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Counseling Masters Students' Personal Growth Group Experience

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Abstract

Participating in and experiencing a counseling growth group is a process that is required in all CACREP-accredited counseling programs. Existent literature suggests that multiple variables may impact participants' learning in growth groups, and call into question the effectiveness of such groups. Overall, the majority of the research (Barnette, 1989; Hogg & Deffenbacher, 1988; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) implies that growth groups have the potential to produce meaningful and positive outcomes; however, there are gaps in the literature that do not address the direct experiences of individuals in growth group (Berman & Zimpfer, 1980; Goodrich, 2008). This article presents research that utilized phenomenological methodology to explore the experiences of 13 counseling masters' students who participated in a growth group as part of their degree requirements. Data were collected through individual interviews and focus groups. Eight themes emerged from the analysis in regard to group process and setting. Awareness gained by participants relevant to the perceived purpose of the group, as well as qualities of effective group leadership, was also examined.

Keywords: group counseling, qualitative analysis, phenomenological

Counseling Masters Students' Personal Growth Group Experience

A considerable amount of research has been conducted on the growth group process and the use of groups in educational settings in the last 30 years. Multiple names for these small groups exist such as interpersonal process groups (Hoekstra, 2008), growth groups (Gladding, 2008) and sensitivity training groups (Berman & Zimpfer, 1980). For the purpose of this study, the term growth group will be used. A growth group is one in which the members are given the opportunity to explore and develop personal goals related to awareness of feelings about self and others, improve interpersonal communications, and assess personal values (Masson & Jacobs, 1980). Berman and Zimpfer (1980) defined growth groups as a small group process designed for psychologically "normal" participants where the focus is on the interpersonal relations among group members and improvement of interpersonal functioning. Gladding (2008) simplified the definition by stating that the group's emphasis is on personal development.

Literature Review

Group work in general is designed to foster a sense of belonging and to create a climate that supports individual growth (Corey & Corey, 2006). Yalom and Leszcz (2005) discussed the importance of group cohesion and how this cohesion can lead to individual stability of group members and greater acceptance and approval within the group. Previous research notes several benefits of growth groups: a) increased self-actualization (Barnette, 1989), b) increased self-esteem, c) decreased depressive thinking among college students (Hogg & Deffenbacher, 1988), and d) increased ethnic identity development (Rowell & Benshoff, 2008). In addition to these documented benefits, Carkhuff (1971) believed that training programs specifically focused on student growth are more likely to achieve this outcome than are programs lacking this particular

focus. As an extension of Carkhuff's views, all counseling programs that are accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) require that students complete a growth group as a part of their academic experience. In addition, the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) also supports enhancing growth and awareness within counselor training through the use of group work (ASGW, 2007).

In order to better understand the impact that growth groups have on counseling master's students, it is necessary to understand their experiences in such groups. Ieva, Ohrt, Swank and Young (2009) explored how counselors-in-training make meaning of their personal growth group and how they perceived the experience of being a group member. The three themes that emerged from their study include: a) personal awareness and development; b) professional development; and c) programming, suggesting their experiences assist in meeting several of the goals of counselor trainees. One potential limitation of their study is that participants received credit towards a course requirement in group counseling, possibly influencing their feedback in the interviews. In an earlier study, researchers utilized natural inquiry in order to understand how students take their experiences from participating in a growth group, and use it in their preparation as counselors (Kline, Falbaum, Pope, Hargraves & Hundley, 1997). This particular qualitative study addressed the benefits of group members gaining transferable skills as an outcome of their growth group experience. The acquisition of these benefits was also linked to participation in the group setting. Even though the researchers did not facilitate the specific growth groups that these particular participants experienced, the researchers previously facilitated other sections of growth groups. Therefore, feedback and participation of the group members could have inadvertently been influenced.

Luke and Kiweewa (2010) also explored the experiences of counseling master's students who participated in a growth group by examining their required journal entries. Findings from their grounded theory study provide support for self-examination and introspection as outcomes of successful growth group experiences. As stated in the researchers' limitations section, the course instructor reviewed the participants' journal entries, potentially limiting the trainees' ability to fully express their growth group experiences. In sum, recent studies on growth groups contribute to data on the overall essence of students' perspective of their experience when participating in these groups.

