Research Article

A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Counseling Students in a Co-Facilitated Experiential Group

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Research on experiential learning, group psychotherapy, and neuroscience has supported the inclusion of the experiential group in counseling training programs for the positive impact on students' personal and professional development (Denninger, 2010; Zhu, 2018). This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of master's level counseling students in a group co-facilitated by a doctoral student and a professor. Results of this research provide a deeper understanding of counseling students' experiences in a co-facilitated experiential group and offer a rationale for best practices in the facilitation of the required group experience in counseling training programs.

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Training Graduate Students in Group Counseling

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) identifies group process and dynamics as one of the eight core curricular experiences to be included in counseling training programs. CACREP standards require the use of both didactic and experiential methodologies in group instruction to ensure the most comprehensive and effective training of future group counselors (CACREP, 2016). Participants in experiential groups explore their emotions, self-disclose, and strive for change by focusing on their own experiences in the here and now (Anderson et al., 2014). Teaching group counseling skills through experiential methodologies has long been supported by proponents of group psychotherapy and experiential learning theories. Researchers have suggested that supervised practice and participation in an experiential group provides the most comprehensive development of group

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counseling skills (Corey, 2022). Investigations exploring counseling students' experiences of the experiential group have been primarily limited to quantitative studies, while in-depth qualitative inquiry has been minimal with no qualitative studies examining experiential groups co-facilitated by a course instructor and a doctoral student.

Experiential Groups in Counseling Training Programs

CACREP standards require students to complete a minimum of 10-clock hours in a small group activity over the course of a semester in addition to traditional classroom instruction (CACREP, 2016). The notion that participation in an experiential group can bring about personal change and skill development has prompted counseling programs to use the experiential group to meet the requirement of a small group activity. Researchers have suggested that supervised practice and participation in an experiential group provides the most comprehensive development of group counseling skills (Corey, 2022). Shumaker, Ortiz, and Brenninkmeyer (2011) found that among 82 counseling programs across the United States, approximately 90% of the programs implemented an experiential group. Counselor educators seem to agree that requiring students to participate in an experiential element will help students to develop the necessary skills to be an effective group leader (Kline et al., 1997).

Group skills are best developed through supervised practice and participation in an experiential group (Corey et al., 2018). Counseling students are given the opportunity to develop a personalized understanding of themselves and the group process through the experience of group membership (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). The interpersonal interactions that occur during the group process allow students to increase their level of self-awareness while vicariously learning about the intricacies of group dynamics (Zhu, 2018). Furthermore, experiential groups may promote counseling students' social and cognitive maturation through experiences that encourage thoughtful reflection, self-exploration, and promote disequilibrium (Johnson & Lambie, 2012).

As counseling students experience group dynamics for themselves and face difficult emotions such as vulnerability, they may be better able to relate and empathize with future clients who will incur similar experiences as group participants (Anderson & Price, 2001; Ohrt, Robinson, & Hagedorn, 2013). Studies have examined the impact of experiential groups on students' development of empathy, self-efficacy, leadership skills, listening skills, and the experience of therapeutic factors in comparison with psychoeducational groups (Anderson & Price, 2001; Ohrt, Robinson, & Hagedorn, 2013; Tagay, 2022). Tagay (2022) discovered that participants in an experiential group had higher levels of self-efficacy and

listening skills. Yalom (1995), suggested that through group membership, counseling students would experience, emotionally and individually, what they had learned through didactic training. Having a skilled group facilitator to create and maintain a safe environment is crucial to this process.

Experiential Group Facilitation

The methods and techniques implemented by the group facilitator(s) during the experiential group has been found to have a substantial impact on student members' personal and professional development. Research has revealed that students who participated in an experiential group viewed group facilitators as role models demonstrating appropriate leadership skills and techniques (Ieva et al. 2009). Students reported this modeling helped increase their own confidence in their ability to lead a group, and provided an opportunity for them to conceptualize the techniques and styles they would like to use and/or avoid in their own future practice as a group facilitator (Ieva et al. 2009).

According to Yalom & Leszcz (2020), the goal of an experiential group is for participants to seek and experience change, whether explicitly or implicitly. Group membership can elicit emotional learning about the self and others through the processes of self-disclosure, interpersonal communication, vulnerability, conflict, and acceptance. Group facilitators encourage group members to openly express their feelings to the group, which may result in an increased sense of connectedness to others (Hogg & Deffenbacher, 1988).

