



SPRING 2024

# groupcircle

## Peace and Conflict, Power, and Privilege: Coexistence in the Face of Difference and Trauma

Kavita Avula, PsyD, CGP

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Kavita Avula, PsyD, CGP, is a licensed clinical psychologist and Certified Group Psychotherapist who has worked internationally with humanitarian and human rights organizations for several decades. She is President of Therapist Beyond Borders, a consulting firm, that facilitates change and conflict resolution in organizations whose leaders know they are stuck. Dr. Avula believes in the healing power of groups and brings together interdisciplinary teams to advance systemic changes in hospitals, universities, and counseling centers.

**H**ave you ever tried screaming someone else into believing what you believe?  
I have. It neither works nor feels particularly skillful.

What would happen if we embraced non-violent coexistence and dialogue over coercion and force?

Looking at the impacts of power and privilege in global conflicts can help us to think about how existence and survival is often prioritized for the group that has power. If we are interested in solving any conflict globally, our efforts must begin with becoming aware of power and privilege dynamics in ourselves and our own groups.

Over the last few years, we have seen American society become increasingly polarized (Volkan, 2020). Humans, after all, are social, relational beings motivated by inclusion, exclusion, and rejection (Friedman, 2016). Many of us have witnessed regression in our professional affiliations, including at conferences and gatherings with colleagues, and, perhaps most challenging of all, on our electronic listservs. When our communities start to divide into binary groups based on who is right and who is wrong, it can signal the beginning of an enactment and activation of more primitive unconscious forces. Many of us have participated in and witnessed groups within our own communities turning on each other, condemning and denigrating each other, often arriving at an impasse. Despite conscious good intentions, we often end up re-creating conflicts similar to those we initially sought to resolve. While painful and seemingly destructive, such enactments are an important part of the journey to working through and sustainable change (Grossmark, 2016).

Group theorists have long warned that scapegoating involves projecting unwanted parts of ourselves onto the other (Moreno, 2007). Unrecognized, it can start to feel like we are living in a hateful society devoid of meaning and hope. Worse, specific individuals become receptacles for the group's unwanted parts. The group unconsciously appoints a select few to play out a drama in its effort to work through the unresolved conflict. As bystanders, we can play an essential role in disrupting this dynamic by saying something to protect these colleagues, who become overloaded with the feelings and impulses inherent in the conflict.

Applying a conceptual approach that does not pathologize individuals during these enactments, making meaning by verbally symbolizing what is not yet formulated consciously, advances a non-violent coexistence when working through what feels out of reach.

### Practicing Non-Violent Coexistence

Through many years of working as an international psychologist responding to critical incidents around the globe and engaging in conflict resolution, I believe non-violent coexistence is possible in the face of unresolved conflict and trauma.

One of the more daunting engagements I facilitated centered on the longstanding South Sudan conflict. In December 2013, there was a political struggle between Dinka Salva Kiir and Nuer Riek Machar leading to the latter's removal. Violence erupted in which civilians were targeted along ethnic lines, and the country was engaged in civil war for five years.

A humanitarian organization asked me to lead a team facilitating a retreat in Tanzania for 100 of its staff who were working in South Sudan. In addition, I was asked to facilitate a group for warring tribes. I did not know the nature of the

tribes' differences and did some research to better understand the sequence of events. With so much at stake, I knew I couldn't use a traditional group therapy method; I had to offer something to slow the conversational process down to help the members be with one another.

With a vision of working on nonviolent coexistence in the group, I designed a process focused on active listening with no crosstalk. Instead of reacting to what a member said, the task was to listen and to *show* that you were listening. I made clear that listening did not connote agreement. Freed of the impulse to convince, group members listened and learned. They grew in their awareness because they could now hear and register what others were saying instead of focusing on what they were going to say next. The group, to my surprise, felt peaceful.

### Reflective Citizens Methodology

In Prague, I had the great fortune to meet Marina Mojović, MD, who co-developed with Jelica Satarić, MD, a method to help citizens reflect in the face of war and trauma.

Their Reflective Citizens (RC) methodology was created intuitively and organically in Belgrade in the 1990s during the fall of Yugoslavia, civil wars, and the 2002 NATO bombing of Serbia. These two Serbian psychiatrists brought citizens together at gardens, cafés, and parks to share in experiences created out of group analysis.

The format of the RC methodology begins with social dreaming, followed by a large group, a small group, and another large group. It culminates in a review and applications group. At the heart of this methodology is listening and letting go of the desire to push an agenda to create a safe enough space for the free sharing of thoughts, feelings, fantasies, dreams, drawings, and hypotheses (Mojović, 2022).

This methodology mirrors my own thinking about the value of active and engaged listening and my approach over many years to help organizations engage in true dialogue (Avula, 2021). RC is hosted by a team of individuals in the same way that my consulting firm, Therapist Beyond Borders, operates in teams. The involvement of a hosting team, combined with a social dreaming component, offer a level of containment I had not experienced in large groups.

### Power and Privilege: Confronting Codes of Superiority

In every society, there are favored groups who have a privileged status, thereby automatically given a platform simply based on their identities. For example, in the field of group psychotherapy, white men and (fewer) white women have been the prominent authors, featured presenters, and institute leaders.

Through decades of leading and facilitating diversity, equity, and inclusion dialogues, I noticed unconscious codes of superiority at play (Avula, 2023). Calling out or cancel culture inherently holds that one person, or one group of people, knows better.



Kavita Avula



from the  
president

Lorraine Wodiska, PhD, CGP, ABPP-F, AGPA-F

It's spring in Arlington, Virginia, and the cherry blossoms put on another annual spectacular show in Washington, DC. Because of warmer weather, they were early, but glorious all the same.

### AGPA Connect

We are recently back from AGPA Connect 2024 at the Gaylord National Harbor Hotel in Oxon Hill, Maryland. The conference theme was *Turbulent Times: Using Groups to Overcome Divisions and Foster Engagement*. Our fearless leaders of the AGPA Connect Committee—D. Thomas Stone, Jr., PhD, CGP, AGPA-F, Ginger Sullivan, MA, LPC, CGP, AGPA-F, and Brenda Boatswain, PhD, CGP, SHRM-CP—planned a week of excellent group training opportunities.

We welcomed attendees from the US and Canada, as well as those from countries across the globe. Our main events included two all-day Special Institutes—*Fractures, and Integration: Therapeutic Work with Forced Migrants and Survivors of Torture*, presented by Adeyinka Akinsulure-Smith, PhD, ABPP, and Hawthorne Smith, PhD; and *Thinking Existentially: Living Authentically in Turbulent Times*, by Farooq Mohyuddin, MD, CGP, FAPA, AGPA-F.

Nina Brown, EdD, LPC, NCC, FAPA, AGPA-DLF, led off the two-day Institutes with her plenary, *AGPA Institutes as Adventures in Learning Group Psychotherapy*. In the next two days, the Institute Committee offered more than 40 choices including 23 general process group experiences and 20 Institutes with a specific focus.

The Conference Opening Plenary speaker was Julianne Holt-Lunstad, PhD, who presented on *Social Connection as an Underappreciated Determinant of Health and Wellbeing*. The Conference Committee offered a full array of courses, workshops, and open sessions.

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**Leo Leiderman, PsyD, ABPP, FAACP, CGP, AGPA-F**

The ongoing wars in the Middle East and Europe, as well as the upcoming November US presidential, national, and state elections, are emotionally consuming dilemmas for many of us. These highly charged events can lead to binary thinking and relating with others, at times causing hurt, division, conflict, and turmoil. Individuals can become entrenched in their own perspectives, being unable to listen, understand, or even be open to multiple perspectives. As group leaders, we may be challenged with how to advance communications among and between our group members, without bias, without imposing our own politics on the group, and without excluding others who may have different views.

Our feature article, *Peace and Conflict, Power, and Privilege: Coexistence in the Face of Difference and Trauma*, by Kavita Avula, PsyD, CGP, proposes insightful constructs for large and small group facilitators to consider enhancing communication and understanding between subgroups, groups, and populations with unresolved conflicts. The model highlights the power of inclusivity, a central component to antiracist, anti-oppressive organizational systems.

