Working Across Differences While Online: Examining the Experience of Facilitating a Virtual Group

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Abstract
A growing body of literature illustrates the benefits of online groups for clients, but few studies have examined counselors’ experience facilitating such groups, particularly in regard to counselor work with clients of differing sociodemographic traits. In this study, graduate-level counseling students facilitated two psychoeducational college counseling groups via an online platform. Groups were tailored for Black and/or African American first-generation college students (FGCS) enrolled in urban high schools. Facilitator experiences using an online platform and counseling across sociodemographic variables were explored. Themes included barriers to cohesion building, difficulty of power/oppression discussions via a virtual setting, and adjusting tactics and expectations.

Keywords Online group counseling · Group facilitation · Adolescent counseling · African American · First-generation college-goers

Introduction
Across a wide array of clientele and settings, virtual counseling services have been documented as a viable alternative to in-person supports (Barnett et al., 2021; Goodrich et al., 2020; Woo et al., 2020b). Considering the ubiquitous presence of
social media and technology in the lives of young people, online supports are particularly well-suited for adolescents (Pew Research Center, 2018). Researchers, in turn, noted outcomes of virtual counseling as comparable to those of in-person services for addressing a variety of conditions (Fletcher et al., 2018; Nelson & Duncan, 2015; Novella et al., 2020).

Online group work is one important mode of counseling that brings together peers with shared experiences in a virtual setting (Guth et al., 2021; Robinson & Pond, 2019). Researchers assessing the impact of online mental-health groups found positive outcomes (Brouzos et al., 2021), with some findings showing that online services provide impacts equal to those of in-person services (Lleras de Frutos et al., 2020). Thus, emerging evidence suggests online group counseling to be a viable option for clients open to such a format.

Respectively, the use of online group counseling increased over time and in response to various events or issues, including the growing need to increase counseling access for clients in rural settings and for those lacking in time or transportation (Haylock et al., 2022). The growing presence of online schools also spurred use of school counselor online group interventions (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016). Finally, the Coronavirus affected a rapid surge in the number of organizations moving to online services, albeit in the absence of adequate practitioner preparation for the unique qualities inherent in such a venue (Marmarosh et al., 2020).

Considering the growing use of online group services, there is a small but emerging body of literature noting various challenges with the practice. Kozlowski and Holmes (2014) found that the online environment can impede important group elements, particularly in relation to communication. In one study of a group intervention for high school students, members refused to join with their videos and preferred communicating through the use of the chat feature, as opposed to verbally speaking (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016). The authors recognized that such behaviors could potentially inhibit member relationship and cohesion building. Hence, preliminary research suggests the need for enhancing facilitator understanding of potential challenges and specific tactics for facilitating groups in an online setting (Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006; Haug et al., 2008).

In response to such challenges, the Association for Specialists in Group Work published a set of comprehensive tips for effective virtual group facilitation (Guth et al., 2021). Recommended tactics focused on ensuring competent counselor and member communication and cohesion building in an online environment. Examples of directives included initially promoting client practice with online communication functions such as the chat, online whiteboards, and the muting button (Guth et al., 2021), and slowly adding a variety of communication tools over time. The authors also recommended the use of ongoing check-ins to verify client satisfaction with the group and the online venue (Guth et al., 2021). Accordingly, experts in online group practices urged counselors to understand clients may need time and training to adjust to an online venue, and counselors can normalize its unique functions through ongoing reminders (CTAC, 2020). In turn, counselors can use the shared process of learning to navigate an online venue to build group trust and cohesion (CTAC, 2020).
Despite the limitations that technology in counseling can pose, the accessibility of an online venue, coupled with its growing commonality, suggests that virtual group services are a permanent reality (Brouzos et al., 2021; Hanley, 2021). What is less clear, however, are the actual training tactics needed to best prepare facilitators for online group work. Due to a limited research base, there is a dearth of understanding of the challenges faced by online group facilitators. This is particularly true in regard to providing online group counseling across client sociodemographic differences—despite the many calls for more accessible, culturally-aligned, unbiased, competent group services (Miles et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2021). Hence, group services may be reaching a broader, more diverse population, how effective counselors are with those clientele, as well as what the nature of any challenges may be in cross-cultural, online group work is unclear. Ultimately, such issues translate to limited guidelines and corresponding tactics for the training of group facilitators in work across various clientele (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016; Woo et al., 2020b).

