The Use of Poetry in Psychoeducational Groups With Multicultural-Multilingual Clients

Kimberly K. Asner-Self
Southern Illinois University

Alemé Feyissa
D.C. Commission on Mental Health

Immigration to a different country can change one’s socioeconomic status, familial and social networks, cultural behavioral norms, language, and values. Immigrants to the United States usually reevaluate themselves and their identity as a result of this acculturation process. Group counseling can help alleviate the sense of isolation many immigrants feel, normalize the acculturation process, and offer a support network. Using well-chosen poetry offers both the opportunity to discuss delicate issues and to encourage communication in English as a foreign language. This article presents an outline of a 10-session group that uses poetry to address the acculturation process.

The idea of using poetry in group counseling is not new (Getzel, 1984; Gladding, 1998; Mazza & Prescott, 1981). Counselors trained and either registered or certified as poetry therapists by the National Association of Poetry Therapy (NAPT, 2000) intentionally select specific poems to promote healing and developmental growth within a theoretical framework appropriate to a given population (Mazza, Magaz, & Scaturro, 1987). Effective use of the creative arts, inclusive of poetry, in counseling multicultural clients is also not new (Ford, Tyson, Howard, & Harris, 2000; Kaplan, 1994). Such practices can allow for the nonthreatening
symbolic expression of both the unique and universal experiences of multicultural clients as well as promote interpersonal learning and intercultural appreciation, while developing a sense of universality, instilling hope, and building confidence (cf. Henderson & Gladding, 1998).

The term multicultural is broad and encompasses a variety of groups of people, including immigrants to the United States. The latest available population estimates indicate there are more than 31 million immigrants and refugees in this country, or more than 10% of the population (U.S. Department of Justice, 1996; U.S. Department of Labor, 1999). These people often experience a considerable amount of stress related to their decision to leave their country of origin, their subsequent journey, and their adjustment to a new culture replete with its different legal, education, economic, and language systems (Berry, 1990; Berry & Kim, 1988). Depending on a variety of factors, including premigrational psychosocial issues of physical and mental health (Murphy, 1965), experiences of trauma (Cervantes, Salgado de Snyder, & Padilla, 1989), political and economic oppression (Ronstrom, 1989), expectations of the new culture (Berry, 1990), postmigrational kinship and support systems (Espino, 1991), and legal status in the United States, immigrants may come into counseling with a variety of debilitating depressive and anxious symptoms that can increase their already stressed capacity to adjust to life in the United States (Cervantes et al., 1989). They may feel isolated, misunderstood, and overwhelmed (Berry & Kim, 1988).

In this article, we focus on addressing the sometimes isolating process of adjusting to life in the United States by proposing the use of poetry in a time-limited psychoeducational group. Specifically, we review briefly the literature on the practice of using poetry with a group counseling format. We discuss a theoretical framework on acculturating immigrants. Then, we present a 10-session psychoeducational group outline to integrate the practice of using poetry with a group format designed to offer immigrants a forum in which to address, explore, share, and resolve some of their acculturative experiences. The article concludes with a discussion of implications for counselors.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT MULTICULTURAL-MULTILINGUAL CLIENTS**

The United States is experiencing the largest numerical influx of immigrants in its history, an increase from 5.4% of the population in 1960 to 9.7% in 1999 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1999). Currently, the Census Bureau estimates 26.4 million people living in the United States
are immigrants, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) (U.S. Department of Justice, 1996) estimates that an additional 5 million people are undocumented residents. Immigrants come from a variety of countries for a variety of reasons. In 1990, most documented immigrants came from 10 different countries, including Mexico, the Philippines, Cuba, El Salvador, Vietnam, China, and Korea (U.S. Department of Labor, 1993). The majority of undocumented residents came from 20 countries, topped by Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Canada (many of whom had been immigrants to Canada), and Haiti. The most recent immigrants come from countries beset with political and economic turmoil (U.S. Department of Labor, 1993), adding to the stress of adjustment to life in the United States. They come with hopes and aspirations for a better life; yet, many are psychologically unprepared for the realities of life in a new country (Berry & Kim, 1988). In addition, about 80% of immigrants coming to the United States speak little or no English (U.S. Department of Labor, 1993). Language can, therefore, be a significant barrier in the use of mental health services because many of the interventions used in counseling are talking based (Preciado & Henry, 1997; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

A MODEL OF GROUP WORK USING POETRY

Using poetry in group counseling requires a variety of skills. Counselors must intentionally select specific poems to promote healing and developmental growth within a theoretical framework appropriate to a given population. The skilled group facilitator is already well aware of the stages of group development (beginning, middle, and termination or forming, storming, norming, and performing) and how they manifest themselves in a variety of settings (e.g., psychoeducational, counseling, task, therapeutic) (Brown, 1997). Moreover, group counselors must have a theoretical understanding of the developmental process of particular issues within certain age groups. For example, in working with abused children, Mazza et al. (1987) discuss the appropriate timing for the introduction of poetic material as dependent on where the child is in recovery. It is important not only to recognize the symptomatology of traumatization among abused children but also to be grounded in theory and practice in working developmentally with the same population to avoid unintentionally inflicting psychological harm (Finkelhor & Browne, 1986). Therefore, counselors must select poems appropriate to the subject (abused children), the developmental level (of the abused child in healing), and the group’s developmental level (e.g., forming,
storming, norming, performing). Similar care must also be taken when working with immigrant groups.

