

# 3 Multicultural Issues in Group Work

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## Preview

Members and leaders bring diverse worldviews to group experiences; the purpose of this chapter is to get you thinking about these diverse characteristics and how you can both harness and accommodate these special gifts to interpersonal interactions. Group work with diverse members is addressed using oppression and marginalization as the frameworks from which group leaders can conceptualize group members' problems, behaviors, and actions. Because research indicates that people from oppressed backgrounds (e.g., ethnic minorities, disabled persons, the materially poor, gay and lesbian persons) are more likely to avoid counseling experiences, to drop out prematurely from counseling, and to report lower outcomes, it is important that group leaders become more responsive to member experiences of discrimination, prejudice, and inequities. Leaders can act to prevent or address these issues in the group. Also, because oppressed and marginalized persons are accustomed to being silenced, made to feel inferior, and having no voice, leaders must be skilled in working with members who are quiet, suspicious, pessimistic, cynical, and even angry. Second, how issues of oppression and marginalization may influence each stage of the group process will be introduced. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion of dilemmas that may arise when implementing groups with culturally diverse members.

## Multicultural Issues in Group Work

Whether through varying communication styles, language, sexual orientation, abilities, ethnicity and race, beliefs, behaviors, or perceptions, every group will

be influenced by the cultural backgrounds of its members. In essence, a group becomes a social microcosm whereby the group members' values, beliefs, prejudices, cultural biases, and past experiences are played out in the group setting. With the increasing diversity of today's society, the need for more culturally competent work among group leaders is critical and has received much attention (ASGW, 2012). This is particularly relevant for today's schools, where more than one-third of the population is comprised of students of color.

From a multicultural perspective, several goals or frameworks are important to consider when working with multicultural groups. For example, Bemak and Chung (2004) believed that group leaders working with culturally heterogeneous group members should: (1) foster acceptance and respect for diversity within and between group members, and (2) promote social justice and social change among members and the communities the leaders represent.

Historically, group work has been based predominantly on Eurocentric models of therapy and counseling, with very little attention paid to working across cultures. Recently the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW, 2012) adopted the *Multicultural and Social Justice Competence Principles for Group Workers*. These principles serve as a guide for multicultural training, practice, and research and marked the beginning of a movement to address multicultural and diversity issues in group work. Gladding (2016) cited three reasons for the delay in addressing culture and diversity in groups. First, he contended that the death of Kurt Lewin in 1947 marked the end of the first movement to include cultural aspects of group work. In the 1940s, Lewin and his associates began a movement to train community leaders to use group work as a means to reduce tensions among interracial groups and to facilitate changes in racially biased attitudes. Gladding believed that the emphasis on reducing racial tension among groups and through group work ended when Lewin died.

Second, Gladding (2016) attributed the delay in addressing cultural issues in group work to the fact that culturally different group members were not considered to be significantly different from dominant group members. In other words, professional counselors believed that it would be best to be color-blind or that issues of race and culture did not have an influence on one's presenting problems. As a result of the multicultural movement in counseling, however, the color-blind approach was deemed inappropriate, unethical, and eventually abandoned.

Finally, Gladding (2016) stated that many counseling professionals did not believe that cultural minority group members' behaviors and attitudes had a significant effect on group dynamics. However, more recent thinking indicated that culture can become the foundation from which a group functions. For instance, ethnically or racially diverse members may bring their negative and faulty stereotypical beliefs about one another to a group, creating disharmony and distrust among members.

There are various definitions of multiculturalism found in the counseling literature. The multicultural movement has defined culture in a narrower manner,

including only ethnic and racial differences. However, culture can and should be defined broadly to include demographic (e.g., age, gender, sexual orientation) and status (e.g., economic, social, disability) factors. For the sake of clarity, this chapter applies the broadest definition of culture because all of these groups can experience oppression and marginalization. Also, if this broad definition is used, then it is in keeping with the fact that all group work is multicultural. In addition, definitions of the terms *diverse persons*, *minorities*, and *nondominant* will be the same as delineated in the *ASGW Multicultural and Social Justice Competence Principles for Group Workers* (2012). The principles stated that “non-dominant” and “target populations” are

groups of persons who historically, in the United States, do not have equal access to power, money, certain privileges (such as access to mental health services because of financial constraints, or the legal right to marry, in the case of a gay or lesbian couple) and/or the ability to influence or initiate social policy because of unequal representation in government and politics.

