LA IMPORTANCIA DEL PROCESO DE GRUPO ESTRUCTURADO EN UNA EXPERIENCIA DE INMERSIÓN CULTURAL INTERNACIONAL

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRUCTURED GROUP PROCESS IN AN INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL IMMERSION EXPERIENCE

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Resumen

Las experiencias de inmersión cultural internacional para los estudiantes de consejería ofrecen oportunidades únicas no sólo para experimentar las maravillas de otra cultura, sino para compartirlas con un grupo intencionalmente formado.

El éxito de tal experiencia suele basarse en el desarrollo de la cohesión grupal a lo largo del proceso. Este documento describe la formación de un grupo para un estudio a corto plazo en el extranjero, experiencia que incluye las etapas de desarrollo del grupo y la importancia de un proceso de grupo estructurado a lo largo de la experiencia a corto plazo en el extranjero. Los autores exponen las implicaciones para la consejería y la educación del consejero.

Palabras clave: Proceso, grupo estructurado, inmersión cultural, cohesión grupal, consejería, gestión de conflictos.

Resumo

Experiências internacionais de imersão cultural para aconselhar estudantes oferecem oportunidades únicas não apenas para experimentar as maravilhas de outra cultura, mas para compartilhá-las com um grupo formado intencionalmente. O sucesso de tal experiência é geralmente baseado no desenvolvimento da coesão do grupo ao longo do processo. Este documento descreve a formação de um grupo para um estudo de curto prazo no exterior, experiência que inclui as etapas de desenvolvimento do grupo e a importância de um processo de grupo estruturado durante toda a experiência de curto prazo no exterior. Os autores discutem as implicações para aconselhamento e educação de conselheiros.

Palavras-chave: Processo, grupo estruturado, imersão cultural, coesão grupal, aconselhamento, gestão de conflitos.

Abstract

International cultural immersion experiences for counseling students offer unique opportunities to not only experience the wonders of another culture, but to share them with an intentionally formed group. The success of such an experience is often predicated on the development of group cohesion throughout the process. This manuscript describes the formulation of a group for a short-term study abroad experience including the stages of group development and the importance of a structured group process throughout the short-term study abroad experience. The authors discuss implications for counseling and counselor education.

Keywords: Process, structured Group, cultural Immersion, group cohesion, counseling, conflict management
Faculty-led international cultural immersion experiences are often a rewarding experience for both students and faculty. For students, it is an opportunity to expand knowledge through the experience of what it means to be a global citizen. For faculty, it is an opportunity to mentor students in their personal and professional development as global citizens. While faculty-led study abroad education encourages personal and professional growth, such experiences within a group context can also provide challenges. Students in faculty-led study abroad courses often encounter deep and rich cultural experiences that need structured processing. Because successful study abroad groups are often predicated on effective group cohesion, it is important for faculty to provide a group opportunity for shared reflections of such deep and rich cultural experiences.

While it appears that faculty-led international cultural immersion opportunities are increasing in counselor education (e.g. Alexander, Kruzcek, & Ponterotto, 2005; Canfield, Low, & Hovestadt, 2009), their prevalence is difficult to measure. At the time of this writing, the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision is attempting to create a database of counselor education programs that offer such opportunities. Despite the need for further investigation into the frequency, duration, and goals of international cultural immersion opportunities within counselor education, there is clearly a growing interest in internationalization of the counseling profession. The National Board for Certified Counselors, for example, now has an International Division (NBCC-International), which promotes strengthening counseling worldwide through efforts such as supporting other countries in developing a credentialing process for counselors. Additionally, international counseling interest networks are now present in all regions of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision. Gerstein and Ægisdóttir (2007) tracked the percentage of articles regarding international topics published in four select U.S. counseling journals between the years 2000-2004. Despite a trend toward internationalization of the counseling profession, their research revealed that only 6% of articles published during this time period related to an international topic.

In an age of globalization and internationalization of the counseling profession, it becomes paramount that counselor educators embrace the call to action issued by Gernstein and Ægisdóttir (2007) to demonstrate a commitment to studying diverse cultures and countries. By providing students with access to opportunities for interacting outside of the culturally bound contexts of traditional classroom-based training, counselor educators can act as social change agents. To date, however, few manuscripts have been offered that describe in detail how to organize and plan short-term study abroad learning opportunities (c.f. Alexander, Kruzcek, & Ponterotto, 2005; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010; Authors, 2013). Moreover, little attention has been given to facilitating group development and process during such experiences. The authors contend that a successful short-term study abroad experience is predicated on group process and development, supported by establishing group cohesion and providing structured group processing throughout the experience.