Poetry may be effective in counseling children and adolescents. However, counselors may be reticent to use such techniques with adults, particularly adult immigrants. Yet, Henderson and Gladding (1998) reviewed the literature on using the creative arts, including poetry, in counseling multicultural clients. They found that the creative arts allow for symbolic expression. Poetry can focus on the process of symbolic expression. This helps in the recognition of both the sorts of universal and unique experiences that clients are likely to introject in group sessions. The choice of appropriate poems helps immigrant clients explore the past, present, and future; aids in developing an appreciation of life’s wonders; bolsters the clients’ coping capacity when faced with life’s potential barriers; and leads to an acceptance and embracing of diversity while instilling hope, confidence, and a zest for life. To design such a poetry psychoeducational group requires a general understanding of the immigrant acculturation process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:
THE IMMIGRANT ACCULTURATION PROCESS

Designing a psychoeducational group for immigrants to explore the dynamic acculturative process through the use of poetry requires some background. Acculturation is the ongoing and dynamic process of psychological adjustment that results in a reevaluation of oneself and one’s identity within the context of a second culture. Moving to a country with a different culture often changes one’s socioeconomic status, familial and social networks, cultural behavioral norms, expectations, language, and values. Many times, acculturation requires the often difficult acquisition of a new language (Berry, 1990; Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991).

Theoretically, an acculturating group, through behavioral and attitudinal change and identity reformulation, comes to one of four resultant acculturative stages: assimilation, in which the group takes on the dominant culture and rejects the culture of origin; separation, in which an acculturating group rejects the dominant culture and embraces the culture of origin; marginalization, where the group either rejects or is rejected by both the culture of origin and the host culture; and biculturalism, the state wherein an acculturating group rejects neither the host culture nor the culture of origin while accepting and being accepted by both cultures. Cultural groups in the United States do not always, as believed in years past (Stonequist, 1937), automatically acculturate to an assimilated stage. Research suggests that some
acculturating groups consider themselves assimilated within three generations, whereas other groups maintain a separate or marginalized status, and still other groups establish a sense of bicultural identity (Berry & Kim, 1988).

What is imperative to recognize, however, is that individuals, as they work to discover how to function successfully within the new culture, acculturate at their own speed and in their own manner throughout their life span. Some individuals from a cultural group that remains separate may want to assimilate and may work toward assimilation. Some from a cultural group that is assimilated may push to define a sense of cultural identity that is separate. Still others may tend toward a bicultural or even a global cultural identification. Research suggests that people who have a stable, internalized sense of self exhibit higher levels of mental health (Davis, Bremer, Anderson, & Tramill, 1983; Sterling & Van Horn, 1989), whether that stabilized sense of self has never been challenged or whether it has been challenged and subsequently resolved (cf. Marcia, 1966). Immigrants to the United States address issues related to a changing sense of themselves simply by nature of their physical journey.

Effectively, immigrants' cultural identity development begins in the country of origin as they struggle through a decision-making process leading to emigration. Often, this process includes an idealization of the host culture and a denigration of the country of origin (Berry & Kim, 1988). Poems chosen specifically to open discussion about the psychosocial factors leading to emigration can help in the exploration of this process (see, e.g., Session 4).

Arriving in the host culture, immigrants may experience culture shock (Pedersen, 1995) when their idealized hopes are not matched by the reality and when culturally based cues, coping mechanisms, and assumptions about what one does in a variety of situations no longer apply. The resultant feelings can be loss, anger, isolation, and betrayal; immigrants begin to address dissonance between a sense of self and an understanding of the new world (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1997). Poems such as Adrienne Rich's (1984) “The Fact of a Doorframe” in Session 5 can be used to encourage discussion of immigrants' personal experiences of culture shock and their variable means of coping with everyday life in the United States, whereas poems such as “Yes or No” in Session 6 can be used to focus on culturally based communication styles.

At points during the acculturation process, immigrants may come to harbor strong disenfranchised and deprecatory feelings toward the host country coupled with an idealized, perhaps nostalgic view of the country of origin. At this stage, immigrants are not likely to enjoy interacting with people other than immigrants from their country of origin.
Exploring what led to emigration and what aspects of the new country are still appealing can be useful in counseling. As the immigrant engages in introspection and struggles to come to terms with what it means to embody multiple selves, these issues can be explored in Session 8 with Juan Ramon Jiménez’s (1990) poem entitled “I am not I.”

Ultimately, research suggests that the immigrant who becomes bicultural incorporates a healthy sense of self, inclusive of an appreciation for aspects of both culture of origin and the host culture, and the capacity for fluid and comfortable interaction within, between, and among the cultures involved (Berry & Kim, 1988; Birman, 1998; Szapocnik, Kurtines, & Fernandez, 1980). This process takes time, and although it is presented in a linear fashion in this article, it is more likely to be somewhat circular as the individual revisits stages and reintegrates experiences into an achieved identity.

