

Using multicultural resources in groups

Gwenelle S. O'Neal¹

Abstract: *This article describes an approach to working in groups that integrates excerpts of multicultural resources. With a concern for emphasizing the strengths perspective in groupwork, using multicultural resources and Bibliotherapy promotes the need to identify and employ strengths central to various cultures. These resources can be used in a broader context than simple reading. Using excerpts from carefully selected materials can stimulate guided discussion. This paper describes an approach based on bibliotherapy and small group discussion.*

Keywords: *groupwork, bibliotherapy, multicultural resources, engagement*

1. Associate Professor

Address for correspondence: *Graduate Social Work Department, West Chester University, West Chester, PA 19383, USA. GO'Neal@wcupa.edu*

Introduction

The potential of groups with clients is well established in the social work and counseling literature. Helping people in groups has focused on the purpose and process of the groups. Generally, the evolving group process establishes a mutual aid system (Anderson, 1997). Research indicates that groups may be enhanced through the use of various materials (Brown, 1991). Brown (1991) notes that various techniques and using materials contributes to a health perspective of knowledge, values and skills.

The use of resource materials provides information and enhances participation. Bibliotherapy is the use of reading materials to help alleviate a problematic situation.

Literature

Bibliotherapy

In recent years the literature supporting bibliotherapy has increased. Bibliotherapy has been described to be useful in two ways. Reading materials may be used in a structured format as a self help strategy (Dole, 2001; Berns, 2001; Kupshik & Fisher, 1999). *Counseling & Psychotherapy Journal*, reports (2005) that General Practitioners will prescribe self help books to patients with depression in Glasgow. They intend to expand this healthy reading strategy because of growing evidence that bibliotherapy is effective.

Education methodology has drawn on this concept to teach students reading. Counselors, psychiatrists, and other practitioners have used the technique with children experiencing problem situations ranging from health problems to adoption. (Pardeck, 1998; Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994) Jones discusses the effectiveness of this method in cognitive behavior therapy (2002). Other research connects the use of reading materials to help discuss feelings. Hayes and Amer (1999) conducted a study to determine if children would discuss their feelings about short stature after reading a work of fiction with a character that experienced similar challenges. Their results validated the use of bibliotherapy to

encourage dialogue about challenges. Riordan and Wilson (1989) also discuss positive behavioral change through the use of bibliotherapy. They address the need for continuing conceptualization of and research on bibliotherapy but the technique is perceived to be a positive adjunctive method.

Several studies report bibliotherapy has been found to be effective in changing self concepts, using self-help, changing adolescent's inappropriate behavior, reducing stress, and helping to treat children in stepfamilies (Bowman, 2000; Pardeck, 1998; Riordan and Wilson, 1989).

Bibliotherapy has been used by various professionals including psychotherapists, counselors, doctors, nurses and educators. According to Pardeck, 'Among professionals in the area of mental health, social workers appear the least likely to use self-help books or literature in practice' (1992, p.19). However, recent research indicates that this is changing (Vodde, Dixon, & Giddings, 2003). Integrating the use of culturally sensitive reading materials has been recognized to have benefits (Schliebner, 1992; O'Neal & Reid, 1999).

Research relevant to this discussion involves multiple levels of concern. In addition to the potential of bibliotherapy and the utility of appropriate materials and activities (Brown, 1991; Dole, 2001), there is consumer feedback regarding the need for more specific concrete treatment methods (Pottick et al, 1990). The efficacy of culturally relevant literature with ethnic minority students (Rickford, 2001) speaks to the conceptual approach presented here. However, this approach is useful with culturally homogenous Eurocentric groups as well as diverse ones. Exposure to alternative views and experiences with opportunities to reflect and think critically is an educational process that can enhance the group process.

