

Divergent Cultures: Consideration of Confrontation in Conversation

Matthew P. Larson

Transpersonal Wilderness Therapy, Naropa University

CNSW-751-A.2023FA: Group Counseling

October 10, 2023

Author Note

This paper is a response to prompts quoted from an online assignment:

- *Based on the Johnson, Gitterman, and Hoffman, et al. articles, say a little about how you think small group work can shift today's dominant paradigm of oppression and white supremacy. According to Gitterman, what are specific things leaders can do to prevent groups from reinforcing oppressive dynamics?*
- *Review the 7 key issues for facilitating race-related dialogues per Bemak, et al. Which keys stand out to you and why?*
- *What tools are you developing to support generative or consciousness-creating conflict? How prepared do you feel to facilitate dialogues related to race or other sources of division within a group, and what additional experience might help you feel more prepared?*

Divergent Cultures: Consideration of Confrontation in Conversation

One overriding impression from the cited reference articles used for for this assignment is the need for authors in this space to emphasize the ease of walking away from conflict while inhabiting privileged social locations. The conflict is widely acknowledged when oppressed people use protest, and rarely before such times. Hoffman, et al (2016) expose this in a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1967 speech in Stanford: "[America] has failed to to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity." The Watts Riots were but one stanza in a saga expressed using "the language of the unheard" (Hoffman, et al, 2016). More recent protests and direct actions taking place under Black Lives Matter banners appear to be expressions from that same tongue.

Similarly, though worded to provide much more portability to other marginalized groups, Gitterman (2018) spends a great deal of space discussing the need to center difference and the difficult conversations one must at times endure in order to prevent rebuilding macro-level systemic oppression within the micro-level of a specific group container. The suggestion comes several times to get in front of the discussion with pre-contact to begin drawing out hidden differences. "The sociocultural context is often ignored when working with majority identities, as it is rarely experienced as a cause of interpersonal tension" (Gitterman, 2018). As such, we need to purposefully center and focus on the ways marginalization is re-playing (or even likely to replay) within group containers, up front, and repeatedly over the life of the group. It is precisely these missing conversations where learning how to do right by our peers takes place. As Gitterman said, "it is important to not assume universality" (2018).

The entire concept at play in Johnson (2006) expands on prior mentions of escapism through/as privilege. “When you deny the reality of oppression, you also deny the reality of the privilege that underlies it, which is just what it takes to get off the hook.” All of the described methods from denial, victim blaming, re-labeling, offers of better ways, to being sick and tired of talking about it all the time; all methods to get off the hook which allow one with privilege to simply forget about (micro)aggression and move on. Fragility is not something I’ve found to be held very well in people first confronted with the realization of their own reactivity, despite producing a range of presentations from *quite bold and direct* to something more like *I’ll just leave this within reach*.

The Bernak & Chung (2018) list of key factors in addressing race in groups was encountered primarily as delightfully succinct, and followed with well fleshed out examples to support the condensed assertions. I tend to encounter such weighty brevity as thought spaces that have been especially thoroughly considered; the ability to quickly encapsulate such rich topic areas, to distill the wisdom, reveals true craft. Standout items from the list include *encouraging race dialogues*, *acknowledging racial identity as key*, and *modeling courage in demonstrating difficult dialog*. Truly, as framed, these items deserve their own time and platforms. I also find myself wanting to generalize the list to allow application of the same wisdom for other forms of marginalization.

Imagine some possible futures realized by intentional focus on “emphasizing the importance of redefining cultural ethical boundaries” (Bernak & Chung, 2018). Redirecting the application of such an intent to a different aspect of marginalization, such as neurodivergence, or queer affect, reveals liberatory promise in any frame. Assuming thorough work on internalized

bias and tracking skills, clinicians might broach any or all of these topics using a similar approach. And as with race, explicitly agreeing to uphold custom boundaries for each group container means that how the participants choose to show up is the predominant consideration; breaking away from oppressive patterns in the macro-system becomes the relatively simple matter of ratifying agreements and standing accountable to the group. Crucial to avoiding causing harm to marginalized group members, is the enforcer role that may be necessary from facilitators, and this also demands cultural humility and intersectional awareness (and perhaps even some suggestions to seed group agreements).

As a thought exercise, let's play with the notion proposed earlier and re-write a generalized seven factor list for psychotherapeutic group work considerations. In order to effectively address sources of conflict in any relevant setting: (1) encourage difficult dialogues; (2) involve marginalized interpersonal process as a core element; (3) acknowledge marginalized identity as a key element; (4) facilitate emotionally charged, difficult marginalization conversations; (5) engage facilitators in modeling honesty and courage in broaching conversation about marginalization; (6) incorporate sociopolitical countertransference in marginalization dialogues; and (7) emphasize importance of redefining cultural ethical boundaries in marginalization dialogues.

I wonder how well the flow and level of attention serves a variety of marginalized identities.... I'll defer to non-white people on whether it serves issues relevant to race as well as the original without explicitly naming race as the central consideration. I would offer that this sort of softening has made broaching white fragility easier than otherwise in my own experience. Reading through the list, while inserting bi, enby, autistic, etc. identities, feels quite effective in

the way one might sneak up on a great reveal in a (potentially too) spicy tale. I can think of ways I brought all of that in through vulnerability in sharing my own marginalized identities while volunteering for fishbowl sessions in classes during year one, so to say I feel ready to take on the challenge of working with groups would not be an understatement so much as a continuation of prior workings and reality tests.

Item number seven in the key factor list is very present for me as I seek to close out my thoughts on these readings. It is simultaneously the most slippery and crucial space while pondering how the embrace of autistic identity, so deeply fundamental to my healing path, is simply not allowed in most public discourse. Without facilitators carving out space for such consideration, the same broadly oppressive experiences described so fiercely by Yergeau (2018), will play out (and indeed, has) in any groups that aren't making time for redefining how we talk about autistic experience, and trans experience, and bisexual erasure, and the many ways those experiences intersect with the impacts of systemic, and interpersonal, and internalized racism.

References

- Bemak, F., & Chung, R. C.-Y. (2018). Race Dialogues in Group Psychotherapy: Key Issues in Training and Practice. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 69(2), 172–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207284.2018.1498743>
- Gitterman, P. (2018). Social Identities, Power, and Privilege: The Importance of Difference in Establishing Early Group Cohesion. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 69(1), 99–125. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207284.2018.1484665>
- Hoffman, L., Granger, N., Vallejos, L., & Moats, M. (2016). An Existential–Humanistic Perspective on Black Lives Matter and Contemporary Protest Movements. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 56(6), 595–611. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167816652273>
- Johnson, A. (2006). Getting off the hook: Denial and resistance. In *Privilege, power, and difference*, (2nd ed.) (pp. 108-124). McGraw Hill.
- Yergeau, M. (2018). *Authoring Autism : on rhetoric and neurological queerness*. Durham: Duke University Press