Groups that are rich in intrinsically curative factors are said to produce a higher rate and influence of change amongst members. Style and facilitation methods of the group facilitator are a major contributor to the presence of curative factors posited by Yalom (1995) in a group. The group leader's skill greatly influences the overall dynamics of the group, which can significantly impact the potential to either create or diminish these curative factors in a group setting (Bloch & Crouch, 1985).

The expectation that students should divulge personal information in the experiential group is frequently noted as an ethical concern and has prompted discussion about possible facilitation methods to help reduce potential issues and encourage sharing (Davenport, 2004). Berg, Landreth, and Fall (2017), suggested that a doctoral student, under the supervision of a faculty member, should lead the experiential group and be supervised off campus. Another suggestion proposed the required group should be facilitated by a person completely unrelated to the counseling program (Lloyd, 1990). Similarly, Yalom (1995) agreed with the notion of separating the group instructor from the group facilitator because of his own experience in the dual role, stating that he found it to be a severe handicap and he also argued

that the experiential group is far more effective in student growth and development if the group facilitator comes from outside of the counseling institution.

Benefits to students with the instructor as group facilitator or co-facilitator have also been cited. Shapiro et, al. (1998) stressed the opportunity for students to view an experienced group leader in action firsthand and increased personal development with the instructor being able to model and evaluate directly as positive factors. Some posit that the idea that all dual relationships are not inherently bad (Davenport, 2004; Kottler, 2004) and students may gain from learning from a competent instructor and facilitator.

Sklare, Williams, and Powers (1996) supported the course instructor acting as the group facilitator, suggesting that students benefit by receiving important guidance and feedback directly from the faculty member. In a study reviewing the proposed model, they also found that 80% of the students who participated reported that having the instructor as the leader of the group did not inhibit their participation in any way (Sklare et al., 1996). The majority of the data related to group facilitation in counselor education programs is now dated, and new research is needed to address current trends in the field (Armstrong, 2002; Yalom & Leszcz, 2020).

The utilization of the course instructor and a doctoral student as a co-facilitator is an area that needs research to compare to other methods involving the course instructor only and determining if this assists in the overall reduction of harm and increase in student comfortability and growth. Since studies such as Merta et al. (1993), suggest that many counseling training programs utilize the instructor as a group facilitator, this makes it imperative that future research be conducted to help identify student preferences and outcome of experience when implementing specific facilitation strategies.

Student Attitudes and Perceptions

Data from studies exploring student attitudes and perceptions of the experiential group have provided new perspectives on the benefits and risks of the required group component. Regarding ethical concerns, results of the Ieva et al. (2009) study indicated that students were more uncomfortable participating in the experiential group when they had fears that their facilitator was not competent in facilitating the group. Student attitudes may result in limited participation from a group member, ultimately decreasing the effectiveness of the group experience and general comfort level (St. Pierre, 2014). The outcomes of these studies seem to suggest that having an experienced group leader, such as the course instructor, could be potentially beneficial in creating a positive student experience in the experiential group component of counselor training.

Alternatively, in a study conducted by Davenport (2004), counseling groups were facilitated by doctoral students instead of the group course instructor. In this study, all student participants emphasized the importance of having facilitators separate from the instructors of the course, and many of the participants indicated they would have been more apprehensive about self-disclosure and providing feedback in the group had it been facilitated by a faculty member (Davenport, 2004).

A review of the literature has found that much of the research conducted on the experiential group experience has been comprised of using survey instruments to gain information from instructors and students in master's-level counseling programs (Merta et al, 1993; Shumaker et al., 2011). While research recently has focused on student outcomes and documentation of their experiences (Anderson et al., 2014; Ieva et al., 2009; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010), the use of quantitative survey methods has been the most utilized methodology. Qualitative research providing in-depth inquiry into counseling students' experiences in group can provide the field of counselor education rich data to assist in choosing the most appropriate formats for facilitating the group process. It is even more crucial that research explore student experiences with alternative facilitation methods, such as having a doctoral student co-leader in addition to the course instructor, to provide new insights into the benefits and limitations of alternative approaches.

