Hello lovely people!

I am writing to you today from a very sultry mid-July afternoon in Atlanta and among the many things I have to be grateful for I am especially counting conditioned air as primary. Hopefully you are sipping on something cool while reading this message and letting the joy of late summer melt over you.

I was initially planning to start this note with an admission of anxiety, but I changed my mind. Don’t get me wrong - I am nervous. I think anyone would be if they were trying to fill the large and loving footprints left by Alicia Homrich who has been a mentor to me in ASGW for many years. And then think of all those who have walked this path before, especially my mentor and friend, Diana Hulse, who is also a former President and the reason I am at all connected to ASGW. I am very appreciative to them and all who have nurtured me for this position. So, sure I am nervous; however, I have grown tired of nurturing anxiety in my life. The alternative direction I am taking to set the tone in my role as ASGW President is fierceness. I am not talking about fierceness in the context of aggression or malice, rather, fierceness expressed as intensity and unwavering conviction. This expression of fierceness is something that I recognize in my time connecting with all of you at conferences and gatherings. You express fierce joy, fierce advocacy, fierce acceptance, and fierce love. You care deeply about the work that you do connected to group work and you care deeply about the people who you impact through that work. It is your spirit of fierceness that inspires me and set the tone for my time as President.

I have many plans for transferring your fierce energy into action over the coming year and I hope that you will support me and join the in my efforts to continue building a strong group. Over the last year Alicia Homrich has done some amazing work behind the scenes for ASGW in terms of overhauling the policies and procedures that drive our association. You may not spend hours reading all of that information but it directly benefits all of us by creating a better association experience. I plan to carry her effort forward and restructure many of our committees and service opportunities in ASGW. The goal will be to create more opportunities for you to be involved in ASGW and for ASGW to make the most of the tremendous talents of our volunteers. I will work closely with the various committee chairs to create more systematic processes for training and mentoring leaders for ASGW. Like before, you may not be directly involved in my efforts, but the impact of those efforts will produce results that benefit all of our members. I also have set a goal to increase our membership numbers in ASGW. We have a vibrant association with so much to offer individuals, institutions, and the profession as a whole. A growing membership translates into a larger community of support for all of you and a powerful force to advocate for group work in service to our clients and our communities.

I close my message to you with some quick reminders. Our work is enhanced by your energy and ideas, so please take the opportunity to reach out to me or to any of our ASGW committee chairs. We are on an “off” year for the ASGW conference, so that means that ACA Orlando in March 2015 will offer the primary opportunity for us to connect and build
A Message From the President-Elect

Kimberly Asner-Self

Folks, I am delighted to be President-Elect of ASGW, and I will do everything I can to serve this organization well. Traditionally, my service has been on the writing and editing side of things with JSGW. After several years on the editorial board under the fantastic leadership of Janice DeLucia-Waack, Don Ward, and Sheri Bauman, I wanted to try to get involved in other ways. I am both excited and scared. I want to talk with you, email with you, argue and discuss with you. And for those of you who know me, you already know that I want to laugh with you. But I am scared even if, at times, I look or sound confident. So, like you do when facilitating a group, I remind myself to trust the process. And I thank you for your support and your confidence.

I want to share with you an experience where my confidence was shaken and then restored. I was a part of a talented group of counselor and counselor educators. We had the good fortune to travel to Malawi, a small land-locked country south of the equator in Africa and bordered by Zambia, Tanzania, and Mozambique. We were invited there to participate in the Malawi Counseling Institute by the Guidance, Counselling, and Youth Development Centre for Africa and co-sponsored by Old Dominion University and the National Board of Certified Counselors – International to collaborate to further develop the counseling profession. Now, I love our profession, and I do believe in it, but I am leery of exporting it. Like you, I am well aware of the human propensity to become culturally encapsulated (Wrenn, 1962). I am also acutely aware of the impact of western colonialism – the acculturative effects of military occupation, western religious influences, and economic neo-colonialism. Is collaborating with other cultures as they develop a counseling profession counseling colonialism? Does that make me a type of colonialist? Even though I believe in it, but I am leery of exporting it. Like you, I am well aware of the human propensity to become culturally encapsulated (Wrenn, 1962).