Considering these many issues, this study sought to better understand the challenges of facilitating a group counseling intervention, as viewed through the lens of student group facilitators. Four group facilitators of varying sociocultural identities offered an online college preparatory group with urban high school, African American first-generation college-goers. The study protocol was guided by the following overarching research question: What are graduate-level counselors’ experiences of facilitating a virtual counseling group?

Method

Approved by an Institutional Review Board, this study drew from a reflexive thematic analysis (TA) as an inductive qualitative approach for the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2016). The use of TA allowed for a theoretically flexible approach to identifying meaningful patterns across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2016), which, in this study, entailed the examination of participants’ experiences facilitating an online group intervention. TA is considered a well-suited approach to understanding participants’ perceptions and experiences (Braun et al., 2016). An intersectional lens was paired with TA in designing and interpreting the data (Marfelt, 2016), meaning that we took into consideration participants’ multiple sociocultural identities and the complex ways such identities lead to experiences of oppression and/or privilege in compounding and conflicting manners. In this way, we sought to honor the multifaceted interplay between the various traits of both facilitators and their clientele, from gender to race and ability status, and to provide group activities and process questions that allowed those truths to be acknowledged and explored in the group setting (Crenshaw, 1989).

Participants

Group facilitators (N=4) were graduate-level counseling students at a suburban private university, two in clinical mental health concentrations, and two in school counseling
concentrations. Three identified as female and one as male and were in their early to mid-twenties. Self-ascribed racial identities were as follows: White (n = 2), Black/African American (n = 1), and Pakistani-American (n = 1). All but one had previous experience facilitating groups with adolescents, and two had facilitated this particular group in person prior to this study. All had experience engaging in online counseling with clients through their internships and had training specific in online counseling during their graduate studies. Training was integrated across various courses and entailed basic tactics for online counseling, ethical issues related to online work, and considerations and challenges of online counseling. Additional support was provided through an initial training prior to the start of this specific group, and online supervision sessions were provided following each group session.

As researchers, we sought to gather data in multiple forms and through multiple interviews in an effort to achieve data saturation (e.g., “the degree to which new data repeat what was expressed in old data”; Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1896–1897). Consequently, saturation was achieved through gathering the voices or perspectives of all four counseling students across the span of the group process.

Researchers

The four research team members all identified as female. Their races included White (n = 3) and Black (n = 1). Two of the researchers were full-time faculty members who had designed the group intervention used in this study. The other two researchers were both master’s level graduate students studying counseling who had prior experience and interest related to supporting first-generation college students (i.e., the group focus).

The researchers attempted to bracket (e.g., set aside or compartmentalize) any assumptions regarding the study by sharing their traits and perspectives with one another prior to engaging in the analysis process (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Bracketing is used to acknowledge researchers’ preconceptions that they might bring to the study, in effort to diminish the effects such perspectives can have on how one views the data. Examples include making assumptions about the findings based on personal experiences or biased understandings of others, rather than viewing the data as it stands (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

One assumption the research team discussed was the belief that group members’ participation may be inhibited in some way by the online venue. Additionally, based on previous research, clinical experience, and lived experienced as a Black person, one of the researchers assumed that the White facilitators might experience feelings of discomfort or disengagement from the Black clientele, particularly in relationship to broaching topics of identity, power, and oppression. All researchers considered the possibility that the lived and cultural differences between group facilitators and the clients (such as race, ethnicity, immigrant, and socioeconomic status, as well as geographic residence) could pose challenges in communication, trust, and cohesion building.
The Group Intervention and Members

Participants in this study facilitated an eight-session online counseling group designed to support college preparation for first-generation college students (Malott et al., 2020). Group topics were informed by evidenced-based practices, including suggestions specific to minoritized youth. Topic examples include help-seeking, study skills, identity strengthening, and tactics in navigating oppressive campus settings or scenarios (Branch, 2018; Dennis et al., 2005; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Green, 2015; Malott et al., 2020; Ishitani, 2006; Parnes et al., 2020; Tate et al., 2015). For a detailed overview of the group content, see (Malott et al., 2020).