Purpose of the Study

Due to the lack of research in this area, this study employed a phenomenological qualitative study to explore the lived experiences of South-Central CACREP-accredited program counseling students in a co-facilitated experiential group. This study intended to uncover student experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and personal reactions to the experiential group process. The researchers examined the lived experiences of master's level counseling students in a group co-facilitated by a doctoral student and the group course instructor had over 30 years' experience in group facilitation. The research question that guided this phenomological study was: "What are the lived experiences of counseling students who participated in a professor/Ph.D. student co-lead group as part of graduate course requirements?" To answer this question, the following sub-questions were addressed:

a. What are the characteristics of a professor/Ph.D. student co-lead experiential group?
b. What are the attitudes and perceptions of counseling students towards the group facilitation process?

Methodology

Research Design

Researchers employed a phenomenological inquiry to assist the researcher in gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences (Patton, 2015). This approach was the best choice for this study as the phenomenological point of view emphasizes the importance of understanding what people experience and how they interpret the world (Patton, 2015). This provided the foundation for exploring the experiences of a group of people (counseling students) who have shared a common experience (experiential group) and examine any responses, reactions, feelings, change, challenges, or growth that may have emerged because of this experience. This study utilized a semi-structured interview question format to combine elements of both structured and unstructured interviews. The semi structured interview contains a pre-determined set of open questions while still allowing new ideas to be brought up and the interviewer to explore themes or responses further (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

Participants

This study included six master's level students who were recruited from a CACREP-accredited university in the southern United States. All participants were required to have successfully completed a nine week experiential group that utilized the course instructor and a doctoral student as group facilitators. Upon completion of the groups, all 17 students were invited to participate in the study. Of the 17 participants, 6 agreed to participate in this study. Six were female; all were enrolled in a master's-level group theory course in which the experiential group was required for course completion; with an age range from 24-39 with a median age of 27 years old. Four participants identified as Caucasian, one as African American and one Caucasian/Asian American. It was determined that the six study participants offered rich information and that saturation was met.

Research Team and Reflexivity Statements

The primary researcher was a doctoral candidate in a Counselor Education and Supervision Ph.D. program, she is also a Licensed Professional Counselor, and a Registered Play Therapist who has worked in mental health for 10 years. She identified as a cisgender Puerto Rican American female with previous experience facilitating groups. She was a participant observer as she also served as co-facilitator for the

groups. DeWalt et al., (2002) claim, “The goal of using participant observation as a research design method is to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomena under study that is as objective and accurate as possible given its’ limitations" (p. 92).

Procedure

After achieving approval from the University Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants of this study who previously had been enrolled in a Master’s level group counseling course and participating in required experiential groups were asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire, participate in a semi-structured open interview, and a follow-up member check interview. Archived journal entries were also used and analyzed for contribution of data collection for this study. Archival data was chosen to alleviate concerns students might have had as they currently participated in the group. Demographic information included questions regarding age, gender, level of education and information relevant to previous group experience. Semi-structured interview questions were targeted to gather information related to participants’ attitudes, perceptions, and reflections about their time spent as a group member and any reactions to the facilitation process. Participants were also asked questions related to the general experiences of being a group member, ethical dilemmas faced regarding the group leader(s), the structure and format of group, and individualized questions to gain deeper insight and understanding of the phenomenon.

The experiential groups were facilitated by a university professor who also served as the instructor of the group courses. This professor had advanced training and experience that qualified him as a skilled facilitator, with over 30 years of group counseling facilitation experience in the mental health setting and 25 years of experience as a counselor educator facilitating groups to counseling students. This researcher served as the co-facilitator of the experiential group. as a doctoral student with two years of licensed counseling experience and 10 years of experience working in the mental health field.

The experiential group was held for one hour and 15 minutes, once per week for nine total weeks. The class was split into two separate experiential groups, one meeting immediately before the Dynamics of Group Counseling class, and one meeting immediately following class. The group facilitators used person-centered and Gestalt techniques and interventions. The groups were focused on the here-and-now processes and participants were encouraged to discuss personal issues or dynamics occurring within the group. Participants in this study were pooled from both group sections.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness several steps were implemented such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checks and an audit trail to improve the validity and reliability of data collected. Since the researcher is considered the research instrument in a qualitative study, there is an increased need to include methods such as reflexivity to help reduce bias. The primary researcher kept a reflexive journal to document thoughts and feelings throughout the data analysis process to help identify and take note of any personal perceptions and issues of subjectivity that may have arisen as suggested by Cope, 2014.

