

2021

## A Qualitative Exploration of Using Experiential Groups to Train Future Group Counselors

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### Recommended Citation

Pollard-Kosidowski, B. L., Diambra, J. F., Bettge, J. R., & Burd, C. K. (2021). A Qualitative Exploration of Using Experiential Groups to Train Future Group Counselors. *The Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 14(2). Retrieved from <https://repository.wcsu.edu/jcps/vol14/iss2/4>

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### Abstract

As counselors routinely provide both individual and group-based services, it is important to prepare trainees to effectively utilize both approaches. One popular method for engaging students in group work training requires them to participate in experiential small groups. Although this requirement meets CACREP's (2015) standard that students engage in 10 hours of group *membership*, less specific focus is placed on engaging students in active group *facilitation* training. This study analyzes qualitative interviews with seven counseling graduates who participated in experiential small groups during their training. Five emergent themes provide insight for counselor educators and accreditors into students' group training experiences.

### Keywords

group work, counselors-in-training, experiential learning, CACREP, content analysis

Counselors perform many duties in their professional roles, including providing individual services and facilitating various types of groups (Corey, 2015). As such, group work constitutes a critical element of the counselor training experience (Gladding, 2016). To date, researchers have detailed many different instructional methods for counselor educators to consider in their training of future counselors, including didactic lectures, discussion-based activities, testing, reading and writing assignments, observation, and clinical supervision (Sangganjanavanich & Lenz, 2012). In addition, researchers routinely cite firsthand experiential learning opportunities as significantly impacting students' cognitive complexity development and fostering the skills necessary for them to perform as clinical professionals (Granello, 2010). The 10-hour small group membership experience required by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) for counselors-in-training constitutes one such experiential method and is the strategy most often employed by counselor educators to provide students with firsthand group work experience. Research suggests that although this provides valuable group work exposure, however, the small group experience alone may fail to adequately prepare students as active future group *facilitators* (Ieva et al., 2009; Ohrt et al., 2013). Using semi-structured interviews, content analysis methodology, and Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), this article qualitatively describes seven participants' firsthand small group learning experiences. By analyzing emergent themes related to these experiences, we hope to provide insight for counselor educators and accreditation bodies to consider in designing increasingly effective group work training methods for future counselors.

### **Literature Review**

In recent years, group-based strategies have become increasingly prominent in the helping professions, with training and education for counseling students growing more sophisticated

alongside methods for implementation and practice (Gladding, 2016). Group work is one of eight core counselor training areas required by CACREP (2015) and is included in the American Counseling Association's (ACA; 2014) Code of Ethics as a fundamental clinical practice requiring both sound competence and conscientiousness. Many counselors consider group work to be its own specialized subset of general counseling practice (ASGW, 2014), with Gladding (2016) and Corey (2015) noting increased research on group counseling efficacy and several studies citing group work as being just as effective as individual therapy in achieving productive counseling outcomes (Burlingame et al., 2004; Gladding, 2016).

Existing literature emphasizes experiential techniques as valuable strategies for training counseling students on group work and each of its unique nuances (Granello, 2000). The most recent training standards published by CACREP (2015) require that master's-level counseling students engage in "...direct experiences... as group members in a small group activity, approved by the program, for a minimum of 10 clock hours over the course of one academic term" (p. 11). Less specifically, the standards require that, "...during *either* the practicum or internship, students must lead or co-lead a counseling or psychoeducational group" (p. 13). Though CACREP (2015) does not specify the nature of requisite small groups, nor provide structural guidelines for the group leadership experience (Springer, 2016), it is evident that group work is considered a core element in training future practitioners.

As counseling trainees progress through their programs of study, they are increasingly expected to demonstrate skill mastery and general and specialized forms of expertise (Kivlighan & Kivlighan, 2009). Although this need for integration is emphasized throughout the literature, Conyne et al. (1993) found nearly three decades ago that while master's-level counseling graduates reported being effectively trained in group-based *knowledge* competencies approximately 85% of

the time, only two percent of surveyed group counselors reported adequate training in the effective *application* of relevant skills. Since that time, little research has been done to further explore the construct of group work self-efficacy (Midgett et al., 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical lens used for this study is Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which describes learning as an active, constant, and evolutionary process in which learners are tasked with grasping experiences concretely and abstractly, as well as transforming experiences through reflection and experimentation (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Yeganeh & Kolb, 2009). Experiential Learning Theory highlights four stages: Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE). Kolb suggested that as learners encounter new experiences, they cycle constantly through the four stages of experiencing something new, reflecting on that experience, further conceptualizing what they have observed, and applying what has been learned. As a result, this process helps individuals to construct and internalize new knowledge (Kolb, 1984).

