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Standards of Care for Research in Group Work

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ABSTRACT

The Standards of Care for Research in Group Work were developed in partnership between the Association for Assessment in Research in Counseling (AARC) and the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW). The purpose of these standards is to highlight empirically validated and literature-supported practices for conducting research in group work, as there are methodological and design considerations that are unique to group work research. These include, but are not limited to, small sample sizes that are often inherent in group work, the dependence of variables when measured in a group setting, historical lack of empirical rigor in group work research, and the need for theoretical and methodological congruence in qualitative research. During the development of this document, the committee used extant research standards to guide and center our efforts, and it was our intent for these standards to be used in conjunction with other established research standards. We also recognized the need to emphasize quantitative and qualitative research guidelines to encompass the importance of both types of research in the counseling field; and to highlight the importance of recognition and attention to concerns related to conducting group work research with participants from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds.

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Introduction

Groupwork Researchers:

- a. Consult relevant Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) materials before constructing research to ensure appropriate standards of care and base knowledge of the group work environment. These include:
 - i. ASGW's *Best Practice Guidelines* (Thomas & Pender, 2008),
 - ii. *Multicultural and Social Justice Competence Principles for Group Workers* (Singh et al., 2012), and
 - iii. *Professional Standards for Training of Group Workers* (Wilson et al., 2000).
- b. Consult relevant professional standards, including the American Counseling Association (ACA) *Code of Ethics* (2014), and related research standards sponsored

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by the Association for Assessment and Research in Counseling (AARC). Groupwork Researchers also infuse relevant research and ethical content that must be attended to by researchers. Utilize an appropriate ethical decision-making model throughout the research process. Appropriate consultations, including any required notifications to appropriate institutional review boards, occur when ethical concerns arise as part of the research process.

- c. Consult other specialty standards or ethical codes (e.g., American Mental Health Counselors Association, American School Counselor Association) to ensure that they have specialty area and context-based issues expertise in constructing their research protocols (Goodrich & Luke, 2017). Consulting with additional specialty standards or ethical codes can also ensure researchers respond in culturally and developmentally responsive ways to the communities they are researching (Hays & Singh, 2012).
- d. Ensure that counselors implement appropriate and culturally relevant protocols when researching with members of vulnerable and culturally marginalized groups, noting that not all Western norms or cultural values are universal. Researchers should recognize how some communities have been historically marginalized and oppressed through the research process and intentionally address this in their research protocols.
- e. Explore the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) to familiarize themselves with current information related to relevant clinical and research practice. and clearly communicate to subjects the experimental and untried nature of the intervention(s) when researching experimental and untested models of group work. Group members should be provided alternative models if they do not wish to engage in untested or experimental models (Goodrich & Luke, 2017). Researchers should endeavor to ensure that they do not penalize non-consenting members for their nonparticipation.
- f. Appropriately address the assumptions of the research interventions and methodologies that they employ. Standard practices involve ensuring all methodological and theoretical assumptions are met when designing the protocols of the study. When not all assumptions can be met, this should be specifically addressed in the manuscript's limitations section. In particular, quantitative researchers should attend to the assumption of independence of observations while considering the context of research addressing group variables (McCarthy et al., 2017).

Review of Existing Literature

Groupwork Researchers:

- a. Are aware of the development and changes in best practice guidelines in group work (originally published in 1998; revised in 2008) with the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) and are intentional in staying current with group work best practices.
- b. Recognize and highlight the various specializations within group work, including, but not limited to: task groups, group psychoeducation, group counseling, and group psychotherapy.
- c. Understand the importance of using empirically supported models and interventions in group work research.

- d. Recognize the historical oppression of non-dominant identities (i.e., persons of color, LGBTGEQIAP+ persons, persons with disabilities, persons experiencing poverty) in research and how future research can be conducted in culturally-sensitive ways.
- e. Are aware of the development and assessment of culturally-sensitive instruments throughout literature, noting the importance of norming on the population of study participants.
- f. Are aware of the gaps in the literature regarding multiculturalism and social justice issues in group work research and are intentional in producing research focused on these groups (i.e., diverse affectional and gender identities, persons with disabilities).
- g. Empirically investigate experiential groups of extant literature and explore both process and outcome of group work.

