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How do counselling trainees describe group process and does this change over time?

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Abstract

Personal development groups or "group processes" are used in most counselling and psychotherapy trainings, but little is understood about how trainees change in their experience and descriptions of them over time. This study collected qualitative surveys ($N = 70$) from two groups of master's students ($N = 35$), at the mid- and end point of their first year of counselling training, to find out whether their descriptions of group process changed. We used content analysis to study the most common words and phrases used by trainee counsellors to describe group process and to monitor how positive, neutral and negative their descriptions were over time. We found a significant difference in the vocabulary and the ratio of positive to negative descriptions of group process at the midpoint of term, depending on the group the trainees were assigned to, with a levelling out of vocabulary words and positive and negative descriptions over time, converging towards a 70%–80% positive point at the end of term. Our results indicate that process groups need time to develop trainees above a positive threshold, by balancing group bonding against an ability to challenge and learn from difference, because individuals and groups start at different points in relation to their readiness and capacity for personal development. Further research should explore facilitation and trainee variables, as well as the impact of process groups on students' well-being, because, while most of our students positively described the process, an important minority of students described negative experiences that were unresolved at the end of the study.

KEYWORDS
content analysis, counselling and psychotherapy, counselling training, group process, personal development groups

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1 | INTRODUCTION

It is common for student counsellors to worry about elements of their training, and nowhere is this more the case than with "process groups." Process groups are psychologically demanding, yet essential to the personal growth of the student therapist (Godward et al., 2020). The psychotherapy community was slow in realising how unstructured groups could unravel interpersonal issues between trainees, drawing unconscious psychological issues into the light to initiate self-awareness and psychological growth (Bion, 1951). Freud (1923) brought to life the psychodynamic theory of human development, that, if we are to function as healthy adults, each of us must balance the ways in which we satisfy our most basic needs with an ability to confront an uncertain and sometimes-hostile reality. It took psychotherapists more than 50 years before they understood the group to be a mechanism for prompting such growth and before process groups became an established method for training counsellors and psychotherapists (Rogers, 1971).

Implications for Practice and Policy

- Group processes balance personal experiences, group cohesion and counselling development, and facilitators should create space for counselling trainees to explore their positive and negative experiences of these.
- Positive and negative experiences of group process can both restrict and encourage learning, and facilitators should use supportive facilitation to probe into negative experiences for personal growth and challenge positive experiences that avoid difference and group tensions.
- Counselling trainees tend to describe and experience group process more similarly over time, implying that facilitators should trust the group's own process to move towards a common benefit, and should resist structuring the group based on a moment of tension or conflict in the group.
- Facilitators of group process should be trained to differentiate between group cohesion and group coherency, allowing them to assess when group relationships are being privileged over counselling develop and when conflict becomes inhibiting of growth.

2 | BACKGROUND

Carl Rogers (1971) noticed that student therapists would experience more freedom in their counselling practice after encountering and working with fellow trainees in unstructured groups. The importance of this was noticed when counselling topics such as death, anxiety, depression and psychosis were more bearable after personal growth occurred within this safe and secure group context (Rogers, 1970). It appeared to Carl Rogers that the human potential for helping and healing was realised more clearly when trainee therapists used group processes to explore themselves and their relationships with others.

Once the process group became attached to counselling and psychotherapy trainings, it did so under many names such as “personal development group,” “experiential group” and “encounter group,” being adopted by many different training organisations. Instead of Rogers' (1971) Encounter Group being the template for other psychotherapy trainings, each institution interpreted the group process within its own theory of psychological development. This is why the history of the process group varies from humanistic psychology, where counselling students gain self-awareness using safety and positive regard from group members (Rogers, 1970); to psychodynamic theory, where unstructured groups stimulate trainee therapists into awareness and insight of feelings and relationship experiences they transfer onto other people (Bion, 1951); to gestalt psychotherapy, where group members form a “psychological environment” in which personal growth comes from forming an awareness of one's whole field of experience (Parlett, 1993); and to systemic psychotherapy, where group process connects trainees to their family and cultural histories for understanding their idiosyncratic social patterns, ways of relating and ways of making meaning (Mason, 1997).

One common factor in these approaches is that process groups are forms of experiential learning whereby the group experience, by removing the structure of a lecture or a therapy session, exposes trainees to the manners in which they cope, communicate and coexist with other human beings (Kolb, 1984).