Counselor educators frequently use ELT strategies to help students learn about and practice skills related to group facilitation (Furr & Barret, 2000; Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Shumaker et al., 2011). One of the most commonly used and investigated experiential techniques is required small group participation (Anderson & Price, 2001; Bacha & Rose, 2007; Osborn et al., 2003; Young et al., 2013). Because this method of instruction is predicated upon a goal of providing students with firsthand, in-depth experiential learning, researchers determined that ELT was the most logical choice for analyzing participants' experiences. Although several studies have identified that small group participation influences students' comprehension of group dynamics, few have focused on *how* this learning occurs or whether this requirement helps students to actively

develop as future group *leaders*. As such, the purpose of this study was to explore the quality and value of these requisite small group experiences, particularly from the perspective of helping counselors-in-training to develop as future group facilitators.

### **Method**

The researchers utilized semi-structured interviews and content analysis (Creswell, 2013) to explore the small group experiences of seven former counselors-in-training. This methodological approach was selected for its inductive qualities, which allowed the researchers to analyze and interpret themes identified across all seven transcribed interviews. Utilizing emergent themes helped to minimize researcher bias throughout data collection and analysis, as well as to ultimately represent participants' collective experiences in their own words.

### **Participants**

Participants included seven graduates recruited from a CACREP-accredited master's-level counseling program at a large public southeastern university. All participants had completed the same Group Dynamics and Methods course as part of their core degree requirements for either school or clinical mental health counseling during the same semester within the five years immediately prior to this study. Course enrollment entailed participating in small personal growth groups of six to eight randomly assigned members, each with one randomly assigned doctoral-level facilitator. Groups met for a total of 12, one-hour sessions throughout the course of the semester. Study participants included five females and two males ranging from ages 24 to 28. Six were Caucasian and one African American. Six were clinical mental health counseling graduates and one was a school counseling graduate. Six of the seven participants were actively practicing as counselors at the time of their interviews.

## **Procedure**

Upon obtaining university IRB approval, the researchers followed Creswell's (2013) "data collection circle" process (p. 146), assuming seven responsibilities throughout the research collection phase: locating participants, gaining access and building rapport, sampling, collecting data, recording information, resolving issues, and storing data appropriately. The Group Dynamics and Methods course instructor contacted and invited eligible former students (purposeful sampling; Creswell, 2013). Those interested in participating responded by email and all respondents were included in this study. Eligibility requirements included having matriculated within the previous three years from a school or clinical mental health program requiring a group counseling course, as well as agreeing to engage in a face-to-face interview with the researchers.

Each participant was interviewed for an average of one hour in a university office setting, using a semi-structured interview protocol that allowed for spontaneous follow-up questions based on participants' responses. Interviews focused on participants' experiences of small group membership and their process of learning about group facilitation. Sample questions included:

1. Please tell me about your required small group experience as a counseling student in the Group Dynamics and Methods course.
2. What is your perspective on the small group requirement associated with the Group Dynamics and Methods counseling course?
3. Please describe any experiences in your small group that contributed to your ability to function in the role of counseling group facilitator.

Engaging in ethical practice during data collection and analysis, as well as maintaining a clear audit trail, helped to ensure that rigor was consistently monitored (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Participants selected pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality and interviewers used both

written notes and audio recording during the interview process to ensure they were fully and accurately capturing the experiences that participants shared. The researchers triangulated their data by seeking multiple perspectives until reaching data saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and further accounted for rigor by employing methods such as ongoing bracketing, member checking, ethical data storage, and peer debriefing among the research team (Creswell, 2013). They also met regularly to ensure that all ACA (2014) research ethical codes were being followed, including the honoring of commitments made to research participants and the maintenance of their confidentiality throughout each stage of the research process.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the data collected for this study, Creswell's (2013) five-step process of organizing the data, reading it thoroughly and making initial notes, identifying codes and themes, interpreting its meaning, and developing a representation to effectively reflect researcher interpretations was used. This process aligns closely with the process of inductive content analysis described by Elo et al. (2014), in which collected data is organized, open coded, categorized by emergent theme, and subsequently reported. Allowing themes to emerge organically throughout the data analysis process instead of identifying data that aligned with pre-determined themes helped to ensure trustworthiness with respect to describing participants' experiences both accurately and authentically.

