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## Breaking Taboos: The Power of Group Work for First-Generation Scholars

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Collectively reflecting on the call for papers for this special edition of *Social Work with Groups* served as a reminder for us that groups form in many ways. It also reminded us that what brings people together may be a topical matter and what holds groups together is finding a meaningful bond, a relationship. Our group: Turner (a newly minted PhD faculty), Pelts (a doctoral candidate) and Thompson (a midprogram doctoral student), originally formed to discuss overlapping research interests. We quickly realized that the common bond that connected us was our identities as first-generation scholars (FGS). Over several months, through the regaling of our academic journeys, a collective transformative experience happened. In this narrative, our stories as FGS became the backdrop of our group experience. In the unpacking and reflecting on our group experience, we allowed space for creative work beyond the “real work,” avoiding what Malekoff (2001) refers to as “spiritual incarceration” (p. 255). It is here we seek to uncover the value of the social work group experience as a tool for FGS success.

### How we met

Our group began to emerge when George, hungry to meet scholars with similar research interests, reached out to Michael after reading an article Michael had published. Even though they lived only 2 hours apart, efforts to meet fell short for months. Persistent, George solidified lunch plans with Michael on the first day of the 2014 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Annual Program Meeting in Tampa. Before leaving CSWE, George and Michael realized that not only did their research interests overlap, but also their experiences as FGS. Even in this early stage, George encouraged Michael that these experiences as FGS were ripe for exploring and sharing with others in academia. The two stayed in touch and began to schedule regular meetings via skype to explore their interests.

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A few months later at the 2015 Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) Annual Conference in New Orleans, Michael met Michelle during an orientation session for student volunteers. They too quickly bonded over their overlapping research interests and FGS identities.

Within a couple of weeks Michelle was a part of the skype meetings. The three of us started meeting in February 2015, and we continue to meet every couple of weeks. During our meetings, we explore ways to advance our scholarly work and confer about ways to manage the academic terrain. More importantly, we visit. We make time to catch up and check in with one another. This seemingly innocuous ritual is a rich and fundamental process in the weaving together of our collective relationship. Realizing how strongly our backgrounds as FGS influences our experiences in academia, we each took one meeting to share what it was like for us as FGS. We also shared how being a FGS affects us today as we navigate the academy. We captured those narratives, and it is through that lens the social work group principles of mutual aid, inclusion and respect, and breaking taboos (Drumm, 2006) were illuminated.

## **The FGS experience**

### ***George: Mutual aid***

As a FGS, I often see glimpses of myself in some of my students: occupying the in-between ...an outsider in your family and within the academy, navigating with trepidation the transition to higher education, and feeling like an imposter. Recalling my own rocky educational path after high school, I was promoted from part-time to full-time at Kmart. I remember asking myself, "Is this all there is for me?!" I grew up in a rural, impoverished socioeconomic area and any full-time employment was considered good enough. None of my friends planned on college. Despite being a good student, there was no discussion or expectation to pursue a college degree.

My parents were not only unable to financially support a college education, but also had no point of reference to offer any practical guidance. My mother, a waitress, did not graduate high school and my father was an over-the-road truck driver, who had some college. In fact, they at times were a barrier. Highlighting my "outsider" status was my father's refusal to provide his income information on my financial aid application. My dad's stance that no one had the right to his private information solidified that I was alone on this journey.

Often a source of shame, my status as a FGS was embraced with familiarity and fondness by Michael and Michelle. Our ascribed purpose, research collaboration, gave way to a more pressing interpersonal need: camaraderie,

healing, and support. For me, the power within the group process to foster mutual aid was illuminated during our meetings.

I reminisced that leaving for college was embarking on a journey that carried me away from my family, not only geographically, but away from my place in the family. I was abandoning them semester by semester as my formal education and life exposure widened a profound yet unseen gap between them and me. It seemed that my family, straddling between pride and apprehension, saw me as occupying some foreign new space.

