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# Differences that Make a Difference: Diversity and the Process Group Leader

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## ABSTRACT

*Traditional group therapy often does not directly address how group leaders can work with oppression and marginalization that occurs between group members. Many group psychotherapists believe that attention to social justice concerns is not within their roles as group leaders and, consequently, may not address issues of member oppression and marginalization. Conflict emerging out of cultural differences can have far-reaching consequences if not accurately identified and effectively managed by group leaders. The purpose of this article is to provide an understanding of factors that contribute to group leaders fostering a climate that facilitates an exploration of cultural issues, along with clinical examples illustrating diversity-related issues that may arise.*

There is very little difference between one person and another, but what little difference there is ... is very important. (James, 1897)

**I**n 1942, Sam Slavson, joined by others, founded the American Group Psychotherapy Association. Only a few years later (1949),

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Slavson was curious about how racial and cultural factors influenced the nature of group psychotherapy. Determined to find answers, he developed a questionnaire and circulated it among professional colleagues in several European countries. The survey included the question: "Please state the modifications in the application of group psychotherapy that have to be made because of the inherent characteristics of the culture of your country." Dr. Slavson did not receive a single reply to this.

More recently, Shay and Caffaro (2017) wrote:

Ethnic or cultural diversity was not represented at the 1942 founding of AGPA, in the 1951 inaugural issues of the journal, or in subsequent years; it is only minimally represented in the journal's pages now. There is clearly significant work to be done in this area both in the journal and in our organization. (p. S241)

**C**onsiderable progress has been made over the past half century toward answering Slavson's original question. However, we still struggle to determine how cultural and ethnic differences interact with group psychotherapy process and learning. A review of current group psychotherapy practice suggests that traditional group theory (e.g., Cooper, Hudson, Kranzberg, & Motherwell, 2017) often does not directly address how group leaders should work with oppression and marginalization that occur between group members (Smith & Shin, 2008).

Race and ethnicity have been and still are topics that evoke discomfort and anxiety in clinical settings, including group psychotherapy, and therefore are often treated as taboo. Oppression is often allowed to occur in such group settings because group members' privilege is left unchecked and unchallenged (Black & Stone, 2005). Many group psychotherapists believe that attention to social justice concerns is not within their roles as group leaders (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008), so they may not address issues of member oppression and marginalization (Burnes & Ross, 2010). Inattention to group process with regard to members' diversity and privilege statuses may be re-traumatizing to group members who have survived sociocultural

oppression in their worlds outside the group (Wright, 2000). Eason (2009) suggests that it is critical for group leaders to understand the impact of ideological racism and institutional discrimination due to the heightened potential for recapitulation of relations between members who hold privilege in a certain cultural group and group members who do not. When a group member or leader is identified as being from a cultural group based on racial or ethnic identity, there is little understanding of the effects of racialized or culturally insensitive remarks on group process and outcome. Additionally, we know little about the effects on group process of implicit racism, broadly defined as an individual's utilization of unconscious biases when making judgments about people from different racial and ethnic groups (Feagin, 2000; Nadal, 2018).

Facilitating difficult dialogues related to social justice issues in group requires some combination of self-awareness, cultural sensitivity, and courage. These facilitation skills, comparable to group therapy skills but in addition inclusive of a critical consciousness and awareness of one's own personal bias and prejudices, are not simple to master. Understanding group dynamics, getting group members to listen and hear one another, and acknowledging and validating the strong feelings likely to arise in a difficult dialogue are all necessary skills important in achieving a successful outcome (Willow, 2008; Young, 2003), but not sufficient in producing a culturally sensitive competent group leader.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF A RELATIONAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ORIENTATION**