(p. 7)

## **Oppression and Marginalization**

Oppression manifests differently in varying contexts. For that reason, it is impossible to identify a single set of criteria that describes oppression. Generally, oppression refers to the unjust use of authority, force, or societal norms and laws to exert control over individuals, a people, or a group. More specifically and contextually important, oppression includes situations of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Zutlevics, 2002). As oppression intensifies and progresses through individualized and systemic manifestations, it may lead to denigration, dehumanization, and scapegoating (i.e., blaming the oppressed for societal problems). Underlying this progression is the faulty belief that the target of oppression is less than or inferior to those of the dominant culture. For instance, a long history of oppression in U.S. schools may have led some educators to believe that students of color, particularly African American and Latino and Latina students, are less intelligent or intellectually inferior to White and Asian students. In turn, this faulty belief has led to the achievement gap and lower expectations for many people of color.

Marginalization, one of the specific contexts of oppression, must be seen in reference to the dominant group. Marginalization is the social process of becoming excluded from or existing outside mainstream society or a given group. Given this dominant group reference, marginalization oddly places individuals of the target group on the outside or fringes of the dominant culture while simultaneously placing them inside the dominant culture (Hays & Erford, 2018). This outside/inside orientation has social, psychological, political, and economic consequences. Persons from marginalized and oppressed

backgrounds often feel as if they will not receive equality, justice, or fair treatment. These beliefs stem from their experiences with discrimination, racism, sexism, injustice, and other types of oppression.

Another important consideration for leaders is the concept of invisible diversity. Even if all of the members have the same skin color or gender, differences in socioeconomic levels, disability, beliefs, and values prevail. The multiculturally competent group leader is aware of potential invisible diversity among members and addresses issues of oppression and marginalization that stem from it.

### ***Diversity Issues Throughout Group Development***

Oppression and its specific structure of marginalization have implications for group development. Before the group is formed, during the planning phase, leaders are primarily concerned with determining group needs and member characteristics. These issues, although simply stated, are actually quite complex. In particular, determining who may benefit most from a specific group experience requires a series of leader decisions and selections. Each of these leader decisions has implications for culture and for the potential manifestation of the related issues of oppression and marginalization.

Heterogeneous groups, by definition, involve members of diverse cultural identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, gender). Due to historical, social, and economic factors, there are often power differentials between members of these various groups. Consequently, some members of these cultural groups experience levels of oppression and marginalization that will undoubtedly emerge as the group social microcosm struggles to develop a sense of cohesion. While the emergence and discussion of these issues may lead to some anxiety, they should not be ignored. Indeed, the discussion of such issues may increase group cohesion. Group cohesion is significant for the effective movement through all aspects of group work, including matters of commitment and attendance, goal and norm establishment, and process factors. Although the issues of oppression and marginalization may be more visible in heterogeneous groups (e.g., groups with male and female members, groups with African American and Asian American members), these issues may also emerge in seemingly homogeneous groups. For example, members of a women's group on stress management may need to address marginalization if the subculture dynamics of stay-at-home moms, working moms, and women who do not have children emerge. Ideally, group leaders should explore these issues during the group preselection interviews and the planning phase.

As group work begins in the forming and orienting stage, members struggle to find their place. Trust, safety, and avoidance of rejection are central to this stage of group development. Effective leaders use a variety of skills to assist members in developing a strong sense of security. However, effective leaders must move beyond traditional counseling skills and techniques to address these same issues for group members who may be oppressed or marginalized.

In particular, in the forming and orienting stage, group leaders must recognize that the effective development of trust not only occurs between the actual group members but also between the sociopolitical identities that are often played out and stereotyped in society at large. Although this task can be overwhelming, it may be necessary to recognize, in verbal and nonverbal ways, the dehumanizing and weighty baggage that society places on marginalized people. For example, bullying is a form of discrimination, usually against marginalized persons. Until this often unspoken and disregarded reality is acknowledged, trust, safety, and avoidance of rejection may not be possible. If safety, trust, and avoidance of rejection are not established, the greater societal misconceptions that are characteristic at this early stage of group development may be maintained and prohibit deeper, more authentic levels of member growth and exploration.