Following the organization of this study's transcribed interview data, each researcher printed and read through each transcript multiple times, making handwritten notes within the margins and at the end of each individual document. Creswell (2013) referred to this note-taking process as "memoing" (p. 183). The researchers then independently identified codes that emerged from the data in each individual interview, as well as across all seven interviews, later collapsing

these codes into themes, or larger categories under which related codes seemed to fit (Creswell, 2013). Independently identified codes and themes were discussed consistently and collectively among researchers and further collapsed until final themes were determined. The data collected in this study resulted in five overall themes, including: “Expectations”, “The Emotional Experience”, “The Learning Process”, “Preparation”, and “Missing Pieces.” Outlier data was stored for future research consideration and exploration.

Following the thematization of the data, the researchers examined each theme using ELT as a theoretical lens to explore whether all four of Kolb’s (1984) stages (Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE)) were addressed by the small group membership experience and, if they were, to what degree and how. Using ELT as a framework for assessing participant experiences allowed the researchers to begin making interpretations about the value of small group membership in contributing to students’ process of learning how to actively facilitate groups. In addition to reviewing each theme as its own entity, themes were also examined collectively, with a goal of identifying any sense of order or significance in how they connected to one another and to the greater body of existing relevant literature. Findings are represented below, using direct participant quotes where possible to increase truth value and trustworthiness in our treatment of the data (Elo et al., 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Results**

The following findings represent the personal small group experiences as described by “Dolly”, “Felicity”, “Harry”, “Olivia”, “Elle”, “Joy”, and “Mike.” They are presented using the five identified themes that emerged from the data analysis procedures described above. Direct participant quotes representing each theme are provided in Table 1.

## **Theme 1: “Expectations”**

The first identified theme was related to participants’ initial expectations of what the small group experience would entail and what value it might offer to counselors-in-training. Upon being asked to reflect on what they remembered about the small group experience, all seven participants recounted their initial expectations of what the purpose of the small group requirement was and how the experience might unfold.

Olivia, Joy, and Elle recalled that although they did not initially know what to expect from their small groups, they walked away with the sense that their experiences had been different from what they anticipated. Olivia and Elle described a lack of instructor explanation regarding the small group requirement, and Olivia contended that a more detailed explanation from the course instructor would have been helpful in better conceptualizing the group’s purpose. Mike, conversely, found the sense of the unknown to be an “exciting” element of the experience. Joy spoke the least about her expectations of the experience, other than reporting that she found it to be a less formal group setting than she had initially expected.

Dolly spoke about the ways in which the small group experience exceeded her expectations related to purpose and depth of interaction, noting the unexpected vulnerability of group members and the camaraderie that developed as a result. She reflected, “When I went into it, I didn’t *expect* that I would get to know these people on such a deep level and I thought that was really nice.” Mike described a similar sense of bonding among his small group members, noting that they all unexpectedly looked forward to their small group session each week and continued to meet regularly even beyond the end of the semester. He described his small group experience as “very positive” and stated that while most of his expectations were met in a productive fashion, even those that were not met were helpful to his learning in some way. One example was related to his

expectation of how the small group would be facilitated, which turned out to be “just about the opposite” of what actually occurred. He explained that this helped him to shape his own approach to group leadership.

Although most participants reported positive small group experiences, Harry and Felicity reported significant dissatisfaction with regard to the group’s failure to meet their expectations. Harry reported disappointment in the group member selection process and restructured his expectations upon learning the identity of the other members of his group. He also expected the group to provide a setting for experiencing some of the constructs discussed in class (e.g., group stage transitions, interpersonal dynamics, facilitation methods, etc.) and reported feeling disappointed when his expectations went unmet. Conversely, Felicity described an initial expectation that the small group was “just an exercise” and not designed to be a “real group” and recounted an initial lack of investment resulting from this expectation. She reflected on feeling surprised upon realizing that “We really *had* a group!” but shared that it could have been a more valuable experience overall.

