The Large Group Experience: Affiliation in a Learning Community

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The Large Group Experience: Affiliation in a Learning Community

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ABSTRACT

This article is designed to orient prospective members of a large group convened for educational purposes. The authors frame the experience as one of affiliation within a learning community, emphasizing relational processes to facilitate group-as-a-whole understanding, civic mindedness, and systemic change. They provide an historical overview of large group work, a description of basic learning goals and relevant concepts from social psychology, and an elaboration of their relational team model of consultancy. A summary of the large group convened at the Annual Meeting of the American Group Psychotherapy Association, AGPA Connect 2018, includes in-session material and integrative commentary. Reflective questions are offered to help readers consider the relevance of large group learning to their professional development as group therapists.

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The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically... Intelligence plus character, that is the goal of true education. (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain, is floating in mid-air, until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life. (Jane Addams)

This article is designed to orient prospective members of a large group convened for educational purposes. As a social microcosm, the large group has the potential to illuminate conscious, preconscious, and unconscious dimensions of the broader sociocultural and political environment that influence our therapy groups, members, and ourselves as leaders. We frame the large group experience as one of affiliation within a learning community, emphasizing relational processes to facilitate goals of group-as-a-whole understanding, civic mindedness, and systemic change. Rather than attending a large group as an event, we emphasize joining the large group as a member of a learning community. Segalla (2014) writes of the positive qualities of large groups:

Much of what has been written about large groups has been from Freudian and Kleinian perspectives. While this has proven useful in understanding some of the regressive and aggressive behavior of large groups, it has not offered enough about the more health-seeking behavior also present in the large group... What has been substantially absent in this literature is an exploration of the positive ways in which the large group overcomes barriers to connection and engagement... Moving away from a focus on projections is not to ignore that these are plentiful but is to emphasize that the human desire to be part of the tribe requires positive efforts and these efforts exist alongside more negative projective forces. (pp. 243–244)

Research and best practices in group therapy have long concluded that “pre-group preparation can be profoundly beneficial for prospective members, and consequently, for the group as a whole” (Leszcz & Kobos, 2007, p. 25). We believe preparation is also important for joining a large group. Toward this goal we provide a brief overview
of large group work, a description of relevant concepts from social psychology and basic learning goals, and an elaboration of our relational team model of consultancy. A summary of the large group convened at the American Group Psychotherapy Association Annual Meeting, AGPA Connect 2018, provides examples of here-and-now experience with integrative commentary by the coleaders of the consultant team (Dluhy and Watkins-Northern). Reflective questions are posed to help readers consider the relevance of large group experiential learning to their professional development as group therapists.

**LARGER GROUPS**

Larger groups, with their volatile nature and yet transformative potential, have captured the imagination of dynamic group thinkers for generations (Agazarian, 1997; Bion, 1961; Foulkes & Anthony, 1965; de Maré, 2012; Hopper, 2003b; Kreeger, 1975; Le Bon, 1896/1952; Shields, 2001; Schneider & Weinberg, 2003). As the 20th century approached, Gustave Le Bon recognized the dawning of an “era of crowds” (1896/1952, p. 9). Popes, kings, queens, and the aristocracy would no longer be the sole centers of power and privilege governing the globe—with little input from the popular masses. New ideas grounded in democratic principles and scientific and industrial transformations were inspiring common men and women to gather in “organized crowds” (p. 5)—at labor union meetings, town halls, and general assemblies. In his seminal work, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, Le Bon reported on his observation of crowds in their natural habitats. “A crowd is as easily heroic as criminal” (p. 15), he concluded, tempering the popular notion that crowds were only to be feared as barbaric and destructive mobs.

A half-century later, clinical applications of large group psychology were being tested in an effort to help traumatized WWII soldiers. Wilfred Bion and his colleagues conducted the first Northfield Experiment in 1942, applying large group and systems principles to organize a hospital unit of soldier patients. A daily community meeting including all staff and patients was a central feature. Bion hypothesized that as collective responsibility for the unit developed among its newly authorized citizens, commitment to their individual treatment would be strengthened. A year later, Foulkes
took up a second experiment examining a more egalitarian approach to leadership (Harrison, 2000).

