

# Navigating in Groups . . . Experiencing the Cultural as Political

Flavio Francisco Marsiglia

In this article, I reflect upon my shared experiences of practicing social work with groups in a variety of settings during the past two decades. During that time I have come to conceptualize group membership as vessels at sea. During the pre-group phase members are navigating on their own until the group worker, serving as the initial caller, loosely brings them together. Once the vessels (members) agree on a common direction (purpose) and a set of navigation rules, they start to develop a sense of belonging (identity) as they navigate toward the agreed upon direction. In due time, the individual vessels grow into a strong flotilla (the group). The power of the group becomes a shared compass that allows them to sail through challenging and tempestuous waters into the safety of new harbors (termination phase). After resting and celebrating, vessels depart on their own to explore new worlds and in some cases to assemble new flotillas. It is through this maritime metaphor that I will provide an overview of my group experiences with diverse populations.

Social workers are often summoned to facilitate these gatherings of diverse vessels, at unfamiliar shores, adventuring into unknown seas. It is at those times that the most beautiful discoveries take place, when our sense of direction becomes challenged, and when new compasses are invented. Facilitating diverse groups at unique environments has provided me with invaluable opportunities to enter extraordinary worlds. My formal social work education provided me with an essential knowl-

e-base of working with groups. It was through the doing, however, the accumulated knowledge came alive, was tested, reformulated, enhanced. Different world views emerged through the group experiences. For the purpose of this article, I have elected to describe some those experiences where the cultural became political (Sanchez and L, 1999). The cultural competency ideal often became challenged by political undercurrents affecting the groups (Renshon and Duckitt, 17). The following group narratives illustrate this phenomenon.

*SOCIAL WORK INTERNS TRANSPORTED BACK-IN GROUP-  
TO THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR*

My initiation into the cultural as political dimension of group work took place during my group work field practicum. I was assigned to a Continued care facility for the elderly sponsored by the Spanish embassy in Montevideo, Uruguay. A large percentage of the residents had migrated to their new country during or immediately after the Spanish Civil War (Persing, 1999). My classmates and I were instructed by our field supervisor to be aware of infusing appropriate cultural content into groups. Culture for us meant a generic "Spanish" culture. As we began our work, we were challenged and educated by the experience. One of the group members, a distinguished looking gentleman in his 70s, whom I will call Don Esteban, was very active in group. Suddenly he stopped attending the weekly sessions. We were informed that he was ill and that the doctor had prescribed him to rest. Group members decided on different roles they were willing to take during his convalescence and agreed to keep him informed about group activities. One morning as we arrived to the residence, the receptionist gave us a letter from Don Esteban. He was asking us to inform the priest about his illness and his desire to receive daily communion in his room. We found the note peculiar. Why was he asking us to deliver such a message? He knew that half of the interns were Jewish, while most of the residents were Catholic. More importantly, we, the interns, did not live there. We raised the issue in group. Members were unusually quiet. Finally, after much prompting, Dona Dolores explained that Don Esteban had already asked her for the same favor. She consulted with the group and decided not to inform the priest about his request because Don

Suddenly, we-a group of young social work interns-were involved in a religious and political dilemma for which we felt completely unprepared. It took the group several sessions and the return of Don Esteban to adequately process the incident. We had to take a back seat approach and listen to the stories. Some members were losing their short term memory, but during those sessions they were able to describe in great detail their Civil War experiences. The group decided that their behavior was inappropriate and one by one they apologized to Don Esteban.

After the conflict, the group became stronger and members became active in different activities, promoting a better understanding between members of the two opposite factions in the old war. Dona Dolores and Don Esteban became co-chairs of the reconciliation committee.

The described residential setting was a microcosm of the stories of the residents. Distance and exile kept the residents away from the national healing that was taking place in Spain. The group became the forum where the ghosts of the past were confronted, a past that was very much present in the daily life of the residents. To be Spanish was not enough. They needed other adjectives such as *falangista*, *republicano*, or *socialista* to truly describe their identities. The cultural and the political were one and the same. The "communion conflict" helped the members advance to the next stage of group development. The incident gave me a new appreciation for the confluence of the political and the cultural. It also prepared me for future experiences as I navigated through other seas and encountered unexpected shores.

### A "CITY BOY" FACILITATING GROUPS WITH RURAL YOUTH

One such journey took place as I was working at a youth agency where I was helping form and facilitate youth groups in the countryside of Uruguay. I was born and raised in the city. My previous ventures into the countryside (or as city residents call it, the *interior*) were related to camping trips with the Boy Scouts or family vacations. I did not know the culture of the *interior* and I was a bit self-conscious about my "city boy" outlook.