I want to share with you an experience where my confidence was shaken and then restored. I was a part of a talented group of counselor and counselor educators. We had the good fortune to travel to Malawi, a small land-locked country south of the equator in Africa and bordered by Zambia, Tanzania, and Mozambique. We were invited there to participate in the Malawi Counseling Institute by the Guidance, Counselling, and Youth Development Centre for Africa and co-sponsored by Old Dominion University and the National Board of Certified Counselors – International to collaborate to further develop the counseling profession. Now, I love our profession, and I do believe in it, but I am leery of exporting it. Like you, I am well aware of the human propensity to become culturally encapsulated (Wrenn, 1962). I am also acutely aware of the impact of western colonialism – the acculturative effects of military occupation, western religious influences, and economic neo-colonialism. Is collaborating with other cultures as they develop a counseling profession counseling colonialism? Does that make me a type of colonialist? Even though I believe in it, but I am leery of exporting it. Like you, I am well aware of the human propensity to become culturally encapsulated (Wrenn, 1962).

I would argue that we label cultures as valuing and falling on, perhaps, a continuum of individualism or collectivism -- where individuals interact collectively in a culturally assumed manner. Any of us has observed how groups present as a microcosm of family-of-origin “culture,” if you will. Over time, we know that these group members develop their own spoken and unspoken ways of being – a
small “culture,” if you will. The facilitators’ culture and manner of developing their professional cultural (not to mention their skills) can have a considerable effect on the group’s development. Members grow, if not always to like one another, to trust one another, to understand one another. Boundaries are broken down. Wisdom, dare I say, can grow. This is not new thinking. Carl Rogers certainly believed groups had the power to promote peace. Theoretically, any time two cultures come in contact, change occurs (Berry, 1986). Presumably, if both cultures are able to approach that interaction openly, there can be a rich and synergistic experience for all. And cultures are made up of groups of people. Can we be the kinds of group professionals, and the kind of profession, that allow ourselves to grow dynamically as we interact with others? And to recognize our own naïveté at times about how much power we have as we facilitate our groups, teach our students, research our theories, publish our thoughts, and...export our profession?

In Malawi, we were welcomed with enthusiasm and reserve. And I learned quickly that the reserve came partially from over a century of interaction with the western world, of which I am a product and hence represent. Would I assume that I actually knew what the counseling profession is and should be in Malawi? Would I consciously or unconsciously promote and try to convert Malawians to my profession? Embarrassingly, yes. And this became clear ONLY after we began to interact using group techniques (ice breakers, for example) and group skills (drawing people out, redirecting, self-disclosure, for example) that promoted cohesion, altruism, universality and led us all to working. It would have been easier to retreat into an “expert” position, just to protect my own ego. But, like you, I have learned to trust the group process.

We groupies truly do have the power to effect change. But only if we are vigilant AND compassionate in our own professional and personal self-reflective growth. Because for one, the minute we believe we are truly an excellent group professional and we are truly an excellent profession, we might, just might, stop doing what it is that makes so; and for two, when our arrogance becomes abundantly clear, we will need the strength and the compassion to make amends, brush ourselves off, and get back in the group. And oh dear, my western cultural roots are showing again.

I am humbled to be a part of this stunning profession, this amazing association, and this inconceivable human race. Thank you again for electing me. Let us talk together, email together, argue and challenge, support and laugh together. Let us promise to grow together. Let us trust the process here and abroad. Please.

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**SOCIAL JUSTICE IN GROUP WORK**

**PRACTICAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHANGE**

**EDITED BY**

Anneliese A. Singh and Carmen F. Salazar

This book spotlights the unique contribution of the *Journal for Specialists in Group Work* to the social justice literature, and of group work to a social justice agenda. Although the term social justice may be relatively new in the counseling and psychology literature, the underlying values - attention to inequities, advocacy, and empowerment strategies for members of marginalized and oppressed populations - are not new in group work. Group leaders have been attending to these concerns all along, and group work itself is an ideal venue for the realization of social justice concerns. However, until now there has been a limited amount of scholarship on group work with a stated focus on social justice.

This groundbreaking book emphasizes action through a practical approach, featuring research and case studies of social justice group work in community and school settings. Articles highlight how group workers infuse social justice consciousness into their work; how they address social justice issues, and implement social justice practice. Authors review the history, practice, and future opportunities for social justice advocacy within group modalities. They also address guidelines for the training and supervision of practitioners engaging in social justice group work.

