

EXPLORING COUNSELING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH HONESTY
THROUGH SELF-DISCLOSURE AND FEEDBACK IN PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT
GROUPS: HIGHLIGHTING THE EXPERIENCES OF ETHNICALLY
UNDERREPRESENTED COUNSELING STUDENTS

By

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To my family, friends, and professors who have believed in my ability and potential

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of congruence for ethnically underrepresented counseling students who participated in PD groups during their master's level training experience, particularly related to the processes of self-disclosure and feedback that take place during group processes. The researcher utilized a focus group to conduct a semi-structured interview. Participants included four female master's level counseling students who self-identified as a member of an ethnic minority. Three overarching themes emerged from the data: (a) congruence facilitating experiences, (b) congruence inhibiting experiences, and (c) personal and professional influences.

CHAPTER 1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Counseling preparation programs offer students a variety of experiences to foster their professional and personal growth and development. In an attempt to parallel the subjective process of the human experience, counseling students may be exposed to experiential and subjective experiences. Thus, the personal growth expectation, in addition to academic expectations of counselor training, differentiates it from other professions.

Group work often provides the context for group members to take risks with honesty and vulnerability, when a safe, trusting environment has been established for the group. Many counseling training programs have utilized experiential groups to assist with the facilitation of honesty and vulnerability. These groups are often referred to as personal development (PD) groups or encounter groups. Yalom (1995) strongly supported the use of encounter groups in the training of counselors and facilitators, as opposed to purely tradition therapy groups for counseling students. Additionally, there is some support to show that counseling students agree. Ieva, Ohrt, Swank, and Young (2009) reported programming as a theme identified by master's level counseling students ($N = 15$), who expressed a belief that experiential personal development groups should be a part of program training requirements, due to the increased personal and professional growth. Although there are often other opportunities within a counseling program to experience vulnerability and personal growth, the basic tenets of self-disclosure and feedback within the group setting makes it a more intentional and specific environment for counseling students to experience honesty or congruence.

Empathy, respect, genuineness and honesty are some of the more subjective aspects of development that are seen as attitudes and actions that can lead toward increasing trust with clients (Corey & Corey, 1997). These characteristics can be difficult to measure and develop. However, counseling students have demonstrated significant personal development changes, increased scores on counseling skills and honesty, and a correlation between personal development and counseling skills when taking courses (e.g., multicultural counseling) that encourage and facilitate personal development and honesty (Torres-Rivera et al., 2006).

This study focuses on exploring the construct of honesty (i.e. congruence) among counseling students. The ACA (2005) *Code of Ethics*, encourages counselors to be honest when communicating with others, when working with and reporting to third parties, and when assessing counselors-in-training. With the therapeutic alliance having a significant impact on counseling outcomes (Bergin & Lambert, 1978), it can be expected that honest interactions between the counselor and client are vital to the success of therapy. However, it appears that a certain level of honesty with others is difficult for counselors to uphold due to discomfort, especially when the honesty is subjective in nature (Hoffman, Hill & Holmes, 2005) or when the honesty is perceived as corrective or to yield negative reactions (Morran, Stockton, & Bond, 1991). Thus, it appears that a deeper understanding of the barriers toward honest expression is necessary to examine in order to ensure an effective therapeutic relationship. In addition, it is necessary to ensure that counseling students are being given the opportunity to observe the honest expression of others and participate in themselves

in order to facilitate this type of personal and professional growth during their training experience.

Self-disclosure has been described as one of the necessary components of the group process (Yalom, 1995) and has been found to facilitate increased group cohesion (Rosenfeld & Gilbert, 1989) and safety (Robson & Robson, 2008) within a group. Clients of therapy, who have participated in studies on self-disclosure, have identified that feeling a sense of safety, particularly based on the therapeutic relationship, allowed for client self-disclosure to take place. They also identified initially feeling a sense of anticipatory fear or shame regarding the content of their self-disclosure but eventually felt a sense of authenticity and relief from the emotional tension of keeping personal information from the therapist (Farber, Berano, & Capobianco, 2004). While self-disclosure for therapists in the counseling setting is often supported and modeled in graduate programs, therapists also report minimal to no training about how to use therapist self-disclosure in counseling in their graduate programs (Bruskard et al., 2006). This lack of preparation and exposure toward expressing honesty in a way that feels congruent may compromise a counselor's ability to self-disclose effectively, especially when honesty is anticipated to yield negative reactions or uncomfortable feelings.

In addition to the process of self-disclosure, there are emotional barriers that can inhibit individuals from honestly giving, receiving, and exchanging feedback (e.g., fear, anxiety, discomfort), especially in regards to corrective feedback (Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1994). Supervisors of counseling students have differentiated between easy feedback (i.e. clear-cut or objective in nature and related to clinical aspects) and difficult feedback (i.e. subjective in nature and related to clinical, personal, and professional

issues). Easy feedback had mostly positive effects, and was facilitated by supervisee openness, while difficult feedback had a mixed impact, as it was often given indirectly characterized by a lack of supervisee openness. Supervisors indicated that there were negative effects of not giving the feedback and indicated that they would do it differently if they could by bringing up the issue earlier, being more direct, focusing more on the supervisee's personal issues, or soliciting help from another staff member (Hoffman, Hill, & Holmes, 2005). Thus, it appears that there are various fears associated with engaging in self-disclosure and feedback.

Due to the influence of power and control that occur in society, especially in regard to race/ethnicity, these dynamics are also likely to occur within the smaller group context. Seward and Guiffrida (2012) identified barriers that ethnically underrepresented students have felt regarding classroom participation, such as feeling a pressure to positively represent their cultural group, a fear of reinforcing negative, a fear that what they say could be used against them, or feeling different from their peers. Additionally, Smith and Shin (2013) acknowledged the focus on multicultural competence within the group work literature. Furthermore, the authors emphasize the importance of continuing discussions regarding the influence of social privilege on group process, dynamics, and training. In order to address the influence of social privilege and oppression, this study focused on the experiences of four ethnically underrepresented master's level counseling students with honesty (i.e. congruence) by asking about their experiences with the processes of self-disclosure and feedback in personal development groups during their counseling training program.

Group Dynamics

Corey and Corey (1977) identified several therapeutic factors involved with group work (e.g., care, hope, commitment to change, acceptance, empathy, intimacy, power, group cohesion). Additionally, Corey and Corey addressed the “freedom to experience” factor that can take place within the group context. The group experience creates a space where group members are given the opportunity to try new behaviors in a safe and accepting environment before deciding to generalize these new behaviors outside of the group (i.e. in a counseling session). A sense of safety has frequently been found to contribute to overall group effectiveness and cohesion (Payne, 2001; Robson & Robson, 2008). Corey and Corey also listed a willingness to take risks and engage in trust as one of the therapeutic factors that operates in groups and described risk taking as “opening oneself to others, being vulnerable and actively doing in a group what is necessary for change. This willingness to reveal one’s self is largely a function of how much one trusts the other group members and the leader” (Corey & Corey, 1977, p.19). Corey and Corey also addressed the goal of learning interpersonal skills so that group members can determine ways to improve their relationships with others. Based on the importance of the therapeutic relationship within counseling (Bergin & Lambert, 1978), these interpersonal skills are an important part of counselor development. Furthermore, while there are many different types of groups (i.e. therapy groups, encounter groups, training groups), Yalom (1995) emphasized “regardless of the group’s name, sponsor, and purported intent, what is considered most important by members are the interpersonal interactions of the group” (p. 482).

