Integrating Television Media into Group Counseling Course Work

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Abstract

We explore the feasibility of supplementing traditional group work pedagogic tools with watching group-themed reality and scripted television programs in order to convey group dynamics and concepts. Students view television programs through a group leader's lens and analyze the group dynamics. Advantages and limitations of this resource are reviewed and implications for counselor educators are discussed.

Keywords

group counseling, counselor preparation, television viewing

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Group work is a core therapeutic skill expected of graduates of counselor education programs. Professors are tasked with designing courses that both develop clinical skills and understanding of group theories (Furr & Barrett, 2000). Counselor educators are often challenged how best to teach these requisite skills to graduate students. The students, in turn, are challenged to meet a minimal level of competence in group work by the end of the course.

The academic challenges experienced by the counselor educator and students might be further exacerbated by generational differences in teaching methods and learning styles (McGlynn, 2005). According to the Pew Research Center (2010), a growing number of Millennial graduate students (i.e., born between 1980 and 2000) who enroll in counselor education programs are typically adept in using electronic devices, as well as in operating on demand and online services for academic and recreational purposes. Effective counselor educators strive continually to teach Millennial students by updating their pedagogic tools in order to meet students' current needs, interests, learning styles, and preferences for academic engagement (McGlynn, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2010). According to Svinicki and McKeachie (2011), "Appreciating the unique needs and characteristics of your students sets an educational environment that will better enhance learning by each student" (p. 151). Similarly,, Granello and Wheaton (2004) asked counselor educators, "What is the best way to deliver instruction to students so that they may learn to be effective counselors?" (p. 276). We ponder this question as it applies to watching television programs to teach group work.

While teaching group work, the first author instructed students to watch selected television programs as a midterm project. The responses were positive, with students reporting that viewings made group work concepts "come alive." A review of the literature on teaching group work by watching television programs failed to identify any evidence-based studies.

However, Shostrom (1968) reported that the history of watching group work on television dates back to the 1960s in which *Therapy* (1966-1967) featured 21 group work sessions conducted by various therapists on commercial television.

Therapy (1966-1967) aired in prime time in Los Angeles and Shostrom (1968) facilitated ten consecutive sessions. He reported that the positive feedback and reports from the televised group members and home viewers were consistent with his enthusiastic reaction although responses from other mental health professionals were mixed. For instance, Hurvitz (1968) critiqued some episodes and raised concerns about ethical issues and facilitator inauthenticity. Shostrom concluded:

> Perhaps therapy in the flesh will never be able to compete favorably with *The Fugitive* for the general viewing public, but we may be on the brink of a new era of 'open therapy' which will be of benefit to observers and participants alike. (p. 209)

When the literature review was unsuccessful in identifying relevant studies, we broadened it encompass watching commercial movies to teach group work. Only one reference was identified (i.e., Tyler & Reynolds, 1998). Tyler and Reynolds (1998) assert:

> feature films, as an adjunct to other methods of classroom instruction, are seen as sound pedagogy…. [F]ilm is seen as a tool to provide shared social experience, to promote social interaction, … to create meaningful effective experiences in the classroom, [and] as a tool to encourage discussion and exploration. (pp. 18-19).

Watching commercial movies to teach counseling skills other than group work is not novel. Feature films, such the classic *12 Angry Men,* are popular with contemporary students, and have served as teaching tools (Armstrong & Berg, 2005). Counselor educators have increasingly incorporated commercial movies to teach a wide variety of counseling theories and

concepts, including identity (Pierce & Wooloff, 2012), couples counseling (Shepherd & Brew, 2005), multicultural counseling, psychopathology (Hatcher, 2005; Wedding, Boyd, & Niemiec, 2010), ethics (Doherty, 2013; Doherty, 2010; Toman & Rak, 2000), positive psychology and resilience (Niemiec & Wedding, 2013), family counseling (Higgins & Dermer, 2001; Hudock & Warden, 2001), and counseling theory (Koch & Dollarhide, 2000). According to Wedding et al. (2010), nearly 1,000 movies are appropriate for educational purposes to illustrate psychopathology and the counseling process.

Watching movies usually encourages classroom discussions, which have been demonstrated to be superior to lectures for knowledge retention, comprehension of key course concepts, and higher learning processing (McLeod et al., 2008; Tyler & Reynolds, 1998). One criticism of using commercial movies for academic purposes is the large investment of time, usually between 90 and 120 minutes, needed for viewing (Holbrook, 2009). Films may be viewed outside of class so that class time is unaffected. However, the time investment must be considered when considering out-of-class workloads. Might watching 30- or 60-minute television programs encompass most of the advantages of watching commercial movies for demonstrating group dynamics without the large investment of time? This academic option appears to be under-investigated, based on the results of the original literature review.