This book was published as a special issue of the *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*. 

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**SCOPE AND THEME OF BOOK**

Group work is an important intervention counselors and psychologists may use to create social justice change. This book reviews the history, practice, and future opportunities for social justice advocacy within group modalities.
First, let me express my deep appreciation for the honor of representing ASGW on the ACA Governing Council (GC) for the past six years. I was also fortunate to be elected or appointed to the ACA Financial Affairs Committee (FAC) for three years and the Investment Committee for two years, which means I had additional opportunities to make sure ASGW’s interests were represented at more than one level. The last GC meeting I attended was in Hawaii, March 25-26, 2014, and I meet with the Financial Affairs Committee monthly by conference call. My last FAC conference call will be this month. We had a face-to-face meeting each year to plan the ACA budget.

Membership. While ACA membership has steadily increased over the past few years, most division memberships have decreased. ACA student membership has been the main source of the increase, probably because of the free malpractice insurance. The trend for student membership to decrease after graduation was addressed by adding an additional year to the New Professional category. The ACA membership at the end of May, 2014 was 55,236.

Dues increased by $2 last year for Regular and Professional members, and $1 for Student, New Professional 1, New Professional 2, and Retired members. An identical $2/$1 increase will occur in fiscal year 2015.

Management Services Agreement (MSA). The MSA agreement increased by 50 cents per member in 2014, and another 50 cent increase will occur in 2015. I always supported keeping an increase as low as possible. I also supported, several years ago, having the per membership fee based on the previous monthly division membership, rather than the membership at the beginning of the year. This eliminated the fees for members dropping out throughout the year. As the membership decreased during the year, so did the MSA fee.

New ACA Headquarters Building. ACA will move to a new building around Thanksgiving and will be completely out of the old, dated building on December 1, 2014. A consulting firm helped narrow the choices to three facilities, and the final choice was near the current ACA headquarters, and we are leasing the building with an option to purchase.

Conferences. Total ACA conference registrations for Hawaii (2014) were 2,381, Cincinnati (2013) 3,494, and San Francisco (2012) 3,834. Whereas the attendance this past year was greater than the Hawaii attendance in 2008, it was still the lowest, by far, in the past four years. When asked why we returned to Hawaii, the best response was that we were offered free facilities that significantly cut the costs.
New Organizational Affiliates. Two groups of ACA members attempted to become Organizational Affiliates, which is a step toward becoming new divisions. Many leaders are strongly opposed to having new divisions because of increasing the size of the GC. The proposal by the hopeful Association of Women and Counseling was soundly defeated. Although I knew little about the effort, I was a lone spokesperson for it. More than half the ACA membership is women, which means the major part of our income is from women. I believe we are about 40 years late in having such a counseling concentration. The other hopeful group wanted to take steps toward becoming the International Association For Traumatology Counseling and Development. This proposal failed by only a few votes, and the issue will undoubtedly come up again.

Publications and Continuing Education. Publication income has decreased for several years. Although the overall publication income is still decreasing, the new books Assessment in Counseling and the 2014 Ethical Standards Casebook have caused a sharp increase in revenue. In addition, the professional learning workshops and webinars, particularly the very successful DSM-5 webinar series, have been productive. I have urged the publication of more textbooks and e-books.

Governance. I want to remind the ASGW members that serious attempts were made during my six year tenure to make major changes in the GC governance, all of which would have drastically reduced division representation. I remained strongly opposed to any change that significantly reduced division representation. The changes eventually made were to have a stronger Executive Committee, and have the GC meet fewer times. Changes were also made in eligibility for ACA President-Elect nominations. Any nominee must now have served in two of three positions, Division President, GC Member, or Regional Chair. All attempts to include a fourth category of state branch president failed.

Overall ACA Financial Status. ACA finances are in good shape. Investments are up, and the ACA staff members have accomplished many goals that are overcoming publication and conference decreases. A major loss caused by the investment with the Heritage of America group has been finalized in court, and by-laws changes will prevent such ventures in the future. The Investment Subcommittee finalized policy guidelines for investments, and the FAC carefully chose a management team to follow the policies. The membership increase has accounted for the major income. The total ACA assets at the end of May, 2014 were $11,961,224, an increase of $1,246,865 over 2013.