Group processes are also dynamic (Yalom, 1995), and care must be taken, for example, to establish, in the beginning stage of group development, a sense of safety and trust by selecting neutral, welcoming poems. Facilitators must then encourage intermember communication by linking concepts and group members. They promote universality while attending to nonverbal cues within cultural contexts. To do so, facilitators will need to do some cultural homework of their own to help them recognize different communication cues among cultures and encourage interpersonal learning among group members.

**GOAL**

A psychoeducational group to address the acculturative process of immigrants and refugees in a 10-session format can be adapted from Hynes and Hynes-Berry’s (1994) book on poetry and bibliotherapy. The goal is to focus on the acculturation process by

Increasing members’ ability to respond to their immigration and acculturation experiences by stimulating and enriching internal images and ideas and by helping the affect associated with these images to surface

Increasing self-awareness and understanding by helping members to examine and value their own personhood within the acculturation process and to become more knowledgeable and accurate about self-perceptions in a multicultural environment

Increasing facility of interpersonal relationships through the recapitulation of the family of origin experience and the experiential application of alternative interactions within the multicultural poetry group

Improving reality orientation and enhancing the capacity to adjust both within and between cultures

Improving confidence and facility of expression in English.
PROCEDURE

Naming the Group and Logistics

In our experience, time spent on preparing for the group both with poetry selection and with such logistical issues as group size, place, time, recruitment, screening, and selection of co-facilitators is invaluable. Not all cultures, nor all people within those cultures, embrace either counseling or groups. We suggest calling the group a “class” and promoting it as time-limited on a semester or trimester time frame coinciding with the local school district’s schedule to enforce the class concept among members. By working with the local school district, community centers, immigrant halls, and religious organizations, facilitators can obtain the use of a room where the group can be held that is away from a mental health setting, thus avoiding possible complications related to stigmatization. However, people already attending day treatment programs or coming into a community mental health agency for medication and counseling, may be more inclined to attend a group or class where they are already receiving treatment. A side benefit for an agency promoting such a class to the immigrant community can be the perpetuation of that agency as a holistic community center offering a variety of services beyond remedial mental health.

Group Membership, Length, and Inclusion Criteria

Group size, length, and inclusion criteria work together. Groups with high-functioning adults or adolescents can be larger, 6 to 12 members, and last 60 to 90 minutes. Groups with lower-functioning, hospitalized adults might be better managed on a smaller scale, 4 to 8 members for 30 to 50 minutes. We worked predominantly with high-functioning outpatient community mental health clients in a large urban setting. Clients at the agency often had Axis I disorders complicated and/or precipitated by adjustment difficulties related to acculturation. Many were on psychotropic medications. The more common diagnoses included post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and bipolar disorder. Inclusion criteria limited participants’ ages to 18 or above. The group was open to both men and women whose first language was not English. Because the group process can bring up possible disturbing experiences that cannot be handled within the scope of the group, members might also be assigned to or encouraged to be in concurrent individual counseling with an appropriate bilingual and/or culturally sensitive counselor. We found that meeting once a week for 90 minutes over 10 weeks with approxi-
mately seven adult men and women gave everyone enough time to participate fully in reading, discussion, and writing.

One inclusion criterion to consider is whether English fluency or literacy should be required. We would like to suggest that neither be required. Using poetry written in English with clients whose first language is not English may seem challenging. Yet, poetry is the use of a few well-placed words to symbolize a depth of personal and universal experiences that can resonate across language and culture. Participants’ common topics of concern about the group generally include their level of English and their ability to write poetry. We suggest conveying the belief that English fluency, literacy, and poetry competence need not be expected or assumed because the group is not about writing poetry but about using poems to help each person to tap into images and feelings about leaving home and coming to the United States. In addition, we found that after co-facilitators modeled writing poems for members with literacy difficulties, and after the group had established a level of trust, members often altruistically offered to help one another with their poems. Finally, using English as the main language allows for the establishment of a multilingual group encompassing immigrants from a variety of countries whose only common language may be English.

Screening

A screening interview gives both facilitators and members the opportunity to prepare for the group process by addressing fears, exploring reasons for being in the group, building a member-facilitator relationship, and covering expectations (Yalom, 1995). It also gives facilitators crucial time to explore the members’ communication styles, inclusive of cultural nuances. For example, during the screening interview with one client from Myanmar (formerly Burma), it became clear that direct eye contact was anathema to her mode of communication. This was in contrast to the manner of interaction preferred by another client, a Nigerian woman whose style was far more direct, both verbally and in body language, for example, leaning forward and maintaining direct eye contact. Facilitators can use this information both in interacting with members and in facilitating culturally appropriate and effective horizontal communication among group members.