Honesty/Congruence

While honesty itself has rarely been viewed as a construct when examining group work, it has often been used as a description within group work. For example, Yalom (1995) explained how PD groups value and encourage “interpersonal honesty” (p. 486). Corey and Corey (1977) expressed the need for feedback to be “given honestly” (p.19). Additionally, Corey and Corey stated several goals for group members, including “to become more open and honest with selected others”, and “to learn how to confront others with care, concern, honesty and directness” (p. 16). Furthermore, many scholars have discussed a psychological basic need to be able to be honest with oneself (Moustakas, 1962; Polzer et al., 2002).

Honesty has been equated with a variety of definitions within the counseling context, such as realness or congruence (Rogers, 1961), transparency (Moustakas, 1962), or truthfulness (Torres-Rivera et al., 2006). For the purposes of this paper, honesty is defined as congruence or realness. Rogers (1951) described congruence as a person’s ideal self being closely consistent with what he or she is actually experiencing. Thus, when we experience and behave in ways that are honest and consistent with whom we feel we are, we experience congruence. Additionally, Yalom (1995) reported that the most important aspect of any kind of group work for its members is the interpersonal interactions within the group. Polzer et al. (2002) also defined interpersonal congruence as the ability for others in a group to see you as you see yourself, both negatively and positively. For example, if you view yourself as empathetic but sometimes impatient, interpersonal congruence would involve your group members also viewing you as empathetic, but sometimes impatient. Self-disclosure and giving/receiving feedback are two avenues to share honest expression of

oneself in the group setting. Polzer et al. (2002) called these behaviors identity-negotiating behaviors that are used in an attempt to receive validation from others, so that others can see us as we see ourselves. However, this requires the ability to honestly let oneself be seen in a way that is real.

Truax (1971) proposed that congruence is directly related to change in the therapeutic setting. He also highlighted self-disclosure as the most basic precondition for the development of self-congruence. In addition, Moustakas (1962) argued that there is a need for honesty from within ourselves, as well as from those around us. He stated that because there are parts of ourselves that we do not express to others, it is possible to create a distorted sense of self when individuals hide honest parts of themselves from others. Furthermore, in examining substance abuse among Latinos, Torres et al. (2004) found a link between dishonesty and substance abuse as self-destructive coping behaviors. The Latino culture values relationships and respect, and honesty was seen as an important prerequisite and construct for this population. Torres et al. also highlighted and redefined substance abuse as a cycle of dishonesty with oneself and others as essential in understanding underlying emotional processes needed for the development of a congruent self. Dishonesty with oneself makes self-awareness and congruence impossible, making it difficult to engage in meaningful congruent relationships. Counselor education students have identified experiencing honesty through the group experience in expressing that they experienced honesty and immediate contact through connection with others, as well as expressing oneself through spontaneity and assertiveness (Kline et al., 1997).

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure is a crucial component in the group process (Yalom, 1995). Engaging in self-disclosure can help the counselor in training to empathize with the process of disclosing personal information for the client. In examining clients' ($N = 21$) perspectives about the process and effects of self-disclosure during counseling sessions, Farber, Berano, and Capobianco (2004) found that most participants identified that feeling a sense of safety, particularly based on the therapeutic relationship, allowed for self-disclosure to take place. Several of the participants reported anticipatory fear of the therapist's reaction or of their own reaction (i.e. feeling embarrassed) as fears that would inhibit their self-disclosure. However, after engaging in self-disclosure of personal issues, most participants reported feeling relief from the emotional tension of keeping personal information from the therapist.

For the purpose of this paper, self-disclosure is defined as sharing thoughts, feelings, and experiences with other group members (Corey & Corey, 1977). Yalom (1995) stressed that individuals must self-disclose at their own pace and that the amount or intensity of information shared may differ from person to person. It is important that the individual self-discloses when he or she feels trust and safety within the group. Counselors-in-training aim to develop a sense of self-awareness during their training, which can be seen in the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) *Standards*, which state the expectation for students to develop, possess, and demonstrate self-awareness. An assumption of self-awareness is necessary when discussing honesty and congruence.

Researchers have examined some of the benefits of self-disclosure in groups (Robson & Robson, 2008). In conducting a thematic analysis of counseling student's

reflections of their experiences in a personal development group, Robson and Robson (2008) found that students identified that safety was established through personal, intimate sharing of oneself, as well as sharing from others in the group. Rosenfeld & Gilbert (1989) investigated the relationship between several dimensions of self-disclosure and group cohesion in small classroom groups and found that group cohesion through self-disclosure was facilitated the most when self-disclosure was perceived as unintentional and positive in nature. Group members were also more likely to perceive their own self-disclosure as honest and others' disclosures as less honest.

The delay or caution with self-disclosure is often very adaptive for individuals. Yalom (1995) also warned against the danger of failing to share any intimate part of oneself throughout the group process, especially in regards to secrets that may be burdening a group member's life. Nondisclosure, in this case, can be counterproductive by potentially experiencing the group the same way he or she experiences life outside of the group, thus, not allowing for change or liberation from the secret. In addition, too little disclosure can inhibit the ability to receive feedback, while too much self-disclosure could foster feelings of anxiety in group members. Additionally, Corey and Corey (1977) warned against the use of self-disclosure for the sake of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure should be a means toward self-understanding, as opposed to an end in itself.

Examining single supervision sessions among 204 counselors-in-training, Mehr, Ladany, and Caskie (2010) found that 84.3% of students withheld from self-disclosure to their supervisors, with an average of 2.68 nondisclosures in the single session. Students most commonly reported nondisclosure in regard to a negative experience in supervision. When the supervisee/supervisor relationship was perceived as more

positive, there were less nondisclosures and greater overall willingness to disclose in supervision. Higher anxiety from the students was related to more nondisclosure and lower overall willingness to disclose in supervision (Mehr, Ladany, & Caskie, 2010).

Feedback

The feedback process provides the opportunity for group members to evaluate and make sense of their own behaviors through the lens of the other group members. When receiving feedback, members may choose whether they incorporate the feedback that they receive from others (Corey & Corey, 1977). Due to the subjective nature of self-perception and self-awareness, it is necessary for individuals to receive and integrate the honest perception from others (feedback) as a part of self-awareness (Moustakas, 1962). According to Corey and Corey (1977), honesty and care are important prerequisite to ensure that the group members are able to understand the influence they have on others more clearly. Honesty should be simple, open and direct. However, group members may be afraid to be honest if they anticipate a negative outcome from others. Nonetheless, when the truth is hidden, it becomes a form of manipulation towards the other person.

Feedback has often been a way for counseling students to develop both personally and professionally. Feedback includes information about different areas of the person's skills, attitudes, behavior, and appearance that may influence one's effectiveness with clients or within the supervision relationship (Hoffman, Hill, & Holmes, 2005). Additionally, feedback is the way that members of the group are able to see themselves through the perspective of the group members (Corey & Corey, 1977). Lennie (2007) reported that "Opportunities for honest feedback are available in the group but are embedded within its complexities" (p. 11). Furthermore, according to

Yalom (1995), feedback in groups is most effective when it is present oriented (in the here and now), when it is following and related to an event, and when the person receiving the feedback checks in with other group members for consensus. It is also highly likely that if there is consensus from the group in regard to the feedback, other individuals in a person's life outside of the group may also experience this person similarly. This is extremely valuable for beginning counselors who may be missing important feedback as to how their clients might view them.