2.1 | Structure

Counselling training is intricate because it requires individuals to evolve in personal and professional domains (Haber, 1990). As such, trainees must explore their personal, social and cultural history, reflecting on the impact it has on their counselling skills (Mason, 1997). To achieve the integration of personal and professional selves, the structure of a process group varies according to the model or theory that underpins it. Three general principles seem consistent across group formats: an allotted regular time on the day of the training course, an allocated facilitator(s) who is consistent for the duration of the group, and an unstructured and open format (Godward et al., 2020). Given the importance placed on such group processes and the fact that they are usually mandatory, this is quite a vague set of criteria that understandably removes the safety of certainty from the training environment.

Some counselling courses respond to lack of a manualised approach to group process by attempting to create safety through person-centred facilitation (Rogers, 1971), while others use trainees' emotional and behavioural responses to the lack of safety for instigating self-awareness (Bion, 1951) or to use exposure to anxious and overwhelming feelings as a necessary experience for trainees to learn to tolerate uncertainty (Gould et al., 2004). Not many rule

books for these process groups have been made, but most agree that the group should remain without a structure or guiding purpose and be facilitated rather than taught, led or controlled (Godward et al., 2020). The facilitation element throws up ethical dilemmas, such as do tutors who facilitate process groups inappropriately take on a dual role with student trainees (Goodrich, 2008), maybe finding conflict in being academic tutors and group facilitators. The orientation towards having personal therapy as part of counselling training, led by Patrick (1989), is much clearer in terms of personal therapists being independent from the training organisation, but the influence of tutor-facilitated groups is not fully understood or examined in the literature. The outcome of this is that group processes persist over time in a marginally undefined way, lacking any universal structure but with the guiding principle of contributing to counselling trainees' personal and professional growth, using unstructured experiential learning (Godward et al., 2020).

2.2 | Efficacy

Evidence for the effectiveness of process groups would come from trainees testing self-awareness and counselling abilities before and after process groups and these comparing favourably to students who do not take part in such groups. This evidence is unlikely to be found given the ethical implications of removing an important part of a counsellor's training, though there is evidence that demonstrates that trainees within process groups, but without comparison groups, demonstrate an increase in self-awareness and social learning, with the unstructured format having the biggest positive effect when compared with development groups that are more structured (Kivlighan et al., 2019; Tschuschke & Greene, 2002). Studies without control groups make it difficult to distinguish between the effect of the process group and the overall effect of the training course.

Other evidence for the efficacy of process groups would be that outcomes for clients in counselling with trainees are compared with outcomes of clients seeing trainees who do not engage with process groups, but evidence of this kind is also lacking (Godward et al., 2020). If this evidence was available, we may still struggle to understand the benefits of process groups because they may rest on the quality of the student's growth rather than the number of successful outcomes (Tschuschke & Greene, 2002), and process groups are, of course, one of multiple components of counselling training.

If quantitative evidence is lacking, what other evidence would point towards the efficacy of process groups? What we have is survey evidence that reveals a mixed picture, skewed in the direction of positive experiences related to developing self-awareness, increasing counselling skills and group cohesion (Lennie, 2007). In one study, counselling and counselling psychology students were asked, towards the beginning of their training, about their experience of process groups, and trainees reported improvements in several areas: personally, linked with self-awareness, their ability to manage emotions and with gaining support; professionally, linked with understanding client perspectives and with gaining counselling skills; and socially, linked with enhancing course relationships, resolving tensions and increasing engagement with the counselling course (Moller & Rance, 2013). Another study revealed that trainee counsellors were more aware of their emotions and more able to take on feedback from peers after engaging in group process (Kline et al., 1997). One study obtained retrospective accounts from 12 qualified counsellors using semistructured interviews (Smith & Burr, 2022). The researchers found that counsellors benefited most from a Rogerian style process group, where psychological safety, respect and trust were footholds from which developing counsellors could gain validation, self-awareness and support (Smith & Burr, 2022). Looking at trainee and post-trainee experiences, other research validates these studies and shows a tendency towards a group process improving affective experiences, introspection, self-awareness, a sense of personal agency, social influence, professional identity as a counsellor and the ability to navigate social and personal difficulties (Anderson & Price, 2001; Moller & Rance, 2013; Shumaker et al., 2011; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005; Young et al., 2013).