Previous literature on faculty-led international cultural immersion opportunities supports the importance of individual processing of the experience. Daily journaling, for example, is broadly recommended to support students with processing and integrating their cognitive and affective reactions to the experience (Alexander, Kruzcek, & Ponterotto, 2005; Canfield, Low & Hovestadt, 2011; DeRico & Sciarra, 2005; Ishii, Gilbride, & Stensrud, 2009). Supervision is also recommended for experiential learning in diverse and cross-cultural settings (Alexander, Kruzcek, & Ponterotto, 2005; Baggerly, 2006). Less attention, however, is given to group process within the literature. Although Arthur and Achenbach (2002) cite debriefing as an ethical practice that allows for processing of strong emotional reactions and integration of new knowledge and awareness, this is something that often does not occur in a structured way until after the experience (e.g. Canfield, Low & Hovestadt, 2011; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010).

By attending to group development and group process within the context of the immersion experience itself, faculty members can support students in increasing awareness of privilege, developing sensitivity and empathy toward diverse populations, navigating “unsettling” experiences, and identifying previously hidden biases and prejudices. Additionally, group processing supports the development of group cohesion, meaning making, and the reflection of one’s self through the eyes of others. This manuscript illustrates the process of group formulation for short-term study abroad courses to Bolivia, South America including: (1) the stages of group development, (2) the importance of a structured group process throughout the short-term study abroad experience, and (3) implications for counseling.
1. THE STAGES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

Several well-known models of group development and stages of group process exist (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2010; Gazda, 1989; Gladding, 2008; Trotzer, 2007; Yalom, 2005). Depending on the particular model, most groups are thought to contain between four and five stages of development (Gladding, 2008), with all sharing in common some form of beginning, middle, and end. Our experience in several faculty-led short-term study abroad groups over the last eight years finds that Corey, Corey, and Corey’s (2010) stages of group development best fit our experiences. Using these stages as a framework, we will share our experiences of group development, providing examples from our faculty-led trips to Bolivia, South America, with Master’s degree counseling students from a CACREP accredited program in the Southeast.

1.1 Formation of the Group

Certainly the formation of a group of counseling students for purposes of a faculty-led short-term study abroad experience is not with the intent of providing group counseling or psychotherapy. However, the selection of students for this opportunity benefits from some similar form of structured screening process. Adopting protocol aspects set forth by the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) Best Practice Guidelines (Thomas & Pender, 2008) is recommended. Specifically, under standard A.7 Group and Member Preparation, standard A.7.a states:

   Group Workers screen prospective group members if appropriate to the type of group being offered. When selection of group members is appropriate, Group Workers identify group members whose needs and goals are compatible with the goals of the group.

Our example from Bolivia: The screening process for our faculty-led short-term study abroad begins with a general orientation to the program. Our approach is first one of a group-conducted pre-group screening process. Advertisements for the program and orientation meeting are sent via email to the four student counseling program listservs in our department (clinical mental health counseling, professional school counseling, marriage and family therapy, and student affairs). Interested students attend the group orientation meeting where information regarding the faculty-led short-term study abroad experience is discussed. This orientation serves as an initial informed consent meeting, which is consistent with standard A.7.b of the ASGW Best Practice Guidelines (Thomas & Pender, 2008):

   Group Workers facilitate informed consent. They communicate information in ways that are both developmentally and culturally appropriate. Group Workers provide in oral and written form to prospective members (when appropriate to group type): the professional disclosure statement; group purpose and goals; group participation expectations including voluntary and involuntary membership; role expectations of members and leader(s); policies related to entering and exiting the group; policies governing substance use; policies and procedures governing mandated groups (when relevant); documentation requirements; disclosure of information to others; implications of out-of-group contact or involvement among members; procedures for consultation between group leader(s) and group member(s); fees and time parameters; and potential impacts of group participation (p. 114).

