Ethical issues in experiential counselor training groups

Lisa Kramer Kukral

University of Northern Iowa

Copyright ©1999 Lisa Kramer Kukral

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp

Part of the Applied Ethics Commons, Counselor Education Commons, and the Education Commons

Recommended Citation


https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/1032

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
Ethical issues in experiential counselor training groups

Abstract
Of the ethical issues addressed in the professional literature regarding group counselor training, those most frequently addressed are confidentiality and dual relationships, and informed consent and involuntary participation. The purpose of this paper is to explore how these ethical guidelines apply to the personal growth/training groups utilized in counseling master’s and doctoral programs and the ethical dilemmas that arise because of them. This paper will also explore suggestions that have been made to address these ethical dilemmas.
ETHICAL ISSUES IN EXPERIENTIAL COUNSELOR TRAINING GROUPS

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
And Postsecondary Education
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Lisa Kramer Kukral
May 1999
This Research Paper by: Lisa Kramer Kukral
Entitled: ETHICAL ISSUES IN EXPERIENTIAL COUNSELOR TRAINING GROUPS

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

Date Approved

Thaddeus Rozecki
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Date Approved

Roberto Clemente
Second Reader of Research Paper

Date Approved

Michael D. Waggoner
Head, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education
Ethical Issues in Experiential Counselor Training Groups

Ethics and ethical behavior are very subjective concepts. Counselor educators and counselor trainees need to ensure they are not crossing the very fine line that distinguishes ethical behavior. The Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW, 1989; 1990) has created a series of guidelines for professional counselors to abide by, a set of “rules” to prevent litigation from occurring. The preamble of the Ethical Guidelines for Group Counselors (ASGW, 1989; 1990) states:

The following ethical guidelines have been developed to encourage ethical behavior of group counselors. These guidelines are written for students and practitioners, are meant to stimulate reflection, self-examination, and discussion of issues and practices. They address the group counselor’s responsibility for providing information about group work to clients and the group counselor’s responsibility for providing group counseling services to clients.

(p.2)

It is the responsibility of counselors to implement these standards in their own professional practices. If they choose not to, they risk incurring future negative consequences.

There are also many ethical considerations in teaching group counseling practices. The purpose of a master’s program in counseling in
regard to group work is to maximize student's knowledge and skills in group counseling while protecting the counselor education program and the profession from incompetent group leaders (Conyne, Wilson, Kline, Morran, & Ward, 1993).

Most professionals believe that in order to effectively train students in group counseling, the students must become clients in a group (Conyne et al., 1993; Corey & Corey, 1997; Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 1993; Gladding, 1995; Kottler, 1994; Merta & Sisson, 1991; Morrissey, 1994; Pierce & Baldwin, 1990; Roback, Ochoa, Bloch, & Purdon, 1992; Sklare, Thomas, Williams, & Powers, 1996). Being group members allows counselor trainees to experience the process actual clients in a group experience. Being members of this type of personal growth/training group is often a part of counselor training programs. In many graduate programs, students are required to participate in a personal growth experience in preparation for leading counseling groups (Conyne et al., 1993; Corey & Corey, 1997; Corey et al., 1993; Gladding, 1995; Kottler, 1994; Merta & Sisson, 1991; Morrissey, 1994; Pierce & Baldwin, 1990; Roback et al., 1992; Sklare et al., 1996). This method is supported by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), emphasizing that "students are able to improve self-
understanding, self-analysis skills and interpersonal skills” (CACREP, Section 2, Paragraph F, 1994).

At the same time, all clients are protected by core ethical counseling principles: autonomy (respect the client’s right to be a free agent), beneficence (consider what’s best for the client), nonmalfeasance (do no harm), and justice (be fair) (Kurpius, Gibson, Lewis, & Corbet, 1991; Pierce & Baldwin, 1990). In essence, then, while participating in a personal growth/training group as part of their academic program, counselor trainees become clients whose welfare must ethically be protected.

