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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

First-Year Counselors-in-Training and Perceptions of the Group Environment

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Abstract
This exploratory study examined the impact of three process groups for first-year, first-semester master's degree students ($N = 20$, total). The Group Environment Scale (GES; Moos 1994, 2002), Forms I (Ideal) and R (Real), were utilized to measure the participants' ideal perceptions and real perceptions of the small group environment. The overall results show that cohesion, leader support, task orientation, order/organization, and leader control were critical aspects of the experience. A group facilitator impact was found when comparing the results from the three different groups. Implications for group work training and future research are presented.

Keywords Group perceptions · Counselors-in-training · Group work training

Introduction

Counselors-in-training undergo a diverse and comprehensive set of challenges in their journey to becoming professional counselors (Skovholt and Rønnestad 1992, 2003; Stoltenberg et al. 1998). The most acute of these challenges are knowledge acquisition and skill development.

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While these challenges are a natural part of personal growth and professional development, scholars have found that a lack of recognition of and attendance to these challenges at an early juncture can impact the professional identity development of future counselors (Furr and Carroll 2003; Melchert et al. 1996; Skovholt and Rønnestad 1992, 2003).

The beginning stages of professional identity development for novice counselors are seen as a period of diametric internal experiences: between fear and excitement, self-doubt and validation, and dissonance and resolve (Skovholt and Rønnestad 1992). The counseling literature shows that under the rubric of an effective training process, counselors-in-training are able to develop into individuated, competent clinicians (Auxier et al. 2003; Gibson et al. 2010; Sawatzky 1994; Skovholt and Rønnestad 1992; Wagner and Hill 2015). Stoltenberg et al. (1998) identified motivation, autonomy, and self-other awareness as markers of professional growth. It is important to understand that emergent counselors typically begin their training at a level characterized by high levels of motivation and anxiety with a focus on acquiring basic counseling skills. At this level, students are dependent on instructors for validation and assistance in locating the "right" answers. Additionally, students at this level require structure and positive feedback, and seek to avoid direct confrontation (Skovholt and Rønnestad 1992). This limited self-awareness may be coupled with an inherent apprehension about the evaluation of self by others. Learning theorists have highlighted that working through these feelings and internal experiences is a necessary part of the learning process (Gowin 1981; Kolb 1984; Piaget 1970).

Self-awareness and understanding of the impact of self on others to prevent personal issues from negatively impacting the therapeutic environment have been identified as vital areas of counselor development (Auxier et al. 2003; Gibson et al. 2010; Stoltenberg et al. 1998; Skovholt and Rønnestad 1992). As a result, there exists a responsibility for counselor educators and supervisors to facilitate self-reflection and self-awareness practices across the curriculum that promote students' personal and professional growth (Auxier et al. 2003; CACREP 2016; Furr and Carroll 2003; Gibson et al. 2010). Auxier et al. (2003) pointed out that counselor training programs typically operate in three domains: conceptual learning (lectures, reading, and papers); experiential learning (practicums, internships, and small group experiences); and external evaluation (instructor and peer feedback). While all three domains are necessary, experiential learning in particular has been shown to impact positive intrinsic motivation (Kolb 1984; Pew, 2007; Wang and Pomerantz 2009) and encourage collaborative learning (Totten et al. 1991).

Experiential learning seems to strengthen the opportunity for counselors-in-training to develop a healthy professional sense of self and an understanding of their environment and of others who share that environment (Bohecker et al. 2016a; Kolb 1984). Experiential learning is an interactive process that can foster a sense of self-efficacy and challenge preconceived notions and beliefs, while also creating a heightened sense of anxiety since it can be challenging to try new and unfamiliar ways of thinking, questioning, and learning (Gowin 1981; Kolb 1984). As a result, perceptions of the learning environment are shifted and redefined (Furr and Carroll 2003). Critical learning incidents are essential for developing insight as such incidents provide a space where reflection occurs and meaning is derived.