We explore the feasibility of how counselor educators might use selected reality and scripted, group-themed television programs, heretofore called programs, to teach group work. That is, counselor educators instruct students to watch group-themed television programs using focused viewing through a group leader's lens to guide their observations and comprehension (Holbrook, 2009), rather than passively view them through a general audience lens for recreation or entertainment. Holbrook (2009) calls this pedagogic activity "mindful learning" and believes

it should be an active experience. He asserts, "Mindful learning is more effective than mindless learning and movies represent a mindful approach to learning, particularly when viewing is done with a purpose" (p. 491).

Advantages

Baruh (2010) describes the act of watching programs as non-pathological voyeurism that enables the spectator to observe people on-screen in their natural environment. Spectators are transmitted into a human event, enabling them to witness the complexities of human interactions from inside the relationship of dyads, families, and groups while exerting no influence on the outcome of relationships (Goldfarb, 2002; Orchowski, Spickard, & McNamara, 2006; Peters, 2007; Taub & Forney, 2004; Wedding et al., 2010).

When students watch a social microcosm in a movie, human interactions and group dynamics can convey visually-specific group work concepts such as cohesion, conflict, membership influences, confrontation, alliances, and stages of group development, among others that could be difficult for some students to grasp from reading textbooks or through traditional pedagogical tools (Holbrook, 2009; Stuckey & Kring, 2007). Television watching also enables replaying of specific scenes to analyze human interactions repeatedly. Finally, the use of programs for academic purposes avoids some of the educational limitations of traditional pedagogic tools.

Watching group-themed programs is recommended, particularly programs airing from 2000 to present. More recent programs may be more familiar and appealing to millennial students. Programs that use physical sequestration of multiple individuals are advised. Such environments can replicate the group counselor's initial task, which is to help create a physical entity – a cohesive group (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Scripted programs (e.g., *Lost,* 2004-2010) or

reality programs (e.g., *Survivor*, 2000-present), which create sequestered social microcosms, can provide a shared foundation for students to identify significant group dynamics as well as normalize and simplify complex group interactions (Furr & Barret, 2000; Wedding et al., 2010).

Television characters are often similar to the typical and diverse clients who comprise groups and begin to appreciate the complex multicultural context of group work (McLeod et al.; Schwitzer, Boyce, Cody, Holman, & Stein (2005).Some reality programs depict characters and contestants to which student are likely to relate (e.g., *Big Brother,* 2000-present) or a scripted ensemble of actors portraying a group of people (e.g., *Under the Dome,* 2013-present). The behaviors and interactions of people, who generally have no formal training in group dynamics, could depict relationships among clients in group work. This similarity enables students to use programs to expand their awareness about the range of people's personal belief systems, socioeconomic influences, cultural effects, and worldviews that might differ from their own when they eventually work with clients. It may also enhance their multicultural awareness in group work (McLeod et al., 2008; Schwitzer et al., 2005).

Students should be encouraged to use focused viewing and reflect on how they, as future group leaders, might work effectively with a specific character or diverse clientele in groups; interact with group members who espouse different worldviews; use confrontation skills effectively within a multicultural group without alienating some; and facilitate the group process and promote behavior change for all group members.

Limitations and Considerations

The production of television programs creates a potential conflict between the needs of academia for authenticity and reality and the roles of cast members/actors, directors, writers, and production teams for entertainment value. The presence of cameras can alter how people behave.

For nearly ninety years, the Hawthorne Effect has described behavioral changes in subject who are aware of their participation in experiments (Jones, 1992). Production teams edit several hours, days, or months worth of taping into neatly wrapped 30- or 60-minute episodes that do not necessarily reflect accurate depictions of human interactions, but entertaining ones (Kosovski & Smith, 2011). In scripted programs, the director's and writers' purpose is to seek a "reality effect" (Leone, Peek, & Bissell, 2006) for the story line, instead of capturing true reality. The reality effect is often skewed toward what attracts viewers and boost Nielsen ratings (Nielsen Media Research, 2000), rather than focus on authenticity in relationships. Commercial interests limit some of their pertinence for counselor educators' needs, and they seldom reflect concern for client exploitation (Hurvitz, 1968). Consequently, some benefits of students analyzing group dynamics from watching programs are diminished.