Research has identified multiple variables that have the potential to influence the growth group experience. Examples include: a) the type(s) of group and period of time meeting (Johnson & Johnson, 1979), b) the importance of preparation (Laux, Smirnoff, Ritchie, & Cochrane, 2007), c) the facilitation of enduring changes after growth group (Berman & Zimpfer, 1980), d) group participation (Kline et al., 1997) and e) effective leadership of growth groups (Anderson & Price, 2010). In a grounded theory study exploring personal growth and awareness of 14 master's level counselor trainees, four systemic levels emerged from the data (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010). The effects of the facilitator emerged in the fourth level, named *Supragroup*, which specifically encompassed facilitator interventions. Participants commented on specific facilitator interventions as having the potential to be both helpful and hindering. A few examples of helpful interventions included not filling the silence, pushing members to share, and providing specific topics for group members to discuss. Decreased structure as the group progressed had mixed reviews among group members, as some group members appreciated the freedom, yet others felt lost with the lack of structure. Finally, feedback involving bringing in a process observer was seen as hindering the group process. Another study using a mixed-methods

approach also found the specific personality characteristics of the facilitators a contributing factor in the group's climate (Lennie, 2007). Along those same lines, group leadership can also play an important role in the effectiveness of a growth group. In examining interpersonal process groups in a behavioral setting, Hoekstra (2008) points out specific group leadership skills, such as flexibility, genuineness, and the ability to shift with the group process as key proficiencies. In regards to facilitator impact, Anderson and Price (2001) found that approximately one third of their 98 research participants had some trepidation concerning dual relationships and privacy concerns when involved in an experiential group. As a follow-up to their research, Anderson and Price (2001) recommend assessing how different levels of instructor involvement might affect students' learning in group settings.

As the aforementioned research has outlined, the leader can have a significant impact on the experience of group members. Another key ingredient of effective growth groups includes the level of clarity regarding the purpose of the group. Masson and Jacobs (1980) state that the clarity of purpose in the group is one of the key points of a successful group and that the group leader is responsible for clarifying the purpose of the group to the group members. This purpose also gives a framework of what will be occurring in group so members will know what to expect (Hoekstra, 2008).

Rationale

Overall, the majority of the evidence implies that growth groups have the potential to produce meaningful and positive outcomes. The most effective way to gain awareness of growth group outcomes, and to inform best practices, is to capture the voices and experiences of the growth group members themselves. In 1980, Berman and Zimpfer pointed out a gap in the existing research, stating that future research should include data on the experiences of persons

in growth groups and the impact of their environment. Since then, there have been a few key studies that have used qualitative methods to explore the experiences of counseling master's students who participated in a growth group (Ieva et al., 2009; Kline et al., 1997; Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010). These studies have enriched the available literature and have assisted scholars and practitioners in obtaining a better understanding of participants' varied experiences. However, some researchers agree that further exploration is needed in order to understand students' perceptions of their growth group experiences and how their experiences can contribute to gaining a better understanding of both self-awareness and group process (Goodrich, 2008; Kline, Falbaum, Pope, Hargraves & Hundley, 1997). The specific viewpoint from the phenomenological tradition is that multiple realities from group members exist and are relevant in our research (Hays & Wood, 2011). Therefore, this study seeks to increase the understanding of such multiple realities and add to the literature on this topic. Thus, the purpose of this study is to further the knowledge and understanding of group process by including the voices and perceptions of group members regarding their experience, and to ascertain the overall essence of counseling master's students' perceptions of their growth group experience. This study is an extension of a pilot study that examined the overall perceptions of counseling master's students on their growth group experience at a large CACREP accredited comprehensive university in the Southeast. The pilot study revealed the need for further exploration into understanding group members' experiences in growth group.

Paradigms/Traditions

The qualitative tradition used for this research study was phenomenology. The phenomenological tradition was utilized in this study because of its natural similarity with the field of counseling. Specifically, understanding information about client experience is a large

part of practice as a professional counselor (Hays & Wood, 2011). As Patton (2002) noted, phenomenology is the essence of the meaning of an individual's lived experience. Further, the phenomenon in this study, the essence of the human experience regarding growth group, was described by each participant (Creswell, 2009). Using a constructivist framework, the purpose of this phenomenology is to understand the lived experience of counseling master's students' participation in a growth group, thus the focus is on experience and perception of the phenomenon. Ontologically, multiple perspectives on students' experiences in growth groups exist. These experiences were investigated and individual and collective meanings will be presented (Moustakas, 1994). Epistemologically, knowledge and meaning concerning growth group experiences were constructed through a dynamic interaction by both participant and researcher (Creswell, 2009). The axiology of social constructivism states that there is an emphasis on shared values and influence on the setting (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, in order to understand the experiences and perspectives of students' participation in growth groups, the data must reflect the participants' voices and describe both the role of the researcher as well as the setting.