Counselor educators must be certain, then, that ethical guidelines are being followed throughout the training process for their students. Currently, the ethics of certain training methods are being questioned by professionals in the counseling field. The most provocative of these methods is the personal growth/training group, mentioned previously, used by a vast majority of counselor training programs. Many authors have addressed the ethical dilemmas posed by these groups (Conyne et al., 1993; Corey & Corey, 1997; Corey et al., 1993; Emerson, 1995; Gladding, 1995; Hayes, 1991; Kottler, 1994; Kurpius et al., 1991; Merta & Sisson, 1991; Morrissey, 1994; Pierce & Baldwin, 1990; Roback et al., 1992; Sim, 1997; Sklare et al., 1996).
Of the ethical issues addressed in the professional literature regarding group counselor training, those most frequently addressed are confidentiality and dual relationships, and informed consent and involuntary participation (Conyne et al., 1993; Corey & Corey, 1997; Corey et al., 1993; Emerson, 1995; Gladding, 1995; Hayes, 1991; Kottler, 1994; Kurpius et al., 1991; Merta & Sisson, 1991; Morrissey, 1994; Pierce & Baldwin, 1990; Roback et al., 1992; Sim, 1997; Sklare et al., 1996). The purpose of this paper is to explore how these ethical guidelines apply to the personal growth/training groups utilized in counseling master's and doctoral programs and the ethical dilemmas that arise because of them. This paper will also explore suggestions that have been made to address these ethical dilemmas.

Confidentiality and Dual Relationships

The first area of ethical concern consists of the combination of two issues: confidentiality and dual relationships. These two ethical issues are tied very closely together as far as their concern in training graduate students because of the personal growth/training groups used in academic programs. Confidentiality, as related to group counseling, is defined as the explicit agreement that what is said within a group will stay in the group (Corey & Corey, 1997; Gladding, 1995; Sim, 1997). Harvill, Jacobs, and Masson (as cited in Gladding, 1995) stated, "Confidentiality is also the
right of group members to reveal personal thoughts, feelings and information to the leader and other members of the group and expect that in no way will non-members of the group learn this” (p. 174).

The issue of confidentiality in group counseling is much more complex than in individual counseling. The group leader must not only keep the confidences of members but must also get the members to keep one another’s confidences. This can be quite difficult to do, as suggested by Kottler (1994):

Confidentiality cannot be enforced absolutely in a group. In all probability, no matter what safeguards are taken, no matter how careful we are to button our lips, no matter how much we stress the importance of privileged communication, there will be those who slip up. Some clients will inadvertently disclose confidential information during a mindless moment, while others will deliberately run home with a pocket full of juicy details to spill. (p. 241-242)

Counselor trainees, similar to other members involved in personal growth groups, assume that any self-disclosure would be held in confidence by the leader and the other group members. However, counselor trainees undergo an additional risk in that they are involved in the personal growth group for training purposes and are being evaluated throughout the program for self-awareness and competence in what they
ultimately learned as a result of the group experience. Merta and Sisson (1991) supported this notion:

Counselor educators face the dilemma of asking participants in an experiential group to engage emotionally and in a meaningful way to maximize interpersonal learning, while informing them that because of the limits of confidentiality and the evaluative nature of the preparation, they will be assessed as to their interpersonal effectiveness. (p. 239)

In its Ethical Standards, The American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD, 1988) stated that counseling educators "must establish a program directed toward developing students' skills, knowledge, and self-understanding" (p.8). The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision's (ACES) Standards for Counseling Supervisors (1993) suggested that educators should interact with the counselor trainees in a manner that assists their self-exploration. Both of these standards emphasize the supervisor's responsibility for encouraging self-awareness as part of the trainee's professional development. The ASGW's Ethical Guidelines for Group Counselors also support fostering this self-awareness, stating "Group counselors develop an awareness of their own values and the potential impact upon the choice of the interventions they are likely to make" (as cited in Corey et al., 1993).
Professionals agree, as mentioned previously, that personal growth/training groups are the most effective methods to encourage this personal awareness.