The small group experience in counselor training has been found to be an impactful environment for attending to components of development. Because of the nature of the experience, small group members have the opportunity to gain perspective and develop interpersonal awareness of what it is to be a participant in a counseling group; they also learn to be empathic to the group process (Gladding 2012; Perera-Diltz and MacCluskie 2013;

Yalom and Leszcz 2005). A number of studies have indicated that the experience of participating in a group can increase students' self-discovery and reflective practices when, as group members, they are invited to engage authentically in the process (Gladding 2012; Moody et al. 2014; Ohrt et al. 2014). These increases are significant in that they demonstrate how the group experience contributes to increased self-awareness, self-exploration, and professional development.

Group work has been found to facilitate personal growth, awareness, and cognitive complexity (Bohecker et al. 2016a; Bohecker et al. 2014; Moody et al. 2014). Bohecker et al. (2014, 2016a) detailed the importance of intentionally constructing a group experience curriculum that is sensitive to the developmental needs of students, while also challenging the students to move outside of their comfort zone in order to maximize their growth potential. Ohrt et al. (2013) found that counselors-in-training reported that their sense of self-efficacy increased through participating in a group experience, as they were able to encounter their fears in a facilitated, supportive environment.

In recognition of these various elements, we considered that it was most appropriate to investigate the perceptions of group work held by students enrolled in their first semester of graduate education in a counseling program. Their perceptions at the beginning of their training reveal the depth of their experience and how those experiences influence their growth and development as emerging counselors. In addition, our investigation of student perceptions provides insight into how to best facilitate growth, awareness, and cognitive complexity.

Fear and self-doubt are commonly experienced emotions amongst counselors-in-training (Bohecker et al. 2016a; Skovholt and Rønnestad 1992, 2003). Therefore, training experiences that increase self-efficacy are critical throughout the learning process. New ways of thinking can be difficult as they challenge one to move beyond what is comfortable and to come to recognize the complexity and variation of learning (Bohecker et al. 2016a). This difficulty makes it important to examine student perceptions of the nature of events that influence their development. It is also critical to explore student perceptions of the group environment. For example, there may be significant differences between what a student expects, prefers, and then actually experiences within a group environment. Student experiences can be particularly crucial for counselor educators and group facilitators to navigate, situating the experiences within the context of counselor training and development.

The literature indicates that participation in group experiences during counselor training can promote healthy development for emergent group counselors (CACREP 2016; Moody et al. 2014). In addition, such experiences can prompt reflection, professional identity development, and increased self-awareness (Bohecker et al. 2016a; Bohecker et al. 2014; Furr and Carroll 2003; Howard et al. 2006). While some studies have attended to how the personal and professional development of counselors-in-training is impacted by group experiences, scholars need to further examine how specific components of these experiences evolve over time in the group. A better understanding of the varied factors of the group experience, namely perceptions and expectations, within the dimensions of relationships, personal growth, and systemic maintenance and change, could assist counselor educators in more effectively attending to the needs of group members.

Moos (1994, 2002) developed the Group Environment Scale (GES) to address the perceptions and expectations of individuals in a group environment. It has been found that administering the GES can assist researchers in understanding the evolution of the group (Moos 1994, 2002). If the group's facilitator is intentional, the facilitator can construct the group experience so as to promote members' safety, engagement, and personal and professional

development (Bohecker et al. 2014; Bohecker et al. 2016a; McCarthy et al. 2014). In this study, the GES (Moos 1994, 2002) coupled with facilitator intentionality was utilized to assist in understanding differences in participants' perceptions of their ideal group experience compared to their real group experience.

Method

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the perceptions of the group environment held by first-year, first-semester master's-level counseling students taking part in a process group experience. First-year, first-semester master's degree students were selected because of a disparity of the conceptualized expectations in the literature as to what counselor development entails (Skovholt and Rønnestad 1992, 2003). Moreover, students entering a graduate program that trains them to think not as lay persons but as counselors have the opportunity to experience immense personal and professional growth (Skovholt and Rønnestad 1992, 2003). Additionally, the management of students' expectations, or their perceptions of ideal circumstances, has been found to be a significant factor contributing to students' successful navigation of counseling programs (Skovholt and Rønnestad 1992, 2003). This study thus sought to answer the following research questions: 1) What did participants perceive to be the ideal small group environment?, 2) How did participants' perceptions of the ideal and their real experiences of the small group environment differ?, and 3) Were there group differences in perceptions based on the facilitator of the group?