The literature on feedback is commonly focused on the supervision setting, rather than the group setting. Bernstein and Lecomte (1979) examined the effects of congruent versus incongruent feedback for field dependent versus field independent master's counseling students ($N=108$). Field dependent students were described as typically having greater interpersonal skills. The researchers looked at both positively and negatively incongruent feedback, as well as congruent feedback (constructed to be similar to the subject's expectations for feedback). Once four types of feedback (moderate positive, congruent, moderate negative, and extreme negative) were constructed experimentally and delivered, the following responses were measured (a) agreement with the feedback, (b) evaluation of the feedback content as important, and (c) accuracy in recall of the feedback. Results indicated that field-independent students agreed more and evaluated the feedback content more positively than field-dependent students. Further, significantly greater agreement, more positive content evaluation, and more accurate recall were elicited by positive and congruent feedback as opposed to the moderate and extreme negative feedback. While this study was not completed in

the context of a PD group, it appears that the interpersonal skills of a counseling student can have an impact on receiving feedback.

Clinical supervision is one of the more structured settings for counseling students to receive feedback. Therefore, it is important to note that even in a setting where feedback is inherently encouraged, both supervisees and supervisors are expressing difficulty. Hoffman, Hill and Holmes (2005) asked 15 supervisors from a variety of counseling centers about easy feedback, difficult feedback, and feedback that was not given to their doctoral level internship students. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, the supervisors indicated that easy feedback was most often about clinical problems that were clear-cut or objective in nature. This feedback was given directly, had mostly positive effects, and was facilitated by supervisee openness. Difficult feedback was most often about clinical, personal, and professional issues that were more subjective. This feedback was given indirectly, had mixed impact, and was characterized by a lack of supervisee openness. Feedback not given was typically about personal and professional concerns and was hindered by a lack of supervisee openness. Supervisors indicated that there were negative effects of not giving the feedback and indicated that they would do it differently if they could by bringing up the issue earlier, being more direct, focusing more on the supervisee's personal issues, or soliciting help from another staff member.

In examining group members' ($N = 48$) experiences of providing feedback in group settings, Morran and Stockton (1991) found that group members reported difficulty delivering feedback, especially corrective feedback when compared to positive feedback. While the participants in this study were approximately half college students

and half members of the community, as opposed to counseling students, the fears involved with providing corrective feedback may likely apply to counselor students as well. The participants were presented with the feedback and given a prompt for their feedback. For the positive feedback, the participants finished a sentence that asked them to describe how a group member's participation "enhanced" his or her interpersonal effectiveness and attractiveness in the group. For the corrective feedback, the participants provided a response to how a group member may have hindered interpersonal effectiveness and attractiveness. The researchers used a seven-point scale to assess reactions of (a) perceived harmful/helpful the feedback would be for the recipient, (b) perceived harmful/helpfulness for the group, (c) perceived negative/positive reaction from the group, and (d) perceived difficult/ease of delivering the feedback. Overall, group members reported that they believed that the effects of corrective feedback would be harmful. The anticipated reaction from the other group members was the strongest discriminator making the corrective feedback more difficult to deliver, followed by anticipated difficulty delivering the feedback. Thus, it appears that group members feel as though they have to choose between being liked/accepted by the group and being honest. It is interesting that rejection from the group has such a significant effect even when the delivery of the corrective feedback was presented in a very structured way through a feedback exercise activity in which all of the members were asked to provide the corrective feedback. Thus, when feedback is not structured and viewed as more optional or spontaneous, the risk and fear involved may likely be heightened; such is often the case for counseling students in personal growth groups or in classroom discussions. While Morran, Stockton, and Bond (1991) findings indicated

that group members were clearly more comfortable giving positive feedback, group members were only moderately uncomfortable giving the corrective feedback, with their ratings at or near the middle of the seven point scale. Thus, it could be helpful for facilitators to more directly facilitate the exchange of both positive and corrective feedback in order to be able to provide both (Morran, Stockton, & Bond, 1991). In addition, modeling how to engage in honest feedback from the facilitator is an important factor that influences the comfort level and ability of the group members to also engage in honest feedback (Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1994).

Similar results were found when Hulse-Killacky & Page (1994) interviewed counseling students about giving, receiving, and exchanging corrective feedback. The following themes emerged: (a) ambivalence (even though it may be hard, it will be good in the long run), (b) protection (most people have developed buffers to deal with giving corrective feedback), (c) preparation (people receive it better when they are prepared for it), skill building (practicing makes it easier in the future), (d) childhood memories (more careful about giving the feedback if they received a lot of critical feedback as a child), (e) method (giving written feels easier than verbal), (f) leader (feel more comfortable when facilitator models how to give and receive feedback), (g) evaluative (corrective feedback has been equated with saying something negative about someone else), and (h) context (most people prefer to receive corrective in a group as opposed to one-on-one, so that they can hear others perspectives) (Hulse-Killacky & Page, 1994).

On behalf of the Graduate Council, the Dean or the Dean's representatives examine all theses and dissertations to ascertain adherence to University-wide standards of scholarship, research, and presentation.

CHAPTER 2 PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT (PD) GROUPS IN COUNSELOR TRAINING PROGRAMS

Although the CACREP (2009) standards require students to participate as group members in a small group experience for a minimum of 10 direct hours during a single semester, counseling students may benefit further through continued group experiences. Facilitating the development of multiple perspectives through dialogue and debate is viewed as a critical part of the humanistic perspective of counselor training, aimed at highlighting the complexity and subjectivity of the human experience (Hansen, 2012). One way to facilitate this development is through personal development (PD) groups. Personal development groups may include encounter, personal growth, training, marathon, or T-groups. While there are some differences between these types of groups, there are many shared characteristics (e.g., size of the group, time constraints, focus on the present or here-and-now). Additionally, all of these groups tend to encourage emotional expression, self-disclosure, interpersonal contact, searching of oneself, and confrontation (Yalom, 1995). For the purposes of this paper, these groups will be broadly referred to as PD groups. The PD groups in this study are within the classroom setting and are aimed toward personal and professional growth (i.e., group counseling course, elective courses focused on personal growth).

Many studies investigating the outcomes of PD groups within counseling programs have found positive themes of personal and professional growth and development (Kline et al., 1997; Ieva et al., 2009), specifically in regards to the development of self-awareness (Lennie, 2007). However, there are also mixed outcomes with students expressing concerns associated with their experiences in PD groups. Anderson and Price (2001) investigated master's students ($N = 99$) attitudes

about the use of experiential group activities and reported that 77% to 97% of students stated that they agreed or strongly agreed that experiential groups were necessary to training and yielded positive results. However, 3% to 29% of responses demonstrated that students were concerned with issues of confidentiality and dual relationships that can occur in experiential groups. Nevertheless, Corey and Corey (1977) identified that feelings of fear are commonly and naturally a part of the group experience in general.

Personal growth groups, within counseling preparation programs, are likely to have a dimension that may not exist in regular therapy groups, especially in regard to dual relationships. For example, students may fear being evaluated by the facilitator/faculty member for their grade in the course. Further, students may also fear judgment from their peers that if they share too much about themselves, it may be discovered that they are not competent or well enough to function in this field. Insecurity and self-doubt about one's ability to be an effective counselor may contribute to the group member's apprehension toward sharing him or herself with the group. In addition, group members often have dual relationships as both classmates and friends, which can make confidentiality more difficult to secure. Further, counseling programs use different models of training (e.g., cohort model). Romano and Sullivan (2008) attempted to eliminate the dual relationship involved with counseling students in PD groups by implementing a simulated group counseling experience where participants ($N = 98$) formed 12 focus groups over a 4-year period. Participants engaged in role-playing group members, rather than participating as group members who brought in their own personal issues, perspectives, and values. Researchers examined if a simulated group of role-playing participants would approximate a four-stage model of group development

as outline by Corey (1995). An observer rated participants on the following areas within the Group Observer Form: (a) group cohesion, (b) focus on the here and now, and (c) group conflict within the four stages after each session. Results indicated that the simulated group was significantly different across all three components for all groups. Thus, it appears that in order to learn certain group skills through the group experience, it may be a necessary component to engage in the true experience, regardless of the dual relationships that often exist between peers and the facilitator/faculty member.