## **Theme 2: “The Emotional Experience”**

Each participant described varying emotions related to their small group in both positive and negative ways. Dolly, Mike, Harry, Olivia, and Joy referred to emotion in a two-fold manner, speaking not only of their own personal emotions within the small group experience, but also of the emotional processes and interactions among group members.

Dolly described her initial reluctance to invest in the small group experience due to her perception that, “...it was gonna be small, and quiet, and awkward, and we’re all just kinda gonna be doing activities that none of us really wanted to do.” As the group progressed, Dolly reported enjoying and appreciating the experience and noted that her initial nervousness dissipated as she

felt increasingly accepted by the other group members. She recalled her surprise at the vulnerability within the group and noted that these emotional experiences helped to solidify group cohesion. “I remember... all of our personal things that came up, that I didn’t expect to. I know at least, at least one time, everybody cried.”

Felicity described her emotional experience less than other participants did but did recall feeling initially skeptical. She described being constantly aware of her hesitance to share within the group setting. She also described a sense of comfort that slowly developed as she settled into the group experience and recalled her appreciation of the group facilitator’s transparency regarding the group facilitation process. The emotions Felicity recalled most vividly seemed to occur *after* the completion of the small group experience. She highlighted that she felt “incredibly nervous and unprepared” upon facilitating her own first clinical group during practicum but conceded that “There’s no way to prepare or explain to someone *how* to take the gravity of the [group] course at the time.”

Harry extensively detailed his emotional journey through the small group experience. He stated, “I went into the group class knowing that it was going to be one of my favorite experiences.” Harry recounted that this initial anticipation turned quickly to disappointment upon learning that none of his already established social circle would be in his small group, an intentional structural strategy employed by his group course instructor. He also described frustration as he surmised that he was more skilled in group facilitation methods than both his peers and his assigned doctoral group facilitator. Harry described this frustration as an ongoing struggle that forced him to engage in “calculated vulnerability.” As a result, he reported that he “...would leave the group sometimes, saying, ‘I wasn’t a part of the group in that moment’” and he recalled feeling alone in that sentiment. Ultimately, Harry described vacillating emotions related to a strong sense of self-

awareness and a lack of genuineness between him and fellow group members. He stated, “I guess I never really saw myself as a group member” and described lacking senses of safety and trust, as well as a lingering sense of discomfort.

Similarly, Olivia described a range of emotions. Initially, she remembered feeling uncomfortable, annoyed, and slightly angry based on a lack of knowing what to expect, but also described routinely looking forward to the small group sessions. She reflected on a sense of comfortable vulnerability among group members and credited the facilitator for sharing her own experiences, which Olivia described as creating a safe environment. She stated that although she enjoyed the experience, she felt a sense of disconnection and a lack of focus, reporting “I remember thinking like, ‘I don’t really feel like it meshed very well together. Like, it [class and small group] felt like to separate things to me’.” Olivia also described anxiety stemming from the initial structure of her small group, in which each member would routinely respond in turn to a prompt. She recalled group members collaborating to provide evaluative feedback to the facilitator, which resulted in restructuring how discussion was facilitated. According to Olivia, this helped group members to open up more organically and make more meaningful connections.

Elle spoke the least about the small group experience from an emotional standpoint, noting primarily the stress associated with initially being sorted into groups and the relief of not getting stuck with a dissatisfactory group of peers or group facilitator. She recalled “overall, enjoying the experience”, but at times feeling frustrated with a sense of wasting time. Similar to Olivia, she recalled particular activities that elicited emotional responses from her in group, recounting one experience when she felt embarrassed as she cried unexpectedly in front of her peers. Elle also described relief in learning that she would not have to facilitate a small group session, as she originally had expected to be the case.

Joy's emotional reflections were the only ones that centered primarily on group processing and interpersonal events. With regard to her own feelings, Joy shared that she "...remember[ed] being really shy", nervous, and painfully self-aware. Joy pinpointed many more interpersonally emotional moments than other participants did. She reflected on one emotional moment between two group members sharing different experiences with the same personal issue, and the emotional impact that she and the rest of her group members felt as a result. She described recognizing in that moment the "...power of a group and the power of different perspectives and how it can kind of broaden... how you think about your own situation by hearing about other people's."