Recommendations for Future GC Representatives. I leave with these recommendations, not only for Niloufer Merchant, but for other ASGW leaders and members who can support her in these efforts:

- Maintain a positive and cooperative relationship with ACA staff. They work hard for us, but they need to know what we want.
- Keep informed about the goals and efforts of other divisions, regions, and affiliates. Support those efforts that affect ASGW.
- Speak up in GC meetings. Make our voice heard.
- Do not be afraid to be in the minority. I have seen my minority voice occasionally become a majority voice. Do not be embarrassed by losses.
- Be aware of efforts to reduce the cost of having a large GC by decreasing division representation. If it comes down to ASGW paying to have a GC representative, then pay. ASGW needs a voice at that table.
- Build a small pool of ASGW leaders who might be needed as a future ACA President-Elect. The new requirements take years to accumulate.
- Keep the ASGW leadership and members informed about GC decisions that affect our association.

Finally, I congratulate Niloufer Merchant, your new GC representative, and I offer her continued support. Having worked with her on the ASGW Board for several years, I know we have a competent and caring representative.
I recently facilitated a workshop to a group of secondary professional school counselors at a charter school in Washington, DC. A few weeks prior to this session, I consulted with the guidance director to determine the topics I was to cover. In particular, I was to discuss co-leadership and group cohesion. I prepared the best I could and proceeded to present the information. Fortunately, as I began this workshop, I made an effort to solicit the school counselor participants’ desires for the pending workshop. As you might imagine, their ideas did not match up with what I had diligently prepared based on the information I was given. So, like any skilled, knowledgeable, and experienced group worker, I admitted the discrepancy between what their goals for the session were and what I had planned. Then I proceeded to offer the information in a flexible manner that allowed a discussion addressing their unique concerns.

While I led this session, I had no idea the impact I was making with these participants. After reviewing their feedback it became clear that this workshop exceeded their expectations. On the one hand, I would love to take full credit for this apparent success. However, this would not be completely accurate. First, I must share that I learned this specific leadership posture from my doctoral adviser professor Fred Bemak a number of years ago. I remain grateful for this lesson. Second, the current participants made their requests very clear to me when they were given the chance to do so, and I responded. Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that in every professional situation I have come to value the necessity of adaptability. Specifically, group work warrants a certain level of wiggle room. We must contextualize our expertise and apply it directly to our various clients, students, families, communities, schools and so forth. Please note these contexts are never stagnant. I believe failing to address the unique needs of our clientele will at minimum limit the group’s potential. But more importantly, doing so allows for endless opportunities.

How is all of this relevant to this edition of the Group Worker? The columns embody flexibility. In some cases, the writer offers an “aha” moment. In other cases, our colleagues set out to be flexible, yet more adaptation is necessary. More specifically, President Jonathan Orr continues to have a creative approach to urge us to go beyond our comfort zones. His vision for the vanguard of group workers (both scholars and practitioners) trumps the current status quo often evident in our counseling profession. Yet his vision remains loyal to our group work predecessors’ strong foundation. The current President Elect Kim Asner-Self challenges us to contextualize our efforts squarely on the needs of the communities we wish to serve. Not doing so teeters between being unethical and just plain ignorant. To further illustrate this point, both the outgoing and incoming Governing Council Reps, M. Carolyn Thomas and Niloufer Merchant respectively, embrace this flexibility in their expositions. It is fascinating to hear these seasoned scholar-practitioners provide their reflections and visions moving forward. Finally, two developing leaders, my co-editor Rachel Vannatta and a bold current GW master’s student Matthew Mueller, reflect on the fact that flexibility is a necessary component of completing a group for college students or homeless individuals even if they did not realize the power of this phenomenon until after the fact.

In closing, I hope the commentary in this Group Worker is helpful in revealing any stagnation that might be less obvious in your professional endeavors. Simply put, be diligent, intentional, yet flexible!
BARBARA GAZDA SCHOLARSHIP

KELLY A. MCDONNELL AND LORRAINE J. GUTH, AWARDS COMMITTEE CO-CHAIRS

The ASGW Awards Committee is pleased to announce the recipients of the two Barbara Gazda Scholarships for 2014: Stephanie Carroll and Katy Schroeder. This scholarship was established to support students’ and/or new professionals’ attendance at the association’s biennial conference, which was held this year on February 6-9 in Orlando, Florida. The scholarship was named for Barbara, the late wife of Dr. George Gazda, who was an encourager and strong supporter of her husband’s career. George, a pioneer and leader in the field of group work, was instrumental in the formation of ASGW and served as the organization’s first president. The creators of the scholarship wanted to honor Barbara’s unselfish dedication to her husband and his work and, by doing so, also acknowledge her support of the ASGW organization. Awardees are selected based on a statement of interest and experience in group work, and ways in which they are likely to benefit professionally from attending the conference. Here is a little background about this year’s recipients.

