

**Association for Specialists in Group Work:
Multicultural and Social Justice Competence Principles for Group Workers**

Approved by the ASGW Executive Board, March 22nd, 2012

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PREAMBLE

The Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) is committed to understanding how issues of multiculturalism and social justice affect all aspects of group work. This current document reflects the updating and revision of a previous document entitled, “Principles for Diversity-Competent Group Workers,” which was endorsed by ASGW in 1998 and published in the *Journal for Specialists in Group Work* in 1999. The current document uses the term “multiculturalism” to align with the most recent language used in multicultural counseling scholarship, which embraces a broader perspective of recognizing unique worldviews, appreciating socio-cultural differences and facilitating the empowerment of individuals within a society.

In contrast, the word “diversity” refers typically to the different types of people in a group or society. The term “social justice” refers to the influences of both privilege and oppression that shape the well-being of individuals, groups, and communities. Multicultural and social justice concepts are often intricately linked; therefore, this document addresses both as they relate to group work. These intersections include (but are not limited to) the following domains: training group workers who seek competency on issues of multiculturalism and social justice in group work; conducting research that will add to the literature on group work with multicultural groups and social justice issues; understanding how multiculturalism and social justice affect group process and dynamics; assisting group facilitators in various settings to increase their awareness, knowledge, and skills as related to facilitating task, psychoeducational, counseling, and psychotherapy groups with diverse members; and engaging in social justice change.

The current revised document adds several new dimensions to the earlier version of the diversity principles:

- Integration of multicultural and social justice competencies based on more recent literature

- Collapsing of awareness of group workers' and group members' worldviews into one subset, removal of attitudes and beliefs, knowledge and skills sections under each dimension to avoid repetition and incorporation of the concepts throughout
- Integration of *ASGW Best Practice Guidelines* (2008) and an expanded delineation of skills under the skills and strategies section
- Introduction of a Social Justice Advocacy principles section
- Provision of two examples on what a group worker who is seeking multicultural and social justice competence may "look like" or "be doing"

The present competencies also draw from the scholarship on multiculturalism and recent research (Ingene, 2011) examining the previous "Principles for Diversity-Competent Group Workers" (Haley-Banez, Brown, & Molina, 1999) document. In addition, the recent scholarship on social justice, advocacy, and group work has been added.

ASGW has endorsed this document with the recognition that issues of multiculturalism and social justice affect group process and dynamics, group and individual outcomes, facilitation, training, and research. Oppressive systems (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, sizeism, nationalism, adultism, ageism) affect everyone in substantial and different ways. As individual members of this organization, it is our personal responsibility to address these issues through developing multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills, and social justice advocacy skills. We are responsible for increasing our awareness of our biases, values, and beliefs, and how they impact the groups we form, facilitate, participate in, and evaluate. Finally, we must increase our ability to facilitate groups that are diverse on many dimensions, leading with confidence, competence, and integrity as we assist group members in forming and maintaining relationships that emphasize respect.

DEFINITIONS

Multicultural: The belief systems and typical daily activities of people from various diverse groups, and denotes that attending to the needs and values of these diverse groups ensures a more vibrant, dynamic, and empowered society overall. Examples of multicultural identities include (but are not limited to): gender identity and expression, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious/spiritual traditions, ability status, migration status, age, and social class.

Social justice: The awareness of how social locations of social privilege and oppression influence group work process and dynamics, but also identifying ways to take action related to these social locations and the various social justice issues group members and workers experience (Singh & Salazar, 2010a, b, c).

Social Privilege: The power and advantage a dominant group is granted, entitled to, or born into that provides those individuals in the dominant group with the ability to sanction and/or have immunity based on the identities of gender identity and expression, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious/spiritual traditions, ability status, migration status, age, and social class amongst others (Black & Stone, 2005)

Oppression: The systemic, limited access to resources for an individual, group, or community due to multi-systems prejudice and discrimination (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, adultism, ageism).

Taking action: A central focus of social justice competency, both multicultural and social justice competency are ongoing processes of self-reflection, learning, and action. Because issues of privilege, power and exploitation are so insidious in the various systems of oppression that exist (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism), group workers must take the time to identify specific ways in which privilege and oppression statuses and oppressive systems work.

When group workers seeking multicultural and social justice advocacy competence identify issues of privilege and oppression and oppressive systems operating within themselves (i.e., internalized oppression) and their group settings, they should: embrace their role as a social change agent; develop the skills to move towards making specific changes based on their knowledge and roles; develop ability to take action and make changes to group work practice, research, training, and advocacy; and identify issues of privilege and oppression that influence group workers and group members.