Group members were recruited from a community-based, non-profit extended education program available to all public high school students in a large metropolitan school district. As part of the organization’s Saturday morning educational program, juniors and seniors were verbally invited to voluntarily participate in a small group designed to enhance their college preparation. Members were a mix of juniors or seniors who identified as Black or African American and first-generation college-going (i.e., the first in their immediate family to attend college). The group was offered monthly and on a Saturday via zoom during a forty-five-minute time slot. Of the 31 students who initially elected to participate in the college-preparatory group, on average, about 20 students total attended the group each month. With the high number of students participating in the group, they were divided into two groups during each session (each group was led by two facilitators). Youth who were uninterested in the opportunity joined a different session offered by the educational program.

Data Collection

In an effort to glean understanding of the experience of facilitating an online counseling group, interviews with group facilitators were the principal data source for this study. Following group completion, three virtual interviews were conducted with all four facilitators (one interview included two participants at once due to availability). Interview length ranged from 25 to 44 min \( (M = 33 \text{ min}) \). The open-ended interview protocol included the following questions: a) What was your experience like facilitating the group? b) What challenges did you experience? c) What went well? d) What was your experience in engaging in online group facilitation? e) What was your experience like, working with this specific population?

To triangulate the data sources (Patton, 2002), facilitators’ reflective journals were also collected following each session. That is, facilitators were invited to write a brief journal generally reflecting on their group experience after sessions. These writings were collected via an online survey link. The last form of data used in this study was notes recorded from monthly supervision sessions. A notetaker recorded the topics and discussions that emerged.
Data Analysis

In applying a thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2016), we used an inductive and recursive approach to data analysis through “data-driven” coding in an effort to answer the research question (Braun et al., 2016). Braun et al.’s (2016) six steps of TA include Phase 1–2 Familiarization and coding; Phase 3–5 Theme development, refinement, and naming; and Phase 6: Writing up. Afterward, we referenced the reflective journals and supervision notes as a form of data triangulation to confirm or compare and contrast with the identified themes.

Phase 1–2

Initially, we (the researchers) familiarized ourselves with the data set by reading and re-reading the interviews. We enacted this step individually in an effort to avoid influencing one another. This phase entailed each researcher keeping individual notes regarding meaningful words and segments present in the interviews, to gain a deeper understanding of the data set through a critical reading. Afterward, we coded the transcripts. To do so, we re-read the transcripts line-by-line collectively to label any words or segments that connected to our research question (i.e., identifying points of the transcripts that focused on the experience facilitating the groups). We discussed each of the transcripts and codes that were identified. Whenever differences arose in data interpretations, we came to mutual agreement through ongoing dialog. We held three meetings to ensure a thorough review of each transcript.

Phase 3–5

Following coding transcripts, we created a table to organize findings. This provided a clearer picture of overlap and differences across participants in identified themes. We then discussed ways to cluster or collapse similar findings, along with defining or clarifying those findings. After, we engaged in a recursive process, whereby we reviewed the codes while continually returning to the transcripts and our individual notes to ensure the accuracy of our interpretations. This process involved multiple meetings as a research team to finalize themes. Once themes were identified, they were further refined for accuracy by returning to representative quotes. We used a table to organize the themes into three levels: Overarching themes, themes, and subthemes (Braun et al., 2016).

Phase 6

The last phase involved finalizing themes previously identified by editing, compiling, and writing up the findings from phases 1–5. At this point, we finalized the themes and referred back to the reflective journals and supervision session notes to further support our findings. This resulted in the researcher team agreeing on three main themes.
Trustworthiness

We employed multiple strategies to ensure trustworthiness in the data analysis. First, we engaged in reflexivity through journaling and group discussions whereby the researchers reflected on assumptions about the findings and how they might influence the data prior to engaging in the analysis (Hunt, 2011). Second, two of the researchers engaged in prolonged interaction with the facilitators by participating in weekly supervision sessions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This allowed the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of the facilitators, to better understand what they shared during the interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further strategies to ensure trustworthiness included member checking by conducting a follow-up interview with one participant to determine whether how we perceived her response was actually what she meant and to ask her to respond to our preliminary themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

With a repetition of themes found across all interviews, we felt confident that data saturation was achieved. Additionally, throughout the study, we maintain an audit trail by keeping track of all steps taken and data collected, as well as maintaining records and notes of all meetings (Hunt, 2011). Lastly, the researchers used multiple forms of data in an effort to triangulate the data sources (Patton, 2002)—interviews were used as a primary source of data for this study, and reflective journals and supervision notes were utilized as a means to confirm themes.