Stephanie Carroll is a Counseling Education and Supervision doctoral candidate at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama and an ASGW member since spring of 2012. Her primary counseling interests are in addictions and at-risk students and for the past several years she has been providing group counseling to both of these populations. Stephanie has also co-taught the group counseling course as part of her doctoral work, including providing both didactic education and supervision and feedback for simulated group counseling sessions for the master’s students. Because Stephanie’s future plans include group facilitation and most of her formal training has been on working with clients individually, she saw a need to expand her understanding of how to provide productive group counseling. She was excited about attending her first ASGW conference to gain essential tools and information to apply not only to her professional group work but also in her future role as a counselor educator teaching the next generation of counselors-in-training.

Katy Schroeder is a first-year doctoral student in Counseling at Oregon State University (OSU) and an ASGW member since January 2013. Attending the ASGW conference in Orlando was particularly significant to Katy as it was the first time she co-presented her scholarly work at a national conference with OSU Assistant Professor and ASGW member, Dr. Daniel Stroud. Her presentation on Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) group work represented a continuing effort to provide specialized EFP groups for trauma survivors. She has been working over the past year with Dr. Stroud and professors from the OSU Department of Animal Sciences in preparing to offer these EFP groups for vulnerable populations at the equine center in Corvallis, Oregon. Katy was also interested in attending the ASGW conference for other professional development opportunities: exchanging information and sharing ideas with colleagues, consulting with leading researchers, strengthening her emerging skills as a group work specialist, and exploring new ways to contribute as a member of this fantastic organization.

The ASGW Awards Committee and organization membership congratulate Stephanie and Katy on their scholarships and involvement in ASGW activities! Stephanie and Katy were recognized during the conference luncheon and presented with their certificates and checks. The next biennial conference is scheduled for 2016, and information about all ASGW sponsored scholarships and awards can be found on the website at http://www.asgw.org/.
This past academic year, I completed my doctoral internship at a university counseling center. I was enthusiastic about my placement, and eager to get back into some clinical work after spending the previous two years heavily immersed in coursework. One of my goals was to gain more experience running groups during my internship. My supervisor was very supportive of my interest in offering a group or two, though she did caution me that it may be more challenging than I was anticipating. Concerns that could prevent students from participating include disclosing their problems to other people, worrying that others would violate confidentiality, experiencing a lack of commitment by other group members, having prior familiarity with other members, and being recognized by others who are not in the group (Johnson, 2009). Delucia-Waack (2009) also points out that students may feel entitled to receive individual counseling, which could prevent them from engaging in group treatment. I figured some overzealous enthusiasm would go a long way, so I mostly put my supervisor’s cautions about getting the group off the ground aside.

I recalled there was a student at the university who expressed interest in having a body image support group, so this is where I started. My supervisor and I did some pre-group planning, talked about having an open vs. closed group, number of sessions, a few ideas for session content, and what the screening process would be. It is important to note, closed groups are generally time limited, have a predetermined number of sessions, and members remain throughout the group with no new members being added. On the other hand, open groups allow for membership to change—members leave, new members are added, and the group continues (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2010). Additionally, open-ended groups usually focus on interpersonal learning, are typically unstructured, and often have heterogeneous membership (Kline, 2003). Because of the specific topic of the group and the time constraints of the semester, we decided on a closed group. Additionally, we decided on 10 sessions lasting an hour and a half each. Short-term, closed groups typically range from 10 to 20 sessions (Kline, 2003), and Corey et al. (2010) recommend 15 sessions for their college groups. We decided on 10 sessions in order to have time to recruit members at the beginning of the semester, and also to allow the group to wrap up before the very end of the semester.