Group workers strive to develop competence in both multiculturalism and social justice advocacy during and after counselor training. Yet, group workers will encounter situations where they must seek to build multicultural competence prior to engaging in social justice change or vice versa (Singh & Salazar, 2010c). Group workers should also be aware of the ACA-endorsed Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003), which provides a framework when considering, planning, or engaging in social justice action. The current principles are intended to guide group workers in the ongoing development of multicultural and social justice competence.

The multicultural and social justice competence principles for group workers are described under the three following domains: (I) Awareness of Self and Group Members, (II) Strategies and Skills (Group Worker Planning, Group Worker Performing and Processing), and (III) Social Justice Advocacy.

THE PRINCIPLES

I. Awareness of Self and Group Members: As group workers move towards multicultural and social justice advocacy competence they will:

1. Demonstrate movement to being increasingly aware of and sensitive to their own multicultural identity and how their race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, age, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, religion, and spirituality, are impacted by their own experiences and histories.
2. Demonstrate movement towards being increasingly aware of and sensitive to the multiple dimensions of the multicultural and multi-layered identities of group members.
3. Demonstrate an awareness of different connecting and communicating styles. Group workers recognize different communication styles related to the various nuances of one's cultural worldviews. They are aware of how myths, stereotypes, and

- assumptions learned by living in a society that bases one's cultural identity on excluding and devaluing others, impacts group dynamics.
4. Seek to understand the extent to which general group leadership skills and functions may be appropriate or inappropriate for group work facilitation with multicultural group members.
 5. Recognize obstacles that group members encounter based on lack of opportunities and systems of oppression (e.g., sexism, classism, heterosexism) and gain awareness of how to integrate an advocacy focus into group learning to address these barriers.
 6. Increase awareness and deeper level of understanding through educational, consultative, training and cultural immersion experiences in order to become more fluent with culturally-based practices.

II. Strategies and Skills: As group workers move towards multicultural and social justice advocacy competence they will incorporate the ASGW Best Practice Principles of Planning Performing and Processing.

a) Group Worker Planning: Planning involves a range of logistical tasks such as identifying group needs, goals, determining type of group to be implemented, selecting group leadership and membership, pre-screening and preparing group members, and determining techniques, leadership styles and resources needed to conduct a group. Group workers demonstrating multicultural and social justice competence in group planning will:

1. Develop multiple ways to demonstrate respect for group members' multicultural worldviews, which affect psychosocial functioning and expressions of distress.
2. Develop their skills, through language development or familiarity with interpreter use, to actively value bilingualism and sign language and to not view another language as an impediment to group work.
3. Seek to possess specific knowledge and information about the life experiences, cultural heritage, and sociopolitical background of group members who have been displaced as a result of trauma, violence, and/or other overt forms of oppression with whom they are working.
4. Exhibit understanding of how race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual identity, different abilities, age, socioeconomic status, other shared cultural experiences and other immutable personal characteristics may affect personality formation, vocational choices, manifestation of psychological disorders, physical "disease" or somatic symptoms, help-seeking behavior(s), and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the various types of and theoretical approaches to group work.
5. Model relationship skills essential for connecting with and creating connections between multicultural group members while planning, performing, and processing groups.
6. Recognize and be aware of group needs and goals, determine type of multicultural and social justice variables as they conduct assessments, identify appropriate groups to be implemented, select group leader(s) and members, pre-screen and prepare members, and determine the techniques, leadership styles and resources needed to conduct a group.

7. Partner with target populations and collaboratively decide on the setting, time, structure, and format of the group that best fits the cultural context of group members.
8. Determine if the most appropriate group should be a culture-specific (a group of people who share common experiences as a result of their diversity), an intercultural learning (designed to promote greater understanding across cultural groups to increase cultural knowledge and improve relationships among diverse groups of people), or other-content focused group (groups focused on other issues but give consideration to the diversity of group members and related group dynamics) (Merchant, 2006, 2009).
9. Address differences in communication styles across cultural groups, and negotiate differences or cultural conflicts when they emerge.
10. Use culturally grounded frameworks and techniques that provide the best fit for group members' cultural context.
11. Be willing to adopt different roles, such as teacher, mentor, ally or advocate, and to serve as role models in helping members navigate personal and systemic change.
12. Identify cultural nuances in the group even if the focus of the group is not on multicultural issues.
13. Articulate and consider the impact of multicultural elements on the group dynamics such as cultural conceptions of time and differences in communication styles due to high context (primarily non-verbal) and low context (primarily verbal) communication.
14. Use culturally appropriate pre-group screening mechanisms. Group members should be carefully selected based on type, focus, and purpose of the multicultural group.
15. Determine if group membership needs to be expanded or altered to allow for a greater level of connection and support for group members who are isolated in the group due to one or more dimensions of multicultural identity or experience. Group workers ensure that a framework exists for members to feel supported for their diversity in the group members.
16. Be able to refer clients from diverse backgrounds to culturally appropriate groups and group work providers as necessary.