Bibliotherapy is a tool to be used to assist group members in meeting the purpose of groupwork - giving and receiving mutual aid. The groupwork agenda should be designed to integrate multicultural resources at selected points to highlight the group's specific purpose, themes, issues, and member needs. Multicultural resources, books, quotes, poems, art can be used to focus on areas of concern, to stimulate thinking, and elucidate members' connections to their environment.

Multicultural Resources

Research on learning styles and the effectiveness of alternative teaching methods, is useful to multidisciplinary group workers. It offers a framework for designing instructional methodology for students and for developing alternative methods of helping consumers.

Within cultures, the use of books, biographies, oral histories and the oral tradition itself played a major role in guiding youngsters through childhood and adolescence. Practitioners intervening in family, group and individual struggles can use these same resources. Research confirms the need for African American youth more than others to be exposed to culturally relevant role models (Maton, 1996). Maton refers to a key factor in assisting child development – helping them find adult role models and mentors. Technology can link children to appropriate cultural web sites that provide information about appropriate external systems- mentors, school supports and jobs. Implementing sessions that integrate these resources requires commitment to reading, learning, and working with resource people of different groups who may offer consultation in areas that may be helpful to our clients.

O'Neal and Reid (1999) established the use of multicultural books in various ways. Readings, poems, and art provide joy and mutual support. Using clips from books can remove or diminish pressure on group members to expose their problems.

Simultaneously, using culturally relevant materials promotes engagement and sets the foundation for future trust to address problem areas. Bibliotherapy can be used to demonstrate sensitivity to cultural heritage and strengths. Designing learning modules can identify themes that group members may have grappled with and offer solutions early on for responses. Concrete progressive questioning and facilitator support helps understanding. These methods also encourage library skills. Using reading in practice settings emphasizes the importance of reading and academic skills for self-help. In working with people who need improved communication and employment skills, this additional focus and support of skill improvement is critical.

Culturally specific material provides a context for group explorations. Rickford (2001) discusses the positive influence of taking students' cultural background into account when teaching reading to improve their level of enjoyment, critical thinking, and comprehension. Using cultural resources in groups with diverse membership also provides

role models, encourages thinking and challenges participants to use the information for their lives.

The theoretical basis for this approach derives from social exchange theory. This theory assumes that each party gives something and takes something away. Anticipating consumer well-being and growth as outcomes, making efforts to respect the community of the consumer seems a logical starting point. Social exchange and groupwork theory concepts operate within ecological and strengths based perspectives. This theory base is also prevention focused. Broadly, culture as the environment within which we grow and develop has significance for treatment interventions (Aponte, 2000). Presenting examples of strength and orienting consumers to strengths that already exist, offers reframing strategies that may be used in helping consumers help their children achieve. (Miller, O'Neal, & Scott, 1982) Eliciting cultural strengths from literature helps group members discover their heritage, analyze options, and find ways of overcoming obstacles and achieving goals. (O'Neal & Reid, 1999). Additionally, employing peer interaction techniques enhances high-quality thinking and discussion (King, 2002).

International issues

Most of the larger industrialized countries around the world have some history regarding ethnic minority group social exclusion and oppressive treatment. Austin, Bergum and Nuttgens (2004) consider the possibility that medical health practitioners do become desensitized to the systemic reality of oppression. This reality is not necessarily reduced or eliminated by the protocols advised within clinical environments. Europe and the USA acknowledge the disparities that many persons of color and low income experience (Lehtinen, Riidonen, & Lahtinen, 1995; Singleton-Bowie, 1995). Although reports call for new approaches and increased sensitivity, the prevalence and increasing numbers of persons who experience emotional distress and mental illness suggests continuing obstacles and practitioner resistance to understanding and accommodating social influences that contribute to the problems.

Several articles address the continuing influence of colonialism, racism and social control in treatment regimes.

Breton has clearly advanced that 'effective reaching out to poor and

oppressed people involves a challenge to group social workers to give up some professional control and power and develop new practice models' (1989, p.16).

