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

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

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Counselor Education

by

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Abstract

Research in the fields of experiential learning, group psychotherapy, and neuroscience has supported the inclusion of the experiential group in counseling training programs due to the potential for positive impact on students’ personal and professional development (Badenoch & Cox, 2010; Denninger, 2010). Investigations exploring counseling students’ experiences of the experiential group have been primarily limited to quantitative studies, while in-depth qualitative inquiry has been minimal. Additionally, an extensive review of the literature has found there have been no qualitative studies examining experiential groups co-facilitated by a course instructor and a doctoral student. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of counseling students in a co-facilitated experiential group. Counseling students in a South Central CACREP-accredited program were purposefully selected as participants for this study, based on the criteria of membership and successful completion of a 9-week experiential group facilitated by the course instructor and a doctoral student. This study utilized qualitative methodology to permit in-depth inquiry into and understanding of this phenomenon. Results of this research may provide a deeper understanding of counseling students’ experiences in a co-facilitated experiential group. This study may also offer a rationale for best practices in the facilitation of the required group experience in counseling training programs.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation was fulfilled only with the love, encouragement and endless support from the following very special people.

I would like to start by thanking my committee who advised me along the way of this exciting journey. Dr. Higgins, who served not only as my chair, but as my supervisor, advisor, professor, and most importantly, my friend. Your positive attitude and relaxed sense of being was a constant inspiration for me to not take myself so seriously and a reminder to enjoy every moment of every day, even while writing a dissertation.

To Dr. Blisard, who also played multiple roles in my life as co-facilitator, committee member, professor, co-teacher, and part-time comic relief resource. Thank you for always showing me the lighter side of things while being humbly skilled in everything you do. I am truly grateful to have witnessed your talent and skill of group facilitation, as this dissertation would not have been possible without your incredible abilities as a clinician. I am still in awe of the gifts you have as a counselor and strive to uphold your standard of group leadership every day.

Dr. Perryman, the velvet hammer, thank you for guiding my research methodology, but most importantly for all the other wonderful experiences you have brought into my life. You have acted as my supervisor, friend, mentor, professor, motivator/coach. Somehow you had the energy to fill all these roles while always pushing me to do better and strive for more.

Dr. Grover, for helping me narrow down my methodology during this proposal, for always having an encouraging smile on your face, and for calling me “doctor” before I even deserved it. Your energy is truly contagious.

Dr. Wakefield, for encouraging me to pursue my doctorate degree when I still had not even conquered the task of completing my master’s degree. Thank you for always believing in
me and providing me with the guidance and positive encouragement to go for it. You are a continued blessing in my life and in the lives of so many others.

Dr. Ramey, although not on my committee, you provided so much support and knowledge that you didn’t have to give, yet you always did. Your kind words kept me going.

Also, a very special thank you to Jack Norrell, for opening my eyes to the beauty of the process of therapy, and for being such a great role model of what an empathic and skilled clinician should look like.

To my participants in this study, thank you for your time, patience, and most of all, for your vulnerability. Your openness to experience an experiential group in the first place is admirable, but to continue your exploration of the depths of what it all meant is remarkable. Thank you all for taking your time out to help a hopeful doctoral student.

To my friends, co-workers, colleagues, and confidants. Thank you for the countless times you have listened to me complain, stress, and whine about “needing to write”. Thank you for always suggesting time for fun and giving me much needed breaks in my process. Your time and encouragement did not go unnoticed.

To my love, Cody, thank you for being there before this process, somewhere in the middle, and most importantly, in the end. You have provided me the unconditional love, support, and accountability that I never knew I needed to press forward with my goals of completing this dissertation. Thank you for your tender heart and endless belief in me in all things. I am incredibly blessed to have had you walk through this journey with me and for all journeys to come.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all the students who don’t think they have time to pursue a doctorate and enjoy the life they have always wanted. It is possible to do it all. My advice to you is to travel, make time for friends, family, work, and fun. Your dissertation will be there when you are ready for it and the rewards of making time to incorporate balance in your life will be so worth it.

Most importantly, this dissertation is dedicated to the strongest, most resilient woman I know, my mother. Thank you for your unwavering support and belief that I can do anything I set my mind to. You have modeled a spirit of strength and determination that I can only hope to achieve and pass on to my future children. Without your guidance, I would not be half the woman I am today. I hope this dissertation may reflect the extraordinary sacrifices you have made to provide me the life you always believed I could have.
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Chapter One: Introduction and Overview

Background

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). The experiential training component most often utilized within counseling programs is known as the experiential group. The experiential group can be defined as a therapeutic group, usually lasting several weeks, where students participate as active members and can process personal issues through self-disclosure (Merta, Johnson, & McNeil, 1995). Members are encouraged to share and process safely in the group with the assistance of a trained group facilitator. Experiential groups tend to focus on participants’ own experiences and attend to processes occurring within the group (i.e. here and now). A major goal of the experiential group is for members to seek and achieve some form of personal growth or change, either explicitly or implicitly (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

The teaching of group counseling skills through experiential methodologies has long been supported by proponents of group psychotherapy and experiential learning theories. Through membership in an experiential group, counseling students are exposed to several dimensions of the group process that promote interpersonal skill development and encourage personal and professional growth (Kline, Falbaum, Pope, Hargraves, & Hundley, 1997). Researchers have even suggested that supervised practice and participation in an experiential group provides the most comprehensive development of group counseling skills (Corey, 2016). Recent findings within the disciplines of neuroscience, interpersonal neurobiology, and
neurocounseling have provided additional support for the experiential group in counseling training. Studies have suggested that significant neurobiological changes may occur because of group membership such as increases in neuroplasticity, reformation of implicit memories, activation of mirror neurons, and neural integration (Badenoch, 2009; Badenoch & Cox, 2010; Schermer, 2010; Siegel, 2007).

CACREP-standards require counseling programs to fulfill 10 clock-hours of experiential group experience, but do not provide recommended best practices for how to facilitate or structure the group (CACREP, 2016). Merta, Wolfgang, and McNeil (1993) and Shumaker et al. (2011) found that there are more than five different approaches being used in the facilitation of the experiential group experience across counseling training programs. The facilitation approach found to be most often used is the group course instructor as the group facilitator, which may present ethical dilemmas due to the complex nature of the dual relationship. Counseling training programs have adopted methods such as including a doctoral student as a co-facilitator to help alleviate ethical risk, but research exploring the outcomes of these groups has been limited. An extensive review of relevant literature found several studies investigating counseling students’ attitudes and perceptions of the experiential group, but none have specifically targeted students’ experiences in a co-led group that uses a doctoral student and the course instructor as the group facilitators.

Statement of the Problem

CACREP-accredited counseling programs emphasize the importance of the experiential group in the training of future counselors but leave the decision of how to implement the experiential component at the discretion of the course instructor or the university (Anderson & Price, 2001). While various facilitation methods are used throughout counseling programs,
research has shown that most experiential groups are led by the instructors of the course, which presents inherent ethical dilemmas such as dual relationships and issues regarding confidentiality and gatekeeping (Anderson & Price, 2001; Merta et al., 1993). Research has been primarily focused on the quantitative collection of student self-reports regarding their reactions to the required experiential group, while qualitative studies on this topic have been profoundly minimal. Furthermore, there have been no reported qualitative investigations that specifically examine students’ experiences in a course instructor and doctoral student co-facilitated experiential group.

**Significance of the Study**

There are many contributing factors that warrant in-depth examination of counseling students’ experiences in the experiential group. The ethical dilemma of the dual relationship and general lack of uniformity in facilitation of the experiential group give reason to investigate students’ experiences within these groups. It is the hope that data may be collected in this area to provide additional insight and rationale that can assist counselor educators with the most appropriate and ethical implementation of the experiential group experience. Moreover, recent advancements in group psychotherapy and neuroscience suggest profound impacts for experiential group members which makes new data imperative to help support these findings.

There appears to be a significant deficit of qualitative research focused on exploring the student experience in a co-facilitated group. Qualitative investigation is necessary to gather information-rich data regarding counseling students’ experiences in the required experiential group and may even assist in the comprehensive understanding of the phenomena that presents through membership in an experiential group. Qualitative methodology provides researchers the ability to obtain detailed information and insight that may go undetected using traditional data
analysis techniques (Lawrence & Tar, 2013). Although qualitative studies cannot determine or confirm neurobiological processes in the brain, they can provide support for established research by confirming experiences said to be a result of group participation that elicit neurobiological changes.

This in-depth study was designed to extend the literature through qualitative exploration of counseling students’ experiences in a required co-facilitated experiential group. This study aims to provide a greater understanding of the phenomenon of student participation in an experiential group and to establish variables for future quantitative research. Results may contribute to the field of counselor education, neuroscience, and group psychotherapy by providing increased understanding of the impacts that experiential groups can have on counseling students as group members. This research may also provide counselor educators with information regarding learning outcomes and shed light on ethical dilemmas and challenges that may present during the group experience. It is the hope of this research to provide relevant data to help aid future decisions regarding best practices for facilitation and implementation of the experiential group in counseling training programs.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was 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.
Research Questions

Through this study the following research questions will be explored:

1. What are the lived experiences of counseling students who participated in an instructor/Ph.D. student co-facilitated group as part of graduate course requirements?
   a. What are the characteristics of an instructor/Ph.D. student co-facilitated experiential group?
   b. What are the attitudes and perceptions of counseling students towards the group facilitation process?

Definition of Terms

Several terms are used often in this study and are defined as follows:

1. Co-Facilitator: A group therapy leadership structure in which two therapists are partnered to facilitate meaningful interactions among group members (Kivlighan, London, & Miles, 2012).

2. Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP): An independent agency recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation to accredit master's degree programs in Counseling and doctoral degree programs in Counselor Education (CACREP, 2016).

3. Counseling Students: Students who are enrolled in a university to obtain a higher education degree in counseling that will result in the ability to work as a licensed counselor upon completion of course and supervision requirements.

4. Experiential Group: A training component in which students self-disclose and work on personal issues relevant to their groupwork (Merta et al., 1995).
5. *Experiential Learning:* The process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984).

6. *Gatekeeping:* The ethical responsibility of counselor educators and supervisors to monitor and evaluate an individual’s knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions required by competent professional counselors and to remediate or prevent those that are lacking in professional competence from becoming counselors (CACREP, 2016).

7. *Group Counseling:* Emphasizes interpersonal communication of conscious thoughts, feelings, and behavior within a here-and-now time frame. Tends to be growth oriented in that the emphasis is on discovering internal resources of strength (Corey, 2016).

8. *Group Facilitator:* The therapist leading the group whose primary function is to create an accepting and healing climate in the group. The group leader can facilitate the group process through actions such as active listening, linking, creating a non-judgmental and safe space, and providing support and encouragement (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2018).

9. *Interpersonal Neurobiology:* A scientifically-grounded theory developed by Allan Schore (2003) and Daniel Siegel (2015) to illuminate how relationships shape the brain throughout the lifespan. Interpersonal neurobiology holds that we are ultimately who we are because of our relationships, and because the mind is defined as a relational process that regulates energy flow, our brains are continuously rewiring themselves (Schore 2003; Siegel, 2015).

10. *Neurocounseling:* The integration of neuroscience into the practice of counseling, by teaching and illustrating the physiological underpinnings of many of our mental health concerns (Russell-Chapin, 2016).
11. *Neuroscience:* Neuroscience is the study of how the nervous system develops, its structure, and what it does. Neuroscientists focus on the brain and its impact on behavior and cognitive (thinking) functions (Nordqvist, 2017).

12. *Self-Awareness:* an inwardly focused evaluative process in which individuals use reflection to make self-comparisons to reality and the feedback of others (Steiner, 2014).

13. *Self-Efficacy:* People’s beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning and other events in their lives (Bandura, 1991).

Definitions have been provided to ensure uniformity and understanding of these terms throughout the study. This researcher developed all definitions not accompanied by a citation.

**Summary**

This study was designed to provide understanding and insight into counseling students’ experiences in a required co-facilitated experiential group. This chapter detailed a brief introduction of the background for the research, statement of the problem, purpose, and significance of the study. Research questions, definition of commonly used terms, and potential limitations of the study were also provided.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

To provide a broad scope of relevant literature, several databases were accessed to retrieve articles. The key terms “group counseling”, “counselor education”, “experiential groups”, “group facilitation”, “interpersonal neurobiology”, “neurocounseling”, and “counseling students” were used to gather the resources necessary for a review of related literature through *Ebsco Academic Search Premiere, ERIC, ProQuest Direct, Proquest Dissertations and Theses*, and *PsycINFO*. The following chapter will provide an in-depth discussion on the foundations of group therapy, including group process and stages, neurobiological implications, application to counselor training, and ethical concerns and dilemmas. Relevant research related to student attitudes, perceptions, and experiences regarding the experiential group are also presented. Implications for future research are noted, referencing the lack of qualitative data on counseling students’ reports of their experiences in a required co-facilitated experiential group.

Experiential Groups

Group therapy became a formal practice in the field of psychology during World War II (Fehr, 2003). The goals and process of group therapy have continued to evolve since its’ introduction in the early 20th century, resulting in the creation of various subtypes and categories adapted by counseling disciplines. In this review of literature, the specific type of group identified is the experiential group. Experiential groups are small groups in which the primary object of attention is the ongoing interpersonal communication process (Cohen & Epstein, 1981). The term experiential is derived from the concept of experiential learning. Experiential learning can be defined as, “The process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Moreover, “An experiential group is a learning method through
which trainees are educated about group dynamics via a direct encounter” (Markus & King, 2003, p. 207). Authors cited in the literature may refer to these groups as: “Experiential process groups”, “Process groups”, “Interpersonal process groups”, or “Experiential growth groups”. For the purposes of this research, groups will be referred to as experiential groups.

According to Yalom & Leszcz (2005), 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, vulnerability, conflict and acceptance. A well facilitated experiential group can create a safe and confidential environment where members can receive multiple perspectives, support, encouragement and feedback from other individuals. Experiential groups also help participants examine the interpersonal communication and relationships that occur between group members. 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). As vulnerability and trust increases within the group, members may begin to move through the group stages and start to fully understand the group process.

Experiential groups focus on encouraging members to discuss and explore the thoughts and feelings they experience within the present moment (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Techniques such as “staying in the here and now” draw attention to the immediate process occurring within the group, which strengthens group growth and development (Corey, 2016). According to Yalom (1995), a pioneer in group therapy, eleven specific factors are curative and influence change and recovery for group participants. The eleven curative factors include: Installation of hope, universality, imparting of information, altruism, corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, development of socializing techniques, imitative behavior, interpersonal learning,
existential factors, catharsis, and group cohesiveness (Yalom, 1995). 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 in a group. The facilitation methods and behaviors of the group leader greatly influence 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).

**Stages of Group**

Although there are more than 100 reported models of group development, many researchers believe that development transpires in stages or phases (Hill & Grunner, 1973). Corey (2016) has developed one of the most widely utilized descriptions of group stages which include the initial stage, transition stage, working stage, and the final stage. Every stage embodies various group characteristics, leader and member roles and tasks, and addresses concerns and/or issues that may arise specific to each stage.

The first stage of group process as described by Corey (2016) is the initial stage. It is during this phase of group that members become familiar with the group process and each other by expressing fears, expectations, hopes, and by determining whether the group is a safe place they can be vulnerable. Acceptable behaviors are also decided by group members during this stage through the process of attending to the reactions of the group facilitator(s) and other members (Steen, Stokes, & Vannatta, 2014). Due to the vulnerable state of the group during this stage, it is imperative that the group leader facilitate an atmosphere of trust. This environment can be created in many ways such as through the demonstration of empathy, active listening, and establishing a present and active role in the group (Corey, 2016).
Corey, Corey, & Corey (2018) describe the transition stage, which immediately follows the initial stage, as characterized by feelings of anxiety and defensiveness. Members in this stage may express resistance and even hostility towards the group leader and other members, thus fighting the group process (Steen, Stokes, & Vannatta, 2014). There may also be significant changes in group member behaviors, dependent on what issues of conflict or hostility present during this phase. This stage tends to be highly uncomfortable for group members, and may lead to some members becoming more silent or withdrawn while others may attempt to dominate or control the group (Tuckman, 1965). Group members must be willing and able to deal with their own resistance towards the group process in order to advance to the next stage.

After successful navigation and resolution of conflict during the transition stage, the group ideally moves on to a more productive stage of group process and development, also known as the working stage (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2018). This stage is titled for the meaningful and deeper exploration that can occur within the group. The working stage is known for facilitating an increase in interpersonal relationships within the group, which can also be characterized as group cohesion (Tuckman, 1965). The process of working through initial feelings of resistance transforms the group into one where group norms, standards, and roles are established. During this stage, group members also become actively engaged with one another and show the ability to solve group issues. Group norms that were established in earlier stages continue to develop and are further solidified during this stage. Members become more aware of facilitative behaviors during this stage, which contributes greatly to the process of experiential learning and the comprehension of group dynamics (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2018). A major feature of the working stage is that members may start to fear the inevitable termination of the group and could potentially resist change due to this factor.
Corey (2016) describes the last stage of group as the final stage. During this stage, members consolidate what they have learned and face the reality of termination and the ending of the group experience. This phase of group may be particularly difficult for some members, and responses may manifest in behaviors such as: resistance, conflict, or even early termination of group. One of the tasks of the final stage of a group is for facilitators to assist members in openly expressing their reactions to the group process and discussing what they hope to continue working on after termination of the group. Group facilitators may also help members put into perspective what they have learned during the group experience (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2018). The final stage of group serves as an opportunity for members to give and receive feedback to one another, which helps them assess the impact they have had on others during the group experience.

**Experiential Groups and Neuroscience**

One of the most important evolutions of group counseling and training has been the integration and adaptation of neuroscience into counseling practice, also referred to as neurocounseling (Montes, 2013). Scientific findings in disciplines such as neuroscience and interpersonal neurobiology support long-standing counseling theories’ perspectives on the positive benefits of group therapy. The experiential group has been found to create a favorable environment that can promote self-regulation, reformation of implicit memories, brain-wide neural integration, and overall calming of the limbic system (Alerbini & LeDoux, 2013; Badenoch & Cox, 2010; Schermer, 2010; Siegel, 2007). It is necessary to include neuroscience research when exploring the impacts of the experiential group, as it assists in making therapeutic outcomes in group measurable and physiologically-based (Russell-Chapin, 2016).
Experiential group members often disclose personal experiences and memories within the group setting. A group is considered a safe and regulated environment when members can share their personal experiences and receive empathic understanding and support from other members and facilitators (Corey, 2016). This type of therapeutic setting may also help to regulate the intensity of uncomfortable or implicit memories (bodily sensations, behavioral impulses, emotional surges, perceptions of safety or danger). When group members disclose and uncover implicit memories, they can begin to access to their own calm inner state because of the regulated environment of the group through processes such as reconsolidation and the alteration of implicit coding (Alberini & LeDoux, 2013; Badenoch, 2008; Siegel, 2015).

According to Schiller, LeDoux, Monfils, and Phelps (2013) when implicit memories are accessed, they are susceptible to change, and a new experience can then be created. Future recall attempts of the implicit memory retrieve the changed information, which is also known as the process of reconsolidation. Reconsolidation provides the capacity to respond to memories in a flexible and adaptive manner and allows for changes in memory strength. Reconsolidation can occur in the group setting when a member accesses a traumatic memory that causes a heightened physiological arousal response and an increased level of intensity of the memory. After accessing the memory in the safety of the group and receiving empathic and validating responses, the memory may then be changed to one that leads to less arousal and can weaken the intensity of the original memory (Alberini & LeDoux, 2013). A secondary theory of memory reconsolidation discussed by Badenoch & Cox (2010), relies on the assumption that it is likely that implicit memories in the neural networks of other members will be triggered through group disclosures, fostering an empathic and safe space to hold difficult feelings such as pain and fear. This recreation of experiences and implicit memories may also lead to permanent alteration of
implicit encoding. Once implicit memories have been replaced with new associations formulated within the group setting, change and healing may occur. As members continue to change implicit memories throughout the group experience, the capacity for self-regulation increases and creates an overall calmer autonomic nervous system (Badenoch & Cox, 2010).

Research has suggested that the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) and the process of neural integration may also play significant roles in the regulation of the autonomic nervous system during the group experience. Since the ACC has connections to both the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex, it has become a distinctive area of focus in understanding psychopathology and neural integration’s influence on affect regulation (Stevens, Hurley, & Taber, 2011). Siegel (2009) describes neural integration as the process of connecting areas of the brain that link the social, somatic, brainstem, limbic and cortical systems together. Gantt and Badenoch (2013) explain:

Observing our own minds and the minds of others builds a layer of processing via increased integration between certain aspects of the prefrontal cortex and limbic regions, creating a broader perspective, increased bodily and emotional regulation, and a sense of confidence and stability, often followed by increased compassion. (p. 2)

During neural integration, the limbic system grows calmer and internal and behavioral reactivity decreases, while the capacity to maintain calm increases. This allows for a safe and therapeutic environment where continued experiences can emerge within the group (Badenoch, 2008). A group facilitator that is familiar with the neuroscience that occurs during the release of painful experiences may assist members in understanding and making meaning of these experiences through the explanation of the brain’s healing process of self-regulation through integration (Badenoch & Cox, 2010).

The Polyvagal Theory also supports this theory with a neurobiological model that explains how social behaviors, as displayed in group therapy, may serve as a regulator of
physiological activity (Porges, 2003). Cranial nerves known as special visceral efferent pathways form the neural substrate of a Social Engagement System (SES) that provides the neural structures involved in social and emotional behaviors. Porges (2003) explains how the system functions:

The SES has a control component in the cortex (i.e., upper motor neurons) that regulates brainstem nuclei (i.e. lower motor neurons) to control eyelid opening (e.g. looking), facial muscles (e.g. emotional expression), middle ear muscles (e.g. extracting human voice from background noise), muscle of mastication (e.g. ingestion), laryngeal and pharyngeal muscles (e.g. vocalization and language) and head turning muscles (e.g. social gesture and orientation). Collectively these muscles function as filters that limit social stimuli and determinants of engagement with the social environment. (p. 506)

Research exploring the field of neuroscience and brain functioning has become increasingly important in identifying the complex processes that occur in the body during intense and heightened experiences of emotional arousal (i.e. group therapy). As research advances, counselor educators may include the neuroscience data to help students better understand that the human brain and body are constantly working together to create healthy or dysregulated states of being (Russell-Chapin, 2016).

Another neurobiological phenomenon that researchers claim becomes activated during the experiential group is the process of sending and receiving mirror neurons between group members. The frontal lobes are believed to house the experience of empathy and are also considered responsible for production of specialized cells in the cortex known as mirror neurons. It has been suggested that mirror neurons can pick up another person’s movement, emotional state and intentions, which makes group members particularly vulnerable to others as they experience these elements in session (van der Kolk, 2014). If the group facilitator is aware of the concept of mirror neurons and translates this to members, they may be better able to attend to their own regulation and maintain a safe environment where members are free to be vulnerable.
and met with empathic understanding from the facilitator and members (Badenoch & Cox, 2010). It is important to note that members may share common positive implicit experiences that mirror neurons react to which are expressed through the experience of feelings such as empathy, compassion, and understanding. Additionally, negative implicit experiences can also be shared which may illicit undesirable feelings such as: abandonment, shame, terror, and grief.

Group facilitators have been encouraged to teach group members about nervous system responses to increase motivation and efforts to keep the group space safe (Badenoch & Cox, 2010). As group facilitators and members become more aware of the biological effects that occur with revisiting trauma, sharing memories and being vulnerable, they may also become more aware of their own responses and reactions towards others within the group. Increasing the group’s knowledge of the processes of the brain may assist with creating an environment of hope that even difficult and longstanding struggles can eventually be resolved (Gnatt & Badenoch, 2013). According to Badenoch (2008) and Siegel (2006), as group members learn about their brains, they may begin to have a paradigm shift in thinking about their issues as neurobiological rather than a deficit in themselves or in their motivation, also referred to as explicit awareness. Once this shift in thinking occurs, brain-wide neural integration can then take place (Seigel, 2006). Through the implementation of neurocounseling within the experiential group and in counseling training programs, students may come to understand the structure of the autonomic nervous system and create groups that promote safe environments to encourage regulation and integration for all members (Badenoch & Cox, 2010).