b) Group Worker Performing and Processing: *Performing* is the adaptive implementation of the plan using ethical and appropriate group interventions and techniques (Thomas & Pender, 2008). *Processing* includes “assessing progress on group and member goals, leader behaviors and techniques, group dynamics and interventions” (p. 117). Due to some overlap between Planning and Processing, the leadership skills related to these functions, are discussed under one heading. Group workers demonstrating multicultural and social justice competence in group performing and processing will:

1. Establish group norms to accept, value, and respect cultural differences. The group leader needs to be intentional about such norming very early in the group to allow for open discussion of dynamics related to cultural issues.
2. Attend to differences in acculturation levels, racial/ethnic and cultural identity, and multiple identities of group members related to gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, immigration status, social class, education level, geographical location, etc.
3. Attend to the intra-cultural differences and individuality of members within these groups to avoid stereotyping and labeling.

4. Demonstrate just and fair leadership. Group leaders may experience alliances with group members who have similar political beliefs or cultural values and may exhibit negative feelings or distancing behaviors towards group members who do not share their beliefs. Group leaders need to be aware of such alliances, identify the impact on their facilitation, and actively work towards inclusion of multiple perspectives and free expression among group members.
5. Address overt and covert cultural conflicts in group. Group leaders may avoid and/or ignore cultural conflicts due to “political correctness,” fear of offending members, or their own discomfort with addressing diversity issues. Such avoidance will only serve to intensify group conflict and is detrimental to constructive group process. Group leaders need to address underlying cultural conflicts when appropriate and model ways to constructively address the issues.
6. Respond to language needs. Accommodations need to be made to best meet the language needs of group members. Group leaders who are bi or multilingual may have the ability to more easily respond to needs of members who speak similar languages. Interpreters may be used; however, leaders need to attend to the unique dynamics that are likely to occur due to their presence and the act of interpretation in a group setting. Leaders need to work with the interpreters and group members to determine what would cause the least disruption to the group process. When appropriate, group leaders need to check with interpreters on impact of group dynamics on them and debrief as needed.
7. Incorporate traditional and spiritual healing or seek consultation when appropriate. Group members who find solace in culturally-based therapeutic techniques may respond to the use of traditional healing methods that engage the mind-body-spirit connection. Group leaders who are not immersed in the cultural context and/or very familiar with the healing techniques can consult or invite spiritual or cultural leaders to the group to more appropriately incorporate those methods.
8. Use culturally grounded frameworks and techniques as appropriate (e.g., use of storytelling, poetry, music, food, and other culturally and spiritually based practices). When utilizing Western approaches, use techniques and frameworks that best fit the group members’ cultural context or adapt the approach.
9. Use culturally-appropriate assessment and evaluation tools where the benefits of quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method data collection is carefully considered. Because marginalized groups have often experienced exploitation and/or over-analysis of their groups by practitioners and/or researchers, assessment should be used with sensitivity. Research and evaluation findings should be shared with participants and used in a way that empowers and benefits members and their community groups, as well as assists in reducing/eradicating barriers imposed by those in position of power.

III. Social Justice Advocacy: As group workers move toward social justice advocacy competence they will:

1. Discuss why social justice and advocacy issues are important within a group setting and how these issues influence the practice of group work.