I hope this edition of the *Group Circle* provides you with another meaningful connection to AGPA. Our second feature article, *The Climate Crisis is Here and Group Leaders Can Help: AGPA's New Climate SIG*, by Anna Graybeal, PhD, CGP, SEP, and Janet A. Castellini, MSS, LCSW, LCADC, CGP, NCPsyA, addresses our globe's greatest existential threat and an exciting new AGPA Special Interest Group (SIG) that will be dedicated to the climate crisis.

In her first *From the President* column, Lorraine Wodiska, PhD, CGP, ABPP-F, AGPA-F, AGPA President, shares her reflections on AGPA Connect 2024, updates on AGPA, and the core organizational strategic initiatives she will address during her presidency. In the *Research Matters* column, Yifei Du, MPsy, reviews and provides scholarly understanding regarding compelling articles on *What was that session like? An empirical-by-derived typology of group therapy sessions* (Li, et. al., 2021) and *"I get you": A qualitative study on group members' empathic expression* (Shao, et. al., 2022). Our *Consultation, Please* column features a clinical dilemma and responses from Rob Williams, LICSW, MBA, CGP, and Jeffrey Roth, MD, AGPA-F. The Affiliate Assembly's column, *Uncovering the Power of the ASA: Building Collaboration Through the Affiliate Societies Assembly* by Deborah Sharp, LCSW-S, CGP, AGPA-F, highlights the centrality of the ASA and its impact personally, professionally, and organizationally with compelling interviews.

In this edition, we congratulate several AGPA members for their professional milestones and achievements! This includes AGPA's newest Fellows: G. Sathya Devan, MD, AGPA-F; Robert (Bob) Hsiung, MD, AGPA-F; Noelle Lefforge, PhD, MHA, ABPP, CGP, AGPA-F; Jill Lewis, MA, LCSW, CEDS-S, CGP, AGPA-F; Rachelle Rene, PhD, BCB, HSM, CGP, AGPA-F; and Alyson Stone, PhD, CGP, AGPA-F. We showcase Aaron Black, PhD, CGP, AGPA-F, who received the distinguished 2024 Harold S. Bernard Group Psychotherapy Training Award at AGPA Connect 2024. In *Member News*, we applaud

Andrew Susskind, LCSW, SEP, CGP, who just authored a workbook, *It's Not About the Sex: Moving from Isolation to Intimacy after Sexual Compulsivity*. We also congratulate the new members of our governance in our feature *AGPA Installs New Officers and Directors*.

I welcome your comments and feedback about this column or anything else about the *Group Circle*. I look forward to your providing us with your article on a contemporary, scholarly group psychotherapy topic at [lleiderman@westchester-nps.com](mailto:lleiderman@westchester-nps.com). 📧

**FROM THE PRESIDENT**

*Continued from page 1*

On Friday, I presented my Inaugural Presidential Address: *This is Your Pilot Speaking. Buckle Your Seatbelts, We Expect Turbulence Ahead*. In each of the seven decades since AGPA began, I considered the turbulent times we have experienced societally. These were paired with the events of my life during that period and then related to intentional and thoughtful decisions made by AGPA leadership to create necessary change and growth. I hope you take time to watch it virtually—in the AGPA store—if you were not there in person.

Cynthia de las Fuentes, PhD, President of the American Psychological Association, offered the Mitchell Hochberg Memorial Public Education Event on *Inclusion's Imperative: Understanding the Root Causes of Health Inequities and Their Antidotes*.

Non-educational events included morning stretch or meditation. There were New Member/New CGP Breakfasts, Fellow Breakfasts, and even a Past Presidents' Breakfast. In addition, we had an Awards Ceremony, a Community Meeting, a Memorial Session, and, as always, dinner with newcomers, AGPA friends, and newly made connections.

The week ended with the Foundation lunch and attendees being treated to the exuberant entertainment of Step Afrikaas. Audience members stomped our feet and shouted joyously to their rhythms.

The AGPA staff onsite included: Angela Stephens, CAE, CEO; Diane Feirman, CAE, Public Affairs Senior Director; Nakeshia Betsill, Membership Director; Angie Jaramillo, Account Executive, Marketing; Holly Lundgren, E-Learning Education Manager; Kate Monkus, Conference Education Manager; and Monica Saunders, Meetings and Expositions. Kellen Vice Presidents Neil Gottlieb and JerrieLynn Kind were also onsite. Three cheers to the Local Hosting Society, my home Affiliate, the Mid-Atlantic Group Psychotherapy Society, which offered an excellent overview of the food and fun times available in Washington, DC.

AGPA Connect 2025 will be held in San Francisco, California. Get ready for the request for proposals, which will likely be due in early summer. For the upcoming conference, the AGPA Connect Committee would like to invite many more proposals for virtual sessions, as AGPA is considering how to construct a conference with more

events available for those who can only attend online. For first-time attendees, please consider AGPA as your professional home. Write a proposal to present a workshop or open session. Help us to make our organization a place where you feel welcomed and want to belong.

**Welcoming Members in New AGPA Positions**

In this AGPA election year, we welcome talented members to our governance who will be generously serving our organization. Please see the article "AGPA Installs New Officers and Directors" on page 6 of this issue of the *Group Circle*. I look forward to working with them.

**Presidential Theme**

During my term as President, I will be focusing on training group leaders who work in agencies. In the past five years, there has been a dramatic increase in depression, anxiety, loneliness, and struggles with relational skills. Individuals who are in the most serious need of mental health treatment are referred to and treated in agencies, and the most typical treatment in these clinics, agencies, and hospitals is group therapy. AGPA offers superlative training for group therapists who can be part of the solution to the current challenges in meeting mental health treatment. I will have more to say about the implementation of this strategic initiative in future columns.

**Turbulence**

Our world continues in turmoil—particularly in the Middle East and in Ukraine. Because we are a non-profit organization with 501(c)3 status, we are not permitted to make political statements. Still, and as expected, some strong feelings came forward with force in the Large Group. I trust that we can remember kindness, curiosity, and continued contact with one another during these times.

As mentioned in my Presidential address, I expect turbulence and optimistically believe that our organization is built to withstand the winds of conflict and land safely at a great destination.

I welcome input and reactions to this column. There is a place for fresh perspectives and new ideas for AGPA, for AGPA Connect, and for our membership. Contact me at [lwodiska@gmail.com](mailto:lwodiska@gmail.com). 📧

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is published four times a year by the American Group Psychotherapy Association, Inc. and the International Board for Certification of Group Psychotherapists.

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# The Climate Crisis is Here and Group Leaders Can Help: AGPA's New Climate SIG

Anna Graybeal, PhD, CGP, SEP, and Janet A. Castellini, MSS, LCSW, LCADC, CGP, NCPsyA

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Anna Graybeal, PhD, CGP, SEP, is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Austin, Texas. She has been a climate activist with Citizens' Climate Lobby since 2012 and has been teaching and conducting workshops about the psychology of climate change since 2018. Among her four weekly ongoing groups, one is a training group for therapists engaged with the climate crisis.

Janet Castellini, MSS, LCSW, LCADC, CGP, NCPsyA, is a modern psychoanalyst in private practice in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Cherry Hill, New Jersey. She worked for 27 years in energy education before moving to a career in mental health. She joined the Climate Psychology Alliance in 2018 and provides training, supervision, and group leadership in its Climate Cafe program.

**W**e believe that group therapists have a valuable role to play in the climate crisis, one of the most stirring issues of our time.

## The Climate Crisis is also an Emotional Crisis

While both of us are now therapists, we each started our working lives in the sciences: Graybeal in biology, and Castellini in energy and the environment. Because of the experience we gained in those fields, we have been alarmed about climate change for a long time. It is not an overstatement to say that there is nothing more existentially threatening to humanity, and to most of life on Earth, than the climate crisis. The concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has increased by 50% since the start of the industrial age, and the associated warming is well underway (Lindsey & Dahlman, 2023). The variety and intensity of consequences is staggering, including disrupted wind, water current and precipitation patterns, ocean acidification, spreading of parasites and diseases, sea level rise, loss of biodiversity, and an increase in natural disasters like hurricanes, wildfires, droughts, and floods.

