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John M. Laux, Jennifer B. Smirnoff, Martin H. Ritchie and Wendy S. Cochrane

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# The Effect of Type of Screening on the Satisfaction of Students in Experiential Counseling Training Groups

John M. Laux

*University of Toledo*

Jennifer B. Smirnoff

*Children's Safe Harbor, Toledo, Ohio*

Martin H. Ritchie

Wendy S. Cochran

*University of Toledo*

Students' participation in training groups as a function of enrollment in a group counseling course is almost a universal requirement in counselor education programs. The skill of screening for group membership is an essential component to the development of effective group leadership. Guided by the functional theoretical perspective, this study investigated the role that type of screening (verbal or written) plays in determining student satisfaction with the group and the group counseling class in general, the degree of satisfaction with the groups' success and goal attainment, and the composition of the group membership. The results suggest that both types of screening methods produce neutral to favorable responses; however, students screened using face-to-face verbal screening methods reported significantly greater satisfaction with the group and the group counseling course. Specifically, students screened using the face-to-face verbal method reported that their groups were more successful and reached their goals to a greater degree than those screened using a written approach.

**Keywords:** *group counseling; screening; group dynamics; psychotherapy groups; counselor education; counselor trainees*

Wittenbaum and others (2004) described the functional approach to groups as a set of theories that explain, predict, and improve group performance. At the core of functional theories are those attributes that produce

**Authors' Note:** Correspondence concerning this article may be directed to John Laux at the University of Toledo, MS 119, HHS 2225, 2801 W. Bancroft Street, Toledo, OH 43606, or to [John.Laux@utoledo.edu](mailto:John.Laux@utoledo.edu).

significant outcomes and help the group to achieve its goals (Pavitt, 1994). Attention is focused on the traits and qualities of groups' leadership, specifically, the behaviors that promote group functioning (Benne & Sheets, 1948; Poole, Hollingshead, McGrath, Moreland, & Rohrbaugh, 2004; Wittenbaum et al., 2004). Much of the research focus has been on those attributes, traits, and qualities evidenced once a group has been formed and is functionally active. However, Hirokawa (1994), considered by Pavitt to be the most important of the functional researchers, outlined several activates, called *critical decisions*, the performance of which produces positive group outcomes such as effectiveness and member satisfaction. One of these functions leads to group members' thorough understanding of the purpose and function of the group. A second important function is for the group leader to influence, when possible, external factors, such as the group's initial composition, a function believed to influence group performance (Wittenbaum et al., 2004).

A reasonable hypothesis, grounded on functional theory, is that pregroup leadership activities such as screening, where the leader clearly outlines the purpose of the group and carefully constructs the group's composition, are associated with group members' satisfactions and ratings of group. Screening is recognized as an important step in the formation of counseling groups (Capuzzi & Gross, 2002; G. Corey, 2004; Yalom, 1995), and screening is of benefit to group facilitators and prospective group participants. Screening orients prospective members about a group's process, rules, and goals. And screening allows group leaders to ensure that group members will benefit from the group experience, are ready to contribute to the group process, and understand the expectations of group counseling (Gladding, 2003; Miller, 1987). According to Couch (1995), pregroup screening involves identifying the needs, expectations, and commitment of potential group members and challenging any myths or misperceptions they may have about the purpose of the group or the group process.

The importance of screening in groups is reflected in the learned societies. For example, the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics states,

Counselors screen prospective group counseling/therapy participants. To the extent possible, counselors select members whose needs and goals are compatible with goals of the group, who will not impede the group process, and whose well-being will not be jeopardized by the group experience. (ACA, 2005, §A.8.a.)

Furthermore, according to the Association for Specialists in Group Work's (ASGW) "Best Practice Guidelines,"

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. (ASGW, 1998, §A.7.a.)

Most counselor education programs include an experimental group lab as part of their entry-level training. The ASGW, in its *Professional Standards for the Training of Group Workers* (2000), recommended that this group experience occur during a group counseling class. Typically, students are divided into small groups and meet once a week during the semester under the supervision of an instructor or doctoral student (Anderson & Price, 2001; Forester-Miller & Duncan, 1990). The purpose of the group experience is for counseling students to experience, firsthand, what it is like to be in a group as a member and as a leader, to experience the group dynamics, and to learn effective group techniques by practicing them in the group (M. S. Corey & Corey, 2006; Furr & Barret, 2000). Although the importance of screening is supported by theory, it is unclear if participation in the screening process is typical in training groups. Screening counseling students might help orient them to the group experience and allow them to indicate topics or issues they want to work on. This information can be used to assign them to smaller groups with others who share their concerns. Screening might also identify students who are not ready for or committed to the group experience. Finally, by experiencing screening from a participant's perspective, students may recognize the value of this skill on a personal level, which in turn may increase the likelihood that they will incorporate its use when conducting their own groups.