Prolonged Engagement

The relationship formed between researchers and participants can increase the level of comfortability to disclose, which can be beneficial for both the researcher and the participants of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The researcher had already established rapport with participants from serving as the co-facilitator of the experiential groups, spending 9 weeks building trusting relationships with participants in the group setting and provided feedback to participants on weekly submitted journal entries. This provided a foundation of trust and helped to increase participant willingness to answer interview questions openly with this researcher.

Persistent Observation

According to Lincoln & Guba (2000), persistent observation is a technique used, "to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued" (p. 304). To be persistent in this study, this researcher explored details of the phenomena under study to a deep level through semi-structured interviewing to help decide what was important and what was irrelevant and focus on the most relevant aspects. Using this type of interview allowed this researcher to sort through participants' responses and follow-up with questions to achieve more depth in areas most relevant to the inquiry.

Triangulation

Semi-structured interviews, member check interviews, and participants' journal entries documented during the experiential group were used as a validity check for this study. Utilizing interviews, member

checks and journal entries also served as multiple methods of data collection for this study, and helped this researcher gain a clear and comprehensive view of the phenomenon.

Peer Debriefing

Researcher biases can be addressed during peer debriefing and any interpretations given can be clarified (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Peer debriefing was utilized using a doctoral committee member who also co-facilitated the groups being researched. The peer debriefer had a direct connection with the study in question as well as extensive experience with group facilitation and methods. They were chosen because of their familiarity with the research and to assist in comparing perceptions of the phenomena in question. A doctoral student in an experimental psychology program at the same university participated as an uninvolved outside auditor to help reduce unintentional biases. They were familiar with qualitative research methods and had experience conducting research with focus on group behavior.

Member Checks

The member check can be described as a research phase during which "the provisional report is taken back to the site and subjected to the scrutiny of the persons who provided information" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 236). Summaries and output of interview data can be shared with the participant who provided it to gauge for reaction, comments and clarity. After initial interviews were conducted, data was collected and analyzed by this researcher, and peer debriefed by the group co-facilitator and a colleague. Semi-structured member check interviews were then completed via e-mail. Participants who provided information and contributed to the research assisted in determining if this researcher accurately reported their stories, ultimately increasing the validity of this study.

Audit Trail

The credibility of a study can be established by allowing individuals outside of the research (auditors) to assist in examination of materials and methods analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For this study, an audit trail was created during the collection of materials and notes. Data analysis, process notes, and drafts of the final report were also examples of materials used to create this audit trail.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study was guided by Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method. This distinctive seven step process of rigorous analysis provides a concise and thorough description of the phenomenon under study, confirmed by the participants who lived it. In this study, these accounts came from face-to-face interviews, document collection of participant journal entries and member check interviews.

Using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method of descriptive phenomenological analysis, several significant statements and theme clusters were integrated to formulate an exhaustive description that assists in describing the phenomenon thoroughly. The primary researcher examined documents for rich data and extracted significant words and statements pertaining to the experience of participation in the experiential group process. A total of 271 significant statements were derived from 51 journal transcripts and 6 semi-structured interview transcripts. This researcher became familiar with the data through repeated review of each transcript, until a comprehensive understanding of the material had been achieved. The coding process included formulating meanings from all significant statements identified. Primary meanings were coded and grouped into separate categories as they reflect an exhaustive description. Cluster themes were then created through extensive review and grouped by relevance into seven cluster themes and coded with a descriptive thematic label. Cluster themes were examined further and grouped into four emergent themes that best described the overall meaning of the participants' lived experience. The peer de-briefer and outside auditor for this study reviewed coding categories and themes and found the process and corrections were made to ensure meanings were consistent.

Exhaustive descriptions were derived from the emergent themes. Through the process of analysis and merging of themes, the complete structure of the phenomenon of the lived experiences of counseling students in a co-facilitated group had been extracted, leading to the fundamental structure. A reduction of findings was executed during this stage, and any descriptions found to be misused or overgeneralized were eliminated from the overall structure.

