

Intergroup Dynamics

Racial and cultural dynamics in groups are related to some basic intergroup differences that are contextual in society. According to embedded intergroup relations theory, five characteristics can be observed in groups: group boundaries, power differences, affective patterns, cognitive formations and distortions, and leadership behavior (Alderfer, 1997). In multicultural groups members have an opportunity to experience the interplay of the management of boundaries; working with power differences; various cultural modes of emotional expression; the testing of assumptions, beliefs, and myths held about individuals who are different from them; and working with perceptions of leadership fit as a role for members and the group leader. A multicultural group functions as a "group as a whole" that consists of multiple subgroupings with varying cultures, beliefs, and behaviors. I use the term *culture* broadly here as defined by Goldberger and Veroff (1995), who include the traditional definitions of shared history, geographic region, language, rituals, values, rules, and laws but also add that in a pluralistic society, groups of individuals with shared characteristics (such as race, gender, social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and age) may call themselves "cultures," and be regarded as such by others, despite their membership in the larger culture and dissimilarities of history, language, rules, beliefs, and cultural practices. This broader definition of culture makes for a more complex understanding of multiple identities and the ways in which they intersect. It becomes more difficult to identify just one aspect of any individual or group; each is like a Janus figure, with many different faces. Therefore, the cultural, economic, political, and social contexts in which interactions occur become the background and sometimes the foundation for our efforts to communicate with and understand one another.

Power differences encompass differences in access to resources and assumptions concerning who has control and who does not. Reed and Noumair (2000) describe how power differences affect intergroup relations:

There may be significant intergroup conflict related to which groups are most deserving of corrective advantage. Identity groups and individuals may minimize their own advantage or emphasize their disadvantage within the context of such discussions. We refer to this as the relationship between context and currency: What chips are worth the most in what context, and how is public identity selected and displayed to others on this basis? (pp. 62–63)

In my experience in working with multicultural groups, the issue of context and currency is usually prevalent. It is a competitive process to give precedence of oppression to one group, with little room for recognition of multiple kinds of oppressive experiences.

Conflicts and disconnections occur in groups when the emotions related to power, authority, and leadership bump up against one another or collide without group members' recognition or cognitive understanding of what is happening. Many experience the "disconnect" as it occurs but are unable to label or acknowledge it in a manner that makes sense. When the subtle meanings ascribed to comments and behaviors—whether intended or not—are negative, the consequence can be withdrawal or conflict (Tsui, 1997). These interactions could be described as racial, ethnic, and cultural microaggressions. Sue et al. (2007) define racial microaggressions as

brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color [or cultural groups]. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic [or cultural] minorities. (p. 271)

Racial and cultural microaggressions are often the results of individuals' perceptions, hidden assumptions, stereotypes, and attitudes about the social roles expected for members of different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. In multicultural groups the roles taken by members and the leader may not fit what some members have seen and experienced in the past. For some members who have had little exposure to multicultural environments, a form of cognitive dissonance may occur. Making sense and meaning of an experience sometimes requires exposure to additional voices, knowledge, alternative considerations, and opinions. When group members are in an environment that provides opportunities for more freedom of expression of both positive and negative thoughts and feelings, risks are taken, anxiety rises, and learning occurs. Groups can be safe spaces for members to be curious, ask questions, and challenge, confront, and test interpretations about dynamic processes as they occur from a spectrum of levels: interpersonal, group, intergroup, group as a whole.