Identification of Research Questions

Groupwork Researchers:

- a. Establish relationships with cultural partners and conduct comprehensive needs assessments to construct relevant and culturally-sensitive research questions.
- b. Are intentional in co-developing culturally sensitive research questions with group and community members with the purpose of social change and advocacy.
- c. Aim to engage with and build upon the research conducted by and with professional group work practitioners/clinicians.
- d. Are congruent with their epistemological position, research questions, and method.
- e. Develop research questions that are non-stigmatizing, holistic, multisystemic, and dynamic.
- f. Honor and empower vulnerable populations by considering language differences and cultural practices while constructing research questions.
- g. Protect the safety and welfare of research participants while constructing research questions.
- h. Identify research questions that focus on Black, Indigenous, and Persons of color (BIPOC), persons with non-dominant affectional, sexual, gender identities and expressions, and other historically and culturally marginalized groups.
- i. Are intentionally aware of power dynamics and differences between the researcher(s) and potential participants while developing research questions and how those questions and subsequent design may impact group participants.

Research Design

Groupwork Researchers:

- a. Recognize inherent sample size restrictions in group research, and work to mitigate challenges. For example, ensuring effective interventions through pilot studies, conducting a priori power analyses, and using repeated measures and metaanalysis designs (Sink & Mvududu, 2010).

- b. Recognize inherent clustering of data in group work research (dependence of observations), and work to decrease Type I error inflation by reporting both the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) and a design effect of the study.
- c. Recognize that if Type I error corrections are not implemented, researchers must note this as a limitation of their study.
- d. Are aware of the risk of Type II error in nested designs and attend to those risks accordingly.
- e. Recognize the challenges in implementing random assignment of participants within group work research and use control variables to account for preexisting differences among group members when necessary.
- f. Make efforts to conduct rigorous experimental designs within group work by considering cluster randomized studies, where assigning entire groups to conditions instead of individual group members is a possibility (Whiston & Campbell, 2010).
- g. Recognize the reliance on self-report in group work research, and work to strengthen data collection methods, by supplementing research with observational data (i.e., reports, coding schemes) and other methods.
- h. Recognize the critical importance of measurement model selection, which should occur before item construction, including the Rasch Model, formative and reflective measurement models such as, but not limited to 2-PL, 3-PL, and polytomous item response theory (IRT) models (Willse, 2017).
- i. Understand the complexity of data structures and research questions in group work and consider addressing nested data through multilevel methods (e.g., multilevel regression, multilevel analysis, hierarchical linear modeling) when deemed appropriate.
- j. Consider the implications of using social network theory and analysis as an additional methodology for task and process group research.
- k. Understand the impact of rigorous qualitative methodologies in sharing participant voices, experiences, and narratives while also being cautious of the power behind the assumption that the researcher is “giving participants a voice,” as this framework suppresses the very voices researchers are seeking to amplify, further oppressing historically marginalized populations.
- l. Recognize that qualitative methodologies (e.g., grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis, narratology, consensual qualitative research) may be able to provide more insight to group process and interaction as well as group leader development (Rubel & Okech, 2017), which play important roles in the outcome of the group.
- m. Consider the rigor and impact of conducting Participatory Action Research (PAR) within group work, which can enrich and empower communities and collaborative researchers.
- n. Consider using single-case designs (SCD) as a rigorous and appropriate group work research design (Foster, 2010).
- o. When engaging in international research, consider including indigenous, cultural, and/or cross-cultural approaches as appropriate and culturally relevant strategies.
- p. Recognize the benefits of conducting Mixed Methods Research (MMR) with groups such as increased depth of knowledge, exploring process, and outcome (Wester & McKibben, 2019).

- q. Follow current developments in quantitative and qualitative methods to overcome current limitations in group work research.
- r. Consider conducting focus groups as a strategy for applied group research.

