

Critical Issues in International Group Counseling

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Three-quarters of the world come from collectivistic group-oriented cultures. As the world becomes more globalized it is inevitable that group counseling will be a major choice of healing and psychological intervention internationally. However, a review of scholarly articles from The Journal for Specialists in Group Work and Group Dynamics during the past 10 years reveals that there are few articles that address international group work. To better prepare group counselors to do group counseling across international boundaries this article discusses 9 critical cross-cultural themes in international group work and the importance of having an international group counseling training curriculum.

Keywords: *cross-cultural group counseling and psychotherapy; global group counseling and psychotherapy; international group counseling and psychotherapy; international group counseling and psychotherapy curriculum*

As globalization creates a world that is more closely connected it is inevitable that group counseling becomes more prominent as a mental health intervention that bridges international, national, and regional boundaries and cultures. This is particularly relevant given that 70% of the world's population originates from collectivistic group-oriented cultures (Chung & Bemak, 2012) where societal values are based on interconnectedness and cooperation. The emphasis on social connectedness in the majority of the worlds' societies would make group counseling a natural choice as a means of healing and psychological intervention (Bemak & Chung, 2004; Conyne & Bemak, 2004).

Although group counseling would be a culturally responsive intervention in collectivistic cultures, there is very little that has been published on this topic in Western-based English language journals.

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We suspect that most of the group counseling work that is done internationally is either not published in Western English language academic journals or published in journals that are in languages other than English. Regardless, a wealth of information on international group work is not shared globally. Pedersen (2003) stated that "American psychology is in danger of being left behind," because "U.S. psychologists know far less about psychology in other cultures than international psychologists know about us" (p. 400). We believe this can be generalized to group counseling in Western countries.

The purpose of this article is to review issues relevant to global group counseling and provide recommendations about how group counselors can be better prepared and culturally responsive when conducting group counseling in international settings. The article will examine nine critical cross-cultural themes that are essential for effective transnational group counseling, and will provide recommendations for modifications in international group counseling practice. The article will also discuss the importance of addressing international issues in group counseling training that will provide a basis for global group counseling cultural competence. We will begin with content analyses of international group work articles in *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work (JSGW)* and *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* which will lay the foundation for discussing the importance of global group counseling, followed by a discussion of the nine international cross-cultural group counseling critical issues and themes.

CONTENT ANALYSES OF GROUP COUNSELING ARTICLES

The results of a content analyses of international group work articles for the past 10 years (2003 to 2013) published in *JSGW* and *Group Dynamics* found that for *JSGW*, out of 248 published articles, only 10 (4%) were about international group counseling/psychotherapy. Within that time period *JSGW* published seven special issues, none of which were specifically focused on international group counseling. For *Group Dynamics*, out of 245 articles, there were 93 (37.9%) international group counseling articles and out of 93 only 21 (22.6%), or 8.6%, were about actual group counseling and group psychotherapy. The remaining 72 articles focused on a variety of group work topics that ranged from group dynamics (i.e., group identification, ambivalence, bias, cohesion, climate, trust, prejudice, intergroup relations, and group leader-member relationship; e.g., Hornsey, Olsen, Barlow, & Oei, 2012; Stathi, Crisp, & Hogg, 2011); group functionality (i.e., group team building, task, decision making, and information exchange; e.g., Kooij-de Bode, van Knippenberg, & van Ginkel, 2008; Marques-Quintero, Curral, Passos, & Lewis, 2013); group leadership

(i.e., group leader behavior and traits; e.g., Leicht, Crisp, & Randsley de Moura, 2013; Seppälä, Lipponen, & Pirttilä-Backman, 2012; Tjosvold, Coleman, & Sun, 2003); and types of groups (i.e., short-term, homogeneous vs. heterogeneous, and virtual groups; e.g., Kösters, Burlingame, Nachtigall, & Strauss, 2006; Martinez-Moreno, Zornoza, González-Navarro, & Thompson, 2012; Piper, Ogrodniczuk, Joyce, & Weideman, 2009). Within the 10-year period *Group Dynamics* had published three special issues, again none were specifically about international group work.