Research Question

In a phenomenological research design, the primary research goals are to "...describe the meaning or essence of participant experience of a phenomenon" (Hays & Wood, 2011, p. 289). This design is useful when a phenomenon has been identified by researchers and when there are participants that can provide descriptions and perspectives related to their own experience of this phenomenon (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2001). Furthermore, "...the purpose of phenomenological research is to address questions that pertain to a lived experience in which answers can be derived from participants who have lived through that particular experience"

(Christensen & Brumfield, 2010, p136). Thus, research questions that seek straightforward and mindful experiences from each participant are essential (Hays & Wood, 2011). Developing a set of research questions "...aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the person's experience" and that guide the interview is an important method in a phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). The core research question that remained "...viable and alive throughout the investigation" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105) is as follows: What are counseling masters students' overall perceptions of their growth group experience? Guiding questions under this core research question included: (a) What were growth group participants experiences of their group leader? (b) What do students perceive to be the purpose of their growth group experience? (c) What effects, if any, do students reflect on multiple semesters after their growth group experience?

Methodology

Procedures

Students who were currently enrolled in a counseling master's program and had completed growth group within the past three semesters were recruited for their participation in this study. Participants were recruited through an e-mail including the parameters and purpose of the study. All participants, a total of 21 counseling master's students, had participated in a growth group within the past three academic semesters. Fifteen participants replied to the e-mail and indicated their preference of days and times available to participate, thirteen of which reported for participation at the agreed upon date and time. Assignment to participate in a focus group or an individual interview was ultimately decided by the dates/times each participant indicated through availability. For example, if multiple participants indicated a similar date/time, those participants ended up in a focus group together. Upon scheduling a meeting

time and place, each participant signed a consent form, which also outlined their consent to be videotaped during their participation; a demographic questionnaire was then completed by all participants. The demographic questionnaire included questions that focused on prior counseling experience, current work setting, and clinical interests, in addition to age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Either an individual interview consisting of 12 guiding questions, or a focus group consisting of seven guiding questions, was conducted (See Appendix A & B). Additional questions were also asked to gain an understanding of participants' diversity and aid in the conceptualization of multicultural implications. The interviews and focus groups took place over a three-week time period. Transcription, completed by an outside individual, occurred after all interviews and focus groups were completed. After all interviews were transcribed, each participant had the opportunity to review their transcript for accuracy and to make corrections, if necessary.

Ethical Considerations

Proper procedures for research utilizing human subjects were followed, including obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was solicited from each participant, each of whom was provided with the following: 1) an explanation of the purpose of the research, 2) the expected duration of participation, 3) a description of relevant procedures, 4) foreseeable risks and benefits to participation, 5) an explanation of confidentiality, 6) a description of the incentive, 7) researcher contact information, and 8) reiteration that participation was strictly voluntary, specifying the option to discontinue participation at any time with no penalty.

Participants and Context

Criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to identify participants who had completed a growth group in the last three academic semesters. For the purpose of recruitment, the authors used the CACREP (2009) definition of a growth group, which includes a group of counseling master's students consisting of between 5-8 members who come together for a minimum of 10 scheduled hours over one semester. The growth groups in the current study were facilitated individually by a counseling doctoral student. The growth group was not connected to a course or an instructor, minimizing concerns related to confidentiality and dual relationships. Participant interviews and focus groups took place in a secure room at the university that is typically used for counseling sessions to ensure privacy.

Participants for this study consisted of 13 individuals who were currently enrolled in a master's counseling program. Polkinghorne (1989) suggests sample sizes of 5-25 in phenomenological designs, while Creswell (1998) recommends 8-10. Conversely, Wertz (1985) suggests that 1-6 participants may be adequate. Thus, because our number of participants was in the upper end of the ranges provided by other scholars, the researchers felt that 13 participants were sufficient for this design. Of those participants, 12 identified as female and one identified as male. Three participants identified as African American and ten identified as White/European American. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 31 years with a mean age of 24 ($SD = 3.11$). All 13 participants identified as heterosexual. When asked about religious/spiritual orientation, five individuals indicated Christian, two indicated Buddhist, and six indicated Other. With regards to group experience, nine participants indicated they had taken a graduate course related to groups/psychoeducational groups, one participant indicated he/she had completed undergraduate course work in groups/psychoeducational groups, one participant indicated both graduate and undergraduate coursework in the area, and two participants indicated no previous academic

training in group work.