Different leaders use differing strategies to address these issues, but most leaders bring these issues into the open to allow members to discuss and deal with them in a supportive environment. Growth, understanding, and trust seldom occur when issues of oppression or marginalization are glossed over or treated as taboo topics. As will be discussed in the planning chapter (Chapter 7), recruiting and screening of group members prior to initiating group work is critical. It is essential that leaders become aware of the cultural and ethnic identities of potential members in order to plan for or at least anticipate issues that may arise later in the group.

The transition stage of group development, characterized by struggles for power and control and the building of group cohesiveness, also requires specific group leader functions. The culturally competent group leader recognizes that building awareness, providing support, and modeling must include the potential needs of marginalized members. While recognizing and dealing with potential conflicts and resistance are a leader's primary tasks when facilitating a group's movement through the transition stage, it would be negligent and unethical to fail to address social and political issues that may underlie the emerging group conflicts or resistance. For example, a transition stage conflict that emerges in a male and female adult group on commitment may be fueled not only by the members' anxiety about the group experience, but also by concerns tied to societal power differentials between men and women. To ensure that such a group moves effectively through this stage of development, a skilled group leader must assist the group in effectively managing the surface-level conflicts while simultaneously addressing the underlying social and political issues of gender as appropriate. This assistance can include imparting information on the history and politics of gender and issues of gender socialization to the group members in developmentally appropriate ways. Disclosed in appropriate and sensitive ways, this information may inform and inspire creative and effective solutions for members and their individual behavioral situations and needs. The group leader can also continue to explore and develop his or her own awareness of knowledge and skills related to gender preferences in counseling and the relation of gender and value structure. These topics are

discussed elsewhere in this chapter. The extent to which these knowledge and skills sets should be introduced into group work depends on a number of factors, including the developmental level of the group members and the degree to which the particular cultural factor is salient for individual group members and for the group as a unit.

Oppression and marginalization must be vigorously addressed during the working and termination stages of group work. Typically, during these stages, members begin to acquire new insights, behaviors, and skills that are first practiced in the group and then integrated into the members' lives beyond the group. Group leaders should safeguard the group environment so that individualized and systemic applications of oppression do not form barriers for members during this significant time of growth and exploration. While this practice may unfortunately be impossible beyond the group setting, group members can explore the realities of social injustice and come to understand and adapt newly acquired behaviors and skills in ways that are culturally relevant and personally empowering. For example, a leader working with a group of African American students of any age on academic achievement can help the members discover growth-engendering strategies that promote school success. While the strategies may not affect the societal injustices of oppression in any measurable way, acknowledgment and discussion of the dynamic, particularly as it relates to the academic achievement gap, educational opportunities, and learning outcomes, could provide the group members with valuable information and insight that could acknowledge and validate their personal experiences and ultimately fuel their commitment to maximized academic performance. In contrast, denying or ignoring the existence of oppression and its effects on the African American population could prove detrimental. Failing to address, discuss, and act on oppression perpetuates oppression.

Leaders must consider the relevance and developmental levels of members in order to accurately assess the extent and manner in which these should be introduced into group work. For example, the manner in which a leader facilitates group exploration of oppression and achievement with second-grade children or seventh-grade students may differ from the way the leader could appropriately address the same issue with twelfth-grade adolescents, young adults, or senior citizens.

### **Group Leadership and Oppression**

To combat oppression and marginalization, group leaders must first engage in a process of self-exploration. By exploring their feelings about their own cultural and political identities, group leaders become more culturally sensitive to others' differences. This process of developing a sense of cultural awareness also causes group leaders to take into account how they experience their own cultural differences and how their experiences and beliefs may affect their interactions with members from other backgrounds. Leaders should become very familiar with the *Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling*

*Competencies* (Ratts et al., 2015) and explore their own attitudes, beliefs, and values regarding diversity and marginalization.

Before implementing groups with diverse members, it is also important for group leaders to explore and understand the complexities of oppression and how members from historically oppressed cultural groups may view the group process and the leader. When group leaders recognize that group members come to the group with various perspectives based on their experiences with oppression, they are better equipped to help group members process their thoughts and feelings and to overcome any cultural conflict in the group. The reality of ethnic and racial superiority themes in our society, as well as classism, sexism, and the history of depriving certain groups of rights and resources, should all be considered when exploring one's cultural self-awareness.