It is hard to wrap one's head around the scale of the global natural systems that are close to tipping points and the consequent disruption and suffering in store for all life on Earth (Richardson et al., 2023). The feelings of anxiety, rage, and helplessness are dreadful, and understandably activate defenses like denial, avoidance, and disavowal. For many, it is easy to rationalize outright avoidance. We would "rather go out for tacos," as Graybeal stated in the title of her AGPA Connect 2024 workshop. For others, it is far more difficult to deny or avoid the ongoing and impending devastation.

The World Health Organization reports that "the people whose health is being harmed first and worst by the climate crisis are the people who contribute least to its causes, and who are least able to protect themselves and their families against it" (World Health Organization, 2023). Thus, the climate crisis is also a crisis of injustice, and addressing it must include grappling with entrenched power dynamics intertwined with colonization, slavery, extractivist (the removal of natural resources particularly for export with minimal processing) culture, and racism.

Another common reaction to the climate crisis is ambivalence (Lertzman, 2015). We worry and want to change the system, but also feel impotent and guilty because of being deeply embedded in that system. All our lives and livelihoods depend on the use of fossil fuels, which power everything from transportation and electricity to food production and the creation of most of what we buy. This ambivalence can be so extreme it can lead to being frozen, numb, or collapsed.

It is no wonder that we are struggling, individually and collectively, to engage with the climate crisis. The choice before us could not be more miserable. Denial may serve to protect us from experiencing feelings like terror, guilt, rage, helplessness, and grief. Our other option is resistance, which may be problematic, because while resistance may protect us emotionally, it also inhibits our thinking, our ability to learn, and, especially, our capacity to talk about and address what's really happening.

## Working with Resistance in Group

This situation presents an opportunity for group therapists because we can facilitate both large and small groups to foster change and address resistance. The idea of resistance started with Freud, who viewed it as something to be overcome with interpretation (Freud, 1959). One hundred and thirty years later, many treatment modalities, from modern psychoanalysis to motivational interviewing, recognize that resistance serves a purpose in clients' lives, and cannot be worked through without the clients' maturational needs first being met. Many group leaders use joining techniques that serve to bolster resistances, being attuned to a patients' emotional needs until they are ready to give up their resistances voluntarily.

According to Weintrobe, all of us "need support to bear the anxieties that come with facing climate change" (2013, p. 9). We need to talk with others who share and relate to our feelings, providing validation and compassion, so that we

can "experience [our] feelings of anger and grief over what [we] have lost [so that we] are able to move on" (2013, p. 14). Groups provide the therapeutic space to engage with others while experiencing uncomfortable emotions, making those feelings easier to bear.

Additionally, groups provide the experiences needed to increase our capacity to have difficult conversations, learning via experience so that we can stay connected to others even as we have uncomfortable feelings towards them, like anger and competitiveness. Group helps us get more comfortable tolerating hard feelings, expressing them constructively, and staying in relationships as we do. These concepts are particularly useful when addressing feelings related to experiences shared by the group, the group leader, and the culture in which our group work is contained.

Theoretical group approaches with the climate crisis are needed, because resolving our human resistance to it is of the utmost urgency. Experts are telling us the future of human civilization depends entirely on what we do or do not do at this point. In other words, we no longer need to take time to clarify the science, nor figure out the technological fixes, or determine policy solutions. What remains is to implement solutions, work that requires confronting our resistances, both personally and societally. Group leaders have skills that the world needs now.

## Suggestions for Engagement

If you feel inspired to address the climate crisis, we have some suggestions to get you going. One place to start is a site from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: <https://climateprimer.mit.edu/>. Some notable books include: *Falter* by Bill McKibben (2019); *The Uninhabitable Earth* by David Wallace-Wells (2019); and *All We Can Save* by Ayana Johnson and Katharine Wilkinson (2021). Watch movies and shows like *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Chasing Ice*, and the *Life on Our Planet* series. Sign up for the newsletters from the *New York Times* Climate Desk, *Carbon Brief Daily* (free), or *Yale Climate Connections* (free), and read the excellent climate coverage at *The Guardian*.

As you expose yourself to this material, pay close attention to the emotions you feel. Be aware that this can be profoundly uncomfortable and unsettling work. We recommend finding other people with whom you feel safe enough to share your feelings with so you are validated and not alone. Ideally, talk about this in your personal therapy and training groups, or consider making use of one of the resources discussed below.

As you're doing your personal work, you may notice that you will be helping your clients talk more as well. You may be more likely to pick up on small comments, such as remarks about the weather, and delve into the feelings that clients may or may not be aware of. This, in turn, may help your clients find ways that they can channel some of their feelings.

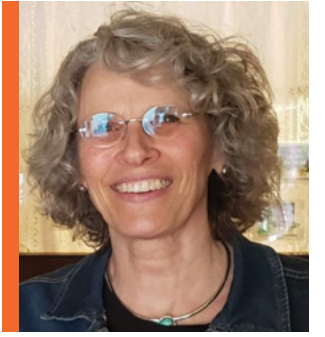
## Putting Your Group Skills to Work

Most of all, consider using your group skills to address the crisis. There is already a tradition of group work embedded within the climate movement. The Work that Reconnects, developed by Joanna Macy ([workthatreconnects.org](http://workthatreconnects.org)), The Good Grief Network ([www.goodgriefnetwork.org](http://www.goodgriefnetwork.org)), based on Alcoholics Anonymous, and Climate Cafes developed by the Climate Psychology Alliance ([www.climatepsychology.us](http://www.climatepsychology.us)) provide structured group formats for people to talk together and benefit from the co-regulation of emotion and community connection. These groups are generally short-term or single events, led by facilitators trained by the organizations.

As modern analytically trained group therapists, we are especially passionate about the potential that interpersonal process groups can play for individuals and communities. We can't say it enough: It is better for all of us to feel our feelings together with others and not alone. The crisis is profoundly existential. It can't help but prompt us to grapple with what really matters in our "one wild and precious life" (Oliver, 1990, p. 60). These struggles are mutual and have the potential to bring us together when so much is divisive. What better place to have the experience of connection to others, in all its beauty and difficulty, than in groups?



Anna Graybeal



Janet Castellini

## The New Climate SIG at AGPA

We hope that group therapists within AGPA can engage in all these areas. We are working on creating a new Climate SIG within AGPA. We were thrilled to host a large and enthusiastic lunchtime discussion at AGPA Connect 2024, where we discussed goals and initiatives for this SIG. For example, the SIG will raise awareness of the climate crisis within our organization, promoting more engagement by our community. It will foster the development of additional training opportunities, such as workshops and lectures, formulating substantive contributions to the burgeoning practice of climate-aware psychotherapy, and collaborate with ongoing DEI initiatives to address long-standing societal inequities. SIG members who are skilled in both group work and the climate crisis may serve as invaluable sources of technical training, consultation, and co-facilitation for other climate-concerned practitioners and organizations. Providing climate-aware therapy and activism is emotionally demanding, and there is a great need for training groups where therapists can get support and consultation. A Climate SIG will organize efforts that have the potential to make a difference to society-at-large.