Finally, Mike described his emotional reaction to the experience very positively, noting that he enjoyed it and found small group to be "...something [he] always looked forward to." He described himself as feeling inquisitive throughout the small group process, particularly with regard to his group facilitator's approach and what he could anticipate week to week. He recounted his appreciation for the bonds established between group members and, similarly to Olivia and Elle, Mike remembered specific activities that caused him to feel particularly energized, engaged, and challenged. Much like many of the other participants, Mike described a sense of comfort as he settled into the small group experience, noting that any initial "...discomfort [was] a motivator after a while, into action." Mike also noted his initial assumption about how group cohesion would occur, recalling his thought that crying would be the driving force. He laughed as he recalled that, "Although we did get close, we didn't... cry that much. I didn't cry at all, but some people I think were drawn to tears, moved to tears."

### **Theme 3: "The Learning Process"**

The third theme that emerged upon analyzing collected data was participants' descriptions of *how* learning occurred within their experiential small groups. All seven participants agreed that

they learned from the small group experience, albeit often in different ways than expected. Common reflections related to this learning process included an appreciation for the hands-on elements inherent in the use of experiential methods, intentional practices of observation and reflection, and consulting with members of other small groups to compare experiences.

Each participant described instances in which their facilitators modeled behaviors they either wanted to adopt or wanted to avoid, including the utilization of theory in a group setting, conflict management, appropriate self-disclosure, and balancing effectively between enforcing structure and allowing flexibility. Joy and Harry both described the power inherent in observing the behaviors and interactions of other group members. Mike recalled witnessing firsthand some of the group dynamics students had learned about in class (e.g., Yalom and Leszcz's (2005) therapeutic factors), as well as observing his own feelings throughout the small group experience. Olivia remembered reflecting after small group on what behaviors her facilitator had modeled and making later efforts to put those observations into practice herself. Joy described her process of reflecting after each small group session and recognizing lessons that had not been apparent to her in the moment. Harry described reflecting continuously on a number of levels, including on his own position within the small group, his facilitator's role and performance ability, and on the power and value of the group experience in general.

In addition to experiencing, observing, and reflecting, many participants described a process of checking in with classmates in other small groups to gauge their experiences and perceptions in comparison to their own. Harry described this consultation process as valuable in discerning whether others were struggling with the same challenges in small group. He found that they were not and reported his peers as, "...telling me they're satisfied because of x, y, and

z... Well, I don't feel x, y, and z, because I'm experiencing this, this, and this. So, what is it that my group facilitator is not doing that's not creating this experience?"

#### **Theme 4: "Preparation"**

The overall consensus regarding how much influence the small group experience had on students' preparation was that while it did not provide a fully comprehensive training experience, it did, as Mike put it, "...get the ball rolling." Many participants (Mike, Joy, Felicity) noted the value of simply being able to participate in *any* group experience, many for the first time, to begin learning and understanding the nature of group dynamics from any available perspective.

With regard to practical application during their small group involvement, participants reported a variety of experiences. Only Dolly, Harry, and Joy got the opportunity to practice group facilitation during their small group experience, and all reported it as positive experience in terms of allowing them to begin applying concepts learned in class. All three of these participants reported engaging in a co-facilitation process with another group member and shared that it provided a foundation for getting started, themselves, as group facilitators. Dolly recalled in particular her responsibility to close the group session she facilitated and described how the experience has stuck with her in her current role as a school counselor.

In reflecting on *how* the small group experience helped to prepare participants for future group facilitation, the most common response was that it allowed group members the opportunity to experience different group roles, take on different perspectives, explore clinical responsibilities, and consider professional identity. Mike reflected that the experience, "...helped in a small way" by encouraging him to learn about group dynamics and his own identity as a counselor. Felicity described the practical ways in which the small group experience prepared her for logistical responsibilities, as well as the opportunity the small group afforded her to, "...stand in future

clients' shoes." Olivia cited learning the value of allowing group members to provide feedback, continuously evaluating group work practices, and adjusting as necessary to best meet members' needs. Harry reflected on his preparation for future group facilitation based on learning how *not* to facilitate and what practices he wanted to avoid as a clinician. Dolly described recognizing in her small group experience that real life in a group setting does not always mirror what students see in training videos.