Identifying Target Population

Groupwork Researchers:

- a. Demonstrate intentionality in their selection of target populations that could potentially benefit most from the research they conduct.
- b. Aim to conduct research with groups that are typically underrepresented in the group counseling literature, as defined by demographic characteristics including but not limited to age, sex, gender, affectional orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, ability status, language, etc.
- c. Remain aware of vulnerabilities and potential power dynamics associated with any identified target population.
- d. Are aware of the multicultural implications associated with the unique terms, nuances, and labels used to identify individuals and/or groups from a target population.
- e. Remain aware of the influence of Eurocentric views and values as they relate to research involving diverse target populations.

Sampling

Groupwork Researchers:

- a. Select a sample with adequate participants (e.g., size, demographic characteristics, or experiences) that support the question being studied in quantitative and qualitative research (Meyer & Wilson, 2009) and, specifically in quantitative studies, mitigate limitations associated with group work research and small samples.
- b. Collect and delineate detailed demographic information of their sample to evaluate the transferability and generalizability of their research results (Singh & Shelton, 2011).
- c. Critically review the extant literature to determine an appropriate composition of a representative sample from a target population.
- d. Follow best practices and ethical guidelines in their identification and practice of sampling procedures, especially related to the investigation of a researcher's group or student trainees.
- e. Employ ASGW's *Best Practice Guidelines* (Thomas & Pender, 2008) in screening members for their appropriateness for a group.
- f. Note the difficulties of accessing "hidden" populations and will use sampling strategies that enable researchers to reach a more diverse sample that has not yet been included in research. Researchers and scholars also maintain a critical awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of these strategies and:
 - i. Understand how stigma, discrimination, and oppression not only limit researcher access to marginalized populations but also increases attrition in sample participants from these populations.

- ii. Recognize subgroups within target populations, and work to limit the number of participants from any one subgroup. Furthermore, groupwork researchers acknowledge though they may attain a large sample, that sample still may not be representative of the target population.
- g. Employ sampling strategies to reduce discrepancies between the members of the identified target population and the members of the sample. Specifically, researchers and scholars:
 - i. Understand the limitations in certain sampling types, including snowball sampling, respondent-driven sampling, community-based sampling, and probability sampling. These limitations increase the researcher's risk of attaining a sample that is non-representative of the target population and lacks diversity.
 - ii. Work to increase access and use sampling methods that increase diversity in samples, such as using diverse locations and times for recruitment, using web-based sampling, and other types of sampling that increase diversity in race ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and education level, as well as geographic diversity.

Recruitment

Groupwork Researchers:

- a. Choose, develop, and document recruitment strategies before constructing research that mitigate the potential for confounding sources that may introduce bias into the study.
- b. Are aware of and address the potential vulnerabilities of clients to impede their ability to make a prudent decision about whether to participate in a study.

Measurement and Instrumentation

Groupwork Researchers:

- a. Consider the psychometric qualities (e.g., reliability, normative samples, ease of use) of the tools or procedures they seek to implement and the quality of the evidence supporting the psychometric qualities reported in the literature or by publishers (Leech et al., 2011).
- b. When planning a study, evaluate how the psychometric characteristics of a measurement procedure or tool (e.g., type of scale, sensitivity to change, scoring) will impact subsequent statistical strategies and analyses, power analyses, effect size estimates, and inferences drawn from the study's conclusions.
- c. Recognize and adapt to updates with technology and group work communication and delivery systems (i.e., utilizing HIPAA/FERPA-compliant virtual modalities).
- d. Understand the importance of clearly differentiating and operationalizing the construct to be explored and the study's purpose within-group research.
- e. Consider and understand the differences in various types of instrumentation in qualitative research (e.g., individual vs. group interviews, field observations, etc.) and how they align with the epistemological position of the study, which should ground appropriate methodology and design.

- f. Develop an interview protocol informed by literature, experience, and/or observation and pilot test protocol (Turner, 2010) with similar populations as group participants, ensuring questions are clear and culturally, and developmentally appropriate for group participants.