When asked if the participants had experience leading a group, five individuals indicated *yes* and seven indicated *no* (one participant failed to respond). When asked if participants had personal counseling experience, 10 participants indicated experience in individual counseling and two indicated no experience (one participant failed to respond). With regards to program of study, six participants indicated school counseling track, six indicated clinical mental health track and one participant indicated college counseling track.

Researcher Team

The primary researchers who conducted this study were two White/European-American females. Both researchers had training in qualitative methods and had participated in other qualitative inquiry prior to the current research. In addition, both researchers indicated first-hand experience with and knowledge of the topic being studied, as both had participated in a growth group during their master's program and facilitated growth groups during their doctoral studies.

This prior experience by both researchers lends itself to potential bias on the researcher's behalf; however, these beliefs were discussed prior to and throughout the duration of the study, as is suggested by phenomenological design. Epoche process, or bracketing ideas, is important for this and other phenomenological studies in that prior experience, biases, understandings, and perceptions could influence the interview (Moustakas, 1994). As such, the previous experience has been acknowledged and bracketed for this study. An example of information that was bracketed and put aside was the researchers own personal experiences with growth group as a member and as a facilitator.

Data Sources

Qualitative researchers often employ multiple means of data collection in an effort to enhance credibility (Newsome, Hays, & Christensen, 2008). Typically, phenomenological research primarily relies on individual interviews. However some researchers also use focus groups in addition (Christensen & Brumfield, 2010). Accordingly, the data sources included in this study were five one-on-one interviews, and three focus groups. The aim of the interview was to encourage each participant to describe his/her own experiences and impressions of growth group as a counseling master's student. Focus groups allowed for multiple perspectives from members who have shared a similar experience but who possess unique perspectives, which can provide new thoughts and ideas for researchers concerning the growth group experience.

Focus group interviews. Participants were a part of either a focus group or an individual interview. The focus group interview consisted of up to three individuals led by one of the two researchers, with a total of three focus groups. Sample focus group questions included: 1) What was your overall experience in your growth group? 2) What do you think was the purpose of growth groups? 3) Describe the dynamics between group members and the group leader? 4) What impact, if any, do you believe growth group has had on you? 5) What feelings arise when you think about your growth group experience?

Individual Interviews. Individuals whose schedules conflicted with focus group times were interviewed individually. A total of five individual interviews were conducted. Sample individual interview questions included: 1) How would you define growth group? 2) Describe the purpose of this growth group experience? 3) Tell me to what degree the purpose was achieved? 4) What impact, if any, do you believe growth group has had on you? 5) If I were to sit in on a group session what would it look like? 6) What feelings arise when you think about your growth group experience?

Data Analysis

Phenomenological research calls for the interpretation of the experiences of participants through four major steps. Throughout this process, phenomenological researchers continually review and analyze the data (Christensen & Brumfield, 2010). The first step in phenomenological research is bracketing. Furthermore, in order to capture initial impressions and aid in understanding the essence of participant experience, the researchers met after each individual interview and focus group to discuss, bracket, and make memos about initial impressions. In order to capture non-verbal cues, focus groups and individual interviews were videorecorded. In one instance during an individual interview where a video recorder failed, audio recording was used. The interviews were then transcribed by an outside source. In accordance with phenomenological design, each experience is considered as a distinct and unique element that is particular to a study participant. "Overlapping or redundant statements are identified and reduced. The product of this reduction is the formation of textural and structural descriptions" (Phillips-Pula, Strunk, & Pickler, 2010, p. 68). Thus, the researchers independently examined all transcripts of both focus group sessions and individual interviews to identify all non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements in a process called horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). Next, in a process called textural description, the researchers grouped information together based on meaning units in order to describe the multiple meaning and depth of the phenomenon being examined (Moustakas, 1994). Meaning units is a descriptive term that contains specific meaning relevant to the study. The final step in a phenomenological design involved conceptualizing meanings and essences by clustering them into themes (Moustakas, 1994). Accordingly, the researchers met multiple times to group information based on meaning units and to cluster those units into themes. The researchers then collapsed the resulting five

codebooks to reach eight final themes with respect to the participants' experiences.