### **Theme 5: "Missing Pieces"**

The final theme that emerged from data analysis was a sense of something missing from their required small group experiences. One of the missing elements described by the majority of participants (Dolly, Olivia, Felicity, Harry, Joy) was hands-on practice at facilitation. Though participants unanimously reported having enjoyed learning about concepts such as group dynamics, stages, and methods for facilitation, the application piece of facilitation practice was resoundingly absent from the overall experience. Dolly said, "I think it would've probably been nice if we'd had more, um, practice leading the group... I think it would've probably made me a little more comfortable starting my own group. I mean, I think it's a good experience, but it would've been neat if I would've, instead of having a co-leader, got to do it by myself." Joy cited the benefit of group facilitation practice as allowing her to shift her focus and perspective from that of a member to that of a facilitator and suggested that all small group members would have likely benefited from the opportunity to practice in some capacity.

In addition to the application piece, some participants noted other elements that seemed to be missing from the experience. These pieces included: being challenged by group members and the facilitator (Harry), experiencing other small groups in some capacity for the sake of observing different facilitation styles and theoretical orientations (Joy), more of an initial explanation of the

purpose of the small group experience (Olivia), a consistent sense of productivity and movement beyond the surface level (Felicity), a consistent sense of security and confidentiality broken at times by videotaping sessions for the course instructor and supervisor (Mike), and a consideration of how the late-night timing of the small group experience directly after a lengthy class may affect group members' abilities to focus (Elle).

**Table 1**

*Direct Examples of Each Identified Theme*

Identified themes	Participant quote examples
Expectations	Dolly: "I didn't <i>expect</i> that I would get to know these people on such a deep level and I thought that was really nice..." Olivia: "Nobody kind of knew what to expect..."
The emotional experience	Harry: "I didn't speak up when I was feeling... this level of discomfort. And... I just didn't... feel super safe inside of that group." Elle: "So I guess that was probably the first time I felt like any kind of... group cohesion... and then not feeling so embarrassed..."
The learning process	Joy: "I mean, for me, mostly, it was observation and reflection..." Elle: "The sheer fact that I was actually able to participate in and experience a group, made it so much better. And I think that helped all of the concepts kind of stick with me."
Preparation	Felicity: "I would say, again, even with the experience I still felt underprepared..." Mike: "I wouldn't say it <i>completely</i> prepared me, but it got the ball rolling, for sure."
Missing pieces	Olivia: "I think [facilitating] would be <i>very</i> beneficial... and I wish we had done that. Because I was thinking... I wanted to do it and we didn't." Dolly: "I think it would've probably been nice if we'd had more practice leading the group..."

## Discussion

Upon analyzing these results through the lens of Kolb's (1984) ELT, four key findings address questions associated with *how* experiential small groups influence counseling students' learning processes and how effectively this training method prepares students as future group facilitators. These include:

1. The small group membership experience provided participants with an overall emotional experience that influenced their learning process.
2. The learning process within the small group setting consisted primarily of experience, observation, and reflection.
3. The participants left their small group experiences feeling only partially prepared to function as future group facilitators.
4. Participants felt that the opportunity to apply their learning as future group facilitators in a practical manner was missing from the experience.

### **Key Finding 1: Emotional Influence on Experiential Learning of Group Work**

The first key finding is that the required small group provided them with an overall emotional experience that influenced their learning of counseling group work. Participants described extensively the ways in which *feelings* influenced their abilities to engage with, observe, and reflect upon the small group experience in meaningful ways.

Several participants described initial feelings of nervousness, discomfort, and hesitancy that dissipated as time went on and as they settled into the group process. Mike likened the sense of not knowing what to expect to a client's first experience in clinical group setting. Participants also shared a range of emotions experienced in preparation for and following small group sessions,

as well as the impact of interpersonal emotional processes witnessed and experienced within the small group setting. Joy recalled one example in which a group member felt unprotected by her peers and by the group facilitator. Joy's response was to consider how she would feel as both the member and the facilitator in that situation and she reported being able to empathize with both parties when she later encountered her own challenging group situations. These examples suggest that emotions played a significant part in the experiential learning process associated with small group participation.