In the available research, there is a clear trend towards some students feeling negatively impacted by process groups. This can not only relate to innocuous feelings of boredom or of wasting time but can also relate to more serious and concerning issues such as a feeling that issues of trauma are detrimentally exposed, group relationships becoming fraught and attacking, and that a lack of clarity and safety in the group prohibits sharing and constructive engagement (Rogers, 1970; Smith & Burr, 2022). Issues of shame, exposure to vulnerabilities, lack of nurturing facilitation, anxiety and uncertainty are all shown to translate into negative accounts of group processes (Anderson & Price, 2001). The research shows that outcomes such as increased self-awareness are more complex than at first sight, with one study finding that trainee counsellors became less self-aware over time, yet the authors concluded that learning more about how un-self-aware the students were was evidence for increased self-awareness (Lennie, 2007), highlighting a certain level of intricacy in what counts as a real or positive outcome within a personal development group.

The complexity of what constitutes an outcome in process groups means that many of the qualitative studies could be misleading in their interpretation of the data. This can be highlighted from some of the data extracts that Smith and Burr (2022) provide. One example is where a counsellor describes negative experiences of a group process, but in a way that seems to show some development; the counsellor in question felt it to be “stupid” and “dangerous” for them to share personal information, because, like other accounts, they may feel uncomfortable or judged by other group members (Smith & Burr, 2022, p. 243). Although, in itself, this is a negative experience, the outcome of realising the danger inherent in sharing personal stories in the context of becoming a counsellor could symbolise a learning process (Truell, 2001) and collapse the dichotomy between “negative” and “positive” outcomes in group processes, particularly where the momentary negative experience contributes to a later growth. A quantitative study involving process groups showed that groups with higher bonding have higher

satisfaction rates, but groups that have higher bonding rates counterintuitively have less impact on counselling development (Maaß et al., 2022). This suggests that positive and negative experiences may not always correlate with growth and development as a counsellor, evoking questions about how to balance personal experience and counselling development when these two aspects compete with each other. If a researcher works on the assumption that the best outcome for personal development groups is *either* group cohesion, group development *or* group satisfaction, then they may give different advice for facilitation and may evaluate the same process group as having different levels of effectiveness (Maaß et al., 2022; Moller & Rance, 2013; Shumaker et al., 2011; Smith & Burr, 2022; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005; Young et al., 2013).

2.3 | The present study

The qualitative data provide a useful insight into a moment of evaluation by trainee or qualified counsellors in relation to their experience of process groups. A limitation comes about from the static nature of these group process studies because experiences of the process groups and their associated outcomes may change over time. This study seeks to understand whether there is a change in how counselling students describe group process during and after 1 year of a master's-level counselling training. Quantifying whether shifts occur in the thinking about and experiencing of group process can offer insights into how students experience group process with time, giving us information about how positive or negative group experiences are described and unfold during a counsellor's training.

The main research questions are as follows: (1) How do counselling trainees experience and describe group process? (2) Do trainee counsellors change how they describe group process over time? (3) If trainee counsellors describe group process differently over time, what are the key differences at the mid- and end point of the groups?

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Research approach

This study used content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980), which is a research approach that changes qualitative data into quantitative data by counting the number of times a word, group of words or certain type of words occur in written documents. Content analysis was chosen to compare data across two academic terms in a statistical way, allowing the researchers to quantify any change that occurred in how trainee counsellors described group process over time. The study was comprised of two researchers, both of whom were senior lecturers in counselling and psychology at the same university in the South Midlands, UK. The researchers were qualified psychotherapists with experience of mixed methods research, and both facilitated the process groups together for each group of trainees.

3.2 | Data analysis

For the analysis, we retrieved feedback forms ($N = 70$) from trainees engaging in process groups at two intervals, the mid- and end point of one academic year (2021–2022). These data were taken from two groups of master's students undertaking their counselling training, each engaging in two terms of weekly unstructured group process, lasting for 1 hr. There was a total of 37 students, two of which did not participate in the study. Data were collated from an anonymous online survey that asked six questions about the trainees' understanding and experience of the group process and how the groups engaged with their personal and professional development:

- In your own words, please explain what the term "Group Process" means to you.
- What was your experience of Group Process?
- How did Group Process engage with your personal development?
- How did Group Process engage with your development as a counsellor?
- Group Process was an unstructured hour. What was your experience of this approach?
- Please add any other comments that you think are important to highlight.

3.3 | Procedure

Data from the two groups of trainees (group "one" and group "two") were separated for comparison purposes into Data set A (midpoint data) and Data set B (endpoint data). The reason for separating the data was to investigate whether change occurred in none of the groups, in one of the groups or in both groups, and to examine similarities and differences.

