

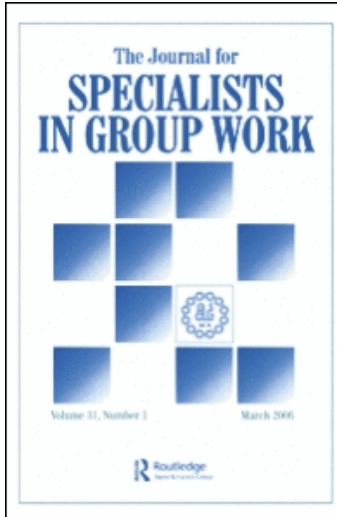
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### Personal Growth and Awareness of Counseling Trainees in an Experiential Group

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## Personal Growth and Awareness of Counseling Trainees in an Experiential Group

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*This article reports research that utilized a grounded theory methodology to explore the experiences of 14 master's level counselor trainees who participated in an experiential group as part of their counselor education course work. Data were collected through weekly reflection journals. Trainees identified 30 systemically interconnected aspects of their experiential group participation as contributing to their personal growth and awareness. The emergent model is presented and discussed in light of the current literature. Implications for counselor training and future research are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *awareness; counselor education; experiential group work; personal growth*

The experiential group has become an established part of counselor education (Lennie, 2007; Payne, 1999; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Its significance is underscored by counseling training standards (Association for the Specialists in Group Work [ASGW], 2000; Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2008) that require counselor trainees to engage in an experiential group as a member within their counselor training (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Participation in such a group is understood to facilitate the development of trainees' personal growth and awareness, a goal that is integral to the overall training of counseling professionals (CACREP; Roach & Young, 2007; Torres-Rivera, Phan, Maddux, Wilbur, & Garrett, 2001; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Correspondingly, Yalom and Leszcz emphasized that participation in an experiential

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group enables trainees to gain an affective and personal understanding of themselves, group processes, and what group participation may present to their future clients.

Despite its widespread use as a training vehicle, there is limited empirical research regarding the use of experiential groups within counselor education (Kline, Falbaum, Pope, Hargraves, & Hundley, 1997), leading some researchers to suggest that this is an under researched area (Donati & Watts, 2000; Lennie, 2007). Related, Lennie criticized the lack of systematic exploration of experiential group participation, as well as the deficient attempts "to identify those factors which are felt to be helpful in promoting personal self-awareness" (p. 118). Others have explained this lack of research as a reflection of theoretical and methodological inconsistencies related to experiential education in general (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002), and the conceptual fuzziness of personal growth and awareness (Donati & Watts, 2000) more specifically. In the context of the current study, implicit in experiential group membership are the four learning modes outlined in Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory; namely opportunities for concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation, and active experimentation. Further, personal growth and awareness refers to the process through which trainees become a particular kind of person (Irving & Williams, 1999) and attain a meaningful understanding of their inner self (e.g., thoughts, emotions, sensations, etc.), stable aspects of their inner self (e.g., values, beliefs, interests, cultural worldview) and perception of the impact that their behavior has on others and how they are perceived by those others (Corey & Corey, 2006; Torres-Rivera et al., 2001).

While there is limited data on personal growth and awareness occurring through experiential group participation (Donati & Watts, 2000; Lennie, 2007), a number of studies have been conducted regarding trainees' perceptions of other educational experiences that contributed to their personal growth and awareness. In their investigation of 84 masters level counselor trainees, Furr and Carroll (2003) found a number of positive and negative educational experiences that trainees reported to be significant in their personal and professional development. Positive incidents included experiential learning-based activities and developing trust in others. Moreover, trainees viewed personal-development activities (e.g., experiential groups, personal counseling, etc.) as crucial to their counselor development. Negative incidents included activities that students perceived as focusing on cognitive deficits in developing insight. While this study did not specifically examine experiential group participation, its main limitation was that it used a retrospective design, asking participants to review past events and recall general experiences.

Using trainee journals, Howard, Inman, and Altman (2006) qualitatively explored trainee identified critical incidents (CI) within their overall development. A total of 157 CIs were initially identified and later grouped into five main themes, professional identity, personal reactions, competence, supervision, and philosophy of counseling. Authors defined personal reactions as including self-awareness and self-insight, constituting 21% of the identified CI. Although this study provided some insight into the importance of personal reactions in novice counselor development, authors noted a need for further investigation in this area. More specifically, the design of the study limited findings related to the processes through which any of the identified development occurred.

Although studies have not examined processes related to personal growth and awareness within experiential group participation, several studies have supported personal growth and awareness as a correlate of such group participation. Kline et al. (1997) explored how 23 counselor trainees perceived their group participation as having influenced their preparation as professional counselors. Trainees reported increased self-awareness and relational insight as two of the most significant result of group participation. Although this study provided initial support for the long assumed link between group participation and self-awareness and relational insight, there were a number of limitations. Researchers were actively involved in both the course instruction and group leadership, potentially having increased the likelihood of both social desirability in trainees' responses and inadvertent researcher bias. In addition, researchers used a structured questionnaire to gather data which may have also limited trainees' responses.

