

2021

Counselor Trainees' Personal Growth through Interpersonal Experiential Growth Groups: An Instrumental Case Study

Yanhong Liu

Syracuse University, yliu363@syr.edu

Peitao Zhu

Northern Illinois University, pzhu@niu.edu

Alonzo D. Turner

Syracuse University, aturne03@syr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/jcps>



Part of the [Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Liu, Y., Zhu, P., & Turner, A. D. (2021). Counselor Trainees' Personal Growth through Interpersonal Experiential Growth Groups: An Instrumental Case Study. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 14(4). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/jcps/vol14/iss4/9>

This Empirical Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu, lysobeyb@sacredheart.edu.

Counselor Trainees' Personal Growth through Interpersonal Experiential Growth Groups: An Instrumental Case Study

Abstract

Following the instrumental case study design, we explored 14 counselors-in-training's (CITs) personal growth within their semester-long experiential growth groups (EGGs). The study illuminated CITs' multifaceted growth within three categories of intrapersonal growth, interpersonal growth, and group cohesiveness. Participants' intrapersonal and interpersonal growth were closely intertwined and mutually activating. Participants' self-reflection, emotional awareness, self-other reflexivity, and their interpersonal communication and attitudes were found to encompass a continuum of activities ranging from being broad/generic to specific/action-oriented. Findings provided insights for group training and future research.

Keywords

personal growth, experiential growth groups, intrapersonal growth, interpersonal growth, group cohesiveness

Author's Notes

Our acknowledgement goes to the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) who sponsored this study through the 2019 ASGW Research Grant.

The *Experiential Growth Groups* (EGGs) as a training activity is commonly implemented across counselor education programs (Merta et al., 1993; Shumaker et al., 2011; Zhu, 2018). The 2016 Standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2015) require a minimum of 10-hour group participation experience for counselors-in-training (CITs); and EGG is a commonly adopted modality to fulfill this requirement (Zhu, 2018). The importance and prevalence of EGGs has been well established in counselor education (Barrio Minton et al. 2014; McCarthy et al., 2014; Pollard-Kosidowski et al., 2021). For instance, McCarthy and colleagues (2014) viewed EGGs as an “integral component of training to be a counselor and a group leader” (p. 187), where students gain direct experience of being a group member and foster personal growth. According to McCarthy et al. (2014), CITs’ participation in EGGs can also facilitate an understanding of emotions and experiences of their future clients in a group context.

Various models are utilized in EGGs such as skill-based groups (Bohecker et al., 2016), psychoeducational group (Ohr et al., 2013), and interpersonal process groups (e.g., Young et al., 2013). Skills-based EGGs such as Bohecker et al.’s (2016) Mindfulness Experiential Small Group (MESG) focus on skill acquisition deemed transferrable to counseling practice in small groups. Psychoeducational groups are structured with an emphasis to discuss counseling-related topics such as self-care and wellness (Ohr et al., 2013). Interpersonal process groups place a great emphasis on here-and-now interactions while modeling counseling skills (Zhu, 2018). Among the three modalities of EGGs, interpersonal process groups appear to be most widely utilized by counselor training programs (Zhu, 2018). Furthermore, Zhu (2018) concluded that students participating in interpersonal process-oriented EGGs, especially when facilitated by non-instructor leaders, tend to show the highest level of authentic engagement. As such, EGGs in

this study were contextualized as interpersonal process-oriented groups with a here-and-now emphasis. Despite the wide practice of EGGs among counselor education programs, empirical research on EGGs in relation to counselor development appears to be quite limited, with only 15 empirical studies between 1997 and 2014 (Zhu, 2018). Since Zhu's (2018) systematic review, several recent studies have started to explore specific dynamics (e.g., group cohesion; members' congruence) involved in EGGs (e.g., Oh et al., 2018; Varney et al., 2020). Still, little is known about CITs' personal growth in the context of EGGs. This study was thus aimed to explore CITs' personal growth through their EGGs focusing on here-and-now interpersonal processing.

Personal Growth and EGGs

According to McCarthy et al. (2014), EGGs comprise two core components: *experiential learning* and *personal growth*. Of the two components, experiential learning through EGGs has been well articulated and gained considerably more attention demonstrated through recent publications (e.g., Li et al., 2020; Pollard-Kosidowski et al., 2021). While *personal growth* has been documented as a common phenomenon in the group work literature (e.g., Ieva et al., 2009; Kiweewa et al., 2013; McCarthy et al., 2014), it is not clearly conceptualized and is often referred under the umbrella term of *growth*. The term personal growth has also been used interchangeably with *self-development* and *awareness*. Recognizing its lack of conceptual clarity and the inconsistent use of terms, Kiweewa et al. (2013) operationalized personal growth as a process of gaining self-understanding or awareness through which members may experience changes at cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels.

Participants' personal growth through EGGs was first explored in Kline et al.'s (1997) grounded theory which delineated growth through two categories of *interpersonal awareness* and *relational insight*, with the former identified as "awareness of the effect of interpersonal

behaviors,” and the latter as “awareness of personal issues and their impact on interpersonal relationships” (p. 160). Later research provided some concrete forms of growth from participants’ EGG experiences. For example, Ieva et al. (2009) outlined three levels of growth including personal self-awareness (i.e., insights on one’s strengths and weaknesses), professional development (i.e., development of counseling skills), and programming matters (i.e., reactions to the structure and setup of the groups). Young et al. (2013) then investigated 43 CITs’ EGG experiences and reported their increased competence to achieve personal aspirations through participating in the groups.