Inspired by the successes at Northfield, work with large groups expanded throughout Europe and America in psychiatric hospitals, therapeutic communities, and day treatment programs. The group relations model (Bion, 1961) and the group analytic model (Foulkes & Anthony, 1965) emerged as dominant, competing approaches to therapeutic large group work. But by the 1970s the deinstitutionalization movement in America and elsewhere had begun to transform the psychiatric treatment landscape, dramatically limiting opportunities for large group-based therapeutic interventions (Paulson, 2012).

Educational applications of large group methods have been advanced in the United States by the A. K. Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems. Adopting Bion’s group relations approach, their model focuses on hierarchical issues of authority and leadership, with the task of transforming unconscious processes emerging in the here-and-now into rational thought and constructive action. Patrick de Maré work (2012) in the 1980s developing a median group format based on the concept of koinonia or “impersonal fellowship” (p. 87) was an important milestone in tapping the transformative potential of larger groups. More recently in the United States, the large group convened for educational purposes has begun to find its way into group psychotherapy conferences, professional meetings, and training programs. New techniques inspired by systems, mindfulness, and relational schools of thought continue to enhance best practices of large group work (Agazarian, 1997; Bunker & Alban, 2006; Gunderson, Gudmundsdottir, Gardarsson, & Grimsson, 2014; O’Neill & Mogle, 2015; Segalla, 2014; Sell, 2005).

Over 100 years after Le Bon reported his observations, contemporary versions of organized crowds have become part of everyday life—campaign rallies, protest marches, town hall meetings, governing bodies, classrooms, radio and television talk shows, sport events with elaborate media coverage, professional conferences, Internet chat rooms, listservs, Facebook, LinkedIn, Match.com, Instagram, and Twitter.
Belonging to a *large group* is a universal experience of human life. Large groups organized at the societal level include “tribes; clans; ethnic, nationalistic, racial, political, or religious entities; or believers in and followers of a political ideology ...” (Volkan, 2014, p. 17). Membership in a large group promotes self-esteem, well-being, and cooperative living. But Volkan also cautions us about large groups’ “least desirable by-product: shared prejudice against the members of another large group” (p. 17), echoing Le Bon’s observation that large groups can be heroic and criminal. A multiplicity of large group identities existing within individuals, groups, and communities—some privileged, some oppressed—create tension and conflict, as well as opportunities for collective learning and personal growth (Nettles & Balter, 2011).

Relative newcomers to the large group may be challenged by the shift in emphasis from attachment-based relating to a dialogic process based on affiliation. Here are some concepts from social psychology that may be useful in preparing for this shift, categorized according to their positive and negative valence.

**Positive Potential of Large Groups**

The *social unconscious* is foundational for understanding large group processes. This concept was named by social psychologist Eric Fromm, one of the early analytic voices to recognize the enduring influence of social facts and forces on human development. Hopper (2003a) operationally describes the social unconscious as

> the existence and constraints of social, cultural and communicational arrangements of which people are unaware; unaware, in so far as these arrangements are not perceived (not known), and if perceived not acknowledged (denied), and if acknowledged, not taken as problematic (“given”), and if taken as problematic, not considered with an optimal degree of detachment and objectivity. . . . However, ‘constraint’ is not meant to imply only ‘restraint,’ ‘inhibition,’ or ‘limitation,’ but also ‘facilitation,’ ‘development’ and even the transformation of sensation into feelings. (p. 127)
This emphasis on a continuum of ever-shifting conscious awareness
within and between individuals is a useful frame of reference for decon-
structing social processes such as privilege, implicit bias, and oppression.

Community, affiliation, and ally for social justice are key concepts for
understanding the relational potential of large groups. Vogl (2016)
defines the essence of community as “a group of individuals who share
a mutual concern for one another’s welfare” (p. 9). Structural fea-
tures include leadership and membership status with corresponding
rights and responsibilities; shared values, interests, and goals; perme-
able boundaries; identifiable group dynamics and processes; and
mechanisms for resolving conflict. Vogl identifies five levels of mem-
bership that correspond with increasing member experience and
depth of service to the community. His designations include “visitor,
novice, member, senior member, and principal elder” (p. 89).