Counseling students have self-identified many characteristics that they believe contribute to their development of self-awareness or professional development when participating in PD groups (Lennie, 2007; Kline et al., 1997; Ieva et al., 2009; Robson and Robson, 2008). Lennie (2007) investigated contributing factors to the development of self-awareness in personal development groups at a university in the United Kingdom. Four focus groups ($n=16, 13, 15, 22$) were formulated and participants were placed in groups depending upon when they began their training and the level of their training (i.e. certificate training Jan. 2002, certificate training Sept. 2002, diploma training year 1 Sept. 2001, or diploma training year 2 Sept. 2000). Three main themes emerged from the focus groups: (a) intrapersonal factors (courage, fear, humor, confidence, intelligence, extroversion, hope, control, self esteem, honesty, self acceptance, spirituality, and popularity); (b) interpersonal factors (group cohesion, group involvement, group conflict, group ownership, trust from others, continuity of others, different personalities, dominance of others, outside contact, regular attendance, and challenge from others); and (c) environmental factors (personality of facilitator, student support, comfort of physical surroundings, choice of fellow group members, choice of

facilitator, residential, guidance of facilitator, and adherence to time boundaries). Next, participants completed a questionnaire that measured the students' perceptions of self-awareness and the extent to which they felt that the contributory factors were present and helpful in their PD group. Students who were part of the January 2002 certificate program were significantly more comfortable on all three variables (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental) compared with the September 2002 diploma program year 2 group, which only yielded a 'comfort fit' for the interpersonal factors. It appeared that students were more comfortable when participating in PD groups at the beginning of their training similarly for both the certificate cohort and the diploma cohort. No clear relationship was found between a 'comfort fit' and increased self-awareness ratings. However, a significant relationship was found between environmental 'comfort fit' and self-awareness for those at the end of their training.

Studies have also investigated the impact of PD groups on professional development (Kline et al., 1997; Ieva et al., 2009). Researchers examined the impact of participation in a group on counseling student development among a group of first semester counselor education master's students ($N = 23$) who participated in 15 unstructured group sessions. Two main themes emerged: interpersonal awareness (i.e., received honest feedback, learned about personal communication style, gained insight in regard to personal behaviors) and relational insight (i.e., increased personal development, understanding of self and others, empathy, understanding the experience of personal change). Interpersonal awareness focused more on behavior, whereas relational insight focused more on insight/self-reflection (Kline et al., 1997). In a similar study, Ieva et al. (2009) explored master's level counseling students' perception of the

PD group experience. The sample of 15 students was a homogeneous group in regard to racial/ethnic composition with 14 of the participants identifying as White and 1 participant identifying as Hispanic. The researchers found three main themes that emerged: (a) personal awareness/development, (b) professional development, and (c) programming. Students expressed that they gained self-awareness through personal self-disclosure, witnessing others' self-disclosure, and receiving feedback from others in an environment that felt safe. Additionally, participants reported that relationships that formed within the group, as well as relationships outside of the group, also facilitated self-awareness. The students also reported that the growth groups enhanced the material learned in classes by bringing the groups to life through exposure and participation. Further, students reported feeling increased professional development, especially as a result of empathy development and modeling from the group facilitator (Ieva et al., 2009).

Robson and Robson (2008) investigated the experiences of counseling psychology students ($N = 11$) in a PD group via journal entries while the group process was currently ongoing. There were 12 major themes that emerged: (a) safety, (b) congruence/realness, (c) "quiet" group members, (d) connection/awareness of other group members, (e) facilitation, (f) awareness of self and others, (g) power of sharing, (h) withdrawal from group, (i) search for identity, (j) anger, (k) response toward a particular member overpowering, and (l) empathy. The researchers chose to specifically focus on the main theme of safety. Through the participants' journals, the researchers found two subthemes of safety: establishment of safety (i.e., through contracting, sharing about self/others sharing, physical environment, having a common focus) and

loss of safety (i.e., perception of disapproval, lack of confidentiality, not trusting self or others, not knowing the purpose of the group). Safety has been a common theme found in other studies as well (Torres et al., 2006; Payne, 2001). While the purpose of the present study relates more to the themes of congruence/realness or the power of sharing, the researchers noted that safety was a theme throughout all the themes.

Overall, the majority of the literature found related to counseling students in PD groups comes from the 1970's and was conducted in the United Kingdom. In order to ensure proper preparation of counseling students, it is important to continue to explore the experiences of counseling students in these groups. Further, this researcher was unable to identify any studies that focused specifically on the experiences of culturally diverse counseling students in PD groups, as most of the studies found involved a homogenous sample of participants.

CHAPTER 3

ETHNICALLY UNDERREPRESENTED COUNSELING STUDENTS IN GROUPS

Prior to the emergence of Black Psychology, much of the research on ethnic minority populations prior to the 1960's was deficit-oriented, such as the Moynihan Report. While research on cultural minority populations has greatly increased since then, it is necessary to continue to contribute to the gap in culture-centered research, especially within counseling journals. Very few studies were found that investigated the experiences of ethnically diverse students within counseling training programs. The research found in this area focused mainly on racial/ethnic minority students' experiences in multicultural counseling classes. However, even in regard to multicultural training, most of the literature found examined the experiences of White student's cultural awareness and competency development. The researcher was unable to identify any articles published on the experiences of culturally diverse counseling students in experiential PD groups.

Smith and Shin (2013) discussed the role of privilege on group work and urged that group work include a focus on social justice and multicultural competencies. Based on the existence of racism and microaggressions in society, it is important to understand how ethnically diverse counseling students experience groups within their training. Sue (2010) utilized the term "microaggressive stress" to describe some of the biological, cognitive, emotional, and behaviors effects that marginalized group members may experience. West-Olatunji and Varney (in press) identified some of the long-term effects of racism, particularly the experience of traumatic stress that can manifest as a result of systemic oppression. Examples of systemic oppression included educational and economic disparities, in which these multi-layered effects of racism in the present

moment could trigger past experiences with racism. Over time, overt and covert encounters with prejudice and marginalization can cause emotional and psychological outcomes, such as depression, hypertension, and anxiety.

Awareness regarding the effects of racism or social oppression is especially important when considering the roles of social privilege and oppression that occur outside of the group and are likely to occur within the group as well. Constantine (1999) identified several themes that he found in the literature from various counselors who shared their personal narratives of racism. The themes include: (a) racial socialization (i.e. experiencing overt and covert racism at a very early age, internalizing racism, feeling shame/inferiority), (b) “passing” as White (i.e. speaking without an accent, denying or distancing self from cultural heritage, fear of exposure as a person of color), (c) biracial identity issues (i.e. pressure to identify with a single racial group), (d) awareness of racism as a White person (i.e. initial denial of racism, over identification with a racial group, feelings of anger toward other White people, process of coming to terms with own racism), (e) counselors as social change agents (i.e. frequently resistance toward social change, responsibility to advocate for change, especially in regard to systemic/institutional racism), (f) racism within counselor training programs (i.e. lack of support from peers/instructors when racist comments are made, feelings of pressure or exhaustion at the responsibility of addressing ignorance of others), (g) addressing racial and ethnic issues in counseling practice (i.e. acknowledging differences or similarities in ethnicity, resisting stereotypes) , and (h) striving toward a nonracist identity (i.e. recognizing the process as lifelong). Since much of the literature on multicultural counseling courses has focused on the experiences and development

of White students, it is unclear if ethnically marginalized students are receiving the support and attention they need within their preparation program.