A within-subjects design was selected for this study because the same participants' perceptions were measured at two different points during the group experience. The study involved participants being randomly placed into one of three process groups (Bohecker et al. 2014, 2016a). The GES (Moos 1994, 2002) instrument was used to measure the following variables: perceptions of cohesion, leader support, expressiveness, independence, task orientation, self-discovery, anger/aggression, order/organization, leader control, and innovation. It was hypothesized that participation in a small process group experience would influence perceptions of the variables under exploration.

Participants

The participants for this study were first-year, first-semester, Master's-level counselors-in-training ($N = 20$, total) enrolled in a Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited counseling program at a university located in the northwestern United States. Of the 20 participants, 17 were women (82%) and 3 were men (18%). The ages of the participants ranged from 22 to 42. All of the participants reported that their ethnicity was White ($N = 20$, 100%). The students were enrolled in a one-credit laboratory course that required them to participate in a small group experience using a process group method. Given the number of students, three groups were formed and the students were randomly selected into the groups (*n's* = 5; 7; 8).

Following approval from a university human-subjects review committee, prospective participants attended an in-class presentation during which they were invited to take part in the study. During the presentation, the students received an introductory letter and consent form. The method of inquiry was explained in detail and the students were informed that participation in the research study was voluntary and would in no way impact their educational

standing or status in their training program. The students were likewise told that if they chose not to be involved in the research component, they would still able to participate in the group.

Each student who consented to take part in the study underwent a screening that lasted approximately twenty minutes. The screening was meant to ascertain whether the potential participant understood the nature of the study and that participation was voluntary. Additionally, it allowed the researchers to gain an understanding of the students' previous small group experiences. Of those who consented to participate in the study, three participants had prior experience with small groups, though none of the groups the participants identified were in an educational setting. All other participants reported that they had no experience participating in a small group.

Instrumentation

The GES (Moos 1994, 2002) is a questionnaire designed to measure group members' perceptions of the group environment. As indicated above, the subscales of the measurement provide information about dimensions of relationships, personal growth, system maintenance, and change. They also "measure the actual, preferred, and expected social environments of task-oriented, social, psychotherapy, and self-help groups" (Moos 2002, p. 7). Three forms of the GES were developed to measure individuals' perceptions of the actual (Form R; Real), ideal (Form I), and expected (Form E) social environments of groups in which people are members or are considering becoming members. Each form differs in the focus of its assessment. Form E explores a participant's expected social group environment, while Form I investigates the participant's ideal perceptions of the group environment. Finally, Form R investigates the participant's perceptions of the group environment based on the actual experience. For this study, the researchers chose to investigate only the perceptions of the ideal group and of the actual (real) group. It was determined that expected perceptions would likely vary considerably based on the participants' training experiences and developmental trajectories (Bohecker et al. 2014; Bohecker et al. 2016a; Moos 1994, 2002; Skovholt and Rønnestad 1992, 2003).

The GES is a 90-item true/false questionnaire with 10 subscales of 9 items each that measure group members' perceptions of the group environment. The reliability of the GES was originally measured through internal consistency (coefficient alpha), test-retest correlations, and profile stability through correlations. Alpha coefficients (Moos 1994, 2002) ranged from .62 to .86, while test-retest correlation coefficients ranged from .65 to .87. Profile stability was reported based on assessments that took place after 4 months ($r = .92$), 8 months ($r = .91$), 12 months ($r = .84$), and 24 months ($r = .78$). These data suggest a moderate reliability of the GES (Moos 1994, 2002). Support for content validity was based on formulating definitions of specific constructs, preparing items based on theoretical definitions, and selecting items consistent with dimension concepts. Construct validity evidence in Moos' (1994) original research was presented in a discussion of literature on factors that influence groups.

Facilitators

There were four facilitators for this study: one in Group A, two in Group B, and one in Group C. The process groups had been incorporated into the training program several years prior to the study's initiation and it was customary that each group include two doctoral students who had volunteered to co-facilitate. In this study, the difference in the number of facilitators per

group occurred because two doctoral students left the program shortly before the start of the semester. As a result, two groups had one facilitator each and one group had co-facilitators. None of the facilitators was in more than one group. As discussed in the participant section, the student participants were placed in the groups using random assignment, which provided variability in the student experience related to having one or two facilitators. Each group facilitator had taken at least one master's-level group counseling course, had facilitated at least one small group experience, and was a doctoral student in counselor education. Additionally, at the time of this study, all of the facilitators were enrolled in a doctoral-level group counseling course.