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Strategies for Working With Racial and Cultural Dynamics

The A. K. Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems (2003), the national organization responsible for bringing the group relations model to the United States in the 1960s, deems a number of competencies important for leaders working with groups and organizations. Those that are most relevant to working with multicultural groups are as follows:

- The capacity to maintain task and role boundaries in the face of positive or negative responses from others
- The courage to speak what is felt to be unspeakable in the particular work context as long as it relates to the task of the group at hand
- The ability to reflect on and express one's internal experience rather than acting on it
- An understanding of how elements of one's own identity and history affect one's work as well as call forth particular fantasies and projections from others in the context of groups
- The ability to recognize that individuals "carry" or express some aspect of the experience of the group as a whole—for example, scapegoating and rescuing
- An understanding that the exercise of leadership and representation affects, and is affected by, group and intergroup dynamics
- An understanding of how group and organizational dynamics are reflections of the larger sociopolitical context

Each of these competencies requires a certain level of awareness and curiosity about self and others in a sociopolitical context: a capacity to do internal work, an ability to focus on task and maintain boundaries, an ability to hold the group in mind as an entity with its own characteristics, and the courage to speak the unspeakable. Thus, group leaders who work with multicultural groups must be willing to state observations that may sound politically incorrect—otherwise, the unspoken topic will become the elephant in the room, something that everybody sees but pretends is not there. Below, I provide some examples from small groups at weekend conferences. These vignettes are taken from transcripts of my research and have been edited to demonstrate some of the racial and cultural dynamics that occur in groups.

Here-and-Now Experience of Differences

In this small group, the members talked about differences outside the group, with no mention of their current experience in their

group that was racially and culturally diverse. The group consultant asked, "How could this discussion be brought to your experience here, now, in this group?" An African American man spoke of his fears of being attacked in other group situations, so he came prepared to do battle in the current group:

Being an African American, I'm generally accustomed to being attacked and having others consider my thoughts as being out of line. As I sit here my heart is racing because I have to be ready to fend off whatever is going to come at me next. I'm ready to do battle. I was talking about this with a friend this morning. It sucks to always be this tough warrior and it's exhausting. I wish I could show people that I can be weak. I wish I could show people that I have a heart. I'm afraid I'll be destroyed. Because being a Black male, I feel as though I've spent my entire life experience carrying negative projections. So to a certain extent, I have to be rugged in order not to collapse. But that's not all of who I am.

Another African American man, who was older, stated that for himself he was more concerned about aging and how others in the group might see him as fragile. His warrior days were over, and now he felt more vulnerable. While the older man was dealing with the loss of virility, the younger one was speaking of his need to be constantly on guard when engaged in predominantly White groups. His defense, his struggle for survival against the negative perceptions, acted to reinforce perceptions of him as the "cautious, angry, hostile Black male other." A White male member spoke about his experience of being gay:

I dressed with a sort of unusual attention this morning. I was like, "How am I going to be a militant faggot?" I put on seven different things only to put on the thing that I was originally going to put on. I think there is a silent homosexual subgroup in here and nobody is talking about it.

The initial intervention allowed three different subgroups to emerge, based in race, age, and sexual orientation. When salient identities are acknowledged, they become available for discussion. The gay member learned that he was not the only gay person in the group and that he could talk openly about his experience. The two African Americans were able to share experiences of how they are perceived as Black men and received feedback about other members' perceptions. The leader then intervened, saying, "I wonder what you have to suffer to get in here? It feels like competition to prove who has the biggest wound."

The group members unconsciously identified currency as competition, related to outsider status of race, age, and sexual orientation. While the young African American man seemed to have currency in his role of victimization due to negative stereotypes and projections about Black men in society, the older man claimed the currency of the vulnerability of aging, and the gay man claimed the currency of discrimination against homosexuality. The group spent time on each issue and explored some of the members' assumptions. While risky and at times tense, the discussion provided an openness that allowed members to explore differences and competition, and to recognize that these issues could not be resolved during the group's time together. So there was some agreeing to disagree as a way of managing the tension. It is often the case that White group members are cautious about broaching the subject of race; doing so can bring up feelings of guilt and shame that make the group feel stuck and threaten group survival.