Before carrying out the analysis, we reviewed the literature on the purpose, experience and effectiveness of process groups to generate categories that would organise the data (Yoon et al., 2011). The content areas found were "understanding of group process," "personal learning and experience," "group cohesion" and "counselling skills and development." These categories were consistent across the literature and were summarised as the components of the counsellor's "Training Wheel" by Godward et al. (2020, p. 41). Drawing on research from Smith and Burr (2022) and Moller and Rance (2013), the four categories were divided into "neutral," "negative" and "positive" sections, and qualitative statements from the trainees were categorised into quantitative data sets by counting the number of positive, neutral and negative statements for each of the content categories. The value of the statement was ascertained by reviewing each word or phrase in the context of the sentence. For example, a description of group process was neutral when descriptions were factual and impartial, such as "group process is an undirected space"; negative when descriptions contextualised group process as undesirable, disagreeable or detrimental, such as "group process is uncomfortable and exposing"; and positive when descriptions were

optimistic, agreeable, affirming or constructive, such as "group process is a chance to talk and think about how we feel in a group."

To ensure reliability of the content categories, each author independently reviewed the surveys and organised the data into the content areas. Following this, both authors reviewed disagreements in categorising the data and engaged in a process of consensus building by reviewing each discrepancy and reaching an agreement for each item (Hill et al., 2005). Once consensus about the content analysis was reached, statistical data were extracted from the samples to compare and analyse the change, or lack thereof, in how the trainees described group process.

3.4 | Consent and ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the University's Research and Ethics Department. Recruitment used convenience sampling, where the study was advertised to students engaging in our master's programme. All participants gave informed consent by reading a participant information sheet and signing a consent form that permitted the use of verbatim quotes in the write-up of the study, following the British Educational Research Association's (BERA; 2018) ethical guidelines. Because participants were all students of the programme, it was important that consent was voluntary and that participation was anonymised. Once consent forms were completed, all students were provided with a link to an online questionnaire at the mid- and end point of their first-year training.

Students were informed that nonparticipation would not affect them or their studies in any way. The fact that the researchers were facilitators of the programme increased the potential for research bias, and this was mitigated by independently coding the data before testing for interrater reliability issues, having the counselling groups review the manuscript before publication, and using peer review within the university to check for alternative explanations of the findings.

4 | RESULTS: MIDTERM DATA

At the midterm, we reviewed the most common words from both groups (Table 1) and found that trainee counsellors tended to describe group process as a student-led space to think about the self, reflect on personal challenges, learn about others and share experiences.

The top 10 words were slightly different for each group, with Group 1 using the words "think," "different" and variations of the word "uncomfortable," such as "comfort" and "discomfort," more frequently. Group 2 used the words "experience," "share" and "emotion" more frequently, and these differences seemed to have a big effect on their experience (Table 2).

Trainees from Group 1 used mostly neutral descriptions, such as referring to group process as an "unstructured and student-led time for reflectivity" and a matter of "reflecting on different people's thoughts, feelings and experiences." The majority (46%) of the first group's words about understanding group process were neutral, and most of the second group's words (65%) were positive. Many phrases were shared across groups, but trainees from Group 1 tended to change these common statements in the negative direction, such as modifying the phrase "circle time" into "uncomfortable circle time" or modifying the phrase "group conversation" into "awkward group conversation." One-quarter of statements in this category showed a negative or pessimistic understanding of group process in the first group, and no negative statements were recorded in the second group.

TABLE 1 Midterm word frequencies by rank.

Group 1a: Word frequency		Group 2a: Word frequency	
Word	**Rank**	**Word**	**Rank**
Feel	1	Feel	1
Help	2	Reflect	2
Think	3	Help	3
Myself/Self	4	Experience	4
Reflect	5	Learn	5
Learn	6	Share	6
Different	7	Myself/Self	7
Space	8	Emotion	8
Un/comfortable	9	Space	9
Aware	10	Aware	10

The content analysis revealed that Group 2 described their understanding of group process with a more encouraging and enthusiastic vocabulary. Words such as "safe," "share" and "opportunity" were more frequent in Group 2's descriptions, such as adding positive words onto the phrase "to reflect on" in cases such as "an opportunity to reflect on the way the group has processed the previous lesson" and "a chance to increase self-awareness, notice what comes up or triggers me, to work out our default position and role in a group." On balance, both groups were more positive than negative about their understanding of group process, but it was clear that the groups started from polarised positions, with Group 1 tending to "think" more about "difference" and "discomfort" and Group 2 tending to "feel" and "share" their "emotional" experiences together.