Procedures

The researchers administered the GES (1994) through a pre-group administration of the Form I (Ideal) and a post-group administration of the Form R (Real). This allowed the researchers to best assess the participants' perceptions of their ideal group environment before the group experience began and to assess their perceptions of the actual (real) group environment at the conclusion of the study. The researchers were thus able to compare the participants' perceptions of their ideal and real small group experiences.

The GES Form I (Ideal) was scored, the mean for each subscale was calculated, and the raw scores were converted to a standard score. The collected data were then entered into an Excel spreadsheet and SPSS was subsequently used for analysis. The GES Form R (Real) was then administered to the participants following the eighth and final small group session to assess their actual perceptions of the small group experience. The analysis included obtaining the mean for each of the subscales of the GES Form R after final data collection and graphing the subset of data across the ten subscales of the form for each small group; these data were then converted from raw scores to standard scores.

The second research question was addressed by comparing the results of the GES Form I taken before and the GES Form R taken at the completion of the small group experience. The third research question was addressed by comparing the mean differences between the subscale domains using scores on the GES Form I taken before and scores from the GES Form R taken at the completion of the small group experience for the three groups.

Results

The purpose of this research was to compare the perceptions of the ideal preferred group environment with their perceptions of the actual/real small group environment for the master's-level counselors-in-training. Quantitative analyses were implemented to assess the differences among the group mean scores of Form I of the GES for each of the three groups. The group means were separated to determine whether there were differences among the groups based on different facilitators. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 24 software.

Before testing the hypotheses of this study, a preliminary statistical analysis was undertaken to increase reliability and validity. The analysis was used to determine whether there was statistically significant variability among the three groups' pre-test scores on Form I. The descriptive statistics for pre-test results for Group A, Group B, and Group C were obtained from total score means on Form I of the GES, as shown in Table 1. Levene's test for equality of variances indicated that the variances for Group A, Group B, and Group C did not differ

Table 1 GES Form I group means

	Mean	N	SD	Range Min	Range Max
Group A	55	5	1.30	53	56
Group B	54	7	3.58	48	60
Group C	55	8	1.89	52	58

significantly at the $\alpha < .05$ level ($p = .705$). This result led to the use of the more powerful equal variance ANOVA analysis to determine whether there were any statistical differences in the groups' pre-test scores. The results, $F(2,17) = .491$, $p = .620$, confirmed that there were no statistical differences among the groups' pre-test total score means on the GES Form I.

Research Question 1: How Did Participants Perceive their Ideal Small Group Environment?

Form I of the GES was used to capture the participants' perceptions of their preferred or ideal small group experience. The GES Form I profile, presented in Fig. 1, shows that the group participants preferred a high level of leader support (M = 58.55, SD 3.63), task orientation (M = 57.90, SD 5.34), cohesion (M = 57.85, SD 3.15), self-discovery (M = 56.50, SD 7.54), order/organization (M = 55.60, SD 8.90), innovation (M = 57.10, SD 6.66), and leader control (M = 53.65, SD 8.35). The results additionally showed that the participants placed less emphasis on expressiveness (M = 47.40, SD 6.17) and anger and aggression (M = 47.00, SD 7.07).

Research Question 2: How Did Participants' Perceptions of their Ideal and Real Small Group Environments Differ?