Preparing and pretraining members for group counseling has been shown to effect group participation, cohesion, and satisfaction (Hilkey, Wilhelm, & Horne, 1982; Smith & Banaka, 2001). Screening of group members has been shown to relate directly to the effectiveness of groups (DeLucia-Waack, 1997) and to the satisfaction of group members (Couch, 1995; Hilkey et al., 1982). Members who express interest in a group by attending screening sessions or pregroup sessions are more likely to participate and benefit from the group (Capuzzi & Gross, 2002). Therefore, if counseling students are screened as part of their group counseling experience, it might affect their satisfaction with the group experience.

The importance of screening prospective group members is underscored by professional ethical standards and the opinion of the leaders in group

counseling education (M. S. Corey & Corey, 2006; Gladding, 2003; Miller, 1987; Ritchie & Huss, 2000). The individual, face-to-face verbal interview is the most preferred type of screening because this method allows for the group leader to provide important information about group norms and expectations and for the prospective member to ask and have answered any pertinent questions (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 2002). However, individual, face-to-face verbal screens are time-consuming and may not be feasible in all cases. If interviewing is not feasible, then the use of a screening questionnaire is recommended (G. Corey, 2004). Although the literature demonstrates the benefit of screening in general, little is known about the impact of different types of screening methods. Recent research investigating the impact of group members' perceptions of their group experience (Pan & Lin, 2004) indicates that group members who judge their group counselor as competent, attractive, and trustworthy also rate their group experience as successful. Pan and Lin (2004) further discovered that hope and the "instillation of hope" (p. 185) were the most important and most strongly correlated therapeutic factors with group members' ratings of positive group experiences. It is reasonable to expect that the individual, face-to-face verbal interview, a more intense and more personal screening method, provides greater opportunity for prospective members to form positive and favorable impressions of group leaders and therefore greater hope for favorable group outcomes than might occur when a written screen is employed. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to test the hypothesis that students screened for group inclusion via face-to-face verbal screening procedures would be more satisfied with their group experience than students screened for group inclusion via written screening procedures.

## Method

### Sample

Fifty-five graduate students enrolled in Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)-accredited counseling programs' group counseling courses housed in two midwestern universities were recruited by the faculty instructors to participate in this study. All students agreed to participate. The sample included 9 (15%) males and 52 (85%) females. Fifty-four (98%) students were European American and 1 (2%) was African American.

## Procedures

Students were informed during the first meeting of the class that they were required to participate in a group experience. Students were given the option of participating in a group composed of their peers and facilitated by a counseling doctoral graduate assistant during scheduled course time or participating in another noncourse-related group experience of their choosing. All students opted to participate in a group associated with the course and signed written consents to participate in the group and this study. Following the discussion about the course expectations, a lecture was presented on the importance of screening potential participants for membership in a group and the types of screening procedures. Students were then randomly divided into one of two screening conditions: face-to-face verbal or written. The students assigned to the face-to-face verbal screening group were individually interviewed by either the instructor or a counseling doctoral graduate assistant. Students in the written screening group were administered a prescreening questionnaire developed for this study with instructions to complete the questionnaire and turn it in to the instructor as they left class. The face-to-face verbal screening questions were identical to those asked on the written prescreening questionnaire (Jacobs et al., 2002).

On the basis of the data gathered in the screening process, students were assigned to groups according to similarity of interests. For example, one group's focus was stress management. Forester-Miller and Duncan (1990) suggest that groups are more authentic when conducted by someone other than the faculty member responsible for assigning final grades. Additionally, the ethical guidelines for the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) suggest that faculty should take care to eliminate potential role conflicts when training programs conduct counseling experiences where students may potentially reveal intimate self-disclosure (ACES, 1993). Therefore, each group was monitored by a doctoral-level graduate assistant who was previously trained in group counseling. At the last class meeting of the semester, students provided data about their satisfaction with the course in general and with the group process in particular.

## Measures

*Group screening questionnaire.* A prescreen questionnaire was created for this study. A review of the literature (G. Corey, 2004; Halfhill, Sundstrom, Lahner, Calderone, & Nielsen, 2005; Jacobs et al., 2002; McLeod & Kettner-Polley, 2004) guided the questionnaire item selection process.

Specifically, we asked students to indicate, in narrative fashion, their response to the following seven open-ended questions: How much, if any, experience do you have facilitating or cofacilitating group? How much, if any, experience do you have participating in a group? What are some suggestions that you have for a focus for the group in which you will participate? What is the best way to provide positive and constructive feedback to you? Is there anyone with whom you would not want to be in a group? What do you think you can contribute to the group? What are your expectations for this group?