4.1 | Personal experience and learning

The trainees described personal experience in positive terms (61% Group 1 and 70% Group 2), but with a significant number of negative statements also (39% Group 1 and 24% Group 2). Some experiences were positive in the sense of a situation that was awkward but resolved, making space for students' voices, or being clear, enjoyable or challenging in a way that created insight, and this happened more often in Group 2, who were less polarised in their descriptions, showing 6% neutrality in comparison with the 0% neutrality shown by members of Group 1 (Table 3).

TABLE 2 Understanding group process statements

Group 1a: Understanding group process statements		Group 2a: Understanding group process statements	
Type	Percentage	Type	Percentage
Negative	27%	Negative	0%
Neutral	46%	Neutral	35%
Positive	27%	Positive	65%

TABLE 3 Personal experience statements.

Group 1a: Personal experience statements		Group 2a: Personal experience statements	
Type	Percentage	Type	Percentage
Negative	39%	Negative	24%
Neutral	0%	Neutral	6%
Positive	61%	Positive	70%

The trainees described positive experiences as not necessarily comfortable or easy, but reported that negative, tense and awkward experiences were often transformed into personal growth: "through tension we were given the space to think reflexively and challenge our own concepts." The second group's negative personal experiences were mostly due to a lack of productivity, which was shown in comments such as, "I do feel a little underwhelmed at times" and "I'm not sure we do it right." These types of statements were connected to impatience and frustration that their group became a "battle of voices" with limited progress because "the group went off topic a lot and it became about who could talk the most rather than a discussion of the topics." In contrast to this, Group 1 experienced the process in harsher terms, using descriptions such as "intimidating" and "uncomfortable" that were not used (nor were synonyms used) by Group 2.

When vocabulary words were shared between groups, they tended to take on opposite connotations. For example, the word "difficult" was used by Group 1 in many more negative phrases, such as "I have found group process difficult. I have felt anxious sharing in the group and feeling pressure to grow." When compared with Group 2, where a representative trainee's statement was, "group process has allowed me the time to reflect on difficult subjects," a general trend developed whereby members from Group 2 tended to describe something difficult that was resolved by the process group and members from Group 1 tended to describe the process group itself as "difficult."

4.2 | Group cohesion

Statements about group cohesion were the most negative of all themes for the trainees in this study. Group 1 was significantly more negative (75% negative and 25% positive) than Group 2 (45% negative and 55% positive). The vocabulary of both groups tended to relate to the same themes: group structure, a lack of connectedness, feelings of exposure, perceived self-centredness, a lack of growth and a lack of leadership from the tutors. Comments such as, "I felt the group did not move forward really; we were stuck in group roles" and "the strong voices often overshadowed the quieter ones" were characteristics of Group 2, with Group 1 being somewhat more concerned: "a group full of aspiring counsellors can be quite daunting as they can pick you apart on things that you say so it creates a big aspect of vulnerability" (Table 4).

Trainees from Group 2 tended to describe the group as "helpful" and "supportive," "encouraging" and "engaging," and "feeling more listened to and valued by others." Conversely, Group 1 described group process as less supportive and used more words with exclusive negative connotations, as in the cases of the word "difficult" and the word "support," in which Group 1 trainees were more likely to feel "unsupported" and find the group "difficult." The highlighted keywords in the below statement are characteristics of the most common words used by Group 1 to describe group cohesion, in contrast to the statement by a member of Group 2:

> Group one: The group has **multiple big personalities** that can be very **dominating**. I have a big personality but put me in a group where it is **very exposing** and **I shrivel**.

> Group two: The group are **actively supporting** others to **engage** in the process. I have **felt** more **connected** to some of my **peers** as a result but also **feel** it's **helped** my own **learning**, **hearing** about lives different from **my own** and **thinking** how this will apply to some of the [clients] I will work with.