Form R of the GES was used to identify the participants' perceptions of their actual experiences in their small groups. A paired samples *t* test was conducted to determine statistical differences between the participants' ideal group environment and the environment actually experienced within each subscale category. Figure 2 shows the overall differences between

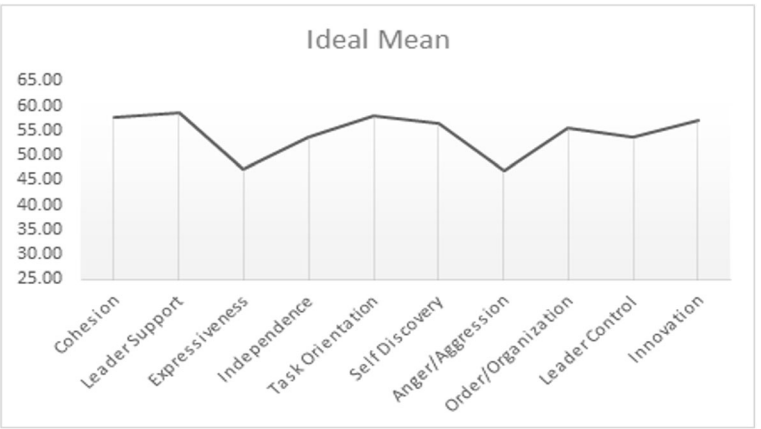

Fig. 1 Mean subscale scores, Form I – ideal group experience perceptions

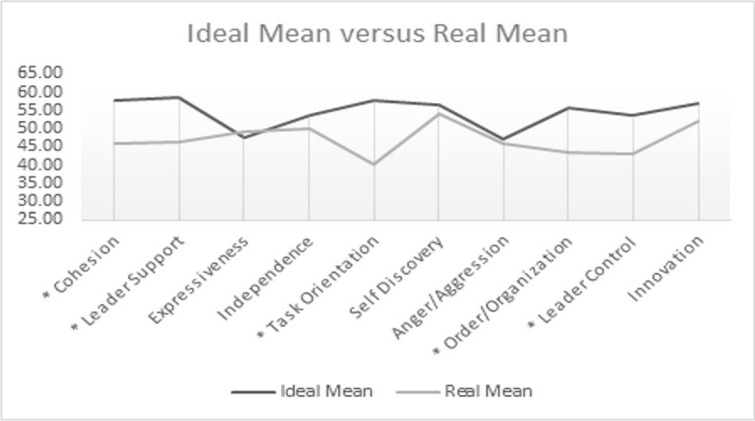

Fig. 2 Comparison of overall mean scores of Form I vs. Form R – ideal vs real perceptions

ideal (Form I) and real (Form R). Statistical significance is indicated by the asterisk before the subscale name.

The scores indicate that the ideal expectations in each of the subscales were higher than that which was actually experienced, with the exception of expressiveness (Form I, M = 47.4, SD 6.18; Form R, M = 49.15, SD 10.00), where the actual experience of expressiveness was higher than expected. Statistically significant changes are seen in the subscales for cohesion ($t(19) = 4.209$, $p = .001$), leader support ($t(19) = 4.898$, $p = .001$), task orientation ($t(19) = 5.654$, $p = .001$), order/organization($t(19) = 3.454$, $p = .003$), and leader control ($t(19) = 4.872$, $p = .001$).

Next, a paired samples *t* test was conducted to determine statistical differences for each group between the projected ideal group environment and the environment actually experienced for each subscale category. Figure 3 shows the differences between ideal (Form I) and real (Form R) for Group A. Statistical significance is indicated by the asterisk before the subscale name. Group A's scores indicate that the expectations in each of the subscales were higher than that which was actually experienced, with the exceptions of the

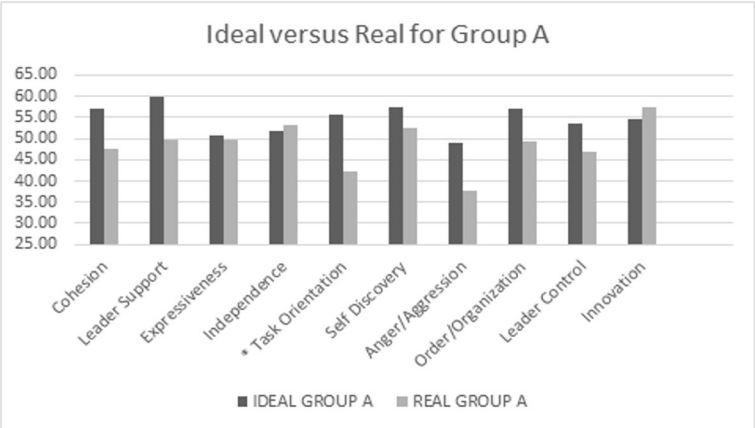

Fig. 3 Ideal vs. real for group A - ideal vs real perceptions

subscales of independence and innovation. Although it is not statistically significant, the direction of the change indicates that actual experiences with independence and innovation were higher than expected. The only statistically significant difference in Group A was between the perceptions of ideal and real on the subscale of task orientation ($t(4) = 3.822$, $p = .019$), where the actual experiences of the group environment were significantly lower that that which was expected.