Strategies for Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the credibility and validity in qualitative research. Strategies for trustworthiness were used in order to eliminate bias and strengthen the study as a whole. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), ensuring credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness. Increasing credibility and interval validity was addressed through prolonged engagement and member checking. Prolonged engagement by the researchers in terms of experience with the setting and context of the study assisted in establishing and maintaining rapport among the participants. Member checking was also incorporated into the data collection and analysis to ensure the participant's voices were accurately portrayed and to increase credibility. Data triangulation was established by using multiple data sources, both individual interviews and focus groups, in order to strengthen the study (Patton, 2002). The use of multiple methods compensates for the limitations of any one method in isolation and enhances the respective benefits of each method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The codes were also triangulated by looking at both the process of the group experience and the individual experience of each participant. In addition, simultaneous data collection and analysis occurred to increase the study's dependability, as well as thick description to assist with transferability and credibility of the study. Finally, an extensive audit trail, which is a systematic method used to document the evidence, phases, and interpreted data, was gathered and gave great detail to the steps taken throughout the process of the research study.

Results

Participants' experiences in growth groups were varied. However, after bracketing, horizontalization, identifying meaning units (textural description), and creating a structural

description, eight major themes were constructed with respect to the participants' experience.

These themes were: 1) conceptualization of growth group, 2) growth group experience, 3) group format/structure, 4) impact on self, 5) feelings associated with experience, 6) facilitator impact, 7) conflict dynamics, and 8) ideas for improvement.

Theme One: Conceptualization of Growth Group

This theme primarily captured participants' personal definitions and conceptualizations of growth group, and encompassed four meaning units: a) *Personal development*, b) *Building relationships*, c) *Introduction to group experience*, d) *Unknown/unaware*.

In regards to the *personal development* meaning unit, many individuals discussed that their conceptualization of the purpose of growth group was to encourage personal growth and development. One participant stated, "So, I kind of got the feeling that it was more about growth. It was about understanding yourself." A focus on others was the second meaning unit of *building relationships* that was noted in participants' responses, in which the concept of meeting people and 'building relationships' emerged multiple times.

The third meaning unit associated with the first theme is *introduction to group experience*. Participants' responses referred to having the experience of being in a group, learning about group stages, and observing the group leader. One participant stated "It was supposed to help us kind of get an idea of what being in a group feels like and you know at least kind of see some of the stages of being in a group." The fourth and final meaning unit in conceptualization of growth group was *unknown/unaware*. The responses in this unit outlined participants' lack of conceptualization or lack of definition for growth group. Responses containing variations of "unknown," "unaware," "don't know," and "lacked a purpose" were coded under this final subcategory.

Theme Two: Growth Group Experience

Negative to positive, *insignificant*, and *awareness* were all meaning units that made up the second major theme of growth group experience. *Negative to positive* encompassed participant responses that focused on initially associating negative feelings with growth group, but ending with a positive experience. One participant stated:

Well at first I was like why are we doing this? You know like what is the point? This is just extra time. It was like, okay this is a requirement and we aren't getting credit for it. And a lot of other people were saying stuff like that so it kind of rubbed off. There were just a lot of negative feelings going into it, so unlike a lot of people I was like "ohh its okay." I only had one class at the time so it wasn't that big of a deal. But I felt like everyone, the group as a whole at the end was almost like in love with the group. They loved coming in and having, kind of like an escape from classes and from studying, and just a way to vent. And finding out... For me personally it was great...

The second meaning unit in the theme of growth group experience was *insignificant*. Responses that elicited this meaning unit were responses that referred to participants' being bored, having "too much technical and surfacy stuff" in group, and having the group feel "redundant," as if participants were "just treading water." Other participants reported simply having a neutral experience.

Awareness was the third and final meaning unit that made up the second theme. This unit included participant responses detailing increased awareness of self and others, as well as multiple responses indicating a sense of enhanced multicultural competency. One participant discussed the latter: "It kind of increased my patience for um not really those who are different,

but for those who are different not in the cultural aspect of it all but I guess in the behavioral aspect it.” Another student discussed tolerance:

I have more tolerance for those people in my classes. Because I think that if I didn't have growth group then there wouldn't be a tolerance for one or two people that I wouldn't have had. And think that it's good because some people can come off, like they said that I came off very aggressive, and a girl said that she learned a lot from me because she realized that I wasn't that way. Umm and I learned that she could come off very judgmental, and she doesn't mean to be judgmental it's just the ignorance of certain things coming from wherever whenever. And that's a part of opening up my tolerance. ...and learning about people and where they come from because it helped me gain a better understanding of their perspective.

