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Association for Specialists in Group Work Guiding Principles for Group Work

Christopher J. McCarthy^a, Sheri Bauman^b, Devika Dibya Choudhuri^c, Angela Coker^d, Cheryl Justice^e, Kurt L. Kraus^f, Melissa Luke^g, Deborah Rubel^h, and Linda Shaw^b

^aUniversity of Texas at Austin; ^bUniversity of Arizona; ^cEastern Michigan University; ^dSan Diego State University; ^eMississippi State; ^fShippensburg University of Pennsylvania; ^gSyracuse University; ^hOregon State University

ABSTRACT

This 2021 document provides a principled framework for group work grounded in the rich history of the Association for Specialists in Group Work. Here, group workers and scholars can find a contemporary integration of ethical practice, contextual perspectives, and organizational values intended to guide group practitioners and scholars from varied disciplines and with varied purposes. Group work, in this context, is a broad professional practice where knowledge of and skill in group facilitation is applied to assist an interdependent gathering of people in reaching their individual, relational, and collective goals. The goals of different groups may include accomplishing tasks, promoting growth and development, and treating mental, behavioral, and emotional challenges.

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Part I: Opening Statement of Positionality and Process

This document is a revision of foundational documents produced by the Association, specifically the *Professional Standards for the Training of Group Workers (2000)*, *Best Practice Guidelines (2007)*, and the *Multicultural and Social Justice Competence Principles for Group Workers (2012)*. Our goal was to update these documents to reflect the current status of the field, while keeping their spirit intact. The three foundational documents have undergone multiple revisions, and each revision addressed the ongoing evolution of our association. Each iteration served as documentation of the growth and development of group work. This document incorporates content from each prior version and brings them together as a contemporary, unified whole. To honor our organizational history and give context to the Association's evolution, we acknowledge these earlier versions of contributing documents as well documents from other helping professions (e.g., American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), 2021; American Counseling Association (ACA), 2021; American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA), 2002; American Psychological Association (APA), 2021; American School Counselor Association (ASCA), 2020; Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC), 2021; NASW Delegate Assembly, 2017; National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC), 2016).

CONTACT Christopher J. McCarthy  chris.mccarthy@mail.utexas.edu  University of Texas at Austin, Department of Educational Psychology, 1912 Speedway, STE 5.708, Mail Code D5800, Austin, TX 78712.

Note: Christopher McCarthy chaired this task force convened by Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) President Devika Dibya Choudhuri. All other authors are listed alphabetically, not in order of contribution.

Taskforce members constructed this document based on several guiding imperatives. First, we sought to clearly articulate the values and principles underlying the practice of group work in helping settings. We believe that practice and research in group work cannot be separated from the ethical and sociocultural foundations in which it is practiced. In support of that belief, we aimed to create a document where intersectional and multi-dimensional considerations convey the overarching principles, on a general level, to practitioners and scholars across a variety of disciplines who aspire to become specialists in group work. Finally, we have provided foundations for building the specialized field of group work in ways consistent with the organizations values, rather than providing overly prescriptive standards and procedures.

Part II: Values in Group Work

Inherent to this document is the belief that group work is as a primary method of empowering members to achieve their objectives. Effective group work is not secondary to other interventions. As research has demonstrated, groups are efficient and relevant to diverse populations and purposes. Group specialists are uniquely positioned to act as advocates and change agents for clients and communities. As such, they have a responsibility to facilitate groups that are informed by a deep understanding social and cultural issues on an individual, community, or societal level.

The *Association for Specialists in Group Work* identifies a number of values and ethical considerations specific to group work. Unlike individual counseling, group facilitators must continually attend to both the welfare of the individual group member and the group as a whole. Given their unique training and expertise in group process, group work specialists can contribute across all areas of counseling and other helping professions. The following values and value-based beliefs, which are infused throughout this document, provide a framework for conceptualizing, applying, and evaluating the preparation, practice, and research of group work.

Specialists in group work value:

- Fidelity to diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Development of cultural sensitization, responsiveness, and competence, and the willingness to be informed by other cultures, communities, and disciplines
- Openness to innovative techniques, modalities, and delivery platforms
- Commitment to a holistic framework for the training, practice, supervision, evaluation, and research of group work
- Research and research-informed practice
- The pursuit of excellence through ongoing professional development that includes continuing education, and supervision, as well as ongoing examination and adoption of culturally competent practices
- The conviction that group work has specific, distinct, and unique benefits
- The belief that group work holds great potential to facilitate human growth, development, and healing in the interpersonal rather than individual environment.
- The belief that an evolving but definable core knowledge base, clinical skills, and advocacy skills exist and are essential for competent group work practice
- The belief that group work has unique ethical considerations across training, practice, supervision, evaluation, and research domains