4.3 | Counselling skills and development

The most positive descriptions of group process were related to counselling skills and development (Table 5). Group 1 showed a 74% and Group 2 an 81% positive description of how group process impacted on the skills and abilities that were emerging in their counselling practice. Counselling techniques such as probing statements were not mentioned. Instead, trainees described their development in terms of personal changes such as increases in "confidence," "awareness" and "empathy for others":

> It **helped** me to be able to **understand** what I needed to work through in personal therapy and potentially what I find **difficult** in practice. **Helped** me to **identify triggers** and what I would find **difficult** to discuss especially in terms of sensitive subjects and being able to be open to **feelings**.

In both groups, variations on the word "reflect" ranked in the top four most used words, expressed mostly in the context of how the

TABLE 4 Group cohesion statements.

Group 1a: Group cohesion statements		Group 2a: Group cohesion statements	
Type	Percentage	Type	Percentage
Negative	75%	Negative	45%
Neutral	0%	Neutral	0%
Positive	25%	Positive	55%

TABLE 5 Counselling development statements.

Group 1a: Counselling development statements		Group 2a: Counselling development statements	
Type	Percentage	Type	Percentage
Negative	17%	Negative	0%
Neutral	9%	Neutral	19%
Positive	74%	Positive	81%

reflectiveness of group process enabled students to reduce personal barriers when counselling clients. There were no negative statements about counselling development in Group 2, but Group 1 produced more negative statements (17%).

For Group 1, the content analysis highlighted a theme around disappointment, where group process was not actively inhibiting counselling development but, in some cases, was not supporting it either. Statements ranged from group process being "not entirely useful," "I don't feel it helped a huge amount" to "I cannot see a benefit." Interestingly, similar comments made by members of Group 2 were categorised as neutral because their statements were more tentative than negative. For example, some members of Group 2 used tentative words such as "yet" to imply that there may be unforeseen benefits in the future:

> ...Not quite sure **yet**. My development as a counsellor comes from the day's **learning**, not from group process, although **this might change**, and **I am hopeful it will** and **can see how it could work**.

These findings highlight an important variation in how the two trainee groups described group process in the middle of term.

5 | RESULTS: END OF TERM

We have so far presented only the data from the first term of group process. The question we wish to answer in this section is, do counselling students describe group process differently over time?

The data collected from the end of the trainees' first year reveal a definitive answer of "yes" to this question, and in some significant respects.

TABLE 6 End-of-term word frequencies.

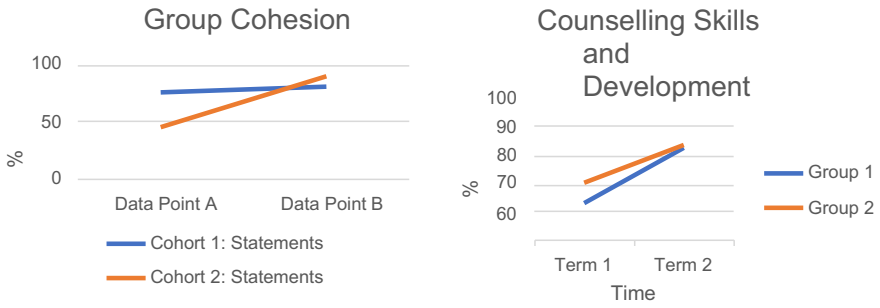
Group 1b: Word frequency		Group 2b: Word frequency	
Word	Rank	Word	Rank
Feel	1	Feel	1
Think	2	Reflect	2
Myself/Self	3	Myself/self	3
Help	4	Think	4
Reflect	5	Others	5
Understand	6	Help	6
Experience	7	Space	7
Un/comfortable	8	Learn	8
Learn	9	Skills	9
Develop	10	Personal	10

After one academic year, many of the most frequent words used to describe group process had changed in both groups (Table 6). We found that Group 1 increased in positive descriptions, using the word "think" at the same rate as in the first term, but the word "emotion" twice as many times. Group 2 declined in positive descriptions, using the word "emotion" at the same rate as in Term 1, but the word "think" twice as many times. A crucial finding was that positive and negative descriptions became more similar and uniform in the second term at the same time as words such as "think" and "emotion" were used at similar rates in both groups.

5.1 | Understanding group process and personal experience

Group 1 showed a significant decrease in the percentage of negative statements, from 27% to 5%, and an increase in the percentage of positive statements, from 27% to 37%, in relation to their understanding of group process. On the contrary, Group 2 showed a significant decrease in the percentage of positive statements and an increase in negative statements, from 0% to 8% negative, and from 65% to 44% positive. We found a rise in the words "challenging," "learn," "skills" and "development" across the groups, with Group 1 increasing their use of the words "experience," "understanding" and "develop" and Group 2 increasing their use of the words "personal" and "skills." This means that the trainee counsellors in both groups were speaking less about learning, skills and development at the middle of term than at the end of term.