Although it has been a decade since Kline and colleagues called for further research into "the learning processes" (p. 165) involved in experiential group participation, only two studies have been identified in response. Anderson and Price (2001) surveyed 99 master's level trainees enrolled in a group work course regarding their attitudes toward participation in the required experiential group component of the course. Specifically, authors sought to investigate trainees' evaluation of their participation in an experiential group, as well as to explore any dual relationship concerns. Although findings revealed that the majority of trainees viewed the experiential group as a positive experience, results did not reveal what specific aspects trainees considered useful. More recently using a qualitative approach, Lennie (2007) identified a number of contributory factors to trainees' increased self-awareness in the experiential group, including group cohesion, regular attendance, continuity of group membership, personality of facilitator, outside contacts, group conflict, individual

personality, guidance of facilitator, etc. The study offered insight into the relationship between the identified factors and trainees' perception of growth in self-awareness. Limitations of this study were similar to previous studies in that the research design was cross-sectional and data collection methods used a structured, closed ended format, potentially confounding findings.

Although previous research has corroborated that participation in an experiential group facilitated trainee personal growth and awareness, to date little is known about the processes through which this occurs. The method and design of the extant research has arguably limited the ability to understand how trainees identify and develop personal growth and awareness. The purpose of the current study was to begin to bridge this major gap in the literature by using a qualitative grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to examine the processes through which counselor trainees identified and developed personal growth and awareness within a semester long experiential group. Qualitative methodologies were appropriate, as it was not known in advance what aspects of trainees' subjective experience would emerge and become the phenomenon under study (Bogden & Biklen, 2006). Grounded theory was specifically selected as it offered a unique opportunity for findings to be organized within an emergent theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A small convenience sample of counselor trainees was utilized for this study because researchers were interested in deeply understanding the phenomena as experienced by this particular group (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Kline, 2008).

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Fourteen master's-level students enrolled in an introduction to group work course at one Northeastern CACREP-accredited institution participated in this study. Thirteen participants (93%) were female and one participant (7%) was male.

Thirteen participants (93%) identified as Caucasian and one (7%) identified as African American. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 60, with a mean age of 26.6 ( $SD = 11.67$ ). Three participants (21%) were enrolled in community counseling, three (21%) in school counseling, two (14%) in student affairs counseling, and five (36%) in higher education, and one (7%) was not matriculated in a program of study. Seven (50%) of the participants indicated that they had had no previous experience as group participants, while the

remaining seven (50%) had participated in at least one, but no more than two group experiences in the past. Participants were part of one of two experiential groups, each co-led by one female and one male doctoral student. The four co-leaders were enrolled in a doctoral-level advanced group work course. Two process observers alternated between observing each of the groups and providing verbal feedback following each session. One process observer was a doctoral student who had several years of experience leading groups and the other process observer was the doctoral course instructor who had 30 years of experience leading groups. Participants were engaged in 13, 90-minute group sessions over the course of one semester.

## Measures

Reflective journals were used as a means of tapping into participants' own subjective accounts of experiences that contributed to their personal growth and awareness. Journaling has been used as a teaching and learning tool across educational disciplines (O'Connell & Dymont, 2006) for numerous purposes, including: (a) to develop trainees' reflective thinking, reflective practice, and refine their cognitive perceptions (Griffith & Frieden, 2000), (b) to explore trainees' emotions and feelings as they relate to events and experiences, (c) to provide an alternative "voice" or avenue for trainees to express themselves, and (d) to facilitate development of personal growth and awareness through reflective thinking and self-appraisal (Harland & Myhill, 1997; Howard et al., 2006). In addition, previous counselor education research has supported the use of student journals as a data collection method (Clingerman & Bernard, 2004; Howard et al., 2006; Kim, Brenner, Liang, & Assay, 2003) and concluded that journals provided as rich a data source as compared to data that were collected through other means (Hill et al., 2005).

The current study utilized course assigned weekly reflective journals. More specifically, trainees enrolled in the group work course were required to submit weekly journal entries to their course instructor and group facilitators following each group session over 13 weeks. The group sessions were not taped because researchers were interested in the perspective of trainees as to what aspects of the experiential group were significant to their personal growth and awareness and the process through which this occurred. Although the focus of the weekly journals was intentionally left open ended, the general guideline for the journal entries was, "Write a 1–2 page reaction paper/journal entry each week regarding your impressions, feeling, and reactions to the most recent experiential group experience as it

relates to your personal growth and awareness.” Students received course credit for submitting the weekly journals, but the content of their journals was not evaluated. Group facilitators responded in writing to each journal, providing observations, encouragement, interpretations, or other feedback. Only the student generated journals were examined and analyzed in the current study.