Acknowledging the impact of EGGs on CITs’ growth, Luke and Kiweewa (2010) went further to scrutinize specific factors associated with participants’ growth, which led to 30 growth factors at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, group-as-a-whole, and supra-group levels. In a follow-up study, Kiweewa et al. (2013) investigated the initial 30 factors (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010) using CITs across three institutions, then highlighted 12 factors (e.g., universality, genuineness, vicarious modeling, validation) that seemed to be closely linked participants’ growth as different group stages. Studies of growth factors enriched the understanding of personal growth in EGGs, specifically, the conditions through which such growth may occur. Nevertheless, the mechanisms involved in these growth conditions remain uninvestigated, and our study serves to illuminate the mechanisms that intertwine with CITs’ growth through EGGs.

Conceptual Framework of Personal Growth

Among the previous studies surrounding CITs’ growth, Zhu (2018) considered Kline et al.’s (1997) study to be the most in-depth in exploring personal growth in the context of EGGs, as the findings not only captured the primary forms of personal development but also intensity of growth under each form of growth. Theoretically, Kline et al. (1997) has served as a forerunner

for numerous later studies on personal growth and learning processes within EGGs (e.g., Ieva et al., 2009; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010). Specifically, Kline and colleagues (1997) explored the interplay between personal growth and interpersonal processes through EGGs. They found that students gain increased awareness of the effects of interpersonal mechanisms on personal growth, as well as the impact of personal issues on the development of interpersonal relationships. Namely, personal growth and interpersonal dynamics and processes are intertwined and mutually reinforceable. Kline et al. (1997) further suggested that the participants' awareness of personal and interpersonal effects is manifested through emotions (e.g., fear, anxiety), behaviors (e.g., communication style), and interpersonal attitudes (e.g., acceptance, honesty), all of which fall under a continuum of activities.

Taken together, the literature has provided support for the effectiveness of the EGGs on cultivating multifaceted growth in CITs (e.g., Ieva et al., 2009; Young et al., 2013), along with factors associated with participants' growth (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Kiweewa et al., 2013). Comparing to implications for professional practice (e.g., Ohrt et al., 2013), limited attention has been devoted to understanding *how* personal growth takes place for CITs in EGGs (Kiweewa et al., 2013). Furthermore, despite the theoretical articulation of how CITs may gain growth in the early work of Kline et al.'s (1997), little empirical evidence is available that explores the mechanisms through which CITs' personal growth may be achieved within the EGGs (McCarthy et al., 2014; Zhu, 2018).

The Present Study

According to best practice guidelines of the Association for Specialists in Group Work (Thomas & Pender, 2008), group workers may “give considerable attention to the intent and context of their actions” (p. 112). The present study thus serves to tackle a twofold gap: (a)

conceptualization of CITs' personal growth in the context of EGGs; and (b) mechanisms through which CITs' personal growth is achieved within EGGs as highlighted in Zhu (2018). Grounded in Kline et al.'s (1997) conceptualizations of interpersonal awareness and relational insight, we employed the *Instrumental Case Study* design (Stake, 1995) with a primary goal to understand how personal growth is manifested in EGGs. Through this study, we addressed the two research questions (RQ): How, if at all, is CITs' personal growth manifested within their respective EGGs (RQ1); and How, if at all, do CITs' personal growth from the EGGs align with Kline et al.'s theoretical propositions of interpersonal awareness and relational insight (RQ2)?

Method

Instrumental Case Study Design

Instrumental case study is a type of case study methodology to understand a complex issue and to test/refine existing theoretical propositions (Stake, 1995). Compared to other types of case studies (i.e., intrinsic and collective case studies), an instrumental case study focuses primarily on the issue of interest (CITs' personal growth in this study) and relationships between the issue and its context; the case itself (the EGG groups in this study) is of secondary interest. Namely, researchers explore the case at in depth, because it facilitates an understanding of the identified issue (Baxter & Jack, 2008). It typically involves testing established points about the issue or refinement of a theory (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Bullough, 2015). In the context of this study, we aimed to generate in-depth understanding of personal growth and to advance the understanding of underlying mechanisms related to CITs' personal growth. The case study design enables analytical versus statistical generalizability (Stake, 1995), in that findings would serve to deepen and advance the understanding of an existing issue rather than to be generalized to a larger population. As such, instrumental case studies are qualitative in nature that involves

comparison and triangulation between findings and existing theoretical propositions.

Case Selection

Case definition and selection is critical in serving its purpose of analytical generalizability. Flyvbjerg (2006) highlighted two common approaches of case selection: selection of an *extreme case* (an unusual case which may be viewed as especially good or especially problematic) and selection of a *critical case* (an information-oriented selection of a case that enables logical deductions). For an instrumental case study, a critical case is considered valuable (Ruddin, 2006). In this study, we treated our EGGs a critical case, based on its organization, structure, pedagogical and accreditation implications, all of which largely align with EGGs applied across counselor training programs. Our emphasis on here-and-now aligns well with Kline et al.'s (1997) contextualization of CIT's growth.

Participants

Participants were 14 Master's students enrolled in a group counseling course affiliated with a CACREP accredited counselor education program in Northeastern U.S. Participants comprised 11 female and 3 male students from three graduate programs, including Clinical Mental Health Counseling ($n = 8$), School Counseling ($n = 5$), and Social Work ($n = 1$). Despite distinctive professional attributes between counseling and social work, the course was designed and implemented to align with CACREP requirements related to group training, and all participants were prompted to focus on personal growth. The participants included White ($n = 10$); Asian international students ($n = 3$), and one African American student. Participants were split into two equal-sized EGGs (denoted as Group A and Group B). We aimed for each group to have equivalent numbers of students based on race, gender, and program of study. Participants endorsed the Informed Consent form prior to participating in the EGGs. While no compensation

was offered for participants, each participant was provided a group souvenir in commemoration of their EGG experience, which was sponsored by a research grant. Table 1 denotes participants' demographic characteristics as well as the breakdown between Group A and Group B.