Group leaders should also be open to the differences exhibited by diverse people. It is important for group leaders to be accepting and nonjudgmental about the values, lifestyles, beliefs, and behaviors of others and to appreciate difference and diversity (Toseland & Rivas, 2016). Because group work tends to be based on Eurocentric values, leaders must be cognizant of the fact that members of culturally diverse backgrounds may have values that conflict with the norms of many group members and leaders. For instance, being on time and taking turns to speak are two societal norms for Eurocentric persons that may not be the expectation of other cultural groups.

It is also important for a group leader to learn about the backgrounds of client groups. Leaders can gain cultural knowledge through researching literature pertaining to particular cultural groups, consulting with members of a particular cultural group, or by visiting a cultural community and becoming a participant observer. Living or spending time in a cultural community (i.e., immersion) can help a group leader better understand the common values, norms of behavior, and worldviews held by members of a particular culture, in all of its contextual richness and without stereotyping.

If immersion is not possible, a group leader might go through the process of social mapping, which consists of observing and analyzing formal and informal relationships among members of a community. For instance, a leader conducting a group for adolescent boys in a community where a majority of its students are African American and Latino could observe classrooms, special school activities, and after-school programs, as well as meet with parents and other community members, to get their perspective on the needs of boys in the community.

Group leaders must also attempt to learn how members self-identify. It is important for leaders to be aware of the politically correct reference to groups, but most important, to be sensitive to how group members want to be identified. If a leader is in doubt as to a group member's cultural or racial identification, the group leader should ask and spend time discussing the issue openly. For instance, a group leader may ask a group member, "Carlos, I notice that you refer to yourself as a Chicano, rather than Hispanic or Latino. Would you mind telling us more about what that label means to you?" It is important for

the group leader to demonstrate respect for the group member as well as interest in knowing more about the group member's cultural background. If the group member appears uncomfortable with the request for more cultural information, the group leader should then accept the member's feelings and decision not to discuss his or her cultural identification. A member should never feel pressured to self-disclose about cultural issues.

Developing culturally sensitive group strategies is another important task for culturally competent group leaders. Although there is very little research regarding the effectiveness of specific group strategies for diverse populations, there is some promising literature related to culturally sensitive group formats. For instance, Pearson (1991) suggested that leadership be more structured for Asian and Asian American people. Using a traditional style, with less structure and a reliance on members to take responsibility for group interactions, would cause discomfort and contradict the cultural expectations of some Asian group members. On the other hand, Rittenhouse (1997) suggested that feminist group work use an unstructured format to minimize the power distance between members and the leader.

Some knowledge of group process in naturally occurring groups, including groups where culturally different persons come together for some type of ritual, ceremony, or entertainment, is also necessary. Typically, these groups include persons with similar or shared cultural experiences. Some examples of naturally occurring groups would include an African American church congregation, Latino youth clubs, gay families, and Native American tribal councils. Group leaders, if given the opportunity to observe naturally occurring groups, should note the nonverbal behaviors of individuals in groups. For instance, eye contact and conversational distance will vary across cultures. However, through the observation of naturally occurring groups, a group leader can acquire knowledge about how members may react in the group.

Finally, leaders need to have substantial self-insight into white privilege and racial identity, which is relevant for all students-in-training. This self-insight must be far more in-depth than simply knowing what to do when you look different from the group (Hays & Erford, 2018).

## **Gender and Group Work**

Group experiences provide opportunities for members to explore their personal narratives and challenges within the context of gender and its associated social roles and stereotypes. Consequently, group leaders work in ways that either support or undermine members as they explore and confront important issues of gender and gender bias. Taking steps to evaluate personal beliefs, feelings, and assumptions regarding gender and gender-based sociopolitical issues (e.g., socioeconomic status, employment opportunities, child rearing, thinking and communication patterns) and considering how those factors may affect the group and group processes is critical to working toward positive group outcomes and experiences for all group members. Group leaders should also familiarize themselves with relevant theory and perspectives. Feminist

theory, for example, may provide group leaders with meaningful conceptualizations of the interaction of gender and culture.