We noticed that Group 1 showed a clear absence of negative adjectives that were used previously, such as "uncomfortable" and "awkward," to describe their understanding of group process, cementing their more neutral and positive understanding of group process over time. The first group's neutral statements increased from 27% to 58%, and the increase in positive descriptions was found in words such as "opportunity" or "chance," the verbs "help"



GRAPH 1 (a) and (b) Group cohesion and counselling development statements.

or "allow" and value judgements such as "important" and "useful," which were more characteristic of Group 2 in the first term. Trainees in Group 2 were still more likely to attach positive attributions to their understanding of the group process, meaning that the change did not indicate a complete reversal of experience, say, from positive to negative, but a general pull towards a common centre of experience.

5.2 | Group cohesion and counselling skills

We learned from the data in Term 1 that group cohesion was described as the most negative aspect of the group process, and this remained true at the end of the year, although Group 1 remained reasonably similar in its negative statements (from 75% to 80% negative), while Group 2 became significantly more negative (from 45% to 89% negative).

Graph 1a,b shows that as the groups began to describe group cohesion more negatively, they described skills and development more positively, cancelling out the polarity of their initial starting point. This was linked to a significant rise in the words "conflict," "challenge," "learn," "skills" and "development" across the data, which may indicate that challenging experiences became essential to personal learning and development. In Group 2, for example, many of the challenging aspects of being a group member were highlighted as essential for growth:

> "I have **developed** as a person through the process. I've **learnt** that it's ok to **challenge**, it's **good** to bring up the elephant in the room, that working with, and **exploring** other people's narratives isn't easy."

> "I see the **value** in it, I would describe myself as **tolerating** it rather than **enjoying** it. I **felt** it was necessary and pushed me to **grow** at a pace relevant to the speed of the training."

The increase in descriptions of challenge and conflict mirrored an increase in descriptions of learning, skills and development for both trainee groups. Their more uniform descriptions were linked to implicit disagreements about the optimum levels of challenge and conflict, for example, shown in contradicting statements by trainees who "found it easier to sit and observe or even withdraw entirely than address conflict," who found that "the group shied away from conflict" and who found that "the tutor should have managed the conflict within the group." An implication from this is that process groups may start off at rather polarised points, being positive or negative in their descriptions of the training method, but the difference over time may be smaller than assumed at first sight and even out as process groups develop.

6 | DISCUSSION

We have shown that counselling trainees describe group process differently according to the group they are assigned to and the timing of the feedback on their training journey. The vocabulary used by trainees to describe group process changes across time and groups, and the degree to which descriptions are negative, neutral and positive varies within the group and across academic terms, appearing to converge to a common centre of experience. Most students report that they positively understand, experience and learn from group process, affirming several findings from existing literature, such as that trainees experience group process as an opportunity to focus on important emotions (Kline et al., 1997), gain insight, empathy and communication skills (Ieva et al., 2009), achieve personal growth, awareness and insight (Furr & Carroll, 2003) and develop greater sensitivity to the needs of others (Cerio, 1979; Kivlighan et al., 2019).

Our findings also affirm research that demonstrates polarities in student experiences (Lennie, 2007). While previous studies have privileged group cohesion for positive group outcomes (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), our findings offer a more nuanced picture. Positive experiences remained high across both groups, but a decrease in positivity and a decline in positive statements about group cohesion did not appear to impact counselling development. Our uncharacteristic findings may be explained by Hornsey et al. (2009), who suggest a lack of "definitional clarity," in which many researchers define group cohesion as "just about anything" that group members experience as positive (Hornsey et al., 2009).

In thinking about our definition of group cohesion, we drew from Burlingame et al.'s (2011) study, which differentiates between group cohesion and task cohesion. In our study, group members described an ability to work effectively together towards the task of personal development, despite factors generally associated with low group cohesion also being described, such as

feelings of discomfort and conflict. Our data suggest that factors such as conflict can facilitate outcomes potentially unobtainable through group cohesion alone, including assertiveness, confidence and the ability to challenge. This fits with Nitsun (2014), who argues that "destructive forces" are necessary for group members to fulfil their potential.