Lichtenberg, Lachmann, and Fosshage (2011) recognize a universal
“affiliative motivational system” (p. 19) in humans that is the basis for
cooperation within and beyond the family, first emerging in early
infancy. He also states that optimal “lived experience” (1992, p. 2)
positively influences our capacity to establish communal affiliations
over the life span.

An ally for social justice is a person from a dominant social group who
is committed to addressing issues of prejudice and oppression impact-
ing minority groups and their members. A developmental process of
coming an effective ally includes education, empathic listening to
the experiences of the other, self-examination, and collaborative part-
nerships with members of target groups (Edwards, 2006).

Risks in Large Groups

Alexander (2004) describes cultural trauma as occurring when mem-
ers of a collectivity “have been subjected to a horrendous event [or
enduring social condition] that leaves indelible marks upon their
group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing
their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (p. 1). The
legacy of trauma is unconsciously transmitted for future generations
to either repeat or complete the task of reparation and reconciliation.
Examples from the American experience include the institution of
slavery (Gump, 2010), the genocide of Native American Indians
(Woolford et al., 2014), oppression of women (Bausum, 2004), and discrimination against persons who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning (Bulough, 2002). Abolitionist, suffrage, and modern day civil, women’s, and gay rights movements are examples of collective efforts to redress legacies of cultural trauma.

Social privilege “operates on personal, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels, and gives advantages, favors and benefits to members of dominant groups at the expense of members in target groups” (Alliesforchange.org, n.d., p. 1). An unearned advantage of a dominant group may be extended to target groups, such as voting rights or religious freedom. But the enduring privilege of conferred dominance by virtue of a particular large group identity (Johnson, 2018) is not as transferrable. In the United States, dominant groups that are historically the beneficiary of unearned social privilege and power include White, male, English-speaking, Christian, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgender, and heterosexual persons. Members of dominant groups are mostly unaware of their social privilege, known as a “luxury of obliviousness,” and are similarly unaware of the oppression experienced by individuals in target groups (Du Bois, 1903/1994; Kimmel & Ferber, 2016; McIntosh, 1988). Systems of social privilege vary cross-culturally regarding which identities may be considered dominant or target.

Intersectionality refers to a feminist sociological theory coined by legal scholar Crenshaw (1994/2005) that originally explored unrecognized dimensions of Black women’s experience of oppression. More generally applied today, the concept of intersectionality holds that

the classical conceptualizations of oppression within society, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and belief-based bigotry including nationalism and speciesism, do not act independently of one another; instead, these forms of oppression interrelate, creating a system of oppression that reflects the “intersection” of multiple forms of discrimination. (Definitions.net, n.d., p. 1)

Othering is a term introduced by feminist critic Spivak (1999), referring to the strategy of disavowing unfavorable attributes of the self and assigning them to another individual, group, or category of people. This projective process is enacted in part to establish
privileged social positions—men versus women, White versus Black, rich versus poor, etc. Behavioral expressions of othering include unresponsiveness, gossip or slander, bullying, discriminatory laws and practices, and threats or acts of violence. Microaggressions (Sue, 2010) are everyday slights or insults directed toward persons based on their marginalized group membership, done with varying degrees of awareness and intentionality by the offender. A “denigrated other” process more intentionally subjects a person, group, or category of people to extreme acts of diminishment and devaluation, creating an enduring scapegoating dynamic that can be observed in any group, but they are particularly destructive in larger ones.

LEARNING GOALS

The Here-and-Now

The large group convened as a learning community presents us with the challenge of reconciling our aggression and competitive strivings with our desire and civic duty to live cooperatively in a complex world into which we are all born and must learn how to share and navigate. It is a powerful opportunity to sit in a group of somewhere between 30 and potentially hundreds of members with the task of giving voice to one’s thoughts, feelings, and associations in the service of constructive, communal dialogue. Taking up this challenge in earnest is an effective way of discovering and overcoming barriers to communication that often operate beyond our awareness.

