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## *Understanding Groups as Psychodynamic Systems in the Context of Racial and Cultural Factors*

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that we work from in this text can broadly be called *group relations theory*, as a model for working with groups. The model was developed at the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations in the United Kingdom, expanded on in conference settings by A. Kenneth Rice, and later brought to the United States by Margaret Rioch, who started the national organization called A. K. Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems (Hayden & Molenkamp, 2004). The theoretical roots of the group relations model can be traced to Wilfred Bion (1961), Melanie Klein (1946), and Kurt Lewin (1951). There are two components in group relations theory, psychoanalytic and systems theory. Psychoanalytic theory helps us understand the conscious and unconscious processes that affect individual and group functioning. Psychoanalytic theory has been linked to race-cultural dynamics, specifically the phenomenon of racism, by a variety of theorists, including Dalal (2002), who has used the theories of Freud, Klein, Fairbairn, and Winnicott to examine racism. Earlier attempts to link psychoanalytic theory to racism have also been made by Fanon (1967) and Kovel (1984). In more recent years, self-psychology, relational theory, and positive psychology have been incorporated in the thinking of many psychoanalytically oriented psychologists such as Kohut (1980), Mitchell (1988), and Seligman (2002). The work on relational cultural theory by Jordan (2001) exploring the connections and disconnections in relationships has been particularly important to our work (McRae, Kwong, & Short, 2007).

## Open Systems Theory and Experiential Learning

Applications of systems theory facilitate the understanding of the context in which a behavior occurs and the sociopolitical factors that may influence an individual's behavior. In this book, we use Alderfer's (1977) definition of a group, as follows:

A collection of individuals 1) who have significantly interdependent relations with each other; 2) who perceive themselves as a group by reliably distinguishing members from non-members; 3) whose group identity is recognized by non-members; 4) who have differentiated roles in the group as a function of expectations from themselves, other members and non-group members; and 5) who as group members acting alone or in concert have significantly interdependent relations with other groups. (p. 230)

Groups, therefore, function as subsystems in larger systems, such as an organization, a community, a society, and the world. Thus, groups are embedded in larger groups and systems and in a social, economic, and political context.

Conceptually, the group relations model encompasses open systems and psychoanalytic theory to explore its premise that the individual acts on behalf of the group, given the group norms and the cultural context in which the group exists. "Within each group or system, there are boundaries, authority issues, roles, and tasks (BART) to be considered that will vary according to the culture of the group" (Green & Molenkamp, 2005; Hayden & Molenkamp, 2004). The concept of BART (boundaries, authority, roles, and tasks) is derived from open systems theory, which focuses on group boundaries, which are observable and subjective measures used to distinguish group members from outsiders. Boundaries in groups can be physical (observable) or psychological (subjective). Group boundaries can also be permeable or impenetrable, enmeshed or disengaged (McCollom, 1990). Management of group boundaries within systems encompasses aspects of time, space, task, territory, and role. Authority, which is the second aspect of BART, is defined as a group's right to perform tasks, use resources, and make decisions that may be binding on others (Obholzer, 1994). Authority can occur (a) from above (e.g., within organizational hierarchies); (b) from below, when given formally or informally by peers; and (c) from within, which refers to individuals' capacity to take up their own authority, to behave in certain ways within the group, based on their personality, their personal and racial-cultural history, and representations of authority within their own mind. Role, the third aspect of BART, refers to an individual's position or function in relation to the formal task and his or her own personal characteristics, which creates a valence for enacting certain behaviors. Finally, task in open systems theory is related to the primary task

that the group needs to perform to survive. The group's task may be defined in multiple ways within the system and may therefore be implemented, impeded, avoided, and/or rebelled against by the group-as-a-whole.

There are five levels at which the group functions during its life: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group (group-as-a-whole), intergroup, and interorganizational (Wells, 1990). It is important, systemically, to consider the individual's personality characteristics, interpersonal relations and intergroup relationships between subgroups, and group-as-a-whole dynamics. Kurt Lewin's (1951) work on field theory and the notion of psychosociological influences over group behavior lead to a focus on examining the group-as-a-whole in a social context (Fraher, 2004). In addition, Lewin's discovery in 1946 that adults learn more effectively through interactive experiences shared in experiential learning environments (Fraher, 2004) has had a profound effect on how group relations theory is used in the field. Practitioners, educators, and group workers who use group relations theory often use experiential learning activities that help students and participants understand theory and concepts. Application of the group relations theory to didactic and experiential learning helps students and participants gain insight into the complex defense mechanisms of splitting, projection, and projective identification. Moreover, these concepts can be experienced in the "here and now" of the experiential setting and discussed, which enhances learning and application of theory.