Given that Kolb (1984) defined learning as an active, continuous, and developmental process, it is only natural that emotions would play a part in an experiential component designed to be transformative in nature. Kolb's (1984) ELC highlights four stages, the first of which is to have a Concrete Experience (CE) involving *feeling*. Other researchers have also noted the inextricable link between feelings and learning (Imai, 2010; Ytreberg & Aars, 2015). In this study, experiencing elements that made participants feel and remember specific, identifiable emotions served as a catalyst for how they processed and transformed their small group experiences into lasting, applicable clinical knowledge. This key finding also falls in line with Gibbons et al.'s (2013) assertion that counselor training is both a personal and professional developmental process. As such, a range of emotions may arise and at times influence both interpersonal and intrapersonal work. This finding also supports previous research on the merits of personal development groups used in counselor training to provide emotional experiences related to learning, self-reflection, and empathy development (Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010).

### **Key Finding 2: Experience, Observation, and Reflection within Group Work Training**

The second key finding of this study is that opportunities for experience, observation, and reflection within the small group setting constituted the bulk of the learning experience.

Participants cited these activities as most influential in their learning of group dynamics, noting the power of all three practices at different stages in the small group process. Mike cited experience as a powerful personal learning tool, reporting, “There’s no better experience than a hands-on experience with group stuff and trying to learn how to be in a group.” Felicity referred to observation as a “...helpful piece to see someone do it, and do it well.” Joy spoke extensively about the value of being provided with ample opportunities for reflection. She recalled an instance of intense group member interaction and described her process for making sense of it as, “...[being] there and witnessing it and hearing it, but then like later, I processed it more and then every time I thought about it, it was like something different.”

This suggests that the processes of encountering group dynamics firsthand, observing the behaviors and interactions of group members and facilitators, and reflecting on experiences provided the basis for transforming experience into knowledge. This also supports and expands upon previous research that demonstrated experiential learning as an effective method for training counseling students on group work (Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010).

This finding aligns most closely with Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning. As described in the first three stages of ELT, learners actively engaged in the learning process move through stages of feeling or experiencing, watching or observing, and thinking or reflecting. These participants reported engaging in three of Kolb’s four stages within their small group experiences, which suggests that this experiential small group model may provide a useful and nearly comprehensive group work training experience for counseling students.

### **Key Finding 3: Partial Preparation of Counseling Students as Future Group Facilitators**

The seven participants in this study reported that although they did learn from their small group experiences, they still felt unprepared to perform as facilitators. Felicity rationalized the lack

of full preparation, noting, “I think we get in this mentality as counselors, ‘I need to be in the client’s shoes, I need to be in the client’s shoes’ and we miss what it takes to be in the *counselor’s* shoes.” Joy described a sense of partial preparedness, reporting, “I mean, I feel like it helped, but I don’t – I’m not sure how much.” Participants’ responses suggested that although the small group experience was valuable in its own right, it left them lacking confidence and/or perceived readiness for assuming the role of group facilitator.

Because their small group experiences stopped short of Kolb’s (1984) fourth stage, Active Experimentation (AE), or *doing*, participants potentially missed opportunities to practice the skills, methods, and interventions associated with the group facilitator role. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) noted the value in offering trainees the opportunity to imitate facilitator behaviors through practice, and it is apparent that these participants were not generally afforded this opportunity within the small group setting.

#### **Key Finding 4: Missing Application in Group Work Training**

The final key finding culminates from the previous three – the application element of the learning process, as described in the models associated with both Kolb’s (1984) ELT, which is a desired element that is clearly missing from this experiential small group training approach. Almost all of the participants spoke of their personal desire for a chance to apply their learning in some practical capacity before being thrust into the “real world” of practicum, internship, and/or professional practice. Dolly’s recommendation for improving the small group experience was to increase opportunity for facilitation practice, which Harry suggested was a definite need for students with no prior experience. These reflections provided evidence for student-identified deficiencies in existing training methods and suggested a need for re-evaluating current training guidelines.

Kolb's (1984) ELT asserts that learners traveling through the cycle of feeling, observing, reflecting, and applying may enter the cycle at any stage and move at any pace that works effectively for them, but that they must attend to and find balance between all four stages to maximize the learning process. Active Experimentation (AE) provides the stage at which learners fully transform their experiences into lasting knowledge, and when the opportunity to capitalize on *doing* the role of group facilitator is missing, it is less likely that learners will fully be able to effectively lead groups when they first enter the professional arena. For hands-on learners, who rely on opportunities for execution to fully process new knowledge, a missing link in this realm could make it difficult to satisfactorily comprehend and retain facilitative concepts otherwise experienced, observed, and reflected upon.