For both journals only a small percent of articles were on actual international group counseling and psychotherapy (e.g., Harel, Zipora, & Cutrona, 2011; Maxwell et al., 2012; Shechtman, Goldberg, & Cariani, 2008; Shechtman & Halevi, 2006). For *JSGW* less than 5% of articles focused on international group counseling and group psychotherapy. Sixty percent ($N = 6$) of the international articles were from Asia, and the others were from Botswana ($N = 1$), Canada ($N = 1$), Greece ($N = 1$) and Israel ($N = 1$). For *Group Dynamics* just over a third of the articles focused on different aspects of international group work, but only 8.6% focused on group counseling and psychotherapy. Interestingly, 22.6% ($N = 21$) of the international articles were from Canada, 16.1% ($N = 15$) from the United Kingdom, 15.1% ($N = 14$) from Israel and The Netherlands respectively, 20.4% ($N = 19$) from other European countries, 8.6% ($N = 8$) from Australia and New Zealand, 1.07% ($N = 1$) from Lebanon and China respectively. Noteworthy is the fact that approximately 90% of international articles in *Group Dynamics* were from the global north, none of the international articles in *Group Dynamics* were from the continent of Africa, Central or South America, the Caribbean, and only one article was from Asia. Although a majority of *JSGW* international group counseling articles were from Asia, they only accounted for 6 (2.4%) articles out of a total of 248 within a 10-year period. *JSGW* also had only one article (.4%) from Africa within the 10-year period. Given these findings it is clear that group counselors in the United States are missing out on the rich information that could be gained from knowing about international group work from other regions in the world.

The content analyses strongly suggests there needs to be a greater focus on international group work, especially group counseling and group psychotherapy, particularly from the global south regions. As globalization fosters greater contact and knowledge across cultures, and challenges the development and growth of the mental health field (Casas, Park, & Cho, 2010; Marsella, 2007) it is essential that group counselors know how to do group counseling and group psychotherapy across international borders and learn from group counseling practices that are occurring in other parts of the world. The next section will

discuss nine themes that address critical issues in doing international group counseling.

CRITICAL INTERNATIONAL GROUP COUNSELING THEMES

To conduct effective culturally sensitive global group counseling requires additional competencies that are specific to international settings. The Association for Specialists in Group Work Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies (ASGW Multicultural and Social Justice Competence Principles for Group Workers, 2012) provides a good starting foundation for doing effective group work internationally. These competencies incorporate the ASGW Best Practice Guidelines (Thomas & Pender, 2008) and offer a set of guidelines on how to work effectively with different cultural groups. The competencies address the areas of: Awareness of Self and Group Members, Strategies and Skills, Group Workers Performance and Processing, and Social Justice Advocacy. The ASGW Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies equip group workers to be culturally responsive and social justice minded in working with diverse populations in the United States. However, we believe that an additional set of competencies building on the ASGW Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies is required to do group work internationally.

It is important to note that the ASGW competencies must be successfully acquired as a foundation to attaining the skills and abilities to do international group counseling. Although the ASGW Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies flag the importance of understanding cultural, historical, and sociopolitical backgrounds and experiences of group members, there are added dimensions working in international settings. Working internationally, group counselors must also be mindful of their home country's mainstream dominant cultural, social, and political viewpoints about that culture and country that influence personal attitudes, beliefs, and values towards group members. Below is a discussion of nine international themes and critical issues that builds on the ASGW Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies that we would suggest are necessary to acquire competency to do effective international group counseling.

Theme 1: Understanding the Context of Collectivistic Cultures and Group Work

The fields of psychology and counseling in the United States have been criticized as being deeply rooted in the cultural values, worldviews, and behaviors based on Western Euro-Anglo principles of

individuality, abstract ideals, and rationalism (Chung, 2005; Leong & Ponterotto, 2003). With most of the world's population being from collectivistic cultures effective group work in these settings may be in sharp contrast to Western individualistic cultural worldviews and group practice. Group counseling, regardless of the context, aims for group members to work cooperatively and assist each other in addressing group and personal issues. Group counseling is rooted with similar values as collectivistic cultures and therefore is an ideal intervention in those cultures within the international arena. Ironically, even though there is an emphasis on social relationships in collectivistic cultures and group counseling, traditional group counseling training and practice founded on principles of Western individualistic concepts may be contradictory to group counseling internationally. Subsequently it is essential that international group counselors have a clear understanding of the fundamental values inherent in collectivistic societies and facilitate groups accordingly.