Yet I didn't find a replacement family in academia. I was just as much an outsider here too as highlighted when I set out across country for school. Tied to a luggage rack atop my car were black trash bags holding all my clothes. We did not own any luggage. Alone and poorly prepared, my educational journey has often felt risky, uncertain, and like a leap of faith. I've often felt embarrassment in my lack of designer luggage or a decent bon voyage send-off for this adventure of a lifetime. With Michelle and Michael I found camaraderie, a climate of good will in the similarities of our stories. In the building of this group relationship, I have a sense of collegiality. Help is freely given and taken in this work group.

The simple nod of group members seeing all of me was a vulnerable act of healing. Bringing my self-doubt to light has allowed me to unpack this baggage and explore its origins. More importantly it has reaffirmed my place in the academy and highlighted my FGS as a strength to be used in connecting with my students.

In meeting Michelle and Michael I have found a crucial support system. They are not just colleagues to explore scholarly research and writing, but FGS soulmates. They are cheerleaders to encourage my ideas, beacons to illuminate the pathway, and friends to prop me up along my continued adventure through the academy.

### ***Michelle: Inclusion and respect***

I recall sitting at a professor's office nearly in tears. I was overwhelmed with the entire PhD program. I told the professor that I am a FGS and did not understand how to navigate academia and all of the unspoken expectations that have been thrust upon me. I stated that some of the students in my program seem to know the right questions to ask or already have the answers. I felt lost, like I did not belong. That professor's response did not make me feel any better. "I'm going to be tough but you need to hear it. Nobody is going to hold your hand. Obtaining your PhD is a very independent process." These statements are replayed over and over. I keep asking for a manual or some type of informal guidance. Apparently there isn't one.

In comparison to George and Michael, my pathway to the PhD program has been quite different and yet in some ways strangely similar. I grew up in

a lower middle-class, biracial/bicultural household, in a large Southern suburban city. Similar to George and Michael, my father, an African American, was born and raised in a very rural area on a farm in Georgia. However my mother is Caribbean Puerto Rican and spent parts of her life in Puerto Rico and New York.

I was a fairly bright kid during my primary and secondary education. When my parents divorced at age 10, my behavior changed and I often found myself in rough waters at home, in school, and any place where I had the opportunity to act out. Because I was quite bright and despite my outrage and protests, my mother enrolled me into a public college preparatory high school my tenth grade year. Neither my parents nor grandparents graduated from college. They often could not help my siblings and me with our homework. We also knew that they could not afford to send us off to college, however; my family saw the value in obtaining higher education and pushed us to excel academically. Despite my adolescent antics, my mother saw my potential, and I managed to successfully complete my Bachelor's and Master's degree in Psychology before age 26 and enroll in a PhD program that I hope to complete before the age of 40.

I felt a little out of place when I initially shared parts of my upbringing with our group. The various dimensions of difference between us are quite stark. I thought to myself, what in the world would I have in common with middle-aged, White men from rural nowhere? To my surprise, I learned that first-generation status cuts across race, ethnicity, class, and gender. When I share these experiences with George and Michael, they totally get me. They don't tell me to "suck it up" or "get over it." They allow me to vent and also validate my experiences. During our sessions, I know that for that allotted time, my voice will be heard, my feelings will be validated, and I will end the call feeling renewed and energized. They affirm that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Through the principle of inclusion and respect, George, Michael, and I have found a common ground in our FGS experiences that have proven very valuable to how I reflect upon my own journey moving forward.

### ***Michael: Breaking the taboos***

I am reserved when I share with others my experiences around entering and maneuvering a PhD program as a FGS. Sharing information about my family history and my experiences as a FGS within our group made me feel vulnerable. When I was growing up in rural farm settings of Iowa and Mississippi, these things were not talked about in my home. Neither of my parents completed high school, and my family emphasized hard work over education. At age 19, I remember telling my mother "This is not going to work for me," in an attempt to express and explain my desire to explore

higher education at a community college. My approach was not well received. She defended the sharecropping farm work that she and my father learned as children and the work that supported my family for generations.