## Procedures

Master’s level students enrolled in an introductory to group work course during the spring 2008 semester at a single northeastern CACREP-accredited counselor education program were solicited to participate in the study. After obtaining institutional review board (IRB) approval, and with permission from the course instructor, the researchers approached all students enrolled in the course for their voluntary participation in the study. After explaining the purpose of the study, the second author distributed a research packet, including a cover letter, an informed consent form, and a demographic questionnaire to all students in the class. Students indicated agreement to participate in the study by signing the consent form and returning the completed demographic questionnaire. Consent did not involve any additional undertaking for participant, rather trainees gave permission for their course required journals to be analyzed. A number of measures were employed to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of participants. First, all students in the class submitted their journals electronically to the course instructor, the course teaching assistant, and to their respective group co-facilitators. Next, the course instructor forwarded all students’ journals to the first author, who had no evaluative role in the course. After identifying journals of study participants, the first author replaced participants’ actual names with trainee selected pseudonyms before any coding took place.

## Design

A qualitative, grounded theory research design was used to explore the experiences that counselor trainees perceived as significant to their personal growth and awareness. In addition, researchers sought to understand the process of how such personal growth and awareness developed throughout trainees’ participation in a semester long experiential group. Grounded theory was selected as the most appropriate methodology because researchers were interested in obtaining a deep understanding of the experiences and perspectives of trainees to inform an emergent theory, as opposed to being interested in a broad representational model that could be generalized (Fassinger,

2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In keeping with the discovery-oriented approach of all qualitative research, the current study was guided by two general, but related questions: What experiences do counselor trainees participating in an experiential group perceive as significant to their personal growth and awareness and how does the process of personal growth and development take place within an experiential group?

## Data Analysis

Researchers shared responsibility for the data analysis. As previous research related to experiential group participation indicated that what participants found significant may have differed as a function of the stage of group development (Kivlighan & Goldfine, 1991; Yalom & Leczsz, 2005), a decision was made to initially analyze journals across four phases (e.g., weeks 1–3, 4–6, 7–9, 10–13) to permit any developmental themes to emerge without presupposing when or how these might appear. As grounded theory endorses simultaneous data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), analysis of journals from phase one was begun as data were being collected for phase two and progressed accordingly.

Grounded theory also recommends the use of analytic strategies, as opposed to stipulating a set of specific techniques (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These strategies were used throughout analysis to assist in developing and refining the emergent theory. To begin, researchers independently open coded one randomly selected journal from each phase and reduced the data to the thought level (Fassinger, 2005), later meeting to compare and argue to consensus the identified codes. Coding of the remaining journals within each phase progressed using constant comparative methods. The identified codes/themes were continually reviewed within and across journals, and modified as the coding process progressed through the four phases. Analysis continued until saturation occurred, which was defined as when no new themes emerged (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Fassinger, 2005). Once all data were open coded, axial coding was used to collapse and group open codes by larger themes representing the different types of relationships perceived to exist among these various themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Creswell, 1998; Spradley, 1979). During this process, it was recognized that themes represented four major levels/categories of group work. Although participants described different factors across the semester, all four major levels/categories were represented throughout. Thus, the four phases were collapsed and



themes were reviewed with respect to the emergent grounded theory. Researchers then revisited the data to establish properties of the codes/themes, identify the particular experiences that best represented the various properties that had been identified, as well as to identify any negative cases (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that the trustworthiness of all qualitative research is established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Towards those ends, researchers utilized triangulation and peer debriefing to enhance the credibility and transferability of the findings. Throughout the analysis, researchers purposefully maintained different degrees of familiarity with the related literatures and wrote independent field notes and memos. In addition, researchers independently open coded journals across phases and later met to find consensus. Peer debriefing was used twice as a trustworthiness check (Fassinger, 2005). Identified axial codes and verbatim quotes representing main themes were presented to a doctoral-level faculty member and three counselor education doctoral students. The peer debriefers audited the categories and provided feedback regarding category names and fit of the data into identified categories. Researchers then utilized this feedback to modify the categories. Following subsequent analysis and emergence of the grounded theory, two additional counselor education doctoral students were asked to select where the journal excerpts best fit within the categories of grounded theory as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998): phenomenon, causal condition, context, action strategy, consequences. Their feedback was used to more clearly articulate the emergent model.