Figure 4 indicates the differences between ideal (Form I) and real (Form R) perceptions for Group B. Statistical significance is indicated by the asterisk before the subscale name. Group B's scores indicate that the ideal expectations in relation to the subscales were higher than that which was actually experienced, with the exception of the subscale of anger/aggression. Although it is not statistically significant, the direction of the change indicates that the actual experiences with anger/aggression were higher than expected ideally. There is statistical significance in Group B between the perceptions of ideal and real on the subscales of cohesion ($t(6) = 3.251$, $p = .017$), leader support ($t(6) = 2.448$, $p = .050$), task orientation ($t(6) = 2.823$, $p = .030$), and leader control ($t(6) = 3.573$, $p = .012$), where the actual experiences of the group environment were significantly lower than that which was ideally expected.

Figure 5 provides the data for the differences between ideal (Form I) and real (Form R) perceptions for Group C. Statistical significance is indicated by the asterisk before the subscale name. Group C's scores indicated that the ideal expectations for the subscales were higher than that which was actually experienced, with the exceptions of the subscales of expressiveness, self-discovery, and anger/aggression. Although it is not statistically significant, the direction of the change indicates that actual experiences with expressiveness, self-discovery, and anger/aggression were higher than expected ideally. There is statistical significance in Group C between the perceptions of ideal and real on 6 out of the 10 subscales. Another 2 subscales (anger/aggression and innovation) were close to being statistically significant. Specifically, statistically significant differences can be seen on the subscales of cohesion ($t(7) = 2.765$, $p = .028$), leader support ($t(7) = 4.737$, $p = .002$), expressiveness ($t(7) = -6.679$, $p = .000$), task orientation ($t(7) = 3.723$, $p = .007$), order/organization ($t(7) = 4.317$, $p = .003$), and leader control ($t(7) = 3.520$, $p = .010$), where the actual experiences of the group environment were significantly lower than that which was expected.