After making the structural decisions about the group, I made flyers and posted them around campus, spoke with residence life representatives and encouraged them to pass the information to their resident assistants, and advertised the group through the wellness center, where we see students for physical health and mental health appointments. After several weeks of advertising and trying to solicit interest from the student body, it was pretty clear that the group was not going to materialize.

My second attempt was a joint effort with the other intern at this university counseling center. We noticed that several of our clients were describing feelings of anxiety and experiencing a lot of school stress. So we decided to try to run an open four-week group that would focus on stress management, which was especially critical during the middle of the semester. We were thinking that students could drop in, and each week we would provide psychoeducation about stress and manifestations of anxiety. We would also teach and practice different exercises, such as deep breathing, guided imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation. Luckily, we had three students come to the first two sessions, but only one student came to the third meeting and no one came to the fourth. While we were trying to meet the needs that consumers of our individual counseling services were expressing, there were several issues that contributed to our lack of success. One significant problem was likely the lack of cohesion, which is often an issue in open groups (Corey et al., 2010). My co-facilitator and I were also leading a group together for the first time. Though we had a good working relationship before we started the group, it would have been beneficial for us to spend more time talking about our leadership styles, personal goals, and individual expectations for the group before we began. Finally, though both of us had a lot of enthusiasm and interest in the group, we are both doctoral students and although we have some experience leading groups, we are budding scholar-practitioners with high aspirations. I cannot definitively say that the group would have had more success if we had more experience, but it certainly would not have been a hindrance.

Reflecting on the whole, both experiences were disappointing. In the body image support group, I experienced what Whitingham (2014) describes as failure to launch, where the group never begins. With the second group, we experienced failure to thrive, where the group begins but quickly collapses. As a staunch believer in the power of groups, I felt strongly that there were students who could benefit from participating in one of these groups or even a group session if we could get more momentum. I was disappointed that I was not able to figure out a way to make the experience happen. Perhaps somewhat selfishly, I was also saddened to miss out on the leadership experience and the professional development that I would have gained along the way. However, I did learn first-hand that the difficulties of starting a group, described in the group work literature are real, and perhaps the lesson was to remind me of my own naiveté.

Fortunately, I secured a part-time position with this university counseling center this fall, and I plan on trying to start a group counseling program for students again. There are a few things I would like to do differently as a result of my learning experience last year. I plan to conduct an informal assessment of interest for different types of counseling groups in order to better understand what might be salient for the students. I would also like to visit different groups on campus to talk about the counseling services offered, and to answer any questions students might have about individual or group counseling sessions. Finally, I plan to offer closed groups rather than open groups, as it seems clear that closed groups have a better chance of developing cohesion and a sense of “groupness.”

Meanwhile, it would be great to get a reaction to some of these issues through the Group Worker. For example, are others experiencing and/or addressing difficulties in starting and maintaining groups? Are there unique strategies you have used that have been successful? I have no doubt that different settings, whether an agency, private practice, school, or university, all have their own challenges. I welcome the chance to explore these experiences by sharing them with others. Please send your comments, strategies, and stories of success or failure to Vannatta@gwmail.gwu.edu. We will post the responses in the next edition of the Group Worker.
I am a heterosexual male from a Christian, middle-class family of European-descent. For all intents and purposes I am, socially and politically, the definition of a privileged human being in the United States. This narrative is a reflection on my recent group work experience with the homeless population in Washington, DC. The DC Metro area has over 600,000 inhabitants, 12,000 of whom are homeless. It is difficult not to see a person who is homeless throughout your day; they are in front of Metro stations, restaurants, grocery stores, and parks. Until recently, my experience with the homeless population was limited. Sometimes when walking around the city, I have often been approached by individuals who ask for spare change. In turn, I ask what they need the change for. They often tell me that they need soap, food, a drink, etc. and I then go to the nearest store and buy it for them. I would much rather spend money on something concrete as opposed to just handing them coins from my pocket. Typically, they strike up conversations with me and I am always delighted when they willingly speak of their lives and their struggles. As a result, I became interested in more intentionally working with people who are homeless. As a rehabilitation counselor-in-training, I believe my background and educational experiences could be directed towards a population that may be out of work and/or living with a psychiatric or physical disability. Essentially, my call for service seemed apparent.