At first it may appear obvious: Interpersonal relationships between group members of different ethnic and cultural groups are at the heart of what ordinarily constitutes "process" group interaction. However, the group leader's reliable and consistent application of social justice principles to relational events transpiring in group requires more—namely, the elevation of such principles to equal status with more traditionally revered psychodynamic principles such as authenticity, here-and-now interaction, and the value of insight in determining therapeutic outcome. According to Singh, Merchant, Skudrzyk, and Ingene (2012), the term *social justice* refers to the

influences of both privilege and oppression that shape the well-being of individuals, groups, and communities. A social justice orientation also pertains to our clinical work; cultural forces operate at largely unconscious levels and contribute to our current societal polarization—they decrease our willingness to talk openly about such matters while simultaneously increasing their clinical relevance in our process groups. There is consensus that group process elicits feelings about one's own ethnic group with greater intensity than individual therapy (Salvendy, 1999). Therefore, it is likely that authentic relationships between group members will be shaped by ethnic, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic differences. What is also likely is that more of the group leader's authentic feelings will be elicited in the group than in individual therapy, as the former resembles real life much more. This suggests the importance of a group leader's thinking in terms of co-creation and a two-person psychology. Group members have the opportunity to understand how they are co-creating problematic relationships as the group becomes a relational microcosm of each member's life (Caffaro, 2015; Goldberg & Hoyt, 2015; Whittingham, 2018). The interface between the leader's capacity to attend to group process while simultaneously addressing diversity-related concerns is also relevant. For example, specific ways of relating in the group (e.g., silence, avoidance of certain topics, not sharing emotion and inner thought processes) have been traditionally conceptualized as problematic. However, such relational styles may also reflect coping strategies to deal with oppression experienced from others.

Rather than focusing solely on roles that are specific to group process and dynamics, a leader can endeavor to see group members' roles as shaped by issues of privilege and oppression, in addition to the role that they have as a group member. In essence, diversity-related concerns often present in a group as manifestations of two polar constructs—an emphasis on issues related to hypervisibility (e.g., focusing on one aspect of a member's identity) and/or invisibility (e.g., ignoring or minimizing unique differences). A culturally sensitive competent group leader views the emergence of diversity-related issues as the process is actually and presently happening in his or her group—they are one and the same.

Much of this article's focus is on how to address diversity-related concerns in the context of heterogeneous groups, where ethnically or

racially different members partake along with White group members, who often form the majority. This is not meant to suggest or imply a lack of importance to the effects of intersectionality in homogeneous groups; within-group differences (i.e., sexual identity, disability, religion, levels of acculturation, etc.) and their intersection with cultural identity are as important as differences between groups. In recognition of this reality, we offer one clinical illustration of an ethnically homogeneous group where levels of acculturation clearly intersect with cultural identity and create a unique opportunity to address intercultural conflict.

### **Relational Microcosms Can Include Cultural Insensitivity**

Issues related to cultural insensitivity actively expressed in group include the possibility of being experienced as both isomorphic events similar to a minority group member's real-world environment, and real events in the room. In such cases, the group leader's increased awareness and experience with "difference" is crucial for moving the group forward. Group leaders must continually examine and identify their own cultural bias and how bias may impede the effective facilitation of the group. However, fear of offending members or discomfort with addressing diversity issues makes addressing social justice-related issues in groups more challenging. Additionally, group leaders may lack the emotional regulation skills necessary to remain grounded and balanced while facilitating emotionally dysregulated communication between members (Champe, Okech, & Rubel, 2013).

### **Clinical Illustration 1**

A minority group leader was co-leading an ongoing process group in a university counseling center with a male colleague; she and two other group members were the only three people of color in the room. Angie, a Mexican American student, raised the issue of race in the first group session. The minority co-leader said to the group, "How do you all feel when there is a conversation about race in the first session of our group?" The group largely ignored the prompt and no one seemed to be interested in discussing it any further. In the next few

sessions, Angie continued to raise racial issues and the group dismissed her by either not responding or changing the subject.