## Conclusion

The solution to the climate crisis will not come from individual efforts. We can only do this together. In other words, the Earth needs well-functioning groups! Therefore, we group leaders are needed. We know how to help people work through their resistances to uncomfortable feelings. We know how to help them have difficult conversations with each other, staying constructive and connected in their relationships even as they are feeling intensely uncomfortable feelings. We know how sustaining emotionally intimate relationships can be, even when everything we know and love is at stake. We have an incredible opportunity to play a meaningful role in one of the most challenging chapters in human history. 🌍

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# Congratulations New Fellows

**G. Sathya Devan, MD, AGPA-F (Singapore)** received his MBBS degree in 1974 in Singapore and graduated from the Royal College of Psychiatry in 1984 in the United Kingdom (UK). Among his positions, he served as head of the Department of Forensic Psychiatry at the Institute of Mental Health in Singapore, head of Psychotherapy Services, Senior Clinical Lecturer at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, and Chairman and Examiner of the Post Graduate Diploma in Psychotherapy. In addition to his private practice, he provides psychiatric services at the Changi Prison in Singapore. His involvement with group psychotherapy began at the Institute of Group Analysis in the UK, where he received supervision from Pat de Mare, a well-known group analyst. He facilitated small weekly groups at the Lim Ah Pin Psychiatric Clinic in Singapore and simultaneously conducted weekly experiential groups for mental health staff at the Woodridge Hospital. He provided group supervision in various settings, promoting group practice to multiple disciplines within the mental health field and ran weekly groups for chronically mentally ill patients, rehabilitation of chronic schizophrenic patients, and relatives of severely mentally ill patients. In 1990, Dr. Devan received a Fellowship in Group Psychotherapy at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, where he immersed himself in short-term models, partial hospitalization, and addiction-type groups. A member of AGPA since 1991, Dr. Devan has served as an AGPA ambassador in Singapore and is considered a developer of group practice in the Asian region. He wrote a key paper on *Culture and the Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, which was published in the *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*. He is currently writing a book titled *Group Psychotherapy East and West*.



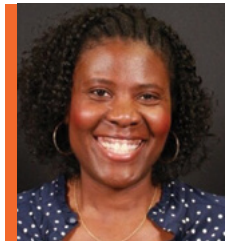
G. Sathya Devan

**Noelle Lefforge, PhD, MHA, ABPP, CGP, AGPA-F (Denver, Colorado)** is Associate Dean for Applied Research and Sponsored Programs, the Director of the Professional Psychology Clinic for the Graduate School of Psychology, and a Clinical Associate Professor at the University of Denver in Colorado. She previously served as the Director of the Professional Psychology Clinic and as a Clinical Associate Professor at the University of Las Vegas-Nevada. She is a licensed psychologist in Nevada and Colorado. Dr. Lefforge did her undergraduate and graduate work at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She has spent most of her professional career in Nevada and Colorado where she has focused on innovative training and program development work, legislative activity, and leadership in state (NPA) and national (APA) associations. Her service to AGPA includes founding the Group Training and Supervision SIG and serving as Co-Chair for two years; membership on the International Board for Certification of Group Psychotherapists for three years; and, until recently as Associate Editor of the *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*. She has also presented several workshops at AGPA Connect on training group psychotherapists and responding to bias and microaggressions in group psychotherapy. Dr. Lefforge's first research publication predates her first graduate degree. Her writing has focused on cultural, substance abuse, and group psychotherapy as a specialty. More recently, she co-authored articles on "Education and Training Guidelines of Group Psychology and Group Psychotherapy," published in *Training and Education in Professional Psychology* and "Group Psychotherapy as a Specialty: An Inconvenient Truth" in the *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, and "A Training Model for Addressing Microaggressions in Group Psychotherapy" in the *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*. A large amount of her group-related scholarship is dedicated to improving group psychotherapists' responsiveness to microaggressions. Her publications and presentations approach the subject from a critical lens and center intersectional marginalized identities.



Noelle Lefforge

**Rachelle Rene, PhD, BCB, HSM, CGP, AGPA-F (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)**, has been an active member of AGPA since she first attended AGPA Connect on a scholarship in 2008. She immediately became involved in governance and volunteered with the Community Outreach Task Force, representing AGPA as part of a New York Team of Disaster Psychiatry that went to Haiti to respond to the devastating earthquake in 2010. Dr. Rene did her undergraduate work at the University at Albany-SUNY and her master's and doctoral studies at the Alliant International University California School of Professional Psychology. She spent most of her professional career to date in the San Diego area, where she demonstrated leadership as Director of Behavioral Health Services and Chief Behavioral Health Officer at a federally qualified health center with 13+ clinics, 34 programs, and 1,300 employees. In 2018, Dr. Rene relocated to Philadelphia, where she is Enterprise Director of Primary Care Integrated Behavioral Health and Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry & Human Behavior at Jefferson Health/Thomas Jefferson University/Sidney Kimmel Medical College. She is on the Board of the International Board for Certification of Group Psychotherapists and the Philadelphia Area Group Psychotherapy Society, and she serves as Co-Chair of the Women in Group Psychotherapy SIG. She has presented workshops at AGPA Connect on *Therapists as Racial Beings -Leading Groups with People of Color* and *Women in Group Leadership Roles and Uses of Power and Influence*. These workshops have helped advance our organizational efforts towards cultural awareness, compassion, and competence. As early as 2002, she implemented and led weekly psychoeducational and process groups for patients and trained staff on clinical issues including cultural competency and gender responsiveness. At Jefferson Health, she developed groups for providers focused on addressing the impact of the stress and anxiety exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. She currently offers and leads group sessions to identified departments monthly as needed. Dr. Rene has also trained staff and supported implementation of psychoeducational and process groups for patients experiencing depression and chronic pain.



Rachelle Rene

**Robert (Bob) Hsiung, MD, AGPA-F (Chicago, Illinois)** has been an active member of AGPA for more than 20 years and has a CV of group-related activities and publications that is 17 pages long. Much of Dr. Hsiung's career has focused on online group work, and he has been a pioneer in developing online support groups and trainings. Dr. Bob has traveled widely within the United States, Europe, Africa, and Asia, presenting about online group work and diversity issues, and has published many articles, chapters, and a book on these subjects. Technology, and helping therapists become comfortable with its use, has been Dr. Hsiung's area of expertise, and his willingness to share his knowledge with others is apparent from his many workshops and online presentations. He received his undergraduate degree from Harvard University and his medical degree from Northwestern University in Chicago. He has had numerous faculty and clinical appointments at the University of Chicago and has maintained a private practice since 2010. He is also a member of the American Psychiatric Association and other psychiatric and technology organizations. Dr. Bob has donated time and expertise to AGPA and the Illinois Group Psychotherapy Society. He served as Co-Chair of AGPA's Psychiatry SIG for three years, and founded the Internet, Social Media and Technology SIG (iSIG), where he serves as Co-Chair. He served on the AGPA Board for four years and has been on the Board of the Group Foundation since 2020, where he is chair of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Fund Committee. In addition to dozens of workshops presented at conferences and in consultation all over the world, he first presented at AGPA Connect in 2006 on *Bridging Differences Between Large Online Groups* and has presented at AGPA each year since then on topics related to online work, as well as diversity and inclusion issues. He initiated and co-chaired the Continuous Online Group at the Annual Meeting beginning in 2007 and has continued active involvement in that forum as its Co-Chair. He has also focused on issues related to Consumer Health Informatics, speaking and publishing on the subject in various countries.



Robert (Bob) Hsiung

**Jill Lewis, MA, LCSW, CEDS-S, CGP, AGPA-F (Atlanta, Georgia)**, received her master's degree from New York University and a master's in social work from the Wurzeiler School of Social Work in New York. Within a year of being employed as a primary therapist at the Renfrew Center, she became their IOP Team Leader overseeing the entire program of approximately 22 residents and supervising six staff members. She worked at Balance Eating Disorders Treatment Center, running biweekly multifamily groups and support groups. After a move to Atlanta, she opened a dynamic group practice. Currently, she supervises three associates, two interns, provides weekly individual and family therapy to an average of 25 clients, and facilitates three weekly psychotherapy groups, two weekly supervisory groups, and a monthly supervisory group to dietitians. Her clinical emphasis combines work with adolescents and adults, eating disorders, and group and family psychotherapy. Simultaneously, she has a deep commitment to training and supervising. For the past 11 years, Dr. Lewis has been creating or collaborating in organizational leadership. She joined the International Organization of Eating Disorder Professions, serving on its Gala committee for two years and then Treasurer for three years. She started Therapist Relocating and Engaging Atlanta Together (TREAT), promoting networking opportunities and support for clinicians in her area. In 2018, she joined the Atlanta Group Psychotherapy Society (AGPS) and readily offered all-day trainings and workshops. She served as its Social Chair and became President-Elect in 2023, a two-year commitment. For the past five years, she has served as the Tri-Chair of the Groups in Private Practice SIG and is the Member-at-Large for the AGPA Affiliate Societies Assembly. She has presented four workshops at AGPA Connect, emphasizing the nuts and bolts of how to start a group and bringing attention to our bodies.