Table 1

Participants and EGG Characteristics

Participants	EGG	Race	POS	Status in the Program
Daniel	Group A	White	SC	2 nd Semester
Abby	Group A	White	SC	2 nd Semester
Yan	Group A	Asian	CMHC	2 nd Semester
Rosie	Group A	White	SC	1 st Semester
Betty	Group A	White	CMHC	1 st Semester
Theresa	Group A	Biracial	CMHC	2 nd Semester
Lei	Group A	Asian	CMHC	2 nd Semester
Nancy	Group B	White	SC	2 nd Semester
Xing	Group B	Asian	CMHC	1 st Semester
Imani	Group B	African American	Social Work	Not Disclosed
Linda	Group B	White	CMHC	3 rd Semester
Emma	Group B	White	CMHC	2 nd Semester
Audrea	Group B	White	CMHC	2 nd Semester
Janet	Group B	White	SC	2 nd Semester

Note. All participants' names were substituted with pseudonyms. POS = Program of Study; SC = School Counseling; CMHC = Clinical Mental Health Counseling.

Group Structure

The EGGs included 11 one-hour weekly sessions during Spring 2019. Similar to Kline et al.'s (1997) contextualization of EGGs, both of our groups were designed to be interpersonal process-oriented with a here-and-now focus. Such contextual alignment is necessary for an instrumental case study. The groups were conducted in the group counseling training rooms of the host department. The EGGs were facilitated by the second and third authors; each facilitator solely led one EGG. Both facilitators were doctoral students in Counselor Education supervised by the first author, also the instructor of record for the course. The facilitators also served as observers of group processes, with notes and personal reactions documented in the case study database (Yin, 2017). Both facilitators have taken a group counseling course at the master's level and an advanced doctoral level course on group work; they have also led numerous groups in different settings including mental health agencies, hospital, and university counseling center. The facilitators and the faculty supervisor met weekly to debrief group sessions, and separate research meetings were held regularly after the completion of the EGGs.

The groups were semi-structured. Facilitators had the autonomy to implement different group activities based on their respective group needs. Both groups started their first session with brainstorming of topics that were of the members' collective interests; the groups then delved into different topics in response to specific group dynamics. Both groups placed an emphasis on processes within the members, and different levels of processing occurred across sessions. With individual sessions, the facilitators tended to initiate the session either through structured icebreakers or informal opening questions/remarks. Differences existed in both topics of emphasis and group dynamics, given the unique group compositions between the groups.

Research Team and Positionality

The research team consisted of a faculty supervisor (i.e., the first author) and two

doctoral students in Counselor Education (i.e., the second and third authors) at the time of the study. The first author has published several articles using the case study design. The second author took one doctoral qualitative course and conducted two qualitative studies prior to the current study. The third author chose qualitative research for his research sequence which entailed three qualitative research courses. The first author is an Asian female, the second author is an Asian male, and the third author is an African American male. As a research team, we held the belief that EGGs were valuable for members' development as future group leaders; we also held the assumption that the participants could become open to each other through group processes. We were aware that our belief and assumption may have influenced the facilitation of the groups. In data analysis, we have worked actively to bracket our belief and assumption.

Data Collection

This study was approved by Institutional Review Board and adhered to research standards outlined within the ACA Ethical Codes and ACES Best Practice. Case study researchers have underscored the importance of employing multiple data sources (e.g., Stake, 1995; Yin, 2017). Noor (2008) highlighted that utilizing various data sources can enable researchers to “gain a holistic view” and “provide a round picture” of a central phenomenon (p. 1603). In the present study, we employed participants' weekly journal entries as the primary data source; field observation (Noor, 2008) and researcher memos (Watt, 2007) were further incorporated to cross-validate information.

Journal Entries

Journaling has been commonly used in case study inquiries (Zainal, 2007) and group research (e.g., Luke & Kiweewa, 2010). Some researchers categorized journal entries as archived data, while others treat them as a form of interview or narrative account where researchers

specify areas they wish participants to cover (Polkinghorne, 2005). Journals in a narrative, written format, can fulfill researchers' expectation to elicit participants' perspectives and to ensure that such expectations do not interfere with participant account (Polkinghorne, 2005). Throughout the course of the EGGs, participants submitted 10 journal entries where they were prompted to expand on three general areas of (a) overall impression of the session; (b) perception of group dynamics and development; and (c) personal experiences. An 11th, celebratory meeting was conducted wherein souvenirs were awarded to participants; thus, no journal submission was solicited. A total of 140 journal entries were collected and analyzed. Given that the EGGs were a training activity for a group counseling course, the journals served as both course assignments and research data. We specified this implication in the Informed Consent Form and bracketed our respective roles. For example, the group facilitators were not involved in journal grading. Participants were deidentified from the journals once grades were assigned for each journal. We waited until final grades of the course were uploaded to start coding and data analysis.

Field Observation

Commended as an effective and authentic tool in gaining participants' real-life experiences (Stake, 1995), observational data were commonly adopted to supplement data from other sources and enrich meaning of participants' responses (Polkinghorne, 2005). The EGG facilitators engaged as observers of participants' involvement in their groups, documenting salient verbal comments and non-verbal cues, critical incidents, and inter-member exchanges. In some sessions, the facilitators noted key words during sessions (e.g., when observing member-to-member exchanges); whereas in other sessions, notes and reactions were added immediately after the groups were wrapped up.

Researcher Memos

Researchers' memos were incorporated as another supplemental data source. As researchers are considered the instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, reflexivity is emphasized through which researchers' assumptions and behaviors are examined (Polkinghorne, 2005). Researchers of the study kept a data-log detailing reactions and interpretations while coding and analyzing data; researchers' interpretations thus became part of the research and are integrated into data reporting, while maintaining the disposition that participants were the authors of their experiences (Harrison et al., 2017).