**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 one academic 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. 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, Corey, & Corey, 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, 2005). 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. Furthermore, experiential groups may promote counseling students’ social and cognitive maturation through group 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). Yalom (1995), a leading clinician and researcher of group therapy, advocated for student participation in an experiential group. He suggested that through group membership, counseling students would experience, emotionally and individually, what they had learned through didactic training. According to McGeehan (2001), emotions are the
gatekeepers to learning and require a safe emotional climate that begins with positive
relationships among instructors, group facilitators, and students. While counseling students
actively engage as participants in an experiential group, they will likely be exposed to a
significant amount of heightened emotional states. The experience of intense emotions resulting
from group membership can aid students in the development of knowledge to later call upon
when leading their own groups.

Research has also continued to support the use of experiential groups in the training of
future counselors because of positive outcomes such as increases in students' levels of self-
efficacy. Bandura (1978) defined self-efficacy as, “The judgment of what one can do with
whatever skill one possesses” (p. 391). Young, Reysen, Eskridge, and Ohrt (2013) studied the
influence of groups on students’ levels of self-efficacy and found that participation in an
experiential group resulted in a significant increase in students’ beliefs in their competence and
abilities to set and achieve personal goals. Additionally, Ohrt, Robinson, and Hagedorn (2013)
examined the impact of experiential groups on students’ development of empathy, self-efficacy,
leadership skills, and the experience of therapeutic factors in comparison with psychoeducational
groups. This study discovered that participants in the experiential groups sustained higher levels
of catharsis, insight, and increases in self-efficacy than those participants from the
psychoeducational groups.

The methods and techniques implemented by the group facilitator(s) during the
experiential group has also been found to have a substantial impact on student members’ changes
in self-efficacy. Researchers Ieva, Ohrt, Swank, & Young (2009), revealed that students who
participated in an experiential group viewed group facilitators as role models demonstrating
appropriate leadership skills and techniques. Students in this study reported that the process of
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. Research and investigation of the experiences of counseling students in the experiential group remains imperative to help counselor educators make more informed decisions regarding facilitation methods and in determining the most ethical practices.

**Ethical Concerns**

Although there are numerous benefits of the experiential group in counseling training programs, there are also significant ethical concerns that necessitate additional inquiry. A major source of disagreement between counselor educators stems from the complex nature of the required experiential activity and the ethical concern it presents when instructors facilitate these groups (Davenport, 2004; Goodrich, 2008). This ethical dilemma also presents as it relates to the practice of gatekeeping. As course instructors who serve as group facilitators become more aware of students’ personal issues, they could potentially be influenced in the gatekeeping decision process. Consequently, problematic behaviors may arise during the group experience, which puts instructors and facilitators in an ethical bind of how to appropriately address these issues (St. Pierre, 2014). Further investigation into the student experience of the experiential group may provide increased insight for counselor educators who are facing the dilemma of how to ethically facilitate a group experience.

**Dual relationships.** The dual roles of the instructor as both group leader and course evaluator, also referred to as the “two hat” problem (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), appears to be the most significant ethical dilemma in the required group experience in counselor education (Osborn, Daninhirsch, & Page, 2003). There has been much debate about whether the nature of
the dual relationship violates the American Counseling Association’s (ACA) code of ethics (Davenport, 2004; Lloyd, 1990), or whether instructor contribution through dual roles enhances learning and provides an additional opportunity to monitor student skill development (Anderson & Price, 2001; Merta, Wolfgang, & McNeil, 1993). Another problem related to the dual relationship of the course instructor as the group facilitator is the potential loss of objectivity in dealing with a student who is also a group member. This ethical concern addresses the misuse of trust in the group relationship as well as in the faculty-student relationship. Counselor educators may even be at risk for committing an ethical violation if the educator allows the disclosures of information within the group to interfere with their objectivity when evaluating the student academically (Goodrich & Luke, 2012). Since the experiential group experience is facilitated by the group course instructor in many programs, this requires counselor educators to become more cognizant of ethical quandaries such as dual relationships, confidentiality, and competency that inherently exist due to the nature of the dual role of instructor and facilitator (Anderson & Price, 2001; Merta et al., 1993).

A frequent point of discussion in this ethical dilemma is related to the appropriateness of instructors’ access to counseling students’ private disclosures as they are shared in the group setting (Ieva et al., 2009). Faculty members may be privy to personal information about their students simply because of a required course component (Goodrich & Luke, 2012). This causes debate of ethical principal of how likely it would have been for the faculty member to have access to the students’ personal information had they not been required to participate in the experiential group. The vulnerable position of the counseling student is apparent, as there is a significant power differential that exists between instructor and students (Anderson & Price, 2001). When the dual roles of the instructor are present, the ability for students to provide
completely voluntary consent to participate is diminished. This is an important bind that must be addressed in that students are expected to be willing and open to sharing within the group, but at the risk of knowing that participation in the experiential component is required for graduation.

A common reported fear of counseling students is that if they refuse to disclose personal information, this could ultimately result in a negative evaluation of their participation grade (Anderson & Price, 2001). Students may inherently feel pressured to share personal information to be viewed as fully engaged in the group. Alternatively, students may feel pressure to withhold information from the group for fear of criticism or negative repercussion from peers and the group facilitator and/or instructor. While counselor educators encourage student participation in groups, studies suggest that not all students may benefit from the experiential component because of the concerns regarding confidentiality and dual relationships (Davenport, 2004). Anderson and Price (2001) argued that while student well-being should be carefully monitored, the feelings of discomfort or fear associated with participation in an experiential group should not be construed negatively. Feelings of discomfort may actually help students become aware of the emotions and feelings of future clients. A study conducted by Kline et al. (1997) found that although participants reported the experiential group created feelings of anxiety and overall discomfort, they also described it as a positive experience that promoted personal awareness and growth.

Many experts in counselor education do not agree with the notion that dual relationships are problematic in the group training process (Ieva et. al, 2009). Corey (2016) suggests that dual relationships are known to impose inherent risks but are not inevitably harmful or unethical. Researchers and experts in the field of counselor education have even considered the dual relationship between counseling students and educators as unavoidable and necessary, as it encourages the personal and professional development of the counseling student (Osborn,
Daninhirsch, & Page, 2003). In hopes of creating an environment where students can safely immerse in the group learning process, there has been an extensive call for research to help minimize ethical concerns related to dual relationships (Goodrich, 2008). Although these ethical concerns are likely to emerge in the teaching and facilitation of a group experience, the occurrence and severity can be greatly influenced by the facilitators’ skills, leadership style, and encouragement of positive relationships (Fall & Levitov, 2002; St. Pierre, 2014). The dual relationship of the course instructor as group facilitator sparks a continued need for research specific to student attitudes and perceptions about the group facilitation process. Further exploration into this area may contribute relevant data to reflect any potential risks of harm or expose potential benefits of the dual relationship.

**Gatekeeping.** The ACA Code of Ethics (2014) and CACREP (2016) standards outline counselor educators’ professional duties, one of which is the role of gatekeeper. Gatekeeping can be defined as, “The ethical responsibility of counselor educators and supervisors to monitor and evaluate an individual’s knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions required by competent professional counselors and to remediate or prevent those that are lacking in professional competence from becoming counselors (CACREP, 2016, p. 45). The gatekeeping process has been established to help safeguard and ensure the integrity of the counseling profession, but it also presents an ethical dilemma for group course instructors who serve as the experiential group facilitator. Instructors as facilitators’ have the bind of encouraging students to be open and share within the group to promote trust and cohesion, while also maintaining the role and duties of gatekeeper. It is important to note that specific disclosures of information shared within the group cannot be used to evaluate the student, but the interpersonal dynamics and interactions
within the group setting may be utilized to evaluate for fitness in the profession (ACA, 2005; CACREP, 2016; Glance, et al., 2012).

The dual role presents an increased potential for conflict as students may share issues that call for remediation or gatekeeping (Goodrich & Luke, 2012). Faculty members must determine whether certain behaviors and disclosures presented in group are problematic or representative of significant impairment. They must also adhere to all established remediation and due process policies and procedures regardless of the personal dilemma that may develop as they try to create a trusting group environment (Foster & McAdams III, 2009). Gatekeeping policies are particularly important as counseling programs and faculty may face legal action if students graduate without appropriate gatekeeping and later cause harm to clients (Custer, 1994). While gatekeeping and remediation may pose potential risks to student-faculty member relationships, these systems are necessary and must be employed to ensure the integrity of the program and to prevent potential legal action.

**Experiential Group Facilitation Methods and Techniques**

Although CACREP standards emphasize the importance of the experiential group, there is no recommended best practice or guideline for how to ethically facilitate the group experience in such a way that promotes student development and avoids causing harm. Research related to this topic has mainly focused on which facilitation methods are the most effective and appropriate, and few in-depth inquiries regarding counseling students’ experiences of group have been published that help support these suggested facilitation practices (Ieva et al., 2009). Qualitative inquiry in this area appears to be most appropriate to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the potential impacts and outcomes that counseling students may incur because of the experiential group. Unfortunately, at this time, literature continues to be predominantly
focused on the quantitative examination of the student perspective of the experiential group and qualitative inquiry remains limited.

Since there are no standard requirements for how the experiential component is to be facilitated in counseling training programs, research has sought to uncover which methods are most often implemented across various programs with the hope of finding comparable outcomes. Merta et al. (1993) surveyed 272 master’s-level programs, 65 being CACREP accredited, and found five basic approaches to the use of the experiential group. These approaches included (a) limiting instruction to didactic methods only (12%); (b) using an experiential group in which the instructor was not involved and did not receive feedback about students’ participation (8%); (c) using an experiential group in which the instructor did not provide leadership but did receive feedback about participation (19%); (d) having the group experience led by someone other than the instructor while the instructor observed or participated in the activity (22%); or using the instructor as the group leader (39%).

The expectation that students should divulge personal information in the experiential group is frequently noted as an ethical issue and has prompted discussion about possible facilitation methods to help reduce the ethical concern and encourage sharing (Davenport, 2004). Berg, Landreth, and Fall (2013), suggested that a doctoral student, under the supervision of a faculty member, should lead the experiential group and be supervised off campus. Another suggestion to decrease the ethical dilemma came from Lloyd (1990), when he proposed the required group should be facilitated by a person completely unrelated to the counseling program. 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.
Yalom (1995) 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.

According to Armstrong (2002), a poll of 162 CACREP accredited programs found that 100 programs (62%) required groups that emphasized here-and-now techniques (i.e., present moment processes and dynamics occurring within the group), which requires members to participate in self-disclosure throughout the group experience. Furthermore, of these 100 programs, other techniques were employed such as: role-playing (3%), structured format and facilitated member self-disclosure (38%), and unstructured format and facilitated member self-disclosure (48%) (Armstrong, 2002). Sklare, Williams, and Powers (1996) supported the use of a “here-and-now” model where the course instructor also acts 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). Counselor education programs have provided research to help identify a variety of methods they believe to be successful for facilitating the experiential group; however, it should be noted that data is now dated, and new methods should be employed to address current trends in the field (Armstrong, 2002; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Although there is disagreement over which facilitation structure should be implemented, there seems to be a trend towards the emphasis on here-and-now techniques, regardless of the type of group facilitator present.

One area that has not been researched at length is the utilization of the course instructor and a doctoral student as a co-facilitator 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. For example, a study conducted by Anderson and Price (2001) examined the attitudes of master’s degree students regarding the use of an experiential group activity in their training. The survey used in this study consisted of 23 questions, collecting information on four matters: (1) the quality of the learning experience, (2) the issues of dual relationships or concerns with confidentiality/privacy, (3) the students’ overall level of comfort with the group, and (4) the students’ choice to participate. The survey attempted to look deeper into the student experience and instructor participation in the experiential group. One limitation of this study, however, is the lack of depth that a survey instrument can truly explore versus using qualitative inquiry and interview methods. In addition, this study did not address student attitudes regarding different facilitation methods, such as if the leader were a full time or adjunct faculty member, or a doctoral student was involved in dual relationship roles (Davenport, 2004; Ieva et al., 2009).

Ieva et al. (2009) also provided relevant research exploring student perceptions and attitudes related to group facilitation methods. This study found that counseling students believed their group facilitators served as models of group leadership and assisted them in feeling more confident in leading group and conceptualizing techniques to use in their future practice (Ieva et al., 2009). Similarly, participants in a study by Ohrt, Robinson, and Hagedorn (2013) expressed
finding value in the process of conceptualizing group because they had a more skilled leader (e.g., the course instructor) facilitate their own group experience. It can be seen in both reported studies that the process of vicarious learning and watching a group facilitator lead an experiential group, in fact, helps to increase student self-efficacy and the belief in their ability to facilitate a group (Ohrt et al., 2013; Ieva et al., 2009).

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 (Ieva et al., 2009). Student attitudes and fears regarding leader competence may result in limited participation from a group member, ultimately decreasing the effectiveness of the group experience and general comfort level (St. Pierre, 2014). 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 survey administered by St. Pierre (2014), indicates that the most common way the experiential component is structured is to have a full-time faculty member serve as both the instructor of the course and the facilitator of the experiential group. However, this survey also indicates that 70% of master’s degree students reported discomfort with this arrangement (St. Pierre, 2014).
There appears to be a distinct variation in student reports of personal attitudes and perceptions of the experiential group facilitation process. Studies such as these may benefit from additional in-depth inquiry to fully explore the phenomenon and assist counselor educators in creating safe and ethical learning environments. 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 there has been a slight increase recently in research that focuses on student outcomes and documentation of their experiences (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.

**Summary**

This chapter provided a literature review relevant to the current research study. Key concepts such as the foundations of experiential groups, experiential groups and neuroscience, experiential groups in counselor education, ethical concerns, experiential group facilitation methods and techniques, and student attitudes and perceptions were highlighted for a thorough review of the research topic. This detailed review may provide guidance for this study and future studies focusing on student experiences in experiential groups in counselor education.
Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of counseling students who participated in a co-facilitated experiential group as a part of graduate course requirements. This chapter describes the current study’s research methodology in detail. It includes discussion of this researcher’s qualifications, rationale for qualitative inquiry and a phenomenological approach, a description of the conceptual framework, research design, description of participants, data collection methods, and issues of trustworthiness. This study was conducted to seek answers to the following research questions:

1. 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?
   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?

Researcher as the Instrument

I, as the researcher, am a doctoral candidate in a Counselor Education and Supervision Ph.D. program, a Licensed Professional Counselor, and a Registered Play Therapist. I have worked in the mental health field for 10 years in several capacities and settings including inpatient and outpatient agencies. As a part of my doctoral course requirements and internship experience, I served as facilitator and co-facilitator of four experiential groups for master’s-level counseling students. I also have personal experience as a group member during my master’s and doctoral programs. I served as a participant observer in this study, fully experiencing the setting
as a co-facilitator of the two experiential groups, while observing and implementing data
collection strategies during and after the group experience. DeWalt and DeWalt (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). Participant observations and direct experiences were used to help better
understand the context and the phenomenon under investigation. I utilized weekly supervision
with the chair of this research, consulted with a peer debriefer, outside auditor, and included
member checks to allow for further reflection and to decrease personal biases. My experience
and training in qualitative research have come from taking courses at the doctoral level in
qualitative research methods and advanced qualitative research methods. I have also conducted
an extensive review of the literature related to group counseling and qualitative methods to
adequately prepare me in writing this research manuscript.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

The overall approach in qualitative research methods helps to move researchers to learn
from and discover populations in their daily lives (Durdella, 2019). Qualitative inquiry is most
appropriate when a group or population with problems or issues needs to be explored (Creswell
& Poth, 2018). The current study aimed to explore and interpret the lived experience of master’s-
level counseling students who participated in an experiential group required for program and
course completion. This study used semi-structured interviews and document collection as a
means of gathering data, which align with qualitative inquiry methods. Qualitative methods
provide a significant amount of information about a small group of people and encourage great
depth and detail in data collection (Patton, 2015). It is the belief of this researcher that the depth
of the emergent data that resulted from this study accurately reflects the lived experience of the participants.

Theoretical Framework

The phenomenological philosophy emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, developed by mathematician, Edmund Husserl (Davidsen, 2013). Phenomenological inquiry assists the researcher in gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences (Patton, 2015). The aim of phenomenological qualitative research is to deal with experiences and meanings, and “to capture as closely as possible the way in which the phenomenon is experienced within the context in which the experience takes place” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 27). 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.

Phenomenological inquiry stresses the importance of participant observation and in-depth interviewing (Patton, 2015). This researcher acted as a participant observer, having a personal connection to and investment in this research by co-facilitating the experiential groups for participants in the study. According to Patton (2015), “The only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience the phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves” (p. 116). This researcher had a personal interest in the study, and an established connection with participants having served as co-facilitator of the groups in question. These
factors assisted in creating a rich environment to utilize the principals of the phenomenological theoretical approach.

**Colaizzi’s Descriptive Phenomenological Method**

Husserl’s development of phenomenology as a philosophy led to multiple interpretations of phenomenological research and divisions of models of analysis. Amedeo Giorgi (1985) developed the descriptive phenomenological method in the early 1970s. When using a descriptive approach, researchers attempt to describe the experiences being lived through by analyzing data through an exhaustive phenomenological analysis within the perspective of phenomenological psychological reduction (Giorgi, Giorgi & Morley, 2017). The Descriptive Phenomenological Method allows the researcher to retain the “voice” of the participants without abstracting their viewpoint out through analysis (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Applying this method to the current study helped to account for reactions, behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and impressions that emerged from the data. These factors assisted in a comprehensive level of understanding of the participants’ lived experiences.

While Giorgi’s descriptive phenomenological 5-step method has been widely known for its use in the social and human science fields, Colaizzi (1978) has also contributed to the development of a descriptive method that has been mostly recognized in the health science areas. The data analysis plan used in this research study was Colaizzi’s (1978) descriptive phenomenological method. Colaizzi’s 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. This method depends upon rich first-person accounts of experience. In this study, these accounts came from face-to-face interviews, document collection of participant journal entries and member check interviews. The following steps represent Colaizzi’s process...
for phenomenological data analysis (adapted from Colaizzi, 1978; Morrow, Rodriguez & King, 2015; & Abu Sosha, 2012).

1. **Transcribe & Familiarize**: Each transcript should be read through several times to obtain a general understanding of the data.

2. **Extract Significant Statements**: Significant statements that pertain to the phenomenon under study should be identified and labeled.

3. **Formulate Meanings**: Meanings should be formulated from the identified significant statements.

4. **Cluster Themes**: Meanings found throughout the data should be clustered and categorized into common themes.

5. **Create Exhaustive Description**: The findings of the study should be written into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study.

6. **Produce Fundamental Structure**: Statement that describes the essential structure of the phenomenon.

7. **Validate Findings**: Present fundamental structure to participants and verify results with their experiences.

This study was rooted in the phenomenological framework to explore counseling students’ experiences in an experiential group and to develop a composite description of the essence of the experience for all the participants. Data from this research was collected and analyzed using steps from Colaizzi’s (1978) descriptive phenomenological method. Significant themes and meanings were interpreted through rigorous analysis of data to formulate the composite findings for this research study.
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in this study used elements from Irvin Yalom’s (1995) 11 curative factors of group therapy, and Corey’s (2016) definition of the stages of group therapy. Using fundamentals of both Yalom (1995) and Corey’s (2016) theories of group process, this researcher was able to guide inquiry to focus on exploring whether participants moved through group stages, and/or experienced the proposed benefits of the experiential group. Literature reviewed in Chapter II of this study revealed substantial support for the inclusion of the experiential group as a method for teaching and preparing counseling students to be group leaders, but lacked in data that designated which interventions and structures of group were most helpful in facilitating these benefits. It was the intent of this study to use the conceptual framework to guide in-depth inquiry into counseling students’ perspectives of the experiential group and assist in the conclusion of best practices of the experiential group component. Utilization of this conceptual framework also allowed this researcher to identify and synthesize reported thoughts, feelings, emotions, and experiences reflected by group participants during data collection and analysis procedures.

Relevant sources cited throughout Chapter II of this study report significant benefits from participation in an experiential group, including comprehensive learning, restorative neurobiological changes, and personal and professional development. It has been found that as students move through the stages of the group process, learning development across several areas occurs (Feiner, 1998). Experiential group membership assists students in obtaining a greater awareness and understanding of future clients’ experiences in group therapy (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Neurobiological findings have also contributed to the literature on experiential group benefits and have proposed that the process of learning while experiencing an emotive
connection triggers a release of dopamine and is directly connected to memory formation (Gazzaniga, Ivry, & Mangun, 2002). Moreover, when group members become emotionally invested in the group process, their implicit memory and the biological mechanisms that permit implicit memory to be modified become actively engaged (Badenoch, 2008).

This researcher drew from personal experience as a former group member and from participant observation as a co-facilitator of the experiential groups in question. This researcher also had pre-existing knowledge of group members’ cathartic experiences that were documented in their reflective journals and disclosed during the group sessions. Through this awareness and an extensive review of literature a conceptual framework was developed for this study. Below is an overview of Yalom’s (1995) eleven curative factors (See Table 3.1) and a brief review of Corey’s (2016) stages of group, which was also discussed in Chapter II of this study.

Yalom’s Curative Factors

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. These factors continue to be cited in current literature as a comprehensive explanation of the different experiences of phenomena found to occur in the group therapy setting (Waldo, 1985). Yalom’s (1995) 11 curative factors were used as a conceptual framework lens to help this researcher interpret data from participants’ interviews and journal entries. The curative factors helped this researcher label different experiences reported by participants and categorize these experiences into appropriate themes. Using the curative factors as a framework also assisted this researcher in validating participants’ experiences with a long-standing theory of group process. The 11 curative factors are described in further detail in the table below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Therapeutic Factors</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instillation of hope</td>
<td>Belief in the treatment mode. Hope that things can be different, and they may overcome their issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universality</td>
<td>Members in the group realize they are not alone in their experience of problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imparting information</td>
<td>Includes the education or information provided by the coordination of the group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>Members sharing parts of themselves and extending help to other group members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The corrective recapitulation of the primary family group</td>
<td>Members can interact with each other in the same way they may interact to their primary family group. Opportunity reenact critical family dynamics in a corrective manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of socializing techniques</td>
<td>Group provides an environment to foster adaptive and effective communication skills. Members may relate directly, honestly and intimately with other group members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitative behavior</td>
<td>Both the leader and members become role models for new behaviors. Members expand their skills by observing others in self-exploration and personal development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal learning</td>
<td>Opportunities to experience similar situations within and outside the group promote changes in personal behavior. Members gain insight about their impact through feedback from other members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group cohesiveness</td>
<td>Members formulate relationships because of participation in group. Feelings of trust, belonging and togetherness are experienced by members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catharsis</td>
<td>Members release strong feelings about experiences. Expression of emotions linked to processes in the group that may promote a feeling of relief.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential factors</td>
<td>Group process in dealing with human existence. Members accept responsibility for life decisions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Corey’s Stages of Group

As mentioned in Chapter II of this research, Corey (2016) established a definition of group stages that is widely used as an explanation of the dynamics likely to occur during the group process. The stages of group as described by Corey (2016) were an important addition to the conceptual framework lens of this study, and helped this researcher classify and organize behaviors and insights reported by participants throughout the experiential group process. Corey’s (2016) four stages of group provides a contemporary definition of the characteristics of the group process, ultimately assisting this researcher in creating an accurate description of the characteristics of the experiential groups examined in this study.