Conflict occurs because AACD's Ethical Standards (1988) also stated that "when the educational program offers a growth experience with an emphasis on self-disclosure or other relatively intimate personal involvement, the member [educator] must have no administrative, supervisory, or evaluating authority regarding the participant [trainee]" (p. 8). Counselor educators are faced with a complex role with administrative and evaluative authority and power in the supervisory relationship and are yet expected to attend to the trainee's personal characteristics that manifest themselves in the counseling interaction. This presents the issue of a dual relationship between counselor educators and counselor trainees. Remley (as cited in Gladding, 1995) advised counselor educators to avoid "dual relationships" such as requiring or allowing students to participate in a group experience led by them as a part of a course, since such situations involve a conflict of interest as well as a breach of confidentiality. To comply with the other standards, however, educators would then have to know students well enough to ensure their ability to provide competent service (Conyne et al., 1993; Pierce & Baldwin, 1990; Roback et al., 1992; Sklare et al., 1996).
The ASGW (1989; 1990) offered guidelines to ensure that specific aspects of confidentiality be taken into account by group leaders. The first recommendation is that leaders should define confidentiality and its limits to group members. The second is that leaders should stress the importance of confidentiality initially, and then address it frequently throughout the group. Third, group members should be made aware of the difficulties involved in enforcing and ensuring confidentiality in the group setting. This might be done by providing examples of how confidentiality can be broken innocently, with no harm intended. Perhaps this would increase members' awareness and lessen the likelihood that a breach of confidence would occur. Last, leaders should state that they can only guarantee their own confidentiality, not that of the other group members. Confidentiality in a group can never be completely guaranteed.

Considering the Ethical Guidelines of the ASGW (1989; 1990), it seems fairly clear what the expectations are, however, counselor educators and counselor trainees still struggle to reach a training method that ensures confidentiality and eliminates dual relationships, while allowing evaluation of the counselor trainee to take place (Donigian, 1993).

The issue of confidentiality is very important for group leaders and group members. Roback et al. (1992) presented many findings in their
exploratory study that supported the need for confidentiality in group therapy. The subjects of this study were clinicians randomly selected from a sample of 300 members of the American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA). The researchers focused on several objectives including the following:

1. Actual experiences with breaches of confidentiality and the consequences of those breaches on the group process.
2. Leader’s degree of concern about confidentiality violations.
3. Prevalence and quality of discussions about confidentiality that were initiated by group leaders with members.
4. Types of issues members raised with respect to confidentiality.

In reference to the first objective, Roback et al. (1992), reported that approximately 54% of responding clinicians indicated breaches of confidentiality by group members had occurred at least once during the course of their practices. The unauthorized identification of a group member to an outsider being the most frequently occurring type of breach. The clinicians themselves admitted to breaching confidentiality under only one circumstance, which was when they had been mandated to do so by the court. This could, perhaps, be accounted for by the fact that even though the survey was anonymous, clinicians may have responded to this area less than truthfully. Therapists who had violations occur in their
groups noted primarily short-term negative consequences. Anger toward the group member responsible for the violation and reduction in self-disclosure by group members were the most frequent consequences.

In discussion of the second objective, Roback et al. (1992), stated that 71% of clinicians reported an average to moderate degree of concern about breaches of confidentiality in their clinical groups. Although the degree of concern of group members toward confidentiality violations was not specifically addressed in this study, it could be construed as fairly high based on the reactions of group members to these instances. Most groups examined returned to previous functioning levels after a breach of confidentiality, but many reported the anger and decreased self-disclosure referred to under the discussion of objective one. They also found some members pulled away from the group entirely, as well as some uncommitted members who used the breach as an excuse to further disengage (Roback et al., 1992).

Regarding the third objective, Roback et al. (1992), found that 87% of the respondents always discussed confidentiality with group members. Only 51% acknowledged that they ever brought the subject up again. Most clinicians defined confidentiality for the group members and stressed its importance. Two-thirds of the responding clinicians explained to their groups that it was acceptable to discuss one's own therapy issues with
outsiders, but disclosures by other group members were not to leave the group (Roback et al., 1992).

In exploring the final objective, Roback et al. (1992), inquired about the types of requests made by group members for confidential information. The largest number of member inquiries focused on third-party access to group information, primarily insurance companies, employers, and family members. There were also a significant number of confidentiality inquiries related to group rules that existed to protect members' identities.