Data Analysis

Case study analysis essentially involves "giving meaning to first impressions as well as final compilation" (Stake, 1995, p. 71). Given that an instrumental case essentially serves "to understand phenomena or relationships within it," gaining categorical data is more important than peculiar information about the case (Stake, 1995, p. 77). As such, the strategy of *categorical aggregation* is favored, which means the searching and establishment of patterns across different sources of data (Stake, 1995; Yazan, 2015). Specifically, we followed the procedures suggested in Miles and Huberman (1994), including (a) open-coding (reviewing data sources; coding segments of data based on first impressions), (b) pattern establishment (where inferential codes were established), (c) pattern matching (comparing similarities and variances of established patterns across data sources), and (d) categorization (relationships between codes were explored and collapsed). All three authors conducted an initial analysis of a randomly selected journal entries from the 1st, 5th, and 10th sessions, respectively. With the categories of patterns and inferential codes established independently, we then met, discussed, and reached consensus on the final categorization of data. The first and second authors then analyzed the rest of the journal entries. All participants names were substituted by pseudonyms.

Trustworthiness

We followed multiple approaches to ensure trustworthiness. First, to ensure dependability and confirmability, we actively engaged in reflexivity, regularly checking our experiences and beliefs associated with group processes (Hunt, 2011). Specifically, we included our reactions and experiences with interpretation of data in the researchers' memos as part of our case study database (Yin, 2017). We were also mindful of dual relationships (authors being course instructor or group facilitators) and strived to bracket our different roles with students, with transparency discussed prior to and throughout the EGG experience. To ensure credibility of our findings, case investigator and data source triangulations (Yin, 2017) were involved, with multiple case investigators and data retrieved from multiple sources for pattern comparison and cross-validation. Prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) through actively engaging in the sessions and establishing rapport with the participants facilitated in-depth information and strengthened credibility of the study. To work against confirmation bias associated with using theoretical propositions, we incorporated negative case analysis (Anney, 2014) through which we carefully compared our patterns with Kline et al.'s propositions and paid close attention to discrepancies/new patterns (e.g., growth through group cohesiveness) that are not captured by established propositions.

Findings

Findings illuminated the processes and underlying mechanisms associated with participants' multifaceted growth through their semester-long EGGs. The findings included three categories: (a) intrapersonal growth; (b) interpersonal growth; and (c) group cohesiveness. Recognizing the somewhat nebulous distinction between Kline et al.'s (1997) terms, we deconstructed personal growth into intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. We illustrated

group cohesiveness as a dynamic and bilateral process involving various intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. In line with Kline et al.'s (1997) findings, participants' personal growth were found to encompass a continuum of activities with varied depth and complexity.

Intrapersonal Growth

Intrapersonal growth involved participants' increased reflection of self-identities and personal issues through the EGGs. Participants achieved salient intrapersonal growth across the semester, evidenced by enhanced self-reflection, emotional awareness, and self-concept.

Self-reflection

Participants ($N = 14$) actively engaged in self-reflection through their EGGs; such self-reflection propelled increased acceptance and understanding within the participants. Emma articulated that, "...it [the group] made me solidify certain aspects of my core being, although sometimes this made me uncomfortable" (Journal 10). Participants further elaborated the influences of self-reflection through the group processes on their professional identity/development. For instance, Rosie highlighted, "it [the group] caused us all to self-reflect and really look at our inner-self and find the reasons why we chose the field we want to be in" (Journal 6). Lei further exemplified that, "it [being always reserved in groups] seems to be a significant pattern rooted in my life...this self-awareness can be helpful for me to work with groups as a facilitator" (Lei, Journal 7).

With intentionality to their role as emerging counselors, participants reported to be able to contemplate their identities and core beliefs and to identify personal growth edges. For example, Emma disclosed,

I often feel like my identity is still constantly in formation, and this causes me a lot of internal struggles from time to time. It feels like I'm not good at anything and the things I

do like are often things that I struggle with, so I feel like I can't always say that I identify with being a mountain climber, or a rock climber, or an athlete... (Journal 7).

Relatedly, our findings denoted participants' increased self-awareness, especially to parts that may have not been well examined and accepted outside of the group, as Janet pointed out, "Other members and the facilitator mentioned how every relationship has different expectations among the people in them. This is something I know but have never taken the time to actually think about." She then acknowledged, "This session has been the first where I feel like I have personally been able to recognize an area where I would like to grow" (Journal 4).

Overall, self-reflection as a form of intrapersonal growth was manifested through a range of activities. The activities captured both generic reflections (e.g., "It reminds me how much I have changed over the last 5-10 years and how much work life, social life, and simply time can change a person" Janet, Journal 3) and purposeful reflections that imply changes in awareness and/or behaviors, as Daniel reflected, that he has learned from the EGGs "...that feelings are optional. I have chosen to feel a certain way about something, and it allowed me to move on. This group has helped reframe my thoughts in a way that is beneficial to me" (Journal 9).

Emotional Awareness

Kline and colleagues (1997) defined emotional awareness "the development of a clearer awareness of emotional reactions and an understanding of their origin" (p. 162). Simply put, participants demonstrated increased sensitive responses over the course of the EGGs, with different patterns evolved from different stages of the groups. Specifically, the first half of the EGGs seemed to portray self-oriented emotional awareness such as fears, anxiety, and curiosity (e.g., "My overall experience of this session was uneasiness mixed with fear of rejection, but also of interest in learning what those emotions can do to make a change and broaden

perspectives” Betty, Journal 1), whereas the second half was characterized with increased relationally-oriented awareness characterized with sensitivity to others’ emotions and keen observation of their own. Triggered by a group conversation on grief and loss, Betty depicted,

I felt bad that I couldn’t contribute or offer more verbal comfort and I wanted to relay how scary the topic was for me, although I felt incapable of doing so... I felt afraid to express emotions and a huge amount of discomfort, [yet] I did not feel like I was in a negative situation (Journal 5).