Angie gradually became the group pariah. Each time she spoke about race or her experiences of microaggression on campus, the group went through uncomfortable silence and tension. In a group session following our country's recent change in immigration policy, Angie looked distressed. She wanted to talk about her feelings connected to the revised immigration policy but was stopped by Laura, who said, "I don't want to talk about politics. This is *not* how I want to spend our group time." The minority leader addressed Laura directly. "Laura, I am hearing you say you don't want to talk about politics but I am wondering if you can also consider the possibility that this policy change might be important for Angie to process in here?" Laura replied, "I don't like feeling accused by her all the time that because I am White I am somehow responsible for the bad things that have happened to her." The group appeared to align with Laura and proceeded to discuss other issues. Meanwhile, there was a loud student protest related to the immigration policy change happening directly outside of the group room. At first, the group refused to acknowledge it, but as it became louder and louder, it seemed to silence the group. The minority leader asked, "What's going on right now in the room; what are people thinking or feeling?" Angie stated, "I am tired of being the angry brown woman in this group!" The minority leader gently replied, "I understand. It seems like every time you bring up the issue of race, no one in the group responds to you. You don't want to be the only one who cares about racial issues in the group. You feel very alone." People remained silent and the minority leader asked the group, "What does it say about us as a group that we make Angie the angry brown woman here? What do we do as a group to put her in that role?"

Several group members told Angie how uncomfortable they felt whenever she brings up the racial issues with frustration and anger. Some of them felt "bad" about being a White person and "helpless" about Angie's microaggressive experiences on campus; they didn't know how to respond. Others felt annoyed because they somehow felt accused by Angie's disclosures and didn't want to feel responsible for the discrimination by others toward minorities, but they chose to hide their anger. The group members slowly began to acknowledge

that their silence made Angie more frustrated and angry. They were gradually able to validate Angie's experiences outside and inside the group, talk about how their interaction in group was influenced by cultural issues, and acknowledge how they had shaped Angie into her role of "the angry brown woman" in the group.

### **Inter- and Intracultural Group Conflict**

The view of conflict as an inevitable and positive component of group development has long held sway in the practice of group psychotherapy (DeLucia-Waack & Donigian, 2004; Kline, 2003; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). However, conflict in groups has also been associated with the presence of opposing cultural views, which may emerge in everything from language to relational patterns (DeLucia-Waack & Donigian, 2004; Kline, 2003; Rubel & Okech, 2010) and can be destructive to group development if mishandled (Camacho, 2002; Kline, 2003). Group conflict emerging out of cultural differences can have far-reaching consequences if not identified and effectively managed by group leaders (Kline, 2003; Singh et al., 2012). Culture influences the nature, expression, and management of conflict in a group; it shapes how conflict is experienced, and therefore ways in which conflict is navigated (Loode, 2011). We believe group leaders have a responsibility to manage manifestations of intercultural conflict by encouraging members to address differences and express their feelings, while simultaneously setting limits on appropriate behavior within the group.

There may also be unique differences in the way that ethnically heterogeneous and homogeneous process groups manage conflict. For example, Western-influenced values of encouraging emotional expression, working through interpersonal conflicts, and confronting an authority figure (i.e., group leader) in front of peers may not be nearly as important as saving face to members of a gender-specific or ethnic-specific group. Likewise, facilitating direct contact between members regarding how they feel about each other may be anxiety-provoking and extremely threatening to group members from another culture with different social cultural norms. Garvin and Reed (1983) long ago demonstrated the pervasiveness of gender influence on the differential experience of men and women in same-sex and mixed groups. Each group member



enters a group with her or his own personal/social frame of reference; group formation is somewhat dependent on the successful intersection of these individual frames of reference.

### **Clinical Illustration 2**

In a Mandarin-speaking group composed of seven Chinese women, Alicia, absent for two consecutive sessions, showed up about 30 minutes late. The group was distracted by Alicia's entry. At an appropriate time, the group leader turned to Alicia and said, "Alicia, we have not seen you for a while. How are you?" She replied, "I am doing well, thank you." An awkward silence came over the group. Jean broke it by stating, "Yeah, we have not seen you for a long time; I thought you decided to drop out." Alicia somewhat defensively replied, "I was absent for only two sessions; once I had to go to the DMV office and the other time I had to study—I couldn't make it." Jean looked away with frustration. The leader turned to the group and asked, "I wonder how Alicia's absence has influenced each of you?" Jean began, "Well, everybody had personal business to take care of, but we made a commitment to participate in this group; therefore, we should make it a priority. When Alicia did not show up twice, the group was obligated to help her catch up and now has to check in with her about what's going on instead of staying on our path of deepening our conversation." Others remained silent while Jean continued, "Even in sessions when she did attend, she was restless and often looking out the window. I don't know if she was present in the group." Alicia, looking embarrassed, replied, "I did not know that I had so much bad influence on the group. I am very sorry. I did not give people eye contact but I was actually listening to what people were saying." Jean angrily replied, "Is your apology from the bottom of your heart or is it just a way to get me off your back?"