One common fear brought up in the screening interview pertains to ownership of members’ poetry. Most members do not want the poems to become a part of their permanent charts in agencies, nor do they want other staff members reading them. They are also often concerned that they will be forced to read their poems to other members in group. We address these issues by assuring each person in the screening interview
and during the initial session while developing group norms that no member will ever be required to read or write a poem in the group at all and that what they do and say will be kept confidential within the already established agency guidelines.

**Facilitators**

As in the case of most groups, the choice of having a single facilitator or co-facilitator run the group may be dictated by budget and time constraints of the workplace. In our case, we were able to justify using co-facilitators by arguing the necessity of having one U.S.-born facilitator and one naturalized co-facilitator, who had emigrated from Ethiopia in the mid-1980s. We believe that having both the host and an immigrating culture represented offered members allies in their exploration and adjustment to life in the United States. More important, however, co-facilitators need to be well-versed in psychoeducational group counseling, need experience working with multicultural-multilingual immigrant and refugee clients with issues related to acculturation, and need to have spent time thinking through how to use poetry as a catalyst for group discussion.

**ORGANIZATION OF SESSIONS**

The 10 sessions discussed below were designed by the coauthors to follow the acculturative process discussed earlier within the dynamics of psychoeducational group development. The first session addresses the group process of establishing a safe environment, discussing group norms, providing participants with materials, and explaining the group format. Subsequent sessions address, in order, the themes of developing a sense of universality through the appreciation of beauty within and across cultures, of sharing country-of-origin fables and stories and emigration stories, of discussing immigration and change, communication styles among cultures, cultural and ethnic identity issues, fears about a new life and the future, self-soothing techniques, and ways of saying good-bye (see Table 1).

**Group Format**

We suggest that each session begin and end with a check-in. After the beginning check, each client receives a poem selected to match the day’s theme. Participants and facilitators read the poem aloud on a voluntary basis as many times as the participants desire. At times, in our groups,
the poem was read up to five times as members gained confidence in their reading and their English pronunciation. Words and idioms need to be discussed, and content questions can be raised within the context of the reading. Once the clients have a general understanding of the content of the poem, discussion can ensue regarding what the poem means to each individual, what feelings the poem evokes, and what similar experiences people have had.

Facilitators will need to work to establish a sense of universality among participants while supporting the uniqueness of each individual’s experience. We find that using mostly client-centered group counseling techniques with some room for didactics is helpful in facilitating. The client-centered group counseling techniques include active listening; reframing; clarification; open probing; basic and advanced empathy; linking statements concepts, and nuances among members and sessions; sensitive cutting off and drawing out group members; immediacy; and appropriate confrontations. The didactic approach focused on explaining any vocabulary other members could not explain and helping with spelling when requested.

After the discussion period, participants can be given a sheet of clean paper to express themselves. Occasionally, someone might draw a pic-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Suggested Poem(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Welcome and introduction</td>
<td>“Friendly in a Friendly Way” by Langston Hughes (1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Our fables and stories</td>
<td>“Why Nobody Pets the Lion in the Zoo” by John Ciardi (1963)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>“Yes or No” (n.d.) by unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Coping skills</td>
<td>“Keep a Poem in Your Pocket” by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers (1968) “I Go Among the Trees and Sit Still” by Wendell Berry (1987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Saying Goodbye</td>
<td>Members’ poetry “In my life” by John Lennon (1965)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ture; the majority of the time, participants write a poem. In cases where participants cannot write, facilitators can quietly help. For example, two of our participants in one group could not write their poems, one because of small motor difficulties resulting from a stroke, the other because of illiteracy. In the beginning, they dictated their thoughts to a co-facilitator, who wrote them down. By the middle of the 10 sessions, other members were volunteering to write down their new friends’ words.

Once poems are written, either members or facilitators read the poems aloud followed, initially, by positive, nonjudgmental, and validating remarks modeled by the facilitators. As the group progresses in its own development, members may offer commentary and ask for clarifications without prompting or modeling by facilitators. Similarities to other group members’ thoughts, feelings, and experiences are linked, first by facilitators, later by group members themselves. Each group ends with a summation period, where members talk about what they got out of the session from one another. The facilitators take the written work, put it on a computer, and return the original and two printed copies of the members’ poems to them by the following session.

**Session 1**

*Theme.* The theme is welcoming and introducing members to the poetry group and one another.

*Goal.* Participants will become aware of various culturally acceptable ways in which people greet one another through their interactions in this session.

*Activities.* The first session begins with a welcoming statement by both of the co-facilitators and an icebreaker in which group members introduce one another to the group including information about country of origin and expectations about the group.

Second, group guidelines discussed in the screening interviews are reviewed (e.g., confidentiality, mutual respect in terms of English use, poetry writing and cultural differences, the right not to participate, timeliness, checking out assumptions, and logistics). Members are encouraged to discuss any additional guidelines they would like considered (e.g., when discussing confidentiality, members want assurance that others will not share information about poetry written or statements made with other staff or with other clients outside the group). Facilitators add that the group belongs to the members, that each person is the expert on his or her own culture, and that all group partici-
pants, co-facilitators included, are present to exchange ideas not to judge.