Corey’s (2016) stages include the initial stage, transition stage, working stage, and the final stage. Each stage described has a purpose and different expectations that must be addressed as the group progresses through the stage. The group facilitators and members also have descriptive roles that change as the group transforms. Listed below is a brief review of Corey’s (2016) identified four stages of group including group stage characteristics and leader roles within each stage. A conceptual diagram (Figure 3.1) of each group stage and description is then provided.

Initial stage. During the first stage of group, members test the atmosphere and get acquainted with group roles and norms. The occurrence of risk taking is relatively low as a central issue is trust versus mistrust. The group leaders’ role is to facilitate a sense of trust within the group.

Transition stage. In this stage, members test the leader and other members to determine how safe the environment is. Characteristics of this stage include anxiety, establishing trust, defensiveness, resistance, struggle for control, member conflicts, confrontation, challenges to the
group leaders, and the emergence of problem behaviors among difficult group members. The group leaders’ role is to recognize these issues and deal with them appropriately.

**Working stage.** Members interact with each other in more direct ways in the working stage. Healing capacity develops within the group and an increased group cohesion results in action-oriented behaviors. The group leader uses a variety of therapeutic interventions to encourage and challenge members.

**Final stage.** During this stage, members are encouraged to share what they have learned, note how they have changed, and consider how they plan to use what they have learned. Members begin dealing with feelings of separation and unfinished business and prepare to deal with the group’s end. The group leaders’ role is to facilitate the closing of the group process, make referrals, and promote independent functioning of members.

---

**Figure 3.1 Corey’s (2016) Stages of Group**

- **Initial Stage**
  - Members learn group roles & norms
  - Low risk-taking
  - Central issue of trust vs. mistrust
  - Group leader facilitates a sense of trust

- **Transition Stage**
  - Members determine safety of the group
  - Members may be resistant
  - Experience of anxiety, confrontation, and conflict among members
  - Group leader recognizes and addresses issues appropriately

- **Working Stage**
  - Members interact with each other in more direct ways
  - Healing capacity develops
  - Increased group cohesion
  - Group leader uses therapeutic interventions to encourage and challenge members

- **Final Stage**
  - Members reflect on what they have learned
  - Begin dealing with feelings of separation and prepare for group's end
  - Group leader facilitates the closing of the group process, makes referrals, and promotes independent functioning of members
Assumptions of Conceptual Framework

Using the assumptions of both Yalom (1995) and Corey’s (2016) theories, this researcher identified potential curative factors described by participants’ personal accounts of the group experience. This researcher also correlated any identified factors to specific stages the group may have been in at the time of the reported significant event. This researcher also used rigorous data analysis to ensure thorough comprehension of the data being studied.

It is important to note the assumptions of this study were formulated based on this researcher’s knowledge of the literature, experience co-facilitating the experiential groups, and personal experience as a group member. These factors assisted in shaping this researcher’s view of the phenomenon in question. This researcher believed that participation in an experiential group can cause significant emotional and developmental growth. This researcher also believed that learning outcomes from participation in an experiential group were related to the relationship and skill of the group facilitators. This researcher assumed that specific behaviors and processes experienced by participants in the experiential groups depicted an accurate representation of the movement through Corey’s (2016) stages of group and embodied certain elements of Yalom’s (1995) curative factors. A visual representation of the conceptual framework used for this study can be seen in figure (3.2) below.
Institutional review board (IRB) approval was obtained before participants were asked to participate in this study (See Appendix A). A class of 17 counseling students in a South Central CACREP-accredited program had successfully completed a 9-week experiential group that was facilitated by the course instructor and a doctoral student, which led to the purposeful selection of these students for this study. Participants who met the above criteria were recruited through an e-mail requesting voluntary participation. Participants were offered a $10 Walmart gift card as an
incentive to participate in the study, provided by this researcher. Volunteers were recruited until the point of theoretical saturation of data was met.

Participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (See Appendix D) and to participate in a semi-structured interview (See Appendix E) and a follow-up member check interview (See Appendix F) as a part of study requirements. Semi-structured interviews took place in the counseling lab on campus and lasted between 25 to 45 minutes per session. All interviews were video recorded and later transcribed. Data collected from interviews were thoroughly reviewed, categorized, and coded to look for themes and correlated concepts. Archived data from participants’ journal entries kept during their experiential group experience also underwent the same rigorous data analysis process. Member checks were completed via e-mail correspondence and necessary changes and review of data was again executed.

Site and Sample Selection

This study took place at a South Central CACREP-accredited university. All semi-structured interviews were held in the “Group Room” in the counseling laboratory located in the Graduate Education building. This site was chosen due to the counseling students’ and the researchers’ access and familiarity to the location. The experiential groups that students participated in were also facilitated in this room. The goal of inviting participants back to where their group took place was to evoke memories and thoughtful reflection during the interview process.

The participants who were purposefully selected for this study came from a sample of 17 students that successfully completed a required 9-week experiential group that utilized the course instructor and a doctoral student as facilitators. Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most
effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2015). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Clark, 2018). Participants were selected for this study because they were able to contribute individualized and thorough accounts of their experiences in the co-lead experiential group.

Participants for this study agreed to participation in a previous research study that included data collection of journal entries documented while students were active members in the experiential group. Participants were not made aware that they would be invited to participate in this study prior to completing their semester requirements or during their participation in the required group experience. This sample was chosen to provide an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of the student experience of membership in an experiential group lead by their course instructor and a doctoral student. The goal of choosing this sample was to collect rich data related to the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of counseling students as members in a co-facilitated experiential group and to explore the impacts that facilitation methods may have had on their experience.

Participants engaged as members in an experiential group in their first year of graduate course work and were interviewed for this study after the successful completion of the group. Through the examination of this population, this study sought to produce pertinent data related to the student experience in a required co-facilitated experiential group. Results may indicate potential benefits, risks, and emergent themes that may be necessary and/or noteworthy to contribute to the field of counselor education.
Data Collection Procedures

Participants of this study 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 from a previous study were also used and analyzed for contribution of data collection for this study. Demographic information obtained includes questions regarding age, gender, level of education and information relevant to previous group experience. 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 purpose of the phenomenological interview in this study was to capture the lived experiences of the participants. The interview is meant to evoke reflection of experiences, memory of events, and elicit recall of emotions related to the lived experience, so that the researcher can describe the phenomenon as much as possible in concrete and lived-through terms (Van Manen, 1990). This study utilized a semi-structured interview question format. According to Edwards & Holland (2013), a semi-structured interview is a qualitative method of inquiry that contains a pre-determined set of open questions. This allows new ideas to be brought up and the interviewer to explore themes or responses further. This researcher utilized the semi-structured interview to explore a framework of themes and allow for participants to fully disclose information about their experiences without being led to a specific answer or conclusion.

The member check in this study was used to help improve the accuracy, credibility and trustworthiness of the research by clarifying responses and questions asked in the first interview,
and to gather any additional data pertinent to the study. This study followed Colaizzi’s (1978) descriptive phenomenological method which includes a proposed member check that occurs near the end of the research project where the fundamental structure is presented to participants and results are verified with their experiences. The participants of this study checked to see whether a “true” or authentic representation was made of what they conveyed during the interview and allowed to critically analyze the findings and comment on them.

**Managing and Recording Data**

All recordings collected were transcribed and data verified by reading through the transcripts while listening to the recordings. Significant measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality of participants and their disclosed information. Participant data and documents were identified using the last four digits of their social security numbers to create their own personal ID code. Video-taped interviews were stored on the password-protected *LearningSpace* program provided by the university counseling laboratory department. Data collection documents are secured in a locked facility (office) within a locked filing cabinet when not being reviewed or analyzed by the researcher and will be kept indefinitely. The figure below (3.3) illustrates the phases of this research study.

![Data Management Plan](image)

**Figure 3.3 Data Management Plan**

44
Phenomenological Data Analysis Using Colaizzi’s (1978) Strategy

Data analysis is the process of clarifying and interpreting information collected in research and establishing meaning from the information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As noted previously, this research employed Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step strategy for the analysis of phenomenological data. A brief description of data collection and transcript formation are summarized, and steps are reviewed. A comprehensive review of data analysis will be provided in the next chapter.

Six group members volunteered for participation in this study. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted using a prepared interview guide. Participants were encouraged to talk freely and to tell stories using their own words. Each interview lasted from 25 minutes to 45 minutes and all were conducted by this researcher. At the end of each interview, the researcher reviewed the requirement for a second contact to discuss the analysis of findings and to ensure an accurate representation of their reported experiences. Archived data was also utilized from journal entries that were recorded by participants throughout the duration of the experiential group process. The level of data saturation was based on consensus between this researcher and two peer debriefers who have extensive qualitative research and experiential group experience.

Transcribe & familiarize. Colaizzi (1978) recommends for each transcript to be collected, read and/or played back several times until a sense of comprehension and understanding of the participants’ experience has been reached. This researcher read, watched, and listened to data collected until confident that a thorough understanding of the experiences had been achieved. Thoughts, feelings, and notions that may have arisen because of this researchers’ previous experience with group membership and facilitation were added to the
researchers’ reflexive journal. This helped to account for any potential researcher bias and to explore the phenomenon fully as experienced by participants.

**Extract significant statements.** Significant statements related to the group process and feelings experienced within the group were extracted from each transcript. These statements were grouped by their participant ID number, transcript type (“J” for journal entry or “I” for interview), journal entry number or page number, and line number. Two hundred and seventy-one significant statements were extracted from 51 transcripts. The table below provides examples of significant statements that were extracted from participants’ data.

Table 3.2 *Example of Extracted Significant Statements*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I’m grateful to have opened up about my mom, but I’m not sure if I should have gone that far with the group. I’m a lot less secure with the group than I was after this session”</td>
<td>2522</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My favorite technique was when Dr. B told me to go from saying ‘I have to be a perfectionist’ to ‘I choose to be a perfectionist’. This really gave me some perspective”</td>
<td>3664</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>10-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Some concerns would be...the things that were disclosed in the group if there would be further repercussions throughout the program...what I shared, if I would be...remediated or...maybe I’m not as empathic as some would like me to be...”</td>
<td>5290</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“As a result of the group I started my own therapy...to work through some of my body issues and...disordered eating and that, I mean, honestly like that changed my life”</td>
<td>6418</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>88-90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Formulate meanings.** Meaning was derived from all significant statements identified.

Primary meanings were coded and grouped into separate categories as they reflect an exhaustive description. Coding is the process of identifying specific details and notations that may be relevant in answering identified research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Table (3.3) provides examples of how significant statements were converted into formulated meanings.

**Table 3.3 Examples of Formulated Meanings from Significant Statements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Statements</th>
<th>Formulated Meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I did not like that our co-leader did not say very much” (2522, Transcript J, No. 1, line 23).</td>
<td>Group members are anxious sharing and being vulnerable with group facilitators they do not know and have not established a relationship of trust with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I just remember feeling like uncomfortable sharing certain things about me at first with you (co-facilitator) ...I probably felt trepidation or nerves...having to share with facilitators I wasn’t close to” (3664, Transcript I, lines 31-36).</td>
<td>Group members have a desire to share their story and connect with other group members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I realized that it was coming to a time where I would need to share. No, I don’t feel pressured by the leaders to share, but if I don’t share I may not get out what I should from the group” (5290, Transcript J, No. 3, lines 2-3).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Once... shared his story, I felt a distinct urge to share” (3664, Transcript J, No. 2, line 6).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It is great to know I’m not alone” (3664, Transcript J, No. 5, line 29).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When you started to hear people’s experiences, and especially experiences that were similar... You do realize in that moment that people are so much more alike than they are different” (3658, Transcript I, Lines 189-197).</td>
<td>The group experience creates a sense of connectedness and reduces feelings of isolation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Cluster themes.** Formulated meanings were extensively reviewed 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 correct and the meanings to be consistent. The table below shows the process of integrating cluster themes to formulate the first emergent theme, "Movement Through the Stages of Group".

Table 3.4 *Example of Formulation of Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formulated Meanings</th>
<th>Cluster Themes</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group members are anxious sharing and being vulnerable with group facilitators they do not know and have not established a relationship of trust with.</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Movement through the stages of group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group members experience an increase in nervousness and feel unsure if disclosures are appropriate within the group.</td>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The group experience creates a sense of connectedness and reduces feelings of isolation.</td>
<td>Connectedness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group members express a sense of sadness and increased reflection on the group experience and its overall impact.</td>
<td>Interpersonal Process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Create exhaustive description.** During this stage of analysis, all emergent themes were integrated into an exhaustive description. Peer de-briefers utilized in this study assisted in the development of this description by providing feedback of the analysis. 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.

**Produce 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. A fundamental statement of structure was formulated at this stage to fully describe the phenomenon in question.

**Validate findings.** This step used member checks as a technique to help validate the analysis of data. This researcher returned the research findings to the participants and discussed the results with them. Participants’ views on the study results were obtained via e-mail correspondence. All participants expressed satisfaction with results and agreed the data conclusions reflect their feelings and experiences accurately.

**Trustworthiness**

The issue of trustworthiness in qualitative research encompasses several levels of validation. Lincoln & Guba (2000) created four questions and criteria for researchers to consider ensuring trustworthiness in a qualitative study. The first question to consider is whether the research establishes assurance in the “truth” of the results and findings. This research constructed validity through the collection of multiple sources of evidence such as self-report in interviews, and the researcher’s reflexive journal. Member checks were also conducted during this study to ensure the congruence between researcher interpretation and analysis and participants’ views and meanings of the information provided. During the member checking process, the participants who provided information can determine if the researcher has accurately reported their stories (Koelsch, 2013).
The second criteria Lincoln & Guba (2000) consider essential to increasing the trustworthiness of a study is the applicability of the research, which seeks to ensure that findings are applicable in other settings or with other participants. To produce a formal generalization, this study sought to gather enough data to support a claim with the population sample of counseling students. To ensure generalizability, researchers must ensure that they have an appropriately randomized sample and calculate how these same findings are true across other populations (Tracy, 2012). This study used measures to reduce bias in purposeful participant selection and analysis of interview data through member checks and peer debriefing methods. Data was also coded and analyzed to look for similar emergent themes until the point of saturation was met to provide a sufficient amount of data to help increase generalizability.

Lincoln & Guba (2000) also described the need for consistency and neutrality in determining trustworthiness. Consistency examines whether the findings would be replicated if the study were repeated with similar participants in a similar situation. Appropriate documentation and logging of data and methods were kept as part of an audit trail so that this study may be replicated in the future with similar groups. As described by Lincoln & Guba (2000), neutrality relates to the degree to which the findings of an inquiry are determined by the participants and conditions of the study and not because of researcher biases, agenda, or personal opinions. This study utilized methods such as member checks, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling to help reduce researcher bias.

A variety of techniques were used throughout the research process to assist in the overall trustworthiness of this study. Methods such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, reflexivity, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checks, and audit trails were used to improve the validity and reliability of data collected and will be discussed further in this chapter.
Prolonged Engagement

A common strategy to enhance credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry is through the process of prolonged engagement. This method requires building trust and rapport with subjects to facilitate valuable and thorough responses. The researcher can encourage prolonged engagement by allowing for adequate time to collect data and acquiring a better understanding of the participants and the phenomenon of the research (Cope, 2014). Prolonged engagement is an essential component in qualitative inquiry to assist in building trust and rapport between the researcher and participants. 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). At the time this study was conducted, this researcher had already established rapport with participants from serving as the co-facilitator of the experiential groups. This researcher spent 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.
Reflexivity

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. Reflexivity is the understanding and awareness that the researcher’s values, beliefs, and previous experiences with the phenomenon has the potential to affect the research process (Cope, 2014). This researcher kept a reflexive journal (See Appendix G) 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.

Triangulation

In qualitative inquiry, multiple methods of data collection can be utilized in one study. Triangulation is a procedure to check for validity where researchers look for convergence of multiple sources of information to find themes or categories in a study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). 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

Creswell & Miller (2000) define a peer review or debriefing as an examination of the data and research process by someone who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon under investigation. 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. This peer
debriefer had a direct connection with the study in question as well as extensive experience with
group facilitation and methods. This peer debriefer was 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. This auditor was familiar with qualitative research methods and had
experience conducting research with focus on group behavior. This auditor was used to help
reduce any unintentional biases that may have presented in the review of the lived experience by
the researcher and peer debriefer. Utilizing peer debriefing methods encouraged increased
credibility and helped facilitate this researcher’s continued exploration of questions and rationale
of methods used in the study.

**Member Checks**

Member checks assist with the validity of a research inquiry by using the lens of the
study’s participants. 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). In formulating an audit trail, researchers must provide clear documentation of all research decisions and actions (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Materials collected can be reviewed by another individual to draw the same study conclusions. 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.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Journal entries used in this study were considered archived data obtained through a previously approved study by the IRB. Research participants were informed through both informed consent and verbal confirmation of measures taken to ensure the protection of their privacy. Neither individual nor aggregated data results can be tracked to a single participant. Upon completion of the research, audio/video recordings were saved and will be kept secure indefinitely. All collected data was coded with an ID marker that does not reveal the identity of the participant. This code cannot be identifiable per reference to initials, name, age, or sex of the participants. The demographic questionnaire does not contain information that would reveal the identity to any reader or consumer of the data. Research participants were also made aware of their right to end the interview at any time or withdraw from the study at any point during this study.
Summary

This chapter described the research procedures of this study. It included a review of the research questions, defined the researcher as the instrument, provided a rational for qualitative research design, and introduced the theoretical framework of the study. This chapter also explored the conceptual framework, research design and timeline, site and sample selection, data collection procedures, and methods utilized to ensure trustworthiness. All data collected from this study were analyzed from a descriptive phenomenological perspective. Emergent themes discovered through the collection and analyses of documents were interpreted and presented through the phenomenological theoretical lens.
Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

The primary focus of this chapter will be to describe the data collected from journals, semi-structured interviews, and from member checks. The purpose of the study and research questions will be reviewed, and demographic data of group members will be provided. Data collection and analysis strategies will be explained, and an in-depth review of findings will be presented. Overall themes discovered in this research will be presented based on the guidelines of Colaizzi’s (1978) descriptive method of analysis. Tables are included to help with clarity and description of information.

Purpose and Setting of Research

As noted in Chapter One, the purpose of this phenomenological study was 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 to assist in improved understanding and facilitation methods of the experiential group in counseling programs. The results of this phenomenological study describe the experiences of six master’s-level counseling students who participated in a nine-week co-facilitated experiential group as a part of course and program requirements.

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. The following research questions were addressed:

1. 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?
   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?

Participant Demographics

Group and research participants’ ages ranged from 24-39 with the median age of 27 years old. All six participants were female. Five participants were enrolled in a master’s level counseling program, and one participant who was enrolled in a doctoral counselor education program. All participants were enrolled in a master’s-level group theory course in which the experiential group was required for course completion. The table below illustrates the group member’s demographics reported at the time of participation in the experiential group.
Table 4.1 Summary of Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant ID Number</th>
<th>Group Section</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Level of Counseling Training</th>
<th>Group Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5290</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1st Year Master’s Student</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9688</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Caucasian/Asian American</td>
<td>1st Year Master’s Student</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3664</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1st Year Master’s Student</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2522</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1st Year Master’s Student</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3658</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1st Year Doctoral Student</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6418</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1st Year Master’s Student</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant 5290**

At the time of journal collection, Participant 5290 was a first-year master’s-level mental health counseling student and reported having no prior experience in group counseling or as a group member. Participant 5290 was a member of experiential group number one which met before the required group class. Participant 5290 submitted eight journals for review during the group experience. Participant 5290 completed the semi-structured interview and member check interview as a third-year master’s student, two years after the time of participation in the group experience.

**Participant 9688**

At the time of journal collection, Participant 9688 was a first-year master’s-level school counseling student and reported having no prior experience in group counseling or as a group
member. Participant 9688 was a member of experiential group number one which met before the required group class. Participant 9688 submitted nine journals for review during the group experience. Participant 9688 completed the semi-structured interview and member check interview as a third-year master’s student, two years after the time of participation in the group experience.

**Participant 3664**

At the time of journal collection, Participant 3664 was a first-year master’s-level school counseling student and reported having no prior experience in group counseling or as a group member. Participant 3664 was a member of experiential group number one which met before the required group class. Participant 3664 submitted nine journals for review during the group experience. Participant 3664 completed the semi-structured interview and member check interview as a third-year master’s student, two years after the time of participation in the group experience.

**Participant 2522**

At the time of journal collection, Participant 2522 was a first-year master’s-level mental health counseling student and reported having no prior experience in group counseling or as a group member. Participant 2522 was a member of experiential group number one which met before the required group class. Participant 2522 submitted nine journals for review during the group experience. Participant 2522 completed the semi-structured interview and member check interview as a third-year master’s student, two years after the time of participation in the group experience.
Participant 3658

At the time of journal collection, Participant 3658 was a first-year doctoral counseling student and reported having no prior experience in group counseling or as a group member. Participant 3658 was required to complete the Dynamics of Group Counseling master’s-level course, as it was not required in her master’s program at another university. Participant 3658 was a member of experiential group number two which met after the required group class. Participant 3658 submitted nine journals for review during the group experience. Participant 3658 completed the semi-structured interview and member check interview as a third-year doctoral student, two years after the time of participation in the group experience.

Participant 6418

At the time of journal collection, Participant 6418 was a first-year master’s-level mental health counseling student and reported having no prior experience in group counseling or as a group member. Participant 6418 was a member of experiential group number two which met after the required group class. Participant 6418 submitted seven journals for review during the group experience. Participant 6418 completed the semi-structured interview and member check interview as a third-year master’s student, two years after the time of participation in the group experience.

Data Analysis Following Colaizzi’s Descriptive Phenomenological Approach

This study aims to convey the experience of counseling students in a co-facilitated experiential group using Colaizzi’s (1978) strategy of descriptive phenomenological data analysis. Descriptive phenomenological approaches attempt to carefully describe the experiences being lived through, and once data is collected, analysis is carried out utilizing phenomenological psychological reduction. This process involves epoché, which means, “to set
aside all knowledge not being directly presented to consciousness, and then to consider what is given not as actually existing but merely as something present to consciousness” (Giorgi et al., 2017, p. 180). 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.

This 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. Meanings were then formulated from the significant statements and theme clusters were developed. Theme clusters were reviewed and consolidated for conciseness and four emergent themes arose from the identified cluster themes. Significant statements and themes were verified with the guidance of the researcher’s peer debriefers. An exhaustive description and fundamental structure of the phenomenon was formed and presented back to participants for further validation of the findings. Participants reported the findings to be true and represented an accurate reflection of their experience. No further modification or analysis was deemed necessary.

A broad inquiry into participants’ experiences of the required experiential group at their CACREP-accredited counseling program, aided this researcher in determining transferability of the phenomenon. Certain aspects of the shared lived experience of group membership can be generalized to other counseling programs. Group characteristics and outcomes described by participants can also be generalized to represent an accurate reflection of movement through the stages of group and encompassing curative properties as described by Corey (2016) and Yalom
(1995). Some statements related to facilitation techniques and methods made by participants may not apply to the experiences of those at other institutions where the experiential group is facilitated differently. However, some statements are broader in nature, thus, appearing to reflect participants’ viewpoints that may be more transferable to counseling students who go through the stages of group and experience known curative processes from the experience.

Data is organized for review in order of Colaizzi’s (1978) seven steps, beginning with step two of extracting significant statements. In addition to excerpts taken from the individual interviews, participants’ quotes from their reflective journals are included to help with comprehension of data analysis. Cluster and emergent themes are reviewed and described in detail. In closing, an exhaustive description which portrays the entire phenomenon and the fundamental structure is provided along with a summary of the validation of findings using member check interviews.