The degree of authenticity captured on programs might be a challenge without the counselor educator's preview of sample episodes. In spite of this limitation, counselor educators can successfully incorporate reality programs into the curriculum in order to visually acquaint students with group dynamics when (1) television clips or programs are previewed; (2) focused viewing is the foundation for class projects, discussions, and deliberations; (3) students are informed of potential limitations (e.g. ethical implications of televising therapy sessions, as with the various Dr. Drew franchises); and (4) discussion questions are assigned (see Appendix), which provides a template of questions to promote focused viewing.

Some reality programs use actual clients, such as *LA Shrinks* (2013-present). This program follows three therapists in independent practices located across the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Counselor educators are advised to preview sample episodes to ensure that the profession's ethical and professional standards are upheld and that Federal laws to protect

clients are followed. Shows can also be used as examples of what not to do or to generate thoughtful discussions around group ethics and legal issues as long as the issues are not egregious. This attention ensures that learning objectives are met and that counselor educators are not complicit in exploiting clients, goals noted by Chessler (2013) in an entertainment review of *LA Shrinks* (2013-present).

According to Baruh (2009), although actual clients on reality programs willingly sign informed consent forms to televise their counseling process, in their vulnerable states of mental illness or active substance abuse, they may not fully comprehend the implications and consequences of waiving their rights to confidentiality or understand the pressures of being televised for viewers' entertainment (Hurvitz, 1968). Moreover, counselors or clients may distort their accurate or authentic portrayal of self or of group interactions in front of cameras (Hurvitz,1968; Shostrom, 1968).

Media characterizations of clinical challenges, interactions, and interventions are often erroneously and purposely portrayed for entertainment purposes (Kauffman, 2010). Some programs portray group leaders and counselors as being professionally incompetent (e.g., *Go On,* 2012-2013), engaging in sexual relations with clients (e.g., *Anger Management*, 2012-present), and engaging in unethical behaviors (Taub & Forney, 2004; Wahl, Hanrahan, Karl, & Lasher, 2007; Wedding et al., 2010). These representations are considered "unbalanced" counselor portrayals (Robinson, 2003; Wedding et al., 2010), and may leave the general audience viewer or novice counseling students with the impression that unethical or incompetent behaviors are relatively common practices in counseling.

While unbalanced portrayals of group leaders, counselors, and the counseling process may be inaccurate, they can be useful as topics for class discussion if the goal is to teach students

what not to do. For example, students might discuss how unprofessional group leaders must behave, clinically and ethically, in order to be redeemed as competent and balanced. However, we prefer programs that convey what *to do* in group work and portray balanced and realistic human qualities (e.g., *Rehab with Dr. Drew,* 2008-2012).

When compiling a list of appropriate programs, counselor educators are advised to preview them for language, content, behaviors, sexual activity, ethnic comments, cursing, violence, and clothing. Counselor educators are advised to warn students of potential exposure to behaviors "different" from and beyond their individual comfort zone. A diverse class of students might elicit a wide range of reactions when they are watching required programs (Furr & Barret, 2000). Some students may be offended by program content, distracted from the program's educational value, or feel detached from peers. If a student raises an objection, counselor educators are advised to prepare an alternative academic activity. If a student has disclosed a hearing or visual impairment with documented accommodations according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009), the viewing assignment can be completed outside of class.

Holbrook (2009) identifies a frequent criticism of watching programs as the large investment in time required to view them. This same criticism was raised about watching commercial movies for academic purposes; however most television programs require 30 or 60 minutes. Holbrook further advises counselor educators to remain abreast of current copyright laws when using programs in academic courses. The current American copyright law, Digital Millennial Copyright Act Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2000), permits the use of television programs and commercial movies without consent for academic purposes. Moreover, counselor

educators who teach abroad must become familiar with and follow the copyright laws of the host country (Holbrook, 2009).

Implementation

Watching programs for educational purposes may be enhanced if students are given specific questions or tasks (see Appendix) to encourage reflection, analysis, and synthesis prior to a viewing and to guide their responses afterward (Tyler & Reynolds, 1998), substantiating their responses with examples observed in the program(s). Responses can be discussed in small or large groups, or be written and submitted.

