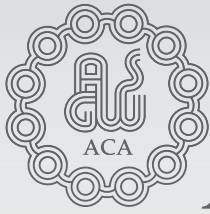


Group Work Practice Ideas



Association for Specialists in Group Work

Personal Reflections on Learning Group Counseling

Reston Bell, Monica Bergandi, Winifred Betts-Campbell, Amie Charlery, Amy Gleason, Monica Martinez, Lauren McKee, Josh Peters, and Braden Peterson



A few students and graduates of George Mason University's (GMU), Counseling and Development program have written about our experiences learning process oriented group counseling from Dr. Fred Bemak. These reflections capture what we learned in a semester long, group process and analysis class that included a 1 1/2 hour weekly lab. We learned how to facilitate counseling groups by reading and reacting to group theory texts (Gladding, 2003, Trotzer, 2006, Yalom, 2005), journaling, observing counselor led groups in the field, leading a group in the class, and participating in a therapeutic counseling group during lab in which students acted both as participants and co-facilitators. This practice idea shares our reflections on learning group counseling and encourages students to seek similar opportunities in graduate school and beyond.

Perception before the Group Experience, Amy Gleason Carroll, M.A., M.Ed.

In anticipation of the group experience, I experienced trepidation, felt apprehensive, and was skeptical. I heard from former students that any psychological issues you have become fodder for the group. I found this prospect humiliating. I was afraid that I would lack credibility as a counselor if my issues were aired in public in front of my professor and colleagues. In addition, the concept of group counseling was foreign to my western, individualistic mindset. How could I benefit from group when the focus will be on all the other members? I was certainly a resistant and skeptical group participant. Only by experiencing the transformative effect of group counseling, did I come to believe in it. As a result I gained self-confidence and began expressing anger freely.

Resistance, Winifred Betts-Campbell, M.A., Doctoral Student

Resistance was a major part of learning group counseling. Paying attention to group member's body language, tone of voice and eye contact (or lack thereof) helped me determine resistance. I feel that group members have to test the limits and determine where they fit in, how they feel, and gauge what they are willing to share with other group members.

A group experiencing resistance will make the counseling session stagnant and it will not allow members to thrive or gain anything out of the process. In an individual, resistance is caused by an emotion, a feeling that gives the individual pain or discomfort. Many individuals may not be aware that they are resisting certain situations in group counseling. When faced with resistance, it is best to not ignore or simplify it, but to face it head on and address the issue. Addressing the issue brings the members' focus to the here and now and allows them to see their actions, thought process, and the impact they have on the group process.

When I was a member learning group counseling, I observed how resistance can be a primary and secondary gain for an individual. By resisting, the individual is experiencing personal gratification. For someone who is experiencing anxiety when speaking about a particular topic, avoiding the topic will relieve their anxiety. Another gain is that the individual may have changed the topic, allowing for the concentration of the group to shift.

The Roles we Play and the Lives we Live, Reston Bell, M.A., Doctoral Student

Our professor, Dr. Bemak, regularly described the group

counseling context as a microcosm of society. It is as if someone has taken the essence of your world and squeezed it into a tiny snow globe; your environmental triggers, your day to day interactions, your scars, the roles you play, your everything! The key difference in the group setting is that all these things are in plain sight. It is common for the group to identify qualities that you have trouble recognizing and accepting. In the group, the same as life, there are the roles that we assume and there are the roles that we are given. However, if you are open to do the work in group it will be difficult to hide from who you are.

Meeting and becoming acquainted with the reflection that is projected by the group can be a painful experience. However, accepting your strengths and weaknesses, recognizing how they have manifested in your day to day living and understanding how their manifestation is affecting you in the here and now is well worth it. The work does not stop here, and for this reason we refer to group as a process. It is not simply getting to the place where you understand why it is that you continue to engage in behaviors that result in taking on the same roles day after day, situation after situation. No, the process continues as you approach the point where you are encouraged to decide what, if any, modifications you will seek to make with the information gained in the group. The roles we play in and out of group are parallel. The goal of group is to become aware and then comfortable with who you are in such a way that the quality of your day to day interactions and functioning are improved.

Group as a Magnifier of Personal Issues and Growth Opportunities, Monica Bergandi

Processing in a group often brings forth one's own personal issues in a manner that is often not fully experienced in individual counseling. There are times when these personal issues are known, but more often than not, they are issues that may reside just below the surface of our consciousness. Recognizing unconscious issues that may need to be addressed is the first step towards becoming an effective counselor and a more self-aware individual. The group dynamic can elicit intense emotions that can be off putting, but the emotional response is just the beginning of the group processing journey.

