

Applying Social Justice to Oppression and Marginalization in Group Process: Interventions and Strategies for Group Counselors

Theodore R. Burnes
Katherine L. Ross
University of Pennsylvania

A call from the group counseling literature (Brown, 2009) recognizes the need for theoretical and empirical writings that explore the intersection of social justice and counseling practice, as many counselors are unprepared to address the impact of oppression and privilege on group process. The authors explore these issues by making recommendations and offering five strategies to assist in group discussions of marginalization, privilege, and oppression into group theory. These strategies include ways to assist counselors in recognizing how group members may oppress one another as well as specific recommendations from two current group counselors who practice social justice.

Keywords: *group counseling; group process; oppression; privilege; social justice*

An analysis of current group counseling practice and training suggests that traditional group theory (e.g., Brabender, 2002; Yalom, 1995) often does not address how group counselors should work with oppression and marginalization that occurs between group members within group counseling settings (Smith & Shin, 2008). Specifically, how counselors advocate for equality and use the group counseling modality to promote social justice has not been addressed in the literature, and there is a clear need for theories and techniques of group process that are designed to incorporate social justice-based

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Theodore R. Burnes, Ph.D., is Associate Director and Coordinator of Training, Professional Counseling & Applied Psychology Programs, University of Pennsylvania. Katherine L. Ross, M.S.Ed., is now a Learning Skills Specialist, Academic Resource Center, Georgetown University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Theodore R. Burnes, Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, University of Pennsylvania, 3700 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104. E-mail: burnes@gse.upenn.edu

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approaches to group theory (Fambrough & Comerford, 2006; Macnair-Semands, 2007; Smith & Shin, 2008).

Such a need is deeply rooted in counselors' personal and professional commitments to multicultural competence (Arredondo et al., 2006). As social justice is rooted in multicultural competence (Lee, 2007; Speight & Vera, 2003), group counselors need to develop a consistent definition of multicultural competence as such knowledge, attitudes, and skills encourage social justice in the group counseling process. Brown (2009) identified specific suggestions for how to work with groups of a given cultural background such as helping clients to explore within-group differences and group counselors gaining specific training on diversity issues. However, the above writings highlight a lack of conceptual framework and empirical research addressing how to work with multicultural, heterogeneous groups. In answer to the dearth of literature on the intersection of social justice in group work, this article addresses inter-group oppression and marginalization in the group counseling setting.

LANGUAGE AND DEFINITIONS USED IN SOCIAL JUSTICE-FOCUSED GROUP PROCESS

Some scholars have documented that oppression is often allowed to occur in group settings because group members' privilege is left unchecked and unchallenged (Black & Stone, 2005). Many people believe attention to social justice concerns is not within their roles as group counselors (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008), so they may not address issues of member oppression and marginalization as they facilitate intrapersonal and interpersonal learning. The lack of this facilitation and attention to group process with regard to group members' diversity and privilege statuses in the group may be re-traumatizing to members who have survived sociocultural oppression in their worlds outside the group (Wright, 2000). Before addressing issues of privilege, marginalization, and oppression within a group counseling experience, it is important to define these terms so readers will have working definitions and a framework for their work, thereby facilitating interruption of privilege and oppression more effectively in group settings. Prilleltensky and Nelson (2002) defined oppression as "a state of domination where the oppressed suffer the consequences of deprivation, exclusion, discrimination, exploitation, control of culture, and sometimes even violence" (p. 12). Historically, some examinations of privilege have focused on gender and race as single social identities; however, it is important for group counselors to examine and discuss privilege within the context of multiple oppressions in order to include

issues surrounding sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, differing degrees of ability, and religious affiliation (Brown, 2009).

Social privilege and the resulting oppression can be counteracted through the group leader's social justice work. In contrast to individual counseling, group counseling represents a microcosm of society (Yalom, 2005); therefore, group facilitators may use social justice principles within this microcosm to provide the most successful and empowering experience for each of its members. In order to achieve social justice, group counselors must acknowledge the reality of the social injustices that are bound to permeate the group experience, just as they permeate society. It is also important to note that before group counselors can begin to engage their clients in group process that focuses on the social justice tenets of empowerment, resilience, and equality of members, they also must begin their own process of consciousness development (Lee, 2007). Counselors have noted the importance of teaching self-examination to trainees in developing their clinical skills (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). Kiselica (2004) also noted the importance of self-disclosure in teaching social justice principles to trainees in mental health services: "When we share our struggles, we become coping role models with whom others can easily identify" (p. 847).

INTERSECTIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND GROUP PROCESS: SUGGESTIONS AND STRATEGIES

For this article, we interviewed three group counselors who work in three different settings to provide perspectives about their work. Their work settings included a college counseling center, a crisis counseling center for survivors of sexual violence, and a private practice. These counselors provided perspectives on their experiences of oppression, marginalization, and related interventions in their provision of group counseling services. We identified common themes across our conversations with them. Below are the results of our personal communications with the three professionals. Pseudonyms are used when referring to these group counselors.

Be Intentional About Having Diversity of Group Membership and Avoid Representation/Token Members of a Marginalized Community

Having token members from a particular marginalized group often creates an inability to relate to others, which may increase those members' feelings of marginalization (Clark, 2002). With less diversity of membership, it is more difficult to create a safe and welcoming space

for the discussion of issues like racial discrimination or homophobia. The responsibility then falls on the group leader; however, the leader should aspire to create a diverse group through the selection process so that he or she does not need to jump in to mediate conflict based on issues of within-group marginalization. It is preferable to have social justice issues be raised and mediated by group members themselves. Not only is this strategy a preventative measure, it also indicates that individuals who cannot conduct themselves in a way that is welcoming to all members might not be appropriate for a group counseling setting. These individuals might be better served in individual counseling. Although the group leader should not deny potential members entry into a group if they are a token member of a culturally marginalized group, the leader should aspire to have as diverse a group as possible.

Assess the Group's Ability to Handle Discussions of Oppression Before Processing Issues of Social Justice—But Always Process These Issues

Group counselors should use pre-screening sessions and the first few sessions of group to assess the degree to which clients can handle discussions of oppression. This assessment can include open-ended questions (e.g., “How do you feel when there are conversations about racism in a group of people?”) and a process observation. As an African-American female counselor, Keisha decides how much she wants to process her minority status to validate feelings of oppression and concurrently start a conversation. For example, she often will validate clients' experiences by saying, “as a woman of color, I can imagine that in that situation you might have been feeling alone or hurt . . .” Keisha decides whether or not to do this by gauging the group members' readiness to validate their own experiences without her intervention. Her preference is to have group members validate one another's experiences. However, she finds that using her own experiences can be helpful for members who might otherwise feel marginalized because they can feel connected to at least one person in the group and understand they are not alone in their experience.

SEPARATE PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES FROM SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED BIASES THAT PLAY OUT IN THE GROUP

Traditional group theory (e.g., Yalom, 1995, 2005) has often pathologized particular relational styles of clients in a group based on European, hierarchical ways of connecting and relationships. For

example, specific ways of relating to others (e.g., silence, avoidance of certain topics, not sharing emotion and inner thought processes) have been conceptualized as problematic. However, such ways of relating may also become coping strategies to deal with oppression experienced from other members. Rather than focusing solely on roles that are specific to group process and dynamics, a group counselor with a social justice lens can endeavor to see group members' roles as shaped by issues of privilege and oppression in addition to the role they have as a group member. Using such a lens can help the group counselor to notice the many roles clients bring into a group that may shape how a client relates in group and how oppression may occur between group members largely based on their experiences of cultural dynamics outside the group. Roysircar (2008) argued for advocacy against pathologizing relational patterns of group members without understanding members' larger contexts, noting that counselors, "[need] to advocate against *counseling* dynamics that marginalize and oppress *group therapy* members who are different from other *group* members as well as from the leader" (p. 377). For example, group members who are privileged by virtue of gender, social class, race, or other identity status, may exert privilege by pathologizing ways of relating that are foreign to them, resulting in the creation of a member who acts as "the scapegoat" for the group (Chen, Kakkhad, & Balzano, 2008).