Following the orientation meeting, students who wish to participate in the experience are required to fill out an application. The application asks students why they are interested in this group experience at this time, how they see this experience applying to their counselor training, what international experiences they may have had, how they feel they handle adversity, and how they see themselves contributing to this experience and the group. Once interested students turn in their applications, the faculty members leading this group experience read them to determine what further information may be needed. Typically, faculty leaders have had applicants in classes and have had a good idea of their “fit” for the group experience. For those students who are not known by the faculty leaders, an individual meeting is scheduled to further ascertain “fit” for the group. Faculty leaders may also elicit information from other departmental faculty who have had students in classes in order to further determine fit for the group.

For our international cultural immersion experience, we find the optimal level of group members to be between 10 and 12 students. Much of this is influenced by logistical considerations (e.g., arranging flight schedules, accommodations in-country, and within country travel). For those students not accepted into the group experience, they are offered an opportunity to apply for the following year or are directed to the university’s Office of International Education and Development for other short-term study abroad opportu-
nities.

1.2 Initial Stage

Corey, Corey, and Corey (2010) identify the Initial Stage as one of orientation and exploration. The task of group members is to identify expectations and develop goals, both personally and for the group. Group members might experience feelings of anxiety and concern regarding how they will fit into the group or the degree to which they will be socially accepted into the group. The role of the group leaders at this stage is to help begin the process of building trust and group cohesion by providing guidance in identifying group goals and expectations of group members. By demonstrating the ability to listen to group members’ concerns and acknowledging their thoughts and feelings, the leaders serve as role models who exhibit trust in each individual, the group itself, and one another.

Our example from Bolivia: Since our faculty-led international cultural immersion trip to Bolivia takes place at the end of the spring semester, we are required to form our group during the fall semester. The group meets as a class four times throughout the spring semester, with each class being 3 hours long and meeting once monthly until we leave. Typically, our group consists of 10-12 students, with two faculty leaders. Since the students are from different counseling programs within our department, they do not always know one another. Thus, we hold a group meeting before the end of the fall semester so that each student is familiar with one another. We generally like to do this in a relaxed environment, so we schedule a group dinner at a local restaurant. In this informal setting, students introduce themselves to one another while enjoying a meal (i.e., breaking bread together). The group leaders distribute the course syllabi and answer any preliminary questions that may have arisen since students were accepted into the group. Students are instructed that more details of the trip and further questions will be answered in the first “official” class. Our experience has been that students enjoy this small preliminary gathering, and the process of forming a bond begins.

Once the spring semester begins, the group meets for the first “official” class. This initial pre-departure meeting provides further orientation and promotes exploration among group members. Group members’ attitudes toward the trip vary, with some members expressing excitement about the unknown of immersing in another culture and others expressing trepidation toward being away from loved ones, fear regarding becoming sick, or discomfort in thinking about having more limited access to the technology and conveniences of life back home. At this stage, the group leaders provide information and share their experiences of having led previous groups. This honest dialogue allows group members to combine new knowledge with their own expectations and to openly express both excitement and fear in an accepting environment. Additional pre-departure meetings allow students to research and share information about Bolivia, prepare for departure, and deepen trust in one another, the group, and the group leaders.

1.3 Transition Stage

The Transition Stage is often described as the point where group members might struggle for power and establish some form of a pecking order (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2010; Gazda, 1989; Gladding, 2008; Trotzer, 2007; Yalom, 2005). Characteristic of this stage are feelings of conflict, competition, rivalry, and division of responsibility within the group. While some group members might feel uncomfortable with conflict, it is also an opportunity for growth and development of the group. Experienced group leaders will understand that group conflict is inevitable and necessary in order for the group to move forward to the next stage of group development. During this stage, group leaders should facilitate open communication among group members, as well as open communication between the group members and group leaders. Group leaders can model how to give and receive feedback in a manner that is both professional and respectful.

Our example from Bolivia: While Bolivia is a beautiful country with equally beautiful and warm people, it is also a country that provides many challenges for group members. Extreme poverty, sanitation challenges, language, crowded conditions, lack of technological access, and unreliable transportation all combine to put external stressors on the group. Groups often move into the transition stage when faced with these and other unexpected challenges. Missed planes, changes in schedule, and sickness among group members, for instance, propelled our group out of the initial stage. When faced with such challenges, the group had to move from “thinking about” adversity to “dealing with” it. Such challenges become opportunities for increasing students’ awareness of how they cope with stress and the attitudes they hold which help to create their experience.