## **RESULTS**

Findings from this study identified 30 factors that participants reported as significant to their personal growth and awareness within their participation in an experiential group. These factors emerged over four phases of initial analysis and were collapsed into four levels of group work through subsequent analysis. Table 1 presents the 30 factors grouped as follows; nine factors within intrapersonal, nine factors within interpersonal, nine factors within group-as-a-whole, and three factors within supra-group. In addition, an explanatory model of the systemically interconnected factors related to personal

**Table 1 Emergent Codes Across Four Phases of Analysis**

	<i>Phase I</i>	<i>Phase II</i>	<i>Phase III</i>	<i>Phase IV</i>
INTRA	Genuineness	Genuineness	Genuineness	Taking risks
	Authenticity	Authenticity	Authenticity	Own characteristics
	Immediacy	Immediacy	Immediacy	Regular attendance
	Own experiences	Taking risks	Taking risks	
	Active participation	Own characteristics	Own characteristics	
	Difficult topics			
	Personality			
INTER	Vicarious learning	Vicarious learning	Vicarious learning	Vicarious Learning
	Safety	Safety	Safety	Safety
	Validation	Validation	Validation	Validation
	Sense of acceptance	Outside dynamics	Immediacy Inter	
	Connecting with others		personal genuineness	
	Shared experiences			
WHOLE	Structure	Structure	Group norms	Structure
	Group norms	Group norms	Group content	Group norms
	Group content	Group ownership	Group cohesion	Group content
	Environment	Group cohesion	Group purpose/goals	Group cohesion
	Sitting arrangement	Composition		Composition
	Composition	Group purpose/goals		
		Ambiance		
		Continuity		
		Facilitator interventions	Facilitator interventions	Facilitator interventions
SUPRA	Facilitator interventions	Process observer	Process observer	
	Journaling			

growth and awareness emerged from the data and included the phenomenon, causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, actions, and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Direct quotes from participants have been selected to best illustrate the theory components and are presented in the sections that follow.

### **Phenomenon: Systemic Interconnectedness**

Within grounded theory, the phenomenon is the main or central happening within the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this study, participants identified 30 factors as being significant to their personal growth and awareness within participation in an experiential group. Further, participants identified systemic links and interconnected relationships between these factors and across the levels of the group system. Although all participants discussed aspects of how these factors were interconnected, Suzy may have captured the systemic interconnection most directly when she noted,

It is hard to look at a person without factoring in the systems in which they are a part of. [A]ll influence our lives . . . and to isolate a person to just the individual would not only be a bad approach, but basically impossible. (Jn #1)

Other participants discussed the systemic interconnection less directly, but commented on the reciprocal relationships across system levels. For example, Rebecca observed that the more the group as a whole addressed sensitive issues “like roles and make up of the group, the more I feel comfortable being myself” (Jn #4). Molly described a similar relationship between the functioning of the group-as-a-whole and her thoughts, feelings, and behavior,

I feel relieved and a little more able to contribute to the group . . . I envy the people in the group who said they tended to be very immediate. I reflect after the fact and feel a little confused as to what went on and my perspective changes as I think things out. (Jn #4)

Still other participants, like Anya, identified the systemic interconnectedness as a synergy taking place between the group-as-a-whole, interpersonally, and intrapersonally. She reflected on this,

I suppose the change in tone in the group from laughter to thoughtful silence gave him permission to align his outer expressions with his inner emotions. That is what I was searching for, too . . .—permission to be genuine, permission to be congruent, permission to be fully present and vulnerable, permission to “bring everybody down.” (Jn #3)

## Causal Conditions: Intrapersonal

Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested that causal conditions are what influence or give rise to the phenomenon or central happening. Nine casual conditions emerged from the data and clustered within the intrapersonal level of a group system and included genuineness, authenticity, immediacy, taking risks, own characteristics, active participation, engaging in difficult topics, personality, and regular attendance. Participants repeatedly referenced how their unique intrapersonal experiences contributed to the phenomenon of systemic interconnectedness. Participants discussed this interface as being both positive and negative. For example Isabel related her past “professional and personal” inability to “stand up” for herself and to “share when I disagree with others” (Jn #5) to the overall functioning of the group. Likewise, Maisha reflected on a recent digression from her typical behavior, “Looking back, I’m glad I let myself feel all that I felt because I know that I don’t always do that” (Jn #7). She later described regretting having cried in the earlier session, but said the experience contributed to others learning “more about people’s insides” and opening her eyes “a little wider to the benefits of counseling and therapy” (Jn #12). Rebecca also observed how her past personal history impacted the connection between her and the group,

I was often too shy or embarrassed to speak up for myself when I was little so people overlooked me or categorized me as something I was not in some group situations. I think feeling those feelings when I was younger makes it easier for me to notice people who are not included or are overlooked now . . . I can really identify with that feeling. (Jn #2)

Participants also frequently compared their intrapersonal experiences to those observed in other group members in their efforts to make sense of the systemic interconnectedness. For example, Suzy attempted to understand her reaction as compared to others in group,

I think my personality has a lot to do with it. Although I can get stressed out and overwhelmed throughout the semester, overall I feel like I am more laid back and less stressed about my courses than many students I have met in the program. (Suzy, Jn #1)

Molly illustrated another form of comparison as she noted the importance of her regular attendance in group:

This week I learned what a big impact missing a group session has. I felt very out of synch with the group. Not only did I miss out on what exactly was said at the previous session, but I also had no notion of the context in which things were said. (Jn #12)

## Context: Whole Group

Within grounded theory, the context represents properties or conditions within which the action strategies were taken to manage and carry out the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Nine contextual factors emerged from the data and clustered within the group-as-a-whole level. The factors included structure, group norms, group content, environment, sitting arrangement, composition, group purpose/goals, ambience, and continuity. Participants described these factors as they occurred within or emanated from the group-as-a-whole, while also making judgments about this context. For example, Maja identified “those who expressed the opinion that group was too intense and they wanted things to be lighter” as “defeating the entire point of the group, which is to face issues and help combat the social stigma against showing emotions” (Jn #3). However, others like Jonathon identified a preference for combining “light” and “heavy” topics to create a “relaxing atmosphere where we learned more about each other’s families, home-life, and the way we feel” (Jn #3).

