

GROUP PROCESS: THE IMPACT OF BLACK FEMALE LEADERSHIP

Cheryl D. Bowers, Ph.D.
University of Maryland Eastern Shore
Princess Anne, Maryland

Rhonda F. Jeter, Ph.D.
Bowie State University
Bowie, Maryland

Direct correspondence to Cheryl Bowers, University of Maryland Eastern Shore, Department of Education, Lida Brown Building, Princess Anne, MD 21853

This study is a qualitative analysis of data collected from 14 training groups for master's level counseling students led by two Black female facilitators. Results suggest that group neurosis involves higher levels of expectation for nurturance and higher levels of dependence than literature indicates for typical groups led by males and/or white females. Three types of group dynamics were identified.

Key Words: African American women, group dynamics, facilitators, training groups

Introduction

An established practice for training counselors to become group leaders is to include a course on group processes in the curriculum of a counselor education program. One model for such a course is to have the students participate in a semester long T-group (T=training), which requires members to learn about group dynamics by studying their own group's behavior. An even more specific technique is the Tavistock model (Bennis, 1968). This model is a 40 hour long unstructured group experience, where the facilitators provide no specific directions and no direct feedback as members attempt to create their own structure, rules, norms, and roles.

Part of the premise of the Tavistock model has psychodynamic underpinnings. Once the group facilitators withdraw and maintain a stoic, uninvolved, and psychologically distant demeanor, the members develop a group neurosis. This neurosis is the crisis that members experience as a result of not receiving verbal and nonverbal indicators of expectations, reinforcement, support, and authority. The perceived abandonment by the facilitators results in group dynamics characterized by dependence, anger, and anxiety as the group struggles to create its own structure and begins to work interdependently.

Review of Related Literature

Kanter (1977), a pioneer in studying modern women's issues, conceptualized the stereotypical roles that are created to encapsulate professional women: the mother, the seductress, the pet, and the iron maiden. The mother role involves caretaking, giving comfort, and being noncritical. The seductress role entails being rewarded for overt as well as diffused femininity. The role of the pet comprises the use of humor, unassuming behavior, and cheerleading for others. The iron maiden role belongs to those women who do not easily fit into any of the above categories. This woman is viewed with suspicion and is ostracized for attempts and expectations for parity in treatment. This assertive posture is distorted to being callous, unduly difficult, and menacing.

Dumas (1983) made a significant contribution with her focus on Black females in leadership positions. She pos-

tulates that it is expected that Black females will be accommodating and provide group members with unlimited resources for help and support. These expectations are fraught with pitfalls. Playing the expected role of selfless caregiver comes with a high price. Assiduously working to meet the needs of others and laboring to match external expectations is psychically exhausting and can result in self-alienation. Not playing the expected role and disregarding imposed norms is also perilous. Withdrawal can result in rage and fear from the Black female's cohorts, resulting in her experiencing estrangement and disaffection.

The caregiver role articulated by Dumas (1983) relates to the historical images that West (1995) connects to Black women's psychological functioning. One such image is that of the Mammy. This is a pervasive image of "an obese dark complexioned woman with African features" whose personality traits are "subordination, nurturance, and constant self-sacrifice" (p. 459).

The authors posit that this Mammy image is an archetype in the collective racial unconscious in both Black and White Americans. In addition, this archetype has influenced the dynamics that evolve in the 14 training groups that they have cofacilitated over a six-year period in a counselor education program. Two Black females facilitating T-groups is an extraordinary circumstance and as such produces dynamics that are different than in more traditional T-groups. Literature (Bayes & Newton, 1985; Bernardez, 1983) indicates that female led groups result in a neurosis with higher expectations for nurturance and with a greater expectation for the facilitators to deal with emotional content than groups led by males or by a male-female dyad. Moreover, the authors assert that the Mammy archetype evokes even greater presumption of care taking and sustenance, and when the presumption is not realized the response may be more intense and conspicuous.

Method

A 30-hour, three-day weekend Tavistock-like lab was part of a course on group processes and group counseling in a counselor education program. Students are given a syllabus with an overview of the course provided by the one of the facilitators. They are told that this is an unstructured group process, that it is not group therapy, and that the purpose is for the group to study its own behavior. Then in keeping with the Tavistock model the facilitators withdraw by not answering questions, by not making eye contact and by speaking only in cryptic language.

The student population in the program is fairly diverse with 50% being Black and 50% being White and with two-thirds of the students being female. The two facilitators are Black, zaftig and full-figured women, thereby characteristic of the Mammy archetype.

Data were collected from 14 training groups over a six-year period. Data were derived from facilitators' journals, student written analysis of their experience and learning. Qualitative analysis focused on the emergence of leaders, dependence on facilitators, on-task behavior and levels of observed and self-reported anxiety and anger.

Results

Global findings were that regardless of racial and gender configuration, group dynamics included an attempt to replace the Mammy. The groups were highly dependent with constant overtures to the facilitators via cajoling, seduction, and demand. Only 1 out of 14 groups had a Mammy substitute who met the groups needs for task and affect.

The authors have identified three types of groups. (I) Mammy figure-Mammy behavior. This was a group that had someone in the group that was a Mammy figure, i.e., Black female, older and/or large in stature and that person also exhibited Mammy behavior, i.e., caretaking, nurturing, reassuring. The dynamics for this group entail more on-task behavior, lower levels of anxiety, and more structure.

(II) Mammy figure-No Mammy behavior. Here there was someone in the group that had characteristics similar to the Mammy archetype but did not display nurturing behaviors. The dynamics for this group type encompassed high levels of anxiety, more off-task behavior, overt existential angst, and more extreme overtures toward the facilitators.

(III) No Mammy figure- No Mammy behavior. This type of group had no one who fit the Mammy image, nor was any one person assuming the nurturing role. This kind of group had higher levels of anger, more pairing between members, low levels of trust, and high dependence. These groups also tended to be leaderless, with individual members unable or unwilling to give up their power to an identified or voted upon leader.

Discussion

These findings are in keeping with the work of both Dumas (1985) and West (1995). The construct of a Mammy archetype is worthy of further discussion and exploration. An awareness and understanding of the Mammy archetype can assist some Black females in leadership positions decode and predict what may seem to be confusing and disconcerting reactions to their authority. Black females may become better prepared to encounter a knotty set of burdens and demands. Maintaining the Mammy role has limited possibilities for upward mobility and not playing the role allows the behavior to be interpreted in the least favorable light. Further exploration of the construct may endow Black women with the discernment to avoid being entrapped and felled by the presumptions that accompany this archetype.

The existence of a Mammy archetype has implications for cross-racial and cross-gender interactions. Individuals may enter into relationships with Black female leaders with unrealistic expectations and impose norms, which may inhibit these women from expressing a range of responses and behaviors that are not only appropriate but are also the same responses and behaviors that are accessible to other groups in leadership roles. Unveiling this conundrum also may play an important role in bias awareness training. The presence of this archetype may be subtle, but nevertheless significantly influence and shape individuals' interactions with Black females. The demystification of a Mammy archetype diffuses its power to encumber aspiring Black women and its power to create distorted perceptions by others.

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