A focus on the experiences of White therapists during individual counseling sessions has also been examined when working with non-white clients. In a study involving 11 European American licensed therapists engaging in cross cultural counseling, Burkard et al. (2006) investigated the content of the self-disclosure, the motivation for self-disclosing, and the perception of the self-disclosure from the client. The most common content of self-disclosure (at least half of the therapists), involved the therapist sharing his/her reaction to the client's experience of racism. Fewer than half of the time, the therapist's self-disclosure involved sharing his/her struggle with racist feelings or sharing his/her cultural values. At least half of the therapists identified the following reasons for self-disclosure: (a) strengthen the counseling relationship, (b) acknowledge and validate racism in the client's life, and (c) acknowledge racism in the therapist's own life. The effect of the therapist's self-disclosure for at least half of the client's was an improved counseling relationship and feeling understood so that he/she could go on to other issues. However, for less than half of the client's, the therapist self-disclosure normalized the client's experience and left the client feeling believed (Burkard et al., 2006). This study focused mostly on the intentions of the White therapists and provided fewer details about the effects that the self-disclosure has on his/her culturally different client, which is vital to our understanding and training of cultural awareness and skills.

Within the multicultural counseling course, Parker et al. (2004) identified several reasons that White versus culturally diverse students may not feel comfortable sharing

in the group context. For example, white students may feel self-conscious or afraid of saying something that could be offensive to their cultural diverse classmates. Thus, Parker et al. (2004) implemented an experiential group, called the Multicultural Mentoring Lab, to supplement the multicultural counseling course experience. The Lab consisted of a facilitator, group members, and group mentors. When asked for feedback about their experience in the Lab, students expressed that the small group environment felt safer than a large classroom setting. In addition, students expressed that the Lab normalized their experiences as they learned that other students were having similar reactions and experiences. In the same way, experiential PD groups may serve a similar focus for both White students and underrepresented students in counselor training programs who experience strong emotional responses within their overall training experience, but lack an appropriate outlet.

Researchers have also examined the factors that may inhibit students of Color from expressing themselves in a group setting. Seward & Guiffrida (2012) explored classroom participation among students of Color (n=20) enrolled in a multicultural counseling course. The students reported that they felt a need to censor their participation in order to make sure they were representing their cultural group in a positive way. Students identified feeling a fear of reinforcing negative stereotypes about their cultural group, sharing information that could be held against them, or feeling different/isolated from their peers. Students also reported feeling a sense of responsibility to protect or advocate for marginalized groups. Furthermore, students were more willing to share when they perceived their environment to be safe and open, and when their professors and peers demonstrated cultural sensitivity and openness to

their experiences (Seward & Guiffrida, 2012). Thus, it appears that an extra layer of barriers may exist for students who are underrepresented in counselor preparation programs. Therefore, it is important to investigate these barriers so that PD groups and training programs in general can facilitate the students' development in a way that is culturally competent.

In regard to group work, West-Olatunji, Henesy, and Varney (under review) completed a case study analysis of a mixed-level group of graduate counseling students who were deployed for an international disaster outreach to South Africa. The researchers utilized thematic coding from group members' journal entries about their experiences during group processing. Two main themes emerged: (a) growth and (b) struggle and discomfort. Within the 'struggle and discomfort' theme, anger, confrontation and racial dynamics contributed to the subtheme of 'conflict and tension'. Many members shared opposing worldviews and demonstrated resistance and blame toward other team members as a result. Further, this often resulted in group members' externalizing their experiences and feelings rather than self-reflecting or processing. While the groups in this study were process groups, the basic dynamics can be generalized. Further, while the scope of the study does not address the specific experiences of the ethnically marginalized group members, it would be interesting to examine deeper into the racial dynamics and confrontation or lack of confrontation that occurred during group processing on this outreach trip, especially from the perspective of the minority group members. Constantine (1999) emphasized the importance of these types of conversations and considerations when he stated that, "as counselors, it

is critical that we challenge ourselves to dialogue honestly and meaningfully about racism, despite our fears and anxieties related to this topic” (p. 71).

Thus, previous studies related to the experiences of ethnically underrepresenting counseling students support a need to investigate further how these students are experiencing personal development groups, for which one of the purposes to facilitate personal growth and development. Again, while there are multiple aspects of the training experience, personal development groups particularly provide the environment to explore the construct of honesty/congruence through the group process, which often provides the opportunity for group members to take risks with expressing themselves. In addition, while it is expected for conversations around race/ethnicity to occur in the multicultural counseling courses, which has often been studied regarding counseling students’ experiences, personal development groups may or may not emphasize or address issues of cultural diversity and social privilege/oppression. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of congruence for ethnically underrepresented counseling students who participated in PD groups during their master’s level training experience, particularly related to the processes of self-disclosure and feedback that take place during group processes.

CHAPTER 4 METHODS

Research Design

A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study due to the exploratory nature of the study. Creswell (2007) describes qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (p. 15). He continues to describe this process as building a “complex, holistic picture” (p.15), exposing the various dimensions and complexities of a particular issue. There are some basic assumptions that characterize qualitative methods: (a) a belief of subjective and multiple realities, (b) the researcher as a part of the process, (c) the researcher has biases and values, (d) the language is in a narrative style and given a personal voice, and (e) the use of inductive logic (Creswell, 1998). Further, phenomenological theory was utilized to allow for several individuals to share meaning of their lived experiences related to a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

Researcher Positionality

The researcher is currently in her third and final year of training in a CACREP-accredited master’s level counselor education program at a large state university in the southeastern part of the United States. The researcher self-identifies as biracial (Eurasian) and female. The researcher conceptualized this study following her experiences in an elective course titled *The Counselor as a Person* created by Dr. Sara Nash as a result of her doctoral dissertation (Nash, 2012). Therefore, the researcher may have had prior experiences and interactions with the participants both inside and outside of the classroom. In addition, some of these prior interactions were as group

members in the group experience together, either through the group counseling course, the counselor as a person course, group supervision, and/or classroom group discussions.

Due to the researcher's experiences in these groups, opinions and expectations existed on the part of the researcher. For example, the researcher noticed interactions where it appeared that ethnic minority students fell to the margins of the group experience, especially regarding the processes of self-disclosure and feedback. The researcher also experienced instances of feeling incongruent during the group process, which she felt was often related to her identity as a biracial, underrepresented counseling student in the program. In order to account for this, the researcher engaged in (a) conversations regarding biases prior to the beginning of the study, (b) journaling throughout data collection in order to provide an outlet for personal and subjective thoughts and reactions, and (c) dialogues with faculty about expectations and biases.

Participants and Procedures

Upon receiving approval from the institutional review board (IRB), the researcher utilized a convenient sample of counseling students who had participated in an experiential group prior to the study. The researcher recruited students who identified as ethnically underrepresented and had completed one of the following courses: group counseling, group supervision, or an elective course structured in a group format (The Counselor as a Person) based on the format of consistent group work in each of these courses. A recruitment email was sent to members of a counseling program's listserv (Appendix A). Additionally, the researcher recruited participants within the following courses: Group Supervision, Multicultural Counseling, Substance Abuse, and Advanced

Family Counseling by reading the recruitment announcement at the beginning of a class session. Lastly, flyers were displayed in classrooms and in the hallways (Appendix B).

The researcher facilitated a focus group discussion to explore the participants' group experiences related to their perceptions of honesty through the processes of self-disclosure and feedback in groups. The participants were given an informed consent (Appendix C) and a demographic survey (Appendix D) prior to participating in the focus group. Ethnically diverse students included those who identified as any of the following: Black/African American, Latino/a, Asian, Indian, Native American, or biracial. If the student identified as biracial, he/she was asked to specify if he/she identified as part of an underrepresented population. For this study, the primary researcher led the focus groups, which lasted 60-90 minutes. The focus groups were semi-structured with questions focused primarily on the students' experiences with honesty/congruence in the group context (Appendix E).