**Extraction of Significant Statements**

From the participants’ journal entries and interview transcripts, significant statements were extracted and reviewed to ensure each one applied to the objectives of the study. The final selection of significant statements revealed 271 statements. Only the most rich and descriptive statements that characterized the goals of the study were included for analysis. To support the trustworthiness of the study, the outside peer auditor not involved in the facilitation process of the experiential group, reviewed the extracted significant statements. Figure 4.1 below provides an example of extracted significant statements from a participant’s interview transcript. The highlighted portions of the participant’s interview transcript represent statements deemed significant to the study.
Formation of Formulated Meanings

Immediately following the extraction of significant statements from all participants’ data sources, this researcher applied meaning to participants’ statements, thus making a “precarious leap” (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59). Colaizzi explained that the precarious leap involves the researcher discovering and illustrating the hidden meanings, while also considering the various contexts and intricacies of the phenomenon as described in the original transcript. Colaizzi’s method also requires that the researcher, “must not formulate meanings which have no connection with the data” (p. 59). Each formulated meaning was coded using the initials of potential cluster themes in relation to its significant statement resulting in 310 formulated meanings. There were more formulated meanings than significant statements due to some meanings falling into multiple
thematic categories. Figure 4.2 below illustrates an example of the development of formulated meanings from significant statements and their corresponding codes.

![Formulated Meaning and Code Application from Significant Statements](image)

**Figure 4.2 Formulated Meaning and Code Application from Significant Statements** (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 6).

**Cluster Themes**

After meanings of the 271 significant statements were formulated, cluster themes were derived through the grouping or clustering of the formulated meanings that represented similar ideas related to the objectives of the study. Seven cluster themes were identified as follows: Anxiety, Vulnerability, Trust, Connectedness, Interpersonal Process, Group Facilitation Process, and Group Learning Outcomes. Figure 4.3 below provides an example of how coded formulated meanings derived from corresponding significant statements were grouped together to form the cluster theme labeled “Anxiety”.

![Cluster Themes Example](image)
Figure 4.3 Development of Cluster Themes

**Emergent Themes**

Four emergent themes arose from the seven cluster themes to form the foundation of the findings reported in the study. The 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. The themes that emerged during the data analysis process provided the foundation to accurately reflect the lived experience of the participants of this study. An illustration of the process of analysis that led to the formation of emergent themes can be seen in Figure 4.2 below.
Table 4.2 Illustration of Process of Identifying Emergent Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Statement</th>
<th>Formulated Meaning</th>
<th>Cluster Themes</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“With Dr. B we had like mini-group therapy in Foundations that whole semester before, so I think we were all a little bit primed…I felt, more comfortable, where if it had been an instructor I hadn’t really had yet then I would have been…I don’t know how I feel about this” (9688, Transcript I, Lines 25-30).</td>
<td>A pre-existing relationship contributed to the feelings of trust and comfort in sharing with the facilitator</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Importance of Trust &amp; Vulnerability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other group members sharing helps to connect and resolve own personal issues</td>
<td>Connectedness</td>
<td>Movement Through the Stages of Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“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” (3664, Transcript J, No.3, Lines 21-23).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The group shows me each week how effective counseling is, it makes me glad to have pursued this profession. I want to dig deeper into this and seek healing over the coming weeks. I feel ready to do that” (6418, Transcript J, No.4, Lines 31-35).</td>
<td>Desire to learn more about themselves and wanting to grow from the group process</td>
<td>Interpersonal Process</td>
<td>Development of Self-Awareness &amp; Personal Growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It basically put practice to theory, in that sense where you’re learning these things in the book and kind of like those scenes just-unfold before your eyes, it was just magical most weeks-to see people having kind of catharsis from the experience” (3658, Transcript I, Lines 100-104).</td>
<td>Being able to see processes occur in the experiential group helped solidify the content learned from the classroom</td>
<td>Group Learning Outcomes</td>
<td>Comprehension of the Group Process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Through the process of extracting significant statements, creating formulated meanings, and developing cluster and emergent themes, the narratives of the participants revealed a comprehensive explanation of their lived experience. The following section provides a description of the emergent themes using narratives of the participants, extracted from journal entries and interview data. A matrix is provided for each participant with examples of the emergent theme.

**Importance of Trust and Vulnerability**

**Participant 5290.** In her interview, Participant 5290 reflected on the significance of vulnerability in the experiential group. She stated, “I think that if someone has skin in the game they want everyone to have skin in the game. So…if they’re vulnerable they want everyone else to feel that vulnerability”. Participant 5290 also described the impact that being vulnerable in group had on her overall experience. She claimed:

> I think that by participating in the group that I discovered more about myself and my peers than I had anticipated. 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)

Participant 5290’s journal entries at the time of the group experience showed her curiosity about learning about other members and a desire for them to share. She journaled about this on several occasions, “I’m interested in hearing about different people’s backgrounds in my cohort. I think if I could describe one emotion after group would be: intrigued”. Again, she wrote about the process of hearing others’ stories, “I am sad that I missed out on people sharing more and getting deeper with the group though”. In her sixth journal entry, Participant 5290 reflected on a missed opportunity to be vulnerable and connect with another group member. She wrote, “I wish I had expressed how much I related to it. I don’t know why I keep holding back I just keep hitting a wall. Maybe I’ll try to share more in group this week”.

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Participant 5290 recalled the influence of the journals and how it contributed to building a trusting connection with the group co-facilitator. She reported, “I think it just helped me further build rapport with you, with the other-co-leader, because I wasn’t interacting with (the professor/leader), and so I guess it just let me build more trust.”

**Participant 9688.** Participant 9688 went into the experiential group with an open attitude towards sharing and being vulnerable in the group process because she had already developed a trusting relationship with the professor/instructor. She claimed:

I mean with Dr. B we had already…like mini-group therapy in Foundations that whole semester before, so I think we were all a little bit primed.

Participant 9688 spoke of trust throughout her journal reflections during the group process. She wrote in her first journal, “I can’t think of anything that I would not want to share. I think this is because I trust my peers and have great confidence that they would not think differently of me or tell others what I’ve said”. Making connections with other group members was important to Participant 9688. This was documented in her first journal entry as she reflected, “Overall, I’m very interested in the group process and the relationships that may be formed throughout the course”. Participant 9688 continued her reflection the following week as she wrote, “On the plus side, I realize that new friendships may grow out of this experience with other members in my group. Although our cohort…is cohesive, and I feel as if I can trust everyone in our cohort”.

Participant 9688 continued with the idea that trust within the group contributes to an increase in vulnerability. She wrote, “It felt cathartic to share, especially because they were feelings I haven’t said all together at one time. It was nice to be able to say what I wanted to say and not worry about how people would perceive it”. When asked to expand on the importance of trust within the group experience, Participant 9688 explained, “It’s easier for me to trust people if they’re willing to trust me”. She continued:
Everyone…willing to share made me more comfortable because it’s one thing for me to come in and say like I’m not really scared, like I’m an open book I’ll share if I need to… and I’m not scared to share it but knowing that everyone else felt to some level the same way, um, made it easier for me. I even said something in my journals about like I’m glad this person shared today, I’m glad this person shared today because I didn’t really know much about them. (Participant 9688, Transcript I, Lines 196-203)

Participant 9688 also reflected on the paradigm of having the group course instructor also as a group facilitator and how this impacted her perception of trust and vulnerability in the experiential group process. She stated, “If it had been an instructor I hadn’t really had yet then I would have been like I don’t know how I feel about this. Yeah, so it just felt more comfortable with him”. Participant 9688 explained further:

I felt like he already knew a lot about me beforehand… I feel like I probably shared more in Foundations than I did in group, so…. if anything, that just made me more comfortable and I guess I was looking at it more of a standpoint like when you’re in a graduate program you’re going to have a different relationship with faculty than you would in an undergrad program. (Participant 9688, Transcript I, Lines 172-178)

Another area Participant 9688 explored in her interview was how the inclusion of a co-facilitator, a doctoral student, impacted her sense of trust with her facilitators. She claimed, “I know other people…with their group experiences with different doc students…they haven’t had a positive experience, but I felt like I had a pretty positive one. I think it’s just because I related to you (co-facilitator) pretty well”.

Participant 3664. Participant 3664 recalled her experience with vulnerability in the experiential group as she stated in her interview, “I felt very exposed a lot of the time, or vulnerable”. She also reported anxiety around being vulnerable with people that she did not already have a relationship with. She explained:

I just remember feeling…uncomfortable sharing certain things about me at first. I don’t think- I guess I had the professor in the fall, but…you don’t really share a lot in there and so I probably felt trepidation or nerves-having to share with facilitators, I wasn’t close to. (Participant 3664, Transcript I, Lines 31-36)
In her first journal entry, Participant 3664 spoke about the significance of vulnerability in group and how sharing and hearing others’ stories impacted her. She wrote:

I was able to get to know a couple members of the group a little better after today’s session, and I was glad to hear that basically the entire group was having the same feelings I was having leading up to the session/during the session; it was reassuring to know that I’m not alone. It was hard for me to speak up, but I was able to “force” myself to do so, and I felt pretty good after that. It is my goal to share something each time we meet. This time I shared that I am hoping to gain some friends or connections by the end of the semester. (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 1)

Participant 3664 also linked the process of vulnerability to the feeling of being connected to other group members. She journaled about this as she said, “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.” She discussed the impact that others sharing had on her as she journaled, “I wondered what I would end up sharing with everyone. I waited to test out the water and once (peer) shared his story, I felt a distinct urge to share”. Participant 3664 often reflected on her growing connections in her journal entries. She wrote, “I caught myself tearing up while he was sharing, and at first I wasn’t sure what was causing those emotions.”

Participant 3664 journal reflections continued:

I do feel closer to a few people after they shared this week. I feel closer to (peer) who opened up about her confidentiality issues; I feel closer to (peer) who shared information about her past/family background; I feel closer to (peer) after hearing him share the trouble he has had making friends. I can especially relate to (peer) in the sense that I remember how hard it was to initially make new friends. I can also relate to him because I currently struggle with making new friends in my cohort. I hope to get to hear others’ stories and worries as time goes on, so I can hopefully relate with more group members. (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No.2)

She journaled the following week:

I had shared some the week before, and I didn’t really feel much like sharing this time. I guess I was still feeling a little exposed after crying, and I kind of just wanted a week off to simply listen to other members share. I was also excited to get to hear others’ stories, and thus get to know some of the members on a deeper level. (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No.3)
Connection to group members appeared to be significant throughout the experience as Participant 3664 referenced the bonds created throughout the group experience. She wrote, “When we spoke at the end I loved hearing that what I shared impacted almost everyone in the group. It is great to know that I’m not alone, and that other people understand my troubles”. In her interview, she reflected the same sentiment as she said:

I’m really thankful, uh, or proud of myself that I was able to open up, you know, not just one time, but at least twice from what I remember, um, maybe three times, um, and it was great, it was actually, it was scary to have it just the second semester of grad school, you know not knowing people, but actually it was probably more beneficial that way because at least the people in my group I felt closer to afterwards, um, because I remember being able to find similarities between us. (Participant 3664, Transcript I, Lines 12-20)

Participant 3664 emphasized that she trusted her professor as the group leader because of his relevant knowledge and experience in group counseling. She explained:

If it was one or two doc students, I mean yeah I could relate to them, but I don’t know I would get out the same as I did in this group. I think maybe I wouldn’t have learned as much, I don’t know why I would think that, but I just initially think that, I guess since Dr. B’s just been doing it for so long. (Participant 3664, Transcript I, Lines 225-230)

Participant 3664 also reviewed a few areas that she would have liked changed regarding the facilitation process. She stated, “I kind of wish you (co-facilitator) could have facilitated more. I remember for sure once where you lead it, but I can’t remember a lot of times, and I really liked hearing your perspective too, maybe just more from the co-facilitator”. 

**Participant 2522.** Participant 2522 went into the group with the goal of being vulnerable. She expressed her dissatisfaction with other group members for not being vulnerable and sharing in group as she journaled in her first entry, “I’m not sure why I was so irritated by people not going very deep. I hate small talk. But I could not open up about the relational differences of my past with everyone’s attention on me”. Her second journal entry continued, “I also am very aware of those who haven’t shared, and now that I have, I feel like they should. I put myself out
there so for me to continue processing they should too.” This participant continued to journal about her desire for others to share their experiences halfway through the experiential group process in journal five when she said, “I think those who haven’t shared a piece of themselves are feeling the pressure to. Their pressure helps me to be more at home with them because I know that they are invested now”. Although Participant 2522 seemed to value vulnerability in the group setting, she also struggled with her own display of vulnerability to the group. Early in the group experience she wrote:

I may have jumped the gun in trying to get people in the group to open up about life and just start talking. I learned the hard lesson that trying to process too deeply without certain cohesiveness in the group is not helpful to the person processing. Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 2)

Her fears about going too far emotionally and sharing within the group were apparent after a particularly revealing session. She journaled:

I have a lot of mixed feelings for this counseling session. I’m really unsure how to process what happened. I’m grateful for having opened up about my mom, but I’m not sure if I should have gone that far with the group. I’m a lot less secure with the group than I was after this session (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 4)

Participant 2522 discussed the impact that trust had on her willingness to share in the group as she stated in her interview, “I think I may have been more open faster if it was just Dr. B(facilitator), because I didn’t really know you (co-facilitator) and I didn’t know your background, and therefore I didn’t want to open up.” This sentiment was validated in her first journal entry which read, “I also did not like that our co-leader did not say very much. After talking about so much trust in the group, and being part of a research study, she needs to say more to gain that trust”. Participant 2522 explained this feeling further in her interview:

I think in the beginning it probably would have made me more comfortable if you (co-facilitator) had opened up a little bit more…I don’t know if I really fully began to trust you until you started talking about the stuff that had happened and losing people in your life. (Participant 2522, Transcript I, Lines 145-155)
Participant 2522 had more to say about the importance of trust in the experiential group. “Group accelerated the trust experience…especially with that confidentiality factor, like I know you’re not going to tell everyone…about this, or at least I hope you won’t…I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt that you don’t.”

**Participant 3658.** Participant 3658 recalled on her experiences in group, stating that when others displayed vulnerability in group, it made her more comfortable with the process. She recommended the co-facilitator could have shared more initially as she recalled:

> Well…in the beginning I felt like maybe, like you could have spoken up more…because… I didn’t know you and I didn’t know right away what it would have felt like, and I didn’t know if it was just that you were like learning too…but you didn’t essentially speak up a lot in the beginning…you could have probably spoken up more. (Participant 3658, Transcript I, Lines 52-58)

In Participant 3658’s interview she explained about her comfort level increasing as others shared, “I guess it started when I was hearing people who over the weeks shared like heavy stuff and so when you started to hear people’s experiences, and especially experiences that were similar (made it more comfortable)”. She continued, “It got better essentially as the weeks kind of wore on because the cohesion provided that kind of, you know, comfort level increased, increased comfort level for me I guess you could say”. Her journals echoed this opinion as she reflected early in the group experience:

> Once group members started sharing, it was very comforting to experience the level of attentiveness and empathy in the room. I was personally impacted by the experiences shared, and I was also totally caught off guard, that I would be personally transported to a painful place in my life that I thought I managed to deeply repress. (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 2)

Participant 3658 appeared to be impacted from others sharing even without her sharing her own story. She claimed the following:
I essentially didn’t share a lot…but it didn’t prevent the connections that I felt with people and just kind of like going back to places that I have not been in a long time...so, yeah it helped in that sense. (Participant 3658, Transcript I, Lines 105-109)

**Participant 6418.** Participant 6418 reported an eager excitement to jump into the vulnerability aspect of group, she journaled about this feeling in her first entry when she said, “I seek to be known by others and so I am excited for that to happen through this group”. She noted her reactions to others unwillingness to be vulnerable in group, “I found myself seeking for people to share and it didn’t start out that way really, I was a little irritated at this”. Participant 6418’s irritation was quickly eased as group members began disclosing parts of themselves. She noted in follow up journal entries, “I was glad that our group felt more cohesive and everyone seemed to open up more and reveal something about themselves”. She continued her appreciations for disclosures over the next few weeks as she wrote, “Tonight I am grateful to share space with such caring and genuine classmates and professors. This journey has been wonderful already, I am thankful for the energy and contributions of everyone in the group”.

Participant 6418 also noted some initial hesitations to disclose and be completely vulnerable in group with those she did not know or had not created a relationship of trust prior. She reflected on these concerns in her interview in the following excerpts:

I remember feeling like a little bit worried about...just being that vulnerable and open with everyone in the group, because there were- I mean there’s like certain people I was close to but then other people that I wasn’t and so I remember feeling like, oh that might be kind of weird for them to know that about me or something. (Participant 6418, Transcript I, Lines 15-19).

Even though we talked about it, it was like, this whole paradigm of like we’re not going to grade you based upon your participation but like this person is still your professor, so it’s kind of like all of a sudden, you’ve gone into this like different relationship with them and they’re your therapist. (Participant 6418, Transcript I, Lines 22-26).
It seemed for Participant 6418 as the group progressed and trust increased within the group by mutual sharing and vulnerability, she became more comfortable with the process and with facilitators knowing personal information about her struggles. She reflected:

I think just as time went on, it was more, it just seemed more normal, and I wasn’t worried that anything I talked about was going to affect alike like how he thought of me as a future counselor or anything. And I think part of that was also guys at certain points like disclosed stuff about yourself, so it wasn’t just us doing that. (Participant 6418, Transcript I, Lines 30-34).

Table 4.3 Examples of Emergent Theme: Importance of Trust and Vulnerability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Significant Statements</th>
<th>Formulated Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5290</td>
<td>“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).</td>
<td>Exposure to the process of vulnerability as an experiential group member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9688</td>
<td>“I felt... more comfortable, where if it had been an instructor I hadn’t really had yet then I would have been like... I don’t know how I feel about this. It just felt more comfortable with him” (Participant 9688, Transcript I, Lines 25-30).</td>
<td>Increased sense of trust having a facilitator with a pre-existing relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3664</td>
<td>“It was reassuring to know that I’m not alone. It was hard for me to speak up, but I was able to “force” myself to do so, and I felt pretty good after that. It is my goal to share something each time we meet” (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 1).</td>
<td>Importance of sharing and being vulnerable in the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2522</td>
<td>“I also am very aware of those who haven’t shared, and now that I have, I feel like they should. I put myself out there so for me to continue processing they should too” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 2).</td>
<td>Expectation of shared vulnerability in group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3658</td>
<td>“Once group members started sharing, it was very comforting to experience the level of attentiveness and empathy in the room. I was personally impacted by the experiences shared” (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 2).</td>
<td>Cathartic experience with shared vulnerability</td>
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Table 4.3 Continued

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<td>6418</td>
<td>“I remember feeling like a little bit worried about... just being that vulnerable and open with everyone in the group, because there were- I mean there’s like certain people I was close to but then other people that I wasn’t and so I remember feeling like, oh that might be kind of weird for them to know that about me or something” (Participant 6418, Transcript I, Lines 15-19).</td>
<td>Sense of mistrust being vulnerable within the group</td>
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**Movement Through the Stages of Group**

**Participant 5290.** Participant 5290 displayed anxieties commonly seen in the initial stage of the group process. She discussed her fear that certain group members may break confidentiality as she stated in her interview, “Fears that I had... I even journaled about, was my stepmom was in an election so...I’m kind of weird about privacy so I think (broken) confidentiality was one thing that I was afraid of”. Participant 5290 also worried about the process of gatekeeping, as noted in her interview excerpt below:

> Some concerns would be...the things that were disclosed in the group if there would be further repercussions throughout the program... like what I shared, if I would be like remediated or maybe...you know if I’m not as empathic as some would like for me to be. I think that was kind of a concern. (Participant 5290, Transcript I, Lines 24-28)

Participant 5290’s anxieties emerged during the group as she struggled with knowing her role and what to share with peers. About halfway through the group experience in journal five she wrote, “I don’t know really what I want to say, and I’m wondering now if that’s a problem that I can’t pinpoint one thing that I want someone to know about me”. When asked about her
perception of the group facilitation process in her interview, Participant 5290 admitted having initial fears about disclosing in group because of the potential for gatekeeping. She stated, “Some concerns would be the things that were disclosed in the group if there would be further repercussions throughout the program…like what I shared, if I would be remediated”.

Participant 5290 reflected on the cohesiveness of group that formed in the transition phase. She wrote about this in her journal entry, “I really enjoyed the experience of group…I learned so much about the people in my cohort that I did not expect to, and I wouldn’t change that for anything”. Her interview corroborated this feeling as she said, “I reflect back on my group experience and think about how much I enjoyed getting to know my classmates!”

**Participant 9688.** Participant 9688 explained her anxiety as related to how others might perceive her. She reflected on this as she wrote:

One thing I was conscious about today during group was how tired I was. I was extremely tired today and was worried that it’d come across as inattentive or uncaring to the group. This is something I wish I would of addressed before we had gotten started but I thought I would be able to battle through it without anyone noticing. Maybe it did go unnoticed, it was just something I was really conscious about and am worried it may have shown in a negative light. (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 2)

The balance between the emotional demands of group along with the course work demands was a struggle for Participant 9688. She journaled, “I came into group a little anxious because of having to do my presentation after, and I ended up leaving group nervous because I had ended up sharing and was worried I wouldn’t be able to focus for my presentation”.

Participant 9688 also described anxieties about the group process and what she might share with her peers. In her fourth journal entry she processed:

I feel as if it’s (my problem) miniscule compared to what other people have gone through. We talk about how just because someone may have it “worse,” it doesn’t diminish your problems – because it’s still important to you, and in group I believe that. But I still have a hard time wanting to express mine because in the grand scheme of
things, I know that I could have gone through much worse and I don’t want to feel like I’m making a mountain out of a molehill. (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 4)

**Participant 3664.** Anxieties regarding the experiential group process for Participant 3664 presented before the group started and continued through the initial stage of the group process. In her first journal entry she claimed, “I was fairly anxious the entire week leading up to this first session. I have personally never participated in a counseling session before, so I had no idea what to expect going into the meeting”. Participant 3664 also reflected on this anxiety in her interview. She explained:

I started off very nervous because, you know, I also didn’t know my classmates *that* well because I guess I took group my, only the second semester, so I didn’t know them very well and I didn’t have any idea what the experience would be like other than I had to go. I was very nervous at first…and probably more reserved (Participant 3664, Transcript I, Lines 4-12)

Anxieties around group continued for Participant 3664 through the first month of the group experience. She journaled:

I still am having anxious feelings before group each week. I never know what to say, and honestly I guess I don’t feel that anything I have to share is that important. I don’t see my problems as “a big deal” compared to what other people are sharing. I think my anxiety has a lot to do with me wanting to control exactly what I’m going to say, and then not being able to do that (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 4)

Even after the group had transitioned through several stages, Participant 3664 struggled with anxiety. She reflected in her final journal, “I was anxious for our final group activity because I don’t like being the center of attention, and I was afraid to hear what others had to say about me”.

Participant 3664 reflected on the group experience during the final stage of group. She journaled in her last entry, “I feel much closer to several people in the cohort now which is something I was really hoping to get out of this experience; I feel like I have eight new close friends.”
Participant 2522. Reflecting on her time as a group member, Participant 2522 recalled her fears that presented in the initial stage. “I think since It was the first group experience that I had done, like I came in really antsy about it, but realized…how potent the group could be”. Her anxieties were also present regarding the fear of gatekeeping. She spoke of this in her interview below:

I had a lot of fear of like if I say something are you going to kick me out of the program. I think I was really worried about being crazy, too. Really worried about…what if I have some mental health issue that I’m not aware that comes out when I’m talking. (Participant 2522, Transcript I, Lines 61-66)

Participant 2522 reflected on concerns about the group facilitators and the group process in general. She reported in her interview, “I didn’t trust myself at all…therefore I don’t think I really trusted you guys to be able to facilitate that”.