Data Collection

Groupwork Researchers:

- a. Before collecting data, review informed consent documentation and are clear about the study's purpose, what it involves, and the risks and benefits of participation.
- b. Evaluate different methods of collecting data (e.g., pen and paper vs. digital survey) and choose the methods most appropriate for the group and research design.
- c. When collecting data, are aware of the possibility of dependence of observations within the same group and its implications for analysis within the general linear model.
- d. When collecting qualitative data, are aware of the importance of achieving data adequacy and depth by utilizing multiple sources of data that may include individual interviews, focus groups, observations, and researcher reflexive journaling.
- e. Qualitative researchers understand the importance of keeping a reflexive journal throughout the data collection to process biases, thoughts, feelings, reactions, and assumptions to the data (Hays & Singh, 2012)
- f. Are aware of the diversity of group members and ensure the data collection process is culturally appropriate.
- g. Are aware of the importance of collecting data regarding socially constructed identities of group members (e.g., gender identity, race, religious/spiritual practices). When possible, researchers should provide participants with the option to write what best reflects their understanding of self or identity.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Groupwork Researchers:

- a. During quantitative data analysis and interpretation, are aware of the assumptions of the type of analysis being used and will assess data for those assumptions, including the possible violation of the independence of observations assumption given the group context of data collection.
- b. During qualitative data analysis and interpretation, focus on congruence between assumptions, theory, and coding. Researchers acknowledge and integrate participants' social identities during data analysis, interpretation, and discussion of results. Furthermore, researchers share their researcher position statement to facilitate consumer interpretation of the research in the context of the researcher's perspective (Rubel & Okech, 2017).
- c. Qualitative researchers continue to employ reflexive journaling as a method of bracketing assumptions about the data throughout the analysis.

- d. Qualitative researchers consider using a triangulation of researchers and employing other methods of trustworthiness (e.g., peer debriefer, member checking, audit trail) to enhance the rigor of analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012)
- e. Analyze and interpret data in the context of the design, setting, and participants, as all of these factors can affect the results of a study (Lenz, 2020)
- f. Evaluate different techniques to measure magnitudes of effect (e.g., correlation coefficients and standardized mean difference) and choose the approach most appropriate for the study at hand (Watson et al., 2016).

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Groupwork Researchers:

- a. Consider their positionality and multiple relationships when designing and implementing research projects. Steps should be taken to minimize the power imbalance and ensure that group members do not feel coerced to participate in the project or face risks if they withdraw their participation from the study, regardless of if participants are groupworkers, group members, students, supervisees, or any other role. Steps to protect group members, including blinding the researcher (or group leader, instructor of record, or supervisor) from active participants (or nonparticipants) in the study, should be intentionally shared with group members who may or may not elect to be participants. When members' participation cannot be blinded, safeguards should be put into place to ensure that all group members receive equal levels of clinical care and service, or students or supervisees do not face negative consequences for their participation, or lack thereof, within the research study. Researchers might consider the use of administrative staff, independent coders, and blinded participant identification numbers to support this process in quantitative research or outside consultants who have the responsibility to collect and retain consent forms or interviewing and blinding transcripts of participants for qualitative studies.
- b. Provide appropriate alternatives to nonconsenting group members, when applicable. Nonparticipating group members are allowed to continue their active participation in the group, or an alternative group (that is clinically relevant) is provided. Alternatives that are provided are transparently communicated to members and are discussed in subsequent documentation of the project.
- c. Discuss expectations for participation in the group and how participation in the research may deviate or intersect with the group participation. These expectations should be communicated clearly at the start of the research process so that potential participants can make informed decisions about their participation in the research process.
- d. Clearly explain to participants that researchers cannot guarantee confidentiality as any information related to research conducted in the group may be known to other group members. Researchers and group leaders should discuss the limits of confidentiality within the group environment, and reinforce the need for all group members, whether they participate in the group research or not, to protect other group members' disclosures outside of the group.