The final step in data analysis was to validate the findings through member checks to help validate the analysis of data. The researcher returned the research findings as described by Colaizzi (1978), reviewing results with the participants. All participants expressed satisfaction with results and agreed the data conclusions reflect their feelings and experiences accurately. The following section gives a detailed description of this process and the results.

Results

Findings from this research revealed that counseling students who participated in an experiential group as part of graduate requirements showed significant growth across several domains including comprehension of the group process, a sense of trust and connectedness with other group members, an increase in self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and the development of professional skills for future practice. Four emergent themes arose from the analysis: Importance of Trust & Vulnerability, Movement through the Stages of Group, Development of Self-Awareness & Personal Growth, and Comprehension of the Group Process. The themes that emerged during the data analysis process provided the foundation to accurately reflect the lived experience of the participants of this study. Illustrating the emergent themes with significant statements and the formulated meaning can be seen in Table 1.

Importance of Trust & Vulnerability

The emergent theme of importance of trust and vulnerability was evident in the participant data. Participants shared about their hesitation to be vulnerable in the group and deciding on how much to disclose. Most of the participants mentioned how hearing others share allowed them to increase their trust in the group members, thus allowing them to feel more comfortable being vulnerable. One participant shared, “It was nice to hear others go into

their own insecurities, because it made me feel better about my own insecurities/helped connect me to others going through the same problems.” Examples of significant statements are shared in Table 1 to illustrate the formulated meaning that was derived from the data.

Emergent Themes	Significant Statements	Formulated Meaning
Importance of Trust & Vulnerability	*"I guess it kind of put me in that place of vulnerability as someone would be in the group, or in any group that I would run...so I kind of had more of an experience as a client more than just like a student"* (Participant 5290, Transcript I, Lines 4-8).	Exposure to the process of vulnerability as an experiential group member (Participant 5290).
Movement Through the Stages of Group	*I feel that there is a growing emotional bond, because of the shared empathy we have for each other. The mood or general atmosphere of the group has shifted, and the level of comfortability seems to be getting somewhat sustained* (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 4).	Increased sense of connectedness and group cohesion (Participant 3658).
Development of Self-Awareness & Personal Growth	*I think I can begin to let go of the cognitive distortions to be perfect, always win, or feel like a complete failure. Ah, THIS is why mindfulness is so important for me. It's a necessity of life. I need to practice it every day, for my own inner health* (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 5).	Self-awareness and reflection of personal issues and processing means for change (Participant 2522).
Comprehension of the Group Process	*"I liked how he would ask for clarification or elaboration when someone could have shared more.... I can already see myself implementing these skills in the groups I lead for my job. I am hoping to gain more confidence as a group leader by the end of this class as well"* (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 1).	Learning group techniques through modeling of group leaders (Participant 3664).

Table 1. *Emergent Themes*

Movement Through the Stages of Group

The second emergent theme was movement through the stages of group according to Corey, et al., 2022. The stages include initial stage, transition stage, working stage, and final stage. Group members expressed anxieties sharing and being vulnerable with group facilitators they do not know. The participants mentioned how the group experiences creates a sense of connectedness and reduces feelings of isolation. Group members expressed a sense of sadness and increased reflection on the group

experience and its overall impact and have not established a relationship of trust with. Examples of significant statements along with the formulated meaning and group stage are listed to demonstrate movement through the stages in Table 1.

Development of Self-Awareness and Personal Growth

Participants shared how through the participation in the group, they were able to increase their self-awareness. They mentioned how through hearing others in the group share their stories, it encouraged them to reflect on their own experiences. One participant shared, "I think that by participating in the group that I discovered more about myself and my peers than I had anticipated" (Participant 5290). Additional examples of statements along with the formulated meaning are listed in Table 1.

Comprehension of the Group Process

Group participants explained that through their participation in the experimental group, they were able to better understand the group process. Participants shared about their experiences of different group interventions led by the facilitator and how they were able to apply this to the overall group process. Salient participant statements are included with the formulated meaning in Table 1.

Yalom's Curative Factors

A final unexpected theme was also evident in the data as the group met Yalom's curative factors; instillation of hope, universality, imparting information, altruism, the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, development of socializing techniques, imitative behavior, interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness and catharsis (1995). Irvin Yalom (1995) defined eleven specific factors said to be curative components for individuals participating in groups. The curative factors are believed to occur in all groups, but their prevalence and effectiveness may vary depending on the groups' characteristics. Table 2 illustrates this theme with salient statements with each curative factor.