2. Develop awareness of the various opportunities for activism and community organizing occurring in local, state, national, and international settings and are able to identify potential ways to provide group worker expertise.
3. Participate in a consciousness-raising group related to issues of social justice.
4. Volunteer group worker skills to an activist and/ or community-organizing group or initiative.
5. Use technology for activism and community-organizing related to group work and increasing equity through resources and access to group work.
6. Address the following four elements while providing group work services: (a) Equity with focus on involvement in culture centered approach; (b) Access, with focus on understanding identity construction based on differences and deficiency model; (c) Participation, with focus on mutuality and authenticity; (d) Wellness, with focus on a culturally defined state of being in which mind, body, and spirit are integrated in a way that enables a person to live a fulfilled life.
7. Become familiar with how local, state, national, and international policies may influence group workers and group members.
8. Know the various community and government advocacy services and organizations available to group workers and group members.
9. Initiate discussions and training opportunities to identify how personal statuses of privilege and oppression and oppressive systems influence group workers' and group members' lives and make changes related to the group work planning and facilitation process and types of groups offered based on this information.
10. Develop their facility with and engage in writing letters to community and government leaders advocating to increase resources that provide equity for potential group members.
11. Directly address issues of personal statuses of privilege and oppression and oppressive systems that arise in group worker facilitation.
12. Serve as an advocate and exercise institutional intervention skills. The group leader needs to be prepared to intervene at an institutional level when working with culturally diverse groups. This can take various forms ranging from applying for funding to recruit more diverse membership or to provide amenities such as food, child care, and transportation; working with management and administration in institutionalizing diversity efforts in the organization; or acting as an advocate on behalf of a member who is experiencing discrimination. Issues such as these may surface in any type of diversity group.
13. Expand the concept of "client" to include systems and communities when examining change.

Case Examples: The Group Worker Who Seeks Multicultural and Social Justice Competence

In order to provide a snapshot into what multicultural and social justice competence “looks like” in practice, we share the following case example to illustrate the current competencies:

Case Study 1

Jason is a White man who graduated from his counselor training program in 1991. Since he graduated, the ACA endorsed Multicultural and Advocacy Competencies and he has sought further training at professional conferences and in continuing education specifically on issues of multicultural groups and social justice (Awareness 1, 2). Therefore, Jason has actively reflected on and raised his own awareness with regard to the social privilege he has as a White, Christian, and heterosexual man, and U.S. citizen – in addition to learning how the oppressive experiences he had related to growing up in a poor and rural environment (Awareness 1, 2). For instance, after seeking post-masters training in LGBTQ continuing education, he now defines his gender identity as cisgender and has cisgender privilege. Cisgender is a term that denotes the privilege that he has because the sex he was assigned at birth (male) is in alignment with his gender identity (man) and expression (masculine), unlike transgender people whose societal sex assignment may not align with their gender identity and expression (Awareness 1, 2).

Jason uses his self-awareness of his various identities of both privilege and oppression to gain knowledge and skills with groups that are different from his own upbringing and consistently seeks to be aware of how his own identities influence his values in similar and different ways than the group members in the various groups he facilitates (Awareness 3, 4). For instance, he is currently leading a group in a high school setting designed to increase the preparedness of students of color to apply for colleges and universities. In his leadership of this group, Jason actively reflects and/or shares as appropriate for group members’ processes about his own ethnic/racial identity and how these identities shape his leadership (Awareness 4). Jason reflects in an ongoing way on the ways his identities as a White man with numerous social privileges may impact how he structures the group and the materials he uses within the group (Awareness 5). In addition, Jason leads groups in a recovery center and works with a diverse client base (Awareness 3, 4). Therefore, Jason actively seeks knowledge of the various social justice issues his group members face (e.g., poverty, racism, sexism, etc.) and carefully considers how these issues influence group processes and dynamics (Awareness 5, 6). Jason also works with others in his work environment to ensure his agency collaborates with organizations that may help the clients he works with access important resources (e.g., education, healthcare, etc.) and seeks to take action (e.g., writing an editorial on the connection between poverty and addiction, lobbying his legislative representatives on healthcare) on various social justice issues the clients with whom he works face (Social Justice Advocacy 2, 6, 10, 11, 12).

Case Study 2

Jorlan is a group leader who comes from a multiracial family and working class background. Her mother is an immigrant from Haiti and her father is an African American, raised in a conservative family that has lived for generations in a rural area of a southern state. Being part of a community, having strong work ethic, as well as partaking in family and religious life, has been very important to Jorlan and her family. Jorlan enjoyed helping others since she was a child and decided to become a counselor who specializes in group work as she has been intrigued by group dynamics that promote healing. She wanted to make sure that she understands how general group leader skills and functions can be applied to group work facilitation with multicultural group members. Therefore, Jorlan decided to seek knowledge and information about life experiences of individuals who are different from her. Gaining specific knowledge and information helped her gain awareness of strategies and skills essential for competent group work practice (Strategies and Skills A1, A3).

