

approaches is the research evidence pointing to the effectiveness and applicability of brief groups to a wide range of client problems and diverse settings (Piper & Ogrodniczuk, 2004). Brief group counseling is popular in both community agencies and school settings because of the realistic time constraints and the ability of a brief format to be incorporated into both educational and therapeutic programs.

What does the research evidence suggest regarding the effectiveness and applicability of brief group therapy? In their review of the group literature, Fuhriman and Burlingame (1994) conclude that group therapy (including BGT) consistently results in positive outcomes with a wide range of client problems. Other reviews of the group literature are consistent in lending a strong endorsement to the efficacy and applicability of BGT (see Burlingame, MacKenzie, & Strauss, 2004; MacKenzie, 2001; Piper, McCallum, Joyce, Rosie, & Ogrodniczuk, 2001; and Piper & Ogrodniczuk, 2004). Among the populations for which BGT shows promising results are cancer patients, those with medical illnesses, personality disorders, trauma reactions, or adjustment problems, and those dealing with grief and bereavement (Piper & Ogrodniczuk, 2004).

Although the clinical benefits of brief group therapy are clear, this approach does have some limitations. Piper and Ogrodniczuk discuss a number of reasons for providing BGT, yet they stress that the benefits of BGT should not be oversold. They emphasize that this approach should not be thought of as a panacea or as a means of producing lasting personality change. For BGT to be effective, it is essential that group leaders have training in both group process and brief therapy because BGT makes unique demands on group practitioners and requires specialized skills.



A Multicultural Perspective on Group Work

The term **culture** encompasses the values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people. But culture does not just delineate an ethnic or racial heritage; it also can refer to groups identified by age, gender, sexual identity, religion, or socioeconomic status. You belong to a particular cultural group (or groups), and so do your clients. Culture will influence the behavior of both you and your clients—with or without your awareness. Increasing your awareness of your own cultural values and personal assumptions will help you to work sensitively with culturally diverse clients. This kind of self-awareness is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for developing competence in multicultural group work. You need knowledge and skills that will enable you to work effectively with a diverse membership. In our view, achieving cultural competence is a lifelong journey. We do not arrive at a place of being all-knowing. However, a realistic goal is to learn effective ways of being with those who differ from us while continuing to learn and grow as competent counselors.

Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and members of other underserved groups terminate counseling significantly earlier than do Euro-American clients. This dropout rate is often related to language difficulties and culture-bound values that hinder formation of a good counseling relationship (Pedersen, 2000; Sue, 1990). It is our belief, which we share with many of our colleagues, that the high dropout rate with certain cultural groups is directly related to the lack of cultural awareness and appropriate responsiveness of group therapists. Regardless of your ethnic, cultural, and racial background, if you hope to build bridges of understanding between yourself and group members who are different from you, it is essential for you to recognize your possible position of privilege and the power of your professional role in the group. We hope you will engage in critical thinking and self-exploration pertaining to your ability to connect with clients who differ from you. There are things you can do to increase your capacity to make meaningful connections.

Anderson (2007) proposed the following comprehensive definition of multicultural group work, which affirms the developmental and remedial goals of group work and embraces striving toward goals of health, dignity, liberty, and autonomy:

Multicultural group work is a helping process that includes screening, assessing, and diagnosing dynamics of group social systems, members, and leadership for the purpose of establishing goals, outcomes, processes, and interventions that are informed by multicultural counseling knowledge, skills and abilities. It is a process of planning, implementing, and evaluating group work strategies from a socio-cultural context of human variability, group, and individual identity, world-views, statuses, power, and other salient demographic factors to facilitate human and organizational development. The goal of multicultural group work is to promote human development and to enhance interpersonal relationships, promote task achievement, and prevent or identify and remediate mental, emotional, or behavioral disorders and associated distress that interfere with mental health, and to lessen the risk of distress, disability, or loss of human dignity, autonomy, and freedom. (pp. 225–226)

Pedersen (2000) views multiculturalism as the “fourth force” in the counseling field, along with the psychodynamic, behavioral, and humanistic perspectives. Pedersen makes these basic assumptions about multiculturalism, which have a significant impact on techniques in group work:

- Culture is best defined broadly rather than narrowly so that demographic variables (age, gender, and residence), status variables (social, educational, and economic), and affiliations (formal and informal) are considered as potentially salient cultural features.
- All counseling occurs in a multicultural context given the complexity of every client–therapist relationship.