*Group satisfaction questionnaire.* Influenced by Hirokawa's (1994) work, the researchers developed a questionnaire to assess the participants' satisfaction with the course in general and the group specifically. Participants provided answers to the questions by responding to a Likert-type scale of 1 to 10 (*strongly negative* to *strongly positive*). These seven questions were the following: How satisfied were you with the group experience? To what degree did the screening process at the beginning of class influence your satisfaction with the group experience? What was your overall level of satisfaction with the group-counseling course (including the group and the lecture)? To what degree do you feel that your participation in the group screening process contributed to the group composition? To what degree do you feel that your participation in the group screening process contributed to the group goal? To what degree do you feel that your participation in the group screening process contributed to the group's success? To what degree do you feel prepared to conduct screening procedures for groups you may facilitate in the future?

## Results

Cronbach's alpha was calculated on the data from the satisfaction questionnaire. This analysis produced an internal consistency estimate of .86, suggesting that the items were measuring similar constructs. To further test for homogeneity, the satisfaction questionnaire's seven items were subjected to principal-components exploratory factor analysis. This analysis produced two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 (3.89 and 1.08). These factors accounted for 71% of the total variance in this sample. A review of the component matrix indicates that Factor 1 was composed of Items 1 to 6 and Factor 2 was composed solely of Item 7. Taken together, the results of the internal consistency estimates and factor analysis suggest that the satisfaction

**Table 1**  
**Descriptive Data, *t*-test Analyses, and Effect Sizes for**  
**Oral Versus Written Screening Groups**

Question	Oral Screen Group			Written Screen Group			<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> Value	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>X</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>X</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range			
Eval 1	9.1	1.3	5-10	7.4	2.1	2-10	4.8	.001	.97
Eval 2	6.6	2.9	0-10	4.4	2.2	2-10	5.01	.001	.86
Eval 3	8.6	1.5	5-10	7.3	2.3	2-10	4.0	.01	.67
Eval 4	7.1	2.0	2-10	5.6	2.8	0-10	3.5	.001	.62
Eval 5	7.3	1.8	2-10	5.1	2.5	0-8	5.5	.001	1.01
Eval 6	7.5	1.4	5-10	5.0	2.5	0-8	6.5	.001	1.23
Eval 7	8.1	1.6	3-10	7.1	1.8	3-10	2.8	.01	.59

Note: Oral *n* = 28; written *n* = 27. Eval = evaluation.

questionnaire was a relatively reliable and internally consistent instrument. Descriptive statistics were calculated for each group evaluation questionnaire item. Student *t* tests were calculated to determine if group differences existed between students who received the oral screen and those who completed the written screen on each of the seven items of the satisfaction questionnaire. The results of these *t* tests can be found on Table 1. To aid in the interpretation of group differences, Cohen (1992) suggested that researchers calculate effect sizes. Cohen's rubric for interpreting effect sizes is as follows: An effect size of .80 or larger is considered large, .50 to .79 is medium, and .20 to .49 is considered small. Based on this system, the differences between the interview screen groups and the written screen group on final course evaluation Questions 1, 2, 5, and 6 are considered high; the differences on Questions 3, 4, and 7 are considered medium.

## Discussion

The functional approach to group theory posits that group leadership is an important determinant to groups' successful functioning and members' satisfaction with their group experience. Hirokawa (1994) argued that leaders should work to help improve group members' understanding of the purpose and function of the group as well as manage the formulation of the group's composition. This theory tested the hypothesis that the leader behavior of conducting face-to-face verbal screening of group members



would produce greater satisfaction with the group experience than would a written screen. The results of the present study support this hypothesis. The scores of the students in the face-to-face verbal screening group were significantly higher (indicating greater satisfaction) than the students in the written screen group for all seven questions of the group satisfaction questionnaire. The students in the face-to-face verbal screening group reported that they thought the screening process at the beginning of class influenced their satisfaction with the group experience significantly more than the written screen group. Students in the face-to-face verbal screening group also reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction with the group counseling course in general. Additionally, the face-to-face verbal screening group indicated that they felt that their participation in the group screening process contributed to the group's composition, the group's goal, and the group's success significantly more so than the written screen group. The face-to-face verbal screening group also reported feeling significantly more prepared to conduct screening procedures for groups they may facilitate in the future.

More specifically, both the face-to-face verbal screening group (Item 1 mean = 9.1) and written screen group (Item 1 mean = 7.4) reported that they were satisfied with the group experience. However, the face-to-face verbal screening group reported being significantly more satisfied the group experience than the written screen group.