I found a volunteer opportunity at a local homeless day program looking for someone to facilitate a workshop on interpersonal skills and peer mediation. I jumped at the opportunity and made my way for an interview. My first understanding of my own privilege came at this time. Dressed in a suit and tie while carrying my briefcase, I can only imagine what the members of the day program thought of me walking into the facility. It felt like I was given strange looks in the main room which was made up of majority Black, young males with a few White and Latino males. For a moment, I thought to myself; don’t look at me like that. I’m not like the privileged white people you’re used to meeting in DC. However, I caught myself and thought what makes me think I am any different from the other White men in suits they are used to seeing?

The interview was very informational and I was told that the series of group sessions would be psychoeducational in nature. After the interview, I walked outside and stood a few feet away from two older gentlemen who were talking and smoking cigarettes. I lit up a cigarette while feeling slightly over-dressed. A moment later, I was greeted by one of them and we started a conversation. He asked who I was and I told him why I was at the day program. He seemed genuinely interested and we introduced ourselves. In that moment, I felt accepted.

I am no stranger to being the racial minority in social settings. During my time at my undergraduate institution in New York, I was a Black Studies major. In my courses, more often than not, I was one of a handful of White students. I have been to Black churches; I have gone to lectures on racism; I have gone to hip-hop concerts; and worked in facilities where the majority of employees were people of color. This, however, was different. I felt I had something to prove with the homeless population, not because I was White, but rather because I was privileged in many other ways.

During the first session of this group, I walked up to the building knowing the importance of building rapport with the members and I thought to myself I need to connect with these guys before the workshop starts.

During the first session of this group, I walked up to the building knowing the importance of building rapport with the members and I thought to myself, I need to connect with these guys before the workshop starts. So I stood against the wall and lit up a cigarette. One member saw me and asked politely for a cigarette. I gladly gave him one and we introduced ourselves. He told me he was interested in hearing what I had to say in the workshop because, “Some of the guys really needed to learn how to talk with others.” The next moment, another member of the day program approached us and he...
asked me for a cigarette, as well. The man I was speaking with told
him that they could share the one he was smoking. In that instant, I
saw a glimpse of some individuals in this homeless community. The
mere act of sharing a cigarette may not seem to be wildly extraor-
dinary. However, there seemed to be a salient sense of collectivism
amongst this group of people who are often seen as “being with-
out.” As the group session began, we all introduced ourselves and I
started with discussing what the members wished to gain from the
group sessions. The first session took a very informal, discussion-
based direction. Many individuals talked and some looked visibly
bored, while others were falling asleep, or left the room. I found
this to deter the development of group cohesion but the group
members who stayed informed me that they found it helpful and
wanted me to come back.

I sought supervision with the other professionals at the day
program. They willingly informed me that I should work on making
the next group session more structured. The next week, I returned
and it was raining. Some of the members were outside smoking and
I joined them. One of the more outspoken gentlemen from the
week prior was in the middle of cutting someone's hair. He told
me that it was his way of giving back and helping out his friends. I,
again, glimpsed the culture they constructed: this group of people re-
ally is a community, I thought to myself. Just then, an older woman
left through the front door and, without saying a word, a young
man handed her the umbrella he was holding and said, “I wouldn’t
want you to get sick.” She smiled and walked into the rain.

As the next group session began we went around the room and
introduced ourselves again. I started by asking the group, “What
comes to mind when you hear the words ‘peer mediation’.” Some
of the members of the group stared blankly at me. I asked them to
break down the phrase: Who/what is a peer? Their basic answer was
that the other members in the room were peers, because they are in
the same boat as me. I asked them who else were peers and they in-
fomed me that they saw the professionals in the building as peers as
well because they treat us with respect. We worked with that idea for
some time and tried to articulate how we give and receive respect.

I then asked if I was their peer? One previously silent young
woman raised her hand proudly. She said, “I consider you my peer
because you are volunteering to help us. You are talking with us
like people.” I was taken aback, at first; not by what she said, but
the implications of her words. I never considered the feelings I had
as she expressed herself. I felt that she meant: some people with my
privilege do not usually associate with people who are homeless.
The group discussed the “two worlds of DC,” the political/business
world and the world that the homeless live in. Crossing between
the two was apparently out of the ordinary and it dawned on me
that the stigma of homelessness could prevent individuals from see-
ing the homeless as simply real people.