Part III: Principles, Values, Ethics, Diversity

The Association for Specialists in Group Work recognizes the commitment of its members to the most current Code of Ethics of the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2021) and nothing in this document shall be construed to supplant that code. ASGW views ethical processes as being integral to group work and views group workers as ethical practitioners. Group specialists, in being required to be responsible and responsive to their group members, necessarily embrace a certain potential for ethical vulnerability. It is incumbent upon group specialist to give considerable attention to the intent and context of their actions. Group specialists have a commitment to life-long learning and the ongoing development of clinical, multicultural, and social justice competencies within the context of group work.

At its best, all group work is inclusive, intersectional, and socially just. Group work specialists are informed by both cultural humility and scholarship on multiculturalism and social justice. Group workers address the needs of socially and culturally diverse populations by recognizing intersecting identity dimensions such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and age. The foundation upon which best practices are built rely on the life-long commitment of group specialists to awareness, knowledge, skills, and actions necessary for cultural competence, proficiency, and social justice advocacy. This foundation shapes all aspects of group work from research, training, supervision, group planning and leadership, interactions with group members, community engagement, and advocacy. Best practices inspired group facilitators strive to be anti-oppressive, antiracist, and attend to group members' and leaders' broadly-defined overlapping social and cultural realities. These best practices support group facilitators' role as change agent in response to inequity and its harm to individuals, families, groups, communities, and society.

Part IV: Foundations for Training, Practice, Supervision, and Research in Group Work

Group work is a modality within professional human service that recognizes the social nature of human beings and asserts that interpersonal relationships are essential components of well-being. Because groups are composed of individuals, each with their own goals and sociocultural contexts, and who purposely come together to accomplish their goals, groups are complex and dynamic. Specialists in group work acknowledges that specific training is necessary to prepare group facilitators to practice ethically and effectively.

Section A: Definitions of the Four Types of Group Work

Task Groups

Task groups promote efficient and effective accomplishment of tasks by a group of people typically assembled to achieve a specific and time-limited goal.

Psychoeducational Groups

Psychoeducational groups promote personal and interpersonal growth and development. Such groups often work to prevent future difficulties and enhance personal attributes and abilities.

Counseling Groups

Counseling groups strive to alleviate personal and interpersonal problems of living. Counseling groups promote personal and interpersonal growth and address the needs of those experiencing challenging life transitions.

Psychotherapy Groups

Psychotherapy groups are treatment oriented and address significant and persistent patterns of behavior, thinking, and relating among members. A key feature of such groups is comprehensive diagnostic assessment and a particular focus on treatment modalities.

Section B: Education, Supervision, and Consultation

Counselor Education

Foundational training for group workers includes the knowledge, skills, and experiences deemed necessary for general competency for all master's degree prepared counselors. The Association for Specialists in Group Work advocates for all professional preparation programs to provide core training in group work. Subsequent specialization in group work builds upon this foundation.

Entry-level Training. ASGW advocates the incorporation of specific group work competencies in the required entry level training for all professional preparation programs. Components of foundational training include self-assessment and reflective practice. Didactic instruction will include: group theory, ethics, and facilitation skills; multicultural and social justice considerations for group work; observation of groups in practice, practice in group facilitation, ethical group practice, and participation as a group member is required. Participation as a group member for a minimum of 10 hours in conjunction with a graduate group work course is required. Mastery of basic knowledge and skills in group work provides a foundation for ethical practice and serves as a platform for ongoing professional group training and development.

Advanced Practice. Additional training and experience in group work is considered a necessary prerequisite for advanced practice in group work. The application of principles of normal human development and functioning, including culture, social identity, and positionality, are foundational to all group work. Advanced training includes educational, developmental, and systemic strategies, applied in the context of here-and-now interaction, with attention to both group content and process. Group leaders acquire knowledge and experience that prepares them to promote efficient and effective accomplishment of individual and group goals.

Professional Development. Group specialists are dedicated to life-long learning, personal growth, and professional development. This includes engagement in the pursuit of cultural sensitivity, humility and responsiveness.

Supervision of Group Work

Group specialists engage in developmentally appropriate clinical supervision with a supervisor or as a member of a peer group with specific expertise and experience in group work.

Pre-Service. Pre-service group workers who lead groups as part of their training ensure that they have access to supervision from a qualified group specialist and make every effort to recognize and respond to the unique ethical and professional issues inherent in group facilitation. Pre-service group workers engaged in group work in field experiences receive supervision from individuals with expertise in group work.