Most of my work took place during weekends. Small town parishes served as my conduit to young people. I would often spend the night at

Traditional gaucho barbecues, guitar playing, and singing were always part of the group meetings. Many of my book-learned concepts about group work needed some adaptation to be applicable in those places and in that environment. For example, one of the youth groups decided to meet at a remote chapel in the middle of the pampas (hilly grasslands). Starting time was approximate, as they waited for the last member to arrive before beginning the sessions. Usually I was the first one to arrive. I had been instructed by the group to boil water, prepare, and later serve mate (a ritualistic South American tea).

A strong code of hospitality was observed. Protecting one's boundaries in a clinical sense would have been plain rude. Taking care of each other meant much more than active listening. The country was going through rough times, the political waters were stormy, anti-democratic forces were targeting the very soul of the nation. Groups were a refuge, a risky act of defiance, and a tool for change.

Much of group work in those days was based on the consciousness-raising writings of the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire (1985). Freire made the distinction of being among a long list of authors banned by the governing dictatorship, 1973-1984 (Roniger, Sznajder, and Skaar, 2001). Censorship became real as I became involved with several groups located in an area bordering Brazil. This particular set of groups organized a gathering to share their experiences, applying "praxis," and to receive additional training on Freire's method. The regional army garrison learned about the gathering and forbade holding the session. Young people had traveled from distant points in the region and were not willing to go back home without achieving the stated purpose for the meeting.

A principal of a small school on the other side of the international border learned over the radio about the ban and offered her school building on the Brazilian side as an alternative meeting place. Unanimously, the youth accepted the invitation and decided in protest to march across the border. After a long hour walk under the midday sun, the youth arrived safely to the school cafeteria where a delicious traditional meal (*fresuada*) awaited them.

This example illustrates how the political, geographic, and cultural context influenced the life of the groups. During the described unfortunate political era, groups were often the only tools available to maintain

ance. Each group decision and group action kept alive the flame of a long democratic tradition that the regime was attempting to extinguish.

Groups were harbors of dignity in a very undignified sea. Some young women and men involved in such groups were eventually arrested, others had no other alternative than to go into exile. Despite all the repression, the spirit of democracy was kept alive and eventually the regime collapsed under the weight of its own anachronism.

### *FA CILITATING AN ARAB YOUNG WOMEN'S ISSUES GROUP*

The early 1990s found me in Cleveland, working as a bilingual school social worker. I was assigned to develop and facilitate a drop out prevention program for limited English proficient middle school students. I had the joy of working with children and families of many cultural backgrounds. There were many student groups. One group that taught me unique lessons was the Arabic young women's group. The school district became aware of an unusually high drop out rate among young Arabic-speaking female students. These girls were high achievers and attended school regularly; however, as they got older many of them were dropping-out and not enrolling in high school. As we investigated the trend, we learned that the majority of these Arabic speaking students were Palestinian refugees and immigrants.

We formed a group with the purpose of discussing the female student's school experiences. I recruited an Arabic speaking acquaintance to be my volunteer co-facilitator; I will call her Fatima. It took a few weeks to get all the consent forms signed by the parents. Fatima helped me conduct home visits to explain the purpose of the group to a few doubtful parents.

Soon after the group started to meet, we learned that some of the students were preparing to participate in their pre-arranged weddings. They needed to go back to their village or refugee camp of origin to participate in the ceremony and it was understood that upon their return they were not going back to school. Some of the remaining Lebanese, Syrian, and other Palestinian students (Moslem and Christian) were very vocal in their disapproval of the practice. My initial reaction to the stories was one of puzzlement and helplessness. Fatima took the driver's seat. She asked me and the other group members who presented

**They were expressing their desire to continue with their education and at the same time they wanted to follow the traditional ways. Fatima taught us not to put down the culture and the family while we helped look for alternatives. Some parents became concerned with their daughters' participation in the group. My inability to speak Arabic made me completely dependent on Fatima. In group we searched for [alternatives](#). The group members became supportive of each other instead of just critical of each other.**

**Negotiating within the culture was proven to be the most effective solution. Some weddings were delayed, others took place as planned but the new husbands and the brides' parents were visited by group members. A wedding fund was established and gifts were bought and presented by the group members. Those visits served as a bridge between the families' culture and the school's culture. Some of the original group members in time became younger "Fatimas," bi-cultural women able to navigate through two different worlds and able to reconcile apparently irreconcilable dreams.**