For the group activity, we add a few niceties. Participants are each provided with a folder with brads and pockets, a schedule of group themes, a pen, and the first session’s poem, entitled “Friendly in a Friendly Way,” by Langston Hughes (1994). The poem is read first by a co-facilitator, with pauses allowed for discussion of such words and phrases in the poem as “Howdy” and “How do you be?” Facilitators ask group members questions on vocabulary and colloquialisms before providing definitions. Members are invited to read the poem aloud as well. Activity discussion focuses on various culturally acceptable ways in which people show friendliness in greeting one another, both verbally and physically (e.g., nodding, shaking hands, and bowing), as well as ways in which native-born Americans have greeted the members. Facilitators can promote universality while supporting uniqueness by using process questions: What did you learn about different group members’ ways of greeting? What similarities did you notice among the greetings?

The next activity is writing a poem and, for those who are willing to do so, sharing the poem with the rest of the group. Facilitators may choose to model the process by writing simple poems about what they heard the group discuss. It is essential at this stage of the group that members who do share their poems be supported and admired. Facilitators will need to use immediacy to model positive feedback and be able to carefully cut off any negative commentary or criticism of others’ work this early in the group. In our experience, this has not been an issue. The group is still quite polite and is willing to offer only positive comments to one another. Some questions that can be used to help process the activity include: What feeling did this person’s poem bring out in you (to group members)? What was it like to write/read this poem for you (to the individual)? What was it like to listen to these poems for you?

**Emerging issues.** Emerging issues are similar to those in the beginning phases of all psychoeducational groups. Clients are concerned about the sanctity of their work. They are concerned about being misunderstood in the group because of their level of English and their cultural communication styles. For example, a Nigerian woman in a group with a Myanmar woman may be concerned that the Myanmar woman’s silence and refusal to make eye contact is judgmental or that she is passive and easily trod on. The Myanmar woman may assume that the Nigerian woman’s emotions are embarrassingly out of control and it would be polite to allow the Nigerian to save face by pretending not to notice her emotional outburst. Members wonder what role they are to play in the group.
Session Two

*Theme.* The second session’s theme is the universality of beauty.

*Goal.* Participants will become aware of such existentially universal concepts as beauty and recognize unique cultural and individual differences within the manifestation of those concepts.

*Activities.* The group guidelines are revisited, facilitators hand members their original poems along with two typed copies, and members check in about last session. Facilitators hand out the poem entitled “Beauty” (n.d.) by an unknown author and ask if anyone would like to read. The poem is read, vocabulary and content are discussed, and anyone who would like to read the poem aloud is encouraged to do so. Members are placed in dyads and asked to describe what they find to be beautiful in nature, in work, in play, and within themselves. They return to the group to discuss what they have learned. Similarities are linked, and differences are admired. A possible question to bring out a sense of universality might be, What makes something beautiful to us? Facilitators can reframe the answers toward an unofficial and broad definition of the universality of beauty.

Second, facilitators lead the participants in a discussion of whether some of their views of beauty reflect their culture, their family, and/or themselves. Possible process questions might include: What do you consider beautiful that no one in your family finds beautiful? What do you consider beautiful that people from other cultures seem surprised by? Earlier, we said beauty meant (as defined in previous activity); what did someone in the group today find beautiful that you had not thought of as beautiful before?

Then, poems are written starting with the first words of the poem as a prompt. Again, members are encouraged to read their poems if they wish to. The session is processed with questions such as What did it feel like to share your sense of beauty in your poem with us? What was it like to hear about others’ cultural ways of viewing beauty? What other things might we consider universal overall but that might be also a little culturally based?

*Emerging issues.* The participants use the poem to talk about what they see as beautiful in nature, in work, in play, and within themselves. The facilitators steer the conversation toward exploration of what aspect group members carry within them that makes them beautiful. Facilitators link similarities between group members’ sense of inner
beauty, while focusing on strength, perseverance, and a sense of hopefulness.

Session 3

Theme. The theme for this session is the exploration of cultural messages transmitted via children’s stories and fables that members carry implicitly within themselves.

Goal. The goal is to increase awareness about how some of our cultural norms are transmitted, to become aware of how similar and different norms are transmitted in others’ cultures, to increase appreciation for both the universality and the uniqueness of the human experience, and to recognize positive attributes in oneself.

Activities. Facilitators return last session’s poems. Members check in. Facilitators hand members the poem entitled, “Why Nobody Pets the Lion in the Zoo” by John Ciardi (1963). The poem is read aloud, vocabulary is discussed, and anyone who would like to read the poem aloud is encouraged to do so. Some recommended questions include: What does the Lion represent in your culture? What animal represents [quality: i.e., bravery, wisdom, strength, trickery, evil] in your childhood stories? How did you learn about these stories as a child? The answers can lead to discussions related to similar values along with variable transmission modes and imagery.

Participants are encouraged to choose either an animal or an attribute of which they are proud about which to write a poem. After reading the poems, discussion can be focused on reinforcing the positive decision making with such questions and statements as: I noticed you wrote about courage (or about the animal that represents courage in your culture) and What made you decide to choose the snake to write about? These questions encourage both individual and group development appreciation of such positive attributes as courage, strength, and honor.