Jill Lewis

**Alyson Stone, PhD, CGP, AGPA-F (Austin, Texas)**, received her doctorate in psychology from Texas Tech University. A member of AGPA and the Austin Group Psychotherapy Society (AGPS) since 2005 and a CGP since 2010, Dr. Stone started her involvement with group work in 1993, co-leading groups for adolescents and adults in various settings. She opened her private practice 26 years ago, offering long-term psychotherapy services to adults and adolescents. Currently, she offers four psychotherapy groups for clients, a training group for clinicians, and group consultation services. She has been an active member of Jeffrey Hudson's, MEd, CGP, AGPA-F, and Andrea Pully's, MEd, LPG, CGP AGPA-F, weekly consultation group for the past 18 years. Similarly, she joined both Ronnie Levine's, PhD, ABPP, CGP, AGPA-F, training group and Hudson's and Pully's weekly training group, learning the modern analytic method experientially. In 2015, she joined the Center for Group Studies (CGS), where she continues her instruction in the modern analytic method. She served as Editor of AGPS's newsletter, an AGPS Board member, and CEU Chair. Currently, she is AGPS President. She served on the Workshop Committee for AGPA Connect and was part of the Fall Conference Committee for AGPS. Dr. Stone led two Specific Institutes and a General Process Group Institute at AGPA Connect. She has 23 professional presentations related to group psychotherapy in various settings. In addition, she has led seven classes on such topics as working with religious trauma, defensive use of spirituality, maintaining a thriving group practice, managing difficult emotions, and training college students to be peer mentors. 🧘



Alyson Stone



## Member News

**Andrew Susskind, LCSW, SEP, CGP**, authored a workbook, *It's Not About the Sex: Moving from Isolation to Intimacy after Sexual Compulsivity* (Routledge Press, 2024), which joins his book *It's Not About the Sex* (Central Recovery Press, 2019). The book presents a wellness model that takes the whole person into consideration rather than pathologizing or dwelling on sexual compulsivity of the past. Utilizing the tools of positive psychology, attachment theory, and nervous system regulation, readers are challenged to leverage their resilience and resourcefulness. Critical issues, such as spirituality and mindfulness, provide a purposeful soul-searching toward well-being and vitality. 🧘

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**Being Seen: The Many Faces of Group**



# Conceptualizing Group Through the Lens of Group Climate and Group Members' Empathy Expression

Yifei Du, MPsy, MexpArtsTh, George Washington University

Li, X., Kivlighan, D.M., Paquin, J.D., & Gold, P.B. (2021). What was that session like? An empirically-derived typology of group therapy sessions. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 25(2), 107-121.

## Intro

As a novice group leader, I often find myself pondering how to quickly grasp a group's developmental stage and interpersonal dynamics. In their article, Li and colleagues (2021) presented a valuable framework that aids group clinicians in conceptualizing each session and enhances the understanding of group developmental stages. Furthermore, the researchers identified five distinct types of group sessions and noted a significant association between these session types and group developmental stages.

## Summary of Research Findings

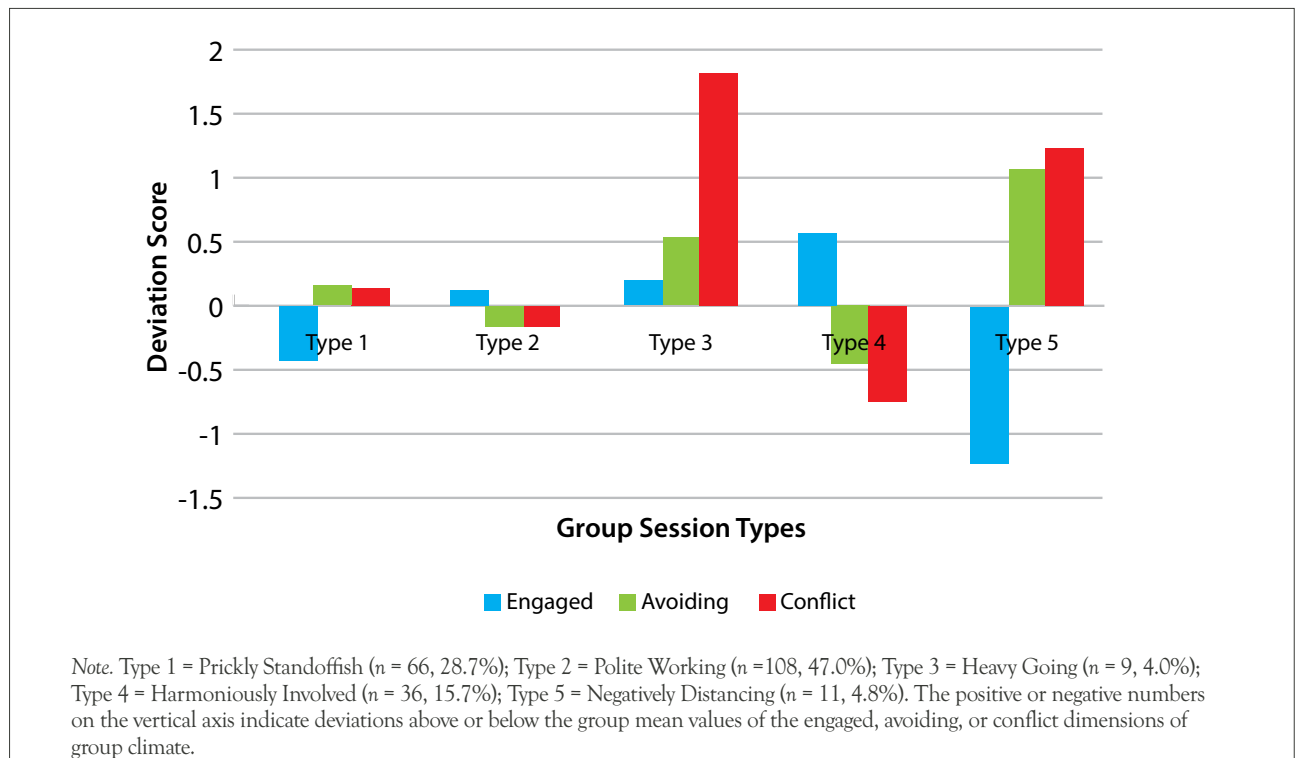
The study included 73 incarcerated women who participated in six structured trauma-focused therapy groups and 36 university students in four unstructured interpersonal process groups. The trauma-focused groups met twice per week for 11 weeks (22 sessions), while the interpersonal process groups met twice a week for 14 weeks (28 sessions). The Group Climate Questionnaire-short form (GCQ-S) was used to measure group members' perceptions of the group climate across three subscales: engaged, avoiding, and conflict.

The cluster analysis revealed the presence of five distinct types of group sessions: Type 1 prickly standoffish; Type 2 polite working; Type 3 heavy going; Type 4 harmoniously involved; and Type 5 negatively distancing. Interestingly, the first two types of group sessions, which were characterized as less intense, were more frequently observed in the structured trauma-focused group. Conversely, the latter three types, which were considered more intense, were more common in the unstructured interpersonal process group. In addition, the researchers observed a noteworthy "perseveration effect," indicating a tendency for the same session type to persist from one session to the next, demonstrating a continuity of climate-based group session type over the short term. Furthermore, group session types showed a significant association with group developmental phases. Specifically, Type 1 prickly standoffish tended to occur the earliest in the first and second quarter of the group sessions, followed by Type 2 polite working and Type 3 heavy going, and ultimately Type 4 harmoniously involved.