A basic learning objective is to increase our understanding of societal, systemic, and subgroup dynamics related to large group identities, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, sexual orientation and identity, age, ability, and professional status. A companion relational goal is to redress legacies of collective trauma by fostering reparative dialogue with the marginalized and denigrated other (Jarrar, 2003). When we are able to experience affiliation in a safe enough communal environment, our ability to bear witness and empathize with diverse experience and competing perspectives is broadened and deepened. Developing the capacity to recognize ourselves in the other, and the other within us, is
essential to fulfilling our responsibility as therapists to ensure safe space for therapeutic work.

The complexity and power of the large group experience means that members will inevitably encounter threats to their individual identity (Turquet, 1975), prejudice and scapegoating (Morrison, 2017), and unconscious enactments that may grip the entire membership (Grossmark, 2017; Hopper, 2003b). Mindful of these potentially destructive processes, the large group nonetheless affords us a unique opportunity to examine group-as-a-whole concerns from an emotionally engaged perspective. Optimally the work of a large group is guided by an ethos of inclusion and tolerance. Sell (2005) writes:

In a large group, the intentions and actions of the individuals, subgroups, and group-as-a-whole meet in ways that can be used to enlighten and enrich … while hopefully avoiding the traps and pitfalls of our habitual tendencies to politicize and polarize when we feel uncomfortable or threatened. (p. 268)

The Process of Joining

Members of both small and larger groups share the aims of connecting with others and speaking authentically in the here-and-now. In an intimate small group, emphasis is placed on attachment-based relating, addressing individual concerns, and promoting cohesion among the members. With the increased size of the large group and a shift in primary focus to group-as-a-whole concerns, a timely and attuned interpersonal response from others is less dependable and sometimes even absent. Participants might attempt to protect themselves from being overwhelmed in this less predictable environment by remaining silent. Aggressive behavior may be reactively expressed in an attempt to restore a sense of safety and well-being. Consultants and members share responsibility for developing the large group into a safe and effective learning community.

The dominant features of a member’s initial efforts to join are often confusion, a difficulty connecting with one’s thoughts and feelings, and a hesitancy to speak in a public forum. Out of this struggle to join, a civic opportunity begins to emerge—that of relating to one another as citizens of a globalized world with the potential to effect positive
change to attitudes and power structures. Weinberg and Gilmore (2008) affirm that the large group offers the challenge of "staying an individual amongst the crowd, feeling the conflict of being involved in community, and exploring social issues" (p. 1).

**A RELATIONAL TEAM MODEL OF CONSULTANCY**

**An Evolution**

The authors are all practicing group therapists, with wide-ranging experiences with large group work in the related fields of organizational development (leadership), collective trauma response (victim recovery, strategic planning, reconciliation), higher education (student well-being), and community organizing (citizen advocacy and empowerment). We professionally come together as faculty members at the Washington School of Psychiatry's National Group Psychotherapy Institute with the mission of training group therapists for the 21st century. After 25 years at the NGPI, the large group, along with small group and didactic experiences, remains integral to the Institute’s philosophy of experiential learning. Over time our approach to consultancy, however, has evolved.

The group relations model with its emphasis on authority and hierarchy was the original influence informing our approach. But over the last few decades, new relational theories and models of practice in psychoanalysis have been developed based on the principle that therapeutic action is cocreated by both therapist and patient or group within an intersubjective field. Aware of these changing views, our consulting team began to listen and respond differently in the large group. How was this demonstrated? Rather than making interpretations from a knowing position of authority, team member observations became more reflective of a relational effort to make direct affective contact with each other and the membership. Our efforts were gradually mirrored by the members. This mutually influencing process resulted in greater transparency and authentic dialogue among and between members and consultants.

In all large groups, the members routinely struggle with a desire to either join or topple the leadership. In our relational model, we
work to stay emotionally available for this struggle. As members of a diverse consulting team, we value each other’s unique ways of understanding large group experience and working relationally with the membership. We are able to remain dependably engaged in our task because of an essential transparency among team members, despite differences in our theoretical positions and personal styles. This is key to our continuing enthusiasm about the potential of large group experience to positively influence attitudes, contexts, and communities.