Cultural oppression is addressed in various ways. In the U.S. social work encourages using the strengths based perspective (Saleeby, 2002) which can be applied to groups via Schwartz's mutual aid model (1971). Yet, students often express difficulty in applying the concept of strengths within the pervasive problem-solving model that is the foundation of socialization in the helping professions.

Other countries have similar dynamics. Pollack of Ontario presents an anti-oppressive framework that is more inclusive of clients' experiences and that recognizes coping and resistance to oppression (2004). Binder suggests using a Freirean empowerment model with adolescents (2004). Racism is perceived to be the mediating factor in misdiagnosis and mismanagement (Bhugra, 1999) by doctors who become oppressors through stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination (Thesen, 2005). These authors recommend improving the understanding of racism in order to recognize and resolve oppressive aspects of care. Understanding the history and relationship of privilege to national policies is also needed.

Mkhize (1994) explores the experiences of indigenous people and the political influence on providing mental health services in South Africa. The absence of policy that aims at addressing mental health issues is clear. Similarly, the Arab minority in Israel has experienced oppression, trauma, and social exclusion (Al-Krenawi, 2005). These situations, like other post colonial ones, reflect continuing traditional perspectives. Visible differences as well as linguistic ones exist (Madoc-Jones, 2004) as risk factors in mental health problems. Lordan (2002) uses experiences with educating social work students as an illustration to combat social exclusion in Europe. Her framework addresses helping traditional students explore the dynamics of oppression. Nevertheless, the oppression dynamic as it exists supports an ambivalent and resistant attitude among the people for whom mental health distress risk is high.

Model designs which take these dynamics into high consideration and that promote the integrity of the culture and its own resources, beyond traditional paternalistic structures require reconceptualizing the service framework. Efforts to improve mental health cannot by-pass cultural realities and the challenges of social position (Lehtinen, Riikonean & Lahtinen, 1995).

Integrating multicultural resources in groupwork

Preparation for groupwork involves: assessing group membership; drafting group and individual goals; establishing an agenda; selecting materials; designing questions related to the goals; and developing a set of evaluation questions. If familiarity with multicultural resources is limited, consultation with ethnic group educational or community agents should occur. Manor (2003) describes the groupwork framework as one that can be made relevant to a diverse range of methods. He encourages making quality of life goals relevant for individual group members as an inclusive method.

The Bibliotherapy process includes reading the excerpt, encouraging discussion with specific questions, and allowing time for group participants to process their reactions with another person (a dyad) or in a small group, depending on the number of participants, and in the full group. Processing the information with one other person promotes opportunity for fuller discussion. Sharing the discussion with the full group provides an opportunity for contributions by more peers and guidance by the facilitator.

There is substantial research that suggests cultural competency should work, but admits there is limited research about which techniques are effective (Brach & Fraser, 2000). In perceiving cultural competency as a model and a continuum of awareness, the proposed model provides a structure and resources to modify services. The results of the end of session evaluations may be shared with the participants and used in an aggregated fashion for program planning.

Literature can be useful in promoting engagement

Using multicultural resources in heterogeneous groups can promote connections with specific group members and expose others to the contributions of diverse citizens of the world. The engagement phase of a group involves messages about working together. It establishes a context for communication between all participants. Engagement is the foundation for establishing a partnership to work together.

Engagement is the process of becoming connected. Working from the premise presented by Schwartz and Zalba (1971) that discomfort

often occurs in the initial groupwork stage, during the beginning power transactions, the focus on engagement recognizes the uncertainty members may feel as groups meet for the first time. From a program development perspective, it is important to design a group process that clarifies power and helps people feel comfortable with the leader, the members, and the task. The dynamics generated by cultural variations, power roles, and communication are important for analyzing and addressing member needs in preparing to work together (O'Neal & Reid, 1999).