The merits of single-gender and mixed-gender groups should be considered. Group leaders must consider the purpose of the group and the needs of members to determine which composition is most appropriate. Homogeneous groups may provide members with a level of security, acceptance, and shared experience while simultaneously limiting the barriers of gender-based oppression, unintentional miscommunication, and other gender-related challenges within the group context. However, mixed-gender groups allow members to explore problems and concerns within a cultural context that more closely matches society. Regardless of group composition, group leaders must keep in mind that both women and men are affected by a host of gender-influenced factors, including, but not restricted to, developmental processes, value structures, belief systems, behavioral repertoires, sex-role stereotypes and expectations, power dynamics, and gender-related oppression and marginalization. Racial and ethnic diversity may add dimensions of complexity to all aspects of gender and gender interaction. This may be particularly true for cultures that have extremely differentiated roles and expectations for males and females. Case Study 3.1 explores issues of gender and group work.

### **Case Study 3.1 Gender**

Karla, a European American, is a counselor working in a community counseling center. She is running a group on grief and loss for eight adults who have lost partners or spouses in the last year. Each group member voluntarily sought counseling support, although each had previously received varying levels of encouragement to seek counseling from family and friends. The group is comprised of five women and three men. Two of the women are African American. All other group members are European American.

The group has met for four sessions. Although members report that the group is helpful, Karla is concerned about several issues of early group development, including universality and cohesion. Although all members are beginning to interact in productive ways, Karla cannot help thinking that the group members are not really hearing each other. She realizes that the development of trust and emergence of authentic, meaningful disclosures occur over time, but she wonders what she can do to facilitate the process.

After consulting with her supervisor, Karla realized that her group members' lack of hearing may be related to gender-based factors. In addition to more obvious differences in gender-based communication

patterns, Karla and her supervisor considered gender-based roles and expectations regarding responses to grief. Karla challenged herself to consider her own stereotyped views of men's and women's experiences of grief. She wondered, for example, if society expects men who have lost a loved one to take on different roles than women who have lost a loved one. Karla was also aware of the possible implications of race and ethnicity on the grief and loss process. Careful to avoid inappropriately attributing these issues to the group and its process, Karla decided to encourage the group to explore gender and race in the next session. Karla believed the group could best determine the salience of these issues for itself within and outside the group context.

During the fifth session, Karla posed a series of interpersonal and intrapersonal processing questions to encourage the members to self-determine the salience of gender in their personal and collective experiences of grief and loss. Although the group initially resisted Karla's questions, members slowly began to express a range of emotions regarding their views of society's gender-based expectations. In particular, one of the male group members stated he was angry that people expected him to "get over [his] wife's death and get back to work." He reported that many of his friends wanted him to "get on with [his] life, as if grieving had a time limit." A female member shared that she was sure her family and friends saw her as "a weak, helpless widow who could not be left alone." The group agreed that perhaps they had been unintentionally interacting with each other based on gender-based stereotypes and expectations.

Karla and the group members were pleased with the group session. Karla was happy to see the members' willingness to address the here and now of the group by examining the person-to-person interactions. Overall, Karla believed broaching the issues of gender enabled the group members to gain significant insight into their emotions and experiences and to achieve deeper levels of trust.

### **Questions**

- What series of interpersonal and intrapersonal processing questions might you ask to encourage the members to self-determine the salience of gender in their personal and collective experiences of grief and loss?
- What gender roles might the group members be displaying and coping with?

- How might the group dynamics be different if all the members were women? Men?
- How can you apply these gender role realizations to other types of groups you may run, either with school-aged or adult group members?

## **Sexual Orientation and Group Work**

Individuals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, or questioning (GLBTIQ) comprise a diverse population with varying perspectives, needs, and concerns. Due to these varying needs and perspectives, GLBTIQ, like their peers who are not sexual minorities, are well served in a variety of group counseling structures: homogeneous groups, heterogeneous or mixed groups, and special groups (e.g., issue-centered groups that may have particular relevance for GLBTIQ). In determining which group setting is most appropriate, the group leader should use, in part, the pre-group selection process during the planning stage to assess the degree to which sexual orientation and the presenting problem overlap, and the current, self-identified reference group of the client. For example, a young woman who is questioning her sexual identity while struggling with her transition to college and life away from home may not be comfortable in a transition lesbian group run by her college counseling center, while a young woman of a similar demographic who came out in high school and has accepted her sexual identity as lesbian may appreciate and benefit from group counseling support in the described context.