Participant 2522’s worries extended through the initial stage and continued during the working stage as she began to disclose personal issues. She reflected in her journal extensively after sharing with the group:

I have a lot of mixed feelings for this counseling session. I’m really unsure how to process what happened. I’m grateful for having opened up about my mom, but I’m not sure if I should have gone that far with the group. I’m a lot less secure with the group than I was after this session. (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 4)

Participant 2522 recalled also being insecure and worried about timeliness and the quality of her feedback in group. She claimed:

Why couldn’t I have just said that like if I’m thinking something why couldn’t I have just, expressed that or there’s so many times where members would say something that would influence me, and I was like, ok well is this the right time to say it? And I’d like scrutinize everything I was doing instead of just being honest with it. (Participant 2522, Transcript I, Lines 32-37)

Additionally, Participant 2522 was able to reflect on the relationships formed because of the group during the transition and working stages. She journaled about this as she said, “It was
really nice to hear that my sharing last week impacted (peer) to share some more as well.” She was also mutually impacted by others in the group as she wrote, “(Peer) really impacted me this time. She spoke about her background in such a way that I could not get my mom out of my head”. Participant 2522 expanded on these connections further as she stated in her interview, “I think that was the first time that I had ever really talked about that (issues with mom) and had other people, like normalize the experience”. She continued, “I mean it really strengthened the relationship with a couple of members in group, so that was pretty cool too to kind of take that outside of group, don’t know if we were supposed to but it definitely happened”.

In Participant 2522’s last journal entry, she reflected on the final stage of group, “By the end of group, I was able to relate to everyone, if not experience their pain”. She closed with the sentiment of feeling connected with members and contributed this to trust and vulnerability as she stated:

The honesty and vulnerability in the group really is the key factor. We trust each other and want to see each other succeed. This pushes us to work on ourselves. It’s a natural occurrence that happens over time. This last group was able to work with each other and speak off of each other. (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 8)

Participant 3658. In the initial stage of group, Participant 3658 wrote about her fear of the group experience and the added pressure of not knowing any other group members. She reflected, “The group experience for me was very new…I felt a little bit like an outsider at first. As a new person to the class, I was really anxious not knowing anyone, or having an idea how the experience would be”. Additionally, Participant 3658 was the only person of color in the group which may have had significant influence on her experience of anxiety and sense of segregation from the group. Participant 3658’s recall of the group experience in her interview echoed similar emotions. She stated:
I was…essentially new to the program, new to this place, and…it was kind of like very anxiety-ridden, because I knew absolutely no one and so it was…kind of like getting into a setting where people had, formed relationships or at least were, at least were familiar with each other, so I was kind of like an outsider. (Participant 3658, Transcript I, Lines 4-9)

Anxiety for Participant 3658 continued in the weeks to follow as she journaled about the uncertainty of the group. She reflected:

In a small way, I experienced some of the anxieties in week 3 that I did in week one, just for a short while. I am not sure what that was about, but I think it might have something to do with thinking a lot about the previous week, and just being uncertain how the evening was going to unfold. (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 3)

It was apparent that anxiety and fear continued in various forms throughout the group stages and experience for Participant 3658. Her final journal reflection reflected this when she wrote, “As we settled in for our final meeting, I felt really tense and exposed”.

Participant 3658 was able to identify a decrease in anxious feelings as she began to shift from the initial stage to the transition stage. She wrote in her journal, “By the end of the evening, I felt a lot better and less anxious than when we got started”. Participant 3658 also processed feelings about the connections she formed with other group members during the experiential group.

Even though I am still not physically close to any individual member outside of class or 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)

Journal entries became increasingly more focused on the development of bonds with other group members, indicating that Participant 3658 had moved into the transition stage. She reported, “I feel a sense of connection to one member especially, because she is now currently experiencing the selfishness and rejection from her dad like I did, some years ago”. Although Participant 3658 started the group feeling as a sort of outsider, her interview reflected a renewed sense of
belonging and acceptance that developed over time in the experiential group. She recalled, “It was…a good experience and just like being able to, being accepted, you know, like I still remember people based on the experiences. It’s kind of… interesting you see people and kind of wonder…if they are doing okay”.

Participant 3658 showed movement into the working stage in her seventh journal entry as she reflected on what she learned in group. She wrote, “The courage and empathy exhibited in the group has been quite infectious. On a personal level, I have learnt a lot and I have had many questions answered that I did not even have to verbalize”. She explained in her interview the profound impact that mutual shared experiences had on her ability to reflect on her own life and internalize the change she had experienced in others. She stated:

I remember one thing that maybe stood out one person…had some daddy issues’ or something like that, and I thought well I haven’t thought about that in a long time. I’ve repressed it so much to where, you know, maybe it’s not really part of my present…and you do realize in that moment that people are so much more alike than they are different. (Participant 3658, Transcript I, Lines 190-197)

Participant 3658 closed the interview with a thoughtful reflection back on the group in its final stage:

You know it worked out beautifully, and just to kind of hear people like say things or repeat things that were like maybe said in the early weeks you’re kind of like darn, like wow, you kind of realize how cohesive the group was because if people remembered that then you know, wow so I guess it probably wasn’t that weird after all so that was very eye opening for me. (Participant 3658, Transcript I, Lines 234-239)

Participant 6418. Participant 6418 journaled in her first entry about the anxieties present in the initial stage of group. She wrote, “At the start I was extremely anxious, I noticed my heart was pounding, lips dry, clear anxiety”. Participant 6418 continued her reflections about notable feelings of anxiety in her interview as she stated, “I remember feeling like a little bit worried about…just being that vulnerable and open with like everyone in the group”. She also expressed
significant worry about her contributions to group and fear of judgement from others. She recalled, “I remember it being difficult at the time just because…. just kind of worried that I didn’t want to say like everything and then it be looked at negatively or something like that”.

Participant 6418 wrote in her second journal about growing compassion for others which may have indicated a quick personal jump to the transition stage. She wrote, “I felt deeply with those that shared even though I did not relate to everyone’s specific information-that to me felt like true empathy”.

Participant 6418 began to experience even deeper levels of connection as time progressed in the group which led to interpersonal progress and growth. She reflected on the transition to the working stage as she wrote, “I felt heard and understood and that was huge. If it was not for this group, I probably would not have sought out individual therapy and even realized that what I struggle with is not normal…an eating disorder”.

In Participant 6418’s eight journal entry, she was able to reflect on moving through the stages and being in the final stage of group. She wrote:

One thing I’ve taken away from the group is the “shared experience of suffering” which a few individuals also echoed last week. This seems really vital to understand as a future counselor that our struggles are not relative they are very important and very serious for those experiencing the pain (Participant 6418, Transcript J, No, 8).

Table 4.4 Examples of Emergent Theme: Movement Through the Stages of Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Significant Statements</th>
<th>Formulated Meaning</th>
<th>Group Stage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5290</td>
<td><em>Some concerns would be…the things that were disclosed in the group if there would be further repercussions throughout the program...if I would be...remediated</em> (Participant 5290, Transcript I, Lines 24-28).</td>
<td>Anxiety about disclosing and fear of judgement</td>
<td>Initial Stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Significant Statements</td>
<td>Formulated Meaning</td>
<td>Group Stage</td>
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<tr>
<td>9688</td>
<td><em>I feel as if it’s (my problem) miniscule compared to what other people have gone through…I still have a hard time wanting to express mine…I know that I could have gone through much worse and I don’t want to feel like I’m making a mountain out of a molehill</em> (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 4).</td>
<td>Anxiety about disclosing in group and being unsure of what to share</td>
<td>Initial Stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3664</td>
<td><em>I still am having anxious feelings before group each week. I never know what to say, and honestly I guess I don’t feel that anything I have to share is that important. I don’t see my problems as “a big deal” compared to what other people are sharing</em> (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 4).</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2522</td>
<td><em>I have a lot of mixed feelings for this counseling session. I’m really unsure how to process what happened. I’m grateful for having opened up about my mom, but I’m not sure if I should have gone that far with the group. I’m a lot less secure with the group than I was after this session</em> (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 4).</td>
<td>Anxiety and fear of disclosure in group and sense of mistrust of group members</td>
<td>Initial Stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3658</td>
<td><em>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</em> (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 4).</td>
<td>Increased sense of connectedness and group cohesion</td>
<td>Transition Stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6418</td>
<td><em>I felt heard and understood and that was huge. If it was not for this group, I probably would not have sought out individual therapy and even realized that what I struggle with is not normal</em> (Participant 6418, Transcript J, No. 7).</td>
<td>Cathartic experience from sharing and being vulnerable in group</td>
<td>Working Stage</td>
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**Development of Self-Awareness & Personal Growth**

**Participant 5290.** The experiential group had a lasting effect on Participant 5290 on several levels. She reflected in her interview, “I think that by participating in the group that I discovered more about myself and my peers than I had anticipated”. She also described the experience, “As a whole…rewarding, rewarding for not only my future practice but also, human growth”. Participant 5290 spent time explaining the acquired sense of self-awareness that resulted from the group as she stated:

I think that some of my…hesitation with sharing and things like that, I think it’s still present, so I think that it’s made me…more aware of it. Long-term effects…I’m more aware of my stuff and why I’m not like just jumping into this pool of feelings.

Participant 5290 documented her personal reflections throughout her journals. She indicated a continuous process of introspection when she wrote, “I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to journal over spring break or not, but I figured since I had reflected about group and counseling as a whole, that I would write anyways”. She continued her personal reflections throughout the group process and came to new insights as she noted in her second journal, “Last week I thought about how our upbringing affects us and how we are going to be long term. I wonder if I didn’t have parents in the spotlight if I would have conducted my life the way that I have.” Participant 5290’s internal process and hope for continued growth was especially apparent in the final group gift-giving activity as she journaled, “I don’t really know what to do with said gift but the word ‘strong’ keeps resonating with me and hopefully I can figure out what I want to do with that”.

**Participant 9688.** Participant 9688 came into the group experience with an expectation of growth. She wrote, “It will also be a good experience when it comes to self-awareness and learning more about myself and others that I don’t usually think about during daily interactions”. Participant 9688 utilized her journals to continue her reflections after group as she processed other areas in her life not addressed in group. She stated, “This is something that doesn’t really
have to do with group, but it was brought to my attention yesterday and I think I need to talk about it”. Participant 9688 continued to write a lengthy reflection about a suicide of a friend that she was not yet ready to process verbally but wanted to begin the process of closure through her writing. Participant 9688 gained additional insight into her own situation as she moved through the group stages and looked at areas she had not examined before. She mentioned in her journal:

Other than realizing that I hadn’t really dealt with this, I also realized I need to pay more attention to my mental health. I think I internalize way too much; like a balloon, I keep adding more air into it until it bursts. Hopefully this is something I can begin to work on in and outside of group. (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 3)

Additionally, when other group members would share their experience, it encouraged Participant 9688 to do the same and examine her own life. She journaled, “When (members) were talking about depression along with parental relationships caused me to examine my own”. She also attended to her reactions in the moment and processed her feelings about them in her journals afterwards. She wrote:

I was aware that something she said rubbed me the wrong way. I had to internally process it for a minute and then realized that was the way she was raised. I wasn’t sure if my body language or expressions had changed, I was trying to keep a “poker face,” but I felt myself kind of disengage after she made those statements. It didn’t change my opinion of (her), but it just irritated me. (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 6)

Participant 3664. Participant 3664 journaled often about the personal issues she wanted to explore further. Early in the group experience she commented on her need to address these issues when she wrote:

I left group feeling drained and very reflective of my life. I am aware of the struggles I have but since they are nothing that concerning right now, they are put on my back burner until they boil over eventually. So far I have been able to handle everything, but who knows how much longer I can keep that up. (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 4)

Participant 3664’s reflections sustained into the following week as she continued:

I mentioned in last week’s journal about some of the thoughts I’ve been having about this semester, and also some thoughts about myself. I’m a worrier, a planner, and a constant over-thinker. I know I should try and be a more open and flexible person, but it is really
Participant 3664 not only displayed significant internal process and reflection, but also set goals for herself to work on areas that she could improve. She noted in her journal:

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. I want to be care-free and happy, and I want to take risks; I just don’t know how to get to that point. Talking about it in group has been more than helpful and I’m very appreciative of that. Maybe next week I can talk more, and maybe simply talking more about it will help me start to change. The first step in changing is realizing you need to change, and now I can say I’ve officially done that. (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 7)

In her interview Participant 3664 also discussed the impact that journaling had on her ability to explore different areas. She reported:

It was nice that… I was required to go home and reflect about it (group)...it kind of forced me to share in a way...maybe if I wasn’t as comfortable sharing with the whole group I was still... sharing or reflecting about what other people said in the journal. (Participant 3664, Transcript I, Lines 120-124)

In closing, Participant 3664 set goals for how to continue the internal progress and challenges that she had set for herself even after the group ended. She reflected:

Hearing everyone’s gifts and kind words really made me feel confident. Now I know what they think about me and it’s nothing bad; I am a good person and I am “good enough”. I feel like this gave me the strength to move forward and face any challenges that may lie ahead of me. I want to incorporate spontaneity into my life; I want to live more, and plan less; I want to be a more honest and open person with my friends and family; I want to give myself the gift of relaxation. (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 9)

Participant 2522. Participant 2522 quickly realized the potential for interpersonal process through the group experience. She discussed this in her first journal entry when she wrote, “I came into the group excited to do work, but maybe I thought I could give people insight about myself and that could help them. Instead I’m working through understanding myself and that’s really exhausting in front of other people”. Participant 2522 reflected in her journal entries about her experiences of processing in front of peers and what realizations she had formulated.
because of this. She reflected on the personal impact that occurred because of seeing another peer process their own issues:

Her catharsis was like looking into my past as a younger version of me and being there as I realized I don’t want to fail. (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 5)

She continued in the same journal entry about what this reflection meant to her and what she hoped to do with her awareness:

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. These cognitive distortions are a lot more rooted than I gave them credit for (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 5)

While Participant 2522 had periods of motivation and set goals for herself throughout her internal process, she also had moments of vulnerability and self-doubt that she processed in the following journal entry:

I’m really second guessing my ability to be a counselor now that I realize how much I hate being the one everyone takes out their anger on. This may be because I don’t put up enough boundaries. I really need to understand how to put up boundaries better (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 6)

As group continued, Participant 2522 showed an increased ability to reflect on what the group had given her in terms of personal growth. She wrote, “The group process has taught me that life is a process. It takes time to implement anything but having support and people to keep me responsible makes my rate of success increase so much more”. Participant 2522 also reflected, “This last group session helped me to just sit and wade through what it means that I am good enough. The transference and countertransference with (member) helped me the most”. In her interview, Participant 2522 discussed the significance of the experiential group and how the journal reflections helped her process in her interview:

I realized like oh that is a way that I process really really well. So that really like helped me learn maybe even a coping skill for me, um but it also…I don’t know if I would have
gone back and thought about group in between sessions without I, because there was so much anxiety that I had about group that I didn’t want to look at (Participant 2522, Transcript I, Lines 205-209)

In her final journal entry, Participant 2522 reflected on her personal areas of growth and the progress that she hoped to make in the future. She wrote:

Life is a process. It’s a way of doing the journey well. I know for mine to be healthier I need to set boundaries and have those vulnerable, honest relationships. I also know that I’m doing it well. I am more spontaneously vulnerable. It’s risky as hell, but worth it. I believe in loving people until they are gone, and to love fully means I must give myself fully (or at least as much as I can handle at the time because boundaries are important). I can’t be afraid of having a two-way conversation. This group has fostered that ability and strength to do that. Thank you. (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 9)

Participant 3658. Participant 3658 journaled extensively about her internal processes and personal changes that transpired over the course of the experiential group. She reflected in her second journal about feelings that came up during the group:

I experienced a level of anger and resentment that I hadn’t experienced in years – and this was not just at my father’s shortcomings, but at the other fathers who has caused so much pain to all these other people whose lives are still very much affected by the things they did or did not do. (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 2)

Her journal entries continued, noting significant internal reflection and self-awareness. She stated:

I find interesting how much I continue to grow as an individual on a weekly basis, as I acquire a deeper comprehension and meaning of the group process. I was not sure at the onset what it is that I had hoped to accomplish or acquire from the process, but as the weeks unfold, I am having awareness of different things – some that I had not remembered or chosen not to deal with for a long time. It is becoming more apparent to me how effective the process can be, and really is. (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 6)

As other group members shared about difficulties with their parents, Participant 3658 reflected on her own parenting style. She documented about this event in her fourth journal:

I have also been reflecting on my parenting skills, and the impact I have made and is still making on my children’s lives. I am grateful for the privilege of having access to people, tools and resources that can help me to be continually better. (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 4)
Participant 3658 recognized the significance of peer relationships and mutual sharing as important in the process of self-discovery and personal awareness. She wrote:

It was therefore useful for me to hear from someone with a somewhat similar experience say [paraphrased] that given time, the relationship, even though severed in childhood, has the potential to heal, grow and develop, when the child reaches a stage of maturity, and chooses to make that decision to make it work. That was truly liberating for me to hear. In addition to bonding with the other members of the group, I am also learning and growing as an individual. That makes the experience truly amazing (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 5)

Participant 3658 continued her reflections over what other members had shared and discussed the changes to come:

Over the break I thought about the group experience, and about individual members who have done a tremendous amount of work for the weeks we have been meeting. I also thought about what it would be like moving forward without the group experience (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 7)

She continued this dialogue in the following week’s journal entry and proudly recognized the insights she had developed over the course of the experiential group. Participant 3658 explained:

As I listened to different group members bring some kind of closure to the group occurrence, I thought about my own experience over the weeks and how impacted I have been. Even though I did not have the chance of being in the “hot seat,” the experience was nonetheless enriching and beneficial. I have learned so much about my personal strengths and weaknesses, and I have had questions answered that I did not even need to ask. (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 8)

Participant 6418. When asked about her general perception of the experiential group, Participant 6418 stated in her interview, “I think it helped me grow, like I needed to go through that to grow as a counselor, a future counselor, like to have that awareness about myself”. She explained further:

It was actually a really transformative experience for me. There were a lot of things I didn’t realize… things that I was dealing with until I got into the group and…we were sharing different things and…there were just some things that I thought were totally normal and didn’t realize like they weren’t, and I really needed to work on them. (Participant 6418, Transcript I, Lines 4-10)
The experiential group process provided insight and awareness for Participant 6418 as well as fostered motivation to seek help and move towards change. She recognized this factor in her interview as she said:

I mean like as a result of the group I started my own therapy and like to work through some of my body issues and like disordered eating and that I mean, honestly like that changed my life. That was not something I would have realized I needed to like process through without having the group. (Participant 6418, Transcript I, Lines 88-92)

Participant 6418 related her experience of the group as being impactful on both her personal development as well as professional growth. She reported:

I think it’s just like the awareness piece is what stands out to me. It’s like, I think, not speaking for anyone else, but I feel like we all sort of like had more awareness of like who are we as a person, and how does that relate to us as counselor, um and I think that’s really important in being a good counselor. (Participant 6418, Transcript I, Lines 127-131)

These sentiments were often repeated throughout Participant 6418’s journal entries such as her final reflection when she claimed, “The group has grown my empathy and understanding of the commonality of suffering and the fact that we are not alone. We are all different, and that is the only thing that makes us the same”.

Table 4.5 Examples of Emergent Theme: Development of Self-Awareness & Personal Growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Significant Statements</th>
<th>Formulated Meaning</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5290</td>
<td>“Last week I thought about how our upbringing affects us and how we are going to be long term. I wonder if I didn’t have parents in the spotlight if I would have conducted my life the way that I have” (Participant 5290, Transcript J, No. 2).</td>
<td>Self-awareness and reflection of personal issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Significant Statements</td>
<td>Formulated Meaning</td>
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<tr>
<td>9688</td>
<td>“When (members) were talking about depression along with parental relationships it caused me to examine my own” (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 4).</td>
<td>Experience of listening to other’s share in group leads to introspection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3664</td>
<td>“Talking about it in group has been more than helpful. Maybe simply talking more about it will help me start to change. The first step in changing is realizing you need to change, and now I can say I’ve officially done that” (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 7).</td>
<td>Self-awareness and reflection of personal issues and processing means for change</td>
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<tr>
<td>2522</td>
<td>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).</td>
<td>Self-awareness and reflection of personal issues and processing means for change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3658</td>
<td>I continue to grow as an individual on a weekly basis, as I acquire a deeper comprehension and meaning of the group process. As the weeks unfold, I am having awareness of different things – some that I had not remembered or chosen not to deal with for a long time. It is becoming more apparent to me how effective the process can be, and really is (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 6).</td>
<td>Impact of the group process on self-awareness and reflection of personal issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6418</td>
<td>I feel like we all sort of like had more awareness of like who are we as a person, and how does that relate to us as counselor, um and I think that’s really important in being a good counselor (Participant 6418, Transcript I, Lines 127-131).</td>
<td>Impact of the group process on self-awareness and reflection of personal issues</td>
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Comprehension of the Group Process

Participant 5290. Participant 5290 described the learning experiences gained from the experiential group in terms of personal development and growth. She reported, “I felt like I…grew more in that brief group than I would have if I hadn’t participated”. Participant 5290 also felt there were lasting impacts from the experiential group on her sense of self-awareness and self-reflection. She claimed, “I think that by participating in the group that I discovered more about myself and my peers…I kind of had more of an experience as a client more than just, like a student”. The skills and insights that Participant 5290 reflected on during the experiential group continued even after termination of the group. She reflected:

I think that some of my hesitation with sharing and things like that, I think it’s still present. I think it’s me being hesitant to be vulnerable. It (group) made me more aware of it so like long-term effects, I’m more aware of my stuff and why I’m not just jumping into this pool of feelings. (Participant 5290, Transcript I, Lines 103-110)

Participant 5290 also believed that the group experience directly connected and related back to what she was learning in the classroom. She stated:

I think the experience as a whole (lead to) understanding what it’s like to be a group. What I learned, in class when we went over the different theories of groups and how to essentially run them…it was interesting to kind of put the pen to paper and see what it was like to even be a part of a group. I guess maybe even made it more realistic. (Participant 5290, Transcript I, Lines 103-110)

Participant 5290 discussed specific methods of facilitation that were most impactful. She claimed:

When the group first started we’d do like an over round-all around check in and it’d go back to people that had…concerns…and I did like that. The facilitators kept focus on one person but then would ask if they would want to hear from one person in the group what would they say or…who would you want to hear from so I did like that, that it was inclusive in that way. (Participant 5290, Transcript I, Lines 33-39).

Participant 9688. Participant 9688 saw the experiential group as beneficial in understanding and comprehension of the group counseling process. She reported, “It was just a
good way to just expose me to what a group process looks like, whether it’s structured how ours was or more experiential or whatever else”. Personal awareness and insight were also group outcomes for Participant 9688, which were displayed in her journal entry. She stated, “I wasn’t aware a statement like that would affect me until I heard it said. It’s just something for me to be more aware of in the future to make sure my non-verbal cues don’t come across as closed off”.

Participant 9688 also described a few challenges that presented because of the format of the experiential group and how it impacted learning outcomes. She explained:

I liked the group better than class. I guess one thing that would have been helpful since we went through all the different theories in class, was maybe seeing how those actually look in a group setting…I think the hardest thing was…having both the group and class going on…and transitioning (to class after group). (Participant 9688, Transcript I, Lines 88-92)

She continued about the difficulties with the transition between the group and class:

I had group before class so then it was really hard sometimes to go to class after and…in one of my…journals the day that I had my presentation was the day that I had disclosed the most, so it was really like nerve wracking trying to transition…between the two. (Participant 9688, Transcript I, Lines 91-97)

Participant 9688 also expressed concern with group behaviors and felt increased facilitation interventions could have been helpful. She recommended:

The main thing that I like really picked up on looking back was that we had three people that kind of talked for the majority of the group so every week it turned into kind of a check in on what’s going on with these three…so I think sometimes it did take away from other people getting to share. (Participant 9688, Transcript I, Lines 210-215)

Participant 3664. Participant 3664 journaled about learning outcomes as early as her first entry. She stated, “I already feel like I learned a lot about facilitating just from this first session. I liked seeing Dr. B use counseling techniques on other members; it was helpful to see the process in action, even if it was brief”. In the same journal entry, Participant 3664 also described feelings of comfort gained from the facilitator’s approach. She wrote:
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)

Participant 3664 continued her commentary about the group facilitator’s approach and how it impacted her experience positively. She reflected, “I didn’t like everyone watching me, but sometimes I didn’t even notice it…because just like his (group facilitator) eye contact…it just felt…very genuine and that he really was listening to what I was saying and understanding”.