- Culture includes both the more obvious objective symbols and the more subjective perspectives hidden within individuals.
- Both cultural similarities and differences are equally important in multicultural counseling.
- A multicultural perspective is relevant to all aspects of counseling practice.
- Multiculturalism needs to be understood as a continuous theme in all fields of counseling rather than as an attempt to develop a new and separate field of study.
- Multiculturalism can be the basis for people to disagree without one person being “right” and the other being “wrong.”

Another useful way to think about the differences between our clients and ourselves is to consider the multiple identities each of us has. For example, we possess gender, sexual identity, personality styles, abilities/disabilities, socioeconomic status, relationship status, levels of privilege, parental status, and so forth. Each of these categories influences how we view the world, who we are, how we behave, and inform the ways people see us. It is impossible to become experts on every dimension of difference we possess in relation to our clients. However, we can develop a set of tools and a way of being with others that adequately respects, addresses, and explores these differences in a therapeutic setting. For example, when I (Cindy) became a new mother, I went through enormous transitions in my identity as a woman, a wife, a friend, and in my career. Had the therapist ignored these aspects of my identity and only addressed my symptoms of depression, it is likely that I would not have wanted to remain in therapy. Being able to see how my struggles were contextual helped me to feel validated and motivated me to feel powerful enough to move through the difficulties. This example illustrates that regardless of the identity or cultural issue, we must work with our clients in ways that honor the context of their past and their present realities.

There are advantages and limitations when using group formats with culturally diverse client populations. On the plus side, members can gain much from the power and strength of collective group feedback. They can be supportive of one another in patterns that are familiar. As members see their peers challenging themselves and making desired changes in their lives, it gives them hope that change is possible for them.

It is important to realize that groups are not for everyone. Some individuals may be reluctant to disclose personal material or to share family conflicts. They may see it as shameful even to have personal problems, and all the more shameful to talk about them in front of strangers. People from some cultures rely on members of their extended family, their clergy, or indigenous healers for help rather than seeking professional assistance. Some individuals may not feel comfortable in a group or even be willing to be part of a counseling group. Some may be hesitant to join a group because of their unfamiliarity with how groups work. Others may find that what is expected in a group clashes with their cultural values. Counselors and group members together

can bridge these cultural divides so that people from all backgrounds benefit from group work.

Although it is unrealistic to expect you to have an in-depth knowledge of all cultural backgrounds, it is feasible for you to have a comprehensive grasp of the general principles for working successfully amid cultural diversity. What is equally important with having an intellectual understanding about cultural groups is having an attitude that includes an appreciation of the fact that not everyone views the world as you do. Although cognitive learning is important, this learning must be integrated with attitudinal and behavioral shifts. This is a good time to take an inventory of your current level of awareness, knowledge, and skills that have a bearing on your ability to function effectively in multicultural situations. Reflect on these questions:

- In what ways does your own culture influence the way you think, feel, and act?
- How prepared are you to understand and work with clients of different cultural backgrounds? Do you feel more or less comfortable working with particular groups? How might you increase your comfort level and skills with these groups?
- Is your academic program providing the awareness, knowledge, and skills you will need to work in groups with diverse client populations?
- What kinds of life experiences have you had that will better enable you to understand and counsel people who have a different worldview?
- Can you identify any areas of cultural bias that could inhibit your ability to work effectively with people who are different from you? If so, what steps might you take to challenge your biases?
- Are you familiar with how various cultural groups perceive or respond to persons from your cultural group as well as those from their own cultural and ethnic identity group? How would you feel if a client shared these reactions or stereotypes with you?

You will need to know much more about diversity if you hope to become an effective multicultural group counselor. We recommend the following sources for educating yourself and acquiring multicultural competence: Atkinson (2004); DeLucia-Waack and Donigian (2004); DeLucia-Waack, Gerrity, Kalodner, and Riva (2004); Ivey, Pedersen, and Ivey (2008), Johnson, Santos Torres, Coleman, and Smith (1995); Merta (1995); Pedersen (2000); Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, and Trimble (2008); Sue and Sue (2008); Sue, Ivey, and Pedersen (1996); and Yu and Gregg (1993).

We encourage you to take a few minutes to complete the Multicultural Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills Survey (MAKSS) at the end of this chapter. After you score this inventory, look over any items you would like to be able to answer differently. When you finish this book, we suggest you complete this inventory a second time and compare your results with your initial assessment. Have any of your attitudes or beliefs changed? Have you acquired new knowledge and skills in multicultural counseling during this course?