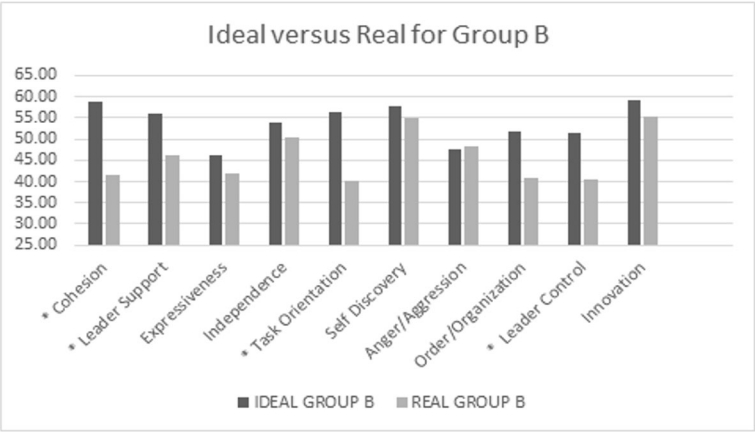

Fig. 4 Ideal vs. real for group B - ideal vs real perceptions

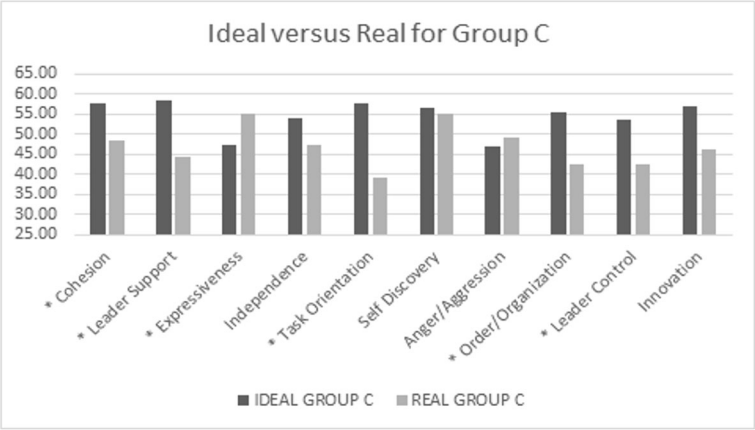

Fig. 5 Ideal vs. real for group C - ideal vs real perceptions

Research Question 3: Were there Group Differences Based on Facilitator?

The differences between the means on Form R of the subscales for each of the three group facilitators are reflected in Fig. 6. We first determined that there were genuine outliers in the data and that not all groups were normally distributed. Therefore, the data did not meet the assumptions required for conducting a one-way ANOVA. We thus chose the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis H test (Kruskal and Wallis 1952) to determine differences among the groups. Our results indicate that there was not an overall statistical difference among the groups on real experiences as measured by Form R. However, there were statistically significant differences in the subscales of expressiveness ($H(2, N = 20) = .651$, $p = .044$) and anger/aggression ($H(2, N = 20) = 10.219$, $p = .006$). The numerical values for Group A, Group B, and Group C on the subscale of expressiveness were 50, 42, and 55, respectively. The numerical values for anger/aggression for the groups were 38, 48, and 49, respectively.

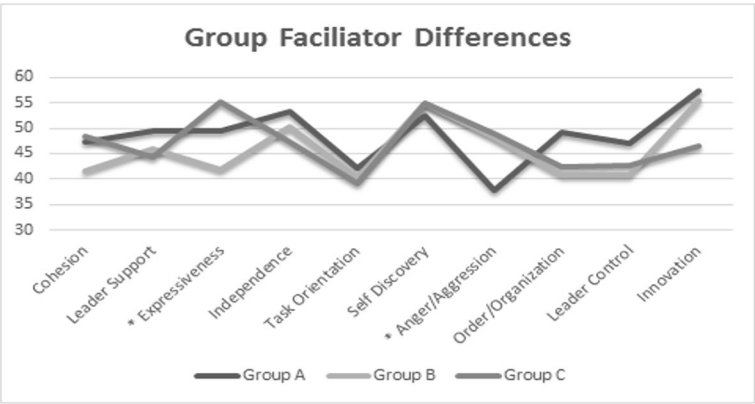

Fig. 6 Group facilitator differences with Form R (Real)

Discussion

The results of the current study reveal a number of areas for discussion when thinking about the development of counselors-in-training, their first small group experiences, and the small group environment as a microcosm of their training. In many ways the small group experience serves to mirror a number of their critical learning incidents as students. During critical learning incidents, trainees are encouraged to provide their perceptions of the experience, engage in reflection, and share their meaning-making with their cohort of learners. A number of studies indicate that the experience of being a group member can increase students' self-discovery and reflective practices if they are invited to authentically engage in the process (Gladding 2012; Ieva et al. 2009; Moody et al. 2014; Ohrt et al. 2014). Additionally, experiential and collaborative learning have been found to strengthen the ability of counselors-in-training to develop a professional sense of self and an understanding of their environment and of others who share their environment (Bohecker et al. 2016a; Moody et al. 2014). In and of itself, this type of experience is invaluable. In a counseling program, such an experience can facilitate a tolerance for ambiguity and can promote counseling self-efficacy (Bohecker et al. 2016a).

Overall, the results of this exploratory research reveal that the expectations of an ideal experience do not always mirror the lived reality of that experience. For example, all participants would have preferred a high level of cohesion, leader support, task orientation, order/organization, leader control, and innovation within their small groups, yet they placed relatively little emphasis on expressiveness, self-discovery, and anger/aggression as ideal experiences. Their reality differed from their expectations in that there were higher levels of anger and aggression than anticipated in two of the three groups. It can be posited that in different iterations of a small group experience using the same curriculum, there may be differences in levels of expressiveness, self-discovery, and anger/aggression. To better understand this phenomenon, counselor educators should further explore how to best train group leaders to facilitate expressiveness, self-discovery, and anger/aggression, as well as to manage the dynamics between themselves and the group members. The results of this study additionally indicate that there are differences on these subscales among groups, which may be an indication of differences in facilitators. Further research is needed to better understand the depth of these differences.