Session processing focuses on what members have learned about themselves and others over the past three sessions.

Emerging issues. In Session 3, participants explore their culture of origin’s lessons, passed to them through children’s fables and stories. Members discover similarities and differences in what information each culture finds important to pass on to the children. Finally, animal imagery is powerful and will be different depending on culture. The underlying assumptions represented by animals can begin the process of uni-
versal acceptance of one another’s cultural differences within the context of the human experience. For example, in one of our groups, the Nigerian participant described the snake as being a most heinous creature, a portent of evil, whereas an Asian participant described snakes as being good luck and a positive presence. Still other animals among the other cultures were said to represent evil and good in the ensuing conversation. The concepts of good and evil became the focus of agreement among participants, whereas the differences in the animal attribution were noted with amusement. This type of discussion helps to set the stage for later discussions of cultural differences, similarities, and the capacity to accept and be accepted.

Session 4

*Theme.* Session 4’s theme is exploration of the emigration decision-making process.

*Goal.* The goal of this session is to talk about the psychosocial factors that led to the decision to emigrate, to recognize what was left behind, and to imagine what advice they might have given themselves prior to leaving their country for the United States if they knew then what they know now.

*Activities.* Return of prior poems and check in. Facilitators hand out the poem “Advice to Travelers” by Walker Gibson (1953). The poem is read, and vocabulary is discussed.

Members work in dyads or triads to talk about how they decided to leave their country of origin. Depending on the level of English comprehension and literacy, simple questions or probes are handed to each dyad to help prompt the discussion. Examples of questions and probes: Tell your friend about your country. What did you not like about your life there? Tell him/her what you hoped and dreamed for coming to the United States. What/whodoyoumissaboutyourcountry? After members have time to talk with one another, they are encouraged to talk about what it was like to share their experiences with another immigrant or refugee. Similarities and differences of experience and affect are explored.

Facilitators ask members to imagine themselves as they were prior to coming to the United States. They are then asked to write a poem with some advice they feel they could give themselves now about the emigration process. Those members who are comfortable sharing their poems may do so. Processing the poems focuses on the experience of members’
willingness to share their stories and what they learned about themselves in the emigration process. It honors the members’ learned expertise.

**Emerging issues.** Participants’ discussion about why they left their country and what they feel they have left behind allows time to honor both their home countries and their reasons for emigration. It is common for members to have had an idealized view of the United States prior to emigration and to have experienced disappointment shortly after arrival. Often, members agree that in the heat of the moment, they did not really think about the parts of themselves and their culture that they were leaving behind and the impact it would have on them. In addition, members begin to recognize that they are experts in the emigration process and that they can offer guidance to others in their country of origin considering emigration. Members may describe journeys made out of desperation, fleeing poverty and/or abuse: familial, political, or both. This is a good time to touch base with individuals, encouraging exploration of the topic in concurrent individual counseling.

**Session 5**

**Theme.** Session 5 focuses on the process of immigration, entering and living in the United States.

**Goal.** The goal in this session is to explore the decision-making process each member faced in entering the United States and continues to face in daily living.

**Activities.** Participants read Adrienne Rich’s (1984) poem, entitled “The Fact of a Doorframe,” which can be used to describe immigration as a door through which a person shall either pass or not, offering no guarantees either way.

Discussion can build on the emerging themes brought out in Session 4, such as members’ initial culture shock. Members may be prompted by statements like these: Last session, some of you said you were surprised when you found the United States was not a rich place where “money grows on trees” (It would be useful to use the phrase the members used in Session 4 because different cultures have equally rich sayings to describe abundant opportunity). What are some of the things you have told yourself to help deal with that disappointment? Every day that we live, we seem to make decisions about living as we do. What are some of those decisions for you?
Participants draft poems that touch on their daily thoughts about living in the United States. This encourages focus on their unique adaptation to coping with their changing life.

Emerging issues. The shared experience of culture shock opens up issues related to daily coping mechanisms that we discuss in Session 8 and cultural communication patterns to be discussed in Session 6.

Session 6

Theme. Session 6’s theme is communication (verbal and nonverbal) between and among members of the same culture group, the dominant group, and other cultural groups.

Goal. Participants explore some of the “proper” and “polite” ways to communicate in their culture and in the U.S. culture based on age, gender, and social status by focusing on ways of being heard and what control one has over one’s actions and the actions of others based on communication.

Activities. Members read a poem from an unknown author entitled, “Yes or No,” with a first line of “If I only knew when to say them.” Vocabulary is clarified.

Facilitators encourage a discussion of the cultural interpretations of what the very simple terms yes and no mean in interpersonal interactions within culture, gender, and age by using statements like these: How do women/men/children/elders say yes or no in your culture? How do they say yes or no in the United States? How did you learn these unwritten rules in your culture? Here? How have you handled being misunderstood?

Members draft poems describing an incident or incidents where they learned a different meaning for a word because of its cultural context.