Findings revealed nuances in participants’ emotional awareness beyond the dichotomous self- and relationally- oriented emotional awareness. Particularly, we observed a continuum of emotional awareness, ranging from awareness of own emotional changes (e.g., “[It] made me feel happy and secure within our group” Abby, Journal 10) to complex emotional anatomy along with cognitive components (e.g., “I still feel shame about not being supreme or good at any of my hobbies. I knew there is a lot behind this feeling because I constantly question myself, what am I good at.” Xing, Journal 7).

Enhanced Self-concept

Self-concept is a new pattern that arose from our study, which aligned with Rosenberg’s (1979) definition as “the totality of an individual’s thoughts and feelings” resulting from one’s reflexive activities (p. 7). Findings showed participants’ enhanced self-concept, denoting increased awareness of own feelings and thoughts evolved from interactions with other members. For example, Janet expounded, “listening to others share their feelings on relationships and thinking of my own feelings, I have realized that I can be very guarded or protective with my own feelings and even the feelings of others” (Journal 4). Similarly, Theresa engaged in reflexive activities related to her own beliefs, as articulated in Journal 6, “Instead of thinking other

members were wrong, I decided to think that each person has a right to have their own opinion and that does not make them wrong.” followed by her acknowledgement, “This thought helped me be able to start seeing other member’s frustrations through their eyes”.

Feedback seemed to serve as a catalyst of self-concept enhancement. Participants viewed feedback as an effective tool in facilitating self-learning in both direct and indirect ways. While the direct feedback prompted them to reflect or even react in the EGGs, indirect feedback, despite not being directly provided to members, propelled participants’ vicarious reflection of own personal issues. Audrea, for example, expressed her hope that through the indirect feedback, “it is most exciting to watch someone come out of their shell and express themselves more. That is exciting to me because that is positive human growth that is visible” (Journal 1).

Likewise, participants’ self-other reflexivity involved a spectrum from generic to moment-/content-specific activities. For example, generically, Imani noted, “For me this EGG session put into perspective on the role that I play within the group” (Journal 9). With moment-specific reflexivity, participants tended to deliberate exchanges between members and detected patterns within these exchanges, as a participant illustrated,

I was surprised and flattered that two members mentioned that they felt I was honest and disclosing a lot. Honestly speaking, I knew I shared and disclosed a lot, but I thought everyone was that honest and I didn’t feel I deserve the credit (Xing, Journal 9).

Interpersonal Growth

Interpersonal growth, overlapped with interpersonal awareness (Kline et al., 1997), denoted participants’ changes in interpersonal behaviors and attitudes. All 14 participants responded to have gained interpersonal growth evidenced through *interpersonal communication* and *interpersonal attitudes*.

Interpersonal Communication

We observed changes of interpersonal communication in all participants ($N = 14$) demonstrated through increased transparency, mindfulness, and role flexibility involved in their EGG experiences. Nancy reflected in Journal 10 that, in the initial stage of her group, she used to think in her own mind that “wow that is hard” or “what a great point,” but did not communicate such thoughts to others. However, she wrote that toward the end of her group experience, “I now know the importance of saying these things. I learned how to be an active listener” (Journal 10). Daniel elaborated on the importance of mindfulness, which he described as intentionality toward own thoughts and behaviors, that, “I really try to focus on the moment, my body movements, and my intentions behind each task...It [the session] has allowed me to approach everything I do now with a sense of purpose and meaning” (Journal 4). Through the EGGs, the participants demonstrated increased awareness of their exchanges with group members and how the exchanges in turn affected their communication approaches. For example, Abby, in Journal 5, illustrated that,

My biggest takeaway and learning experience during the EGG sessions so far has been that although I typically am a leader, playing more of an inactive role in the sessions is beneficial for me. I have learned that, by listening rather than talking, I am able to see that many of my group members have a lot of same feelings I have about personal topics.

Participants’ changes in interpersonal communication permeated to their life situations outside of their EGGs. For example, Daniel expressed “...to be able to set up boundaries in order to live in the here-and-now” (Journal 9). Relatedly, “it is imperative to let others know of our feelings and intentions, and that it is not out of hate or not wanting it, but rather a respectful and honest way to alleviate further stress, anxiety, and depression” (Journal 8).

Changes in interpersonal communication were also found to follow a continuum that ranges from broad awareness of communicative patterns (e.g., “I was able to compare the things we learned in class about group dynamics to something tangible—I could see things working or not working in a real-life setting.” Betty, Journal 10) to targeted awareness involving behavioral changes or active experiment. For instance, Linda named a moment where “I knew this was my opening to finally be honest with my group. I discussed my fears coming into the group about being misunderstood by others as well as the lack of validation I felt during some of the sessions” (Journal 8).

Interpersonal Attitudes

Interpersonal attitudes referred to “attitudes relevant to interpersonal communication” (Kline et al., 1997, p. 162). Interpersonal attitudes encompassed participants’ attitudes towards interpersonal cues in group processes, as well as attitudes towards other members’ engagement (or lack thereof) in the group. Similarly, participants’ interpersonal attitudes presented to be developmental as the EGGs unfolded. Participants’ initial journals denoted keywords such as “feeling judged,” “nervous,” “afraid of offending other”. With the development of interpersonal relationships, participants seemed to gain and show more self- and other-acceptance. For example, Xing reflected that “I didn’t enjoy much of my life due to all the small things I criticize myself about,” and through the EGG, she learned to “focus more on the things that I can control or the things that make me happy” (Journal 9). Similarly, Yan observed changes in her attitudes towards herself and the group, noting,

I started to have a different approach to the differences in the group. Previously, when I felt I am different from other people, I automatically thought I didn’t fit in. But now, I felt even though sometimes I am different from other people, I could still be part of the

group and be happy as a group member (Journal 7).