While the differences between ideal and real on the subscale of self-discovery were not found to be statistically significant, in reality all three groups reported experiencing high levels of self-discovery on the GES-R (Moos 1994, 2002). Self-discovery can impact the development of future counselors' professional identities (Furr and Carroll 2003; Johns 2012) and can be tied to self-awareness (Skovholt and Rønnestad 1992, 2003). The literature shows that self-discovery and self-awareness are vital areas of counselor development (Auxier et al. 2003; Gibson et al. 2010; Stoltenberg et al. 1998; Skovholt and Rønnestad 1992). As a result, counselor educators and supervisors have a responsibility to facilitate self-reflection and self-awareness practices across the curriculum that promote students' personal and professional growth (Auxier et al. 2003; CACREP 2016; Furr and Carroll 2003; Gibson et al. 2010).

Counselors-in-training would ideally have a unique set of learning opportunities that foster expressiveness. An ideal environment would likewise provide conditions necessary for learning whereby the student could engage in self-expression without the level of guardedness that oftentimes accompanies beginning counselors-in-training (Bohecker et al. 2016a). The facilitators in this study were trained in a curriculum that research has supported for the

development and integration of the congruent expression of thoughts and emotions (Bohecker et al. 2016a). Therefore, the statistical differences among groups on the subscale of expressiveness have implications for training in counselor education. As a result, an exploration of factors contributing to facilitator differences is warranted.

An ideal learning environment would provide space and opportunity for counselors-in-training to make meaning of their experiences. Each of the GES subscales of leader support, task orientation, order/orientation, and leader control was statistically significantly lower than expected. The learning counselor educators hope students and group members experience entails a shifting of responsibility and ownership for the group and its members' own learnings. There is the hope that the shift is away from the leader and more towards the students and group members. Providing first-year, first-semester, Master's-level counselors-in-training with the opportunity to participate as group members means that they as counselors-in-training may have a more comprehensive perspective and better interpersonal awareness of what it is to be a participant in a counseling group; they may, therefore, be more empathic to the group process (Gladding 2012; Yalom and Leszcz 2005).

Limitations

The limitations of the current study include its small number of participants. While a small number of participants is appropriate for an exploratory study such as this one, the results cannot be generalized to a larger population. A large-scale replication of the study is needed to increase generalizability. A replication of the study utilizing a larger sample size would also help to support and validate the study's findings. The current study provides a baseline for this type of research. Second, all of the participants in the study identified as White. This further limits the generalizability of the study, given the typically diverse and complex population of counseling students. Third, all of the participants were from the same university, which again limits the diversity of the experiences and perspectives.

Implications for Future Research

The current study has a number of practical implications for future research. In addition to a replication study that would explore the use of the GES in more depth, a study that focuses on the differences among facilitators is warranted. Since each of the facilitators in this study was using the same curriculum, focusing on subtle characteristics and the style of implementation by facilitators may shed light on the differences among the groups. A mixed-methods study that integrates a qualitative component would also add rigor and depth to the design. The addition of qualitative inquiry would allow for a rich description of the trainees' experience and foster better knowledge of the subscales of the GES and the trainees' felt significance related to them. This means the potential to expand our knowledge base is twofold. This type of study could further inform counselor educators focused on group work and training who would like to utilize the GES as a training tool for beginning counselors.

Conclusion

In recent years, a number of studies have investigated various experiential training methods for counseling students (Bohecker et al. 2014; Bohecker et al. 2016b; Ieva et al. 2009; Moody et al. 2014). The current study centered on the small group experience as a vital aspect of

counselor training and development. In doing so, the study has the potential to inform current training practices. In addition, this study reveals the importance of future research utilizing the GES as a tool to explore other dimensions of counselor training and experience. Such research could enhance the small group experience during counselor training and in the clinical arena. The current study provides a framework and rationale for envisioning how alternative methods of training for beginning counselors can be introduced within the training curriculum.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declared that they have no conflict of interest.

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