The group leaders at this stage continued in an accepting role, reflecting what group members were experiencing and encouraging supportive
connections among group members. Maintaining flexibility and harnessing internal resources were encouraged through direct and respectful communication, which sometimes breaks down under stress and conflict. The group leaders modeled these qualities and encouraged connections between challenges faced in the immersion setting and challenges faced in the counseling setting. These often-rich discussions allowed group members to foster an increase in empathy both toward one another and toward those they work with in the counseling setting.

1.4 Working Stage

The Working Stage is characterized as action-oriented, with increased cohesion and productivity (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2010; Gazda, 1989; Gladding, 2008; Trotzer, 2007; Yalom, 2005). As group tasks are completed and goals reached, there is an increased sense of group solidarity and cohesion. Group members’ roles have been established, and they know what to expect from one another and themselves. At this point, the group leaders’ role is to provide constructive feedback and support in continuing to meet goals.

Our example from Bolivia: When a group faces adversity and successfully navigates it, cohesiveness increases. Despite the significant challenges mentioned in the transition stage, the group was able to adjust and bond over their shared experience. Adjustments, such as holding group process in the sick person’s room to emphasize the value of all members being included, changing the schedule to stay more locally rather than traveling by bus, and making other special accommodations along the way as needed allowed the group members to develop trust in one another and those leading the group.

During this stage, group leaders often step back and hand decisions to the group to weigh options. In this way, the students themselves are empowered to participate in the construction of their own experience. Navigating such decisions increases trust and ownership of the experience, though there were times when group leaders had to make decisions themselves based on safety. An attitude of openness, however, facilitated trust and contributed to an attitude of acceptance and an increased ability to navigate adversity—qualities of the Bolivian people themselves.

1.5 Consolidation and Termination Stage (Final Stage)

The Final Stage is connoted by consolidation and termination (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2010; Gazda, 1989; Gladding, 2008; Trotzer, 2007; Yalom, 2005). Individual and group goals have been met and the group process has come to a conclusion. Group leaders at this stage should help members identify strengths and encourage their application in future experiences.

Our example from Bolivia: Daily group processing throughout the immersion experience, successfully navigating challenges, and sharing positive experiences allowed group members to move out of their comfort zones in a context of safety and support. By creating time during group processing for students to reflect and express their experience at the end of the trip, insight, awareness, and growth were further consolidated. Group members recognized that they had been changed by the experience, perhaps in ways they never imagined, and they began to ask themselves what this experience would mean moving forward. Some group members expressed a desire to learn Spanish in order to connect with the Latino population in the U.S. Others recognized self-imposed limitations and began to think bigger both about themselves and the issues they confronted during the immersion experience. Students continued to reflect on their own awareness and engagement in their home communities.

At this stage, the group leaders trusted the group process to hold and contain the members. Sharing observations regarding personal growth and change supported the translation of these new levels of awareness, knowledge, and skills to future experiences. Leaders also recognized and shared that students’ growth and processing would continue after the end of the experience itself. In this way, leaders encouraged ongoing reflection and meaning making following students’ return from the short-term study abroad. Additionally, leaders predicted that students might experience some difficulty transitioning back to their life in the United States. Leaders normalized such an experience and encouraged ongoing personal reflection to increase awareness of what such difficulty may mean. Students were encouraged to bring such experiences and reflections to the final follow-up meeting.

1.6 Follow-Up

A follow-up group session after the formal termination of the group can be invaluable for several purposes. According to Corey, Corey, and Corey (2010), a follow-up session can serve as an accountability measure, an opportunity for group members to share difficulties they’ve encountered since leaving the group, and a reminder to group members of their responsibility to take risks to become what they want to become.
Furthermore, follow-up with group members is considered a best practice set forth by ASGW standard C.3.b, which states, “Group Workers conduct follow-up contact with group members, as appropriate, to assess outcomes or when requested by a group member(s)” (Thomas & Pender, 2008).

Our example from Bolivia: Approximately one month after the group returns from Bolivia, we reconvene. The follow-up meeting is typically scheduled as a “pot-luck” gathering of group members and leaders. Group members bring with them photographs, video, and other artifacts from the trip to share with one another. During this time, members further reflect on the impact of their experience in a final group processing session. Leaders from the host country also participate in this final processing through video conferencing on Skype. Members recount memories and make meaning of their time abroad. Additionally, they turn in an assigned process paper reflecting on their experiences. This final assignment seeks to support continued reflective practice for the students and also supports reflective practice for group leaders who will be responsible for facilitating future short term study abroad experiences. Such reflective practice is consistent with standard C.2 of the ASGW Best Practice Guidelines, which states:

Group Workers attend to opportunities to synthesize theory and practice and to incorporate learning outcomes into ongoing groups. Group Workers attend to session dynamics of members and their interactions and also attend to the relationship between session dynamics and leader values, cognition and affect (p. 117).