### **Implications**

One implication is that those who are currently tasked with revising existing training standards would benefit from reviewing studies in which counselor trainee and practitioner voices are highlighted. The present findings come from currently practicing counselors (with the exception of Felicity) who reflected on their group work training experiences. The 2016 CACREP standards represented a minimal adjustment to group work training requirements for accredited programs in comparison to the 2009 standards. As CACREP members begin to prepare for the upcoming 2023 standards revision, they might consider strategies for more clearly promoting the importance and value of group work training and incorporating more application-based requirements for group counseling practice. Counselor educators and practitioners can directly advocate for this cause by reviewing proposed 2023 standards future to ensure CACREP group work training guideline robustness parallels the guidelines provided for individual counseling skills.

An implication more specific to counselor educators is the necessity of analyzing existing training practices and their effectiveness in preparing them for real-world practice. Although experiential small groups serve as a helpful supplement to classroom instruction, counselor educators may want to structure group experiences that help students transition more fully through the ELT cycle of experiencing, reflecting, conceptualizing, and, in particular, *experimenting* (Kolb, 1984). Participants expressed a desire for making connections between classroom learning and applicable group experiences; however, traditional methods of making these connections may not be serving students in a practical sense. A related implication is for faculty to consider adding a clinical group work requirement to existing curriculum, where students engage in group facilitation practice alongside or in addition to individual practice.

Counselor educators could also ensure they incorporate questions to alumni follow-up surveys that assess graduates' perceived readiness specific to group training and preparation. Given that only four of the more than 300 currently CACREP-accredited Clinical Mental Health Counseling programs in the country require a group practicum experience, there is much work to be done on this front.

### **Limitations**

First, researchers noted limitations inherent in the content analysis approach, including challenges related to narrowing one's focus and managing large quantities of collected data (Creswell, 2013), as well as minimizing researcher bias during the data analysis process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Although the researchers were unable to eliminate these limitations, they addressed them by bracketing and identifying personal biases before interviewing participants, making conscientious efforts to review and interpret data as purely as possible, and using member checking to ensure that findings were represented as accurately as possible.

The second limitation revolves around the researchers' lack of control concerning participants' unique individual experiences. Eligibility for study participation included having successfully graduated from a counseling program (with a required group course) within the past three years, and the ability to participate in a face-to-face interview. For these participants, their group membership experience had occurred several years prior to study participation, leaving open the possibility for other contributing factors to have influenced their reflections and subsequent responses (e.g., current professional responsibilities, other group encounters which may have impacted their perceptions of the small group experience, any unique intricacies inherent in belonging to different small groups, etc.). The researchers addressed this limitation by identifying commonalities as they analyzed collected data and focusing on the thematic links that emerged across participant interviews.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research may benefit from expanding the participant population to include and represent graduates from other counseling programs, students more recently enrolled in a Group Dynamics and Methods course, and counseling professionals who have practiced for longer than one year. Researching different populations would provide a more extensive understanding of additional small group experiences. Including questions pertaining to group training in graduate exit interviews and/or surveying alumni might also offer feasible methods for collecting student data. It would be interesting to consider how length of professional practice might influence reflections, or conversely, how active student status might affect participant perspectives.

Another recommendation for future research is to replicate the present study and investigating student experiences with other experiential group work training methods, such as role-play, in-class demonstration, and simulation exercises. Qualitatively exploring other

experiential learning methods may prove valuable in determining whether experiential learning constitutes the most effective approach for preparing counseling students to be successful group facilitators. Conducting a similar study focused the preparedness of students in counseling programs that also provide clear group facilitation opportunities is encouraged.

A final recommendation is to investigate counselor educator, student, and counseling professionals' perceptions of current group work training standards and guidelines established by bodies such as CACREP and ASGW. A quantitative survey design would likely garner significantly more responses and would allow for numerically calculating the demonstrated significance of findings. It could also constitute a routine evaluation of sorts for CACREP and ASGW, as well as provide feedback to help revise and strengthen training recommendations.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study provided valuable, student-voiced insight into the use of experiential small groups as one method for training counseling students on group work and facilitation. Though this study represents only an introductory venture into this field of inquiry, the researchers hope that future studies will expand upon these findings, and that accreditation representatives and counselor educators will utilize the research to help them design increasingly effective group work training recommendations to benefit the counseling profession.

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