Participant 3664 recalled specific interventions she learned from the experiential group:

My favorite technique was when Dr. B told me to go from saying “I have to be a perfectionist” to “I choose to be a perfectionist”. 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)

Even while experiencing difficult emotions and uncomfortable feelings, Participant 3664 continued to see the benefit of the group facilitation techniques implemented in the experiential group. She relayed:

It was really a growing experience for me…I felt very exposed a lot of the time, or vulnerable, like one time he didn’t ask me this but… someone was tearing up and…he asked them what would your tears say, and I never heard-or been asked something like that…but I understood why he was asking it in the end…after I reflected about it later. (Participant 3664, Transcript I, Lines 39-47)

Participant 3664 also recalled techniques learned that she reported hesitancy to use in her future practice. She journaled:

This week I noticed Dr. B saying, ‘Who do you notice in the room right now?’ I think it’d be hard for me to answer that question if I was asked because it’s almost like a form of confrontation. I wouldn’t want to single out one particular person in the room that I was “noticing”. I think this is one of my least favorite techniques so far. (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 2)

Participant 3664 expressed her preference of certain group facilitation techniques in her interview as she stated:
I really liked how we did it…like having Dr. B…and his…knowledge and expertise, but then also having… I felt like we could relate to you maybe a little better, because you know, you went through what a lot of us went through, like more recently (laughter) and I don’t’ know that was nice to have someone like to relate to but then to also have Dr. B. I don’t know, I really liked that…combo and I liked having two facilitators. (Participant 3664, Transcript I, Lines 207-213)

Participant 3664 commented on the connection between the experiential group and group course work. She stated:

It did connect (back to the course) maybe a little bit, not like a lot. I remember learning about certain techniques and things like that, but really the group experience is where I learned the most. I’m pretty sure I read the book and things like that. I just feel like I actually learned a lot, I mean that kind of goes with any class, you learn a lot by doing. (Participant 3664, Transcript I, Lines 183-188)

Participant 3664’s final journal entry reflected the significance of the experiential group on her personal and professional learning outcomes. She wrote:

I also feel even more confident going forward, and not worried as much about facing my problems. Honestly now that I know how a group process goes I am even more inclined to try individual counseling or maybe another group in the future. (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 9)

**Participant 2522.** Initially, Participant 2522 was somewhat confused about what insights she was supposed to gain from the experiential group. She wrote in her third journal entry, “I’m not sure if we are supposed to develop those counseling skills of reflecting or questioning or empathy. I know they all make us more authentic of a person, but the unstructured and yet structured-ness of our group confuses me”. About mid-way into the experiential group experience, Participant 2522 appeared to begin to understand the group process and impact. She reflected in her fifth journal, “A lot of the group members are becoming more self-actualized and I love it. It’s like a holding environment for some, a working environment for others, and a way to learn all at the same time. What a beautiful idea”.

In her interview, Participant 2522 discussed how the experiential group connected to classroom learning. She stated:
I know I’d go back to the classroom and have…these moments of oh that’s what we did! It felt like what we were doing in there just because those are like the basic techniques and we got to see them come out and we got to see people open up and get into the working stage so that was pretty cool. I think it definitely…showed me like how the process works and how it takes some time and that it’s…clunky, it’s not that linear model that you get taught in class. (Participant 2522, Transcript I, Lines 183-192)

Another insight Participant 2522 gained during the group experience was a new comprehension about group counseling as a process. She reflected in one of her later journal entries:

I also see how helpful processing in group can be because it’s not like personal counseling with depth, but it’s a place for catalyst action outside group. Being able to name problems is really important in life, and I have learned that within group. (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 7)

In her final journal entry, Participant 2522 provided her personal insight into the influence that the experiential group had on her view of the group counseling phenomena.

This whole experience has been a gift. I really understand why group can be so good. I can also see how they could go bad quickly. We learned each other’s boundaries and respected them. If one of the members did not respect boundaries, however, I can see disrespect happening as well because our members were so vulnerable. I know I wouldn’t have done well with someone challenging me. (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 9)

**Participant 3658.** Participant 3658 went into the group experience with an attitude to gain insight and learn. She reflected in her second journal, “Even though it is new and still somewhat awkward for me to self-disclose, I would prefer to learn and grow through these experiences, rather than having negative counter-transference on any individual or the group as a whole”. She continued in her third journal about the experience of playing different roles in group and practicing different skills. She reflected, “The observer role interestingly felt just as, or even more valuable than speaking did. It was great to be in a position that allowed me to practice active listening and attending. In Participant 3658’s sixth journal entry, she was able to identify what she had gained from the group experience so far. She reflected:

I was not sure at the onset what it is that I had hoped to accomplish or acquire from the process, but as the weeks unfold, I am having awareness of different things – some that I
had not remembered or chosen not to deal with for a long time. It is becoming more apparent to me how effective the process can be, and really is. (Participant 3658, Transcript J., No. 6)

In Participant 3658’s final journal, she recognized the substantial impact the group had on her learning and comprehension of group process. She claimed, “It was great to see theory put into practice, and moving forward, there is a lot that I have learned and would implement, if the chance arises to lead or co-lead a group. Participant 3658’s interview statement was similar in nature. She related:

It basically put practice to theory, in that sense where you’re learning these things in the book and…those scenes just kind of unfold before your eyes, it was just like magical most weeks-just to see…people having kind of catharsis and stuff that they experienced from the experience, and even personally–I essentially didn’t… share a lot…but it didn’t prevent the connections that I felt with people and just kind of like going back to places that I have not been in a long time…so, yeah it helped in that sense. (Participant 3658, Transcript I, Lines 100-109)

Participant 3658 spoke of the positive skills she gathered from specific group facilitation interventions. She explained, “I felt like it was really nicely facilitated and that made the experience a lot more enriching for me personally”. Participant 3658 also described her appreciations in a journal entry, “I valued the group leader’s active participation and timely interjection of humor in the group discussion, which further helped to increase comfortability in the room”. She continued, “I think the group leader’s active participation and appropriate self-disclosure in the discussion has been really beautiful, and a great instrument in making the group members feel at ease. Participant 3658 provided unprompted journal reflections about the group facilitation process as seen in journal entry seven which stated, “It was really helpful hearing from the group leader who gave a parental point of view, on the matter of how parents feel, when they have to have that honest conversation with their adult children. Participant 3658 summed up
her perceptions of having the group course professor as the experiential group leader. She explained:

I’m really happy that there was an instructor, because I got to see it from that learned experienced perspective, so I’m not saying it wouldn’t have been great with just a doc student, but doc students essentially don’t come with that level of experience, and for me I probably needed that experience. I feel like a doc student probably could have facilitated and it would have been okay, but just to have like Dr. B’s level of experience was very beneficial to me (Participant 3658, Transcript I, Lines 77-86)

According to Participant 3658, the experiential group provided learning that lasted long after the group had ended. She reported:

It really left long lasting impressions on me because last Spring I actually facilitated a group by myself… and it went really great. I’m glad I had that personal experience because I feel like it made sense to me now as a practitioner it’s good to experience things before you try to do it before. (Participant 3658, Transcript I, Lines 136-141)

She continued:

It makes a lot of sense. I was able to…draw on a lot of those…personal experiences that I had and be more empathic with the group members, because…once you experience something and you see it happening to someone else then you kind of know what that feels like and you can sit with someone and look at them a little different. (Participant 3658, Transcript I, Lines 141-146)

**Participant 6418.** Early journal reflections for Participant 6418 included a willingness to learn and grow because of the group experience. She wrote, “I am really looking forward to the group continuing and seeing how it will change me”. Throughout the group experience, Participant 6418 displayed growth in professional development. She reflected:

I wonder if it is hard as a group leader when things impact you in this way to stay composed. This made me realize how important it is for counselors to process through their own ‘stuff’, so we can be present for clients” (Participant 6418, Transcript J, No. 2)

Participant 6418 provided insights into the learning impacts that resulted from specific interventions. She stated in her interview, “I really liked the piece where…Dr. B would ask people…what their younger self would say to them now and that was really powerful”. She
reflected on the significance of a facilitation intervention during her group experience journal. She wrote, “Acting out what I want to say to my mom was clarifying. It gave me the opportunity to see what it felt like for me to say those things, and to get practice if I decide to actually confront my mom”. Alternatively, Participant 6418 shared the concern also reported by another group participant about the group feeling like individual therapy at times. She stated, “I felt like sometimes…it felt like one person was just sharing and we were all just kind of…silently…like we weren’t providing feedback to them…we were just listening”.

Participant 6418’s desire to seek insight into her own abilities as a counselor continued throughout the group process as she wrote:

I was reflecting on that experience, which also led me to thinking about things that would trigger me as a future counselor and the importance of dealing with your own stuff properly, so you can be fully present for others. So far this has been my favorite experience as a counseling student, I’m excited to see how it affects me in the future. (Participant 6418, Transcript J, No. 8)

In her final journal reflections, Participant 6418 described the personal and professional learning outcomes that resulted from group membership. She explained, “I do feel more confident that I can feel empathy for different types of struggles because of my participation in the group”. She continued, “I did not realize how much I would learn about individual counseling through the group experience, and those are things I will take into my practice someday”.

Table 4.6 Emergent Theme: Comprehension of the Group Process

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<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
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<td>Able to understand group process from experience of group membership</td>
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<td>9688</td>
<td>“The main thing that I like really picked up on looking back was that we had three people that kind of talked for the majority of the group so every week it turned into kind of a check in on what’s going on with these three...so I think sometimes it did take away from other people getting to share” (Participant 9688, Transcript I, Lines 210-215).</td>
<td>Understanding of dynamics of group members and the process of sharing</td>
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<td>3664</td>
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<td>Learning group techniques through modeling of group leaders</td>
</tr>
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<td>2522</td>
<td>“I know I’d go back to the classroom and have...these moments of oh that’s what we did... I think it definitely...showed me like how the process works and how it takes some time and that it’s...clunky, it’s not that linear model that you get taught in class” (Participant 2522, Transcript I, Lines 183-192).</td>
<td>Connecting group techniques back to course work and text</td>
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<td>6418</td>
<td>“I felt like sometimes...it felt like one person was just sharing and we were all just kind of...silently...like we weren’t providing feedback to them...we were just listening” (Participant 6418, Transcript I, Lines 70-72).</td>
<td>Understanding of dynamics of group members and the process of sharing</td>
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Exhaustive Description and Fundamental Statement of Structure

The lived experiences of master’s-level counseling students in a co-facilitated experiential group reflected a remarkable acquisition of personal, professional, and educational growth and learning. Counseling students who participated in an experiential group facilitated by a skilled instructor, partnered with a relatable doctoral student as a co-facilitator, showed consistent movement through Corey’s (2016) four identified stages of group. Students also displayed significant therapeutic benefits as a result of participation as a group member, which closely relates to counseling pioneer Irvin Yalom’s (1995) 11 curative factors of group process.

Counseling students were somewhat apprehensive and often highly anxious for the initial meeting of the experiential group. There was a tendency to be somewhat guarded and a general lack of confidence in students’ beliefs about the value of their contributions to the group. While most counseling students were somewhat hesitant to be vulnerable and open in the first few group sessions, there was a sense of longing and a desire for others to share to help reduce anxiety and increase the sense of community and trust. This phase of the group was known as the initial stage. Counseling students engaged in imitative behavior modeled by the group leader and other members to help determine the norms of the group experience. Trust was an important variable during this stage and increased communication from group leaders and group members helped to create a heightened sense of trust.

During the first few group sessions, counseling students began taking risks of vulnerability by providing small disclosures. When students were met with positive regard and feedback from other peers, anxiety seemed to decrease, and a sense of connection and trust formed. This stage was referred to as the transition stage, as members began being more open and contributed to the group experience. As students began to share, there was a sense of
universality and members realized they are not alone in their experience of problems. Group members began sharing parts of themselves and extended help to other members in displays of altruistic acts of emotional support. It was also at this stage of group that students began developing socializing techniques and worked on problem solving and effective communication skills.

As counseling students in the experiential group began sharing intimately personal details about themselves to the group, a sense of group cohesiveness was formed, and the group moved into the working stage. Members were free to share openly without fear of judgment and reported feeling a genuine sense of connection with others who shared. Counseling students reported a sense of cohesiveness within the group, and experienced each other in similar ways to how they experience their primary family group. This served as an additional opportunity for the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group. During this stage of group, students started to reflect on their own interpersonal experiences and gained insight about their impact through feedback from other members. Students’ journaled about behaviors they wanted to change in their own lives and realized the impacts of the disclosures in group.

Counseling students experienced significant catharsis through their disclosures in group. Group members reported catharsis presented as their disclosers were met with positive regard and encouraging feedback from peers. Another characteristic of the working stage was that counseling students were exposed to imparting information through direct teaching of group skills, observation of group techniques, and through the experience of being a group member. Counseling students were able to see theory put to practice as they experienced the group process and simultaneously learned about the group process in the classroom.
Although counseling students reported feeling as though they had just entered the working stage, the group transitioned once again and entered its final phase, the termination stage. This stage consisted of the realization that group was ending, and group facilitators began using methods to provide a sense of closure to members. Counseling students reflected on existential factors and continued to process the interpersonal issues that presented during the group experience. As group ended and reflections on the process increased, members reported an instillation of hope, belief in the group process, and increased ability to overcome personal issues. Counseling students had final reflections on the experience and noted the personal and professional growth that resulted because of the experiential group experience.

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. Furthermore, findings from this research were consistent with all of the characteristics and movement through Corey’s (2016) four stages of group including the initial, transition, working, and termination stage. Counseling students’ expressed experience of all 11 of Yalom’s (1995) curative factors, which was demonstrated throughout their journal reflections and in their interview data. Table 4.6 below illustrates examples of participants’ experiences that reflect movement through Corey’s (2016) stages of group. Table 4.7 provides participants’ examples of the experience of Yalom’s (1995) curative factors.
Table 4.7 Examples of Participant’s Movement through Corey’s (2016) Stages of Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Stage</th>
<th>Transition Stage</th>
<th>Working Stage</th>
<th>Termination Stage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>5290</strong></td>
<td>“Some concerns would be...the things that were disclosed in the group if there would be further repercussions throughout the program...if I would be remediated” (Participant 5290, Transcript I, Lines 24-28).</td>
<td>“I just have issues about confidentiality. I mean, I trust the people in my group, I think but I know that a lot of people would pay good money to write things in the Democrat” (Participant 5290, Transcript J, No. 2).</td>
<td>“Last week I thought about how our upbringing affects us and how we are going to be long term” (Participant 5290, Transcript J, No. 2).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>9688</strong></td>
<td>“Overall, I’m very interested in the group process and the relationships that may be formed throughout the course” (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 1).</td>
<td>“Although our cohort as a whole is cohesive, and I feel as if I can trust everyone in our cohort, I’ve already established stronger bonds with a few people” (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 2).</td>
<td>“It felt cathartic to share. It was nice to be able to say what I wanted to say and not worry about how people would perceive it” (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3664</strong></td>
<td>“I was fairly anxious the entire week leading up to this session. I had no idea what to expect going into the meeting” (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 1).</td>
<td>“I kept having reactions to what others were sharing, but I found it hard to just jump in with my thoughts; it seemed like an interruption” (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 3).</td>
<td>“I was able to process that a lot the anxieties I am feeling can be stemmed back to my fear of failing” (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No 5).</td>
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<td>“I feel very proud of myself and the group members for the strides we have made in our own personal issues. I also feel even more confident going forward, and not worried as much about facing my problems” (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 9).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Initial Stage</td>
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<td>Working Stage</td>
<td>Termination Stage</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2522</strong> “I’m not really sure how this group is going to go, and after entering it pretty confident, I realized it’s going to be a lot more work than I expected and I’m not sure I have the energy for it” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 1).</td>
<td>“I may have jumped the gun in trying to get people in the group to open up about life and just start talking... Trying to process too deeply without...cohesiveness in the group is not helpful to the person processing” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 2).</td>
<td>“The countertransference with (peer) helped me the most. Her catharsis was like looking into my past as a younger version of me and being there as I realized I don’t want to fail” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 5).</td>
<td>“This experience gave me a gift of honesty in myself again. By the end of group, I was able to relate to everyone, if not experience their pain” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No 9).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3658</strong> “The group experience for me was very new, and I felt a little bit like an outsider at first. I was really anxious not knowing anyone, or having an idea how the experience would be” (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No 1).</td>
<td>“I still was a lot uncertain about what to expect, and how I would be affected by the progression and outcome of the session. Even though we had grown a little more comfortable with each other, there was still a little hesitance to share at first” (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No 2).</td>
<td>“It was therefore useful for me to hear from someone with a somewhat similar experience... In addition to bonding with the other members of the group, I am also learning and growing as an individual” (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 5).</td>
<td>“It dawned on me then, that we have just a couple more weeks to go, and I wonder what the process of termination would look for the group, and also for individual members” (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 7).</td>
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<td><strong>6418</strong> “At the start I was extremely anxious, I noticed my heart was pounding, lips dry, clear anxiety” (Participant 6418, Transcript J, No 1).</td>
<td>“I did notice a moment of conflict in my own mind. As I shared, I felt selfish. I didn’t want to take up space in the room, or be selfish by taking time to share” (Participant 6418, Transcript J, No 2).</td>
<td>“I felt heard, and understood that was huge. If it was not for this group, I probably would not have sought out individual therapy” (Participant 6418, Transcript J, No 7).</td>
<td>“I’m sad that the experience is over, but very glad to have taken part in it. I did not realize how much I would learn” (Participant 6418, Transcript J, No 9).</td>
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<td>Curative Factors</td>
<td>Participants 1-3</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Instillation of hope</strong></td>
<td>“I don’t really know what to do with said gift but the word ‘strong’ keeps resonating with me and hopefully I can figure out what I want to do with that” (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 9). “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). “I also feel even more confident going forward, and not worried as much about facing my problems” (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 9).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Universality</strong></td>
<td>“So last week (member talked about how she had these standards placed on her. I wish I had expressed how much I related to it” (Participant 5290, Transcript J, No. 6). “It felt cathartic to share, especially because they were feelings I haven’t said all together at one time. It was nice to be able to say what I wanted to say and not worry about how people would perceive it” (Participant 9688, Transcript J, No.5). “It is great to know that I’m not alone, and that other people understand my troubles” (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 5).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Imparting information</strong></td>
<td>“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). “I guess it was just a good way to just expose me to what a group process looks like whether it’s structured how ours was or more experiential or whatever else” (Participant 9688, Transcript I, Lines 222-225). “I already feel like I learned a lot about facilitating just from t (Phis first session. I liked seeing Dr. Blisard use counseling techniques on other members; it was helpful to see the process in action, even if it was brief” Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 1).</td>
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<td><strong>Altruism</strong></td>
<td>“I just figured I would share and be a little more relatable to the group” (Participant 5290, Transcript J, No. 6). “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). “When we spoke at the end I loved hearing that what I shared impacted almost everyone in the group” (Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 5).</td>
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<td>Curative Factors</td>
<td>Participants 1-3</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The corrective recapitulation of the primary family group</strong></td>
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<td>“Last week (member) talked about how she had these standards placed on her. I’ve always had standards kind of set on me academically since my dad was on the board since my spring semester of my sophomore year”</td>
<td>“Talking about depression along with parental relationships caused me to examine my own. My mom has struggled with depression and their openness about dealing with depression had me reflecting on what it was like when my mom was going through it”</td>
<td>“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)”</td>
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<td>(Participant 5290, Transcript J, No. 6).</td>
<td>(Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 4).</td>
<td>(Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 5).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Development of socializing techniques</strong></td>
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<td>“I can reflect back on my group experience and think about how much I enjoyed getting to know my classmates!”</td>
<td>“I’ve tried to tell myself that our friendships are stronger than that but I’m also a little paranoid and can’t help but think it’ll be inevitable that our friendship dynamics may change through this”</td>
<td>“I can start to see a friendship between us in the future where we are both able to be spontaneous together. She and I seem to have a lot in common and I’ve really loved getting to know her over these last nine weeks”</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Participant 5290, Transcript J, No. 9).</td>
<td>(Participant 9688, Transcript J, No. 2).</td>
<td>(Participant 3664, Transcript J, No. 8).</td>
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<td><strong>Imitative behavior</strong></td>
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<td>“I think it’s awesome that she was so open and shared and took charge of her life (in my opinion)”</td>
<td>“Everyone just like willing to share made me more comfortable (to share)”</td>
<td>“As the group started, I wondered what I would end up sharing with everyone. I waited to test out the water and once (member) shared his story, I felt a distinct urge to share”</td>
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Table 4.8 Continued

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<tr>
<th>Curative Factors</th>
<th>Participants 1-3</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5290</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal learning</td>
<td><strong>I was pretty surprised by what everyone told me… I’ve never considered myself to be “strong” …It’s just crazy to hear it from someone else’s perspective. I guess you really never know how others perceive you until they give you a gift</strong>” (Participant 5290, Transcript J, No. 9).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group cohesiveness</td>
<td><strong>“The more people opened up about their own personal things, I learned more about other people that made me comfortable to share”</strong> (Participant 5290, Transcript I, Lines 82-84).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catharsis</td>
<td><strong>“I don’t really think I had a goal when I first started but midway through I decided that I was going to share—which I did and took half a Kleenex box down with me”</strong> (Participant 5290, Transcript J, No. 9).</td>
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<td>Curative Factors</td>
<td>Participants 1-3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5290</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Existential factors</strong></td>
<td><strong>“I think that some of my... hesitation with sharing and things like that, I think it’s still present... it’s made me more aware of it so like long-term effects like I’m more aware of my stuff and why I’m not like just jumping into this pool of feelings”</strong> (Participant 5290, Transcript I, Lines 159-163).</td>
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## Table 4.9 Examples of Participants 4-6 Experience of Yalom’s (1995) Curative Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curative Factors</th>
<th>Participants 4-6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2522</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Instillation of hope</strong></td>
<td>“I can’t be afraid of having a two-way conversation. This group has fostered that ability and strength to do that” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 9).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Universality</strong></td>
<td>“I can see how ties in the group between people with similar problems really help push group members to do better” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imparting information</strong></td>
<td>“This whole experience has been a gift. I really understand why group can be so good. I can also see how they could go bad quickly” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 9).</td>
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<td>Curative Factors</td>
<td>Participants 4-6</td>
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<td>2522</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Altruism</strong></td>
<td>“I came into the group excited to do work... I thought I could give people insight about myself and that could help them” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The corrective recapitulation of the primary family group</strong></td>
<td>“I think I reacted to her so much because she reminded me of my mom when she hurts with depression” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Development of socializing techniques</strong></td>
<td>“I want to socialize with him really bad outside group...I also really want to hold (peer’s) hand to help her relax during group but I’m not sure how that would be accepted” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 2).</td>
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### Table 4.9 Continued

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curative Factors</th>
<th>Participants 4-6</th>
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<td>2522</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Imitative behavior</strong></td>
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<td>“I can relate deeply to</td>
<td>“I was personally</td>
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<td>(peer’s) catharsis</td>
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<td>moment this week with</td>
<td>shared, and I was</td>
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<td>her fear of failure. I</td>
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<td>hope she can do something</td>
<td>caught off guard,</td>
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<td>with it!” (Participant</td>
<td>that I would be</td>
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<td>2522, Transcript J, No.</td>
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<td>painful place in</td>
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<td>my life that I</td>
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<td>thought I managed</td>
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<td>to deeply repress”</td>
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<td>(Participant 3658,</td>
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<td>Transcript J, No.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal learning</strong></td>
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<td>“I also see how helpful</td>
<td>“I think the group</td>
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<td>processing in group can</td>
<td>leader’s active</td>
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<td>be...it’s a place for</td>
<td>participation and</td>
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<td>catalyst action outside</td>
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<td>group” (Participant 2522,</td>
<td>disclosure in the</td>
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<td>Transcript J, No. 7).</td>
<td>discussion has</td>
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<td>been really</td>
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<td>beautiful, and a</td>
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<td>great instrument</td>
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<td>in making the</td>
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<td>group members feel</td>
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<td>at ease” (Participant 3658, Transcript J, No. 4).</td>
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<tr>
<th>Curative Factors</th>
<th>Participants 4-6</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group cohesiveness</strong></td>
<td>“I’m really glad that it only took us three sessions to start talking about real life situations in our life” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catharsis</strong></td>
<td>“Her catharsis was like looking into my past as a younger version of me and being there as I realized I don’t want to fail” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Existential factors</strong></td>
<td>“I choose to be in my mom’s life, and I can put boundaries that allow me to flourish in my own life” (Participant 2522, Transcript J, No. 5).</td>
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</table>
**Member Check Validation of Findings**

Lincoln and Guba (2000) recommend utilizing the practice of member checks to maintain the trustworthiness of a study and to support its credibility. As mentioned previously, member checking is an explicit component of data analysis and is referred to in step seven of Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological analysis as a method of validation. Participants in this research study were provided with emergent themes and a description of the phenomenon for validation. Participants were asked to review the themes and to check for any inconsistencies in findings compared to their personal experience of the phenomena. All participants reported the findings and conclusions to be true and congruent with their lived experience. No additional inquiry or modification to this research was deemed necessary.