With a focus on engagement rather than establishing leader control, the messages that are transmitted during the preliminary communication are crucial. Messages should be informed by research on supportive networks and transactional leadership (O'Neal & Reid, 1999). Engagement is an area to illuminate dynamics that encourage or discourage member continuation. When engagement is also viewed as a teaching unit, this phase may be conceived as potentially a single session. Kosoff (2003) describes the relevance of worker preparedness and practice skills for single session groups with cancer patients. Operating as a contingency mode, it is important to provide participants with substantive information in case they terminate early.

Using resources from various cultures during the initial session(s) promotes a sharing relationship and offers positive constructs for relationship building. This approach, integrating multicultural resources, IMCR, allows the practitioner to respect various cultures, acknowledge approaches that have been employed and described in literature, and gain responses in order to modify communication and interventions.

By paying attention to the macro environment during the engagement phase groupworkers can initiate social connections without violating personal space. This intervention does not preclude using resources in any session or around selected themes throughout the groupwork program.

Lewis and Ford (1991) offer examples of recognizing and accepting the resources existing within cultural communities and using them to engage with consumers we serve. Other studies also indicate that youngsters gain from involvement with culturally specific role models in schools and practice settings (Kaplan, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994; O'Neal, 1998; Pai, 2001). Macgowan ((2003) emphasizes the need to increase member engagement in groups and to measure the changes.

An Illustration of the process

Example: Group of mixed culture boys

Materials: Excerpt from *You hear me? Poems and writing by teenage boys*, edited by Betsy Franco. Cambridge Mass: Candlewick Press, 2001.

Objective: To engage with participants and have them consider the ideas of a young black male. The process will involve reading the poem and asking for reactions. Whether they agree or disagree, like or dislike it, the conversation should set tone for listening to one another and discussing their reactions and feelings about the words.

Process: Preparation should involve the members. In a prep session members can review the table of contents and select poems they would like to discuss at that or the next session. Facilitator can make copies for members to read beforehand or have poems or excerpts read aloud during the session.

Discussion Questions: Questions should be developed before the session but modifications may occur as the group discusses the content.

1. What do you hear in this poem?
2. Have you ever written a poem? A rap?
3. How does it compare to this one?
4. What kinds of feelings dominate this poem?
5. The facilitator may ask members to write a poem or rap on the topic for next time. This will encourage using writing skills. They can be asked to discuss their poems with their dyad partner. Facilitator will support, praise their efforts and encourage future leadership and participation in this way.

Focus: Words may be used to describe loss, we may hear pain, but often we can turn those words inside out and find hope. Each session should wrap up with an evaluation of the usefulness of the reference and the discussion. The evaluation comments should be used in a subsequent session for follow up to determine if the material has been used. If so, discussion can provide support for this. If not, discussion can review how the information can be used and help specify additional steps.

An example of this process comes from a group session with diverse adolescent girls held in a residential treatment facility in the U.S. The facilitator used a body image theme. The materials used included African American women's magazines, (*Essence* and *Honey*), the poem

'Phenomenal Woman' by Maya Angelou, and paintings by Paul Gauguin. His artwork features women of color.

The discussion was centered on what the girls felt was the person in the poem's 'secret' to her attractiveness. These materials generated comments about attitudes, the focus of the paintings on women of color, and recognition of similar messages in contemporary film (i.e. in *Poetic Justice*). The student group worker concluded that 'this was really a wonderful learning experience and I honestly feel that I am a wiser woman.'

The evaluations from the adolescent participants included high ratings of interest and potential use of the information gained in the sessions. Some of their written comments included: 'It was great just to talk about us and what we think...' 'We need to let other sisters know especially little ones that their bodies are okay no matter what.' 'Miss, those meetings were really good, could we meet again?'

Appendix 1 presents examples of literature and ideas for implementing its use. Table 1 overleaf provides a sample form for evaluation.