Curative Factors	Significant Statements
Instillation of Hope	*"It was something that had been on my mind and was intensifying as the weeks went on and I'm really glad I finally vocalized it"* (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 3).
Universality	*"It is great to know that I'm not alone, and that other people understand my troubles"* (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 5).
Imparting Information	*"I liked that the facilitators kept focus on one person but then would ask if they would want to hear from one person in the group...it was inclusive in that way"* (Participant 5290, Transcript I, Lines 33-39).
Altruism	*"I wanted to reach out and hug him or tell him he's always welcome to hang out with me"* (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 2).
The Corrective Recapitulation of the Primary Family Group	*"Something I can work on is possibly talking directly to my parents and sharing with them the feelings I'm experiencing currently (about my courses, future, and failing)"* (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 5).
Development of Socializing Techniques	*"I can reflect back on my group experience and think about how much I enjoyed getting to know my classmates!"* (Participant 5290, Transcript J, No. 9).
Imitative Behavior	*"Everyone just like willing to share made me more comfortable (to share)"* (Participant 9688, Transcript I, Lines 196-200).
Interpersonal Learning	*"I was able to process that a lot the anxieties I am feeling can be stemmed back to my fear of failing...This really gave me some perspective. I'm choosing to be this way, so I can just as easily choose not to be this way"* (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 5).
Group Cohesiveness	*"The more people opened up about their own personal things, I learned more about other people that made me comfortable to share"* (Participant 5290, Transcript I, Lines 82-84).
Catharsis	*"I'm really glad I finally vocalized it. Prior to Tuesday, I had mentioned it to a few people, but it was more cathartic for me to explore it in a controlled environment than casually over dinner or coffee"* (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 3).
Existential Factors	*"I need to figure out how to let things go, move on, go with the flow, etc. I know in my heart that I can't plan everything, but I just have this need to plan inside of me; this need to control things in my life. I want to be able to change the choices I have been making"* (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 7).

Table 2. *Examples of Participants 1-3 Experience of Yalom's (1995) Curative Factors*

Discussion

The first research sub-question was designed to identify the specific characteristics of a course instructor/Ph.D. student co-facilitated experiential group. Throughout this study, counseling students reflected on the structure of the co-facilitated groups, and provided feedback on the methods, approach, and interventions used throughout their experiences. Through the participants' rich descriptions, the characteristics of the groups were able to be recognized and described in this study. The course instructor/Ph.D. student co-facilitated experiential groups in this study were characterized by the focus on the present "here and now" processes occurring within the group. The group leaders utilized a non-judgmental, person-centered approach, and incorporated Gestalt intervention and techniques. Group leaders also utilized appropriate self-disclosure during the groups to help create a sense of trust and build rapport with counseling students.

The final research sub-question asked, what are the attitudes and perceptions of counseling students towards the group facilitation process? According to documented journal reflections and interviews, the counseling students in the experiential groups in question reflected a wide range of emotions and regard for the group facilitation process, but all reported it as a positive learning experience for both educational and personal growth. Participants in this study described the group facilitation process as a safe environment where they could disclose personal information, as well as an educational one, where they could watch skills demonstrated for their future use. While there were reports of initial apprehension for fear of gatekeeping, and feelings of mistrust for the co-facilitator, these attitudes quickly shifted as students moved through the group stages and became more comfortable and trusting of the process in general. This experience aligns with Corey's (2022) suggestion that dual relationships are not inevitably harmful or unethical, and with other research that describes the dual relationship as necessary to encourage personal and professional development (Osborn, Daninhirsch, & Page, 2003).

Findings were also presented in this study that went beyond this researcher's initial inquiry. Participants in this study simultaneously learned about the group process while experiencing the group, which suggests that the integration of both didactic and experiential modalities leads to the comprehensive understanding of the group process and experience of Yalom's (1995) curative factors of group.

Counseling students may be more open to the group experience because of the information learned in class about the potential impact of group therapy. Students' expectations of the outcomes of group may inadvertently influence their willingness to contribute and experience the group fully.