Team Structure

The structure of our consultant team includes distinct roles of active, observing, and training consultants. This provides a unique learning opportunity to work collaboratively in developing a wide range of consulting skills throughout the team. We approach our team as a small group as a microcosm of the large group we are convening, a parallel process to the large group itself functioning as a microcosm of the host setting and wider social world. Our confidential team debriefing after each session provides us with diverse perspectives for reflection and containment of not-yet-metabolized experience. Our task is to connect with those aspects of ourselves that relate to the themes, subgroups, and voices emerging from the large group. The observing consultants’ experience of bearing witness contributes a unique perspective on the unfolding large group process. These collective efforts enable the team to also consider what might emerge in subsequent large group sessions.

THE LARGE GROUP AT AGPA

The yearly offering of a large group at AGPA began in 1996 and has evolved into a popular and highly valued continuing education opportunity. A loyal following of returning members each year contributes institutional memory, core skills for navigating complex large group processes, and encouragement to early-career and first-time attendees. A large group session is held
each day, Thursday through Saturday. Conveners of the large group are selected to serve for two years.\textsuperscript{1}

AGPA Connect in 2018 was held in Houston, Texas, at an upscale, urban shopping mall named the Galleria. The conference title, “The Healing Power of Groups in a Fragmented World,” signaled an appreciation for the embeddedness of therapy groups within a social context. As a team of conveners selected for 2018, we referred to ourselves as consultants to emphasize our relational perspective. Active consultants included Mary Dluhy, Ayana Watkins-Northern, Leon Paparella, and Robert Schulte. The observing consultant was Kavita Avula, and the training consultant was Reginald Nettles.

**Contextual Factors**

*Scheduling* by the conference planners is an example of a contextual factor impacting the relational experience of the large group. The current schedule at AGPA Connect includes one daily session during the lunchtime break on Thursday and Friday for an hour and 15 minutes. This allows conference registrants the opportunity to attend without directly conflicting with other scheduled educational programming. But the final session is held on Saturday afternoon for two and a half hours, directly competing with other educational programming options. The first 90 minutes of this final session are dedicated to the large group. The remaining hour is allotted to a debriefing that included consultant commentary and a dialogue among the team and membership. These institutional choices of scheduling and structure created distinctive attendance patterns and group rhythms, culminating in the final session where attendance dropped significantly. The total registration for the conference portion of AGPA Connect was 790. The attendance at the three LG sessions was 280, 270, and 90 respectively. An estimate of 30\% of the total conference registration experienced one or two large group sessions, and 12\% experienced all three sessions.

Spatial arrangements are another example of context influence. The meeting space was a hotel ballroom near the conference registration area. The steady stream of people heading to the first large group had a “just follow the crowd” feel to it. Once inside, members were confronted with a seating configuration fashioned in the group-relations tradition of a continuous spiral. This choice was in contrast to rows of multiple, concentric circles associated with the group analytic model that is more typically used for AGPA large groups. The spiral is a universal symbol found in many ancient cultures embodying the evolving, continuous journey of life. It suggests a flow of energy going in both directions—inwards toward the primordial known and outwards toward the cosmic yet-to-be-discovered (Fox & Wang, 2008, p. 235). The paradox of the large group’s potential to spiral out of control and yet return to the calm of a labyrinth is also symbolized by this configuration. A practical feature is the first chair and last chair designations. While concentric circles might be more suggestive of a balanced system with inner and outer rings of neatly differentiated social status (Vogl, 2016, p. 87), the spiral suggests a more dynamic interplay of hierarchy and the struggle for recognition and equality.

At the first session, the seating of the consultants was preassigned. For subsequent sessions, however, the consultants intentionally arrived just moments before the start time without overtly claiming their previous seating. This provided members an opportunity to either maintain the original seating or to displace the consultants, thus altering the “social, cultural and communicational arrangements” of the large group’s social unconscious. These microdecisions and their consequences unfolded over the three sessions with varying degrees of awareness and reflection by the membership.