Another influence on our analysis comes from Ezquerro (2010), who forms a distinction between group cohesion and group coherency, whereby cohesion is seen as those bonds between group members that may limit the growth they can facilitate, since being cohesive is to deny differences in perspectives, challenges and conflict. In contrast, coherency comes about when group members can communicate previously denied aspects of themselves and accept their conflict and differences in relation to one another. Ezquerro's (2010) frame helps to analyse our data, which shows that positive descriptions of group cohesion reduce when counselling development remains and increases in the positive direction. An interpretation of the change in negative descriptions of cohesion is that the groups moved towards greater coherency, which allowed room for difference, challenge and conflict to instigate learning (Ezquerro, 2010, p. 504). A further support for this conclusion is that, at the end of term, the vocabulary of both groups increasingly included more growth words such as "understanding," "development," "skills" and "learning."

We found that the first group's statements were more aligned with the second group's statements at the end of the year. An important minority of trainees continued to feel emotionally exposed and lacking in progress, which may be down to the inherent impossibility of balancing learning and development trajectories for multiple students, individual student factors such as extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness (Peeters et al., 2006), facilitation styles and group size (Burlingame et al., 2011), but, overall, the majority of trainees described group process as an important contribution to their counselling development.

7 | IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Our data suggest that the task of a group process is to strike a healthy balance between group cohesion and group coherency, which means balancing the bonding of the group with an ability for trainees to challenge one another, name and attend to differences, and learn from the responses evoked by this process. Despite a tendency for groups to move towards a centralised experience, large differences remained at the extremes, and it is not obvious how a group leader can facilitate an environment in which all members of a group process develop equally, or if this is even desirable. Attempts to achieve this would ignore the different points of development from which members enter the group. This realisation is helpful for the group facilitator who may be concerned about conflict, group fragmentation and trauma, to learn from our findings that some trainees report that conflict can be beneficial, and even necessary, for individual and group development, particularly for building associated skills. However, the group facilitator must monitor the level of conflict, being sure it does not fall beyond a level at which group cohesion is detrimentally impacted, using a supportive facilitation approach that proactively creates space for students who are feeling stuck in unhelpful group dynamics (Smith & Burr, 2022).

8 | LIMITATIONS

A limitation of our study is that the views of trainee counsellors were collected at the mid- and end point of two academic terms, or 22 weeks, posing several issues in interpreting the data. There are currently no formal standards for running process groups, and there is no agreed optimum duration for group processes to facilitate learning outcomes, meaning our data may be incomplete. The second data set was collected at the end of one academic year, and this time frame may not relate to the maximal development for group processes, creating some uncertainty as to whether our data expose something about groups in general, groups lasting for 22 weeks, or only something about these two specific groups.

A second limitation is that, although group cohesion has been discussed in some detail, we did not ask a specific question about group cohesion. This may have biased the kinds of responses students gave about their relationships with other group members. For instance, if statements about group cohesion were mostly given in response to questions about learning, then these statements may have been more likely to be negative because students may have been more likely to identify ways in which other members inhibited their learning. Our finding that statements about group cohesion became more negative over time is therefore limited to "statements about" group cohesion and cannot make claims about the "actual" group cohesion experienced by our trainees.

9 | FURTHER RESEARCH

Our findings highlight that further research should pay attention to individual experiences and well-being during group process. Although we found that challenges and difficulties within the group tended to be growth-promoting, it is necessary to monitor the extent of the negative experiences that persisted and consider how facilitation styles and individual differences may impact students' tolerance for conflict and engagement within the group (Burlingame et al., 2011). Identifying social factors such as age, ethnicity, gender and sexuality may therefore be a useful starting point, and studying differences in personal characteristics, mental health factors and past experiences with group development processes could be crucial to understanding our data.

Another factor to consider is that our study did not monitor the impact of group size on descriptions of group process. Burlingame et al. (2011) have shown that group size correlates with cohesion in therapy groups, but what is less clear is how group size impacts learning outcomes, not simply whether learning takes place, but what

kind of learning takes place and what kind of learning is desirable in order to develop competent counsellors. Burlingame et al. (2011) propose that the optimum size of groups for enabling cohesion is between 5 and 9, but further research could investigate whether larger groups, such as the groups in this study ($N = 17$ and 20), therefore inhibit outcomes or simply facilitate types of outcomes unrelated to cohesion, such as group coherency.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS STATMENT

The authors declare no competing interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at https://doi.org/10.24339/3f86951e-876e-45b5-a6db-c8bccdf50d81.

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