## **Group Relations Theory**

From a psychoanalytic perspective, groups engage in unconscious and conscious behaviors that are attributed to the anxiety that most people experience in groups and organizations. Using Klein's (1946) object relations theory, Bion (1961) noted that groups trigger primitive fantasies, such as the infantile desire to join others in an undifferentiated entity, while simultaneously creating fears of being rejected or abandoned by the group or of losing one's identity and sense of self. The tension between wanting to join the group and be independent from it often generates anxiety in its members and can lead them to defend against this anxiety through the mechanisms of splitting, projection, and projective identification. These defenses are unconscious processes and will be explained in more detail in later chapters. It is important to note that these unconscious processes distort reality, impede optimal functioning, and promote behaviors that can create a variety of both negative and positive feelings among group members. Bion (1961) hypothesized that groups had two modes of functioning: work and basic assumption. The work group attends to its primary task of group survival. Basic assumption group functioning

represents an unconscious mode of group behavior that is focused on management of anxiety that surfaces related to the group's work. Thus, when the group members are engaging in basic assumption behavior, they are no longer attending to the primary focus of their task at hand. Originally, there were three basic assumption modes: dependency, fight-flight, and pairing, all of which serve as unconscious defense mechanisms against the anxiety created by the group in the service of accomplishing its primary task. A fourth mode, basic assumption oneness, was developed by Turquet (1985); the fifth basic assumption, or basic assumption me-ness, was developed by Lawrence, Bain, and Gould (1996). Both of these modes are also unconsciously used by group members to defend against anxiety created by their experience in the group. From a positive-psychology perspective, basic assumptions can be viewed as a way of managing anxiety. In groups, we look for ways of containing and channeling those emotions in a more productive manner.

Group relations as a theoretical model focuses on factors that have proven most successful in group counseling and psychotherapy training programs: didactic, observation, and experiential learning. The didactic component includes lectures about theory, as well as a collective sharing of reactions to readings and lectures about theory. Observations provide an opportunity to see and hear how others manage the role of consultant, leader, and facilitator, as well as client member. The experiential component allows for reflection on the here-and-now experience, as well as an understanding of the relationship between theoretical and experiential learning and the application of what has been learned. The experiential component also provides an opportunity to learn about aspects of anxiety as it relates to group membership in the here and now, for example, the tension caused by fears of identity fragmentation and engulfment by the group. While the current focus of the group relations model is on experiential learning, earlier conceptualizations of the model included a didactic component. In our group dynamics classes, we have found that readings, lectures, and discussions further enhance students' understanding and application of group dynamics.

From a systems perspective, groups are confronted with racial-cultural issues that are related to the power differentials, authority, and class hierarchies that exist in society. Thus, racial-cultural dynamics are phenomena that are an integral part of the group experience. Demographic variables such as race, ethnicity, culture, class, sexual identity, gender, disability, and age often represent differences between group members that may evoke negative stereotypes and stimulate feelings about inclusion and exclusion (McRae & Short, 2005). Differences that are visible or invisible may foster conflicts characterized by inclusion or exclusion; differences may also serve as a catalyst for feelings about membership to emerge. Membership may be affected by stereotyped assumptions about difference, which may influence group members' perceptions of