Although many in American society have made some gains in appreciating and accepting the diversity of the GLBTIQ population, the GLBTIQ community still experiences a good deal of oppression, prejudice, and harassment. Group leaders working with this population must be keenly aware of the extreme levels of oppression experienced by this population and the resulting manifestations, which include substance abuse, family conflicts, academic and career concerns, emotional turmoil, and suicide attempts (Hays & Erford, 2018). Furthermore, group leaders must be extraordinarily committed to maintaining confidentiality, establishing trust and an environment that promotes emotional security, examining their personal perspectives and assumptions regarding sexual minorities, and developing awareness of cultural and intrapsychic issues of the GLBTIQ population. Case Study 3.2 further explores many of these issues.

### **Case Study 3.2 Sexual Orientation**

Paul is a counselor at a career center on the campus of a small, private, religious college. He is running a time-limited career exploration

group for four female and two male college students. The work of the group has progressed well during the previous six sessions. With only two more sessions left, the group members are beginning to process significant learning from the group experience that they will be able to transfer to their impending career decisions. Douglas, one of the group members, disclosed that he learned a lot about who he is and the relation of true self and satisfaction in work through the many group experiences. He further shared that, during the group process, he came to accept his identity as a bisexual man and no longer feels the need to hide. Tamara, another group member, is obviously shocked and troubled by Douglas's disclosure and shared that she believes the disclosure had nothing to do with group and was totally "inappropriate and unnecessary." Paul recognized the importance of both disclosures and encouraged the group members to work through the current tension. Using advanced empathy and processing skills, Paul was able to help the group move forward and, in particular, provide Douglas with the supportive and affirming environment that he needed at that particular moment. In coming out, Douglas self-identified as a sexual minority that could unfortunately be subject to oppression, prejudice, and harassment. To safeguard Douglas's well-being and the validity of the process, Paul ended the session with a review of confidentiality and its importance in group work. The members agreed that, out of respect for each other and the work they had done over the past several weeks, confidentiality must be maintained.

### **Questions**

- From your worldview, how appropriate was it for Douglas to come out in the career group?
- What about in other types of groups for school-aged youth, young adults, older adults?
- How would you have handled the situation?
- How would you safeguard against potential oppression and marginalization?
- What additional knowledge and experiences do you need to be helpful to individuals who are GLBTIQQ in your work counseling setting?

## **Disabilities and Group Work**

The interactive nature, high levels of peer support and encouragement, group sense of belonging and cohesion, opportunities for interpersonal and intrapersonal learning, and opportunities to develop and practice new skills may make counseling groups ideal delivery interventions for individuals with physical and mild disabilities, including learning disabilities, emotional disorders, and mild intellectual disabilities. Of course, individuals with disabilities represent a very diverse community and are entitled to appropriate counseling services. This significant population, about 9% of school-age students and perhaps an even higher percentage of adults, may receive the most appropriate counseling service when the counseling is provided in coordination with other required services, which could include educational, medical, and remedial supports. Leaders must also be mindful that members with disabilities who maintain status as a marginalized people due to factors of gender, race, and socioeconomic status may face special counseling concerns. Called double oppression by some researchers and simultaneous oppression by others, minorities with disabilities are often relegated to positions in an invisible and ignored segment of society that is cast well beyond the fringes of the dominant culture (Hays & Erford, 2018).

In serving all populations of individuals with disabilities, counselors must clarify their own feelings and attitudes about counseling members with disabilities, gain knowledge and training to increase competence in this area, and consult and collaborate with other professionals (e.g., supervisors, special educators, physicians, psychiatrists, social workers) and family members to provide the best possible counseling service. Case Study 3.3 illustrates these principles in a school setting.

### **Case Study 3.3 Disabilities**

Ms. Diaz is an elementary school counselor. She is planning to run a third-grade group on resiliency for students referred by classroom teachers and administrators. Through the selection process, Ms. Diaz has decided to include five students. Two of the students, Rochelle and Brian, have been identified as having specific learning disabilities; Rochelle is the group's only African American student.