Interpersonal attitudes denoted participants' increased flexibility and interpersonal sensitivity when engaged with other EGG members, as Nancy reflected, through the EGG experience, she "...learned how to be more empathic to other people and the importance of validating individuals" (Journal 10). Like the previous subthemes, interpersonal attitudes were illuminated through a range of mechanisms from broad observation (e.g., "We each had an opportunity to bring something to the table and learn about each of the group members on a more personal level" Daniel, Journal 1) to subtle action-oriented attitudes (e.g., "I regretted [that I] didn't say this to her during the session, as I think this response would be important for her to hear" Xing, Journal 6).

Group Cohesiveness

Group cohesiveness is conceptualized in this study as the interface between participants' intrapersonal growth, interpersonal growth, and the development of group as a whole.

Breadth and Depth of Group Processing

Both EGGs revealed breadth and depth of content and processes, which involved participants' management of seemingly tough topics. For example, for one session alone (i.e., Session 7), five out of seven participants from Group B recognized the depth of their group processing contributed by members' willingness to engage with each other through sensitive topics. Four members underscored the profoundness of the group processes around religion, one of whom elaborated,

Religion is usually a pretty difficult conversation to have in a group of people, especially when it is a group of people who do not know each other's views and do not have the same views. However, we all shared our different experiences and beliefs and it was just

an open place to share. We are a mixture of different beliefs and experiences and I do not think that one person was judging anyone else there (Emma, Journal 7).

Janet echoed the profoundness of the same session, emphasizing how group processes on tough topics affect her processing own identity. She recognized that, “everyone has different experiences that form and shape who they are (especially in terms of faith). This session allowed me to share my own feelings on identity and religion.” Likewise, all but one member ($n = 6$) in Group A appreciated the capacity of their group to tackle difficult topics such as grief and loss. Participants pointed out that the processing of difficult topics reinforced the cohesion among members, as Daniel explained that, “...identifying similarities between fellow group members, especially similarities that are difficult to broach and discuss with others, provides that sense of universality; a sense that you are not alone in this world” (Daniel, Journal 9).

Vulnerability and Authenticity

The development of group cohesiveness featured an increment of participants’ vulnerability and authenticity. Similar to the patterns observed in emotional awareness, participants showed lower levels of vulnerability and authenticity in the initial sessions. Yan wrote, “I was afraid to share my different experience and feeling, because I didn’t want to act like an outlier. In the group, people tended to seek similarities among one another and there is pressure for expressing different opinions” (Journal 1). Fears associated with differences seemed to interface with uncertainties of group compositions and risks of being judged, echoed by Linda, “...I had no reservations about being open, as I possibly could be with the other members, [yet] I feared their ability to understand and process the information I was sharing. I feared judgement” (Journal 1). Participants’ fears and uncertainties seemed to gradually dissipate with increasing interpersonal awareness. Lei, who tended to be reserved recalled,

I no longer performed as a listener or observer. Instead, I tried to share my stories proactively. I would say it was my first time sharing my personal thoughts with the group in such depth. It was really interesting when I told the story, because I tended to be surprisingly vulnerable beyond my imagination (Journal 5).

Members were found to actively navigate the group dynamics to balance their group needs and their own tendency to be vulnerable and authentic. Betty, remarked, “This EGG was a little more vulnerable for me than other times. While I had shared more serious issues from time to time, I felt like I was opening up more into my world than I was used to” (Journal 9). In Journal 10, Betty further expressed that, “As our first session began with a lot of silence and what looked like fear to disclose and be vulnerable, our last one showed the extent we had come to be vulnerable and open to disclosure.” Accordingly, participants actively attended to others’ vulnerability in connection with their own emotional awareness. For example, Janet expressed in Journal 5,

Many of the share outs from the members caught me by surprise, and a lot of them shared situations that I have never been in, but can absolutely empathize with and relate to. It was really powerful to hear stories from different members of the group and to see and hear the other members of the group provide support and feedback to each other.

The navigation of vulnerability and authenticity in the groups evidently contributed to the holistic development of the groups and cultivated participants’ personal growth, as demonstrated through the exemplar, “[The EGG] is a vulnerable environment and we all got through this hard topic [grief] together by listening, pointing out strengths, bringing out commonalities, offering and asking for advice, and just giving everyone their undivided attention” (Yan, Journal 5).

Discussion

Echoing previous studies (e.g., Ieva et al., 2009; Kiweewa et al., 2013, Young et al., 2013), our findings indicated that CITs experienced multifaceted personal growth through their EGGs. Our findings following the three categories of intrapersonal growth, interpersonal growth, and group cohesiveness largely corroborated Kline et al.'s (1997) propositions of interpersonal awareness and relational insight. Findings provided answers for both research questions.

Research Question 1

In response to RQ1, our findings illuminated mechanisms that underlie CITs' personal growth, capturing various growth patterns in their self-reflection, emotional awareness, self-concept, and interpersonal communication and attitudes. Our findings built on Kiweewa and colleagues' (2009) operationalization of personal growth to range from intrapersonal-, interpersonal-, and group-levels. The categories of participants' growth as illuminated by our study were also consistent with the classification of growth factors in previous findings (Kiweewa et al., 2013; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010). Participants seemed to have expanded awareness, attitudes, and behaviors in these growth areas. Consistent with Kline et al. (1997), each of the growth areas was found to be characterized with a continuum of activities ranging from participants' generic to specific reflection or from broad observation to action-oriented mechanisms, with varied depth, intensity, and/or complexity. Findings contributed to conceptual clarity of personal growth. The mechanisms further illuminated the complexity of personal growth in the context of the EGGs and contributed to unfold the process through which personal growth takes place, an area identified as underexplored (McCarthy et al., 2014; Zhu, 2018).