Theme Three: Group Format/Structure

Two meaning units of *structure* and *setting* were present in this major theme. Responses that discussed structure and agenda were included in the structure meaning unit. Structure was noted multiple times. A few participants noted that the structure was constricting and stated that the group felt forced when there was a set agenda by the facilitator. It was noted that there was too much structure and too much agenda present. Other participants noted that the groups had no agenda and they would prefer more structure. Information regarding format and setting of group, such as room conditions or time group was held, was coded under the *setting* subcategory. One participant noted that the setting was unimportant to the experience while others indicated the setting was “too cold,” the time was not convenient and that time boundaries were not respected.

Theme Four: Impact on Self

This theme entails two meaning units: *self-exploration/growth* and *understanding group dynamics*. *Self-exploration/growth* describes the impact growth group had on the participants in regards to self-exploration, growth, challenge, and personal development. For example, many participants noted that self-exploration and growth were important aspects of growth group, and one participant shared her personal challenge within herself in this regard:

I opened myself up and I shared. And even if I was a little uncomfortable with another person, I didn't say 'oh, I can't go anymore and just do it next semester.' I kind of stuck it out, and I was proud that I stuck it out until the end. I think I played a pretty active role. Another comment addressing the personal challenge aspect states "You get out what you put in."

Understanding group dynamics was the second subcategory and encompassed participants' responses related to growth groups, academic classes on groups, group dynamics, and stages of group. Participants noted that by having the growth group experience, they were better able to understand groups in general. For example, one participant noted:

I didn't know about the group process and I wasn't aware of the group dynamics... I wasn't aware of the dynamics that were occurring. It was like a fresh look. And then once I had group I understood it and I was able to look back and be like 'oh that's when that happened and that's when that happened.'

Another participant further illustrated this concept with the following quote "I didn't really appreciate growth group until I got into group [class]."

Theme Five: Feelings Associated with Experience

The two meaning units making up this main theme are *positive* (noting positive feelings) and *negative* (noting negative feelings) associated with growth group. Many positive feelings

were shared. Negative feelings were also shared. Participants' stated positive and negative feelings are displayed in Table 1.

Theme Six: Facilitator Impact

This theme addressed the impact of the group facilitator on group members and the experience itself. Three meaning units of *positive impact*, *no impact* and *negative impact* were noted. *Positive impact* encompassed responses that discussed how the role of the facilitator influenced the growth group experience in a positive manner. Participant responses suggested that the relationship with the group leader impacted the overall experience. For example, participants that connected with their group facilitator tended to have more positive experiences and discussed growth group in a beneficial light. One participant stated:

I mean being in different groups from afterwards I realized how influential she [the group leader] was. Because I have had groups since then where I didn't really care for the group leader and it really affected if I participated and how much I really shared.

Another positive impact was noted when a participant shared:

She [the group leader] made me feel really comfortable. She was really at ease and she was very warm and welcoming. I think that I identified more with her than the other people in the group. So she helped make me feel just more comfortable and able to warm up to everyone more easily.

The meaning unit of *no impact* was acknowledged when participants stated that there was "no effect" and when participants noted no particular connection with the group leader. *Negative impact* was coded when participants discussed their relationship or feelings toward their group leader in a negative way (e.g., trust in group process/group leader, issues with surface-level talk, and structural concerns). When participants discussed how conflicts were handled, one

participant stated that a particular conflict was not talked about in group and was instead discussed outside of group by group members. She stated "I don't think that my facilitator would have been comfortable confronting it. She was very non-confrontational." Additional negative impacts in terms of trusting the group facilitator were noted in another participant's comments:

Some people were frustrated that she would call people out or that she would call on people, because that wasn't like what we learned for a group to be. It was like when you feel like sharing you share. The fact that she would make everyone have a turn, I know that people didn't like.

Another participant noted that she felt the facilitator "helped to facilitate our surface level" and this was also noted as a negative impact.

Theme Seven: Conflict Dynamics

Conflict dynamics referred to conflict during the growth group process and how conflict was handled in the group. *Interpersonal* was the first meaning unit of this theme, and noted participants' responses to internal conflict arising during the growth group experience. The second meaning unit was *ignored*, which refers primarily to conflict that was brought up during group and was ignored by the group members and facilitator within the group setting. One participant describes conflict as follows:

There was one girl in our group who was very like...umm...she was off-putting and kind of aggressive. We didn't really handle it. Some of the members emailed the facilitator to say like something needs to be done, because she would say inappropriate comments or someone would cry and she would laugh like it just didn't flow very well. Umm... and I don't know if somebody talked to her, but we all saw that she kind of just settled down.

Like I don't know if somebody did talk to her or if she just realized what was going on or maybe that was just her resistance, I'm not quite sure, but it did get better.