Participants described the importance of group norms as a context for personal growth and awareness. For example, Molly noted that “checking in and checking out” and granting “permission” to choose what and when to share in group “probably made some of us feel more safe and less pressured and, ironically, possibly more likely to openly share at times as a result” (Jn #2). Maisha described these norms as enhancing group cohesion, noting that “it . . . showed our sense of community and care as a group for one another” (Jn #10), whereas Christina found summarizing or “recapping” key aspects of previous session helpful to inform missing members of “any developments that took place while they were gone” (Jn #10).

Related, participants understood the importance of group-as-a-whole functioning on their own personal growth and awareness. Maisha described noticing a difference in taking “a step as a *group* . . . instead of a few individuals moving at different paces” and added that “I felt like we finally accomplished something” (Jn #5). Maja also noted this,

It reminds me of the saying back in high school about running track, when people would say, “You’re only as fast as your slowest runner.” I feel like our group can only grow as far as the members who are contributing the least. (Jn #12)

Related, participants expressed concern how the group-as-a-whole context could negatively impact the group process and their personal growth. Molly felt that her group was “floundering because we

have not collaborated to make a concrete statement of purpose” (Jn #8). Such lack of clarity of purpose, she continued, was preventing the group experience from being “as close to reality as it could be.”

Participants like Elizabeth expressed how differing expectations created tensions within the group-as-a-whole. She compared this context to “a journey [with] no destination and no specific finish line” (Jn #4) and went on to explain how this often resulted in frustration within the group. Still others described how the way that the group dealt with this collective frustration often created “positive effects” (Dunkin, Jn #5) and “made the group stronger” (Suzy, Jn #6).

Participants also reflected on the diversity in group membership as a group structure that positively influenced the context and their subsequent personal growth and awareness. For instance, Dunkin believed group members enrolled in higher education would be a “valuable asset” because they could “critique and give feedback from a point of view that has not been trained in the counseling field” (Jn #1). Later he described generational differences as “one of the most salient things . . . taken from the group,” adding that “it would be an amazing opportunity to engage in an experiential group with members of 3 generations” (Jn #6). Elizabeth also valued the diverse opinions, noting how the “younger folks” helped her “understand the different ways of looking at things” (Jn #6).

### **Intervening Conditions: Interpersonal**

Within grounded theory, intervening conditions are broad structural conditions that impact action strategies (Fassinger, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Nine intervening conditions emerged from the data and clustered within the interpersonal level of a group system. These factors consisted of vicarious learning, safety, validation, sense of acceptance, connecting, shared experiences, relationships outside of group, interpersonal immediacy, and interpersonal genuineness. The most significant aspects of vicarious learning involved other members’ demonstrated risk-taking and inter-personal courage. Jonathon described this as the willingness “to let down personal barriers and walls and to share experiences” and viewed it as “awakening something within” members (Jn #5). Participants like Lisa illustrated this when she expressed how “incredible and valuable” she found the disclosure of two group members, “I can almost describe it as “intimate” because it was such a shared feeling” (Jn #8). Rebecca expounded on this further when she noted, “I really felt like I was among all these strong women who trusted their instincts and were brave enough to

follow their own path—it was inspiring” (Jn #6). More specifically, Maja reflected on the participation of an apprehensive member,

I think after hearing and seeing her apprehensions last week, I did not expect her to be so open this quickly . . . The risk she [took] seemed to have an obvious effect on the group. Many of us proceeded to share some of the difficult things we are struggling with. (Jn #2)

Vicarious experiencing also triggered internal reactions. Dunkin noted how one member’s story “brought up memories that I have never processed” (Jn #10). Caitlin also commented on her changed perceptions, “[N]o matter what I want to talk about, before I felt I was being judged. Now I feel more at ease and willing” (Jn #5). Jonathon’s captured the internal effects,

When . . . others share about their grief . . . [it] empowers me to explore the feelings and emotions that I once was afraid to explore. I somehow feel braver allowing myself to open up about them and to let some of my walls down . . . [and] allow us to confront issues we normally wouldn’t on our own. (Jn #5)

Participants also discussed interpersonal experiences related to safety, validation, and feeling both accepted and connected to others. Caitlin’s “panicked” reaction in the first group session “because the topic was the same but the safety wasn’t” was later replaced by increased comfort and participation in the group after realizing “the safe environment I was in” (Jn #2). For participants like Lisa the sense of “I am not alone” that was engendered by “similar experiences and shared different obstacles in life” helped her see the importance of universality in group counseling because “it builds the group” (Jn #3).