Post-masters, Post-Licensed and Beyond. Specialists in group work intentionally seek out regular clinical supervision opportunities to enhance their effectiveness as group facilitators serving diverse communities.

Consultation

Group specialists provide consultation and training to organizations within and beyond their employment setting when appropriate. Group workers seek out consultation as needed with competent professional persons knowledgeable about group work as needed (e.g., when working with a new population, new type of group, or when engaging in ethical decision-making).

Advocacy Responsibilities

Group specialists acknowledge sociopolitical realities (e.g., racism, sexism, ableism, heteronormativity) and their role in promoting positive change across multiple contexts. Group workers make efforts to advance the welfare of individuals and populations they serve. Group leaders recognize when advocacy is necessary in the systems in which they work, and practice. Group workers extend efforts to advance the welfare of populations they serve through advocacy beyond the scope of group members.

Section C: Guidelines for Pre-Group Planning

Regulatory Considerations

Group counselors actively know, understand, and apply the current ACA Code of Ethics and the ACA endorsed competencies and standards of practice (ACA, 2021), relevant state laws, licensure regulations, accreditation requirements, other relevant counseling standards, and third-party payor requirements impacting the practice of group counseling and psychotherapy. Non-counselors who uphold the Association for Specialists in Group Work standards substitute a current, alternate, ethical code and standards of practice relevant to their professional education, training and orientation.

Scope of Practice and Conceptual Framework

Group specialists develop and are able to articulate a general conceptual framework to guide their practice and techniques. Group specialists limit their work to those areas that fall within their professional scope of practice. The Association for Specialists in Group Work

recognizes the need for additional training beyond the foundational competency depending on the practitioner's scope of practice.

Assessment

Group specialists develop an awareness of personal and external strengths, needs, and resources that guide them in planning and preparing to engage in group work activities.

Ecological Assessment. Group specialists assess community needs, agency or organization resources, sponsoring organization mission, staff competency, attitudes regarding group work, professional training levels of potential group leaders, client attitudes regarding group work, and multicultural and diversity considerations including systemic factors that facilitate and impede equity issues related to group work. Group specialists use this information as the basis for making decisions related to their group practice, and groups for which they have supervisory, evaluation, or oversight responsibilities.

Self-Assessment. Specialists in group work are aware of their personal strengths and weaknesses in leading groups. Group specialists actively assess their knowledge and skills related to the specific group offered. They also assess their social position and power, values, beliefs, and theoretical orientation. Specialists in group work attend to how these impact the group, particularly when working with a diverse and multicultural population and/or with group members who have differing life experiences and beliefs and worldviews based on race, religion, culture, and other aspects of identity.

Group Planning and Development

Group workers understand that creating culturally inclusive, socially just groups address the unique needs of its members during planning. Group specialists identify the type(s) of group(s), the modalities through which they are offered, and how they relate to community needs. Specialists in group work concisely state in writing the purpose and goals of the group. Group specialists set fees consistent with the organization's fee schedule, taking into consideration the financial status and locality of prospective group members, and balance sustainability with accessibility. Group facilitators choose techniques and a leadership style appropriate to the type(s) of group(s) being offered and the anticipated diversity of group members.

Resources

Specialists in group work advocate for and coordinate resources related to the kind of group(s), modalities through which the groups are offered, and the group activities to be provided, such as: adequate funding; technology and reasonable accommodations; the appropriateness and availability of a trained co-leader; space and privacy requirements for the type(s) of group(s) being offered; marketing and recruiting; accessibility; and appropriate collaboration with other community agencies and organizations.

Professional Disclosure Statement and Informed Consent

Group specialists respect the privacy of group members and engage in a process of professional disclosure. They ensure that group members provide informed consent and/or assent, as appropriate to their life circumstances (e.g., age, competency).

Cultural Sensitivity. Group specialists maintain awareness and sensitivity regarding both cultural and power-differentiated meanings of confidentiality and privacy. Group facilitators respect differing views toward disclosure of information, while striving for a shared understanding to which the group members can assent.

Professional Disclosure Statement. Group specialists have a professional disclosure statement which includes information on group confidentiality, exceptions, and limitations, theoretical orientation, information on the nature, purpose(s) and goals of the group, the group services that can be provided, the role and responsibility of group members and leaders, facilitator qualifications to conduct the specific group(s), specific licenses, certifications and professional affiliations, and address of licensing and credentialing bodies.