themselves and the group-as-a-whole. For example, members who belong to the dominant racial-cultural group may perceive themselves or be perceived as powerful and privileged. Likewise, members who externally represent non-dominant groups may have self-perceptions of having less or more power given the particular context of the group (McRae & Short, 2005). Using systems theory allows a more direct examination of the intersection between racial-cultural factors and systemic factors such as power, authority, leadership, boundaries, roles, task, and interpersonal relations in the group experience.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, group processes involve paying attention to what occurs in the here-and-now experience of the group. Frequently, unconscious processes can occur that polarize racial-cultural groups. This polarity can be indicative of defense mechanisms, such as resistance, intellectualization, splitting, projection, and projective identification (Fenster, 1996). Group members may use intellectualization as a defense by the majority to focus on superficial cultural or racial attributes of those members in the minority (Fenster, 1996). Splitting and projective identification, while adaptive defenses in group life, can also be characterized, when used in diverse racial-cultural groups, as major defenses that are used to protect members against feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability (Cheng, Chase, & Gunn, 1998). One of the tasks of the group is to help make the unconscious conscious by speaking authentically to behaviors that occur in the group and attending to the nuances of speech and language and the nonverbal behaviors of members. When this type of processing can be done with racial-cultural group issues, it provides invaluable opportunities for learning. For example, many students who attend predominantly white institutions throughout their academic lives may never have had an African American professor. According to bell hooks (2003), in predominately white institutions, African American professors, particularly those who are female, may have their authority challenged by white students, who may not have had any relations with black people and thus may never have been in situations in which they have had to listen to a black person or a black woman speak to them for any length of time.

From a systems perspective, being a professor is a role with the authority to determine course content, method of teaching, and grading. If students are encountering an African American professor for the first time, what is the experience of these students? In our experience as African American female professors, students have questioned us in subtle and not so subtle ways about our credentials and work experience. It has become clear to us that in addition to the more traditional aspects of the role, being an academic professor also encompasses taking a role that is perceived by the students as incongruent for someone of our race and gender. Thus, a key question is "What are their perceptions of us in terms of personal characteristics such as race, gender, and our professorial role of authority and leadership?" The question then becomes

“Do students from diverse backgrounds feel that they will be treated fairly by a professor of color, and, moreover, why is this even a question for consideration?”

Distrust of a black professor does not exist only in white students. Depending on their level of racial identity development, some black students may perceive a black professor as too black identified or not black identified enough, based on their own identification with this racial reference group. For example, one of the coauthors' (M.B.M.) students, who is biracial and has a white mother, wondered if she could be accepted by the coauthor as the loving daughter of a white woman who had been treated badly by some black women who are adamantly against interracial marriages. Another example of this phenomenon in a larger, societal context is the critique that was leveled against President Obama, when he was a nominee and presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, by some members of the black communities in the United States as not being “black enough.” This critique was based, in part, on his biracial and multicultural identities, as well as his political stance on issues of race. The election of President Obama created more opportunities to explore the complexities of authority and leadership in role as they relate to race and gender at the societal level.

Since racial-cultural factors in many societies encompass aspects of power, authority, and class or status hierarchies, the lack of attention to them prohibits exploration of a lived reality for many individuals. The lack of discussion concerning the existence of racial-cultural hierarchical dynamics may be reflective of existing societal structures that perpetuate the invisibility and institutionalization of a dominant culture in which privileges are readily available to some subgroups and not to others (McRae & Short, 2005). In a larger social-historical context, this ambivalence about exploring race and culture also has its roots in the American cultural experience. Toni Morrison (1992) in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* postulates that silence and evasion about race have historically been viewed as effective methods of enforcing the invisibility of the African American presence within the dominant culture. This condition of invisibility perpetuates the emergence of an “other” with which one group can compare itself via the use of racist stereotypes and projections. While Morrison's focus is on African Americans, the “other” can easily be any disenfranchised group. We hypothesize, therefore, that the inability to fully explore and embrace issues of race and culture may be an example of reinforcing long held patterns of denial of the pervasiveness of racial-cultural dynamics within institutionalized environments.

Understanding the confluence of stereotypes, projection, and interpersonal style that exists within groups increases our ability to negotiate and collaborate among and between racial-cultural groups in society. In our work as professors and organizational consultants, we have used the group relations model to address the power hierarchies that we have encountered, in order to provide a

foundation for the examination of systemic structures and their relationships to racial-cultural factors.