- e. Explain the risks and benefits of participating in group research beyond the actual group work experience. Relevant information should be shared so that potential research participants can carefully weigh the risks and benefits of their participation in the study so that they can fully understand the possibilities and potential for personal impact.
- f. Recognize the unique considerations in working with youth (e.g., family awareness of and consenting to group counseling; families understanding of the research process and/or their access to the youth's research data; the youth participant's ability to assent to the research process) and create appropriate research protocols to ensure youth's safety as part of the research process.
- g. Recognize the unique considerations in working with members of historically marginalized populations (e.g., racial/ethnic, diverse sexual/affective and gender orientations/identities, immigrants, English language learners, diverse ability statuses, mandated clients, etc.) and create appropriate research protocols to ensure participant's understanding and safety as part of the research process.
- h. When conducting research in multiple settings, ensure that they have not only appropriate academic institutional review board approvals but also appropriate approvals from institutional review boards (or related groups) across research settings. This can include IRB's in school districts, community/clinical agencies, and specific communities (e.g., sovereign indigenous communities, international communities, other specific communities under investigation).
- i. Set specific protocols to communicate how issues will be handled when a group is researched, which consists of members who elect to participate in the research as well as those who do not. Group dynamics influence the group process, and any addition or subtraction of members influences that process (Goodrich & Luke, 2017). In qualitative research, researchers need to be clear that only members who elect to participate will have data (e.g., quotations or written interactions) shared in research. For group dynamics that researchers wish to share, they need to omit data from nonparticipating members. As such, if there are salient interactions or group dynamics that occur within a group under study across members who both consent to participate in the research and those that do not, only participating members' material can be shared. Researchers should explicitly address this in the research manuscript (i.e., protocol and limitations section). With group research that involves students, consider and create protocols that address the need for confidentiality of participants while respecting the faculty member's role of gatekeeper for the profession. Researchers must consider how the role of faculty members and researchers may interact with one another and how disclosures that students make in-group while being researched may be handled by the researcher. Researchers should consider the group's format, how data is collected (and/or blinded from the faculty researcher), and how gatekeeping concerns might be communicated to other faculty (and students) when constructing research protocols. Researchers/faculty should explicitly communicate the expectations and differences between the group class (or supervised) experience and the experience of participating in research in the informed consent.
- j. Consider how, in reporting data, group member participants' excerpts can impact their future life/career. Researchers should recognize that even if quotes

- are blinded, other group members may easily distinguish whom the excerpt came from. Discussion about respecting the confidentiality of the group, as well as the protection of participants, is important throughout the group research process.
- k. Consider how confidentiality (of person and of research site) is addressed through the scholarly dissemination process. Research participants and sites need to be appropriately blinded so that readers should not be able to identify one's identity or site based on the information shared. Scholars should note how reporting of demographics themselves can unblind research participants or sites and work with editorial boards/journal editors to ensure that not too much information is published to unblind the research participant in any subsequent research article. Special considerations should be provided to participants from vulnerable and/or historically and culturally marginalized group members, whose numbers may be smaller than other group members in published research. To further assist with blinding in qualitative research, consider having group members select their own pseudonyms instead of the researcher assigning them to prevent any covert bias that may reveal participant identity.
 - l. If study designs include a control group for a group intervention, employ best practices to ensure control group participants have the opportunity to receive the group intervention.

Potential Limitations

Groupwork Researchers:

- a. Are aware of the potential impact sample size may have on their results and do not assign inferences to study results that exceeds what is reasonable.
- b. Are transparent about the potential limitations of their studies, the sources of the limitations, and how they impact the inferences the researchers have drawn.

Dissemination of Knowledge

Groupwork Researchers:

- a. Choose scholarly sources to submit research for publication and choose sources that align with the purpose and the results of the study.
- b. Are careful not to overstate the impact of their results while also highlighting unique and essential findings.
- c. Provide rich descriptions, compelling narratives, and ample evidence (e.g., participant quotes) to support findings (Rubel & Okech, 2017)
- d. Are clear about the limitations of their research and the areas where more research is needed.
- e. Take care to maintain participants' confidentiality when disseminating results, and report results in aggregate form and/or use pseudonyms for participants when appropriate.

Notes on Contributors

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