Consent/Assent. Specialists in group work engage in the appropriate informed consent/assent processes for work with minors and other dependent group members including the provision of both oral, written, and technology-facilitated information. Group facilitators define confidentiality and its limits (for example, legal and ethical exceptions and expectations; waivers implicit with treatment plans, documentation and insurance usage, inability to ensure confidentiality by other group members). Group facilitators have the responsibility to inform all group participants of the need for confidentiality, potential consequences of breaching confidentiality and that legal privilege does not apply to group discussions (unless provided by state statute).

Telehealth and Professional Disclosure. Group specialists communicate the particular legal and ethical considerations of practicing group work in a telehealth modality. These considerations include, but are not limited to, highlighting the importance of maintaining confidentiality in the virtual environment in which the group members are participating in the group process as well as the individual physical environments of origin, and ensuring that group members understand the associated limitations of confidentiality.

Communication of Information. Specialists in group work communicate information in ways that are both developmentally and culturally appropriate. Group facilitators provide professional information in oral and written forms to prospective members (when appropriate to group type): the professional disclosure statement; informed consent and assent with minors; group purpose and goals; group participation expectations including voluntary and involuntary membership; role expectations of members and leader(s); policies related to entering and exiting the group; policies governing substance use; policies and procedures governing mandated groups (where relevant); documentation requirements; disclosure of information to others; implications of out-of-group contact or involvement among members; procedures for consultation between group leaders.

Member Screening

Group specialists screen prospective group members appropriate to the type of group being offered and the modality being used. Group facilitators identify group members whose needs and goals are compatible with the goals of the group. Group facilitators ensure equity in the group screening processes and avoid having potential group members being screened out of the group solely on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, values,

worldview unless such screening is critical to the purpose of the group. They make every effort to provide appropriate and accessible referrals for those who are screened out, particularly those who belong to underserved populations.

Section D: Facilitation of Group Work

Ongoing Self-examination

Specialists in group work continually reflect on and explore their own worldviews, cultural identities, power, privileges, and biases. They examine how these affect their values and beliefs about group work, as well as the dynamic facilitation of group work within diverse settings. Group facilitators actively invite and are open to feedback from group members, peers, community leaders, and supervisors.

Group Competencies

Specialists in group workers have at minimum a basic knowledge of groups and the principles of group dynamics and are able to enact the core group competencies. They actively increase their competencies through personal awareness, sensitivity, and acquisition of knowledge and skills pertinent to working with diverse client populations across group modalities. Additionally, group facilitators have adequate understanding and skill across specialty areas and types of groups (e.g., psychotherapy, counseling, task, psychoeducation). Group facilitators enact their group work competencies in an equitable manner and demonstrate social justice values in their practice. Group specialists have knowledge of the ways in which social power and privilege may operate within and outside of their groups and ensure that group processes, exercises, activities, and materials are accessible to all group members.

Group Plan Adaptation

Group facilitators apply and modify knowledge, skills and techniques appropriate to group type, modality and stage, and to the unique needs of various group members' identities, developmental level, and needs (e.g., age, cultural values, religious practices, ability-specific needs, etc.). Group facilitators clearly define and maintain ethical, professional, and social relationship boundaries with group members based on group type and modality. Group Workers attend to the potential for multiple relationships when facilitating groups with members who are peers and/or with whom they have other dual roles.

Monitoring and Assessment

Specialists in group work monitor the group's progress toward group goals and are able to implement appropriate models of group development, process observation, and therapeutic conditions. Group facilitators continually assess and strive to balance the individual needs of members and of the group as a whole.

Interventions

Group specialists are familiar with, and able to effectively implement, group work theories, techniques, and skills appropriate to the type, modality, and developmental level and goals of the group. They consider the purpose and membership of the group and select activities and interventions that are culturally informed. When selecting interventions for online

groups, facilitators consider the benefits and limits of technology whenever making decisions and adaptations.

Therapeutic Conditions and Dynamics

Group facilitators understand and implement appropriate models of group development, engage in process observation, and establish therapeutic conditions across different group types and modalities. They attend to between-member dynamics within and across group sessions, as well as how these dynamics interact with group cohesiveness. They understand how their own and group members' social identities and cultures affect the development of therapeutic conditions and group dynamics.

Group Member Welfare

Specialists in group work manage the flow of communication, addressing safety and pacing of disclosures to enhance the welfare of individuals and the group, as well as protect group members from physical, emotional, or psychological trauma and reenacted oppressive societal dynamics.

Reflective Practice

Group specialists consider the relationship between session dynamics and leader values, sociocultural identity and power, cognition and affect. They examine their co-facilitation relationships, if appropriate, and make adjustments in consideration of the group development, goals, and processes.