Theme 2: Awareness of Political Countertransference

Providing counseling in an international setting poses new challenges that are related to issues of countertransference. In doing group work internationally group counselors frequently encounter new dimensions in their countertransference that incorporate political, historical, and social issues that we call political countertransference (Bemak & Chung, *in press*; Chung, 2005, Chung & Bemak, 2012). Political countertransference encompasses those issues that are heavily influenced by historical oppression and the contemporary sociopolitical climate that impact the counselor or psychotherapist. Political countertransference is promoted by mass media and politics regarding certain countries, cultures, religions, and political issues related to members of specific cultural groups. Regardless of how aware we are about our biases, prejudices, and privilege we still are influenced directly and indirectly, overtly and covertly, and subliminally by public media coverage about certain groups of people. For example, after 9/11 the United States experienced numerous terrorist alerts. The outcome of each alert reinforced the culture of fear (Bemak & Chung, *in press*; Chung & Bemak, 2012), that specifically targeted Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Eastern people and resulted in hate crimes which escalated 1600% from 2000 to 2001 (Chung, Bemak, Ortiz, & Sandoval-Perez, 2008). Although group counselors were aware of stereotypes and the danger of stereotyping every Middle Eastern person as being a terrorist, they were bombarded with public media information that resulted in promoting a culture of fear and created the danger of experiencing political countertransference. Working internationally it is

essential that group counselors are aware, acknowledge, examine, and understand the origins of their own political countertransference and how it may interfere with effective and successful international group counseling. Being exposed to different media outlets rather than relying solely on one media source or their home country's interpretation of the international events can assist group counselors in gaining a more comprehensive perspective of political issues.

Theme 3: Mental Health Colonialism and Imperialism

As stated in the ASGW Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies, group workers must be mindful of their personal worldviews, beliefs, attitudes, values, stereotypes, biases, and privileges. All these variables can create deep and strong reactions and feelings by group counselors that have the potential to interfere with effective group counseling on a global level. Furthermore, counselors from Western countries are often trained in Euro-American individualistic methods of group work, which is sometimes erroneously interpreted by Western group workers as the "best" or "only" way to do group counseling. We cannot make the assumption that U.S. or Western theories, models, interventions, and strategies, are universal unless they have demonstrated extensive cross-cultural validity and applicability (Chung, 2005; Leong & Ponterotto, 2003). Underscoring group counseling theory and practice are psychological and counseling concepts which are also viewed from a Western perspective that are based on Western ideas, theories, and notions and have the potential to hinder effective international group counseling work.

For example, the term "diversity" or "diverse groups" as it relates to race and the ethnicity is often used in the global north to refer to groups that are dissimilar to the Anglo European-American cultural background. Therefore the term "diversity" or "diverse groups" is a Eurocentric and ethnocentric term using the Western Anglo European-American group as a baseline to view, judge, assess, interpret, evaluate, and perceive non-Western groups. This type of Western colonial and imperialist thinking can be problematic working internationally because group workers may have the mindset that they the "experts," "superior," they know what is best, or have a higher status of skills compared to non-Western cultures. In fact, using the term "American" by U.S. citizens is an ethnocentric term that excludes the rest of the Americas, and can create cross-cultural tension for U.S. group workers working in other parts of the Americas (i.e., Central and South America). Furthermore, Western public media may also reinforce this Eurocentric ethnocentric worldview that promotes Western superiority. In Australia, for example, many of the indigenous population, the Aboriginals, do not identify themselves under the diversity umbrella

that has been established, called *Culturally and Linguistically Diverse* (CALD). CALD is a term that was created by White Australians and designates everyone else but them as diverse (Bemak, 2013). If one was to reverse the baseline for the CALD designation from the vantage point of Aboriginals, then White Australians would be categorized under the CALD label. This type of structure and definition that is done in Western countries is rooted in colonialism and perpetuates imperialism since it ignores not only the indigenous populations but also other ethnic and racial groups, and has the potential to incorporate these dynamics within the framework of international group counseling.