Findings

This study focused on examining the experience of graduate-level counselors facilitating a virtual group. Broad findings suggested that the facilitators perceived the intervention as a positive experience for both themselves, as preservice-counselors, and for the group members. They perceived that the youth were eager to learn about the topic, as exhibited by various questions asked and comments shared, and they believed that group members gained new knowledge regarding college-going. Such a perspective was anecdotally confirmed through regularly eliciting group members’ verbal feedback, both by the facilitators and the directors of the program.

Despite the positive experiences, the three main themes that were identified in this study focused on the facilitators’ experiences with various challenges facilitating the group. These included: Experiencing Barriers to Cohesion Building, Difficulty with Power/Oppression Discussions, and Adjusting Tactics and Expectations. Feelings of doubt and frustration were expressed in regard to the online process and in seeking solutions to addressing multiple barriers. The following themes are organized to include participant quotes, with pseudonyms assigned to protect individual identities. Further, as multiple data sources were collected for this study, beyond the interviews, evidence supporting the themes from participant reflective journals and supervision notes is included in each theme.
Experiencing Barriers to Cohesion Building

All participants experienced one or more barriers to building cohesion due to the online setting. One group facilitator who, when asked if any challenges had existed in facilitating the group, noted viewing the online venue as ‘inherently’ challenging: “The challenges came from being online ... and the inherent issues that come with being virtual.” The most commonly cited challenge was the inability to view the group members, the majority of whom insisted on keeping their cameras off during sessions. Despite attempting multiple tactics to encourage camera use, the vast majority refused.

Kira acknowledged that, while allowing youth to keep the cameras off accommodated youths’ needs to feel safe or to communicate in their preferred manner (e.g., chat vs. verbally), as a facilitator, a lack of visuals presented a barrier to connecting with members of the group. She explained, “That added an extra level of challenge. Just because I wasn’t able to pick up on facial expressions, body movements, interactions with other people in the group.” More simply stated by Bajes: “It felt like sometimes that we were speaking to just empty boxes.”

Participants perceived that an inability to view clients and their respective settings had multiple negative effects. For instance, they felt that it reduced their ability to read and respond in real-time to the clients. As Bajes explained, “We weren’t able to read the facial expressions or their body language or we didn’t know like what kind of environment they were in, what perceived notion they [had] coming into those sessions.” The lack of visuals also seemed to inhibit cohesion building between peers and with facilitators. Of this, Sara noted, “I feel like I didn’t really connect with any of the students because it was virtual.” Similarly, Ama said, “I feel like not being able to see that and not being able to really sense people’s energy, hindered us in creating that sense of community.” Bajes also speculated, “If it was in-person, [deeper] kinds of conversation could probably happen a little bit earlier because the rapport were probably built up more naturally because being physically there.”

Ama perceived that the online venue reduced her ability to track the clients (i.e., to follow and interpret how they were interacting with each other). She felt that the session flow was negatively impacted, making it difficult to address important tangential topics as they surfaced, as well as to return to essential prior topics. Of this, she states:

Sticking to that agenda was much harder, online, because again, we couldn’t really sense their energy or what they wanted. ... [It] was much easier to do in person than it is online. So, if we ever did get off track, or talk about something else, at a certain point, it almost felt a little impossible to get back to the activity.

Notes from supervision and facilitators’ journals provided confirmatory evidence supporting this theme. Facilitators repeatedly cited the challenges of participants leaving their cameras off so that only audio could be heard. Only at one point did they share that a participant had their video on for a sizable portion of the session. The facilitators did, however, recognize increased interaction over
time, including increased use of the Zoom chat feature during sessions. Hence, over time, the facilitators cited growing accustomed to the limited visuals, and they also began to recognize group members by their voices. In spite of these positive trends, the facilitators consistently expressed feelings of frustration with the limited visuals, resulting in a sense of reduced member connectivity. Notably, in journal reflections from the last session, the facilitators recognized an absence of sadness in regard to group termination. Nor did they feel the need for closure. The facilitators speculated that this was due to the weak cohesion building with the participants. Supervision notes further confirmed the facilitators’ perceived challenges to generating member cohesion.

