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Group Work with 'Mixed Membership' Groups: Issues of Race and Gender

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SUMMARY. The small group is a social microcosm of the wider society in which it is located. Patterns of social oppression will be repeated in social group work practice unless active steps are taken to counteract these tendencies and replace them with a culture of empowerment. This article examines some of the information available about the effects of race and gender in small groups, and develops some practice principles to inform a methodology for anti-oppressive group work in 'mixed' groups. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

This subject is beset with contentious definitional problems, and we start therefore with an attempt to clarify our use of terminology in this

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paper. By 'mixed' we mean a group membership with a composition which includes black and white people and/or women and men. Our use of the term 'black' is that used quite commonly in the political context in Britain to refer to people from those ethnic groups whose skin color attracts a racist response in a predominantly white society. We are aware that in the USA 'black' refers to African-Americans and not to other ethnic groups, for example Hispanic or Indian. For clarity in the major argument we shall retain the inclusive term 'black', but when the occasion requires it—for example when cultural difference rather than racism is the issue—we shall refer to specific ethnic groupings.

'Sex' and 'gender' tend to be used interchangeably in the group work literature (as in Garvin and Reed, 1983). We shall use sex to refer to the biologically determined differences between women and men, and gender to refer to the socially constructed meanings associated with female and male. By 'anti-oppressive' we mean practice which in Philipson's words '. . . works to a model of empowerment and liberation and requires a fundamental rethinking of values, institutions and relationships' (1992, p. 15). This paper concentrates on the in-group dimension of anti-oppressive practice. We are in full agreement with Breton's view that '. . . the times are such that social workers cannot afford the luxury of looking only at what goes on inside groups' (1991, p. 46), but think that in-group anti-oppressive practice is an essential starting point for social group workers.

There are of course unfortunately many other oppressions besides those associated with race and gender. We have selected these because of their centrality in our own experience and understanding, and because we believe that many of the points made in this paper transfer directly to other oppressions in the social microcosm of the group. Our view is that ranking oppressions in order of hierarchical importance is itself an oppressive act, and we recognize that each oppression merits analysis in its own right.

THEORETICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

There have been several theoretical, conceptual and ideological developments in the last decade, in Britain and in North America, which form the background to the rationale for this paper.

1. The sex and 'race' of group workers and group members has a profound effect on group behavior and process. Although there is some disagreement on precisely what some of these effects are, there is over-

whelming evidence from research to support the contention that there are major effects. Davis and Proctor (1989) combed the research literature exhaustively and produced substantial evidence of the salience of both race and gender in groups. Garvin, Reed and colleagues (1983), in a special issue of this journal on gender and group work, demonstrated the pervasiveness of gender influence on the differential experience of men and women in same-sex and mixed groups. In one of the few studies that examines the intersection of gender and race in leadership in groups, Brower et al. (1987) conclude ‘. . . the gender and ethnicity of the group worker (and all leaders) have an impact on group situations that may be of equal force to the variables we customarily seek to affect such as program, leadership technique, group composition, and so forth’ (p. 147). In Britain, practice-based articles refer to the powerful influence of race and gender on group process and the feelings of the workers and the members (see Rhule, 1988 and Mistry, 1989, both articles by black women practitioners).

2. *Groups are a social microcosm of the wider society.* For some time we have thought of a small group as a social microcosm, on the basis that any small group will replicate the social-structural-political status and power relationships that are evident in the wider society (see Brown, 1992, p. 154). This view is based not only on research-based theory, but equally on our own separate and shared experiences as a black woman and white man in numerous ‘mixed’ groups. It was therefore with much interest that we recently read Shapiro’s article ‘*The Social Work Group as Social Microcosm*’ (1990) and noted his views on the implications for group practice.

In his paper Shapiro conceptualizes group members as entering a group, each with her or his own personal/social frame of reference. The effects of this are analyzed on the two dimensions ‘Familiar/Stranger’ (inclusion and intimacy) and ‘Horizontal/Vertical’ (status and power), with group members experiencing society as both their in-group and external environment. Shapiro envisages group formation as the intersection of these individual frames of reference, and goes on to say, ‘Social group workers have a particular responsibility—and opportunity—to help members engage sensitively with both the content and context of their frames of reference and, through this engagement, to shape the structure and development of their own group as a “person/group/structure-sensitive” task’ (p. 18).