Anticipating the needs of the students, Ms. Diaz spent weeks observing all of the group members in their classrooms and in less structured school settings (e.g., hallways, cafeteria) and talking with the students' teachers. Ms. Diaz also met with the school's special

education teacher to gain general information about specific learning disabilities and the needs of Rochelle and Brian in particular. The special education teacher consented to give Ms. Diaz feedback on the activities and discussion prompts she planned to use for the group to ensure that the activities would be appropriate for Rochelle and Brian. Finally, in preparation for the group, Ms. Diaz consulted with one of her former college professors so that she could access the most recent literature on resiliency and African American students. Through the pre-group interview with Rochelle, Ms. Diaz began to suspect that Rochelle's issues of double minority status may intersect in ways that it did not for the other students in the group. Overall, Ms. Diaz spent many hours preparing for the third-grade resiliency group. Although the time was hard to find given her busy schedule as an elementary school counselor, Ms. Diaz realized that the time was not only well spent, but also a professional imperative because the new knowledge would come in handy in the future when working with other students with disabilities and multiple oppressions.

### **Questions**

- How would you have handled the situation differently if the group was being run in a university setting? Community setting? For young adults? Older adults?
- How would you safeguard against potential oppression and marginalization of Rochelle and Brian?
- What additional knowledge and experiences do you need to be helpful to individuals with disabilities in your counseling setting?

## **Special Issues That Might Arise When Leading Multicultural Groups**

A number of challenging issues may arise when implementing groups with culturally diverse members. These issues are not difficult to overcome, but they require that the group leader understand and acknowledge the influence of culture on the actions and beliefs of the group members. Below are some common issues that may arise and a discussion of how a group leader may overcome them.

### ***When a Group Leader Is Culturally Different From Group Members***

As stated previously, it is important for the group leader to recognize that the group members' cultural background can have a significant effect on how

members participate in the group. The same is true when the group leader is culturally different from the group members. The culturally different group leader should carefully consider how his or her cultural background might affect the members' behaviors in the group. The members may stereotype the leader based on preconceived notions of how they believe persons from a particular culture behave. For instance, White group members may have faulty beliefs about a group leader of Asian descent. They might base their expectations of the group leader on stereotypical notions about "how Asian people act."

So how does a group leader's background influence group dynamics? When a group leader is ethnically or culturally different from the members of the group, the leader should consider how members from different backgrounds might view the leader's cultural and/or ethnic background. It can be helpful for leaders to initiate a discussion of difference and to positively frame the discussion so that members can see the benefits of having diversity in a group. By initiating an open, honest discussion about cultural differences, the group leader is modeling a positive behavior for future group sessions.

When a group leader is culturally different from the members, it is also important for the leader to be aware of personal stereotypes and reactions to the group members. It is possible that the leader's discomfort or biased perceptions can influence the group's dynamics. Marbley (2004) even suggested that leaders of color may want to seek a co-leader who identifies with the culture of the members. She further suggested that leaders seek a co-leader with a high status of racial identity and an acute awareness of and sensitivity to cultural issues both inside and outside group work.

### ***When Group Member Hostility Arises***

In culturally diverse groups, members may bring their preferred patterns of behaviors, values, and language to the group. Members may also bring experiences with oppression and negative feelings about themselves, their group identity, and the larger society. When member dissatisfaction or hostility among members occurs, the leader should keep in mind that the problems may be caused by experiences of oppression and marginalization, not by a flaw in the group's process. At the same time, leaders must be aware of the cause for the group member's hostility and label it as such for the members. For instance, consider the example of a group member who is heterosexual and who becomes upset when a group member who is gay complains about being mistreated and discriminated against in social settings. The member talked about his reaction to what he perceived as the gay member's whining and pouting about "everything." The gay member became frustrated and explained how the other member's reaction is typical of people in general. The group leader then proceeded to reflect the group members' feelings and engaged the remainder of the group in the discussion about gay bias.

When hostility arises, group leaders must not fail to recognize that cultural differences exist or diminish their importance. Facing differences is difficult

but it is necessary. Contrary to what many group leaders believe, recognizing and expressing differences does not cause more conflict. Recognizing and accepting differences creates a feeling of safety for members and in turn promotes personal growth among members.

### ***When Advocating for Group Members***

Group members from historically oppressed backgrounds or groups may need special assistance in negotiating difficult situations outside the group setting. In working with members from varied cultural backgrounds, the group leader may need to advocate for members. In a support group for sixth-grade Latina girls, for example, the leader may become concerned about the girls' lack of knowledge regarding after-school enrichment activities. The leader not only sends the girls' parents information about the activities, she also encourages her colleagues (fellow professional school counselors and teachers) to distribute after-school information to all of their students. Because of the leader's efforts, the members and their parents were more committed and trustful of the group leader.