## Comments

Based on empirical data, the researchers provided a concrete depiction of five types of group sessions using the dimensions of engagement, avoidance, and conflicts. Ideally, the framework can be a valuable resource for group leaders, aiding in the conceptualization of specific sessions, identification of the current stage of group development, and planning of suitable interventions. However, I have encountered challenges when directly applying this framework to classify my own group sessions. In particular, my ratings of the three dimensions often do not align with the distinct score patterns (Figure 1) presented in the article. Moreover, if I were to imagine myself as each participant and assign scores, averaging the scores as the researchers did may lead to the loss of individual score differences, which is also informative.

Nevertheless, I genuinely appreciate the study's confirmation of the continuity of group climate. As the authors suggested, recognizing a group session as Type 2 (polite working), which commonly occurs in the early stages of group development, allows group leaders to deliberately foster open discussion about potential group conflicts and address any avoidance or



Note: Adapted from Li, et. al. (2021)

resistance to move the group forward. Additionally, when a significant shift in the group climate is observed across two consecutive sessions, it serves as a signal for reflection on the underlying reasons behind the change.

Shao, J., Li, X., Fan, F., Wu, J., & Wang, W. (2022). "I get you": A qualitative study on group members' empathic expression. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 26(2), 151-168.

## Intro

Empathy is a vital component predicting therapy outcome. It also plays a significant role in fostering desirable interpersonal relationships in an individual's life. In the context of group therapy, empathy is not limited to the therapists but also includes interactions among group members. In their study, Shao and colleagues (2022) aimed to explore the content of empathic expressions among group members and how these expressions evolve throughout the groups' development.

## Summary of Research Findings

Ten group leaders and 42 college student group members from six unstructured interpersonal process groups participated in the qualitative study conducted in China. Each group met once a week for 90 minutes and was co-led by two group leaders, spanning a duration of 10 to 12 weeks. Fifteen transcripts were selected for analysis using the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) procedures.

Four domains of empathy expressions were identified, namely cognitions, emotions, similarity, and group domains. The findings revealed that group members predominantly expressed empathy in the cognition domain, followed by the similarity domain, and the group-as-a-whole domain had the least occurrence. While the frequency of empathic expressions in the similarity domain decreased as the group developed, the frequency of empathic expressions in the cognition domain increased. Contrary to the initial expectations of the researchers, the study found that group members displayed a similar amount of cognitive empathy at both surface level (such as reflecting literal meanings) and intellectual levels (including understanding causes, characteristics or patterns, and implications).

## Implications

The researchers analyzed group members' empathic expressions. They found group members tend to demonstrate similarities with fellow members to foster a sense of connection. As a sense of safety is established, they become more inclined to take risks in expressing cognitive empathy. However, in the absence of intimacy, group members may find it challenging to utilize effectively emotional empathy or empathize with the group-as-a-whole. Hence, the authors suggested that group leaders could encourage self-disclosure and advance emotional empathy during the initial stage. As the group progresses, group leaders are also recommending a focus on cognitive empathy, capitalizing on the distinct ways in which group members empathize and connect. Additionally, group leaders can teach alternative domains of empathy expressions by modeling them to the group members.

From my perspective, the analysis of patterns of empathy expression among group members can serve as a model for future research. The frequency of observed empathy expressions can provide insights into the group's progression through different stages. Research on the manner and extent to which group members convey their empathy can advance the understanding of the relationship between effective empathic exchanges between group members and interpersonal progress both within and outside of the group context.

## Limitations

It is important to consider the limitations of the study including group members' empathy expression may be influenced by their level of functioning. The participants in this study were university students dealing with academic problems and interpersonal difficulties. Therefore, the identified pattern may not be universally applicable to other groups, such as inpatients with severe mental illness or individuals who have experienced trauma. Secondly, it is crucial to acknowledge that the participants in this study were Chinese individuals from a collectivistic cultural background. The observed pattern of empathy expression may vary in a different cultural context, such as the United States, where an individualistic society prevails. 🌐

## Your Membership Matters; Renew Today

As a valued AGPA member, we invite you to renew your membership and continue benefiting from all we offer to enhance your group therapy practice.

Renewing is simple: Visit our website at <https://portal.agpa.org/>.

Renew now to access:

- Continuing education, meetings, and training to sharpen your group skills.
- Both online and in-person networking for peer support and referrals.
- Key publications like the *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* and the *Group Circle* to keep you informed on field advancements.
- Advocacy promoting group therapy as a vital mental health treatment.
- Special Interest Groups and Affiliate Societies for community engagement and local connections.
- A career center to help you find jobs and advance in group therapy.

## Uncovering the Power of the ASA: Building Collaboration Through the Affiliate Societies Assembly

Deborah Sharp, LCSW-S, CGP, AGPA-F, Affiliate Societies Assembly Chair

Central to the Affiliate Societies Assembly (ASA) mission is its pivotal role as a two-way bridge between local Affiliates and AGPA governance. Here we delve into its unparalleled role, its hidden values, and its innovative development of AGPA leaders.

There is so much good energy flowing in the ASA these days! Our newest Affiliate—the Nashville Group Psychotherapy Society led by Christina Oliver, MA, LPC and Avi Dressler, LMFT—is thriving. There is interest in reviving former Affiliates in Puget Sound and in Utah. ASA members are enthusiastic about being together and supporting each other to the benefit of each Affiliate.

The leadership team of the Affiliate Societies Assembly consists of Chair Deborah Sharp, LCSW-S, CGP, AGPA-F, Chair-Elect Donna Harris, MA, LCSW, CGP, and Member-at-Large Jill Lewis, MA, LCSW, CEDS-S, CGP. Our structure of committees, consultants, and liaisons are all active in supporting our Affiliate members and each other. Our desire is to be open, collaborative, and collegial in our work together.

In our most recent Zoom meeting, our leadership team talked to each other about the level of collaboration in ASA as a group. Our conversation, edited for brevity and clarity, follows.

### Transcript

#### Donna Harris

**(DH):** Why does AGPA need the ASA, and why does the ASA need AGPA?

#### Deborah Sharp

**(DS):** From your vantage point as President of the Philadelphia Area Group Psychotherapy Society (PAGPS) and also a member of the ASA, do you have an answer, Donna?

**DH:** Because AGPA has been vocally supportive of the ASA, the connection is clear. For the Philadelphia Area Affiliate Society, we have our non-profit status under AGPA. That is one of the reasons why we need AGPA; they help us exist. The AGPA also provides overall structure, guidance, and educational opportunities. I think that could be strengthened by educating local members and Affiliates that something bigger (AGPA) brings value (to each local Affiliate).

**DS:** It's important to me as a leader of an Affiliate to

be part of something larger than myself. It can be lonely to be in leadership in your local Society, which reflects how lonely it can be in our profession. What I get from being a part of ASA is very similar to what happens when we join any group—understanding that in my individual experience as a clinician and in my experience as a leader in my local organization I'm not alone. Knowing other people are having similar challenges and experiences connects me so that I can learn from them, they can learn from me, and we can support each other. Also, when I go to AGPA Connect, I can develop my clinical leadership skills. Meeting people from all over the country and the world allows us to get different perspectives and exposure to different cultural views, as well as didactics centering around practice. I find that valuable.

#### Jill Lewis

**(JL):** I also feel like AGPA Connect is wonderful, but it's so massive. The ASA is smaller, and I have developed more intimate relationships there. In the last two years, I feel like I found more of a home being part of the ASA. I feel grounded. This speaks to encouraging members of our local societies to participate in the ASA.

**DS:** That's such a good point. I too have had that experience of the ASA being home base.

**JL:** In my local Affiliate (the Atlanta Group Psychotherapy Society [AGPS]), I have felt like I was floundering as a Society leader and wasn't sure what to do. Having linkages within the ASA helped connect me to AGPA and to other leaders so I didn't feel so isolated and alone; it provided me with a soft landing. Now I feel like I can connect with other Presidents who can help me understand what I'm doing, or about systems and how to put those into place at AGPS. The ASA and AGPA have helped me and my Affiliate.