Post-Large-Group Debriefing

A collective debriefing segment immediately followed the third and final large group session. Chairs were quickly repositioned to create a traditional proscenium arrangement, with the six consultants seated up front directly facing the members. This gave the membership their first all-inclusive sighting of the consultant team, a unity not available when the consultants were dispersed throughout the large group space. Visually recognizable large group identities within the team
became evident, including gender (three women, three men), race (three White consultants, three consultants of color—two African American individuals and one Indian American), age (ranging from 44 to 75 years of age), and physical ability (two consultants with visible physical disabilities). Many other large group identities residing within the consultants, though not immediately recognizable, included religious affiliation, sexual identity, marital and economic status, and nationality.

The observing consultant began the debriefing by sharing observations linking the here-and-now experience of the large group to sociocultural-political themes in the conference and beyond. This served as a bridge to the concluding discussion between consultants and members reflecting on the various meanings, personal and collective, of their experience together.

**Integrative Commentary**

Here is a brief summary of some sociocultural, political, and other contextual factors that found expression, either directly or indirectly, in the dialogue of the large group:

*Large group.* The previous large group experience at 2017 AGPA Connect; the death of a senior AGPA member who had championed the large group and was a principal elder in the community; the selection of our team to serve as conveners.

*Conference-as-a-whole.* Installment of a new AGPA President; Hurricane Harvey and catastrophic flooding in Houston; gender-neutral bathrooms provided as a response to Texas state legislative action limiting transgender rights.

*Sociocultural-political environment.* Immigration enforcement at the southern border of the United States; Department of Justice investigation of foreign interference in the 2016 Presidential election; provocative tweets by President Trump directed toward minority persons and groups; police shootings of persons of color; victims of sexual misconduct breaking their silence; and identity politics expressed through self-affirming declarations of “what I am” and “what I am not.”
As a consultant team coleader (Dluhy) my experience working with Ayana Watkins-Northern and our consultant team was an honor and a privilege. Having served for many years on the Annual Meeting Committee and eventually as a cochair, I was an ardent supporter of introducing the large group to AGPA. The commitment of the organization to make this powerful learning opportunity dependably available to the entire AGPA membership is key to its effectiveness as a learning community (Stiers & Dluhy, 2008). Working collaboratively with the AGPA Connect staff, from the preconference planning to the on-site room setup, was essential support. Witnessing the members find their way through a dense sociocultural-political landscape, taking up the work in a spirited and authentic way, was the most compelling result of our cocreated process.

As coleaders of the team, Mary and I (Watkins-Northern) recognized that an initial task for the team was to reflect on why we had been chosen as conveners for 2018. We knew that the impact of the previous year’s tumultuous large group experience had been a significant consideration. Briefly, the large group in 2017 had taken up a conference-as-a-whole concern related to a public comment made by a senior, White male copresenter to young Black support staff persons that was subjectively experienced by some conference participants in attendance as a microaggression. Mindful of the ongoing polarizing political climate impacting race relations in the United States at many levels, we anticipated a continued interest in addressing issues related to dominant and minority large group identities. We appreciated our thoughtful consultations with the AGPA Connect Co-chairs in considering how a relational model of consultancy and our team’s diversity might enhance that continuing work.

During the first several minutes of the initial large group session, I (Watkins-Northern) felt a sense of heightened anxiety in the room. The initial comments from dozens of members came rapid fire in short bursts—single words and clipped phrases shooting out—seemingly, in the service of establishing “I am here” and maybe a more pointed message of “don’t mess with me.” This opening provided an early test for a consultant team coled by two older females, one European White American and one African American. Would we let them speak freely? Could we keep them safe? The pace of the comments eventually slowed, taking on a calmer quality of “naming.” This
allowed the consultants to further demonstrate their capacity to hold boundaries and contain intense affect.

At some point I noticed a quiet melody of an old spiritual playing in the background of my thoughts: *Amazing Grace*. Upon reflection, I considered that my evoking this song might be self-soothing in response to the frenzy in the membership firing away with their opening words. The other emotion I was experiencing, however, was sadness. The music for *Amazing Grace* is written on the pentatonic scales—all of the black keys on the piano—also known as the slave scale. *Amazing Grace* is ascribed as a White spiritual. John Newton, a White slave ship captain, and eventual clergyman, wrote the English hymn, published in 1779. Following a harrowing experience while crossing the ocean and having found comfort in the “sorrow songs” (Alexander, 2004, p. 73) of the captive slaves on board, Newton wrote a hymn inspired by their uncertain journey together upon a dangerous sea. The hymn was intended as an expression of gratitude for what he believed was divine intervention allowing the ship safe passage.