Difficulty with Power/Oppression Discussions

Participants indicated that addressing topics related to power and oppression (which were woven into the group curriculum) was particularly difficult, including engaging participants in discussions of discrimination. Specifically, they cited struggles connecting with and reading the group members’ responses, which then impeded their ability to address such topics. As Bajes explained, “Not seeing people’s facial expressions, or body language, when we start talking about oppression or intersectionality was really the hardest part for me.” Further, Sara noted that broaching identity-related topics were tricky due to her own dominant racial identity, an issue that seemed exacerbated by the online setting:

It’s a touchy topic, and I think it’s touchier because I’m a White person talking to … Black or Brown students. So, I’m always very delicate with how I approach those topics. … not that I necessarily had this relationship with the students in our group. But maybe I would have, if we were in person or maybe I did, and I just don’t know.

Kira similarly pondered barriers to building greater cohesion and comfort in addressing tough topics, particularly in relation to her identity:

As a White female, in a space of predominantly marginalized student identities … I think was really something on my mind as I navigated that space, and especially without being able to really see the students … I wonder if it might have … looked different in a physical setting. … Because I think in [in-person counseling], by session four, you really know your peers, and you know the members and sharing things like that might come a little bit easier.

Ama shared her reluctance to model through naming her own minoritized identity due to feeling less safe or comfortable in the online venue, in light of recent societal issues of racioethnic and religious oppression. Paradoxically, she also recognized how much more important counselor self-disclosure was when online, to elicit youth participation:

The last time I ran this group [Ama had previously facilitated the group the year prior], and it was in-person, people disclosed a lot more about their iden-
tities. I felt this time … no one was really saying anything until we shared our own experiences or our identities…. I’d never knew if I could share me being South Asian … that felt really challenging to do online. Because, it was like a blank screen.

The difficulty of addressing issues of power and oppression as a theme was confirmed through the supervision notes and reflective journals. The supervisory notes reflected facilitator struggles to engage with participants around specific talk about different “-isms” on campus. The group members speculated that the youth may not have been comfortable putting on their cameras due to potentially highlighting their sociocultural and low-income backgrounds. These perceived challenges resulted in group members steering the conversation to more general college issues, thus avoiding oppression-affiliated topics such as racism, sexism, and ethnic discrimination. Hence, both counselor and client behaviors seemed to suggest the facilitators experienced various assumptions, heightened awareness, or discomfort associated with personal sociocultural identities.

Adjusting Tactics and Expectations

To address the many above noted barriers, participants cited a realized need to adjust their skills and tactics to enhance the group process, though they did not always feel successful in those efforts. For instance, Kira noted the difficulty of attempting to adjust the activities to an online setting, explaining, “It took … more creativity and flexibility and making it adaptable for the online space itself. In addition to the fact that it’s challenging to navigate an agenda without getting to see how people are reacting to the material.”

To compensate for the reduced sharing of group members, some participants described self-disclosing more than they normally would as a group facilitator. This came with a perceived risk of over-sharing and dominating the space. Sara noted, with some sense of frustration, “I feel like we did a lot of the talking.” Kira stated that such sharing, while offering important modeling, at other times, “definitely might have overpowered” the youth.

Hence, the facilitators sought other ways to elicit youth participation, such as through adapting the activities to allow use of online interactive tools. These included increased use of chat with rounds, the Whiteboard, and interactive polls. As Kira explained, “Using some of those online platforms like Mentimeter or the chat helped … me become adapted and more flexible to seeing those breakthrough moments.” The participants, in turn, reflected upon learning improved communication tactics from this online group experience. Sara noted, “What I learned is that you have to set the standard or the expectation early. … Even if like the first session, we did … a tutorial on how to blur your background. … kind of when we do the group norms.” Kira explained that, beyond adding additional engagement tactics, she wanted to change her perspectives of what ‘success’ or ‘breakthroughs’ looked like in an online group setting: “I had to be more aware of the fact that a
breakthrough moment could be so-and-so talked for the first time in the group today. Or someone who hasn’t talked at all shares something in the chat.”