In another example:

People just shut up and stopped talking about it kind of thing. We just kind of nipped it in the bud; it wasn't really worked out, I guess the people just didn't really wanna talk about it anymore or resolve it in the group.

The third meaning unit was conflict that was *handled by group*. This category included responses that discussed the group members handling the conflict within the group setting. Responses indicated multiple conflict dynamics and various ways these were addressed according to the participants in the current study.

Theme Eight: Ideas for Improvement

Participants noted ideas for improvement throughout their interviews or focus group sessions. When asked, "If growth group could have been perfect, what would it have looked like?" participants noted several ideas. These ideas represented the meaning units of *increased participation*, *common focus/topic*, and *structure*. Participants' responses that suggested more participation or participation from everyone were extracted into the meaning unit of *increased participation*. Having a *common focus/topic* addressed having a chosen topic to guide the groups. One participant stated, "...actually having a topic or something to work on like maybe I know we are all masters' students but that's not really a topic - that's not really a focus."

Additionally, another participant commented:

All the groups I have either participated in or lead in certain situations it's all been about some other type of shared experience or a common topic ...and it seems much more productive because there is a purpose behind the group and yeah, I felt like that was

definitely lacking- the shared experience of being in a master's counseling program was not enough to have something meaningful to discuss.

The third meaning unit in this theme addressed structural concerns. *Structure* has been a meaning unit for other major themes but in this example, the essence of structure was noted as a way to improve the experience. Some participants noted that having additional structure and activities would be beneficial, while other participants indicated the opposite. The latter can be demonstrated in the following quotation: "I just wish that it was more like in our moment as opposed to what she wanted to structure." This last theme of ideas for improvement can inform growth group facilitators regarding ideas that could be beneficial when participating in growth groups.

Discussion and Implications

As previously noted, many variables shape participants' perceptions of growth groups, making the effectiveness of such groups difficult to measure (Berman & Zimpfer, 1980; Johnson & Johnson, 1979; Lightsey, 1997). Over thirty years ago (Berman & Zimpfer, 1980) and again more recently (Goodrich, 2008), there was a call in the field for future research to include qualitative data on the experiences of persons in growth groups. Therefore, this study sought to examine the overall perceptions of counseling master's students on their growth group experience at a large CACREP accredited comprehensive university in the Southeast. The purpose of this study was to further the knowledge and understanding of group process and outcome by including group members' voice and perceptions of their experience in growth group. In addition, this research aimed to provide a better understanding of the impact of the group leader, the purpose of growth groups, and any lasting effects of growth groups on the 13 participants included in this study.

The initial theme of *conceptualizations of growth group* was comprised of four meaning units: *personal development*, *building relationships*, *introduction to group experience*, and *unknown/unaware*. The researchers hypothesize that the meaning unit of *personal development* adds to the existing research on gains in self-actualization (Barnett, 1989). This unit addressed understanding self, learning about self, and developing personally, thus relating to self-actualization.

In regards to the second major theme of *growth group experience, negative to positive, insignificant*, and *awareness* were the meaning units making up this major theme. *Negative to positive* and *insignificant* units may provide counselors/group leaders, and counselor educators with ideas of what to consider when planning a growth group. *Awareness* was the third and final meaning unit making up the major theme of growth group experience, and included responses detailing increased awareness of self and others, supporting previous research findings (Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Ieva, Ohrt, Swank & Young, 2009), as well as multiple responses related to multicultural competency. *Group format/structure* was the third major theme that emerged. Captured in this theme were the two meaning units of *structure* and *setting*. When considering interpersonal process groups, Hoekstra (2008) discussed specific group leadership skills, such as flexibility, genuineness and the ability to shift with the group process, as key proficiencies. Participants who noted a constricting group structure and an agenda that felt forced aligned with Hoekstra's findings. Furthermore, Peterson (1979) noted that group leaders who are less initiating when it comes to structure are found to be less desirable. This concept was present in the current study when participants who reported no group agenda indicated that they would have preferred more structure.

Impact on self, the fourth major theme had two meaning units: *self-exploration/growth* and *understanding group dynamics*. The researchers hypothesized that this *self-exploration/growth* unit may enrich the literature on self-actualization (Barnett, 1989), as well the literature on self-awareness (Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Ieva, Ohrt, Swank & Young, 2009). *Understanding of group dynamics* seemed to contribute to the current participants' perspectives of group, and may aid in further understanding of the literature on growth group experiences. In terms of sustained effects, it was clear that all participants noted effects (whether positive or negative) of their growth group experience regardless of when growth group occurred. Although researchers did not examine specific responses related to enduring changes, it is hypothesized that the inclusion of individuals from growth group over a period of a three-semester span in the current study was sufficient in this regard.