Question 2 of the group satisfaction questionnaire was, "To what degree did the screening process at the beginning of class influence your satisfaction with the group experience?" In response to this question, the face-to-face verbal screening group reported an above-average level of satisfaction ( $X = 6.6$ ), and the written screen group reported just below average with a mean of 4.4, indicating a neutral response to the question. The difference between the two groups was significant.

Question 3 of the group satisfaction questionnaire was, "What was your overall level of satisfaction with the group-counseling course (including the group and the lecture)?" Both the face-to-face verbal ( $X = 8.6$ ) and the written screen group ( $X = 7.3$ ) reported high levels of satisfaction. However, the face-to-face verbal screening group's level of satisfaction was significantly higher than the written screen group.

The face-to-face verbal screening group ( $X = 7.1$ ) reported a significantly higher level of satisfaction than the written screen group in response to Question 4 of the group satisfaction questionnaire, "To what degree do you feel that your participation in the group screening process contributed to the group composition?" The written screen group's response to Question 4

indicated a neutral response ( $X = 5.6$ ), whereas the face-to-face verbal screening group reported satisfaction.

Question 5 of the group satisfaction questionnaire was, "To what degree do you feel that your participation in the group screening process contributed to the group goal?" The face-to-face verbal screening group ( $X = 7.3$ ) reported to be satisfied that participation in the group screening process contributed to the group goal, whereas the written screen group ( $X = 5.1$ ) reported to be neutral. The difference between the two groups was significant.

In response to Question 6 of the group satisfaction questionnaire, the face-to-face verbal screening group ( $X = 7.5$ ) reported to be satisfied that participation in the group screening process contributed to the group's success. The written screen group ( $X = 5.0$ ) reported a neutral response to Question 6. There was a significant difference between the two groups.

Question 7 of the group satisfaction questionnaire was, "To what degree do you feel prepared to conduct screening procedures for groups you may facilitate in the future?" Both the face-to-face verbal screening group ( $X = 8.1$ ) and the written screen group ( $X = 7.1$ ) indicated high satisfaction in response to Question 7. Once again, the difference between the groups was significant.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study support Hirokawa's (1994) supposition and suggest that an oral screening process, when compared to written screening procedures, produces greater satisfaction among graduate students participating in experiential groups that are part of the group counseling course in counselor training programs. Although both students in the verbal and written screen groups were generally satisfied with their group experience, students who participated in face-to-face verbal screening procedures were more satisfied with the group counseling course as a whole and were particularly more satisfied with various aspects of the experiential group. Although it is recommended that some form of appropriate screen is conducted when forming a counseling group, the results of this study indicate that face-to-face verbal screening procedures lead to increased student satisfaction with the experiential counseling groups and group counseling courses. The results of this study also indicate that the face-to-face verbal screening group procedures positively influence students' perception of the group's success as well as students' perceptions of being able to lead groups in the future.

## Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Although the study sample was representative of counseling students in the counseling programs at the universities where the study was conducted, the results of the study are limited to similarly constructed participant groups. Another limitation of this study is the fact that the satisfaction questionnaire used was created specifically for the purpose of this study. Although the final course evaluation showed evidence of internal consistency reliability and construct validity, the instrument needs further use and testing.

The fact that the screening procedures conducted in this research study were not created to exclude group members is another potential limitation of the study. The oral and written screens conducted for this study were real in the sense that they helped to determine group composition, but the screening procedures were not meant to exclude any students from participating in the group experience. This being noted, it is interesting that the oral screen group still reported greater satisfaction with the group experience. The oral screening process may also lead to satisfaction with the group experience in other types of groups where members are not excluded, such as court-ordered groups and groups in correctional settings, school settings, and inpatient treatment centers. A recommendation for future research is to test the effect of the interview screen with members of such groups. Future researchers may also want to examine how individual interview screening procedures compare to screening procedures other than written, such as screening via referral, group screening sessions, or preliminary group sessions.

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**John M. Laux** is an assistant professor in the Department of Counselor Education and School Psychology at the University of Toledo. His interests include counselor education, personality disorders, and assessment.

**Jennifer B. Smirhoff** is a clinical therapist at Children's Safe Harbor in Toledo, Ohio. She also serves as adjunct faculty at the University of Toledo. Her interests include counselor education and supervision as well as counseling children coping with a variety of clinical issues, including attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, feeding disorders, parental divorce, disruptive behavior disorders, pervasive developmental disorders, anxiety, and depression.

**Martin H. Ritchie** is a professor in the Department of Counselor Education and School Psychology at the University of Toledo. His research interests include effectiveness of group counseling in schools, peer influences, and legal and ethical issues.

**Wendy S. Cochrane**, NCSP, is an assistant professor and coordinator of the School Psychology Program at the University of Toledo. Her research interests include system-level consultation and organizational change, treatment integrity in school-based interventions, and supervision and training issues in the field of school psychology.