**Summary**

The results of this phenomenological study were obtained from multiple data sources including interview data, journal entry data, and member check interview data. Four major themes were established through the analysis of data including the following: Movement through the Stages of Group, Development of Self-Awareness & Personal Growth, Importance of Trust & Vulnerability, and Comprehension of the Group Process. Through comprehensive data collection, interpretation, and analysis, an exhaustive description of the lived experience of participants in a co-facilitated experiential group was developed for the purposes of this research study.
Chapter Five: Discussion

Overview

A descriptive phenomenological approach was used to achieve an in-depth depiction of the phenomenon. Using Colaizzi's (1978) method for data analysis, seven cluster themes arose and were reduced to four fundamental emergent themes associated with how counseling students experience membership in a co-facilitated experiential group. The results of the data analysis led to a rich and exhaustive description of the lived experience of the phenomenon as detailed in the previous chapter.

The goal of the reported study was to present a rich description of the lived experience of counseling students who participated in a co-facilitated experiential group as a part of graduate course requirements. Research questions explored were as follows:

1. 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?
   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?

The following chapter includes a summary of the current study. Each participants experience will be individually reviewed through the conceptual framework lens. A thorough discussion of the lived experiences of the participants in this study and a comparison of the findings to relevant literature will be provided. In closing, implications for counselor education, recommendations for future research, limitations, and conclusions will be discussed.
Fundamental Structure & Synthesis of the Phenomenon

Colaizzi’s (1975) seven step method of descriptive phenomenological data analysis required this researcher to extract significant statements, create formulated meanings, and develop clusters and emergent themes to reveal the essential structure of the lived experiences of participants. The following section provides a comprehensive description of the lived experience of each participant in this study. The fundamental structure of the phenomenon is described through the conceptual framework lens and supported by the narratives of the participants. The conceptual framework of this study, as described in Chapter III, serves as a guide to the following synthesis and addresses the effects of the experiential group on counseling students.

Participant 5290

Participant 5290’s experience of the experiential group can be described as an overall positive experience. For this participant, the group resulted in constructive impacts on both personal and professional areas of development. She has seen increases in interpersonal skills, as she created new connections with other group members, and gained insight into certain areas of her life that she had not considered exploring before the experiential group.

Participant 5290 expressed some initial anxieties and fears for the experiential group due to her families’ public presence in the community and fears about her personal issues coming out in a break in confidentiality. Participant 5290’s fears of members breaking confidentiality may have even been somewhat higher than others due to her family being under the scrutiny of the public eye. She appeared to move cautiously with expressions of vulnerability and didn’t share with others until around the fourth week of the experiential group after a significant amount of trust had been formed.
Although there were initial reservations about the group process from Participant 5290, there was also a strong desire to know and learn more about other group members. While Participant 5290 was somewhat slow in her displays of vulnerability, she often reflected appreciation for those who shared and reported feeling much closer to several members in the group during and after the group terminated. Friendships and connections appeared to be an important contribution to the overall group experience for this participant.

Participant 5290 continued her reflections about her family throughout the process and drew new conclusions about her fears around vulnerability that she directly related back to the group experience. Growth and awareness also presented for this participant in other areas such as learning what it felt like to be a group member and observing facilitation techniques such as initial check-ins and linking members that Participant 5290 reported as being helpful to have witnessed.

Overall, for this participant the experiential group was an opportunity to gain new connections and interpersonal skills, a chance to overcome fears of vulnerability and trust in others, as well as a group that allowed her to reflect on personal characteristics and dive deeper into exploring why she responds and reacts to things in certain ways. The group experience left Participant 5290 with a deeper comprehension of the group process, facilitation techniques, and a sense of understanding of what it is like to be a group member.

Conceptual framework application. Participant 5290 demonstrated movement through the group stages as defined by Corey (2016) in her documentation of the group experience in journal entries and during her interview. This participant reported experiences that also confirmed experiences of Yalom’s (1995) curative factors of group therapy. Specific factors Participant 5290 appeared to encounter during the experiential group included the following:
Group cohesiveness, development of socializing techniques, existential factors, and imparting of information.

Participant 5290 experienced certain curatives factors outlined by Yalom (1995) that coincide with Corey’s (2016) stages of group. Participant 5290’s early anxieties and caution with vulnerability are congruent with the initial stage, where risk taking is relatively low and exploration is tentative and based upon others’ sharing. A central issue in this stage is trust versus mistrust, a sentiment Participant 5290 echoed in her journals with a general reluctance to be open and share due to fears of other group members breaking confidentiality. According to Corey (2016), during this stage, “Members are deciding how much they will disclose and how safe the group is” (p. 114). Participant 5290 reflected this sentiment often in her journals and in the interview as she recalled a significant amount of pressure to share but being unsure of what was safe to share with the group or what would be a meaningful contribution.

As Participant 5290 became increasingly comfortable in group, she was able to begin sharing more of her personal experiences. This change is congruent with the curative factor of group cohesiveness which is known to be a characteristic of Corey’s (2016) working stage. One major outcome of the experiential group for this participant was increased interpersonal skills and connections formed because of the group. She appeared interested in developing relationships with peers through the process of group and reflected in both her journals and interview, an appreciation for the connections made during the experiential group. Yalom’s (1995) curative factor of development of socializing techniques aligns with this participant’s experience of the group process. Participant 5290 reported similar feelings throughout the process that reflect socializing techniques which indicate relating closely with other group members.
Participant 5290 expressed an awareness of her tendency to not be vulnerable with others and saw how she not only acted in this way in the group setting, but also was reluctant to be vulnerable in other areas of her life. This introspective process is characteristic of Corey’s (2016) final stage of group, where members consider how they plan to use what they have learned. Using Yalom’s (1995) curative factor application, this revelation was indicative of both interpersonal learning and existential factors. Participant 5290 reflected in her interview about the long-term effects of her lack of vulnerability and how this may impact her in various settings. This participant also described often the feeling that she had grown because of the experience of group membership. This sense of growth and change provided Participant 5290 the opportunity to integrate interpersonal learning with existential factors. She was able to promote changes in personal behavior and accept responsibility for life decisions regarding her tendency to avoid being vulnerable with others.

Participant 5290 was able to identify the benefits and outcomes that developed as a result of group membership. During Corey’s (2016) final stage, members share what they have learned and note how they have changed. Participant 5290 reflected on personal characteristics and insights gained throughout her journal entries but became increasingly reflective in the final weeks as the group drew to a close. Participant 5290 also expressed leaving the group with a sense of understanding and comprehension for what a group process may be like. She noted specific techniques observed throughout the group process and connected the facilitation techniques to the development of the stages of group. The information and education that resulted from the experiential group reported by this participant appears to align with the curative factor, imparting information, which recognizes the information and education provided by the group experience.
Participant 9688

For Participant 9688, the experiential group presented as an opportunity to share with others and learn more about the group process. Relationships and connections were highly important for this participant, as she went into the experience with an attitude of openness, willingness to trust, and a commitment to the process. Participant 9688 maintained an awareness of self in relation to others and appeared conscientious of her responses and how they might be perceived by others. Overall, Participant 9688 reported a positive experience as a group member and gained insight into her own behaviors and the group process.

While other group members reported anxiety as being a central component in the initial phases of the experiential group, for Participant 9688, this was not a major area of concern. This participant had prior experiences and interactions with group members and the group facilitator that strengthened her belief in confidentiality and trust within the group. This participant relayed her anxieties as being more focused on a fear of how others might perceive her and how she presented in group. Participant 9688 at times struggled with balancing life demands, course work, and group attendance. She attributed this work-life balance as being difficult at times to focus on the group process and was self-conscious about what others might think if she appeared disconnected or distracted during the group sessions. Moreover, Participant 9688 noted in her journal a reluctance to share due to feeling as though her problems were less severe than others, and because of this, she did not want to share and be judged by others for doing so.

Participant 9688 joined the group with the notion that she would grow personally and develop professionally as a result of membership. She spent time reflecting on personal issues that came up for her that were not necessarily brought up in session but came about as a result of taking the time to reflect on her life. With the increase in self-exploration and reflection through
journals, Participant 9688 expressed a desire to take steps in managing her self-care and felt she may need to attend more to her own mental health. Participant 9688 also utilized the journal reflections as an opportunity to speak freely and process internal responses and reactions she had to others during the group experience.

In addition to interpersonal learning and development, Participant 9688 took note of techniques and processes of the group experience that she found useful and those that were not as helpful. This participant appeared to enjoy learning most by doing and observing within the group process and expressed a desire for more time to be given for multiple members to share their experiences. Participant 9688 determined insights and knowledge gained was a result of other group members sharing about their issues, which caused her to reflect on her own issues.

**Conceptual framework application.** Participant 9688 presented eager to learn and participate in the group experience. She recognized the impact of trust, vulnerability, and cohesion as a contributor to a successful group. This participant took away several new insights about herself as a direct result of the shared reflections of other group members. Participant 9688 moved quickly through Corey’s (2016) group stages and experienced several of Yalom’s (1995) curative factors including the development of socializing techniques, group cohesiveness, catharsis, altruism, interpersonal learning, existential factors, and imparting information.

Participant 9688 appeared to skip Corey’s (2016) initial stage of group, as she reported a willingness to share and trust other members and a sense of group cohesiveness early on. Yalom (1995) described group cohesiveness as a curative factor where feelings of trust and belonging are experienced because of group participation. Participant 9688 recalled in her journal entries and in her interview that she felt trust in the group from the beginning, since they had already taken Foundations of Counseling together and the facilitator was also the professor of that class.
It seemed to be a natural transition for this participant to form bonds and connections with other group members through this process. Indicators of socializing techniques and group cohesiveness were present early in the group process for this participant and increased as group members began sharing more and a sense of closeness developed within the group. Encouraged by others’ displays of vulnerability, Participant 9688 contributed to the safety and cohesiveness of the group by participating early in self-disclosure in an act also known as altruism, where members share parts of themselves and extend help to other members (Yalom, 1995). Participant 9688 reported specifically feeling the curative factor of catharsis after sharing, which indicated she was able to express emotions freely in group and experienced a feeling of relief after doing so.

While Participant 9688 went into the group with an overwhelming sense of confidence in the process, she did indicate some anxieties regarding a fear of judgement by others in the group. In the transition stage, anxieties are present, and members begin sorting out conflict within themselves and in the group. Participant 9688 also journaled about certain negative internal reactions she had towards another group member, which may have indicated the group was moving to the transition stage, characterized by member conflicts and confrontations. Although this participant may not have directly confronted another group member, she experienced somewhat reactive and negative responses that elicited enough of a response within her to process it through in her journal.

Participant 9688’s group was able to make progress moving through the group stages, ultimately entering the working stage, known for its healing capacity and resulting in action-oriented behaviors from group members (Corey, 2016). During this stage, Participant 9688 documented her experience with her own unwanted behavior of internalizing personal issues until they become unmanageable. Interpersonal learning seemed evident throughout this
participant’s journals kept during the group experience. An example of this is an entry where she reported feeling impacted by group members’ stories of difficulties with family members and depression, which allowed her to begin processing her own family dynamics and their experiences with depression. Participant 9688 also expressed the realization that she had not adequately sorted through an experience of a suicide of a friend and felt compelled to begin the healing process while journaling in group. Yalom (1995) would classify this experience as an existential factor, as she began dealing with the essence of human existence.

In the final stage of group, Participant 9688 reflected on what she has learned and noted how she changed. She was able to recall the changes she made in her interview over a year after the experience. The imparting information she took away from this experience included an appreciation for the group process as a group member. Participant 9688 reflected on theories and techniques she felt she did not get exposed to during this group and recommended in her interview ways the group could have been enhanced. For this individual, certain logistics of the group process made learning difficult, such as having class immediately following group, which she noted as being “emotionally draining”.

**Participant 3664**

Anxiety seemed to be a central issue for Participant 3664 that she reported was a constant factor in her everyday life and seemed to carry over into the experiential group process. This participant journaled and reflected in interviews details of her experience of anxiety before the group, during, and even at the end. She expressed difficulty with feeling exposed and vulnerable after sharing, and was not comfortable being the center of attention during disclosures. Some factors that helped decrease her feelings of anxiety were other group members’ affirmations that
her sharing had helped them in some way. She seemed to respond well to positive feedback from peers, which kept her open to sharing throughout the group experience.

Trust and vulnerability were important factors for Participant 3664 throughout the group process. She reported feeling confident that she could trust her professor as a group leader because of his many years of experience with group facilitation. She also desired to hear more from the co-facilitator and appreciated input and techniques used by facilitators to help with the group process. Participant 3664 attributed other group members’ sharing personal information about themselves and their displays of vulnerability as being the cause for increased feelings and sense of connectedness within the group. She recognized times in the group where she became tearful and had intense feelings of empathy for others. For this group member, the connections made were impactful and special. She reflected on them fondly a year and a half after the group had ended and recalled still feeling connected to them. Participant 3664 also acknowledged and appreciated the feeling of not being alone in her struggle, and felt moved as other members voiced their concerns and support for her when she shared intimate details about her struggle with perfectionism and control.

Participant 3664 journaled often of the feelings that came up for her during group and reflections she was drawn to during the week between group sessions. For this participant, she became intimately aware of personal characteristics that she has displayed and acted on for many years, and appeared determined to sort through the emotions that her insights had brought up within her. Participant 3664 used the journals and group experience as an opportunity to sort through some of her thoughts that she could not make sense of on her own. She acknowledged appreciation for the group leader’s compassion and interventions used to help her understand herself more clearly. Compassion from the group facilitator and other members, coupled with
therapeutic interventions, appeared to resonate with this participant as she made significant progress in bringing up issues that she wanted to explore further in group.

Participant 3664 reported learning about the group process and facilitation methods as early as the first journal entry after the initial group meeting. She seemed to absorb the information presented in the experiential format and would connect the experience to the content reviewed in the text in class. Participant 3664 was also highly aware of the group facilitators’ methods and would journal about specific methods she appreciated, such as reframing, and others that she did not like, such as confrontation. For this participant, it was important to have group facilitators that she felt safe and connected with and could relate to. She attributed most of her learning outcomes based upon her experience in the experiential group.

**Conceptual framework application.** The experiential group process for Participant 3664 was characterized by intense feelings of anxiety followed by a sense of catharsis and connectedness with other group members through the expression of shared experience. Participant 3664 looked forward to creating new bonds and fostering deep connections with other members through the power of vulnerability and sharing personal details. This participant trusted the group leaders to facilitate a safe group and left the group experience with several methods and techniques to draw on for her future practice as a group leader. Participant 3664 reflected thoroughly her transitions through each of Corey’s (2016) group stages, and provided detailed reflections that suggested experience of several of Yalom’s (1995) curative factors such as development of socializing techniques, group cohesiveness, altruism, catharsis, universality, installation of hope, interpersonal learning, and imparting information.

According to Corey (2016), anxiety is a central characteristic of the first two stages of group, the initial and transition stage. Participant 3664 displayed marked feelings of anxiety in
her first few weeks of the group experience, and reported feeling unsure as to what she might contribute to the group, and a fear of being the center of attention. She journaled about peers and facilitators’ contribution to her reduction in anxiety by providing positive feedback and connecting with them on a personal level as they began displaying acts of vulnerability more often. Participant 3664 also reflected in her interviews about her initial reluctance to share and more reserved nature, which she recalled was gently challenged over time.

Participant 3664’s experiences in group may also be defined through the lens of Yalom (1995) and his curative factors of group cohesiveness, altruism, development of socializing techniques, and even catharsis and universality. This participant appeared to embrace the healing properties of the group and reflected fondly about the positive impact that peers and facilitators had on her wellbeing and general perceptions of group process. She experienced a closeness with other group members after she shared and other group members reflected similar sentiments. Participant 3664’s group became cohesive quickly as sharing became more of the group norm. For this participant, sharing and vulnerability was important to force herself to do in the group even when it was uncomfortable or difficult for her. Participant 3664 developed socializing techniques through this process as she began relating directly and honestly with other group members. She set goals to share every group in order to help others and gain connections, which is congruent with the curative factor of altruism.

The most significant impact of the experiential group process for Participant 3664 seemed to be directly connected to Yalom’s (1995) factors, universality and the installation of hope. Participant 3664 felt that she had similarities to other group members, that she had not realized until disclosures were made in the group process. Her newfound connections and mutual sharing in group reflected universality, a realization that she was not alone in her experience of
problems. Participant 3664 reflected on a personal struggle with perfectionism and a need for control in her journal entries. She expressed a desire to continue work in group on this area and had the realization that she needed to acknowledge her issue and felt that she had been able to do this within the group setting. Her confidence in the potential healing power of the group process was a direct reflection of the installation of hope. She felt that she could now begin to address her issues and confidentially move forward and working towards resolving her inner battles.

**Participant 2522**

Participant 2522 had high expectations of herself and others upon entering the experiential group process. She found herself feeling irritated and annoyed with other group members as early as the initial session due to her expectation that members would immediately start sharing. This participant found frustration with the slow nature of the process of the first stages of group where there is a general sense of anxiety and reluctance to share and be vulnerable with one another. Participant 2522 inevitably learned about the group process and stages as she realized her personal disclosures early in the group process before cohesiveness had developed left her feeling raw and exposed.

Participant 2522 continued to work through her own defensive behaviors and resistance in group as she felt more guarded and irritated with the fact that certain group members and the co-facilitator had not shared or self-disclosed after she had. After reflecting extensively on the group and its’ processes, Participant 2522 came to identify her negative reactions towards the group as being a result of her feelings of lack of trust in the facilitation process. She also had mixed feelings regarding her disclosures with the group, feeling both relieved that she had displayed vulnerability in group, but also feeling increasingly insecure with the fact that she had revealed such intimate details about her life to others.
This participant was also especially critical of herself for her contributions in the group. She felt unsure in her disclosures and regretful when she would not speak up or offer feedback to others after they had shared in group. Participant 2522 reflected often on the impact of the relationships formed during the group experience. She was able to identify with time and shared disclosures, how quickly her bonds had strengthened and developed. Participant 2522 had ultimately moved away from the initial stages of anxiety and frustration and had become more tolerant of others and herself throughout the process. As trust and vulnerability within the group grew, this participant appeared to become more empathic and found a sense of relief in her own issues as she felt deeply with others who revealed their issues.

Participant 2522 utilized her journal entries as an opportunity to reflect on the things she had learned and processed in group, and showed an ability to problem solve solutions for herself through her writing. She claimed this tool to be one of her favorite coping skills and intended to continue utilization of this skill in the future. Throughout the group process, this participant displayed some dissonance while working through her internal struggles. She would vacillate between periods of motivation and hopefulness and then experience significant moments of confusion and frustration for her situation. Participant 2522 demonstrated transparency in her journals and provided deep insight into the free association of thoughts she was having throughout the process seemingly without fear of judgement.

Participant 2522 seemed to appreciate the format of the group process and acknowledged the benefits of having a Gestalt-like group process for counseling students. She did have some concern about how this may be translated to other areas of the mental health field as a practitioner, and reported a desire to have been able to see other formats or types of groups facilitated so she could be better prepared in the future to facilitate more than one specific type of
group. Participant 2522 reported feeling more comfortable with group facilitators who she had previous exposure and relationship with that self-disclosed. She also thought there may have been too much of individual sessions going on with the rest of the group as an audience, rather than working directly with the group member who shared by providing feedback.

As Participant 2522 went through the wave of emotions elicited by the group experience, she began to find a sense of resolve and confidence that was not apparent in the first weeks. She demonstrated a shift in thinking about the group from being cautious and almost resentful in the beginning, to feeling a sense of appreciation and respect for the intense work that had been done during the experiential group. She also showed progress in the development of relationships within the group, and seemed to respond to others in a less judgmental and more understanding way than she had initially. This participant also showed tremendous emotional benefit from the experiential group as reflected in her interview and journals. She reported a realization of her fondness of group therapy and anticipation for future groups she may lead.

**Conceptual framework application.** Like other group participants in this study, Participant 2522 experienced movement through Corey’s (2016) stages of group and Yalom’s (1995) curative factors of group. Participant 2522 appeared to move through all stages of group, but notably demonstrated the difficulties of the transition stage, marked by defensiveness and resistance. Her journal reflections and interviews provided an intimate look at her personal experiences within the group and the emergence of curative factors like altruism, development of socializing techniques, interpersonal learning, catharsis, existential factors, the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, instillation of hope, and universality.

Participant 2522 attempted to skip the initial stage of group as she entered the process practicing being vulnerable from the start. She was met with what she perceived as resistance
from the rest of the group in their willingness to share as well. This appears to accurately reflect Corey’s (2016) stage of group, the initial stage, where the occurrence of risk taking is relatively low as there is still an element of trust versus mistrust that members must work through. Through Participant 2522’s attempt at quick display of vulnerability, she appeared to comprehend the group norms and rules and learned the consequence of sharing too early when trust had not yet been established. For Participant 2522, this was also a reflection of her experience of Yalom’s (1995) curative group factors of altruism and the development of socializing techniques. As she eagerly joined into the group process, she shared preemptively in a display of altruism to help the group move forward and impact others with her stories. She also was quickly met with resistance, which led to her development of new socializing techniques, as she had to navigate the group experience and decide the appropriate time and setting for sharing and learned how to better relate to group members.

As Participant 2522 transitioned through Corey’s (2016) stages of group, she experienced the working stage as a significant time for self-growth, insight, and awareness. Participant 2522’s personal revelations were documented freely throughout her journals and recalled fondly in her semi-structured interview. The insights and changes experienced by Participant 2522 can be described through Yalom’s (1995) curative factors of catharsis and interpersonal learning. Participant 2522 expressed personal experiences and expounded openly in group about problematic relationships in her life and how this impacted her on many levels. She also reported the process of journaling after the group as being an additional way of releasing emotions and experiencing another form of catharsis outside of personal sharing in group. Frequently, this participant journaled about the significant healing power and impact the group had on her ability to process interpersonal problems. She seemed to readily accept the healing properties of the
group experience through her shared displays of vulnerability and willingness to work through personal issues within the group context.

Due to Participant 2552’s willingness to share and connect with others in the group process, she was able to directly experience Yalom’s (1995) factor of the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group. Participant 2522 recalled specific internal reactions to others in the group as they shared their experiences, and found this to be impactful as she connected their struggles to her own difficulties with her mother. This experience allowed Participant 2522 the opportunity to reenact critical family dynamics in a corrective manner as described by Yalom (1995). According to this curative property, as Participant 2522 spent more time in the group setting and interacted in positive and healthy way with others who have similar struggles, she would be more able to effectively apply these skills to her own relationships.