We find Shapiro’s conceptualization helpful, but it does not address explicitly the ‘fit’ between different member’s socially determined frames of reference. For example, part of the black person’s frame of

reference is that they experience living each day in a racist society controlled by white people, and the white person's frame of reference takes for granted their superior status and power as a white person in relation to black people and all those from minority ethnic groups. Similarly, the social microcosm frame of reference of the woman group member is likely to be infused with her experience of male oppression, and that of her male counterpart in the group to be based on a gendered view of the roles and relative power of men and women in the wider society (but see later comments on the positions of black men and white women in relation to sexism in a white patriarchal society).

This 'fit' between socially determined frames of reference is fundamental to the evolution of both group content and process. The latter will reflect the external oppressive dynamic unless the worker's perspectives and interventions are specifically designed to develop and nurture an 'alternative' culture of empowerment.

3. *There is widespread evidence of the efficacy of same-sex and same-race groups for women and black people, respectively.* The group work literature is replete with accounts of the advantages of same-sex groups for women, at least when the group task is associated with issues of personal identity, social oppression and empowerment. In addition to the research-based work of Garvin and Reed (1983) and Davis and Proctor (1989), there are other recent publications (for example Home, 1991; Butler & Wintram, 1991) emphasizing the strengths of women-only groups. Home makes a very convincing argument that for women to experience groups which can combine both personal and political change, they need to be without men. She supports this by demonstrating how in community work groups men have often assumed leadership and control, and been dismissive of women's concerns, for example about child care and violence, as 'private matters'. The men have a 'macho' ethos emphasizing ends and not means, using 'male' language, and a group culture which is antithetical to the collective decision-making, power-sharing model generally preferred by women.

In *Feminist Groupwork*, Butler and Wintram (1991) have drawn extensively on their experiences of group work in two English Social Services Departments with socially/politically disadvantaged, isolated and oppressed women. They demonstrate how the groups focussed on women's understanding of themselves and their experiences, and how feminist groupwork can lead to potentially liberating interpretations with profound consequences for participants' lives and social actions. To have had any men in this type of group would have been both a contradiction and counter-productive.

Research (see Garvin & Reed, 1983) suggests that whereas women are frequently disadvantaged in mixed groups because their needs tend to get subordinated to those of the men (the social microcosm again), men often prefer and actively benefit from being in mixed groups. One reason for this differential experience is that the presence of women is 'used' by men, often unconsciously, to enable them to be more expressive and in touch with their feelings than they normally can be in groups of men. We say normally because there are now some men's groups which are specifically designed to facilitate men working at their own issues. Some of these are consciousness-raising and to facilitate expression of feeling and caring as an alternative to the competitive status-conscious ethos that typically prevails in all male groups (Sternbach, 1990; McLeod & Pemberton, 1987). Other men's groups focus directly on male violence and aggression (Canton et al., 1992).

Turning to race, the formal evidence (Davis and Proctor, 1989) is less extensive, but points in the same direction: that for many purposes an all-black or ethnic-specific group is both preferred by black members, and more productive, certainly when issues of racial identity, racism and culture are central to the task. Other sources of 'evidence' in Britain include: the campaign to create black sections in the Labor Party; the establishment of 'black only' organizations of social workers and probation officers; and support groups for black social work students on qualifying courses.

The views of white people about respective membership of all white and mixed race groups are not well documented, and probably vary in different contexts. Our experience in social work training is that white students tend to favor 'mixed' groups "to learn from each other," whereas black students accept mixed groups for general learning purposes but prefer their own groups when racism and white oppression are likely to be high on the agenda.