This theme of efforts to adjust online facilitative tactics was ubiquitous in the journals and supervision notes. The facilitators repeatedly wrote and shared about their experiences of engaging in diverse ways to adapt their approaches to enhance member participation. One way they did this was by meeting with their co-facilitators prior to each group session to rehearse discussions and activities for the next session, and to explore additional accommodations, to enhance online communication. For instance, in their journals, they reflected upon the importance of self-disclosure for increasing youth comfort in sharing, while also expressing concern with oversharing and overpowering sessions. Hence, to address this issue, during the pre-group meetings, the facilitators identified which leaders would self-disclose during sessions. In this way, they took turns judiciously sharing certain aspects of their own experiences, such as their own college-going experiences and ways that they sought out help or struggled in their college years. With this tactic, they hoped to reduce the presence of too many adult voices.

The facilitators also adjusted sessions to include more directed questions and interactive activities, rather than relying on talking to elicit sharing. Some noted use of rounds, for drawing out tactics, while Bajes added, “We had to call them by name, or popcorn [i.e., going around and taking turns] sometimes, for them to actually participate.” Finally, in one journal, it was noted that a group participant self-disclosed that they did not like being “called out” directly. Thus, the facilitators sought to balance inviting in members with allowing voluntary participation.

Discussion

The authors explored preservice counselors’ experiences facilitating an online group intervention with first-generation college adolescents who are Black and/or African American and who reside in an urban setting. The online venue posed challenges related to the inability to view clients fully, which reduced counselor comfort in working with clientele of varying different sociocultural identities. Challenges also existed in adapting sessions originally meant for an in-person setting.

Online Barriers

The first and most ubiquitous experience for the facilitators was difficulty in eliciting client engagement. The facilitators expressed frustration at being unable to view, read, and respond to youth body language. They felt challenged by the inability to view their contexts, sensing that these factors were essential to client understanding, connection, and participation.

An additional challenge was youth reticent to share. Rather than verbally speaking up, the group members primarily relied on the chat function to communicate.
They reported that the chat was, at times, “lively” and that group members frequently asked great questions with the medium. Hence, the chat was indeed a meaningful communication medium. However, the group facilitators also felt that it inhibited free-flowing conversation, rendering it difficult to feel connected to and build trust or cohesion across group members. The facilitators perceived that such issues reduced member participation which then, in turn, further impacted the building of trust—in essence, creating a negative cyclical process. Such findings suggest that therapeutic factors critical for group members’ growth (e.g., socializing techniques and interpersonal learning (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) were inhibited due to these communicative barriers.

**Sociocultural Differences as Barriers**

The counselors also perceived barriers to communication due to sociocultural differences between themselves and the clients, from race, age, socioeconomic differences, to geography. These barriers, coupled with online-related challenges to communication, created facilitator sense of disconnect from the youth. This disconnect reduced facilitators’ sense of comfort with identity-related dialogues, such as exploring client experiences of oppression and in modeling their own experiences of bias or oppression. One facilitator, with multiple minoritized identities, expressed a sense of vulnerability and reluctance to address identity-based topics due to her own minoritized identity. Hence, in spite of being with clientele who also possessed a visible minoritized identity, psychological distance was created by the context and venue, even for minoritized counselors.

While client sociocultural identities such as race and gender, and related issues of oppression, are recognized as highly pertinent factors for broaching in counseling settings, counselors in face-to-face settings have shown to struggle with determining which identity markers to broach and how explicit to be in approaching client’s social identities (Bayne & Branco, 2018; Jones & Welfare, 2017). White therapists, in particular, can exhibit anxiety and discomfort around examining racial issues and dynamics with African American clients (Utsey et al., 2005). This is in spite of the fact that researchers have found that a certain degree of counselor cultural comfort, or ease in discussing culture (and related identities), is necessary for enhancing group member cohesion (Kivlighan et al., 2021).