Focus groups are often utilized when the participants have shared characteristics that relate to the purpose of the focus group. It is important that the environment of the focus group feels open to a variety of perceptions and experiences, without the expectation for the focus group members to come to any kind of agreement or consensus (Krueger, 1988). Some characteristics of focus groups include the following: (a) group members influence and respond to one another, (b) open and safe environment for discussion, (c) approximately 7-10 participants, (d) conversation is casual and often socially enjoyable, and (e) a particular focus of the discussion (Krueger, 1988). Participants included four female master's level counseling students

who self-identified as a member of an ethnic minority group (African American, Asian, Black, or Latina) within their program.

Data Analysis

Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. The researcher read through the entire transcript and then identified significant statements within the focus group transcription (Creswell, 2007). Then, the researcher took clusters of meaning from the significant statements and grouped them into themes. In order to strengthen credibility, the following procedures were utilized: triangulation, peer examination, and member checking. For triangulation, the multiple data sources included focus groups, demographic information, and member checking. For peer examination, the researchers presented the list of main themes and subthemes to a research team via email communication. This research team was comprised of mixed-level graduate students in counselor education from two CACREP-accredited institutions who provided feedback, implications, and recommendations. Member checking procedures were conducted to give participants the opportunity to provide feedback, give additional information, or clarify any inaccurate interpretations of results.

Member checking procedures included the researcher presenting the preliminary themes, along with the list of quotes that were grouped together to form the theme. The participants were given the opportunity to find their quotes within each theme and confirm or clarify whether their responses were being categorized accurately. The researcher also explained to the participants that due to their minority status, it might be possible for others to be able to identify their identity based on their quotes. Participants reported that they would keep this in mind while they looked for their quotes and would let the researcher know if they wanted any taken out. The participants

provided clarification when a quote was taken out of context and they also revised some of the terminology.

CHAPTER 5 RESULTS

Three overarching themes emerged from the data: (a) congruence facilitating experiences, (b) congruence inhibiting experiences, and (c) personal and professional influences. Additionally, participants shared their definitions and conceptualizations of congruence. One participant defined congruence as “not feeling that you’re forced to filter yourself, but if you chose to filter yourself and disclose some parts of yourself, that’s perfectly okay too, but not feeling like you have to filter yourself every time.” Another participant described congruence as “feeling like you can walk into a room and kinda be yourself.” The researcher provided Carl Roger’s (1951) definition of congruence (i.e. realness and the ideal self being closely consistent with what he or she is actually experiencing), which was used to frame the questions to discuss the participants’ group experiences. These group experiences, presented within the three themes and their subthemes, are identified below with quotations from the participants.

Congruence Facilitating Experiences

The first theme, congruence facilitating experiences, was related to aspects of the group experience that facilitated the participants’ ability to experience congruence. Two subthemes emerged within the congruence facilitating experiences theme: (a) safety and (b) necessity. A sense of safety was described as resulting from instructor and/or peer influence. Participants expressed how this sense of safety facilitated their ability to experience congruence through self-disclosure. One participant stated,

The professor jumped in and said just, just respect others and give them enough time and when you are ready you can talk about it and we will want to talk about the issue...and that makes me really comfortable I actually talk a lot in that class, talk more than other classes.

Another participant remarked, "I felt safer. It was the people in the group...[they were] more accepting of different cultures, even though there was less diversity, which is ironic...so I ended up talking a lot more in that class." Additionally, participants expressed how peer/professor influenced their ability to experience congruence through the process of giving and receiving feedback. One participant commented,

I think the feedback has been more like inspiring and not like necessarily negative or anything so I think it's a good part of the process and it facilitates me giving other people feedback and I consider myself a pretty like inspirational person, so I try to...give it back to people in the most genuine way." Another participant stated, "It was easiest for the people who were appreciative of who I was, who were appreciative when I shared, um and that who just created safety it was easiest for me to just be really, really congruent with them.

A third participant remarked, "I think ya know having a teacher that looks like you is not very common, is a huge benefit. Um, it's not everything but it's definitely like half the battle. It's just having someone that you can identify with".

The participants described the subtheme of necessity as a cost versus benefit analysis that would take place internally during the group process. One participant shared, "I kept trying to balance like what I should say because I wanted people to gain something out of it, so I felt like the risk was better than like keeping my mouth shut."

While another participant stated,

I would agree with the statement that the people that you're most comfortable with, you can be more congruent with and give feedback, but I found it very necessary to give feedback to one girl in particular who was very hostile toward me and I guess just stepping out on a limb and hoping that she would be able to hear it.

Congruence Inhibiting Experiences

Congruence inhibiting experiences refer to participants' descriptions of feeling unable to speak or act in a way that was similar to what they were actually experiencing

in that moment. One participant stated, “I would talk too much and defend a lot and not care to be perceived as that way, um whereas outside of the department, I don’t have to do that. I don’t have to prove my point.” Another participant stated,

Outside of class, I can be me around people that know me and kinda understand where I’m coming from versus people I don’t know and you’re already telling me you’re not even going to trust my process of where I can get to know you to show you that side of me. So of course I’m going to immediately shut it down.

Two subthemes also emerged within the second theme of congruence inhibiting experiences: (a) micro/macro-aggressions and (b) risk/consequences (i.e. pressure to represent ethnic/racial community, fear of reinforcing stereotypes, fear of self-disclosure used against them).

The micro/macro-aggressions subtheme encompassed experiences of feeling targeted and having cultural experiences dismissed or not valued. Participants described feeling targeted regarding their level of self-disclosure. Additionally, individuals described feeling targeted through feedback given during their group experience related to their race and ethnicity. One participant stated,

I wasn’t really too quiet but I did notice that when minority students in general were quiet in the class, there was more interest towards them versus if let’s say a white person were quiet. It’s like oh they’re just [an] introvert, but ya know I want to know more about you.

Another individual commented,

Some of the feedback has left me kinda like feeling almost attacked almost... It was kinda this idea that why like, I guess for me, it’s like why can’t you be you around us, and it’s like well I don’t know you, so it’s like you’re still not getting it. Um, so it’s, I felt like I was being attacked for being quiet in class.

Participants also reported experiencing microaggressions through the lack of acknowledgement regarding the importance of culture and/or the dismissal of cultural

experiences during the group process. One individual stated “differentiation of race and differentiation of ethnic groups... I would bring it up and talk about it but of course no one wants to tackle that cause it’s a scary place to go.” Another participant remarked,

We also talked about how there’s only one multicultural class in the program, and how I don’t think that’s enough, and we should have more classes. And some people were saying that it’s more than enough. But the people that were saying that it was enough weren’t from... like visibly like minority groups, so that was just interesting.

A third participant stated,

This is my experience. This is what I’ve been through. This is how I saw ya know what or how I perceive the situation, how do you tell me that I’m wrong? And I will not take that, so we will go back and forth. Um and to me, that was very, very frustrating because I was being dictated as basically being told that my world view was incorrect and that I needed to accept theirs and um ya that wasn’t okay with me.

The risks/consequences subtheme involved participants’ expressing a sense of pressure to represent ethnic/racial community or a fear of reinforcing stereotypes. One participant stated,

I would self-disclose something and be like oh in my culture, or in my family, and I would feel like I’m speaking for everyone, um, but I want someone to correct me if I’m wrong or if it doesn’t fit with their experience.... So, I think I started getting self conscious about what I was sharing because I was afraid that I was like not doing them justice.