The issue of representation by race, sexual orientation, age, and gender in relationship to authority, power, and leadership is another aspect of this group's experience. The members of groups are cognizant of whether those in roles of leadership represent their particular social identity groups. The leader of this group was a White man who had been hired by a gay African American man to work with the group. When group members see their own social identities represented by those with authority, it seems to give them personal authority to take up roles of leadership or give them stronger voices in the group. The members were able to connect with the multiple identities of the gay African American male in charge, given their own fantasies, personal needs, and desires. The group leader in this instance spoke the unspeakable about currency and competition in the group. He encouraged members to speak to internal feelings, which decreases the potential risk of acting on them. He also demonstrated an understanding that each of these members represented certain aspects of the group in terms of intergroup dynamics.

Sometimes women in groups have a valence for working to keep the group feeling safe or for taking up stereotypical gender roles. In a small experiential group of students in a class, a Muslim woman and a Jewish woman who had experienced some tensions between them began to talk about their cultural differences. Another woman in the group quickly intervened and was joined by other women discussing other differences that existed in the group, taking the focus away from the work the

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Jewish and Muslim women were about to embark on. The consultant to the group asked, "I wonder if the Jewish/Muslim differences are too hot for exploration in this group. What are some of the fears of what might happen if the conversation between these two members continued?" At the time, Israeli-Palestinian conflict was on the front pages of the daily newspapers. Brazaitis (2004) notes that

White women take on the role of being fragile or emotionally sensitive in groups. They are the ones who cry. White women's historical legacy is that of delicateness and fragility. I have yet to be a participant in a Group Relations conference as a staff or member when a White woman did not burst into tears, silently weep, or leave the room wiping her eyes in the middle of a group session. (p. 105)

Representation

I have also found that there is power in numbers. Often when we create groups at group relations conferences, we distribute the people of color to provide some diversity in all groups, with the hope that this will enhance the experience of all members. At one conference I had a large number of members who needed to be divided into seven small groups. I decided to group members by race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, using information they had provided on their registration applications. In one group there was a predominance of Latino members with a Latino consultant. The Latino members monopolized the first 20 minutes of the session, sharing stories about having their names changed because their original names were too difficult for either priests or educators to pronounce:

Alberto: There was a time that I was Albert. And now I'm Alberto. I was originally Alberto, then Albert. When I went away to college, I became Alberto again. It felt good to go back home as Alberto.

Fernando: I have a story. I was brought up Catholic. And when I was being baptized, my mother was asked to state my name and she says Fernando. The Catholic priest, who happened to be White, went into a conference, and said that's not his name. That's not a real name. So my baptism certificate says Frederick. Even though that's not my name.

Fernando: These stories are about painful experiences. What's sort of hidden is the reality of what it feels like when I change from one side, then to become someone else.

Alberto: So, to be part of that group, we change our name, instead of being Alberto, we become Albert.

Critical Incident

Alice is a 25-year-old second-generation Chinese woman who has been educated in the United States. Her parents moved here long before she was born; in fact, they met and were married in a northeastern state. Alice is the older of two children and has attended top schools. She is highly intelligent and competitive, and she held a number of leadership roles in high school and college. Alice attended a weekend group relations conference and was assigned to a small group in which she was the only Asian. At first this was not an issue, since she had become used to this pattern in the schools she had attended. The group was to meet for four 1-hour sessions over the weekend. Other small groups were occurring simultaneously, and Alice was engaged in a number of other events during the weekend.

During the second session Alice told the group that she had been a member in other groups that talked about racial and cultural differences. She noted that she was often the leader in these groups and was able to demonstrate her leadership ability, stating that she was good at delegating and getting people to follow her command. She told the members that when she is in a culturally mixed group where she is the minority, she gets frustrated. She found herself falling into the stereotypical Asian female role of being quiet and submissive. She could not identify anything that anyone had done to her. She was perplexed about how she had fallen into that role.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the racial and cultural dynamics that Alice may be experiencing in the group?
2. Why do you think Alice has been pulled into this particular role?
3. What competencies would the leader need to help the group explore this issue?
4. Can you think of other situations that might occur in counseling and psychotherapy groups where members from different backgrounds might take up stereotypical roles related to their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, or age?

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