Each of these specific aspects of confidentiality should be considered by master's and doctoral counselor training programs, especially as they relate to group work. Roback et al. (1992) found that only 37% of the responding clinicians had completed a course in ethics during their professional training. A mere 7% indicated that their course relating to ethics covered confidentiality issues specific to group counseling. These findings might have been different with a subject group from the ASGW, although these respondents were selected from an association with group emphasis, the AGPA.

Confidentiality becomes even more essential as a guiding force when involved with student trainees' personal growth/training group. As stated before, many training programs require this type of group as part of the group learning experience (Conyne et al., 1993; Corey & Corey, 1997;
Corey et al., 1993; Gladding, 1995; Kottler, 1994; Merta & Sisson, 1991; Morrissey, 1994; Pierce & Baldwin, 1990; Roback et al., 1992; Sklare et al., 1996). Student trainees may be hesitant to self-disclose personal information in groups where the course instructor is the group leader. When the group leader is a third party, she or he still usually reports to the course instructor, which may inadvertently affect the group process as well as the evaluation process. Emerson (1995) asked several counselors how they coped with the graduate requirement of being involved in a personal growth group. Many stated that they "kept their real problems to themselves and did only what they had to do to get their degree" (p.224). Although they acknowledged the importance of confidentiality and promised to keep it, all the counselors questioned in this study realized and accepted that confidentiality was never guaranteed.

Informed Consent and Involuntary Participation

Informed consent and involuntary participation are two other ethical principles, closely linked to confidentiality and dual relationships, that counselor educators must think about while supervising student trainees throughout the counseling program. These guidelines also raise ethical dilemmas related to the personal growth/training groups required by many counselor training programs. The AACD (1988) required that supervisors remove unqualified candidates from counselor educator programs.
Information used to base such a decision might come from the candidates themselves, through personal self-disclosure in the required growth group. Sim (1997) explained that, "In the true spirit of informed consent, counselor trainees who participate as members in experiential groups must be told that information revealed in counseling will be used to evaluate their ability to be an effective counselor" (p. 61). Given the AACD recommendations, supervisors are obligated to use this information in this way, particularly if it is negative information.

The dilemma is that students are required to participate in a group where they risk jeopardizing their positions as counselor trainees by incriminating themselves through honest self-disclosure. Self-disclosure which is designed and encouraged to intensify their group experience and aid in their training. It seems a no-win situation for the student trainees.

Applying the principle of informed consent, however, means that it should be explained to the trainees that the contents of personal disclosures are not necessarily important (Conyne et al., 1993; Kurpius et al., 1991; Sklare et al., 1996). It is intended primarily that students be evaluated on "interpersonal effectiveness," (Merta & Sisson, 1991, p. 238). Still, students whose personal characteristics significantly interfere with their interpersonal effectiveness are supposed to be considered for termination from a program of study (Conyne et al., 1993; Kurpius et al.,
1991; Merta & Sisson, 1991; Sklare et al., 1996). Student trainees who suspect they might be evaluated negatively in this setting have no alternatives, because the group is a required element of their training program.

Corey et al. (1993), described the predicament of this involuntary participation in this way:

Some critics of the traditional experiential group charge that it is unethical to make participation in the group mandatory while not informing prospective members of what participation in the group entails; they recommend that student counselors should be fully advised regarding program procedures [e.g., participation in an experiential group that encouraged self-disclosures] and that their informed consent should be obtained prior to enrollment in the program. (p. 37)

Considering making the group optional, Sklare et al., (1996) believed that students would be concerned about how they would be viewed by their instructors and peers if they did not “volunteer” to participate in the personal growth/training group. If group participation were made optional, counselor educators might evaluate non-volunteers more negatively. This is shown by Pierce and Baldwin (1990), when they stated that “the
motives of students resisting involvement in the experiential group should be examined" (p. 150).