Discussion

The positive impact of the use of IMCR has been the focus of this proposal. Traditional groupwork may use a psychotherapeutic approach that excludes sensitivity to cultural strengths and social learning styles. Particularly, to engage more effectively with multicultural clients, use of relevant cultural materials should be considered. On the other hand, negative results could occur when therapists or facilitators are not adept with cultural resources or with facilitating more interactive processing and intergroup leadership. Thesen (2005) refers to the tendency to regress to cultural stereotyping in such situations. Nevertheless, addressing the group purpose to enhance the functioning of participants requires seeking and implementing knowledge and resources on behalf of the group members.

Professionals working with groups should seize this important opportunity to integrate multicultural resources to help improve and enhance the accountability of service delivery to diverse consumers. Students in classrooms and participants in groups support the utility of

Table 1
Evaluation form

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. The exercise provided information I could use.	SA	A	D	SD
2. The exercise raised questions for me to consider in addressing my personal goals..	SA	A	D	SD
3. The exercise gave me ideas for talking with friends or relatives..	SA	A	D	SD
4. I am likely to try some of the ideas in the future.	SA	A	D	SD
5. I like the options of drawing, writing or talking about what we are learning.	SA	A	D	SD

Additional Comments::

enhancing group process through the use of relevant cultural literature. By structuring the groups, documenting the process and the feedback with larger samples, culturally relevant contributions to evidence-based practice can be achieved.

There are numerous materials that may be considered for use. Additional selections are listed in Appendix 2.

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Appendix 1 Sample excerpts for engagement and discussion

Culture/Author	Medium	Poem/excerpt	Discussion questions
African American Hughes, Langston Rampersad (Editor) (2001) <i>Collected Poems of Langston Hughes</i>	Poems	'A Dream Deferred'	Focus: Learning from experiences and using them to develop new dreams; appreciating the reality of many lives; understanding others
Multicultural Desetta, A & Wolin, S. (2001) <i>The Struggle to Survive: Teen stories</i>	Essays	Learning to forgive 'by Christopher A. Bogle 'I didn't like talking about my problems. I felt I couldn't trust anybody. I had been hurt a lot by loved ones who were supposed to be in my corner when times got rough. They let me down big time by misusing my trust.' 'My hair is blue but I am not a freak' by Lenny Jones I decided to dye my hair to distract people from making fun of my head. I've always been teased about the size of my head	1. Do you think he ever was able to trust? 2. What might have helped him feel more like talking about his concerns? Focus: Overcoming strong feelings and moving on What do you think he felt about being teased? Have you ever wanted to change your appearance?
Biracial Smith, Zadie (2004) <i>On Beauty</i>	Essays		Focus: Dealing with it. Focus: Perceptions of social position in US New England and in England

Culture/Author	Medium	Poem/excerpt	Discussion questions
<p>African American White, Evelyn (1992) <i>The Black Women's Health Book: Speaking for ourselves</i></p>	Essay	<p>'On Cancer and conjuring', Janis Coombs Epps, p 38. Words are to be taken seriously. I try to take seriously acts of language. Words set things in motion. I've seen them doing it. Words set up atmospheres, electrical fields, charges. I've felt them doing it. Words conjure.</p> <p>Is she telling me that I have cancer?</p> <p>Cancer is indeed a conjuring word. But its power comes from our fear. I have faced death and I know when my time comes, whether I am stalked slowly by cancer or hit swiftly by a Mack truck, I am clear. Those are things that might happen to my body, but my spirit will rise victorious. (p.43)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What do you fear? 2. How is your spirit? 3. What would you want to offer to this discussion? <p>Focus: How do you handle serious issues?</p>
<p>Hispanic Cisneros, Sandra , (1984) <i>The House on Mango Street</i></p>	Novel	<p>'Papa who wakes up tired in the dark Your abuelito is dead, Papa says early one morning in my room. Esta muerto, and then as if he just heard the news himself, crumples like a coat and cries, my brave PAPA cries. I have never seen my Papa cry and don't know what to do.</p> <p>Because I am the oldest, my father has told me first, and now it is my turn to tell the others. I will have to explain why we can't play I will have to tell them to be quiet today. (pp.56-57)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does your culture send away the dead? 2. What other roles does the oldest play? 3. How does death feel to you? 4. Does being put in a leadership role make you nervous? How can it be handled? <p>Focus: Sibling responsibilities</p>