Research Question 2

In line with RQ2, our findings largely corroborated Kline et al.'s (1997) theorization of personal growth within the EGG context. We deconstructed Kline et al.'s propositions of

interpersonal awareness and relational insight and conceptualized CITs' personal growth in intrapersonal and interpersonal realms. Our results showed that intrapersonal and interpersonal growth are closely intertwined and mutually activating. Indeed, it is unrealistic to clearly distinguish participants interpersonal from their intrapersonal growth, as participants' self-reflection, emotional awareness, and self-concept seemed to intersect with their interpersonal communication and attitudes throughout the EGG processes. Our study revealed nuances beyond Kline et al.'s (1997) conceptualization of CITs' awareness of personal and interpersonal effects. Our finding on participants' enhanced self-concept advanced the understanding of CITs' personal growth, as we have found no empirical research investigating self-concept in relation to EGGs. This finding also expanded Kline et al.'s (1997) relational insight, with elucidation on specific intrapersonal (i.e., reflexivity) and interpersonal (e.g., feedback) catalysts in the EGGs.

Likewise, our finding on group cohesiveness as an element of personal growth broadened the existing propositions of Kline et al.'s (1997). Group cohesiveness emerged from our study as an important vehicle through which personal growth takes place. Rather than a static state, group cohesiveness was a dynamic and bilateral process involving various intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. Said differently, CITs' perception and experiences of group cohesiveness interacted with their own and peers' investment (e.g., revealing vulnerability, validation); meanwhile, perception of group cohesiveness may have strengthened CITs' willingness and ability to engage in in-depth self-reflection and behavioral experiment. Most intriguingly, despite the general trend that higher levels of group cohesiveness seemed to align with participants' increased personal growth with the development of the EGGs, we noted conflicts (revealed through journal entries and observational notes) between the two processes in certain sessions. In several occasions, in-depth self-reflection was observed following relational

rupture within the EGGs, which seemed to have contributed to participants' profound intrapersonal and interpersonal insights disclosed through journals. Our finding that group cohesiveness, as an important indicator of group development, intersects with intrapersonal and interpersonal growth within EGGs in a dynamic manner, contributes to a more intricate theoretical understanding of personal growth in EGGs.

Implications for Counselor Education and Future Research

In a content analysis, Barrio Minton et al. (2014) identified the lack of theoretical grounding in examining training activities as a major limitation of counselor education literature. Through an instrumental case study design, our study advanced the theoretical understanding of personal growth through corroborating, expanding, and further contextualizing Kline et al.'s (1997) propositions. With a clearer and more holistic understanding of how personal growth can take place within EGGs, counselor educators may utilize the findings of this study along with existing theoretical tenets to guide their designing and delivery of EGGs to their students. For example, our results may inform how counselor educators prepare CITs for their EGG experience. The EGG literature (e.g., Zhu, 2018; McCarthy et al., 2014) has documented trainees' uncertainty specifically around the benefits of EGGs, which hinders their learning experience. Therefore, it may be beneficial for counselor educators to clearly outline potential growth opportunities, mechanisms underlying personal growth, and group interactions that may be facilitative of growth achievement.

Our findings also have broader pedagogical implications that potentially could be extended beyond the EGG context. The importance of fostering personal growth in counselor training is widely recognized by counselor training programs (Zhu, 2018) and documented in training guidelines (CACREP, 2015). However, the concept of personal growth is often ill-

defined and difficult to assess (Hensley et al., 2003; Kiweewa et al., 2013). As CITs' experience takes place concurrently with other foundational courses within the training curriculum (Shumaker et al. 2011), counselor educators may benefit from fostering a training environment conducive to personal growth in a holistic manner. Given students' confusion about the nature and aim of EGGs (Steen et al., 2014), group course instructors may refer to our findings in conceptualizing personal growth that can be expected through EGGs. Further, the continuum of activities intertwined with each facet of personal growth may illuminate to CITs the intensity and diversity involved in participants' experiences.

Limitations and Research Recommendations

In relation to the instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995), the purpose of the study was to generate an in-depth understanding of CITs' personal growth in their EGGs. Findings of the study advanced understanding of existing propositions (Kline et al., 1997), yet cannot be applied to a larger population or a different sample (e.g., CITs with considerable demographic and cultural differences). It should also be noted that the analytical generalizability could be limited to a designated context. For example, the process of personal growth may manifest differently in a skill-focused EGG (e.g., mindfulness training; Bohecker et al., 2016). Future researchers may consider utilizing research methods such as multiple case studies (Yin, 2017) to further enrich our findings. Another limitation of study lies in the role of the researchers who also served as the group course instructor and group facilitators. While we embraced our roles as active participants in the process by diversifying the observations and documenting reactions (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2017), we did not fully account for factors such as the interactions outside the EGG context (e.g., instructor's formal and informal feedback for students), interactions between researchers, or students' interactions outside of EGG context. Therefore, future researchers could

benefit from conceptualizing personal growth within EGG as an interactive, open process and is susceptible to various external influences. Further, our study did not investigate within group differences in CITs' personal growth. For example, differences may exist between U.S. and international CITs, and certain facets of personal growth may be closely linked to cultural factors. Researchers may look into such differences between demographic groups potentially through quantitative research. Relatedly, we acknowledge that participants' experiences can differ substantially, given their unique life experiences outside the EGGs coupled with different leadership involved in the two groups; and it is outside the scope of the study to compare experiences between groups or within members. Finally, our findings illuminated CITs' increased self-concept through their EGGs, which has not been investigated in the group work literature. Future research would be valuable in testing the relationship between CITs' self-concept and EGGs.