**DS:** I remember talking to Gary Burlingame, PhD, CGP, AGPA-DF, and saying that the ASA is where the welcome happens, and of course, the Membership Engagement Committee is also where the welcome happens. So, I feel good about having a liaison to the AGPA Membership Engagement Committee so we can work together. The ASA serves as the boots on the ground for AGPA. We are a bridge or a conduit from the individual member in their local community to the larger community of the ASA and then to the worldwide community of AGPA. That is valuable because it reduces loneliness and provides intellectual and emotional support.

**DH:** It's interesting that we are having this conversation because I was recently touting the ASA, and the things I said about the ASA helped me convince a person to become President-Elect of my Society (PAGPS). His concern was that he would be alone in the future and wanted reassurance that he wasn't going to be standing there alone as individuals rotated off the PAGPS board. I reassured him that this is what the ASA does—support Presidents and their local societies. The ASA has many support services, which has helped me feel so much more positive than I did before I got involved with the ASA.

**DS:** We are all trying to create something that has never been before. I think it's a great idea to have our experience be more collaborative, more distributed, less hierarchical, more transparent, and more open. I'd love to hear about how we could achieve those objectives. What would it look like?

**JL:** It means making our committees share goals and finding ways to disseminate information more easily and effectively. We need to make things feel more inclusive, collaborative, and connected, and invite people who will work at achieving these objectives. We can help facilitate and grow committee involvement, but our committees need a map, a template, a plan.

**DS:** Local leaders witness our use of technologies, such as Slack and Google Drive, as well as other communication methods. For instance, we hold regular ASA office hours, meeting every Monday from 6:30 P.M. PT/7:30 MT/8:30 CT/9:30 ET. Anyone who has anything specific to celebrate, a question to ask, or a problem that needs to be addressed is welcome to attend. We are going to meet as a full Assembly four times in the year, twice online, and twice in person but with a hybrid possibility using an Owl camera. We did that during our ASA Meeting at AGPA Connect, and that allowed members who couldn't attend the meeting in person to still participate. Also, as the ASA representative to the AGPA Executive Committee, my intention is to write up my own report and post it on Slack. While there might be AGPA information that necessitates a formal announcement, it is important for local leaders to know what is happening now and what might be coming next.

We hope this small conversation provided an inside look at the power of the ASA and its work, value, and leadership development. 🍌

## AGPA Installs New Officers and Directors at Connect 2024

Lorraine Wodiska, PhD, ABPP-F, CGP, AGPA-F, is AGPA's new President. Dr. Wodiska is in independent private practice in Arlington, Virginia, working with individuals, couples, and groups for more than 40 years. She taught group therapy at Johns Hopkins University and has led process groups and workshops at AGPA, Mid-Atlantic Group Psychotherapy Society (MAGPS), DC and Maryland Psychological Associations, and a women's homeless shelter. She utilizes a unique form of therapy and teaches Ethical Canine Assisted Psychotherapy, with her shih-tzus Stella and Teddy as her co-presenters, in local, regional, and national workshops. This work has led to an interest in and extensive teaching on polyvagal theory as it relates to groups on Zoom and internal bias, both highly relevant topics today. She is a Fellow of AGPA, served as Co-Chair of the Open Sessions Committee, and is a Past President of MAGPS. She is also a Fellow of the American Board of Professional Psychology in Group Psychology and served as a Board Member for more than 10 years.

Other members who took office at AGPA Connect include:

### AGPA Officers

Leonardo (Leo) Leiderman, PsyD, ABPP, FAACP, CGP, AGPA-F, *President-Elect*, 2024-2026

M. Sophia Aguirre, PhD, CGP, AGPA-F, *Secretary*, 2024-2026

Michelle Collins-Greene, PhD, ABPP, CGP, AGPA-F, *Treasurer*, 2024-2026

### AGPA Newly Elected Board Members 2024-2028

Stavros Charalambides, Diploma, MSc, CGP

Jacquelin Darby, PsyD, CGP

Rachelle Rene, PhD, BCB, HSM, CGP, AGPA-F

### Early Career Professionals and Students Board of Directors, 2024-2026

Jonathan (Jon) Lewis, PhD, CGP

Brandon (Diggs) Williams, Sr., BSW, MSW

### Affiliate Societies Assembly 2024-2026

(nominated and voted on by the Assembly)

Donna Harris, MA, LCSW, CGP, *Chair-Elect*

Jill Lewis, MA, LCSW, CEDS-S, CGP, *Member-at-Large* (Assembly Board only)

### AGPA Continuing Board Members

Gary Burlingame, PhD, CGP, AGPA-DF, *Retiring President*

Deborah Sharp, LCSW, CGP, AGPA-F, *Affiliate Societies Assembly Chair*

Darryl Pure, PhD, ABPP, CGP, AGPA-F, *Chair*, Group Foundation for Advancing Mental Health

Steven Van Wagoner, PhD, CGP, AGPA-F, *Chair*, International Board for Certification of Group Psychotherapists

Eri Suzuki Bentley, PhD, CGP

Shemika Brooks, PsyD, CGP, AGPA-F

Marvin Evans, LCPC, CSOTP, CGP

Marcée Turner, PhD, CGP





# consultation, please!

Members are invited to contact Lee Kassan, MA, CGP, AGPA-LF, Editor of the Consultation, Please column, about your issues and/or questions that arise in your group psychotherapy practices. Special Interest Group members are highly encouraged to send cases that pertain to your field of interest. They will be presented anonymously. Email Lee at [lee@leekassan.com](mailto:lee@leekassan.com).

## Dear Consultants:

*My weekly therapy group has been meeting for five years. It's a co-ed, gay and cisgendered group with eight members ranging from 25 to 50 years of age. Six months ago, I brought in a new member—a 30-year-old cisgendered man, who I had been seeing in individual therapy, focusing on his difficulty forming friendships and romantic relationships. I suggested the group as a place where we might both learn more about those difficulties through feedback from the other members and what we would be able to observe. I didn't expect him to participate immediately, but it's been a while now since he joined and he doesn't say much, only speaking when spoken to. When pressed for his thoughts or feelings, either by the group or by me, his responses are superficial at best. This was at first frustrating for the group (and for me, too) but at this point the group is mostly ignoring him. He attends consistently and insists that he's getting a lot out of observing the others. But he's not really using the group. I've run out of interventions. What else can I do? Is it okay for him to (non) participate this way?*

**Frustrated and Annoyed**



## Dear Frustrated and Annoyed:

You are doing well as the group leader noticing your feelings and observing the lack of interaction with the newest member. Some things are happening in this group (family) system that you are right to be concerned about.

How we frame the problem opens different paths to finding the solution. For example, the group found a solution to their frustration by ignoring the new member. The rise of your frustration and annoyance could mean the group is letting you hold all the responsibility. You are working hard, maybe too hard, and are all alone. The current state of group functioning is being co-created by everyone. All the group members are withdrawn from engagement.

Integrating a new group member is an important group experience that happens slowly over time as bids for connection are made and responded (or not responded) to. To help the group re-engage with that process, you can ask them to reflect on their experience over the past six months. Can we be curious together about what could be affecting the group's integration of this new member? What do you gain through observation? What is it like to be observed? What is it like to be asked for more? What is it like to want more? What are the patterns of behavior that you are observing in yourself and others? How is what is happening in group related to your romantic and friend relationships outside of group?

As you ask the group to reflect and think about their actions and experiences in group, it's important to stay humble and remember that we all are imperfect. We never know exactly how a new member will be received and what difficulties may arise. Differences, both observable and unobservable, in ethnicity, religious beliefs, cultural norms, socioeconomic status, gender expression, sexuality, neurodiversity, and other factors affect how we enter and participate in group.

When the leader skillfully asks the group for help, it creates an opportunity for the group to grow individually and together. As you describe for the group what you are observing and express your curiosity, it expands their experience of what is expected and what is possible. Guiding the group through naming their individual experiences, exploring their feelings, discovering what is getting in the way of deeper connection, and trying out new behaviors is a creative, enriching, and exciting experience.