Emerging issues. In our experience, members enjoy describing their cultural communication patterns as a way to help reduce barriers. For instance, in Myanmar and Nigeria, people are expected to agree with their elders as a sign of respect and as an acknowledgment of their wisdom. In Turkey and in Egypt, women may say they are not interested in a relationship with a man; however, it is incumbent on the woman to use appropriate body language to convey a resounding no versus an I must say no, but I mean yes response. Discussing the different meanings of yes
Session 7

Theme. This session’s theme focuses on identity, inclusive of culture, gender, age, and ethnicity.

Goal. Participants will explore their evolving sense of self both within their culture of origin and within their current circumstances.

Activities. Members read a poem by Juan Ramon Jiménez (1990), translated by Robert Bly, entitled “I am not I.” Facilitators may, at this time, be able to remain somewhat quiet to allow members to begin discussing what impact the poem has had on them. Members use the poem as a stepping stone to talk about their changing sense of self, their confusion, their resistance to change, and their need to belong. They discuss their desire to be recognized by their country of origin rather than by their skin color. Paradoxically, they talk about their desire to be recognized as who they are, not as representatives of their country or culture of origin. They often talk about feeling accused of having “become American” by friends and family in their country of origin while being considered foreign by U.S. nationals and “not one of us” by ethnic minorities. They may describe a sense of isolation that many believe is somewhat alleviated by their relationship with the immigrant community, the poetry group, and/or with God(s) and spirits.

There is often a strong sense of group identity in this session, which may lend itself readily to a group poem. Suggesting members write poems individually and then offer their favorite line to the group poem may accomplish this. Another technique involves asking participants to compose a line on the spot in a round. Ultimately, the group writes a collective poem.
Emerging issues. Immigration has an impact on people’s sense of identity. For most of the people in this type of group, the reevaluation and integration of a sense of self includes issues related to the presumed membership in various ethnic minority groups in the United States. For example, should they not attempt to speak, someone from China would be viewed as Asian American, an Ethiopian as African American, and many Central Americans as Hispanic or Latino. Each of these designations carries stereotypes and assumptions that affect the manner in which people interact with immigrants and how they learn to maneuver within the host country. Members talk about how they have changed and remained the same inside, as members of their culture, their gender, and their age group. They often talk about forming a sense of connectedness and even identity with people who, regardless of their culture of origin, have experienced living in a culture other than their own. Their sense of group identity is often strong and somewhat transcendent.

Session 8

Theme. The theme for Session 8 is looking toward and preparing for the future, both immediate and long term.

Goal. As the group shifts into the final stages of its work, themes are integrated, and steps for future action are considered. The goal of this session is to begin to shift the focus of the work from life inside the group to life outside and beyond the group.

Activities. Group members read the poem “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening” by Robert Frost (1923).

Facilitators focus discussion on the final four lines of the poem, prompting members to consider what short-term and long-term promises or goals they have made or would like to make, in relation to being in the United States. Facilitators weave in questions and probes to help members discuss steps they think they would need to take to reach one of their goals, likening these steps to the miles they must go before they sleep.

Members write poems beginning with the final four lines of Frost’s poem to describe their promises or goals and the miles or steps they will take to get to their goals.

Emerging issues. This type of goal setting tends to bring up concerns for members related to termination. They are often acutely aware of the
end of group in two sessions, and they are concerned they will lose the sense of connectedness they have shared over eight sessions.

**Session 9**

*Theme.* The theme of Session 9 is recognizing what self-soothing and coping skills members have and what they have developed in the group.

*Goal.* Members explore and share coping strategies to address future change and to alleviate loneliness, isolation, and fear.

*Activities.* Members read Beatrice Schenk de Regniers's (1968) "Keep a Poem in Your Pocket." Vocabulary is clarified.

Members share ways in which they try to alleviate loneliness, isolation, and fear. Facilitators probe the value of writing their poems and sharing them with one another as a way to stay connected.

Members often want to write poems to the class, expressing to their fellow members what they have gained in terms of an extended network of support. As a result, we have found using poetry writing as a homework assignment in this class to be effective.

*Emerging issues.* Session 9 focuses on self-soothing skills. Common themes group members discuss are the role of spirituality, family, and literature in their lives. Often, they focus on what they gained from the group and from group members. They may lament the ending of the group. The homework assignment promotes the exploration and expression of the members’ sense of connectedness, encourages members’ return to the final session, and primes members’ termination processes.

**Session 10**

*Theme.* Session 10’s theme is termination.

*Goal.* The goal of this final session is to help members remember where they were prior to beginning the group, study the relationships they have built over the past nine sessions, and recognize what they did to explore and develop their new network and where they want to go in the future.

*Activities.* Members read their poems to the group. Discussion is relatively standard group termination format and can be prompted: It sounds as though many of you are thanking one another for things
you’ve gotten from one another in this group. . . . Before the group, would you have thought you’d have developed such a connection? What did you personally do? Sometimes, people learn wonderful things in this class about themselves that surprise them. . . . What do you suppose you can do with that knowledge? What will you be doing next week at this time? What would you like to say to others that you have not said?