Conclusion

This instrumental case study served a twofold purpose to provide an in-depth understanding of CITs' personal growth through their EGG experience and to contribute to theorization of personal growth in interpersonal process-oriented EGGs. Our findings revealed the multifaceted personal growth that CITs demonstrated under the categories of intrapersonal growth, interpersonal growth, and group cohesiveness. The findings largely corroborated Kline et al.'s (1997) propositions of interpersonal awareness and relational insight; they further illuminated group cohesiveness as the interface between participants' intrapersonal growth, interpersonal growth, and the development of group and introduced nuanced mechanism involving CITs' reflexivity and feedback.

References

- Anney, V. N. (2014). Ensuring the quality of the findings of qualitative research: Looking at trustworthiness criteria. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 5(2), 272-281. <http://hdl.handle.net/123456789/256>
- Barrio Minton, C. A., Wachter Morris, C. A., & Yaites, L. D. (2014). Pedagogy in counselor education: A 10-year content analysis of journals. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 53(3), 162-177. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6978.2014.00055.x>
- Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 544-559. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1573>
- Bohecker, L., Vereen, L. G., Wells, P. C., & Wathen, C. C. (2016). A mindfulness experiential small group to help students tolerate ambiguity. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 55(1), 16-30. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12030>
- Bullough, R. V. (2015). Differences? Similarities? Male teacher, female teacher: An instrumental case study of teaching in a Head Start classroom. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 47, 13-21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.12.001>
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2015). *2016 CACREP standards*. Author.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12, 219-245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>
- Harrison, H., Birks, M., Franklin, R., & Mills, J. (2017). Case study research: Foundations and methodological orientations. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 18, Article 19. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2655>
- Hensley, L. G., Smith, S. L., & Thompson, R. W. (2003). Assessing competencies of counselors-in-training: Complexities in evaluating personal and professional development. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 42(3), 219-230. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6978.2003.tb01813.x>
- Hunt, B. (2011). Publishing qualitative research in counseling journals. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 89(3), 296-300. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2011.tb00092.x>
- Ieva, K. P., Ohrt, J. H., Swank, J. M., & Young T. (2009). The impact of experiential groups on Master students' counselor personal development: A qualitative investigation. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 34(4), 351-368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933920903219078>
- Kiweewa, J., Gilbride, D., Luke, M., & Seward, D. (2013). Endorsement of growth factors in experiential training group. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 38, 68-93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2012.745914>
- Kline, W. B., Falbaum, D. F., Pope, V. T., Hargraves, G. A., & Hundley, S. F. (1997). The significance of the group experience for students in counselor education: A preliminary naturalistic inquiry. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 22(3), 157-166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933929708414377>
- Li, C., Lertora, I., Dowda, R., & Lin, Y. (2021). The TRAINing technique: An experiential process fostering growth of counselors in training. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2020.1842277>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Luke, M., & Kiweewa, J. M. (2010). Personal growth and awareness of counseling trainees in an experiential group. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 35(4), 365-388.

- <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2010.514976>
- McCarthy, C. J., Falco, L. D., & Villalba, J. (2014). Ethical and professional issues in experiential growth groups: Moving forward, *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 39(3), 186-193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2014.924722>
- Merta, R. J., Wolfgang, L., & McNeil, K. (1993). Five models for using the experiential group in the preparation of group counselors. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 18(4), 200–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933929308413755>
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Noor, K. B. M. (2008). Case study: A strategic research methodology. *American Journal of Applied Science*, 5(11), 1602-1604. <https://doi.org/10.3844/ajassp.2008.1602.1604>
- Oh, S., Mitchell, M. D., Bennett, C. M., Finnell, L. R., Saliba, Y., Heard, N. J., & Pennock, E. R. (2018). Journal sharing on group cohesion and goal attainment in experiential growth groups. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 43(3), 206-229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2018.1484541>
- Ohr, J. H., Robinson, E. H., & Hagedorn, W. B. (2013). Group leader development: Effects of personal growth and psychoeducational groups. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 38(1), 30–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2012.732982>
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). Language and meaning: Data collection in qualitative research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 137-145. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.137>
- 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). <https://repository.wcsu.edu/jcps/vol14/iss2/4>
- Rosenberg, M. (1979). *Conceiving the Self*. Basic.
- Ruddin, L. P. (2006). You can generalize stupid! Social scientists, Bent Flyvbjerg, and case study methodology. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(4), 797-812. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406288622>
- Shumaker, D., Ortiz, C., & Brenninkmeyer, L. (2011). Revisiting experiential group training in counselor education: A survey of master’s-level programs. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 36(2), 111–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2011.562742>
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.
- Steen, S., Vasserman-Stokes, E., & Vannatta, R. (2014). Group cohesion in experiential growth groups. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 39(3), 236-256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2014.924343>
- Thomas, R. V., & Pender, D. A. (2008). Association for Specialists in Group Work: Best practice guidelines 2007 revisions. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 33(2), 111-117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933920801971184>
- Varney, M. A., Swank, J. M., Weaver, J. L., & Placeres, V. (2020). Master's-level counseling students of color in personal growth groups: A phenomenological study of congruence. *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling*, 59(2), 123-143. <https://doi.org/10.1002/johc.12134>
- Watt, D. (2007). On becoming a qualitative researcher: The value of reflexivity. *The Qualitative Report*, 12(1), 82-101. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2007.1645>

- Yazan, B. (2015). Three approaches to case study methods in education: Yin, Merriam, and Stake. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(2), 134-152. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2102>
- Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.
- Young, T. L., Reysen, R., Eskridge, T., & Ohrt, J. H. (2013). Personal growth groups: Measuring outcome and evaluating impact. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 38(1), 52–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2012.745915>
- Zainal, Z. (2007). Case study as a research method. *Jurnal Kemanusiaan*, 5(1), Article 1. <https://jurnalkemanusiaan.utm.my/index.php/kemanusiaan/article/view/165>
- Zhu, P. (2018). Experiential growth group in counselor education: A review of its pedagogy, research, and ethical dilemmas. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 43(2), 144-165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2018.1451581>