Another participant stated, “I have that going against me. Then I don’t want to be another angry black woman so it’s like I’d rather just keep it to myself.” A third participant remarked, “I don’t know you nor am I comfortable with you. I don’t know how you’re going to use the information, what purpose the information is serving for you.”

Personal and Professional Influences

The third overarching theme of personal and professional influences refers to participants’ responses about how they felt that the congruence facilitating and

congruence inhibiting experiences influenced them. This final theme, personal and professional influences, yielded two subthemes: (a) microaggressive stress (Sue, 2010) and (b) interpersonal awareness and empathy. The participants' demonstrated the first subtheme, microaggressive stress, through statements, such as "at that point I think I was kinda like, Ok I'm ready to be done", "I honestly just didn't care", and "not okay with having to sit on the hot coals for two and a half years". One participant stated, "It's like walking to battle, at least for me. It's like I have to spend so much time putting up my walls so that way when I get to the classroom, I'm prepared to fight off or kinda ignore the subtle jabs. I mean not to me personally but just to the class in general."

The second sub theme of interpersonal awareness and empathy referred to participants' reports of an increased ability to relate with and empathize with others based on their experiences in the groups. One participant stated,

I think personally they've made me really aware of how I come off to people. Um and it made me really aware of my triggers, um like I'll say, like I've just constantly been like in, certain things have slapped me in the face, but that's been really good for me, as as a learning experience.

Another participant shared the following statements,

To be respectful of what everyone's experience is, I think, is really valid, something I've taken from this class, not that I didn't have it before, but I think it's been heightened. To validate everyone's experience regardless of how small it might seem to me; but if it's a big deal to them then you know respect that.

A third participant remarked,

For me professionally, it's important for to me to honor that process. I mean some, some may take a little longer than others. Some people may take just one session and like okay we can do this, some had different ranges; but just that initial you don't know me we don't know each other I recognize that and I, I respect that.

Reasons for Participation

In addition to the response from the focus group, participants were asked, “Why did you choose to participate in this study?” The following written responses were provided by each of the participants, “Because I see tremendous value in researching and hearing about the minority experience, because our experience is not always validated”, “I wanted to share my experience in the hope that the results could facilitate change in graduate counseling departments”, “I am interested in the topic and focus group. I hope my experience can help to improve the program”, as well as “To help foster research around the experience of minority students in a predominantly white program.”

CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION

The results of this study are consistent with previous studies that identify the influence of trust and safety within the group process (Payne, 2001; Robson & Robson, 2008; Seward & Guiffrida, 2012). Further, the sub-theme of necessity, which described participants' decision making process to express themselves honestly through feedback or self-disclosure, supports Hulse-Killacky & Page (1994) results where the authors identified a theme titled "ambivalence" to describe students' thought process for giving difficult feedback at the time based on the rationale that it would be good in the long term. It is important to acknowledge that participant non-disclosure or lack of feedback is not synonymous with incongruence. Rather, self-disclosure is encouraged to take place only once trust/safety is established (Yalom, 1995), as well as when there appears to be a purpose (Correy & Correy, 1977). The decision-making process about choosing to self-disclose was also identified in a previous study where clients shared that often times they would self-disclose in order to unburden themselves so that the risk to keep their disclosure to themselves outweighed the risk to self-disclose to the therapist (Farber et al., 2004). This study is related to the participants in the current study, who also identified engaging in an internal cost versus benefit analysis when deciding to express themselves to the group.

Participants in this study were also able to identify barriers toward experiencing congruence in the group setting, such as experiencing a lack of acknowledgement or dismissal of cultural experiences. It appears that these culturally insensitive experiences facilitated microaggressive stress. This stress appears to have served as a barrier toward the ability for the participants to express themselves in a way that feels

congruent and honest during the group process. These results are also consistent with other studies that have identified reports of feeling a lack of support from peers/instructors when racist comments are made and feelings of pressure or exhaustion at the responsibility of addressing ignorance of others (Constantine, 1999). Previous studies have also identified times with culturally marginalized students reported feeling a need to censor based on the pressure of representing their cultural group in a positive way and based on a fear of reinforcing negative stereotypes about their cultural group, sharing information that could be held against them (Seward & Guiffreda, 2012). It is important to recognize that increasing cultural competence continues to be a necessary ingredient for preparing and training counseling students.

Overall, participants reported strength and resilience related to the ability to verbalize personal and professional meaning making out of their experiences. With the extended amount of literature that focuses on the experiences of counseling students within counseling training programs, it is vital to additionally acknowledge the experiences of the ethnically underrepresented and marginalized students, particularly in PD groups, where personal and professional growth is facilitated.

CHAPTER 7 LIMITATIONS

One limitation of this study is that the responses were from a limited number of four participants at one CACREP-accredited institution that many not be generalizable to other counseling students or counseling programs. Furthermore, all of the participants identified their gender as female, so there was no representation of males or transgendered individuals in the focus group. An additional limitation is that the participants may have had prior experiences with one another and with the researcher, through classroom or other interactions, which may have influenced their ability to participate as honestly as possible within the focus group. Therefore, those who chose to participate may have done so based on previous experiences with the researcher. In addition, each participant identified with a different ethnic group. It is possible that the composition of participants inhibited their ability to express themselves fully as they may have experienced a need to represent their particular ethnic group or not reinforce stereotypes, similar to the barriers identified in their personal development group experiences. Finally, there is no measure of a baseline for the participants prior to the outreach experience to demonstrate personal and professional influences from the group experience in particular.

CHAPTER 8 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should continue to focus on ways in which the ethnic minority students can identify feeling supported or have the opportunity to engage in congruence facilitating experiences. Due to the inductive nature of qualitative research, a quantitative study with an emphasis on measuring congruence or personal/professional growth, as a result of PD groups would prove beneficial. Additionally, a deeper analysis into one of the sub themes, such as experiences of micro/macroaggressions, could provide deeper insight into how these experiences are influencing the group process for marginalized students. In addition, it would be useful to further investigate additional sources of microaggressive stress that ethnic minority students may experience throughout their training program, which may trickle in to the group process experience, as well as how they remain resilient in coping with it.

CHAPTER 9 IMPLICATIONS

The implications for this study include increased knowledge regarding the construct of congruence within a personal development group experience for four ethnically diverse master's level counseling students at a particular university. Thus, it may be helpful to discuss the feeling of honesty/congruence more frequently when discussing the group processes of self-disclosure or feedback and assessing experiences of for personal growth and development. In addition, this study brings awareness of the barriers that ethnically underrepresented counseling students may face within counseling programs. Implications highlight the influence of social marginalization on the group process and give some understanding to how this influenced these ethnically diverse students' opportunities to experience congruence within personal development groups. It is necessary to incorporate the accounts of the participants in this study into our knowledge of group practice, dynamics and theory. Particularly, the reports of microaggressive stress need to be addressed in order to ensure that counseling students are being properly supported and mentored during their program experience. There appears to be an increased responsibility for group facilitators/instructors to ensure a safe environment, particularly for the marginalized counseling students, during group and classroom experiences.

It may also be necessary to consider experiential class requirements that facilitate the ability for students to experience personal and professional growth, as well as experiencing congruence and incongruence as a part of awareness and growth. In this case, the experiential groups were able to facilitate relational insight and empathy for others, especially regarding self-disclosure. Overall, this study highlights some of the

positive personal and professional growth experiences that experiential growth groups can yield.

APPENDIX A RECRUITMENT E-MAIL

Hello,

My name is Melanie Varney, and I am an M.AE/Ed.S candidate in the Mental Health Counseling program at the University of Florida. This is an invitation to participate in a focus group for a qualitative study on the experiences of ethnically underrepresented master's level counseling students who have participated in experiential personal development groups within the program.