The evocation of this song serves as a reminder of our daunting task to “work across the boundary,” especially difficult when the effects of collective trauma are present. The bond between victims and perpetrators reflects an indivisible connectedness born of traumatic experience, in spite of societal efforts to forget or deny its existence. This is the ultimate aim of dialogue in the large group: to locate the self in the other and the other within ourselves. There is an old African saying that a thing must be called by its proper name. With that in mind, I would also like to comment briefly on an example of the membership effectively working across the boundary by supporting a member to speak her “proper name.”

Well into the second session a member reacted to the repeated use of the all-inclusive phrase, persons of color. With passion she protested, “I am not a ‘person of color.’ I am a Black woman!” The ensuing discourse was a steady stream of personal pain and anger flowing from the legacy of cultural trauma that would teach this Black woman to concede the right to be the author of her own name. This was a poignant and clear example of the price paid for the generational postponement of authentic naming in the interest of avoiding identification with the other. The courageous dialoguing taken up by the large group’s membership yielded a profound and emotionally intense experience where
privileged members claimed their own large group identity while acknowledging an affiliation with this Black woman. The collective effort to create space for this voice to be heard was transcendent.

Maintaining Community Well-Being

An effort at effecting systemic change emerged from this large group experience. After the conclusion of AGPA Connect 2018, members posted online comments on the AGPA My Communities forum regarding a variety of topics taken up in the large group, including a thoughtful discussion exploring alternative scheduling choices for the final LG session. A second example concerns a civic-minded outreach effort made by a senior colleague to a novice member who was unfamiliar with the large group. We quote AGPA member Jason Crooks, with permission, who posted these comments online:

I also want to … thank the seasoned members of AGPA who welcomed and pushed me to challenge myself. Example: after one of my morning sessions, I was invited to attend the large group by a long-time member. I had never attended large group and didn’t know what to expect. I made up a lame ass excuse because I was anxious and hungry. The person totally saw right through it and invited me again. So, I decided to go and … wow. Ended up being one of my favorite parts of the conference. Believe me, seasoned members, your kindness is not unseen. (Personal communication, June 4, 2018)

CONCLUSION

We have framed the experience of the large group convened for educational purposes as one of affiliation within a learning community, with aspiring goals of group-as-a-whole understanding, civic mindedness, and systemic change. This article was designed as an overview of large group work while highlighting its relational opportunities, done in the service of pregroup preparation.

In the 21st century, continuing education options available to mental health professionals are plentiful. But opportunities to join an educational large group are actually quite limited, and many clinicians will never experience this kind of communal learning. Of those who do, some will find the encounter too difficult to tolerate and
never return. Yet others will find the experience enlivening and meaningful. Here are some reflective questions to help readers consider how experiential large group learning might enhance their professional development as group therapists:

1. How do the influences of sociocultural, political, and other contextual factors find expression in a therapy group, regardless of the leader’s theoretical orientation?
2. How would my interventions as a group therapist be influenced if I worked more directly with contextual factors in the here-and-now of the therapy group?
3. What kinds of therapy groups are amenable to the development of a mature citizen self as an appropriate and attainable treatment goal?
4. Does a “luxury of obliviousness” create blind spots in my ability to empathize with group members whose large group identities I do not share? Do I risk leaving them potentially vulnerable to a traumatic repetition of oppression or denigration in the therapy group?
5. Does my group therapy practice reflect diversity that is optimal for the therapeutic work of all my group’s members?
6. What impact do systemic factors operating in the health-care system have on my group therapy practice, including access to care, reimbursement policies, and professional credentialing standards for the practitioner?

This final question: “How do I connect and work across the boundary with colleagues who also seek answers to these kinds of questions?” The large group is one answer open to therapists of all orientations and levels of experience.

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