It is therefore important that group workers in international settings do not carry the colonial imperialist mentality that they are the “expert”; they know the best way to conduct group counseling with the “we” showing “you” how it is done mentality (Chung, 2005). This type of oppressive attitude only creates further challenges in doing international group work and sets up a power dynamic where the group counselor may be viewed, consciously or unconsciously, as the oppressor rather than the guest. This construct relates to Freire’s (1972) banking concept of characterizing non-Western cultures as empty vessels, ignorant, and passive recipients who eagerly and willingly accept the information, in this case from the Western “expert” group worker. By forcing Western knowledge without the consideration of cultural, historical and sociopolitical background of the country we are working in promotes disempowerment rather than authentic empowerment since this attitude fosters a reliance on the Western group worker as the sole expert (Chung, 2005; Chung & Bemak, 2012; Freire, 1972).

Theme 4: International Group Work Voyeurism

Many international group counselors have the intention of conducting culturally responsive group work as a result of believing they have a genuine understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of cultural differences, combined with self-awareness of their own prejudices, biases, and privileges. Even so, we have often witnessed group workers who hold strongly felt ethnocentric and Eurocentric viewpoints, who are motivated to do international group work, and yet are unaware of their ethnocentric and Eurocentric biases that can potentially cause them to be ineffective in conducting group counseling across international boundaries. We have labelled this type of international group counseling as *international voyeurism*. International voyeurism may result in false idealizations of international cultural competence, accompanied by the denial about the lack of cultural awareness and responsiveness, and more insidiously the arrogant assumption that spending minimal time in a country results in them becoming “experts” of that culture. Traveling to other countries for conferences

or workshops for short periods of time provides a very limited cultural exposure and a cursory cultural immersion, but does not make group counselors experts about that culture. We have encountered group counselors who excitedly talk about their adventures at a conference in a particular country and speak as if they are experts both about the country and about doing group counseling in that particular culture/country. This type of attitude and worldview unintentionally reinforces and perpetuates an international voyeuristic curiosity of those from Western countries, especially towards those in the global south and other developing countries. This voyeuristic curiosity enhances and reinforces the exoticism of being in a different culture/country and more insidiously reinforces and perpetuates the colonial imperialistic perspective of superiority as stated in Theme three. Kleinman and Kleinman (1977) addressed this idea stating, "... voyeurism is another outcome of construing suffering at a safe distance, without the social responsibility of real engagement" (pp. xviii). By keeping a safe distance group workers are avoiding, evading, excluding, denying, and escaping from the realities of their clientele which in some cases may be a painful reality of living in constant and pervasive poverty, violence, oppression, discrimination, injustice, and human rights violations. To deal with these painful realities from a safe distance promotes international voyeurism that results in "let me save you" mentality as stated in Theme three. Subsequently, being an international voyeur inhibits genuine dialogue and authentic group counseling and promotes superficial outcomes. To begin to truly understand the culture in which they are working group counselors must spend adequate time and dedication to doing cross-cultural group counseling, rather than a whimsical "one-off" trip or one-time conference or workshop and belief that they have become the "expert." The voyeuristic mindset therefore creates more harm than good.

Theme 5: Redefining Ethics and Boundaries for International Group Counseling

Working internationally will require adaptation, modification, alterations, and changes to Western traditional group counseling practices. International environments do not have the same narrowly defined legalistic practices as the United States and some other Western countries, which require different responses that are consistent with the national and cultural context in other countries. Barnett, Lazarus, Vasquez, Moorehead-Slaughter, and Johnson (2007) pointed out how codes of ethics in the major U.S. professional national associations were based on Western European-American cultural values and may not have applicability across cultures. Certain national

and cultural practices must be embedded into international counseling such as giving and receiving gifts or socializing with clients (Bemak & Chung, 2015). For example it is considered good etiquette and manners to give and receive gifts on auspicious holidays or at special celebrations in many societies. For a group counselor to reject thoughtful personal gifts for a New Year's celebration would be considered rude and disrespectful. Similarly, to attend a client's wedding or join for festivities for a birthday party in many cultures would be expected and normative, rather than a violation of ethical boundaries.