When something or someone evokes a strong reaction, there is work to be done and an opportunity for growth. For example, my experience with a fellow group member evoked strong feelings of frustration, anger and impatience. On some level I knew that these feelings were not directed towards her as an individual because I did not know her personally. These intense feelings compelled me to process at a deeper level. Interestingly, after some self-reflection, I recognized that my reaction had nothing to do with my group member but instead, it had to do with me and my unspoken frustration with a family member. I often wonder if this issue would have come to light had I not participated in a group counseling environment. It has been my experience that group processing provides group members an opportunity to develop one's ability to discern these personal issues versus avoiding the presenting issues, because group members have the uncanny ability to reflect the

very thing that is an area for growth for the individual.

Empowerment, Monica Martinez

One function of empowerment is to make oneself stronger and more confident in one's ability to deal with their lives. That said, then how can a group, an outside force, influence a person to change? I think this is a particularly foreign concept in our individualistic culture where one is encouraged to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Yet this process of group support is the very essence of group counseling. Groups can be a phenomenal source of support and encouragement as much as they are an impetus for change. Support and acceptance provides a climate of empowerment for the client to both seek change in themselves and most importantly to act on that change without fear of failure or judgment. That was certainly the case for me when I took the group counseling course at GMU. I'm a fairly private person and had not anticipated how quickly our group would coalesce. However, this bond created a safe setting that allowed for honest exploration of unresolved issues. I was surprised by how supportive everyone was as a group member. Additionally, as we took on the role of group facilitator the same level of support and encouragement that existed during the group session was carried into our post-group processing phase. Because of this supportive and encouraging environment, my issue of allowing others to silence me without speaking up for myself was something that I felt comfortable exploring. To this day when I am in a situation in which I need to empower myself, I can still hear the encouraging words of my group reminding me that what I have to say also has value. Ultimately, we all need a little push in life and to know that someone is there for us. A positive group experience can provide both. Essentially this support is conducive to one becoming more empowered to face daily challenges outside of the group.

Multiculturalism, Lauren McKee

Participating in a diverse group counseling lab highlighted the historical and cultural experiences that have shaped the worldview of myself and my peers and the impact of life experiences on our values and beliefs. For me, it also provided startling information that negated assumptions I had made about individuals based on race or age. Those that I had assumed would view things in a similar fashion to myself were actually polar opposites. Furthermore, how I was perceived by my peers and their reactions to my silence was unexpected. Fortunately for me, I was able to reflect on these erroneous assumptions before taking the role as facilitator.

One essential element to practicing multicultural group work is self-awareness. How the facilitator defines herself as a cultural being will influence her impact on the group. Understanding how one's own worldview, including race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender, religion, "isms", and other socio-political factors play a role in how the group process is approached and interpreted should be considered fundamental to group practice. At the end of my group counseling course I was made thoroughly aware that further self-exploration was necessary for me to be an effective facilitator. The feedback

I received from my peers was invaluable as I grow into a multiculturally competent counselor and group worker.

The Value of Silence, Josh Peters

Imagine sitting in a room with 8 other people, with whom you were encouraged to engage in discussion, where no one uttered a word for one minute. In all likelihood, one minute would feel like one hour. This was my experience my first time participating in a counseling group. The group facilitator remained steadfastly silent at the onset, patiently waiting for a group member to speak. It made me uncomfortable, as well as many other group members. It became evident that we could not rely on the facilitator to begin our conversation for us. Thankfully, a group member did eventually speak, and from that comment discussion flowed freely. Whether engaged in individual or group counseling, clients frequently look to counselors for instruction, direction, and advice. They often consider counselors to be experts who will tell them what to do. In the group setting, where a counselor engages multiple clients simultaneously, this effect can be magnified. Too much of a reliance on facilitators will impede the overall progress of the group. However, silence represents an effective tool that group facilitators can intentionally utilize to encourage members to work with and rely upon each other.

Today, when facilitating groups, I remain cognizant of the benefits of silence and try to employ it where appropriate, despite my occasional discomfort with it, as it has proven

repeatedly to be an effective means of initiating discussion within a group. I continue to be impressed at the conversation that ensues when a facilitator refuses to bail a group out by sparing them from silence. A quote in the Book of Proverbs encourages people “not to speak unless you can improve the silence.” Effective group counselors realize that when it comes to facilitating valuable discussion within a group, often there is not much that can be said to improve upon silence.