Rob Williams, LICSW, MBA, CGP  
Washington, DC

## Dear Frustrated and Annoyed:

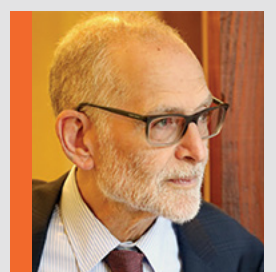
Your wish to be helpful to your silent group member creates difficulty for you when you become aware of the anger that you are holding. Have you considered that this anger may belong to the silent group member and to the group members who are reacting to his silence?

Some of our group members were raised in families where anger was expressed passively using what is generally called the "silent treatment." Rather than staying stuck with your need to change an individual member, you might consider first examining your own history of silence in your family of origin to determine what part, if any, of your own perceptions may be distorted. Taking any such distortions into consideration, you might then raise the question in the group about their reactions to silence from any individual member, including their reactions when you are silent. Of utmost importance is recognizing the risk of colluding in the silent member becoming a scapegoat, which may already be in progress since you indicate that group members are retaliating against him by ignoring him.

Since he attends regularly, his statement that he benefits from observing others should not be overlooked. When we overvalue talking in the group, we may undervalue the learning available from active listening.

If the other group members and you can let go of holding frustration and anger, you may find that your silent member is able to access his own anger. Do not be surprised if some part of his silence reflects feelings that are suppressed and projected onto other group members and you. Given his chief complaint on entering treatment, consider that underneath the anger may be unexpressed feelings of loneliness and hurt in relation to past rejections.

Finally, you mention that group members are heterogeneous regarding gender, age, and sexual orientation. What about the racial and ethnic composition of the group and whether this source of diversity is speakable in the group? If not, then the silence of the new member might represent an enactment of the silence on this form of diversity.



Jeffrey Roth, MD, CGP, AGPA-F  
Chicago, Illinois



# groupcircle

529 14th Street, NW, Suite 1280  
Washington, DC 20045

See *Group Assets* insert

## PEACE AND CONFLICT, POWER, AND PRIVILEGE: COEXISTENCE IN THE FACE OF DIFFERENCE AND TRAUMA

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When we tell each other how to think and feel, it is usually because we feel scared, not in control, hopeless, helpless, or desperate. In a recent large group experience, a person of color with lighter skin told another member, “I don’t see color,” likely meaning that she does not want to hold bias towards those with darker skin color. Those of us who have experienced color blindness know that erasing a person’s color can ignore a prominent part of their identity and lived experience (Haen & Thomas, 2018). Nevertheless, when some members responded by sternly reprimanding the woman, it only triggered her defensiveness, eroded a sense of safety in the group, and made people even more hesitant to speak freely.

Developmentally, she may have not been around many people who are different from her own race. Historically, she may not have experienced skin color bias. Did the group have to shame and shun her to uplift racial justice? Or is there another way to engage, have a conversation, foster learning, make space to hear where she is coming from, keeping in mind we’re all on different diversity, equity, and inclusion developmental journeys.

The RC method’s focus on listening reigns the group in when verbal attacks occur. Members may still express rage, anger, hurt, and many other strong feelings, but are invited to do so without trying to destructively criticize another’s belief system. The conductors of the group remind the group repeatedly: Let’s listen.

To take a frequent example, we can think about misgendering as a problem linked to superiority, given that misgendering is rooted in cisgender privilege and the unearned advantage cisgender people have. At a group conference last year, a female expert therapist was facilitating a demonstration group. Despite her exquisite skill and wish to use her platform to uplift racial justice, she repeatedly misgendered a member of the group (as so many of us have done). The group became angry. The more the group chided her, the more she continued to get the pronouns wrong. The anger in the group spilled over to the entire audience to the point that her authority and credibility were publicly brought into question. The group created a misogynistic enactment to confront a gender microaggression. In other words, the group diminished a woman to protect a non-binary group member.

If we are addressing an unconscious code of superiority by becoming superior ourselves, by telling the expert therapist how she should run a group, we now have two undermined

individuals from historically marginalized groups—the non-binary group member and the esteemed female therapist. Superiority can never be the antidote to superiority. The scapegoating that occurred has yet to be put right—a term for repairing harm, which is often used in restorative justice circles including at AGPA.

### Social Justice and Psychodynamic Group Therapy Institute: Practicing Coexisting

As a Brown woman leader, I have experienced people in power extending their platform to me or giving up their platform for me. Aaron Black, PhD, CGP, AGPA-F, an esteemed and nationally recognized masterful group therapist, was generously willing to forego his regular yearly Institute to step into something new and unknown with me. I shared with him that I did not want social justice work to be lodged only in people of color with the theories and clinical expertise reserved for cisgender white men. He agreed. Together, we figured out how to not only coexist but to co-create a mutually gratifying space in which we would teach theory, demonstrate clinical acumen, strive to be inclusive and equitable, and hold it all together with an unwavering commitment to our partnership.

Unsurprisingly, our AGPA Connect Institute was composed of majority white people. Dr. Black’s following came to see the master at work, while some members struggled to look at me. In the face of this racialized enactment, it was crucial that the relationship and trust between him and me was strong enough to sustain itself in the face of hostility and aggression. I felt comfortable enough to correct Dr. Black or nudge him in a direction other than what he intuited, and he felt secure enough to let me. This had a profound effect on our group. They carefully acknowledged and began to work through the stepmother transference and came to see me as the co-leader, co-parent, co-expert of the group.

Attendees were deeply moved by the mutual respect, trust, and regard that he and I showed for each other. The group appreciated my frame of asking them to not use superiority to address superiority.

Stepping towards those who hold the most different identities from me is my attempt to start with myself. As a person who has worked in and was profoundly changed by my visit to Palestine, my collaboration with an Israeli male has perhaps been the most impactful for me. An unlikely pair, he and I have worked hard to coexist in all our differences.

We all want the global conflicts around the world to decrease

and shift towards peaceful relations. If we start by getting to know each other and let go of homogeneity and consensus, we can begin to live more freely.

After years of feeling angry that others don’t see what I see, or think what I think, I feel relieved to listen and be listened to. While I still hold very strong beliefs and can candidly speak to them, giving up pushing my agenda has allowed for a different, more harmonious, way of being, and opened the possibility of enacting co-existence that so many of us long for. 🙏

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## Harold S. Bernard Group Psychotherapy Training Award Presented to Aaron Black, PhD, CGP, AGPA-F

The International Board for Certification of Group Psychotherapists presented the 2024 Harold S. Bernard Group Psychotherapy Training Award to Aaron Black, PhD, CGP, AGPA-F. The award was established in 2001 and is given annually to an individual or organization whose work in group training and/or education contributes to excellence in the practice of group psychotherapy. It was renamed through a legacy gift provided to the Group Foundation for Advancing Mental Health by Dr. Bernard for the purpose of endowing the award. Throughout his lifetime, training in group psychotherapy was near and dear to Dr. Bernard’s heart. His legacy bequest and this award ensure that individuals and programs meeting a high standard of training quality be identified and honored for their contributions to

the field in developing the next generation of clinicians who use group psychotherapy to help people.

Dr. Black was recognized for his significant contributions to training and leadership in the field of group psychotherapy on a local and national scale, as well as across the spectrum of mental health disciplines. He has led numerous presentations at AGPA Connect and other organizations over the years. He has also been on the faculty for the Center for Group Studies since 2015 and has been instrumental in the professional development of many group therapists through that training venue. He is particularly skilled in the integration of attachment theory and modern analysis. Dr. Black has also published several articles and received awards, with the most recent being Fellowship status in AGPA.

The scope of his impact was clearly conveyed through the comments received from those who recommended him for the award. “What truly qualifies Dr. Black for this award is his rare combination of expertise, confidence, and humility,” wrote one colleague. “Aaron possesses a remarkable skill for simplifying complex ideas into relatable experience,” wrote another.

“Dr. Black is a respected and generous teacher whose dedication to supporting and growing the field of group psychotherapy personifies this award,” said Steve Van Wagoner, PhD, CGP, AGPA-F, Certification Board Chair. “His work has had an impact on innumerable trainees and practitioners, benefitting the profession and the public.” 🙏