Another concept that impacts boundaries when working internationally is how one defines and approaches time. In less time conscious cultures group counseling sessions may be far more flexible and fluid so that being late for a group counseling session would not be perceived as resistance and defensiveness that may require therapeutic interpretation and attention. Similarly, confidentiality is viewed very differently in collectivistic cultures and relates to boundary issues. Given that social connectedness is a dominant value in collectivistic cultures compared to individualistic cultures, in these cultures it is acceptable to speak more freely with others about one's group experience and group members (Bemak & Chung, 2011). We have facilitated numerous group counseling sessions in other countries where the boundaries related to privacy are very different, so that when a group member is having difficulty other group members may feel that this problem is a larger community problem, and believe sharing information outside the group is helpful rather than a violation of confidentiality (Bemak & Chung, 2011; Bemak & Chung, 2014). Given the different perspective about confidentiality and personal boundaries has bearing on where groups meet in international settings. In our experience private physical locations for international group counseling sessions may not be available or may not be very private, related to both a lack of space and less overall concern about privacy. We have held group counseling sessions in open outdoor physical spaces in schools and outside office buildings, in gymnasiums, in open spaces in churches and other religious institutions, etc. (Bemak & Chung, 2011; Bemak & Chung, 2014). Therefore group counselors working in international settings must exercise flexibility and creativity on where and how group counseling takes place.

Theme 6: Three Major Globalization Issues Impacting Mental Health and Group Counseling

There are three major global issues that we believe have significant impact on mental health and group counseling. The first issue is

migration, which is a growing issue in the world today. Approximately 3.1% of the world's population, or 1 of every 33 people, is a migrant, with a 10-year increase in international migrants from 150 million to 214 million people (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2008). Major global trends such as migration should be kept in mind when considering future needs for mental health work and group counseling. Given that global migrants come from collectivistic societies group counseling would be an appropriate means to provide the clinical interventions that this population so desperately needs (Bemak & Chung, in press).

The second global issue that impacts mental health and group counseling is bicultural identity. Many individuals are struggling with bicultural identities as they attempt to retain the values and behaviors of their home culture with the increasing access and awareness of global culture. Globalization is influencing local cultures throughout the world with regards to technological access and information, education, food, media, governance, traditional beliefs, and practices, etc. The result of the confluence of local and global cultures is confusion about oneself and one's identity. Berry (1998) identified the conflict between a new culture and one's culture of origin as "acculturative stress." Group counseling is an excellent means of intervention to assist in sorting through the stress associated with identity confusion based on conflicting cultural values.

The third major issue is global environmental change. The impact of the environment that includes global warming and environmental racism has created a significant increase in environmental refugee migration (Chung, Bemak, & Kudo Grabosky, 2011) with estimates of 25 million environmental migrants or refugees (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2010). Studies have found increased risks for high levels of distress, depression, and anxiety and poorer mental health outcomes after exposure to repeated trauma (Kolassa et al., 2010), such as in the aftermath of environmental disasters. It is projected that with environmental degradation such as global warming, the rapid melting of ice, rising sea levels, and deforestation that 200 million people will become environmental refugees by 2050 (UNEP, 2010). Group counseling and therapy may be helpful in addressing these global environmental changes (Bemak & Chung, 2013; Pandya, 2011).

Theme 7: Partnership With Traditional Healers

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines traditional healing as health practices, approaches, and beliefs incorporating spiritual therapies, manual techniques, and plant, animal, and mineral-based

medicines used singularly or in combination to maintain well-being and to treat, diagnose, and prevent illnesses (WHO, 2008). International group counselors will be working in societies where there are longstanding traditional healing practices. Many of the practices have centuries of recognition with healers such as *Sangomas* (in Southern Africa), the *Curanderos* (in Latin America), *Shamans* (in Asia), *Witch Doctors* (in Africa), *Medicine Men* (in First Nation cultures), *Inyangas*, or *Santeros/as* (in Southern Africa) who provide healing in different parts of the world. Given the longstanding history and recognition of various alternative and complementary healing practices, it is essential that group counselors are aware of and appreciate the work of healers and are able to facilitate collaboration when helpful for clients (Bemak & Chung, *in press*; Chung & Bemak, 2012). Forming an alliance with an authentic traditional healer who is from the same culture as the group members establishes not only credibility of the group counselor, but also an invaluable partnership that combines traditional healing with culturally responsive group counseling.