For example, Jorlan was asked to prepare a plan and facilitate a counseling group for individuals dealing with losses. Jorlan recognized that there are some universal themes individuals across cultures experience. At the same time, she recognized that culture influences how one approaches life events. Jorlan became more aware and sensitive of the multicultural identities of group members as they shared their different experiences with losses (Awareness 2). During one of the group sessions, a group member Mary, disclosed sadness and grief as her partner died. Mary was in love and in a relationship with a woman. She did not have family support and her place of worship did not approve of her sexual orientation. Mary is an immigrant from a South American country and her partner was a woman from New England area with Protestant relatives who with pride traced their roots back to England. Mary felt discouraged, experienced shame, and at times started to question her worthiness. She was angry and hurt as she had no legal protection. She was unable to make funeral arrangements for her partner as legally she was not viewed as a partner. Her partner's family chose to have a private funeral from which she was excluded.

Jorlan understood that as a group leader she needed to adopt different roles such as an ally and an advocate in order to help Mary navigate personal and systemic change (Strategies and Skills A11). Jorlan learned and shared with the group members' information relevant to advocacy services for the lesbian and gay community (Awareness 5; Social Justice Advocacy 8). In addition, Jorlan invited Mary to share with the group, rituals conducive to healing that are important to Mary (Strategies and Skills, B8). Mary was able to experience acceptance, worthiness, and connection to group members who in turn, through mutual empathy, were able to support each other's journey of healing. Jorlan focused on inviting group members to share their stories so that their voices could be heard and she emphasized linking group members' experiences in order to foster universality and instillation of hope (Strategies and Skills A5). Mary shared the process of altar making as a healing ritual in her cultural context. The process of altar creating served as an intervention conducive to coping with grieving by maintaining a relationship with the deceased, consistent with the collectivistic cultures. (Strategies and Skills, B7). In the process, Mary modeled respect for group members' worldviews and effectively addressed issues raised by group members in a cultural context. (Awareness 3, 4; Strategies and Skills A1, A10)

CONCLUSION

This document is the “starting point” for group workers as we become increasingly aware, knowledgeable, and skillful in facilitating groups whose memberships represent the diversity of our society and where group workers are conscious of and take action on issues of social justice. It is not intended to be a “how to” document. It is written as a call to action and/or guideline and represents ASGW’s commitment to moving forward with an agenda for addressing and understanding the needs of the populations we serve. The current principles comprise a “living document.” The Association for Specialists in Group Work acknowledges the changing world in which we live and work and therefore recognizes that this is the first step in working with diverse group members with competence, compassion, respect, and integrity – while becoming social justice agents for positive change in our world.

As our awareness, knowledge, skills, and ability to make positive social justice change develop, so too will this document evolve. As our knowledge as a profession grows in this area and as the sociopolitical context in which this document was written changes, new editions of these *Group Worker Principles for Multicultural and Social Justice Competency* will arise. We encourage future theory, research, practice, and advocacy to operationalize social justice and group work practices related to this document. For instance, future studies should investigate how the multicultural and social justice competencies are being used as part of the group training curriculum in graduate programs. What proportion of ASGW group workers actually incorporate the multicultural and social justice principles in their teaching and training of future group workers? What are the reasons if the principles are not being used in the group training process? Are practitioners in the field aware of the principles, and if so, to what extent are they being implemented in their settings? The operationalization of this document will begin to define appropriate group leadership skills and interventions as well as make recommendations for research in understanding how multicultural awareness and social justice change in group membership affects group process and dynamics.

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* **Authors' Note:** Merchant, Skuydrzyk, and Ingene share second authorship of this document. Also, in order to simplify the readability of the principles and case study, not all citations in the reference list are included in the text. However, the reference list represents the resources we drew from in writing the current document as the base of multicultural and social justice scholarship upon which we grounded the current principles. In addition, the authors integrated several methods of review into the development of the current document that invited feedback from group workers across specialty areas. The steps of the writing and review process were: (1) conducted literature review in order to identify essential principles for competent group work practice with regard to multiculturalism and social justice; (2) received three rounds of feedback from two consultants with expertise in multicultural and social justice group work and the ASGW Executive Board; (3) posted a draft of the current document on the ASGW website and invitations to review the document were emailed to email listservs of ACA divisions (e.g., ASGW, CSJ, ALGBTIC, ACES); (4) presented two professional presentations (ASGW and ACA 2012 conferences) where attendee feedback was invited and integrated into the present document; and (5) presented the final draft to the ASGW Executive Board for approval which was granted during the ACA 2012 ASGW Executive Board Meeting held in San Francisco, CA.