Counselor educators and group leaders face sizable ethical responsibility in the situations surrounding the personal growth/training groups required in many counselor education programs. Student trainees should be protected from unethical practices resulting from participation in an experiential group, but they can and should not be excused from participating in counseling experiences essential to their own education (Conyne et al., 1993; Corey & Corey, 1997; Corey et al., 1993; Gladding, 1995; Kottler, 1994; Merta & Sisson, 1991; Morrissey, 1994; Pierce & Baldwin, 1990; Roback et al., 1992; Sklare et al., 1996). The literature in this area has suggested training methods that are intended to protect student trainees and still give them the experiences and training their programs require.

**Suggested Training Methods**

Many of the authors writing in the area of ethics and group counseling have made recommendations regarding the training of group counselors (Hayes, 1991; Kurpius et al., 1991; Merta & Sisson, 1991; Pierce & Baldwin, 1990; Roback et al., 1992; Sklare et al., 1996). A review of current literature on this topic revealed that there does not seem to be one perfect answer. It seems that the best answer at this time is to
follow the suggestions of successful training programs and experienced group leaders in combination with a healthy respect for the professional ethical guidelines. Some of the recent published suggestions follow.

Roback et al. (1992), made several recommendations for group counseling training programs. Two that apply to personal growth/training groups are: (1) to offer an explicit "guidebook" that covers a variety of ethical dilemmas and their solutions; and (2) to require more courses in ethics at the training level, as well as in continuing education. The first, a guidebook, might specifically cover the ethical dilemmas presented by the personal growth/training groups. The second, increased coursework, might heighten awareness of ethical issues, as well as prepare students and future supervisors more thoroughly. These two suggestions aid supervisors and students alike.

Kurpius et al., (1991) made three recommendations specifically to supervisors. The first encouraged supervisors to "exercise self-awareness and self-critique." (p.55) The second advised supervisors to "incorporate four moral principles into their practice . . . autonomy, nonmalfeasance, beneficence, and justice." (p. 56) The third encouraged supervisors to actively assess the methods they practice, which included staying abreast of current professional literature (Kurpius et al., 1991). Clearly, these
authors believed that the major portion of ethical responsibility fell on the counselor educator.

Pierce and Baldwin (1990) proposed a training model that was intended to address the ethical dilemma between privacy and participation in counselor training groups. Summarized, their model included the following steps:

1. Provide students with information about program expectations.
2. Provide students with specific course expectations.
4. Expect group leaders to be sensitive to students privacy needs.
5. Provide students with feedback and guidelines for appropriate participation.
6. Explain appropriate self-disclosure as the middle on a continuum between totally closed and totally open.
7. Assist students in picking appropriate topics for the group.
8. Group leaders should model appropriate self-disclosure.
9. Counselor educators are encouraged in the use of specific interventions (e.g., video taping, group evaluation activities, individual conferences with members).
At first glance, their model seems comprehensive, but it might be argued that many counselor training programs are already employing these steps and are still running into ethical problems.

In a 1991 article, Hayes suggested a democratically organized group structure that conformed to the following characteristics: committed leadership, the use of reason as authority, enhanced role-taking opportunities, and collaborative problem solving. Hayes described an "ambitious" counselor education program that would:

Be based around democratic principles that would involve the faculty, staff and students, in collaborative relationships that involve developmental assessment of participants and the creation, implementation, and evaluation of programs and procedures in an ongoing, public forum that encourages continued dialogue among interested parties. (p. 29)

This does, indeed, seem ambitious, particularly in the academic world of tenure, budgets, accreditation, and reduced enrollment. The idea of collaboration and participant involvement is appealing, but probably not very achievable.

Merta and Sisson (1991) offered the following recommendations for the preparation of group counselors and more specifically the use of experiential groups as an indispensable counselor education component:
1. Survey counselor education programs nationally to determine what other counselor educators are doing to prepare their students in group counseling while protecting them from unethical practices.

2. Enlist the participation, in this ethical decision-making process, of all individuals involved in the preparation of master's-level students in group counseling.

3. Preparation in group counseling should not be made void of student counselors self-disclosing and working on personal issues.