The message from this research and practice 'evidence' suggests that the grouping of choice, in many circumstances and for many purposes, for women is women-only groups, and for black people is black-only groups. Two points follow from this. First, in order to meet both gender *and* race criteria, we are talking about four types of preferred group composition for black people and women: homogeneous groups of white women, black women, black men and white men respectively. Within the black population as defined inclusively, the choice between black groups of mixed sex, black men's groups, black women's groups and gender-specific/ethnic specific groups (e.g., Chinese women or Jamaican men) will depend on group purpose, political perspectives and

cultural traditions. Secondly, the positions of black men and white women, who are both at one level oppressor and oppressed, should not be thought of as symmetrical—as we explain below.

In practice there will be some situations where workers are in a position to influence ‘mixed or not’ decisions about how group services are offered, and they need to take into account the above points. There will also, however, be numerous situations where lack of resources, the context, and/or the task, result in groups of mixed composition, by race or sex or both.

Composition is often, and quite properly, not controlled either by group workers or group members (for example in small residential units, and groups whose membership is self-selecting from advertisement). Furthermore, to exclude someone from a group on grounds of their race or sex when no alternative is available because of a resources deficit, and/or when they themselves wish to be a member (and many women and black people prefer to be in mixed groups), can be both oppressive and discriminatory.

4. *Social action groups and empowerment.* In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in social action group work on both sides of the Atlantic. As stated earlier, Breton (1990, 1991) has strongly asserted that it is no longer good enough for social group workers to concentrate on empowerment within the group, for example when working with disempowered disadvantaged women. She argues that internal process must be coupled with an external agenda of collective social action—for example in alliance with community groups—not only by group members but also by group workers.

In Britain, Mullender and Ward (1991), with other colleagues, have developed a model of ‘Self-Directed Groupwork’ which as the name suggests is predicated on group members being in charge of their own group agenda and process, with help from a group facilitator. The group task is to identify agendas external to the group in which the members have a common interest. Empowerment is developed as the group work method as well as being the underlying principle.

These social action approaches being developed by Breton, Mullender and Ward, and others, understandably tend to play down the importance of group process relative to the external goals of the group. However, as we think those authors would agree, attention to process is integral to successful goal achievement. It would indeed be ironic to have an oppression-ridden group seeking anti-oppressive external goals! Many social action groups will by definition have homogeneous membership and their process falls outside the terms of reference of this paper. Many

other social action groups are, however, of mixed race and/or sex composition, requiring the careful attention to internal group process suggested here.

5. *The intersection of race and gender in groups.* A further complexity already anticipated is the interaction of race and gender issues in the same group. There is not much on this important subject in the group work literature, and we do not have space to make more than one or two points here.

One of the issues is the potential and actual conflict that can occur between these two oppressions. Many black women reacted critically to the white dominated feminist movement in the earlier days when it was demonstrably racist in its 'white assumption' and failure to address the racism which is central to the experience of all black women. The positions of black women and white men can in one respect be distinguished from those of black men and white women. For the former the oppressed/oppressor dimensions point in the same direction, whereas for the latter they are in opposing directions. Thus in a group composed entirely of white men and black women the dynamic is clearer than in a group with white women and black men. It is interesting to note that in the research of Brower et al. (1987) into (white) group member reactions to leaders of varying ethnicity and sex, there was more positive feedback about their experience of black women and white men leaders than either black men or white women leaders.

It would however be a mistake to treat the oppression position of black men and white women as symmetrical in Britain and North America. As Day (1991, p. 19) records, black women writers (Carby, 1982; hooks, 1982) have pointed out that the dominance of black men cannot be equated with the dominance of white men because only the latter is part of the patriarchal-capitalist inheritance. Day goes on to say that black women are not denying that black men are sexist, but that some black women identify their position as one where they 'struggle together with black men against racism, while we also struggle with black men, about sexism' (in Day, quoted from Carby 1982).

6. *Anti-oppressive group work is about feelings as well as ideology and theoretical formulations.* Inevitably much of the group work literature (with notable exceptions, see Rhule, 1988) on race and gender in groups is theoretical and objectified and does not begin to communicate the strength of personal feeling that for all of us surrounds the issues of race and gender. It is therefore very important when developing a mixed-group practice methodology to 'keep alive' these deep-rooted feelings in both workers and members (see, for example, Brummer &

Simmonds' reference to the hatred associated with racism, 1992)—though not to the point where the group climate becomes disabling and dysfunctional.