The fifth major theme was extracted from participants' descriptions of *feelings* associated with the growth group experience. The two meaning units of *positive* and *negative* feelings associated with growth group increases our understanding of the multiple perspectives and feelings that may be associated with this particular experience at any given time. The researchers found it important to note that there were more positive feelings offered from participants than negative (see Table 1).

Facilitator impact was the next theme, containing three meaning units: *positive impact*, *no impact*, and *negative impact*. Consistent with other research (Anderson & Price, 2001; Peterson, 1979; Yalom, 2005), the current study supported the notion that group leaders have significant impact on the performance of the group. However, this impact can be negative or positive. Positive impact was noted in multiple participant responses that suggested an interpersonal connection with their group facilitator. These individuals tended to have more

positive experiences and discussed growth group to be beneficial. Similarly, another aspect of this study aligned with previous research in that critical or uninvolved counselors (negative reactions to counselor) were found to hinder the group process (Doxsee & Kivilighan, 1994).

The themes of *conflict dynamics* and *ideas for improvement* may add to the current research on participants' experiences of growth group. Information offered by participants can provide counselors/ group leaders and counselor educators with useful information on ways to improve and enhance the growth group experience for students. This information, particularly conflict dynamics, can also aid in further understanding group processes and dynamics, and can be further explored in group process classes while drawing from students' growth group experiences.

Limitations

Limitations of the current study included having only one opportunity for individual and focus group interviews. Perhaps with multiple focus groups and more than one individual interview for participants, additional themes could have emerged, providing further information. Experimenter effects were another limitation in the current study. It is unclear what effect the experimenters exerted in this study and on these particular participants. However, previous research indicates that experimenter effects tend to be minimal. Responses affected by social desirability or group think may have been another limitation.. The researchers further note that participants in this study may have been less likely to share personal stories due to a rumor that emerged within the program regarding having their group course grade impacted negatively based on what was shared in their growth groups. Another limitation concerns the participants' self-selection for taking part in this study, as well as the fact that participation in a focus group or interview was ultimately determined by the dates and times participants indicated availability.

Furthermore, Bird (2005) noted that transcribing one's own data assists in the researcher staying absorbed and engrossed in the data. Thus, a final limitation to take into consideration is the use of an outside transcriber.

Future Research

Future research could include a larger sample, as participants from the same region may have had similar growth group experiences and may share similar ideas related to the group. Future research could also include a more diverse sample of participants, as the sample was limited in terms of diversity. Having multiple focus group sessions and multiple interviews per person could also allow for saturation and could be a focus for future research on growth groups. Additionally, further research is needed that specifically examines the sustained effects of growth groups over time.

Conclusion

The current study sought to expand the current literature on the experiences of counselor education graduate students in growth groups. This study may contribute to existing research, offering additional data related to the perspectives of counseling master's students' in their growth group. This study furthers the notion that growth groups may have the potential to produce meaningful outcomes and address a gap in the literature regarding the direct experiences of individuals in growth group.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Individual Participants

1. How would you define a growth group?
2. Describe the purpose of this growth group experience? Tell me to what degree the purpose was achieved.
3. What impact, if any, do you believe growth group has had on you?
4. If I were to sit in on a group session, what would it look like?
5. What feelings arise when you think about your growth group experience?
6. Tell me about a time when there was conflict? How, if at all, was conflict handled?
7. Describe the dynamics between the group members and the group leader?
8. What role, if any, did your group leader have on your experience in the growth group?
9. What role, if any, did you have on your experience in the growth group?
10. What role, if any, did the setting (time/place/environment) play a role in the groups

effectiveness?

11. If your growth group could have been a perfect experience, what would it look like?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add that we did not cover?

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Focus Group Participants

1. What was your overall experience in your growth group?
2. What do you think was the purpose of growth group?
3. Describe the dynamics between group members and the group leader?
4. What impact, if any, do you believe growth group has had on you?
5. What feelings arise when you think about your growth group experience?
6. If your growth group could have been a perfect experience, what would it look like?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add that we did not cover?

Table 1

Feelings Associated with Experience

Subcategory	Feelings
Positive	Supportive
	Fond Memories
	Community Feel
	Comfortable
	Nostalgia
	Calm
	Appreciative
	Funny
	Happy
	Enjoyable

	Loving
	Interesting
	Proud
Negative	Awkward
	Frustrating
	Waste of time
	Annoying