Consequently, the online setting seemed to exacerbate some of these common barriers that counselors can face to multicultural broaching and exploration. Specifically, limited client visuals and verbal sharing, in concert with client-counselor differences and contextual issues of oppression, led to reduced group cohesion. That issue then reduced facilitator comfort and ability to explore important group topics. This finding suggests the need to potentially take a greater amount of time in relationship building when online counseling, particularly when counselors differ in significant ways from clientele. Counselors may seek to apply a greater amount of ice breakers, for instance, as well as to self-disclose more aspects of selves that could facilitate connection through identifying client-counselor similarities.
Tactical Adaptations

To address trust-building and participation issues, the counselors met more frequently to cultivate additional client engagement tactics. Ultimately, they chose to use greater amounts of self-disclosure and drawing out tactics (e.g., using rounds and popcorn share strategies to elicit broader participation) and increased reliance on virtual tools. The tools included Mentimeter, online whiteboard, and chat. These decisions align with prior researchers’ suggestions to alter online counseling tactics to better engage clients, with additional examples being the strategic use of culturally adapted films (Lang et al., 2020), videos, music, and self-knowledge assessments (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016). Scholars have also suggested increasing client trust and participation through candid discussion of the client’s comfort with the virtual modality, and being more directive as compared with in-person therapy (McLean et al., 2021).

Despite the facilitators’ efforts to adapt group tactics to the online setting in this study, issues persisted. In considering other studies related to adolescent online experiences, although none have assessed alliance-building with clients regarding sociocultural differences, several have cited similar challenges related to client preference for the use of chat over verbal communication and in keeping the camera turned off (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016). Researchers have cited these factors as potentially inhibiting the building of group cohesion and development (Kozlowski & Holmes, 2014). Such findings dovetail with other researchers who have found that cohesion is formed more effectively in live settings (Galyon et al., 2016).

Conversely, other researchers of online mental health services have found client ratings of the therapeutic alliance as similar to those (Berger, 2017; Richards et al., 2018) or better than those (Holmes & Foster, 2012; Reynolds et al., 2013; Simpson & Reid, 2014; Watts et al., 2020) of face-to-face therapy. Researchers found that online groups can succeed in achieving client change (Brouzos et al., 2021; Lleras de Frutos et al., 2020; Sapru et al., 2018), though many of these studies focus on adult populations. Such findings suggest that online counseling itself may not necessarily a barrier to effective support services, and that counselors may need instead to adapt tactics specifically to the population at hand and through the use of a greater variety of tools and tactics.

We also considered the possibility that counselors’ negative interpretation of the virtual platform and of counselor-client differences may have impacted their perception of the group and its development. Such perceptions could also have impacted their behaviors, such as counselors acting less warm or engaging, due to their frustration with the venue or to a sense of client disconnect. This changed behavior may have then inhibited youth participation which, in turn, further led to counselors’ sense of disconnect.

A question emerges, then, that if the counselors entered with a deficit framework regarding the clients or the platform used, how might that framing have affected their behaviors which, in turn, may have affected group cohesion, engagement, or client experience of the group overall? The facilitators did acknowledge their pre-conceived notions of the online venue as being less-than or second best. However, while we suspect counselor perception of one’s platform is meaningful and could
potentially negatively impact their behaviors, currently, there is a dearth of literature to support or disconfirm this speculation.

Finally, in a study by Berger (2017), the researcher found that while client alliance rating was found to align with in-person therapy, it was the counselors who rated the alliance outcomes as lower. In our own study, client perception of cohesion or alliance was not measured. Anecdotally, youth written and verbal feedback elicited during sessions for program evaluation purposes only (and so were not reported in this paper) suggests that group participants gained from participation, feeling more prepared for college after attending sessions. Hence, it is unclear how/if the youth were as impacted by communication issues as the facilitators assumed.

Implications

Considering the limited research on facilitators’ experiences with online groups and with youth of varying sociocultural identities (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016), this article fills an important gap in the literature in regard to the improvement of online group facilitative practices, particularly for adolescent groups with clients of varying sociocultural identities. For instance, in light of the challenges experienced by the facilitators in this study in stimulating conversation and deepening member cohesion and connection, visuals may be all the more important to the development of such groups. Hence, concerted efforts could be made to encourage group members to keep cameras on, potentially eliciting member input as to what might best make this happen.