SUMMARY

There is extensive evidence that the structurally determined oppressions of racism and sexism are replicated as a powerful dynamic in small groups of 'mixed' membership. For this reason, among others, there are many group purposes which, for women and black people and others from minority ethnic groups, are best served in homogeneous 'not-mixed' groups. There are also numerous groups, including some social action groups, whose composition, whether by choice or circumstance, is mixed racially and/or by sex.

We shall now therefore consider some of the practice principles and methodology which are essential if group work is to counteract the replication of social oppression in the small group, and facilitate the empowerment of all group members.

PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FOR ANTI-OPPRESSIVE GROUP WORK

The familiar 'good practice' group work principles go some way towards an anti-oppressive approach, but they mostly do not incorporate the implications of the group as social microcosm. They underestimate—or more likely ignore—the reality that, in a 'mixed' group, members enter the group unequal in power, structurally and interpersonally. The homeostatic assumption of systems theory does not allow for these structural inequalities. Anti-oppressive practice demands not only specific worker actions towards equalizing the power and position of group members, but constant awareness and vigilance to ensure a consistent approach to all aspects of the groupwork process. In what follows we have necessarily been selective in our choice of which worker activities to concentrate on to illustrate the approach.

Agency Context

While it is possible to work anti-oppressively with a group in an oppressive agency setting, this contradiction makes it both stressful and

problematic. Workers who are empowered themselves by an agency which is serious about equality and shared decision-making, are in a much better position to facilitate the empowerment of those with whom they work. For disadvantaged and disempowered potential group members, their perception of how the agency regards them will be a crucial factor in whether or not they seek to join a group (see Breton, 1991).

Group Composition and Structure

The general principles governing group composition for members have been well rehearsed elsewhere (Bertcher & Maple, 1977), and we have already discussed the importance of the initial decision on mixed/non-mixed membership. In mixed groups, a 'balanced' group membership (for example at least four black members in a group of ten) makes an enormous difference to the potential for an anti-oppressive dynamic. Conversely, the singleton member is prone to marginalization and stereotyping, and the worker needs to take action both inside and outside the group to create conditions which offer that member equal opportunity in the group.

Worker composition is an issue that attracts surprisingly little attention in the literature. The case for two workers is particularly strong in mixed groups (see Brown, 1992 chapter 3). As a general principle it is helpful to a minority group member to have at least one worker of similar sex and/or ethnicity. There is also the opportunity for the two workers to model an anti-oppressive, equal relationship between a man and a woman and/or between a black and white person. In 'Black/White Co-working in Groups' (Mistry & Brown 1991) these issues are examined in more detail, including the severe resource limitations on choice of workers.

The Preparation Stage

As in all group work, careful preparation is the essence of good anti-oppressive practice. Five aspects of preparation are particularly relevant:

- a location for the group which offers equal access to the group for all members;
- a group program which is at least in part negotiable, which in both content and methods does not replicate the dominant ethos of the

wider society; and which is reflective of all members' cultural perspectives and interests.

- ground rules which incorporate anti-oppressive principles about relationships and behavior in the group;
- worker(s) preparation;
- preparing responses to oppressive/discriminatory behavior;

The last two are now considered in more detail.

The personal preparation of workers (especially men and white people) undertaking group work with groups of mixed membership is essential. Theoretical understanding is necessary, but needs to be integrated with experiential learning which requires the worker to examine his/her own history and attitudes, and make a self-assessment of what he/she needs to do (for example for a white man to listen to what women and black people are saying about their experience, and for a black woman to learn how to cope with the feelings evoked by racism/sexism in the group).

With two co-workers, male/female and or black/white, the usual preparation for working together (see Hodge, 1985) takes on the additional dimension of acknowledging the significance of socially determined inequality in the relationship (Mistry & Brown, 1991). Especially in a new partnership, there is much work to do in honest sharing of feelings about working together, and discussing the implications of co-working with a mixed membership group. Sometimes a consultant's questions are needed to facilitate co-worker communication: for example, "what feelings and anxieties do you, a white/black person, have about working with a black/white colleague in a group in which racism may surface?" The pair need to work out together how they can organize themselves as a partnership in a way that neither perpetuates oppression nor overcompensates for it. Examples of the latter are when a male worker takes less than his equal share of responsibility in the group through fear of being seen as replicating the dominant male stereotype; or when a white co-worker is unable to query a black partner's actions for fear of being seen as racist.