The termination exercise may vary depending on the group. We have found that a group poem can be beneficial. We also find that an exchange of telephone numbers or other ways to contact one another (if appropriate) can help keep the network alive. Some groups may wish to consolidate everyone’s poems into a booklet as a memento. Two groups contributed their favorite poems to a larger booklet of writings provided by clients throughout the local mental health system.

*Follow-up issues.* Termination is an excellent opportunity to help members recognize what they learned from the process of being in the group, what strengths they already have, and what they might want to do in the future. Many members no longer feel ashamed of their English because they have been able to express adult thoughts and feelings in the language. In our experience, some hitherto uncertain people decided enthusiastically to enroll in English classes, whereas unemployed clients felt confident and supported enough to meet with an employment specialist to obtain work. In addition, all four of the mental health caseworkers whose clients were in our groups believed their clients had become more open and more willing to attend regular case management and counseling sessions.

**DISCUSSION**

There are a number of advantages to using poetry in group psychoeducation to address acculturation issues with multicultural-multilingual clients. A group format can lead to the development of a sense of universality among members through the discussion of similar experiences, breaking through the sense of isolation many immigrants carry. It can promote interpersonal learning and offer an arena for cultural socialization. Like most groups, it helps to promote a sense of altruism among its members such as when members take dictation for others. Specifically designing the group to address issues related to the acculturation process offers individuals the opportunity to explore their development in a safe and structured manner.

The specific use of poetry as a means to access emotional content with clients from other countries may seem odd. Yet, many people come from
cultures in which poetry and oration is admired, accepted, and a part of daily life. Even when a person cannot read or write, value is placed on the oral history passed down within the culture. Both the content and the manner in which the history is narrated are valued.

Using poetry written in English with people whose first language is not English can be an empowering experience. Immigrants have much to say, and some may be quite skilled at explaining themselves in their own languages. There can be a terrible sense of loss of self when people believe they cannot express themselves in another language. Indeed, if one aspect of self-definition depends on the response one receives from others, being locked into limited expression can lead to an incongruent sense of self as reflected by others. By learning to choose a few words and place them within the flexible framework of a poem, members may be able to express a depth of feeling and experience to others that hitherto eluded them. Their desire to learn more words to play with can become stronger than their fear of failure in speaking English. A caveat, however: It is very effective to have bilingual social workers, psychiatric nurses, and psychiatrists who are available to the group members who wish to delve further into the issues touched on in group. It behooves the co-facilitators to have a referral network of bilingual counselors or culturally sensitive counselors available.

Immigrants are confronted with questions ultimately related to their identity: both who they were in their country of origin and who they are becoming in the United States. Many find they need to explore why they emigrated, what they have left behind, what they have brought with them, what they have gained, and what they have lost. They need the opportunity to recognize they are not alone in their adjustment, to celebrate their expertise in the immigration process, and to look toward where they want to go and what they want to do next. Using poetry selected for its capacity to generate discussion and exploration of these concepts in a group setting allows the members to deal indirectly and more safely and comfortably with their emotions and experiences. Members can talk about a poem and the underlying messages they discover without having to take ownership of those messages until they so desire. The non-threatening, non-judgmental handling of members’ interpretations may circumvent some resistance and encourage the exchange of ideas, experiences, and coping strategies.

We have had positive anecdotal experiences using poetry in group counseling with multicultural-multilingual clients. Future research into the use of poetry in a group setting with this population could be strengthened by the administration of pre- and posttests on self-report measures of acculturative stress, self-esteem, and cultural identity, as well as perhaps both self-report and professional observations of mental
health, to determine what measurable impact the group had on specific issues. In addition, it would be interesting to end each session with a checklist that might help pinpoint what therapeutic factors were being addressed and what impact the poems selected had on the process (Yalom, 1995). The authors are not aware of any published measures that are normed on a diversity of immigrant clientele; as a result, future research should be conducted and interpreted with caution. It would be invaluable if a qualitative study of what therapeutic factors are at play and a quantitative outcome study could be combined.

Although we focused on working with immigrant adults in a community agency setting, poetry and bibliotherapy have been quite successful in a variety of settings including schools (Ford et al., 2000; Kaplan, 1994) and with a variety of clientele including families (Mazza & Prescott, 1981), children (Mazza et al., 1987), and multicultural youth (Ford et al., 2000). We believe the poetry we used with adults would be equally useful in group counseling with immigrant high school–age students. Yet, we have not had the opportunity to conduct such a group. Counselors who want to use poetry in groups with multicultural-multilingual clients are encouraged to become familiar with the acculturation literature, as well as to look into the training available in poetry therapy or in the appropriate use of poetry in counseling settings (see National Association of Poetry Therapy, 2000). In addition, work with a multicultural population requires an in-depth understanding of one’s own culture, one’s own cultural identity development, the deeply held implicit and explicit assumptions about other cultures, and the recognition that people from other cultures often hold historical assumptions and views of the facilitators’ culture.

REFERENCES


Yes or no. (n.d). Available via e-mail from kasner@siu.edu.