## **Research on Racial and Cultural Group Dynamics**

There is a dearth of research on racial-cultural group dynamics. Most of the literature is in the form of anecdotal reports and case studies. Some of the research on intergroup relations has highlighted the complexity of racial-cultural group dynamics (Shaw & Barret-Power, 1998). McRae (1994) applied Helms's (1990) model of racial identity development to group dynamics using a case example of a study group of students of diverse races and genders (e.g., black and white, male and female) from a graduate class on group counseling. McRae (1994) concluded that racial identity attitudes are dynamic and dichotomous categorization of group members along racial lines concerning expected alliances and interactions may foster stereotypes and deemphasize the complexity of interracial group behavior.

Research that has been conducted on group formation and intergroup relations has also focused on stress, anxiety, and threat. These variables have been hypothesized to be the foundation of negative and/or uncomfortable intergroup encounters among individuals of diverse racial-cultural backgrounds. Mendes, Blascovich, Lickel, and Hunter (2002) examined the extent to which minority or "devalued" group members engendered threat reactions from interaction partners (p. 939). The researchers measured cardiovascular responses marking challenge and threat among participants (e.g., white, Asian, Latino, and Other) involved in social interactions with black or white male "confederates," who, during the experiment, described their socioeconomic backgrounds as either advantaged or disadvantaged (p. 939). Intergroup interactions in the study were hypothesized to result in perceived danger related to social dominance, cultural inferiority, increased effort to self-monitor, increased vigilance to verbal and nonverbal communication, and unconscious processes. Thus, the interactions with minority or "devalued" group members would involve greater perceived demands and/or fewer perceived resources than interactions with majority group members. The study's findings support the researchers' hypothesis that participants experience threat during social encounters with devalued group members; cardiovascular responses among participants interacting with black/disadvantaged socioeconomic status (SES) confederates were consistent with threat, and participants who interacted with white/advantaged SES confederates exhibited "significantly different" cardiovascular responses consistent with challenge responses (p. 950).

The impact of cultural diversity on work groups has also been researched. Thomas (1999) conducted a study examining the influence of cultural diversity

on work groups, using collectivism (e.g., as in collectivist vs. individualist cultural attitudes) as the dimension of cultural variation for the study. The study's results supported previous research study findings that group-level assessments of cultural diversity, sociocultural norms of group members, and degrees of members' relative cultural distance from the group (e.g., as related to their attitudes about collectivism) were all factors influencing group effectiveness. Thus, the study's results suggested that understanding the dynamics of multicultural work groups is related not only to the group's level of cultural heterogeneity or homogeneity but also to the recognition that culturally different individuals often bring preconceived notions about work group functioning to the groups that they join (Thomas, 1999).

Other studies concerning racial-cultural dynamics of group formation and intergroup relations have also focused on aspects of threat, trust, and distrust as these variables relate to the projection of racist stereotypes (Govorun, Fuegen, & Payne, 2006) and perceived threat in social interactions with stigmatized others (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001). Greene (1999) also conducted a study on representations of group-as-a-whole, as related to personality, situation, and dynamic determinants among a group of participants at a group relations conference.

*Stereotype threat* is a phenomenon, defined by Steele and Aronson (as cited in Suzuki, Prevost, & Short, 2008), that occurs when the salience of race adversely affects the test-taking performance of high-ability African American students, specifically as it relates to anxiety that may be experienced based on stereotypes about an individual's racial and ethnic group affiliation. Another investigation of the impact of stereotype threat on black-white test score differences, by Sackett, Hardison, and Cullen (as cited in Suzuki et al., 2008), found that the impact of stereotype threat is an important phenomenon "because it highlights the fact that test scores can be influenced by factors other than the test takers' true level of skill and achievement" (Suzuki et al., 2008, p. 515). Thus, racial-cultural dynamics related to stereotypes have been found to have an impact on test-taking environments, classrooms, and other academic settings and have implications on group behaviors and performance outcomes in these settings. Moreover, the impact of stereotype threat is applicable to a variety of group settings outside the academy—for instance, mental health environments.

The complex effects of race, ethnicity, and diversity related to racial-cultural factors of group and intergroup relations at the societal and community levels have also been focused on in the print media. An article by Erica Goode in the *New York Times Magazine* (2007) posited that increased diversity within communities, instead of fostering tolerance and trust, can engender a desire for individuals to "stick to their own groups and distrust those who are different from them," thus resulting in a state of isolation (p. 24). Goode then

suggests that diverse community initiatives will require a certain amount of time before individuals become comfortable. On a more positive note, the article points to the rising rates of interracial marriage among the younger generation, resulting in changing attitudes about diversity, as a marker of how racial and ethnic differences can become less salient at the societal level.