Participants reported that their connection with others was aided by shared experiences with and perceived support from particular group members. Suzy expressed how nice it was “to have people acknowledge that they also feel anxiety over situations that might not be huge or major events” (Jn #10). Like Maisha, participants also noted that the shared experiences and inter-personal connection enabled them to actively engage in group,

I have sometimes felt that there are things I needed to talk about or wanted to talk about in group . . . [but] until I feel as though I have permission or someone strikes a similar chord with which I can associate my relevant emotions, I won’t share it. (Jn #10)

Participants also discussed how shared experiences and connections contributed to personal growth and awareness. Anya noted, “This

week was the most productive group session for me because I was able to connect with [a group member] about our common family experiences...and that has been very helpful" (Jn #10). However, Rebecca identified how such a shared experience is not always feasible,

It is important to realize that people react differently and think differently about things like silence, flow of conversation, group dynamics and quality of contribution. I like to think that my perceptions are right—but...how do nine different people come together to support one another and value the differences among the members. (Jn #12)

### **Action Strategies: SupraGroup Pedagogies**

Within grounded theory, actions are strategies that are devised to carry out or manage the phenomenon within context and under the specific conditions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Three action strategies emerged from the data and clustered within the supragroup level, including facilitators' interventions, process observer feedback, and weekly reflective journaling. Participants acknowledged the significance of each of these strategies on their own and the groups' learning. Participants identified some specific facilitator interventions as particularly helpful, like their refusal to "fill the silence," "pushing" members to share, and providing "specific topics." For instance, Maja described an "honest conversation" between one of the facilitators and a group member as "what builds the trust necessary between members and facilitators" (Jn #3). Although Marisa was less enthusiastic when she noted a facilitator introduced intervention, "It was a little different tonight because after check in we went back around the room to highlight the progress and our goals for group (Jn #5). Other participants expressed mixed reactions to a decline in facilitators' structuring within the group. Dunkin described what he thought were fewer facilitator interventions as "enlightening to me as to how the group structure can be confronted and varied" (Jn #7), whereas Maja described this reduction in structure as "upsetting" and "sometimes confusing" (Jn #7).

Participants viewed the presence of the process observer as inhibiting their own and other group members' expression. Anya described her consciousness of "the observers being there, taking notes about...group interactions" as creating a sense of insecurity because of "an artificially constructed environment involving an evaluative component" (Jn #4). Lisa also noted that someone in her group "decided not to share anymore" out of a "fear of being analyzed" by the process observers (Jn #6). Although participants described the



process observer feedback as salient to their personal growth and development, it was clear that evaluative comments generated negative feelings. Isabel captured this:

It was very difficult for me to understand why these topics were seen as surface level . . . to have the topic tagged as “surface level” made me feel as if the most defining and important things to my development as a person weren’t worth anything. (Jn #5)

Participants viewed journaling as a functional pedagogical aid to personal awareness that offered alternative means for self-expression. Caitlin noted that “Sometimes I think in group that I want to say something but I don’t have the courage to say it and think that I can just say it in my journal” (Jn #5). While Suzy described journaling as “an opportunity to reflect and receive feedback,” she also wondered if some group members might have utilized it as a means to process “without having to bring up their thoughts” (Jn #5) within group. However, participants like Lisa used journaling as a means of documenting their goals, to hold themselves accountable, and to celebrate progress, “This was something that was very hard for me to do, but I said I’d do it. Even though it was tough, I held to it like I said in my journal and I’m glad I did (Jn #11).

### **Consequences: Personal Growth and Awareness**

Strauss and Corbin (1998) referred to consequences as the outcomes or results of the actions taken that contributed to the phenomenon. The three combined actions identified and undertaken in this study resulted in two distinct, but non-polar consequences: they facilitated or hindered personal growth and awareness. Although participants frequently identified evidence of their personal growth and awareness or provided some understanding of how they assessed this, their discussions often included reference to the ways in which their growth might have also been challenged or in what areas they remained underdeveloped. Suzy illustrated this when she wrote, “The biggest thing I learned . . . is my fear of confronting people. This is something I would like to continue to work on” (Jn #12). Similarly, Caitlin described an ability to confront a “withdrawn” group member as “progress” toward her expressed goal of “being in the moment,” but qualified this,

I think I showed progress in being able to say something more in the moment than to think about it for a while before saying it. . . . But this is something that is still hard for me and that I have to work on being able to do without prompting. (Jn #9)

Anya expressed a different form of ambivalence related to personal growth and awareness when describing her newfound awareness of not always being genuine, pleased to “know herself” on one hand, but saddened to realized that,