Struggling in the Here and Now, Braden Peterson

Staying in the ‘here and now’ proved to be a challenge I had not anticipated. Studying existential theory permitted a cognitive appreciation for the present, however learning group counseling and co-leading a group truly underscored the multi-dimensional nature of human relationships and communication. With several clients in the room, behaviors that might go unnoticed in a traditional setting were brought to light more quickly than I could think how to address them. I knew it was important for group cohesion that we stay in the ‘here and now’ and attempted to be sure every member was on board before pressing forward.

I co-facilitated a group with Dr. Bemak and at one point found the group basking in shallow conversation around pets when one member brought up her ownership of a snake. At a loss for words and wrapped up in my head on how to challenge this evident lack of depth, my initial reaction was to inquire

Revised Edition

GROUP WORK EXPERTS
SHARE THEIR FAVORITE
ACTIVITIES:
A GUIDE TO CHOOSING,
PLANNING, CONDUCTING,
AND PROCESSING
Revised Edition



Edited by:
DeLucia-Winack
H. Brubard
Sue Kleiner
Nitzza

ISBN 1-55620-265-2

This book presents over 50 group activities in a ready-to-use format with tips for implementation. The activities cover a full range of types and stages of groups. Introductory chapters offer a guide to successful selection, implementation, and processing of structured activities. This book is a must-have practitioner resource as well as an excellent supplemental text.



M & M Game
Paper Bag Skits
Fiddler on the Roof
Feedback as Poetry

To order contact: ACA Order Services
1-800-422-2648 ext. 222 www.counseling.org
5999 Stevenson Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304

what kind of pets others might have. The professor, after noticing the hesitation of some members around owning a snake, simply asked if anyone had fears or concerns around animals...what about people? In an instant the group had gone deep.

In group, I realized that the 'here and now' is not simply a substitution for reflection, but a conscious attention and appreciation to the numerous details that surround us each and every moment. As I learned to listen beyond the words being spoken, I began to appreciate the power of a simple, yet poignant question in the midst of what was once considered chaos. While it is impossible to pre-scribe the perfect question for any particular group, seeing opportunities that present themselves in the moment is much easier when trusting the natural process of group in the here and now.

Perception After Completing Group,

Now Available from ASGW

Celebrating Cultural Diversity: A Group for Fifth Graders

Presented by Sheri Bauman and
Sam Steen

The DVD is designed to generate discussion on topics such as the members' developmental level, the leaders' choice of activities and processing strategies, and issues surrounding the concept of "culture" within the group.



The goal of the group was to increase members' appreciation of cultural diversity.

Order #: 78215, **\$199.00**



ACA Order Services

www.counseling.org

1-800-422-2648, ext. 222

Amie M. Charlery

Once I was introduced to the concept of group counseling, I felt my interest in the counseling profession shift tremendously. Group work pushes the social limits of individuals and addresses feelings of discomfort head on, in a bold manner. I was taken out of my comfort zone through my group experience when I was encouraged to confront several members based on their inconsistent behaviors. The group setting supported my disclosure and to my surprise, the confrontation was well received and appreciated. This act promoted growth among us all, as I learned how to properly confront individuals, and members were made aware of some of their antisocial behaviors. Due to the multiple input sources allotted via the group experience, individuals have an opportunity to truly evaluate themselves, and others while learning to function more adequately according to society and their environment. The mixture of similarities and differences among members only instills an underlying culture which allows the processing of group work dynamics to take precedence, encouraging universality through exploration of members. As I speak from experience, if group work is facilitated appropriately, where strengths among members are celebrated, commitments are fulfilled, feedback is given, truths are told, respect is maintained, support is constant, and all members' psychological safety is protected, group counseling can significantly impact individuals' lives in a positive manner.

Conclusion

Our experience learning group counseling in graduate school was so profound that we encourage graduate students to find opportunities to be both a member and co-facilitator of a therapeutic and/or growth group in order to fully understand group counseling. Membership in counseling groups afforded us invaluable insight into our clients' perspectives. We have experienced the transformative power of group counseling and hope others will do the same in graduate school and beyond.

References

- Gladding, S. T. (2003). *Group work: A counseling specialty* (4th Ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Trotter, J. (2006). *The counselor and the group: Integrating theory, training, and practice*. (4th Ed.). NY: Routledge.
- Yalom, I. (1995). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy* (4th Ed.). NY: Basic Books.

The Group Worker

Published three times a year by the Association for Specialists in Group Work, a division of the American Counseling Association, 5999 Stevenson Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304. Subscription to *The Group Worker* is included with ASGW membership. To join ASGW or to process a change of address write to ACA, 5999 Stevenson Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304. All other correspondence should be directed to the Editor, Sam Steen, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University, 2134 G. St. NW, Washington, DC 20052, sammylsteen@hotmail.com