Processing and Meaning-Making

Specialists in group workers process the workings of the group with themselves, group members, supervisors, co-facilitators or other colleagues, as appropriate. This may include assessing progress on group and member goals, facilitator behaviors and techniques, group dynamics and interventions; developing understanding and helping the group to gain insight about the group experience, and its significance and impact. Processing occurs both within sessions and before and after each session, at the time of termination, and later follow up in person or virtually. They assist members in generating meaning from the group experiences and transferring this outside of the group.

Collaboration

Group specialists continually assist members in developing individual goals and respect group members as co-equal partners in the group experience. Group facilitators actively support the empowerment of group members to assume ownership of the group.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Group specialists practice with broad sensitivity to client differences, including but not limited to age, race, ethnicity, gender, ability-status, religion, sexual identity, social class, immigration status, and geographic location. Group facilitators seek awareness and knowledge of personal, professional, and societal structures that limit equity and inclusion for diverse group members. They continuously seek information regarding the cultural worldviews, traditions, and experiences of the diverse populations with whom they are working.

Co-Leadership

Co-leadership is a relational skill and is foundational for addressing the complexity of group dynamics. Group facilitators who are co-leading a group engage in intentional planning together for group goals and attend to group content and process within group meetings. Co-leaders make use of supervision in order to serve the needs of group members. Co-leadership is also recognized as a training mechanism for more novice group workers to co-facilitate groups with more experienced leaders in order to develop competencies.

E. Evaluation of Group Work

Evaluation Plan

Group specialists have an evaluation plan consistent with regulatory, organizational and third-party payor requirements. They take into consideration current professional guidelines when using technology. They consider the sensitivity of the evaluation plans and methods to issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion and access.

Formative and Summative Evaluation

Group facilitators use formative and summative means to evaluate group processes and outcomes. Results are used for ongoing program planning, improvement and revisions of current and future groups and/or to contribute to professional research literature. Group specialists follow all applicable policies and standards in using group material for research and reports. They conduct follow-up contact with group members, as appropriate, to assess outcomes or when requested by group members.

F. Research on Group Work

Importance of Research

Specialists in group work seek to establish empirical support for group work and group interventions, intentionally attending to the intersections of equity, diversity, accessibility for individual members and the culture of the group as a whole. They attend to efficacy research as well as process research. They are active consumers of current research (e.g., journals, conferences, continuing education.) and strive to use evidence-based approaches to improve practice.

Methodological Considerations

Group specialists are aware of the importance of adaptive quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-procedure research methods procedures unique to research with groups and apply culturally-informed research methodology appropriate for their research goals. They have sufficient understanding of research methods and analytic approaches to evaluate the quality of research findings.

Notes on Contributors

Christopher J. McCarthy is a professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. His research interests include group counseling, stress and coping in educational contexts, and career development.

Dr. Sheri Bauman is a professor of counseling at the University of Arizona. Dr. Bauman conducts research on peer victimization including bullying, cyberbullying, is currently co-PI on a funded project to study the effects of teacher practices on peer victimization and defending behaviors.

Devika Dibya Choudhuri is a Professor of Counseling at Eastern Michigan University. A Professional Counselor (MI/CT), Board-Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselor, Approved Clinical Supervisor, and Certified EMDR Therapist, she has 20 years of clinical experience with refugees, immigrant and multicultural populations, as well as trauma survivors on violence, sexuality, grief and loss.

Angela Coker, Ph.D., LPCC, NCC, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Women's Studies at San Diego State University and Director of Inclusive SDSU. Dr. Coker has 20 years of experience leading groups and is a longtime active member of the American Counseling Association, the Association for Specialists in Group Work, and currently serves as president-elect for the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development.

Dr. Cheryl Justice is Professor in Counselor Education and Supervision in the Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, and Foundations. Dr. Justice has over 25 years of experience in teaching, counseling, group and therapy work with children, adolescents, and adults in a variety of settings.

Dr. Kurt L. Kraus is Professor of Counseling and currently the director of the doctoral program in the Department of Counselor Education at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania. Kurt has proudly held leadership positions across a wide swath of counseling organizations including ASCA, ACES, ASGW, ACA, and the NBCC.

Melissa Luke, PhD, LMHC, NCC, ACS is a Provost Faculty Fellow at Syracuse University, Associate Dean for Research in the School of Education, and Dean's professor in the department of Counseling & Human Services.

Deborah Rubel, Ph.D is an Associate Professor of Counselor Education at Oregon State University and an ASGW Fellow. Her current professional passions are group work, qualitative research, and the influence of systemic ableism and mental health stigma on graduate counselor training.

Linda Shaw, PhD, LPC, LMHC, CRC is a Professor in the Counseling program at the University of Arizona, where she teaches classes in group counseling, ethics, and advocacy and leadership.

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