Additionally, this research study had unique characteristics within the experiential group that likely influenced the outcomes and findings of this study. Data was collected from two separate experiential groups that used the same facilitators. Since outcomes for participants across both groups reflected similar experiences, this suggests that group facilitation style and techniques are crucial to the overall experience and positive outcome of the experiential group for counseling students. The presence of a skilled group facilitator was likely a necessary component for students to be able to experience group stages and the curative properties of group. Outcomes in this study suggest a skilled facilitator is crucial to adequately facilitate a group experience that provides comprehensive understanding of group therapy and dynamics. Blisard (2023) concurred and emphasized that having a professor skilled in group facilitation co-facilitate was beneficial for meeting the objectives of group, especially in ensuring that students have the opportunity to gain self-awareness and observe skills in an actual group counseling environment.

Limitations

There are inherent limitations that exist in qualitative research. One limitation of this study is the length of time that passed between data collection periods. Journal entries were completed during the time of the experiential group, and interviews were completed one year and six months after the termination of the groups. Interviews conducted within a shorter duration of time after completion of the groups would have likely produced richer results and fostered greater memory recall from participants. The residual effects of the group may not have been as present or easily remembered by participants a year and a half after the experience had ended. Additionally, participants' sense of freedom and safety to share information may have been inhibited by the co-facilitator's presence as the interviewer.

The limitations of purposive sampling should also be considered when reviewing the findings of this study. Data in this study reflects the perspectives of a specific sample of individuals who volunteered to share their experiences. The perspectives and experiences are not representative of all students across all counseling programs who participate in an experiential group, nor does it represent the experience of individuals who chose not to participate in this inquiry. There were no male participants in this study,

and only two reported participants with diverse backgrounds. Including more participants with diverse cultural backgrounds and sexual identities would likely influence data outcomes and overall experiences.

Recommendations

Counselor Education

While there is a consensus that the inclusion of the experiential group is necessary for group learning, there is much debate over using the course professor as the group facilitator since it creates an inevitable dual relationship (Davenport, 2004; Zhu, 2018). The concern over the dual relationship has been discussed extensively in the literature and even debated whether it is ethical for a professor to take on this dual relationship, in part, due to the sensitive nature of the disclosures made by students in the group process. Participants in this study reported a mix of feelings regarding the dual relationship. While some participants presented initial fears of remediation or judgement from the course instructor, there were also several accounts of feeling more comfortable with a facilitator they already knew and had a relationship with. Some participants even expressed feeling more comfortable with the professor than the co-facilitator because of their pre-existing relationship. Similar to participants in a study by Ohrt et al., (2013), participants in this study also expressed value in the process of conceptualizing group because they had a more skilled leader facilitate their own group experience. This study found that participants considered the group facilitators' knowledge and skill in group process to be a positive contributor to their overall group experience.

Participants in this study indicated that a dual relationship can be a potential barrier to vulnerability within group, but also demonstrated that students may learn to navigate this process in a way that facilitates personal and professional growth. The dual relationship experienced by these participants aligns with Corey's (2022) view that the dual relationship imposes inherent risks but is not harmful or unethical. The lived experiences of this study's participants support the idea that the dual relationship between counseling students and educators is necessary to encourage personal and professional development (Osborn et al., 2003).

Another implication for counselor educators is the ethical responsibility to assume the role of gatekeeper even when acting as group facilitator. Counselor educators must use their clinical and professional judgement to appropriately screen students that may need remediation to work on problem areas and prevent harm to potential clients. The dual role of counselor educator and group facilitator presents an

increased potential for conflict as students may share issues in the group setting that call for remediation or gatekeeping (Goodrich & Luke, 2012). In this study, some participants expressed a fear of disclosure of personal information for fear of judgement and/or remediation. As with other anxieties and fears about the group experience, this fear appeared to diminish over time as self-disclosures and trust increased. Another important factor may have been related to the fact that students were encouraged to be only as open as they were comfortable. Many participants indicated their appreciation for this approach and noted that they felt they were not forced to share as part of a course grade. It may be beneficial for group facilitators and counselor educators to set this precedence in the beginning phases of group and communicate honestly about the role of gatekeeping and how it relates to the group experience.

Although there were no significant gatekeeping or remediation issues during this study's observation of groups, there were some disclosures that warranted encouragement for continued process through individual therapy and referrals were made as needed. Counselor educators must adhere to the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), which calls for the close monitoring and evaluation of counseling students and to remediate those that lack professional competence. If a situation calls for remediation, the group facilitator may benefit from having a co-facilitator present to staff issues and help reduce subjective bias.