Members also complete both quantitative and qualitative evaluations of the experience in order to inform future short-term study abroad experiences. ASGW Best Practice Guideline C.3.a recommends this process of evaluation:

Group Workers evaluate process and outcomes. Results are used for ongoing program planning, improvement and revisions of current group and=or to contribute to professional research literature. Group Workers follow all applicable policies and standards in using group material for research and reports (Thomas & Pender, 2008, p. 117).

We have found that this follow-up group meeting is an important piece for helping group members reconnect and share their experiences. Many times, the final group meeting allows group members to support one another in their difficulty re-orienting back to life in the U.S. The linking and mutual support among group members normalizes their experience of viewing themselves and the world around them differently. During this stage in the group process, leaders can support students in continuing the ongoing self-reflective practice that was catalyzed during the short-term study abroad. Students may decide that they want to maintain contact with one another and/or the hosts via in-person or virtual “reunions” or a social media group.

2. IMPORTANCE OF DAILY STRUCTURED GROUP PROCESS

Based on written feedback from group members (i.e., students) daily structured group process is a vital component to the overall success of the group experience in our short-term faculty-led study abroad trip to Bolivia. Daily structured group process is also consistent with the ASGW best-practice standard C.1 (Thomas & Pender, 2008).

Group Workers process the workings of the group with themselves, group members, supervisors or other colleagues, as appropriate. This may include assessing progress on group and member goals, leader behaviors and techniques, group dynamics and interventions; developing understanding and acceptance of meaning. Processing may occur both within sessions and before and after each session, at time of termination, and later follow up, as appropriate (p. 117).

Group members are often overwhelmed with their daily experiences and exposure in a country that has extreme poverty and lack of resources. For many, it was the first time they had been confronted with such conditions. One student shared the following:

*We were pushed out of our comfort zones, and although we discussed in our pre-trip class meetings that this would happen, I don’t think we actually knew how it would feel until we arrived. I found throughout the trip that this uneasiness would come and go. Sometimes I felt very aware we were in a foreign land, while other times I felt very comfortable.*

The evening group process meetings allow students a safe space where such changing emotions can be expressed. Students find that they are not alone and they receive support from one another.

Additionally, students receive support from our hosts in Bolivia who participate in group processing each evening. This direct cross-cultural contact in the context of an intentionally created
space for reflection supports cultural understanding from the inside out, allowing students to check assumptions and confront their own biases within the safety of a cohesive group. Such experience supports increased awareness, with implications for counseling.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING

An international cultural immersion program offers students an experiential means of encountering not only the culturally different, but also encountering themselves. Students become aware of both their privilege and their own cultural blind spots, as revealed by this student:

*It is easy to get wrapped in my cozy, privileged bubble here in the United States and forget what is happening in other parts of the world. There is suffering everywhere...*

Additionally, although students are often frustrated by the language barrier, it is our experience that they become much more aware of how connections are facilitated when they cannot rely solely on their verbal skills. Such awareness impacts students who may be anxious about their future as counselors. One student shared the following about interacting with a young child at an orphanage:

*The cool thing about children is that they speak their own language, a language of play and laughter. I did not need to know Spanish in order to develop a relationship with this child. I held him and we played together, and for an hour that day I showed him what it is like to be loved, to be cared for, to matter.*

Students must live together in close quarters and with all the possible challenges that may arise in traveling to a developing country. In doing so, they become aware of their own vulnerability and often shift from an individualistic way of thinking and acting to a more communal mode of being as they rely on one another for the most basic of needs. Being in a position of needing support during times of adversity allows students to recognize the vulnerability that clients may bring with them. These and many other rich and teaching and learning moments are processed each and every evening of the short-term study abroad experience.

In short, structured group processing is the thread, woven throughout, that ties the experience together and the glue that binds the group through it all. Although our course was titled Advanced Multicultural Counseling in Bolivia, students recommended that future classes be called Advanced Group Processes in Bolivia due to the attention and intention to group formation and group process throughout the experience. We agree and look forward to implementing their feedback on future trips.

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