We continued the group session by working with the phrase
“mediation” and what that meant for them. I asked for a hypotheti-
cal scenario in which peer mediation would be appropriate and we
began creating steps for how to mediate between peers. This session
was better received then the previous one and I saw that working
with this population was going to be much different than working
with the high school and college-aged adults I was used to working
with up to this point. What made things more difficult was that
the rapport I perceived seemed to be lacking and not as strong as I
would have liked.

Again, I believe this changed again once outside. The rain had
stopped and I was speaking to some of the participants about their
lives and where they stay. Many of them were open with me about
their life before and now. One man told me his pride stops him
from doing two things: living with his parents and pan-handling. I
guess I assumed that all people who are homeless must pan-handle,
but it became clear that was not the case. He told me he was going
to a soup kitchen near my school and since I was going to campus,
he invited me to walk with him. We started walking and every time
he saw an outdoor cigarette ashtray, he stopped and started looking
through it for half-smoked and dry cigarette butts.

I told him I would give him a cigarette but he said that he liked
looking through these because he wanted to be self-sufficient. He
told me about his life; he has a baby daughter and wants to see
her but cannot afford a bus ticket. He also previously worked with
computers. The more I spoke with him, the more I learned. We
departed and I knew I had to come back to the day program the next
week. The next week came and I did the usual routine and made my
rounds outside with the people who I recognized. One gentleman
asked me what I was doing later on that day because he was trying
to get people to see another member at an open-mic night nearby. I
was very interested in meeting the young man who was going to be
performing and I was introduced to him. He told me that he learned
to play guitar as a coping strategy for being homeless. He also told
me that he was actually in a cheap apartment now and he was taking
classes at the local college in jazz studies. I told him that I would be
at his performance and that I would spread the word for him.

What made things more difficult
was that the rapport I perceived
seemed to be lacking and not as
strong as I would have liked.
that he did not want to get involved in any violent altercation between two of his peers. Someone responded by saying "not all altercations are violent and we are learning how to stop it from being violent." That seemed like a good place to stop for the week.

Before I decided if I was to go to the open-mic event, I wanted to ensure that it was not going to pose any issues with dual relationships or confidentiality. I sought advice from the professional staff and they informed me that my role could be informal. I was told that the homeless members would appreciate me going; so I decided to go. At the event, I was speaking to the member who was cutting people's hair a couple sessions ago and he told me that he found a small party tent and he and some friends erected it in the woods nearby. He invited me to visit anytime and party with him that weekend. I had no plans to take him up on that offer because I knew that would be crossing boundaries. However, I knew that our rapport was strong and that there was mutual respect between us.

Later on in the night, the young man performing was about to go onstage and one of his guitar strings broke. He looked visibly upset because he knew he did not have an extra one. Some of the other performers, most of whom were college-aged White men, were reluctant to allow him to borrow their guitar for his set. However, an older man gladly offered his and he started to play and sing. He blew the crowd of perhaps 35 people away. He sang all original songs about his life, struggles, love, and his family. It was such a powerful thing to see how he was able to convey so much meaning from his art. Perhaps art, I thought, has become a way to cope with his apparent struggles.

For the next group session, I thought that I should adapt the format. I was struggling to find an activity to open the session. It dawned on me; these members need something concrete. I remembered a scene in Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing that would be perfect for the group. We started the session and I put the movie clip on; a young White male steps on the new white Jordan sneakers of a Black man. They got into an altercation and start talking about race, respect, and materialism. It was a comical scene so the room started filling with laughter.

Such a simple thing made such a big difference on the session. The members were all engaged talking about what would happen if that happened to a friend and what would I do if that happened to me. At one point, there was a profound cultural interaction. I posed an anecdote beyond the following: A counselor must utilize their own empathy I have gained. My desire to be a counselor and educator results from my experience which resulted in a three-week coma and a traumatic brain injury. I am not suggesting anything by this anecdote beyond the following: A counselor must utilize their own experiences to truly connect with and impact others.

It seems that the homeless I encountered in these group experiences were not as concerned with racial distinctions as others in society. What an amazing thing to see how people from different racial backgrounds are able to interact with each other so genuinely. They are not colorblind and I think that is what is so significant; they see and acknowledge color, but it does not seem to hinder the relationships that I experienced. They see the similarities as more important than the differences. Respect also seems essential. Perhaps, maybe we all can learn something from the homeless. I certainly did!
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