... what it comes down to is that I feel pretty badly about myself... and I'm scared of other people seeing me for who I really am. If someone rejects a façade it is a lot less painful to deal with than if they were to reject my true self. (Anya, Jn #4)

Jonathon identified something similar, “[T]he fact that I cried in our group surprises me so much. However, as I drove home that night I reflected on our group experience and realized that I have never dealt with the loss of [my] grandmother” (Jn #2). Elizabeth also identified the challenge presented by confidentiality concerns, “There is still a reluctance to share with the people you go to class with and work with and will see and be judged by.” Further, she pointed out how the perceived lack of anonymity may have hindered her authentic participation,

I think we all have a certain “front” or “best foot forward” in our public (work, school) persona, and to let that drop and bare our souls with the same people that we will continue to see, might be hard for some. (Jn #12)

As part of their personal growth and awareness, participants displayed an ability to reframe discomfort, awkwardness, or conflict. Jonathon addressed this,

We had a blip last week and I guess the statement that “what doesn't kill you, just makes you stronger” might somehow apply here. We got through the challenges and now have come out maybe feeling a bit stronger or at least a bit bolder. (Jn #5)

Suzy reflected on a similar reframing process when she wrote,

I believe that my emotional reaction... was an even more powerful learning experience. ... My not being able to keep myself emotionally put together in situations that should not cause me to become so upset was something that I had want[ed] to work on. (Jn #9)

Lastly, participants also identified how their personal growth and awareness might be used in the future. For instance, Dunkin commented on the value of realizing his family structure was different from other group members, “I think this will eventually help me to relate more closely to certain individuals” (Jn #2). Molly described how the

“closeness” and “genuine care” in the group helped her to “gain a little more insight into how a person in group therapy might really be able to have meaningful and helpful relationships with a group of people who they know for only a limited amount of time” (Jn #9). However, participants like Marisa illustrated the potential negative impact of critical facilitator feedback when she wrote about learning what she should not to do in the future as a group leader,

Thank you for teaching me how important it is not to use phrases like “story telling” and “surface stuff” with clients in group and to find better ways to draw clients out and re-direct conversations. (Jn #12)

## DISCUSSION

This study explored 14 counselor trainees’ perceptions of the significant experiences related to their personal growth and awareness during participation in an experiential group. Findings identified 30 factors of varying significance to trainees’ personal growth and awareness clustering within the systemic levels of intra-personal, inter-personal, group-as-a-whole, and supra-group. An explanatory theory, grounded in these four systemic levels, emerged to explain the processes through which this personal growth and awareness took place. The findings of this study support and extend the general literature on experiential groups in various ways.

First, the emergence of the four levels was consistent with some aspects of Group Systems Theory (GST) literature (Agazarian, 1997, 2001). The intrapersonal, interpersonal, and group-as-a-whole subsystems were consistent with the three levels of process identified in GST as individual, interpersonal, and whole group (Agazarian; Connors & Caple, 2005). However, the present research identified a fourth level as significant to trainees, namely the supragroup. In this learning context, the supragroup level encompassed those pedagogical action strategies that came to bear on the group processes and outcomes. Journaling emerged as one of the key themes within this category/level, also rendering some credence to the utility of journaling as a pedagogical tool that fosters personal growth and awareness through reflective thinking and self-appraisal (Harland & Myhill, 1997; Howard et al., 2006).

Second, as the intervening condition of the emergent theory, the factors within the interpersonal level supported earlier GST research. O’Neill and Constantino (2008) identified the interpersonal subgroup as “the cardinal element” that linked the individual system and the group-as-a-whole subsystem. Participants in this study also appeared

to heavily utilize interpersonal experience as a means for systemic interconnection across other levels. Said another way, trainees frequently discussed how their interactions with other group members assisted in bridging their intrapersonal and whole group experiences.

Third, this study corroborated earlier literature regarding elements of a successful group experience. Yalom (1995) identified universality, interpersonal learning, and group cohesiveness among the eleven “therapeutic factors” of groups. Building on this work, Corey and Corey (2006) purported that safety, immediacy, self-disclosure, confrontation, feedback, and a willingness to risk and to trust as additional factors that engender “constructive change” in groups (p. 239). It is noteworthy that without prior refer to these factors or direction to consider these constructs, trainees in this study independently and collectively identified their existence in the experiential group, and further described the significance of these factors in their personal growth and awareness.

### **Research Implications**

Both CACREP (2008) and ASGW (2000) have identified personal growth and awareness as one of three outcome areas for group work training. However, there has been minimal empirical work to understand what aspects of group work training contribute to these outcomes (Lennie, 2007). The current study provided some support for Akos, Goodnough, and Milsom’s (2004) insinuation that self-examination and introspection are key elements in the training of group workers. Future studies could replicate these findings and then build upon them by including the two other core outcome areas of knowledge and skills. Additionally, it may be fruitful to explore whether trainees’ program course of study (i.e., community counseling, school counseling, student affairs counseling, higher education, marriage and family therapy) impacts the experiences identified as significant to their personal growth and awareness. Such a question is particularly relevant given that almost half of the participants in the current study were not matriculated in a counselor education program. Lastly, results of this research suggested a potential developmental process taking place, but findings were not specific as to what this was. Thus, it is suggested that future researchers explicitly investigate the relationship between identification of factors of significance within a group developmental model.