In order to participate, you must identify as ethnically diverse (i.e. African American, Black, Asian, Latino, Indigenous, multiracial, etc.). In addition, you must have already completed at least one of the following courses in order to participate: Group Counseling, Group Supervision, or The Counselor as a Person. The focus of this study is to explore students' experiences of congruence through self-disclosure and feedback in a group setting. Total time commitment is approximately 2-3 hours.

You have the potential to gain self-awareness. Additionally, information obtained from this study may help inform counseling professionals about the experiences of counseling students. No potential risks are expected. However, if you do experience distress during the focus groups, we may discuss your experience and discuss counseling services that are offered to University of Florida students free of charge at the Counseling & Wellness Center. They can be contacted at 352-392-1575.

If you are interested in participating in this study, or if you have any questions, please contact me, Melanie Varney, off the listserv at melanie4@ufl.edu.

Sincerely,
Melanie Varney

APPENDIX B RECRUITMENT FLYER



Participants are needed to participate in a focus group for a qualitative study on the experiences of ethnically diverse (i.e. African American, Black, Asian, Latino, Indigenous, multiracial, etc.) master's level counseling students who have completed at least one of the following courses: Group Counseling, Group Supervision, or The Counselor as a Person.

The focus of this study is to explore ethnically underrepresented counseling students' experiences of congruence through self-disclosure and feedback in an experiential group setting. Total time commitment is approximately 2-3 hours.

You may have the potential to gain self-awareness. Additionally, information obtained from this study may help inform counseling professionals about the experiences of counseling students. No potential risks are expected. However, if you do experience distress during the focus groups, we may discuss your experience and discuss counseling services that are offered to University of Florida students free of charge at the Counseling & Wellness Center. They can be contacted at 352-392-1575.

If you would like to participate in this study or learn more about it, please contact Melanie Varney, MA.E/Ed.S Candidate in Counselor Education, at melanie4@ufl.edu for more information.

APPENDIX C INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title

Exploring Counseling Students' Experiences with Honesty through Self-Disclosure and Feedback in Personal Development Groups: Highlighting the Voices of Ethnically Underrepresented Counseling Students

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of ethnically diverse counseling students experiences with congruence through the processes of self-disclosure and feedback in personal development groups.

Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked a series of questions about your past or current experiences engaging in a personal development group (i.e. through one or more of the following courses: group counseling, the counselor as a person, or group supervision). The semi-structured interview will be audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Once the audio recording has been transferred to an encrypted flashdrive and an encrypted UF server, it will be deleted from the audio recorder. Once the audio recordings have been transcribed, they will be destroyed. No identifying information about you (such as your name) will be included in the transcription. The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes. After analysis of the data, I will ask you to engage in the member checking process by providing feedback of my data analysis. I will present to you what I found in common among all participants' data. This information will be presented without identifying your name or any other identifying information about you or other participants. You will have the opportunity to correct, clarify, or add to any information that you don't fully agree with. Your participation is completely voluntary. You have the right to skip any questions you do not wish to answer. You also have the right to stop participation in the focus group at any point and to withdraw consent from the study without consequence.

Time Required

Approximately 2 – 3 hours

Confidentiality

Some direct quotes may be used in the publication of the study. However, all direct quotes will be anonymous; and therefore, not connected with your name or identifying information. Limits to confidentiality include abuse of a minor or other vulnerable population (this can include past abuse if it has not yet been reported). Confidentiality can be broken if you are a danger to yourself or others or if ordered by a court of law. Your identity and information will be held confidential to the extent provided by law. If you choose to participate and sign the consent form, the form will be held in a folder separate from other documents. Signed consent forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet. Audio recordings will be transferred to a password-protected flashdrive and a secure UF server within 12 hours of recording and will then be deleted from the recording device. Recordings of our focus groups will be transcribed into a word-processing document and the audio recording will then be destroyed. One other graduate student or a faculty member will have access to the transcribed documents to assist with data analysis, but they will

not hear the audio recordings. While confidentiality will be addressed and encouraged, the researcher cannot guarantee that all of the focus group members will keep the confidentiality of the discussion during the focus group.

Potential Risks

No potential risks are expected. However, if you do experience distress during the focus groups, we may discuss your experience and discuss counseling services that are offered to University of Florida students free of charge at the Counseling & Wellness Center. They can be contacted at 352-392-1575.

Potential Benefits

You may gain a greater self-awareness of your experiences through sharing and hearing the perspective of your peers. You may also feel a sense of support or community from the responses of others' in the focus group. The focus group can also serve as an outlet for expression of your experiences in the program as an ethnically underrepresented student. The results of the study will also contribute to the knowledge base of counseling research and may lead to further studies that will inform counseling practice in a way that is culturally competent.

Participants' Rights

Your participation is completely voluntary. You have the right to skip any questions you do not wish to answer. You also have the right to stop participation in the focus group at any point and to withdraw consent from the study without consequence.

Compensation

No compensation is provided for participating in the study.

Access to Results

If you are interested in following up on the study after completion, please contact me, Melanie Varney, at melanie4@ufl.edu after May 2014.

Questions or Concerns

If you have other questions, concerns, or complaints that I have not addressed to your satisfaction, please contact me, Melanie Varney at melanie4@ufl.edu or my faculty advisor, Dr. Jacqueline Swank at jswank@coe.ufl.edu.

To learn more about your rights as a participant, contact the University of Florida Institutional Review Board, at IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 392-0433.

For counseling services, please contact the Counseling & Wellness Center at 352-392-1575.

Participation Agreement:

I have read and understand the procedures explained above. I choose to voluntarily participate in the study, and I have received a copy of the informed consent.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

START HERE

1. Your Gender: _____
2. Your Age: _____
3. Your Race/Ethnicity: _____
4. Are you an international student?
 Yes
 No
5. Sexual Orientation: _____
6. Semester/year you began the program (i.e. Fall 2012): _____
7. Your Counseling Program Track: (check all that apply)
 ___ Mental Health Counseling
 ___ Marriage and Family Counseling
 ___ School Counseling
8. Courses that you have completed: (check all that apply)
 ___ Group Counseling
 ___ Group Supervision (MHC)
 ___ Group Supervision (M&F)
 ___ Group Supervision (School)
 ___ The Counselor as a Person
9. Have you participated in a research study before?
 Yes
 No
10. Why did you choose to participate in this study?

APPENDIX E FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Group Dynamics

What were your experiences like in the group setting?

What were your experiences like as an ethnically underrepresented student?

- If any, what were conversations around cultural awareness or privilege/oppression (ethnicity/race) like?

Congruence

How do you define congruence?

(Researcher will provide the definition of “congruence” that is being used for this study. The definition is taken from Carly Roger’s description of congruence as realness or a person’s ideal self being closely consistent with what he or she is actually experiencing.)

Self-Disclosure

How would you describe your level of participation with self-disclosure as an ethnically underrepresented student? What was this like for you? How congruent do you feel that you were able to be?

What were your experiences with hearing others’ self-disclosure like?

Feedback

What were your experiences with giving/receiving feedback like as an underrepresented student? How congruent do you feel you were able to be?

What was it like observing the process of others’ giving/receiving feedback?

Personal/Professional Growth Questions

How have your experiences in group settings within the counseling program impacted your personal and professional growth?

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Melanie Varney graduated with a Bachelor of Science in psychology from the University of Florida in May 2011. She began her master's program during August 2011, and graduated with a Master's of Arts in Education and Education Specialist degrees in counselor education (with a concentration in mental health counseling) in May 2014.