Participant 2522 spoke graciously about her experience of group in both the interview and journal entries. As the group moved into Corey’s (2016) final stage, Participant 2522 was faced with mixed feelings of separation while having to make plans for how to use the knowledge gained in group in the real-world setting. As this participant journaled and reflected on the growth and insights gained in group, she embraced Yalom’s (1995) curative factors of instillation of hope and universality. Participant 2522 reported not feeling alone in her struggles and described empathic understanding that she was able to give and receive in group. This participant left he group experience with an appreciative understanding of the group process and the healing properties it can bring, as she was able to experience many of them for herself over the course of nine weeks.
Participant 3658 began the group experience with typical anxieties and fears congruent with the group experience, but with the additional factor of feeling like an outsider due to not being a part of the master’s cohort and instead being a doctoral student required to participate to meet criteria for doctoral program admission. This participant journaled about her fears of being disconnected from other members and going into the group experience with increased anxiety because of this factor. Participant 3658 reported a significant reduction of anxiety and feeling more comfort with the group process as group members displayed vulnerability through sharing personal details in group. She felt that she may have become comfortable even more quickly had the co-facilitator shared and self-disclosed early on as well.

While Participant 3658 appreciated others sharing in group, she was somewhat reluctant to share her own experiences throughout the process. She reported this was not because of a fear or anxiety, but rather timeliness and allowing for others to process. Participant 3658 did not see her lack of contribution to the group dialogue as a barrier to relationships in group, and even expressed she felt more empathic and connected with other group members as they disclosed. Participant 3658 was particularly impacted by other group members’ sharing and processing through relational issues. This allowed her to assess her own personal situation and relationships in her life she felt she had ignored or not addressed in years. It appeared for this participant, the process of transference with other group members was the most impactful component of the experiential group as it gave her the opportunity to reflect on her own relationships and make plans for how she would like to change the dynamics in her own family to prevent future harm.

In addition to personal growth and learning, Participant 3658 learned about group dynamics and process. She reported as the weeks went on and she was able to see the group
behaviors and relationships form and connected the material learned in coursework back to the experience. Participant 3658 recognized the power of the group process not only through sharing and disclosures, but through being an active observer of others’ processes. She reported this as being a crucial component of the group experience for her that caused her to recognize the deep value in group therapy.

Participant 3658 also left the experiential group with new insights into which facilitation methods were most helpful and what techniques she would like to implement in the future. It seemed for this participant, the facilitators’ interjection of humor and relatability through self-disclosure seemed most impactful. Participant 3658 also valued the extensive experience of the course instructor as the experiential leader and reported this to be a factor in the success of the experiential group. Additionally, Participant 3658 reported the techniques and skills she witnessed in the group process helped her as she facilitated her own group after this one had ended. Participant 3658 attributed her abilities and confidence in being a group facilitator to having the experience of being a group member. She reported an increased awareness as a facilitator because of her new knowledge of being a group member to relate to and help with empathic understanding and facilitation methods for her own groups.

**Conceptual framework application.** The experiential group for Participant 3658 was a meaningful experience where she gained the most insight learning from other group members’ personal disclosures and relating the experiences to her own. This participant’s experience in the group differed from other participants because of her role as more of an observer/listener rather than a talkative participant. Participant 3658’s lack of self-disclosure did not seem to inhibit her ability to experience benefits from the experiential group. She also appeared to move through Corey’s (2016) group stages, and demonstrated an experience of select curative factors such as
group cohesiveness, universality, instillation of hope, interpersonal learning, imparting information, and existential factors (Yalom, 1995).

Participant 3658 displayed characteristics of Corey’s (2016) initial and transition stages of group early in the group process. She reported significant moments of anxiety and feeling unsure of herself and how to contribute to the group process. As others began sharing, Participant 3658 found herself feeling more connected to individuals she had no prior relationship with, resulting in a cohesive group. According to Yalom (1995), specific factors such as the instillation of hope occur in the group process as members form relationships and can work through issues in a safe environment. This participant reflected often of the shared connections she had with others as they shared experiences that brought her own to the surface that she could directly connect with. This experience is also described as the condition of universality, where group members discover they are not alone in their struggle (Yalom, 1995).

Participant 3658’s intimate journal entries reflected her clear movement through Corey’s (2016) working stage, as she took what she had learned and observed in the group and applied the feelings and cognitions directly to her own situation and attempted to process the impact it had on her life. This led Participant 3658 to the processes of interpersonal learning and fostered a hope for things to be different in her own relationships and life. Yalom’s (1995) factors were distinguishable in these participant’s experience of the group, and her interviews gave voice to similar beliefs, that the group had was powerful, and she believed in the effectiveness of it since she had experienced it for herself.

**Participant 6418**

Participant 6418 entered the experiential group process with a willingness to participate and share personal disclosures with her peers. She also desired reciprocity in sharing from other
group members, and felt irritated that other group members did not approach the group as she had and were reluctant in sharing. While Participant 6418 initially felt willing to contribute to the group process, she also described some anxieties and fears of being vulnerable and sharing with people she wasn’t connected to. Participant 6418 described the paradigm of having her professor, who was responsible for giving her a grade, take on the role of her therapist in the group. She recalled this dual relationship as being an initial source of anxiety that was alleviated over time after trust developed within the group. As the group progressed, Participant 6418 felt a sense of relief and connectedness to her peers and group facilitators as sharing and vulnerability became the norm of the group.

Participant 6418’s journal entries processed her experience of overcoming her anxiety of speaking and fear of judgement of her disclosures because of her growing compassion and empathy for others. Participant 6418 related strongly with her peers and demonstrated movement through group stages as she processed her personal insights and new personal gains because of the group experience. For this participant, the impact and connections to her peers was the most impactful in the group experience. She journaled extensively about her experience of feeling understood and validated throughout the process by peers and facilitators. Participant 6418 also identified personal struggles and issues that she realized she needed to explore further such as her issue with disordered eating. Participant 6418 attributed her new insight and action of seeking out individual therapy directly to her revelations within the experiential group.

In addition to personal insights and growth, Participant 6418 processed a significant amount of professional and educational growth that resulted from the group experience. Participant 6418 reflected on her growth in her interview and described how the group process helped her grow as a future counselor because of the personal awareness gained in the
Participant 6418 connected her personal insights and growth to her abilities as a counselor and reported these factors as directly related. She discussed the process of figuring out who she is as a person as being important for counselor development. She also described the experience of shared empathy and feeling for others as helping her recognize the power of empathy and how she might relate to clients in the future.

Participant 6418 discussed the specific interventions displayed throughout the group process that she most connected to. Specifically noted were interventions of talking to their younger self and the empty chair technique. For this participant, her experience of acting out and practicing the things she would like to say to her mother was personally impactful and a tool that she reported she would likely use in the future. Participant 6418 also discussed certain facilitation techniques that she did not like as much and felt that she might modify in her future as a counselor. She preferred a group where peers were linked more and reported often feeling as though group members took turns doing individual work while others watched, rather than playing an active role as participants providing feedback and engaging in dialogue.

Overall for this participant, the experience in the experiential group provided her with a significant amount of personal growth that directly impacted her professional growth. She took steps to apply the knowledge gained within the group process to her personal life and sought out ways to continue her growth through individual counseling. Participant 6418 reflected positively throughout her journals and interviews on the power of group therapy and felt as if this experience made her a better personal and set her up for success as a group counselor.

**Conceptual framework application.** Participant 6418 experienced many of the characteristics and curative properties of the group experience as described by Corey (2016) and Yalom (1995). This participant came into the experiential group with an eager nature and
willingness to contribute to the group process to fully experience the benefits of group therapy. Participant 6418’s group moved through each stage which was reflected by a steady transition of fear, anxiety, resistance, problem solving, interpersonal process, and the finality of the group ending. Factors that seemed to be most congruent with this participant’s experience were imitative behavior, altruism, catharsis, group cohesiveness, the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, interpersonal learning, instillation of hope, and existential factors.

Participant 6418 quickly moved from Corey’s (2016) initial stage to the transition stage of group process during her time in the experiential group. She began with anxieties as defined by the initial stage regarding concern or fear of disclosing personal information to people she was not familiar with, and fear of being judged or graded by the group facilitator based upon her sharing. Participant 6418 demonstrated issues reported to be common of the transition stage, such as issues of establishing trust, anxiety, and resistance. This participant journaled of her own disapproval of other group members due to their initial resistance in sharing and being vulnerable. This participant also had to work through her own feelings of trust and mistrust as she became more open and vulnerable with group members.

This participant was especially reflective of her personal issues and used the experiential group as a place where she could work through these feelings of inner conflict. The introspective nature of Participant 6418’s journals were indicative of her movement to Corey’s (2016) working stage, as well her experience of Yalom’s (1995) curative factors, interpersonal learning and catharsis. This participant reflected often on her own battle with disordered eating, and used the group experience to process and practice certain situations she needed guidance managing in her day-to-day life. Participant 6418 was one of few members who directly experienced what Yalom (1995) coined as the corrective recapitulation of the family experience by practicing
speaking about personal issues to another group member who played the role of her mother.

Participant 6418 reflected in her journals and interviews that the powerful experiences she was able to witness throughout the group process provided her with a sense of hope for her future, healing, and belief in the group therapy process.

**Shared Lived Experience of Counseling Students**

While data is limited regarding counseling students’ experiences of a co-facilitated experiential group, certain parallels can be drawn from studies that have examined group outcomes in counseling training programs. While no two groups are alike, this study found student attitudes and perceptions were similar to those reported in other studies examining counseling students’ experiences of the experiential group. One quantitative investigation of counselors-in-training (Anderson & Price, 2001) found that between 77% and 97% viewed the experiential group as a positive learning experience. Comparatively, all six participants of this study described the experiential group as a positive and impactful experience, even citing preference for the experiential component over course content and learning. Participant reports in the current study were also strikingly similar to the reports in Smith and Davis-Gages’ (2010) study, where a few participants initially reported having negative feelings and expectations about group participation, but many changed to positive as the group progressed.

Student attitudes and perceptions described in this study provided an in-depth exploration of areas of concern addressed in a quantitative study by Anderson and Price (2001) that examined the quality of the learning experience, issues of dual relationships, concerns with confidentiality and privacy, students’ overall level of comfort with the group, and the student’s choice to participate. Students in this research study discussed feeling significant gratitude for the overall group experience and noted both personal and professional growth as a result of
group membership. Some participants noted initial hesitancies about the dual relationship, but also reported this fear quickly subsided after experiencing the group as a safe place to make personal disclosures. Participants in this study described anxiety around issues of confidentiality and privacy, which also seemed to dissipate with time, trust, and experience of Corey’s (2016) stages of group. Additionally, participants in this study noted a willingness to display vulnerability through sharing and noted the group atmosphere being one that encouraged sharing rather than required it.

An important component of the experiential group is the process of vulnerability through sharing and self-disclosure, leading to the experience of catharsis. Young et al.’s (2013) study of counseling students noted a common theme of reported catharsis after displays of self-disclosure within the group. The experience of catharsis was described in this study multiple times throughout participants’ journal entries and interviews, and reported to occur after sharing and processing personal information within the group setting. Another study, Ohrt et al., (2013), found that participants in experiential groups sustained higher levels of catharsis than those participants in a psychoeducational group, likely due to the significant amount of self-disclosure that occurs in the experiential group process. The experiences of counseling students in groups examined in this study may have been influenced by the experiential group norm of self-disclosure and process, ultimately leading to more intensive process and cathartic release of emotions.

This study utilized rigorous data analysis methods to thoroughly examine counseling student’s journal entries and interviews to aid in the comparison of findings to relevant literature. Data was analyzed and further broken down into the following themes: Importance of Trust & Vulnerability, Movement through the Stages of Group, Development of Self-Awareness &
Personal Growth, and Comprehension of the Group Process. According to a qualitative study by Ieva et al., (2009), 15 counseling students reported themes similar to the themes described in this study, including personal awareness and development and professional development.

Participants in this research study also articulated growth, learning, and development in both personal and professional domains. These reported experiences align with the findings of two studies cited in the literature review, Ohert et al., (2013) and Young et al., (2013), who claimed that experiential groups were responsible for the positive impact on students’ development of empathy, self-efficacy, leadership skills, and the experience of therapeutic factors.

Findings from this research reveals counseling students who participate in an experiential group as part of graduate requirements show 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. Furthermore, findings from this research are consistent with the characteristics and movement through Corey’s (2016) four stages of group and the experience of Yalom’s (1995) 11 curative factors, described in detail through the conceptual framework of this study.

**Application to research questions.** The primary research question for this study was to investigate the lived experiences of counseling students who participated in an instructor/Ph.D. student co-facilitated group as part of graduate course requirements. This study identified four general themes that best portrayed the lived experiences as described by the participants in this research. The themes identified 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. These themes were developed through rigorous data
analysis, and seek to create a meaningful description of the experiences and internal processes that occurred for counseling students in the experiential group. The themes discovered through data exploration also suggested that all participants moved through Corey’s (2016) stages of group and experience of Yalom’s (1995) 11 curative factors.

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, as well as 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 ultimately all reporting 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 (2016) 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 also presented in this study that went beyond this researcher’s initial injury. Participants in this study simultaneously learned about the group process while experiencing the experiential group, which suggests that the integration of both didactic and experiential modalities leads to the comprehensive understanding of the group process and experience of Corey’s (2016) stages and 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.
Implications for Counselor Educators

It is imperative that counselor educators have access to rich data to help determine best practices for the inclusion and facilitation of the experiential group. Leaders in the field of counseling have suggested that participation in an experiential group positively impacts students’ personal and professional development (Corey, 2016; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), but often disagree on which methods of integration are most beneficial for student growth and learning. Counselor educators can use the findings of this study to gain a deeper understanding of counseling students’ experiences in a co-facilitated experiential group. Additionally, these reported experiences may give counselor educators the opportunity to make informed decisions for incorporating the experiential group into their counseling programs.

While there seems to be 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; Goodrich, 2008). 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. Counseling students who acted as 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 (2016) 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 the 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. 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 in 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 (2013) 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. 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.

A method of warm and unconditional acceptance of the client, known as unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1959), was provided throughout the group experience to help create a non-judgmental environment and encourage vulnerability and sharing. 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.

In addition to the implications listed above, perhaps one of the most ground-breaking areas of study for counselor educators at this time is the inclusion of neuroscience in experiential groups and in the training of counselors. Research in the field of counseling has encouraged the addition of neuroscience and interpersonal neurobiology as a support to the experiential group because of the potential for positive effects such as paradigm shifts in thinking, brain-wide
neural integration, resiliency, implicit and explicit memory reformation, and a source for regulation through the process of mirror neurons (Badenoch, 2008; Badenoch & Cox, 2010; Siegel, 2006). In this research study, the course instructor that served as co-facilitator integrated interpersonal neurobiology education into the course and group experience. While measures were not directly observed in this study, there may be evidence in outcomes to support the positive impacts of discussion of these topics in the group experience. As counselor educators seek to identify a standard of best practice for the instruction of group dynamics and the experiential group, they may consider relevant research that supports the inclusion of the integration of neurocounseling into counseling practices and teaching. Specifically, counselor educators may include this method of instruction into the group curriculum to help facilitate a deeper understanding of the biological processes that may occur within the group process.

**Limitations**

As discussed in Chapter III, there are inherent limitations that exist in qualitative research, and this study also contains certain limitations that must be addressed. Qualitative data analysis utilizes the researchers’ subjective perspective, but consequentially runs the risk of increasing the presence of personal biases during data analysis and interpretation of results. This researcher independently extracted significant statements from the data sources and ascribed meaning to each, which resulted in the development of thematic labels. Although the peer debriefer and outside auditor used to review the data in this study agreed with the researcher’s findings, other reviewers of the same data may come to different conclusions.

Another 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 of diverse background. Including other ethnicities and genders may influence data outcomes and overall experiences.

**Recommendations for 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, genders, and races of participants. Future studies may repeat this inquiry, while sampling for a more inclusive range of ages, genders, and ethnic groups that were not appropriately represented in this investigation. Cultural and social factors were not addressed as variables in this study and may have a significant impact on the lived experience of the experiential 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.

Interpersonal neurobiology has become increasingly important in the field of counselor education and group psychotherapy, and the demand for counseling professionals to understand neurobiological processes has grown exponentially (Russell-Chapin, 2016). As the presence of neuroscience continues to emerge, neuro-focused research that supports counseling theories claims about the benefits of experiential groups would be useful to contribute to the understanding of the group process and to promote best practices. While the current study addresses the significant developmental, emotional, and social changes that occur as a result of
participation in the experiential group, future studies may attempt to connect outcomes of the experiential group to counseling theories and seek to provide neurobiological evidence for these findings.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the shared lived experience of counseling students’ participation in a required co-facilitated experiential group. Using a descriptive phenomenological approach adapted from Colaizzi (1975), significant statements were extracted from data, and a formulation of meaning was assigned to each significant statement. Data was then organized and clustered into themes. Themes were again reviewed and consolidated into four emergent themes. These themes sought to provide an organization and explanation of shared experiences that occurred for participations who experienced the phenomenon. Analysis of data incorporated existing counselor education and group therapy theory to help increase the validity of this study. This researcher believes the findings from this study effectively capture the essence of the lived experience of master’s-level counseling students in a required co-facilitated experiential group.

While there is a significant amount of initial anxiety for counseling students at the start of the experiential group process, they quickly begin to realize the benefits that result from group membership. Counseling students can better understand and comprehend the group process by experiencing it directly through group membership. Although some research has suggested that there may be barriers to vulnerability and full engagement in experiential groups that are facilitated by the course instructor, counseling students may overcome this fear with a healthy relationship built on trust, respect, and confidence in the facilitators’ expertise. The experiential group continues to remain a crucial component for counseling students to gain empathy for
future clients, develop interpersonal skills, and learn about the group process through the phenomenon of experiencing the power of group therapy for themselves.
References


Siegel, D. J. (2015). *The developing mind: how relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are*. New York: Guilford Press.


Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

To: Alexandra E. Meyers
From: Douglas James Adams, Chair
IRB Committee
Date: 10/19/2017
Action: Expedited Approval
Action Date: 10/19/2017
Protocol #: 1709070229
Study Title: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Counseling Students in a Co-Facilitated Experiential Group
Expiration Date: 10/15/2018
Last Approval Date: 

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution’s IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator’s responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Kristin Kay Higgins, Investigator
Appendix B: Letter of Invitation

Letter of Invitation

Greetings and Attention:

You are cordially and formally invited to participate in a study exploring your experiences related to participation in a required experiential group. The reason you have been invited is because you have successfully completed an experiential group experience as a part of your master’s degree program course requirements.

Requirements of this study are to include: Completion of a demographic questionnaire, participation in a semi-structured interview, and participation in a follow-up interview.

There is no charge to you for this process and there will be a compensation of a $10 Walmart gift card for participation. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. All information collected will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy. This process has the potential to benefit you through increased self-awareness and reflection of the group process through participation. There are no known or expected harmful effects from your participation in this study.

If you are interested, please contact:

Alexandra Meyers
aemeyers@email.uark.edu
918-982-3700

Thank you for your consideration!
Appendix C: Informed Consent

Informed Consent

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

Investigators: Alexandra Meyers, LPC, RPT
918-982-3700
aemeyers@email.uark.edu

Kristin Higgins Ph.D. LPC
479-790-9521
kkhiggs@uark.edu

Description: The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of counseling students who participated in a co-facilitated experiential group. As a participant of this study, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, and participate in a semi-structured interview and a follow-up semi-structured interview. Both interviews will be audio and video tape recorded.

Risks and Benefits: The benefits include increasing awareness and self-reflection of the group process and experience. Participants will also benefit by receiving a $10 Walmart gift card compensation for successful completion of participation in this study. There are no anticipated risks to participating in the study.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study, defined as completion of the demographic questionnaire, individual semi-structured interview, and follow-up interview, is completely voluntary. Your decision to participate in the study does not impact your grades or standing in the program in any way.

Confidentiality: All information collected will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy. You will be assigned a code number (the last four digits of your Social Security Number) that will be used to match questionnaires and inventories. All information will be recorded anonymously and kept in a secured or password protected location. Results from this research will be reported as aggregate data only and no individually identifying information will be reported. At the conclusion of the study, paper copies of interview transcripts will be kept in a locked file in a locked office indefinitely. Interview video recordings will also remain stored indefinitely on the password-protected program provided by the University of Arkansas counseling laboratory.

Right to Withdraw: You are free to refuse to participate in the research and to withdraw from this study at any time. Your decision to withdraw will bring no negative consequences to you.

Informed Consent: I, ___________________________ have read the description,

Please print name

including the purpose of the study, the procedures to be used, the potential risks, the confidentiality as well as the option to withdraw from the study at any time. The investigator has explained each of these items to me, and I believe that I understand what is involved. My signature below indicates that I freely agree to participate in this study and that I have received a copy of this agreement from the investigator. I know that the researcher listed above will be able
to answer any questions I may have. If, at any time, I feel my questions have not been adequately answered, I may request to speak with the University of Arkansas Institutional Review board for Protections of Human Subjects (Attention: Ro Windwalker, 109 MLKG Building, 479-575-2208, irb@uark.edu).

_________________________________________  _______________________
Student consent signature                  Date
Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Gender with which you identify:
   □ Male    □ Female    □ Transgender    □ Other: __________________________

2. Current Age:
   __________________________

3. Race/Ethnicity:
   □ Caucasian/White    □ Hispanic/Latino
   □ African American/Black    □ Asian American
   □ Hawaiian/Pacific Islander    □ American Indian/Native Alaskan
   □ Two or more ethnicities    □ Middle Eastern
   □ Other (Please Specify): __________________________

4. Level of counseling training:
   □ First Year Master’s Level
   □ Second Year Master’s Level
   □ Third Year Master’s Level
   □ Graduated

5. Previous experience as a member in a group before participation in the required course group?
   □ Yes
   □ No
Appendix E: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What was the experience of participating in the required experiential group like for you?
2. What, if any, were your concerns regarding the facilitator(s) of the group experience?
3. What were the most helpful techniques your facilitator(s) used?
4. What were the least helpful techniques your facilitator(s) used?
5. What, if any, changes would you have liked to see from your facilitator(s)?
6. Is there anything else you would like to discuss related to your experiences with the group facilitator(s)?
Appendix F: Semi-Structured Member Check Interview Questions

Member Check Interview Questions

1. Were there any additional areas that you felt were important in the group process that were not addressed or listed in the findings?

2. There seems to be some disconnect between the techniques utilized in group and the classroom application of theory. Were there any barriers that prevented the connection of theory learned in classroom to the experiential application of theory?

3. Do any or all of themes presented in the findings seem to fit your experience of the experiential group?
Appendix G: Example of Researcher Reflexive Journal

Researcher Reflexive Journal

Date: 10/31/17

Interview #4 @0800

My first initial reaction to this interview was related to the physical demands of it being at 8am and I hadn’t had much sleep. I quickly “woke up” as I met with this individual, in part, because I knew how diligent she was throughout the experience and I wanted to be fully present for this interview.

Some initial thoughts I had going into this interview were similar to other individuals that I had known had processed a lot during the group experience. I also knew that this individual had journaled specifically about not trusting me as the co-facilitator initially because she didn’t know me. I knew this was something that I wanted to know more about but did not ask any additional questions that I had not asked others related to it. Her feelings actually came up about her resistance to opening up to me without me probing too much. I think I remember at the time of reading her journal being somewhat defensive and reactive to the fact that she didn’t trust me; however, when she said it this time it felt very understandable.

She also emphasized the fact that she felt more open with me when I was open with them and wished I had done so earlier. It definitely caused me to have a reflective moment about my own group co-facilitation skills and wondering how things might have looked differently throughout the experience had I spoken up more, connected more, or was diligent in letting the individuals know who I was at the time. I had not even considered the fact that individuals already knew who the co-facilitator was because they had a previous class with him, and they didn’t know me at all.