To encourage sharing, Berg, Landreth, and Fall (2017) suggested that a doctoral student, under the supervision of a faculty member, should lead the experiential group. The groups in this study used a doctoral student and a faculty member as group facilitators and found that it not only impacted sharing, but also created an increased opportunity to observe and monitor for potential issues. While the doctoral student as a group facilitator was under no obligation to gatekeep/remediate students, it did allow for continued reflection of the dynamics occurring within the group and further review of potentially harmful situations. Alternatively, if an inexperienced doctoral student was to facilitate an experiential group alone, there may be areas of concern that might be missed due to a lack of experience in screening for gatekeeping issues. Blisard (2023) also emphasized concern regarding the variance in skills of doctoral students solely facilitating groups as they be unable to consistently meet the group objectives and offer an effective group experience for masters students. A recommendation for co-facilitation or mentorship by a skilled facilitator is recommended to reduce these risks.

A thorough review of literature has found that there are few in-depth inquiries that recommend specific facilitation practices in group that produce positive learning outcomes (Ieva et al., 2009). This study may assist counselor educators when considering best practices for the facilitation of the experiential group. Facilitators in this study used person-centered and Gestalt therapy approaches throughout the group

process. Techniques integrated in both experiential groups were purposeful and relevant to the group members' experiences, and not utilized for the sake of demonstrating a technique found in the course text.

Much like the CACREP programs polled in Armstrong's (2002) study, the groups in this study also emphasized here-and-now techniques, present moment processes, and encouraged members to participate in self-disclosure throughout the group experience. Techniques and interventions were organically demonstrated and incorporated at the facilitators' discretion, based upon the needs of group members expressed within the group context. For example, a modified version of the empty chair technique, a technique used in Gestalt therapy, was incorporated into a group session to help a member practice a potential conversation with her mother about an issue that she had chosen to process with other group members. Based upon the positive feedback from counseling students in this study regarding the group experience, it may be beneficial for counselor educators to consider implementing techniques utilized in this study or consider structuring their programs' experiential component similarly.

Future Research

The findings of this study provide descriptive data that can be used to guide future areas of research. Expanding this research may lead other researchers to construct new hypotheses and formulate theories to enhance the field of counselor education. Various areas of continued research relevant to this study are listed below.

The inquiry in this research study did not specifically address how the phenomenological experience in the experiential group may vary due to the group leaders' theoretical orientation and implementation of specific techniques. While the leaders in this study utilized mostly existential, person-centered, and non-directive approaches, there may be a significant change in participants' experience had facilitators used more directive modalities such as solution-focused, cognitive-behavioral therapy, or behaviorist theories. Future research could examine a specific counseling theory and determine if outcomes were similar to this research or varied due to the counseling approach factor. A study exploring the specific interventions and theories used may assist counselor educators in knowing which theories produce the greatest learning outcomes. Other variables to consider that may have impacted the results of this study include the ages, gender, sexual orientation, and race of participants. Future studies may repeat this inquiry, while sampling for a more diverse group.

While there are many studies that focus on the experiential group, there is a lack of inquiry into the benefits and outcomes of the use of co-facilitation methods for these groups. Since there is limited research on the experience of counseling students' participation in a co-facilitated experiential group, replications of this study would be a noteworthy contribution to the literature. Cross-comparative analysis may be a helpful methodology for studies building on this research to examine differences and similarities between co-facilitated and individually facilitated experiential groups.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of counseling students who participated in an instructor/Ph.D. student co-facilitated group as a part of a graduate course requirement. The four emergent themes were as follows: Importance of Trust & Vulnerability, Movement through the Stages of Group, Development of Self-Awareness & Personal Growth, and Comprehension of the Group Process. Results of this research provide a deeper understanding of counseling students' experiences in a co-facilitated experiential group and offer recommendations for counselor education programs.

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Statements and Declarations

Conflict of Interests

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

Author Contributions

Kristi Perryman was the qualitative research specialist on the committee, assisting with design as well as peer debriefing. She also assisted with cutting the dissertation and editing for an article. Hailey Frost Thomas updated all literature and made significant edits.

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