The following are examples of how counselor educators can use programs and focused viewing in the academic setting for classroom activities, homework assignments, and projects. In each instance, students are assigned to view a program from a short list furnished by the counselor educator. Questions in the appendix can facilitate these learning experiences:

1. *Homework.* Students analyze the program's characters using assigned questions from Table 1. Students gather in small discussion groups based on the program they selected and analyze sub-grouping, power, and impact of member self-disclosures, for instance.

2. *Classroom activities.* Students engage in a role-play exercise that has been stimulated by a television clip shown in class (Taub & Forney, 2004). For example, two students assume the persona of characters from the program and interact with other students to demonstrate maintenance and task roles, leadership skills, or therapeutic factors, for instance that might be appropriate for facilitating group dynamics effectively with the personas.

3. *Project.* Students view a few episodes of one program and submit written responses to questions from Table 1.

Technology's continuous advances have increased accessibility of programs and reruns (Doherty, 2010, 2013; Wahl et al., 2007). Many programs are accessible by (1) viewing on user-friendly web sites (e.g., http://www.hulu.com/plus); (2) subscribing to streaming services (e.g., Aereo), streaming on demand services (e.g., Roku), or offered by most cable and satellite companies; (3) enrolling in a DVD mail service (e.g., Netflix); (4) purchasing a DVD series set (e.g., *Lost,* 2004-2010); (5) downloading a smartphone app (e.g., https://goo.gl/lgNoZn) or a live streaming app for mobile devices to access a broadcast channel (e.g., http://abc.go.com/watchabc-overview); (6) borrowing DVDs from public or university libraries; and (7) watching broadcast channels. These services provide students and counselor educators with multiple viewing options.

In addition to group work, counselor educators can incorporate programs successfully into other counseling courses. For instance, programs might be used successfully in courses that teach couples counseling (e.g., *Couples Therapy,* 2012-present), life coaching (e.g., *Iyanla: Fix My Life,* 2012-present), substance abuse counseling (e.g., *Rehab with Dr. Drew,* 2008-2012), counseling women (e.g., *Starting Over*, 2003-2006), multicultural counseling and human relations and basic counseling and interviewing skills (e.g., *In Treatment,* 2008-2010), and individual counseling (e.g., *The Sopranos,* 1999-2007). Table 1 summarizes some group-themed reality and scripted (i.e. manufactured) programs that portray typical group dynamics experienced in various settings and social microcosms for group counseling courses. Some examples fit under multiple categories.

Table 1

Examples of Group-Themed Television Programs

Type of Group	Television Program	Reality/Scripted Program	Educational Value
Homogeneous	*The Biggest Loser* (2004-present)	Reality program	Demonstrates the group dynamics of contestants working in teams and as individuals, with the goal of shedding pounds and winning prizes.
Heterogeneous	*Under the Dome* (2013-present)	Scripted program	Chronicles sequestered group members' interpersonal conflicts, shifting alliances, and group dynamics.
Multicultural	*Lost* (2004-2010)	Scripted program	Follows the group dynamics and conflicts, through various stages, of strangers who survived a plane crash on a deserted island
Open	*Starting Over* (2003-2006)	Reality program	Illustrates women's diverse issues and life experiences and how the group leader assists them to problem solve while they reside together.
Closed	*Survivor* (2000-present)	Reality program	Highlights group dynamics among sequestered strangers competing in teams and as individuals.
Voluntary	*Big Brother* (1999-Present)	Reality program	Features the group dynamics of sequestered strangers residing with a diverse group of housemates for 3 months and competing for prizes
Involuntary	*Rehab with Dr. Drew* (2008-2012)	Reality program	Focuses on group counseling sessions of people being treated for drug and/or alcohol addiction

Conclusion

As Millennial students constitute a growing number of graduate students, counselor educators need to connect effectively with a generation of students who use electronic devices, entertainment media, and on demand services with ease. The counselor educator's use of

television viewing for assignments and discussions can support students' group skills development and may appeal to their preferred mode of learning (Pew Research Center, 2010; Tyler & Reynolds, 1998). Additionally, watching programs can appeal to students who are visual or auditory learners, as well as to students with undergraduate majors outside the social sciences who have limited previous experience in group work or human relations training (Bruck, 2001).

Watching programs as a course requirement has the potential to introduce students to a wide variety of character behaviors, issues, worldviews, and human differences, thus preparing them to work with a diverse clientele. Pierce and Wooloff (2012) posit that focused viewing of programs has the potential to "heighten counselor sensitivity to diversity and help them evaluate their own ability to engage in helping relationships with various client populations" (p. 54). Therefore, one outcome of extending beyond students' social comfort zones through watching programs is an early awareness of counseling interests or niches with specific populations (e.g., lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered/questioning/ clients) or in specific settings (e.g., group work or substance abuse).

