experienced and learned while also providing specific feedback in I-statements to the group facilitators. Our findings revealed that participants gained more comfort with ambiguity, flexibility, knowledge of skills, and more respect for the power of genuine self-disclosure in the peer group experience in comparison to the group experience that was facilitated by a licensed mental health professional who was not a faculty member.

CACREP (2016) requires that students participate in some sort of small group activity for 10 hours, but our findings revealed that participation in peer-run groups that were followed by a brief processing group oriented to the immediate giving and receiving of feedback was a more productive learning opportunity for students than merely participating in some small group activity for 10 hours, as required by CACREP. This may indicate that certain experiential learning opportunities are better than others at teaching group skills and concepts. The implication may be that CACREP and ASGW may better assist counselor educators by specifying which experiential opportunities have shown to be more efficacious.

A notable shift in self-efficacy was revealed. Over the length of this study, participants reported an increase in perceived self-efficacy after co-facilitating their service groups in schools and agencies. These findings align with SCT tenets in that self-efficacy was influenced by mastery experiences such as facilitating an actual counseling group, observing other facilitators run groups (vicarious learning), giving and receiving feedback (social persuasion) from peers and instructor that was both specific in evaluating skills and supportive in decreasing discomfort (affective arousal). These findings add support to previous research on how direct learning experiences

increase self-efficacy beliefs (Bambini, Washburn, & Perkins, 2009; Bernadowski, Perry, & Del Graco, 2013), and how feedback from supervision increases counselors' self-efficacy beliefs and lowers negative affective arousal (Cashwell & Dooley, 2001; Daniels & Larson, 2001). These findings also add to previous research that revealed increased self-efficacy as a result of participating in personal growth groups (Ohrt et al., 2013; Young, Reyson, Eskridge, & Ohrt, 2013).

Congruent with Ohrt et al. (2014), results of this study further support the fact that participants appreciated learning through observation and supervision. Participants reported the vital role of watching tapes of peers co-facilitating groups and how processing those experiences in group supervision played a critical role in shaping their understanding and confidence as group facilitators. This study adds to the Ohrt et al. findings by elaborating on the type of supervision experiences preferred by our participants who stressed the importance of supervision feedback that was specific, related to skills and strategies, normalizing, and strength-based. Participants stressed the importance of specific and concrete feedback given from peers and the instructor about group facilitations skills, and participants attributed supportive feedback that acknowledged their strengths to their enhanced confidence and enjoyment of group facilitation. These results lend support for previous research about students' preference for feedback and need for supportive and hands-on learning experiences that occurs in a reciprocal and collaborative team setting (McCurry & Martins, 2010). Results of this study also support recommendations that group facilitation training should include multiple instruction techniques such as observation, supervision, and feedback (Ohrt et al., 2014; Torres-Rivera et al., 2004).

An additional implication for group work training may be the need for a brief, interactive tool to teach and assess skills. Participants from this study expressed that their learning was

enhanced by concrete examples of how they were using skills and how they might use additional skills in the future. Such a tool may help students explicitly see how they transfer group knowledge (i.e., the concept and purpose of here-and-now processing) into the intentional use of specific group counseling skills, such as strategies for encouraging here-and-now processing. This kind of tool could be used to allow students to review group counseling tapes, identify and document specific skills they demonstrate, and identify which essential skills they are not utilizing. This tool might also allow counselor educators to better assess the transferability of skills from the peer group to the service group.

Limitations

As a qualitative study, the aim is not to generalize to the broader population but to illuminate the experiences of those who participated with the hopes of providing perspective that might be informative to group counseling instructors and supervisors. Aside from generalization, there are several limitations of the current study. An obvious limitation of this study is the majority of our participants identified as Caucasian females. An additional limitation is the influence of the instructor. Clearly, the instructor of the course played a pivotal role in creating a learning experience. Following the protocol suggested by the authors of this study may not yield similar results if the instructor is not committed to on-going informed consent, self-disclosure training, feedback training, experiential learning, carefully scaffolded learning experiences aimed at increasing self-efficacy, on-going feedback and support, soliciting feedback, modeling group facilitation skills, processing affective arousal, assessing the needs of the group as well as individuals, and the general belief in the power and efficacy of group counseling. Furthermore, a hierarchy exists between students and instructors which may cause students to describe their experiences more favorably. Future studies should utilize multiple methods of data collection

(McCarthy et al., 2017). For example, observational data gathered of group facilitation skills might yield important information about the actual transferability of group counseling skills to the clinical setting.

Conclusion

Budget restraints in mental health and school counseling mean that group counseling will likely become an increasingly popular method for addressing clients' needs. As such, the demand for competent, professional, and effective group facilitators is crucial. It is imperative, then, that counselor educators continue to find ways to firmly inculcate students with the skills and attitudes needed to conduct effective groups. Results of this study show that a comprehensive multi-layered group training experience increases students' group facilitation skills and self-efficacy and we hope other educators and researchers will build upon this work to continue to bolster our profession by creating outstanding group counselors.

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