The group leader asked, "How does everyone feel about the interaction between Alicia and Jean?" Three group members expressed their priority of making a commitment to the group. Two others, Chen and Huang, told Jean that she is "too direct"—her behavior was "shaming Alicia in public." They suggested she express her frustration in private with Alicia outside of the group. They also told Jean that she should "save Alicia's face" after she apologized to the group, instead of questioning the genuineness of her

apology. Chen stated (to Jean), "As a woman, you should not be so direct and confrontational. You can be softer and use the power of your gentleness to express your anger. For example, you can say to Alicia, 'we have not seen you for a long time. You are very important to us and we all miss you very much. How have you been?'" Huang added, "After Alicia apologized, you should drop the issue and save her face for her. If you really do not like her you can choose to emotionally withdraw and gradually distance from her by acknowledging that you are not the same kind of people. You don't need to break the harmony in the group." Their comments sent Jean into shame and self-loathing. She began tearing up and announced that she was not coming back to the group.

The group leader turned to Jean: "Our cultural norm is not to express negative feelings directly and openly, not to have conflict in public, and save people's face as much as possible. Though we are all women, we may have different expectations about what it means to be a woman. It's very courageous of you to speak so honestly in here. I see the tears in your eyes. Would you be willing to share what's it like to hear Chen and Huang's feedback?" Looking down, Jean said, "I think people hate me now. People will not remember the good things I have done in the group; they will only remember how I confronted Alicia." Jean continued to avoid looking at the group and sank into her chair while quietly stating, "I became pushy and questioned Alicia's apology because I am afraid she is upset with me and she used an apology to end the conversation instead of telling me her true feelings." The group leader continued, "Can you tell Alicia about your fear of her disliking you?" Jean said, "No, I can't do it. I don't want to talk about my emotions in the group." The group leader continued to offer support to Jean: "Can you tell Alicia it's too hard for you to talk about emotions?" This time Jean summoned the courage to say, "It's very hard to talk about my feelings in here. I think people hate me." Rachel and Ivy immediately told Jean how brave she was to say something they did not have courage to say in the group even though they both agreed that Alicia's absence negatively affected the group process.

Despite the group leader's continued efforts to facilitate member-to-member interaction, focus on the here-and-now and emotional expression, several group members continued to believe that the best way to handle conflict was through private conversation, or not to address the conflict at all. The group valued saving face and

harmony more than constructive interpersonal feedback. The intersection of traditional Chinese social cultural norms with members' differing levels of acculturation resulted in mixed reactions. Some members clearly valued the opportunity for honest and direct emotional expression, while others had difficulty appreciating the experiential process and perceived this level of interpersonal interaction as shameful and a loss of social integrity; they did not necessarily believe that resolving conflicts would bring them closer, nor did they see confrontation as a helpful means to deepening interpersonal connection.

Speaking directly about negative feelings in a group may make some feel overly exposed regardless of the group's level of cohesion. Group members from non-Western cultures where emotional self-control is emphasized may experience the sharing of personal feelings as a violation of norms around emotional expression and in conflict with internalized cultural beliefs and expectations (Lin, 2018). If group leaders can help these members acknowledge and talk about why it's too hard for them to share feelings in a group, it may help remaining members to understand what their silence may possibly mean, facilitate empathy, and make the group a more culturally sensitive setting.