Facilitate Consciousness Raising and Create Awareness of Social Justice in Group Members by Processing Issues of Oppression in the Moment

Mya, a woman group counselor of color, remarks, "Process in the moment, call it out, talk about what's happening." Such process can often look like the group leader stopping the content of the group session and assessing group members' feelings in reaction to oppressive comments made in the group. Sometimes, group members might discuss an issue of oppression that is more comfortable or familiar to them rather than addressing the type of discrimination that was actually presented by another group member. As counselors are concerned with the success of all group members, group leaders also should remember cohesiveness can be established in a way that benefits all members, and may look different for certain groups. In a culturally or experientially diverse group, certain members may not understand what it means to be oppressed based on a culturally marginalized identity, due to their identification with groups that hold various types of cultural privilege in the larger society. Therefore, true cohesiveness may not be achievable by having these members strive for complete understanding of other, marginalized group members; such

“understanding” may feel patronizing and further oppressive to already marginalized members. Rather, group counselors should model that some members may not fully understand the experiences of others but can instead validate those experiences and own their own privilege. Less obvious or intentional forms of aggression toward group members can also be damaging, such as the use of heteronormative language or assumptions that all group members come from similar socioeconomic, educational, racial, or religious backgrounds. Similar to above, group counselors can facilitate understanding of how group members’ assumptions about other members may be an application of privilege.

Use Structured Activities to Talk About Issues of Privilege and Oppression

Counselors’ acceptance of silence surrounding issues of privilege and oppression can reinforce and perpetuate members’ social identity privilege (Duran, Firehammer, & Gonzalez, 2008), particularly within the group setting. Instead, we urge counselors to bring exercises into the group process (e.g., thought prompts, questions in which the leader asks all group members to respond) that they can use to bring up issues of privilege and oppression. Asking questions such as, “How do you think we often marginalize each other in our space together?” “Who do you believe has power in our group today?” and “Why do you believe that this person has power?” can help initiate a dialogue about such issues. Further, it is important for group counselors to encourage discussion that is respectful and supportive, as they have an ethical responsibility to create a supportive environment and respect the emotional needs of all group members (Rapin, 2004), including those identified as holding power. As they help all members to acknowledge their roles in the group, counselors can facilitate an authentic, respectful discussion about power. Such discussion can help those members who hold power recognize how acknowledging their own privilege and using privilege as a tool to create equality can serve as a catalyst to create social change. Further, this dialogue can help other members to engage in self-examination of their own privilege at their own level of readiness. For example, some group members may acknowledge their privilege in session and brainstorm ways to fight oppression that affect themselves or others in their communities. By listening to these members, other members may use the dialogue as a tool to examine and reflect on their own roles of privilege, oppression and marginalization. These group members may not yet be ready to fight for equality outside session but have started the process of recognizing their own biases.

CONCLUSION

As advocates for social justice, counselors have a specific call to recognize and address issues of marginalization and resilience as part of the counseling process. Not only do issues of oppression play out in interactions and relationships between and among group members and leaders; counselors also can work within a social justice framework to process these dynamics. The strategies communicated by practitioners in the field are applicable to all types of group work, including brief groups, psychoeducation, psychotherapy groups, and counseling groups. The limitations of these strategies will depend on the makeup of the individual group. Although this article offers some concrete strategies for practitioners to use, further knowledge of how the constructs of social justice and group counseling process intersect will aid in the conceptualization, practice, and research of multiculturally sensitive, social justice-focused strategies for use in group practice that are supported and validated by research. As the counseling literature does not always make explicit whether or not empirically supported group counseling strategies also promote social justice, practitioners and researchers should seek strategies that are effective both in facilitating positive group counseling outcomes and promoting social justice.

Further, we do not believe that counselors' social justice practice requires validation in order to be considered effective, as it may not be quantifiable in Eurocentric, reductionistic ways such as traditional methods of measuring counseling outcomes. We urge researchers and counselor educators to continue to explore and investigate intersections between group counseling and social justice to learn more about the ways in which privilege and oppression play a part in the group process and how findings about this phenomenon, whether supported by empirical research or collective understanding, can be incorporated into counselor education programs.

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