In addition, eliciting client feedback of the virtual experiences and of their sense of group cohesion during an online group experience seems essential (Guth et al., 2021). Particular attention should be paid, in future studies, to the impacts of client-counselor differences via online venues. The counselors voiced certain assumptions regarding youth experience, yet counselor assumptions have proven, at times, to be inaccurate when compared to that of the client (Maeschalck et al., 2019). Consequently, eliciting client feedback in a targeted manner can provide direction in ways to better address any differences among counselor versus client perceptions, and allow counselors to more accurately assess and adapt to client stated needs (Burlingame et al., 2018; de Jong et al., 2021).

Beyond eliciting more targeted client feedback, supervision that directly addresses and explores solutions to the many challenges experienced by facilitators in this study is important. Considering the increasing use of online group support for individuals, particularly those with minoritized identities (Hai et al., 2021), it is important to better understand supervisory tactics in cross-cultural online services, as researchers have found distance or online clinical supervision to be equally effective as face-to-face counselor supports (Woo et al., 2020a). Supervisors can draw from important online group standards, such as those cited in this article, as well as recommend best practices, such as requiring that counselors hold at least one meeting in person with clients before online services when possible (CAN & HPSO, 2020).
Bearing in mind the presence and potential impacts of counselor attitudes toward online services in this study, supervisors for online therapists would ideally explore any such preconceived notions or biases counselor trainees bring with them and collaboratively assess the impacts of such notions on the group in an ongoing manner. In addition, both supervisors and facilitators of online groups must be trained on the virtual platforms or tools that will be implemented, as well as on tactics for translating any in-person group techniques to the virtual environment (Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006; Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016).

Attention to these guidelines and practice may be even more important when working across sociodemographic differences, as counselor-client identity differences, in concert with the online setting in this study, seemed to increase barriers to communication. In a training setting, the supervisory process would ideally work to air counselor discomfort and process tactics for better joining with clients of differing identities (Kivlighan et al., 2021). This requires that the supervisor also possesses a comfort level and experience in engaging in such conversations, with an ability to model such tactics (Williams et al. 2021). Additional cohesion-building activities may be necessary with an online venue and, when working across client-counselor differences, to enhance rapport. Finally, regardless of the venue for the services provided, counselors working to address the college and career success of minoritized youth and engaging in antiracist counselor practices can affect greater equity and access for clients in these areas (van Mastrigt & Estrada, 2021).

**Limitations and Suggested Future Studies**

Considering this study’s focus on a group in one setting and a specific population, findings may not be transferable to all virtual group counseling experiences. In addition, while youth feedback was elicited verbally and in a written manner by facilitators as a means of informing the group process, the inability to obtain parental consent during a time of duress (a global pandemic) prohibited the collection and analysis of youth feedback on the group experience and their interactions with facilitators as a data source for this study. Future studies of online group experiences could collect and analyze client feedback, as well as cohesion levels and behavior changes, to corroborate, or elaborate upon, the process, experiences, and impacts of an online group.

The group facilitators in this study were graduate students in training, and therefore, more experienced counselors might have different perspectives and experiences of such an intervention. Future studies should also consider how counselors’ attitudes and skills related to online services impact client participation as well as the therapeutic alliance. Researchers could seek to determine how virtual counseling services may differ for counselors and clientele with minoritized identities, taking the context and multiple counselor and client intersecting identities into consideration (de Jong et al., 2021).

One further concern included the data collection process itself. The research team attempted to interview all participants separately, but due to scheduling, two of the...
participants were interviewed at the same time. The researchers acknowledge that the two facilitators may have influenced one another via their responses. However, to minimize the impact of this issue, the interview facilitator made a point to ask each participant to respond individually. The two facilitators also notably had differing responses to questions and seemed comfortable sharing different perspectives.

**Conclusion**

Findings in this study add to a growing body of research suggesting that in-person group interventions can successfully be adapted for virtual settings, albeit with complications (Kneeland et al., 2021). With a lack of visuals, additional efforts must be made by counselors to connect with clients via additional tools and tactics. Work across sociocultural differences can add an additional element of consideration, with the need to openly address, through supervision, ways to connect counselors with students, to enhance counselor cultural comfort, and build cohesion so necessary to client outcomes (Kivlighan et al., 2021).

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**Declarations**

**Ethical Approval** This study has been approved by Villanova University’s Institutional Review Board as Exempt Research: IRB-FY2021-97.

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