Theme 8: International Group Workers as Learners

For group counselors to be culturally and social-justice competent in the global arena requires a paradigm shift from traditional group counseling methodologies (Chung & Bemak, 2012). Since group counselors working in an international setting are only guests of that culture, the experts about ecological and systemic issues encountered by group members are the group members themselves. Group counselors may have acquired knowledge about the culture and the historical and sociopolitical context of the country in which they are working, and may be updated about current sociopolitical issues, however, they are only guests in that culture and not environmental experts. In an international setting for group counselors to truly understand group members' cultural, historical, sociopolitical, and ecological experiences they may at times need to be "learners" rather than the "teachers" (Bemak, 1996). To prevent an unequal balance of power where the group counselor holds all the authority and in a sense domination over group members the relationship between group counselor and group members must cultivate a two-way communication where at times the group worker is the "learner" and the group members are the "teachers" (Bemak, 1996; Freire, 1972). When the first author conducted a group with street children in Brazil it was a "give and take" and sharing power that allowed the children to teach the author about the ways of the street which established trust and credibility, and the children's acceptance of the author to facilitate groups conducive to healing and growth (Bemak, 1996).

Theme 9: International Group Work Training

As stated in the beginning of the article, globalization has enabled the world to be more connected and provided an easier access to cultures and countries that in even the past 10 years seemed unreachable. With dramatic increases in global migration, natural disasters, and mobility, group counseling has the potential to be a viable choice of healing worldwide, since three-quarters of the world's cultures are collectivistic in nature and group oriented. However, to be internationally competent requires additional skills and awareness as stated in the aforementioned critical international group counseling themes. We have met many motivated group workers who are eager to do international group work, but do not have the training about how to conduct international group counseling. It is our belief that this training is essential in our rapidly changing world.

The literature points towards the need for mental health to achieve a clear understanding of the impact of globalization on training (Ægisdóttir & Gerstein, 2010; Chung & Bemak, 2012; Marsella, 2007; Marsella & Pedersen, 2004; Ng & Noonan, 2012). Extending the need more specifically to group counseling training is imperative given that the global majority of the world's population lives in collectivistic societies. Important recommendations have been made to internationalize mental health training curriculums which would also be applicable to group counseling training, such as increasing the awareness of social, political, historical, and cultural factors; teach about the interrelationship of economics, politics and environment and psychology; integrate culture into theory and human development; enhance transnational research; providing internships in international settings, embed social justice and human rights; infuse training applications to vulnerable populations, e.g., the impoverished, refugees, street children, and survivors of post-disasters and survivors of human trafficking; learn about different cultures; and insert global problems as an aspect of training curriculums (Chung & Bemak, 2012; Heppner, Leong, & Gerstein, 2008; Marsella & Pedersen, 2004). Training group counselors to work within an international context is essential for our future as a profession.

CONCLUSION

Transnational group counseling work has been largely ignored in the field. The studies demonstrate the lack of scholarship and research in this area, leaving many group counselors to carry Western

constructs into their work internationally. Effectively providing group counseling across international borders must include internationalized group counselor training. The ASGW Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies must be expanded and further developed to include international competencies. Additionally, a deep appreciation and awareness of the critical international group counseling themes discussed in this article must be cultivated to closely examine how Western practices can fit within the context of other countries and cultures. It is essential that group counselors continue to update themselves with new information by reading and accessing current scholarly and public media articles that go beyond work that is focused on their home country alone, and maintain a broad view of social, political, economic, and historical factors that comprise the countries where they are or will be working. Furthermore, we strongly believe that for group counseling to be viewed globally as a culturally viable means of healing and intervention then future group counselors must be globally connected, globally aware and trained from an international perspective.

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