Sharing this with others, especially others in PhD programs, can be uncomfortable. I want to be seen as an academic. Sharing this with people who can relate is also normalizing for me. I have many identities, and like others in our group my FGS identity remains salient in addition to my identity as an academic. Even as a doctoral candidate, hopefully nearing the end of my PhD program, my identity as a FGS is on the surface. For example, the terminology and academic jargon used by some in academia can leave me feeling like an outsider. I am aware that, like all students, I am learning new information, but there are some words and concepts that many people just know as a result of growing up with parents, family members and other people who have a college education. There were times in meetings or classes when I felt like I needed a dictionary to participate. On those occasions I quickly asked myself if I wanted to search for more information using an application on my smart phone and risk being viewed as not paying attention, ask for clarification and risk appearing ignorant, or say nothing and risk not being able to follow the remainder of the discussion.

To counter those experiences, being a part of this group with other FGS is powerful—the concept of breaking taboos resonates with me around these experiences. Sharing these experiences with others helps me to see that this is normal for some of us in academia. I can actually say what I am thinking out loud and George or Michele will usually laugh. They laugh, not because they think I am being silly or stupid, but because they have either experienced the same thing or something similar.

### **Our group work insights**

Entering the academy can be challenging for junior scholars who identify as FGS and who often enter academic programs with minimal knowledge on how to traverse the pathways of the academic elite (Gardner & Holley, 2011). The magic of the group process is such that it has provided a venue that is compelling and effective in bridging our success as FGS. In the reflection of our collective efforts to belong to the academy, we experienced three pivotal principles of group process: mutual aid, inclusion and respect, and breaking taboos.

As FGS, we skittishly came to realize that we all struggle with the imposter syndrome, a feeling that somehow we aren't smart enough to be in the academy. And the nagging fear that it is only a matter of time until we are exposed to our colleagues as frauds. We came to recognize that there is an institutionalized academic posturing. Uncertainty or doubt is frowned upon

by the educated elite. Our own pursuit to prove our worthiness, to belong, often enslaves us to this ideology of self-sufficiency. Our reflection reminded us that this is in direct conflict with our understanding of mutual aid. We strive to dismantle the privileging of academic power used as a barrier to FGS. As social work practitioners and educators we experience this magic of vulnerability with our clients and students and we reaffirm our commitment to mutual aid and its power to bridge future FGS success.

We value inclusion and respect as a group process. Celebrating dimensions of differences unveils voices, beliefs, and experiences. During our revealing of who we are as individuals, we found an understanding of our similarities. In a climate of safety we were able to unpack the sting of “otherness.” We found laughter in sharing our coping strategies and healing in revealing the often shadowed pain. Our collection of survival stories became a source of healing and support for one another in negotiating unique academic challenges, normalization of our feelings of otherness around academic privileging, and a reaffirmation of our value to the academy as FGS. Self and group reflections proved to be a potent process for recognizing the diversity of our group and for creating self-awareness.

Telling our stories and hearing about each other’s experiences served as a means to use the power of our group to break the taboos that accompany the identity of FGS. In bringing our full selves from the shadows, we claim a wholeness. We acknowledge the value our FGS status brings to the academy. No longer a taboo our FGS status is, rightfully, a valued professional strength.

We share these narratives as a glimpse into our lives as FGS and illustrate the bonding factors that created our group. Our social group work exerted “extraordinary effectiveness in contradicting feelings of powerlessness and internalized self-hatred” (Drumm, 2006, p. 28). We share our stories in an effort to recognize our own transition into the educated elite and as a reminder of the educational journey of future FGS. We are committed to using our positions as social work practitioners, educators, and researchers to welcome more FGS into the academy.

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