In a larger societal context, the 2008 presidential election surfaced long suppressed issues regarding the complexity of race and culture in the United States. For example, during the primaries, one of the most frequently discussed debates concerned the struggle of individuals and the media to manage anxieties about the salience of race versus gender as they related to Senators Hillary Clinton (a white woman) and Barack Obama (a black, biracial man) as candidates of the Democratic Party. The election of Senator Obama as the Democratic Party's presidential candidate further highlighted a racial-cultural dialogue about the historical significance of his candidacy, as well as the real and symbolic meaning of what having an African American man as president would mean for race relations in the United States and internationally. Some of the dialogues about Obama's suitability for the office of president engendered a subtle, underlying focus regarding race that questioned his ability or readiness to lead, his level of experience, and the quality of his judgment. These are commonly used qualifiers that may label an applicant or candidate of African descent as less qualified to take up leadership roles. Additional research on racial-cultural group dynamics within the United States and internationally will be included in subsequent chapters of this text.

## **Application and Universality of the Group Relations Model**

As with psychoanalytic theory, the group relations model was developed by white Europeans in the United Kingdom and thus complements the traditions of a Eurocentric society. However, we have found that it is a model with widespread applications across race and culture. Our rationale for the expanded application of the model is related to a conclusion drawn by Slavson in 1956 that fundamentally the psychological needs, anxieties, and motivations of individuals are more similar than different. Thus, historical and cultural patterns may cause individuals to behave differently, but they may be united in their emotional responses to a variety of stimuli at the group level. Slavson suggested and Yalom (1995) stated that certain curative factors in groups, such as instillation of hope, universality or knowing that one is not alone in what one is feeling, catharsis (expression of emotions), altruism, reenactment of family dynamics for corrective experiences, and interpersonal learning, are constant across differences.

We believe that the group relations model provides a mechanism for learning and experiencing emotions and understanding them in the context of the group. Knowledge about group dynamics can also be applied to systemic, organizational, and societal functioning. In this book, we use this conceptual frame as a mechanism for understanding the role of the individual in the context of the group-as-a-whole and tasks of the group or institution and for understanding the psychodynamic processes that occur within and between various social identity groups. Behaviors in groups and organizations are open to observation and analysis by all those who participate, if they care to see and reflect. We have adapted the group relations model for teaching group dynamics and helping students develop competencies that will facilitate increased self- and group awareness of racial-cultural factors as they relate to systemic and organizational processes. Our goal is to provide opportunities to learn through experience and reflection, using both intellect and emotions, thus allowing students to explore, model, and discuss behavioral group dynamics. We use a combination of theoretical concepts and experiential work to explore interactions in the here and now as they occur. Thus, cognitions, behaviors, and emotions can be identified and explored simultaneously. We believe, therefore, that a psychodynamic and systemic approach to understanding groups will significantly enhance students' learning and training in counseling and psychology.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, we have presented an overview of the conceptual framework for the book. The group relations model, which is a combination of psychoanalytic and systems theory, was presented as the theoretical framework for examining racial and cultural dynamics in groups throughout this text. This approach allows an exploration of group dynamics in the context of the larger environment. It takes into consideration the conscious and unconscious processes that influence the interactions of members who belong to diverse racial-cultural groups. The rather scant research on racial-cultural dynamics in groups was addressed. Finally, we discussed the expanded application of the group relations model to incorporate, analyze, and assess racial-cultural group dynamics. In this chapter, we have laid the foundation from which we analyze groups; it is one lens from which to view group dynamics and the racial and cultural dynamics that we believe exist in every group.

### QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

1. What are the theoretical roots of the group relations model?
  2. Describe the BART concept, and apply it to a situation or system you are familiar with.
  3. What psychoanalytic concepts are the most relevant in the group relations model, and how can they be helpful in understanding racial-cultural group dynamics?
  4. What can institutional ambivalence about exploring race and culture be linked to in the larger social-historical context of the American cultural experience?
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### KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

BART	Group relations model
Culture	Racial-cultural groups
Defense mechanisms	

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