**The Arabic-speaking young women's group took me to shores I have never seen before. My lack of experience with the culture made me vulnerable. My own vulnerability made me grow and learn. The experience challenged many of my most basic beliefs and attitudes about education, women's rights, and cultural traditions. The safety of the group and Fatima's presence neutralized some of my ethnocentric attitudes and practices. As I look back to that experience, I wonder about the generosity and hospitality I experienced in group and at many of the girls' homes.**

### ***CREATING VIDEOS IN GROUP WITH MEXICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS***

**My concluding story took place in the late 1990s in Phoenix. At that time I was wearing the researcher hat. The National Institutes of Health/National Institute on Drug Abuse funded a study to develop and test a culturally-grounded approach to drug prevention among pre-adolescents in the Southwest. At the core of the effort was the development of educational videos by high school students to be used to teach middle school students prevention messages. The videos were based on narra-**

duce the videos for us. The student producers were enrolled in the media program and had the expertise needed to conduct the "mission."

The premise behind this effort was to have kids producing prevention messages for kids. Again, we used Paulo Freire's teaching to guide us in using "praxis" as a method for group process and outcomes (Freire, 1995). I worked more closely with one of the student groups. Mexican Americans constituted the numerical majority of this group. The group members had known each other for years. Most of them were neighbors, classmates, and in some cases relatives and friends. The group went through the pre-group phase very quickly. The group purpose was two-fold: Students aimed to increase their awareness about ethnic identity and drug use and at the same time produce a set of educational videos for the prevention curriculum.

The charge to the group was to be "in charge." Social workers and teachers involved in the project conveyed the message that the group had the power to produce the videos they wanted from the script to the final editing. Adults were there to provide support, not to lead the process. To evaluate the process we use a technique called "video ethnography" (Wasson, 2000). A university graduate student video-taped the student group sessions. After a month of filming videotapes, we reviewed the videos with the students and evaluated the group process. Some interesting themes emerged.

For example, although they were formally in control, they were not exercising it. The video ethnography showed how they were looking for answers from the adults and were having a hard time exercising their autonomy. It was very difficult for the students to embrace the new approach to creativity and power within the pre-established structure of the school. The content of the scripts came across as moralistic and stereotypical. The youth were repeating the standard messages young people receive from adults. Although the ethnographic data was telling them that most teens do not use drugs, they were emphasizing drug use versus drug resistance. Stereotypes about teens and about Mexican Americans emerged and were questioned and changed. Using "praxis," students became aware of these shortcomings and over time they overcame them. In group they rehearsed new behaviors that allowed them to gain control over the process of producing the educational videos.

In time, students developed the scripts, conducted auditions, and successfully filmed and edited the videos. The product of their work became

We learned many lessons from the experience. For example, we understood more clearly the powerful influence that social context has on groups (Hays and Ellickson, 1996). The group members were young and Mexican American, two identities that have excluded them from full participation in certain settings. The project asked them to be at the center of the creative process, to take the lead, to make decisions, and to have a voice. But just by giving them such a charge, we could have not expected an immediate response. There was a need to develop trust.

The video ethnography served as a mirror for the group members and the group facilitators. The members were not claiming the new waters and the adults were not sharing their turf. The cultural became political as students were afraid of using Spanish terms or traditional Mexican symbols as part of the video scenarios. Previous rejections made them protective of their culture. As part of an internally colonized minority (Blauner, 1972) they were reticent to share cultural products and to be themselves. It took time and trust building to engender in the students a sense that this group was different. The group facilitators also had to prove themselves in order for the young men and women to feel safe enough to raise their anchor and sail through their creative journey.

## DISCUSSION

The four group experiences presented in this article took place in different contexts but shared a common journey through the waters of culture and politics. They took us across imaginary and real boundaries, exposing us to different shores but similar journeys. These groups—as all groups—are microcosms of larger societies. The described groups were not floating in the air; they were navigating on real waters moved by unique cultural and political currents. The groups became stronger as they learned how to recognize and embrace those currents. Quiet waters often do not allow for real groups to emerge. Our role is often to encourage and support the vessels to venture into the open sea. The image of the open sea brings to mind a liberal English translation of the ancient motto of the city of Paris: *To navigate is essential; to linger is not essential.*

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