The other preparation issue is anticipating how to respond in the group if and when sexism or racism—or indeed other oppressive behavior—occurs. It is clear that the worker(s) will have to be active and interventionist, particularly in the early stages, in affirming an anti-oppressive approach. Overt racist or sexist behavior is sometimes easier to deal with than the subtler forms of oppression, just because it is so obviously unacceptable—though often very painful. An example of one of

the subtler forms of oppression is the gradual domination, often unconsciously, by men/white people of group interaction and decision-making, in the process marginalizing the contributions of women/black group members. With 'mixed' co-workers, the man/white person carries particular responsibility for challenging oppressive behavior, whether obvious or subtle, and not leaving it to the woman or black person to be the one who exposes the oppressive behavior. All these issues need discussion in the pair as part of preparation, with the expectation of revision according to what actually happens in the group.

Anti-Oppressive Work in the Group: Saying, Being and Doing

From the moment the group first meets, the worker(s) needs to start establishing an empowering anti-oppressive climate based on trust. How they do this will vary to some extent according to the particular group model and purpose. Certain tangible steps on approach to program, ground rules, and the co-working relationship, have already been mentioned. However, though what the worker says is always important, the membership is likely to be influenced much more by how it is said, and even more by what they observe of the worker's non-verbal behavior-his or her being and doing.

For example, for a male worker to make 'impressive' anti-sexist ground rule statements in the group, and then to proceed to develop an alliance with the male members, tacitly rewarding their tendency to dominate the group, is simply to replicate the social microcosm effect of male dominance. Similarly, for a white worker to emphasize verbally to the group the need to be anti-racist, and then, quite possibly unconsciously, to undermine their black co-worker colleague's equal status role, is oppressive and disempowering of her colleague and of other black members of the group. It is a not uncommon experience in staff groups with just one black member, for that person to find him/herself marginalized by a cultural dynamic which makes it difficult to participate to his/her full potential. This can happen where there is a genuine staff group commitment to an anti-oppressive policy, and may be exacerbated by associated factors to do with gender, class and part-time/temporary employment status.

Research (Davis & Proctor, 1989) and personal experience both suggest that mixed groups—especially those with a gender *and* race mix—are likely to 'import' distrustful attitudes from women/black people towards men/white people, born out of a life-time's experience of oppression. This challenges the worker(s) to take steps early on in the group to

demonstrate their commitment to race and gender being high on the agenda. Some of the most important steps are quite difficult to articulate because they are less obvious. They include: communicating non-verbally and empathically with individual members—particularly those in minority positions—through the kind of eye-contact that conveys recognition, awareness and feeling; being ‘comfortable’ in talking about, and the use of language about, race, gender, racism, sexism, and other oppressions; relating to a co-worker of different race or gender in a mutually respectful and equal way, without suggesting that anti-oppressive behavior is only a matter of good personal relationships; being prepared to challenge, and not defend, oppressive agency policies and attitudes; listening to and validating what group members are saying and expressing non-verbally; being quite open about recognizing power issues in the group, including professional power; being open and ready to acknowledge one’s own oppressive or insensitive behavior when this occurs; acknowledging the reality of the social conditions prevailing in group members’ localities, and so on.

Another anti-oppressive practice skill is recognizing and responding to the cultural diversity of members. This does not necessarily mean accepting, much less celebrating, some culture-based views (for example, religious beliefs that homosexual relations are ‘abnormal’; the practice of genital mutilation). What it does mean is ‘doing your homework’ on the cultural perspectives of group members, and this includes class-based attitudes. Chau (1990) has made a major contribution to the literature on ethnicity, cultural difference and group work; and in the Hong Kong context, Pearson (1991), has drawn attention to some of the fundamental differences between Chinese culture and the ethnocentric cultural assumptions of much ‘Western’ group work practice-theory.