Leaders may wish to consider engaging in other advocacy activities on behalf of members. For example, in a parenting group for single mothers, the leader experienced a great deal of absenteeism from members who seemed to enjoy the group. It was discovered that transportation and child care were the reasons for these adults' frequent absences. The leader used this information to advocate for transportation and child care to be provided by a local social service organization. Eventually the YMCA provided a van for transportation and high school students provided child care, thus enabling the single mothers to attend regularly. It is essential to advocate for members throughout the group process, and both inside and outside of group, as advocacy efforts transcend and are integrated into multiple aspects of counseling. Please familiarize yourself with the ASGW (2012) *Multicultural and Social Justice Competence Principles for Group Workers* and Ratts et al. (2015) *Multicultural Counseling and Social Justice Competencies*.

### **Becoming a Multiculturally Sensitive Group Leader**

Although the training and education of group leaders has become more sophisticated, more attention is still needed to the culture and diversity issues in group work education. Future group leaders must be culturally competent and understand how experiences of oppression can affect group process and content, and they must be fully aware of their own cultural values, beliefs, worldviews, biases, prejudices, and tendencies to stereotype.

One approach to integrating cultural information and situations in the group training process is through simulated group counseling models. These models consist of group leaders-in-training role-playing different group members in an ongoing group experience of 8 to 12 weeks. From a multicultural perspective,

these simulated experiences not only create an opportunity for students to role-play a culturally different group member but also provide students with an opportunity to observe how culture can affect interactions and behaviors among group members.

Another important issue for multicultural sensitivity of group leaders involves the rethinking of traditional group development theories. Most group development theories were constructed without the consideration of cultural factors. For this reason, leaders must be prepared to modify traditional group development theories so that they are applicable and sensitive to the differences among cultural groups.

Finally, group leaders-in-training should become self-aware of their own multicultural counseling competence. One easy way to accomplish this task is to complete self-assessments of multicultural counseling competence. Three often-used multicultural counseling competence assessments for counselors include the Multicultural Counseling Inventory (MCI; Sodowsky, Taffe, Gutkin, & Wise, 1994), the Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale (MCKAS; Ponterotto, Gretchen. Utsey, Rieger, & Austin, 2002), and the Cross-Cultural Counseling Inventory–Revised (CCCI-R; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Hernandez, 1991).

## **Summary**

Given the increasing diversity of the U.S. population, the ability to effectively lead groups consisting of culturally diverse members has become a major challenge. In this chapter, oppression and marginalization were used as a framework within which to understand the complex issues that members of diverse cultural groups face. In truth, all groups are multicultural because each member brings a different history with different cultural experiences and expectations, whether visible or invisible. Group leaders can no longer ignore the cultural differences among members and treat everyone the same. To do so is to ignore the richness and benefits of different perspectives in the group membership.

Groups are the ideal setting for members of marginalized and oppressed backgrounds because in groups feelings can be validated and there is a community support atmosphere. Because many oppressed populations focus on the group rather than the individual as the most significant element of existence, group work is aligned with their cultural practices of cooperation, trust, and relationships. As such, group work provides counseling professionals with an appropriate means of meeting the needs of members from oppressed and marginalized backgrounds.

## **Activities**

1. How can you further develop understanding of your own racial identity? Think in depth about who you are in relation to others in the world and discuss it with others in small groups.

2. Explore research done on the color-blind approach. In small groups, discuss what makes it a problematic approach to group work.
3. Research the benefits of single-gender and mixed-gender groups. In small groups, discuss the beneficial and problematic aspects of mixed-gender group work in developmental stages across the lifespan. Explain, based on research, why you would or would not use single- or mixed-gender groups and in what situations you would use them.
4. Conduct an in-depth study of a cultural group you will likely encounter in your future counseling practice to become aware of the impact cultural differences can have on the group.
5. Locate and self-administer one of the following multicultural competence inventories: the Multicultural Counseling Inventory (MCI; Sadowsky et al., 1994), the Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale (MCKAS; Ponterotto et al., 2002), or the Cross-Cultural Counseling Inventory–Revised (CCCI-R; LaFromboise et al., 1991). Discuss the results in a small group of peers.

### **Note**

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