### **Training Implications**

As trainees identified numerous experiences that contributed to their personal growth and awareness, it may be important for

counselor education programs and faculty to attend to these factors within and across the emergent theory and levels of group. Specifically, instructors of group work courses are advised to attend to the complexity involved in processes related to experiential group and develop strategies to assist trainees in development of their personal growth and awareness. Participants in this study found journaling to be a significant pedagogical tool. As such, training programs may consider including reflective journaling as a supplementary strategy to foster trainee self-awareness. Moreover, the emergent model also provides group facilitators a data-driven framework through which they can organize, structure, and intervene in experiential training groups. For example, group facilitators may want to monitor the systematically interconnected processes that occur within the experiential group so that they can make intentional decisions about how to most effectively intervene.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The greatest strength of this study lies in its grounded theory methodology (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). The current research explored the perspectives and experiences of counselor trainees participating in an experiential group with minimal intrusion. Researchers did not impose a priori assumptions about the factors significant to personal growth and awareness and examined trainees' experiences over time. Results provided a much needed data-driven framework through which counselor educators, group leaders, group members, and group researchers can understand the constructs and processes taking place within an experiential group. Prior to this research, there had been a lack of coherence in the literature related to the factors of significance in experiential group, particularly as they related to personal and awareness (Donati & Watts, 2000; Lennie, 2007). The emergent model not only incorporates the 30 identified factors of significance, it begins to explain the processes through which personal growth and awareness occurs within an experiential group.

As with all research, there are a number of limitations to this study that resulted from methodological decisions. First, although Robson and Robson (2008) recommended the use of trainee journals as a creative means to collect qualitative phenomenological data, the current study analyzed data collected through trainee journals using constant comparative methods and reported findings in a manner consistent with grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The methodological incongruence between the primary research question and the methods of data collection and analysis present a potential threat to the knowledge claim. As only trainees' journals were used

as a data source, it is possible that inclusion of co-facilitators' written feedback, process observers' notes, or transcripts of the group sessions themselves might have produced differing results. Regardless, such additional efforts to triangulate data sources would have added to the trustworthiness of the findings. Secondly, although the qualitative nature of the study provided a window into participants' experience of one type of experiential group work used within counselor education, generalizations cannot be made beyond the 14 participants in the study (Bogden & Biklen, 2006). More specifically, there was little gender or racial diversity within this convenience sample and almost half of the study participants were not enrolled in a counselor training program. In addition, participants in this study were involved in only one of the many different types of experiential group work used across counselor education training (Merta, Johnson, & McNeil, 1995). Likewise, the study took place within an evaluative context. It is possible that the instructor's access to the journals may have influenced what trainees wrote (Howard et al., 2006), even though trainees were informed that the content of the journals would not be evaluated or reflected in their course grade. It is also possible that the journals of those trainees who consented to participation did not reflect the experiences of trainees who chose not to participate. Moreover, the journals may not reflect all aspects of what trainees considered significant to their personal growth and awareness once the study ended. Lastly, the evaluative course context used for data collection presented the need to simultaneously to balance that participation was voluntary, while also protecting participant confidentiality (Robson & Robson, 2008). As a result, researchers identified participants exclusively by pseudonym until after the spring semester course grades were turned in and verified, therefore limiting the ability to conduct member checks with trainees having graduated. While researchers included multiple methodological procedures to increase the trustworthiness of findings (Hays & Singh, 2009), it remains unknown whether or not trainees would have agreed with or provided critique of the findings as presented. The above limitations highlight the exploratory nature of the study and descriptive findings. It is hoped that these findings will assist in generating hypotheses about the different aspects of experiential group work, as well as the development of further research related to the personal growth and awareness in counselor trainees.

## CONCLUSION

To date, the counselor education literature has relied heavily on theory and anecdotal evidence to explain issues that influenced

trainees' personal growth and awareness, particularly within experiential group participation. This work has been confounded by the various definitions of development subsumed within personal growth and awareness. Grounded in the trainees' perspective, the current research provided preliminary empirical understanding of 30 factors significant to personal growth and awareness. Further, the emergent model explains the systemic interconnectedness of these factors and illuminates numerous avenues for learning interventions.

As noted by Suzy, a participant in this study, experiential group participation offered a multitude of learning opportunities,

I came into this class with the mindset that I would learn all about group dynamics and process and I do think that our experiential group and course work has allowed me to explore some of those dynamics in more depth. However, I also want to make sure that I am getting just as much out of being a group member in addition to learning how to be an effective group leader. (Jn #7)

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