We have explored the feasibility of watching group-themed reality and scripted television programs as a pedagogic resource to meet the needs, interests, learning styles, and preferences for academic engagement of a growing number of enrolled Millennial students in counselor education programs. McGlynn (2005) notes, "What is going to be needed in our diverse classrooms is a variety of teaching methods which will enable us to meet the needs of as many students as possible" (p. 13). While observing others in a group setting (e.g., DVDs, clinical observations) is a common pedagogic tool for teaching group work (Furr & Barett, 2000; Stockton & Toth, 1996), watching others in group-themed television programs is an untapped

teaching resource, based on the results of our literature review. Researchers, who focused on movies and group work (e.g., Robinson, 2003; Tyler & Reynolds, 1998; Wedding et al., 2010), concluded that movies enable students to observe group dynamics and grasp group work concepts without immersing themselves into the scene or influencing the outcome. The same might be tenable for television programs.

The educational efficacy of watching programs to teach group work has not been adequately assessed (Schwitzer et al., 2005). Shostrom's (1968) evaluation of *Therapy* (1966-1967), is more anecdotal rather than rigorous and does not address its use in academia. The profession would likely benefit from evaluation research to determine if watching group-themed television programs while using "focused viewing" is an effective practice.

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Appendix

Reflection Questions

General/Introduction • What is the name of the program? • What is the general purpose of the program? Is it a reality or scripted show?
Group Theory • Describe the theoretical orientation(s) you believe were used. • Describe the transition through the stages of group development based on [insert preferred model]. • How would a [select a theoretical orientations] group leader conceptualize group dynamics and implement interventions?
Content • How many people are involved as the core group? • Is the membership homogeneous or heterogeneous? Voluntary or involuntary? Closed or open?   How does each of these contexts affect group dynamics? • What topics or issues are discussed or highlighted? • Describe any ethical issues or dilemmas observed. How might you, as the group leader, address them?
Diversity • Describe diversity and multicultural issues and differences (interpret diversity and multicultural in a broad context). What is the impact of diversity and multicultural differences on members? • Which of the following multicultural group work models apply best and why: [insert preferred models] • How would you use diverse worldviews and coping strategies to support behavioral change, self-disclosure, and cohesion?
Group Process • What is the quality of interaction among and between members? Between members and group leader(s) (including designated and self-appointed leaders)? • Identify types of power demonstrated (e.g., reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, expert power, informational power). • How did appropriate or inappropriate self-disclosure facilitate or hinder interactions? • Describe the task and maintenance roles demonstrated by each member and how they contributed to or hindered group cohesion and group dynamics.
Group Interventions • Describe facilitating individual and group interventions/helping techniques. Describe their effectiveness (or ineffectiveness). • Identify group facilitation techniques used by the designated or self-appointed leader(s). How were techniques effective or ineffective?
Group Leaders and Leadership Skills • Describe the leader's or co-leaders' facilitating skills. If this was a leaderless group, how

	were leadership roles and tasks handled? Were they effective in facilitating group dynamics?
	• Describe the strengths and weaknesses of the leader's/leaders' skills.
	• What did the members or leaders do that is similar to, or different from, your personal style of membership and leadership within groups? Contrast the efficacy of your leadership style with theirs.
	• How did the group leader(s) handle challenging members, e.g., intellectualizers, criers, storytellers, soothers, scapegoats, monopolizers, among others?

Outcome
- What are the expected or unanticipated outcomes and how did ethical issues and dilemmas affect the outcome?
- What assessment procedures would you use to evaluate the effectiveness of the group's outcome and the effectiveness of individual members' degree of behavioral change?

Intervention Plan: Student as Group Member
- How would you encourage group cohesion?
- How would you influence group dynamics?
- How would you handle conflict appropriately?
- How would you handle diversity and multicultural issues?
- How would you handle ethical issues?
- What task and maintenance roles would you use to influence group dynamics?

Intervention Plan: Student as Group Leader
- How would you handle inappropriate self-disclosure?
- How would you handle your own self-disclosure?
- How would you evaluate the effectiveness of the group's outcome?
- How would you handle diverse worldviews?
- How would you handle ethical issues or dilemmas?
- Identify dysfunctional behaviors. Which character(s) appear(s) to employ behaviors most threatening to group cohesion? What are some interventions to address these issues?