When workers have put their own anti-oppressive house in order, one of the most difficult tasks is knowing how to intervene when members are oppressive to one another in the group. The agreed ground rules provide a benchmark, but the worker(s) still has to make delicate judgements about when and how to intervene between members. As outlined elsewhere (Mistry & Brown, 1991) the tendency is for white and male workers, in respect of racism and sexism respectively, to prevaricate if not collude; whereas workers identified with the recipients of sexist/racist behavior feel the pain and anger personally.

In both situations the challenge to the worker is to intervene in a way which is strong and unequivocal, yet without provoking an angry defensive response which exacerbates the situation and disempowers both the

perpetrator and the 'victim.' Part of the skill is learning how to expose oppressive behavior in a way which is not so confrontative that it creates a defensive reinforcing reaction. Wade and Macpherson (1992), who work with young male offenders in a day center in Inner London, describe the dilemma they faced in approaching anti-racism, in a mixed race group, with working-class whites who feel themselves to be powerless and worse off than their black counterparts. After discovering that direct early confrontation which did not recognize white men's feelings was destructive to all concerned, they developed a gradualist approach which included some separate sessions for black and white men on racism and prejudice, and which later in the mixed group enabled a more considered discussion in which anti-racist peer challenges began to occur. As in group work practice generally, one way forward is to make the issue 'group business' in the hope that working it through—painful as that may be—can be a source of learning and empowerment for all group members.

Links with the External Environment of the Group

In mixed groups, with primarily internal aims, an important practice issue is how to link in-group anti-oppressive practice with the external oppressive reality of many group members' lives. A particularly effective way in which this can be achieved is when the group as a whole has contact with the outside world as on group outings and in activity groups.

Mistry has described elsewhere (1991) an example of the power of shared experience on a group outing. The occasion was a three day residential visit of nine group members (black and white women offenders) and their six children to a holiday camp. Mistry was the only worker able to go. "One evening I attended a dance with other women in the group and we were set upon by white women holidaymakers. I was terrified, but the other black women (having always been on the receiving end of this type of behavior) dealt with it in the most skillful way possible. It demonstrated to the white women in our group how racism worked against the black women . . . and much of this shared experience formed an important focus for group discussion in the next twelve months in the group" (p. 152).

Another way in which the internal/external links may develop is when in discussion of racism and sexism in the group, examples are shared of the external oppressive reality of group members' lives. This in turn may generate external agendas for individuals, the group as a collective, and/or the workers and the agency.

Consultation

We are well aware that it is much easier to write about anti-oppressive group practice than to do it! Anti-oppressive work is personally demanding, and evokes strong feelings in workers, whether black or white, male or female, associated with personal identity, emotional pain and past experience of oppressing and being oppressed. The sheer complexity and strength of feeling can confuse perceptions and practice judgements, and sessions with a consultant can be a great help, particularly for inexperienced workers and for 'mixed' co-workers (see Brown, 1988).

In choosing a consultant, not only is their general suitability and competence important, but also their race and sex, depending on that of the group members and group workers, and the purpose of the group. As a general principle, in mixed groups a black and/or female consultant may be preferred, because they can provide both a support for black/female workers, and be more likely to recognize unconscious worker collusion with oppressive developments in the group.

A poignant example of the need for a same-race consultant is the account by Rhule (1988), a black woman group worker, of a group for white women bringing up black (mixed parentage) children. Rhule co-worked with a white woman colleague, and was the only black person in the group. The oppressive racism of the women in the group was such that although she had a racially aware and supportive white colleague she desperately needed to talk through what she was experiencing, on a one-to-one basis with a black consultant—quite separate from any consultancy for the workers as a pair. In Britain there are real practical problems of finding and paying for suitable consultants in these kinds of situations.

FURTHER WORK

This article has taken an overview of issues of race and gender in group work, and discussed some of the ingredients of anti-oppressive practice in 'mixed' groups. What we have not done is broaden the framework to include and discuss the particularities of other oppressions, such as disablism and heterosexism, nor have we done more than touch on the complexities of the intersection of race and gender in groups. These are subjects meriting further papers in their own right.

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