Culture/Author	Medium	Poem/excerpt	Discussion questions
<p>Chinese Xue, Can (Tsai shway) (1997) <i>The Embroidered Shoes: Stories</i>,</p>	Novel/ stories	<p>'A Strange Kind of Brain Damage' There does indeed exist a strange kind of brain damage. I have a friend who is a housewife in her thirties. When she talks with others, her left eye will not stop blinking. One morning several years ago, this friend stopped at my door to tell me, 'I'm suffering from some kind of illness'. 'Maybe you feel that life is empty'. I tried to sound her out. 'My symptoms are invisible. Only through my tone can you sense them. This is why I have wanted to tell you all this. I want to ask you if you understand.'</p>	<p>1. Are there sometimes experiences that one has and you are not really sure what they are about? Focus: Hearing the silent sorrow of our own or of another</p>
<p>Asian Indian Sidhwa, Bapsi (1992) <i>The Crow Eaters</i></p>	Novel	<p>Chapter 3. Hollow-cheeked, glazed-eyed, a shadow of his former self. Freddy decided to consult a mystic. The fakir was reputed to be in touch with spirits and well versed in the arts of his esoteric profession. Upon pondering his decision to attend to this fakir Freddy decided he was not a phony, recollecting the display of vials, powders and parchment. He never had doubted that black magic and witchcraft existed and he was convinced a little ordinary 'magic' would not be amiss under the calamitous circumstances. Of course, he would take the precaution of counterbalancing any risk to his relationship with God with extra prayer and alms-giving. [p 35]</p>	<p>Does life sometimes push you to find solutions you haven't wanted to use? Focus: Looking at the multi-dimensionality of life.</p>

Appendix 2: Selected Resources

African American	Latino	Asian American	Native American	Indian Asian	Brazilian
White, Evelyn (1992) <i>The Black Women's Health Book: Speaking for ourselves</i> . Seattle: Seal Press	Cisneros, Sandra (2002) <i>Woman Hollering Creek</i> . Random House Caramelo or <i>Puro Cuento</i> . New York: Random House	Tan, Amy (1995) <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> . The Kitchen's God's Wife.	Alexie, Sherman (1995) <i>Reservation Blues</i> . New York: Atlantic Monthly Press	Sidhwa, Bapsi (1992) <i>The Crow Eaters</i> . Minn.: Millweed Editions	Coelho, P. (1992) <i>The Alchemist</i> .
Campbell, Bebe Moore (2001) <i>Successful Women, Angry Men</i> . New York: Random House <i>What you owe me; A day late a dollar short</i>	Augenbraum, H and Olmos, MF (1997). <i>The Latino Reader</i> . New York: Houghton Mifflin	Xue, Can (Tsan shway) <i>The Embroidered Shoes: Stories</i> . New York: Henry Holt, 1997.	Alexie, Sherman (1993) <i>The Lone Ranger and Tonto fist fight in heaven</i> . New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press	Desai, Anita (1999) <i>Fasting, Feasting</i> . New York: Houghton Mifflin	
Walker, Alice, <i>The Color Purple</i> .	Cisneros, Sandra, <i>Woman Hollering Creek and other stories</i> . NY: Vintage Books		Dorris, M. <i>The broken cord FAS Syndrome</i> .	Smith, Zadie (2000) <i>White Teeth</i> . NY: Random House <i>On Beauty</i> .	

African American	Latino	Asian American	Native American	Indian Asian	Brazilian
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