*What about accents?* Accents have a strong and immediate impact on the listener; they serve as an immediate cue to the speaker's ethnicity and background and consequently are a primary source of discrimination, followed only by other evidence of national background and race (Fuentes, Potere, & Ramirez, 2002). Speech accents have been shown to affect interpersonal evaluations in areas such as the speakers' competence, expertness, professional status, social attractiveness, personality, and similarity with the listener. They also serve as a judgment heuristic in determining the in-group/out-group status of the speaker (Lambert, 1995). Such judgments are often automatic and unconscious, with genuine potential to affect group process.

An accented leader seen as an "out-group" member may be perceived as foreign, different, or potentially unable to share a common perspective or shared or constructed reality with a group member. Group leaders who speak English with an accent may also have to combat their own negative, internalized ideas about accents. Discriminative behaviors, including microaggressions, may be enacted

against the accented group leader. Further, evidence (Fuentes et al., 2002) suggests that group member recall and comprehension of information diminish with accented speech. In the following illustration, an accented group leader's effective intervention is misattributed to her co-leader.

### **Clinical Illustration 3**

Li, a Chinese doctoral-level group clinician, spoke in supervision about feeling invisible. She struggled to find her voice in social situations, often feeling ignored or dismissed even when she made efforts to comment. During one supervision meeting, she began to make a connection between her role as a group leader and what she experienced in her everyday life.

"It does not matter how many times I facilitate a process group, my heart pumps faster when I enter a room full of White group members. Once I start talking with a noticeable accent, it's even more impossible to ignore the difference between me and the rest of the group. My difference is protected by my professional role as the group leader—We don't have to talk about the discomfort, subtle hostility, or their difficulty relating to me but I still feel it."

Li went on to describe her experience co-leading a heterogeneous group with a Korean American co-leader, Debbie, who spoke without an accent. During the first session, group members spent considerable time talking about nonthreatening topics. One member, Sara, persistently questioned each group member about their academic year level—were they freshman, sophomore, and so on—and at some point, others appeared impatient. Li said, "Sara, people's year level seems to be very important to you. Sometimes when people ask questions, there is a statement they want to make behind their questions. I wonder if there a statement you want to make behind your question about year level?" Sara appeared a bit uneasy about the interaction and looked away. Suddenly, she teared up and stated, "I am really anxious and scared because I have not been able to fit in any social group on campus even though I am already a sophomore." Others quickly offered support by sharing similar fears about how they might not fit in here and the group began to engage on a deeper level. Near the end of the session, Debbie checked in with the group regarding

how everyone felt about the meeting. Sara, looking directly at Debbie, shared how much she appreciated the question that Debbie had posed to her regarding whether she had a statement to make when she was asking others' questions. Debbie smiled, without acknowledging that it was Li who had intervened, and the group ended.

The supervisor listened empathically as Li described her struggle to both understand and make sense of what had happened in group. She suggested to Li that it might be important to speak more directly to Debbie about their interaction. Li felt both empowered and frightened by the prospect of speaking with her co-leader but also immediately understood that such an encounter might have great value. The supervisor agreed, and in a subsequent meeting with the co-leaders, Li shared her pain around feeling invisible, as well as a sense of loss at the lack of acknowledgment in group for her intervention with Sara. Debbie readily acknowledged how Li's intervention effectively deepened the group interaction that day. She apologized and spoke honestly about feeling competitive with Li: By not acknowledging Li's intervention in group, Debbie gained a slight edge in the power differential between them. Her desire to be seen as "more competent" was intensified by their gender and ethnic similarities. Li acknowledged how her fear of being "different" and shame about her accent also affected their power differential. The two women marveled at what they shared in common and their respective differences also became clearer.

### CONCLUSION

Group leaders have a specific call to recognize and address interpersonal dynamics related to ethnic and culture diversity among members as part of the group psychotherapy process. Diversity-related issues of oppression may play out in interactions and relationships between and among group members and leaders. Group leaders who adopt a relational orientation within a social justice framework appear well suited to successfully address these dynamics. Group researchers and clinicians are encouraged to explore how the inherent characteristics of culturally and ethnically diverse group members influence the application of relational group psychotherapy practice and how findings about this phenomenon can be incorporated into group psychotherapy training.

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