4. Participation in an experiential group should not be on a voluntary basis nor should an alternative be provided.

5. Experiential groups should not be led by the course instructor nor by any faculty member in the department.

6. Students should be provided feedback regarding their performance from group leaders.

7. The course instructor should participate, albeit indirectly, in the evaluation of participants in experiential groups.

8. Prospective student counselors should be fully advised of the program procedure requiring participation in an experiential
group that encourages self-disclosures and their informed consent should be obtained prior to enrollment in the program. These recommendations seem to agree with most of the other authors' suggestions, although these authors strongly recommended the group leader be from outside the department.

Final suggestions come from Sklare et al. (1996). As the most recent study, these authors frequently cited the other literature cited in this paper. This article presented a very detailed description of a proposed training model that included "characteristics of professional standards of practice related to both students and future clients." (p. 267) The model offered by these authors addressed gatekeeping and informed consent, group structure, group co-leaders, and group experiences. It also recommended extensive feedback from group members by way of logs, critiques, self-evaluative papers, and group evaluations. The authors recommended procedures for grading. They suggested using blind grading procedures for academic work and not grading activities related to self-disclosure at all. Attendance was also to be considered in the grading (Sklare et al., 1996). The authors of this article believed that the ethical issues involved in counselor training persist, therefore, it is the responsibility of the educators to act in the most ethical manner possible (Sklare et al., 1996).
Conclusion

It is recognized that ethical considerations need to be made regarding the personal growth/training groups required of student counselor trainees by their academic programs. Many professionals recognize the ethical issues surrounding confidentiality and dual relationships, informed consent and involuntary participation as they relate to these groups (Conyne et al., 1993; Corey & Corey, 1997; Corey et al., 1993; Emerson, 1995; Gladding, 1995; Hayes, 1991; Kottler, 1994; Kurpius et al., 1991; Merta & Sisson, 1991; Morrissey, 1994; Pierce & Baldwin, 1990; Roback et al., 1992; Sim, 1997; Sklare et al., 1996).

There remains, however, a type of Catch-22 dilemma. Counseling professionals believe that having student trainees engage in a experiential growth group greatly enhances their learning (Conyne et al., 1993; Corey & Corey, 1997; Corey et al., 1993; Gladding, 1995; Kottler, 1994; Merta & Sisson, 1991; Morrissey, 1994; Pierce & Baldwin, 1990; Roback et al., 1992; Sklare et al., 1996). This growth group, however, produces many ethical dilemmas for the academic programs, faculty, and students (Conyne et al., 1993; Corey & Corey, 1997; Corey et al., 1993; Emerson, 1995; Gladding, 1995; Hayes, 1991; Kottler, 1994; Kurpius et al., 1991; Merta & Sisson, 1991; Morrissey, 1994; Pierce & Baldwin, 1990; Roback et al., 1992; Sim, 1997; Sklare et al., 1996).
The answer does not seem to be the elimination of these types of groups. In fact, the ethical guidelines of professional associations most closely related to this area will not accept their elimination. The ACA (1995), CACREP (1994), and ASGW (1989; 1990) all include the personal growth/training group as part of their recommended counselor training program. However, using terms like “appropriate professional precautions,” (ACA, 1995, p.3), the American Counseling Association presented what may be a solution, it reads:

When a dual relationship cannot be avoided, counselors must take appropriate professional precautions [italics added] such as informed consent, supervision and documentation to ensure that judgement is not impaired and no exploitation occurs. (p. 3)

Lloyd, as cited in Morrissey (1994), said it as well, “It’s not the dual relationship that is the problem. It’s the misuse of the power or taking advantage of the individual that is unethical” (p.10). Kottler (1994) wrote:

The bottom line about dual relationships is the inequality of power. We cannot exploit or manipulate, but counselors need to use their judgement in terms of whether what we are doing is helping the student and accept responsibility for our actions. (pp.10-11)

It seems to be understood that ethical issues arise in counselor training programs, particularly in the personal growth/training group. The
professional counseling associations expect that their members will act ethically, to the best of their ability and knowledge, knowing that these situations can not be avoided. It also seems that no one has come up with a better solution as of yet.
References


