



## Running Therapeutic Support Groups for Trans and Non-Binary Adults

National Transgender Health Summit, 7 May 2023

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### Overview

Support groups can be a crucial asset for trans and gender non-conforming (T/GNC) people, yet professionals have not had clear guidance in combining social justice and group therapy models. In this workshop, we'll review some group therapy theory (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020) and discuss a developmental model for social justice skills development (Nieto et al., 2014). We'll also do an experiential exercise to get a taste for using an emancipatory frame for therapeutic support groups for T/GNC adults.

### Position Statement and Rationale

I'm a transfem non-binary queer able-bodied white therapist. I believe in the power of group to help people grow and change. I've gotten a lot of benefit out of groups and out of therapy. I believe that therapy needs to be politically aligned in order to be effective, particularly when it comes to working with trans, non-binary, and queer folks.

We're obviously at an extremely stressful time for T/GNC people. Politicians and opinion-makers are waging symbolic, cultural, and legal war on T/GNC adults and children. Many therapists and community members may want to do more for trans folks, and not know how. I think that therapeutic support groups (whether professional or community-based) have immense potential for enhancing connection, resilience, and stability at this time.

I think it is also extremely important to examine how support groups can be effective tools for consciousness-raising and mobilization. People need a sense of safety and a secure base to return to, and a small community group can be a real force for change in people's lives. T/GNC support groups can help members acknowledge the harmful effects of cisheteropatriarchy and co-create T/GNC-emancipatory strategies, while also doing personal work around character and biographical traumas. Such an approach blends theory and practice from social justice and group therapy.

### Acknowledgements

On the social justice side of things, I am indebted in this work to luminary Women of Color, including Audre Lorde, Pamela Hays, and Leticia Nieto, who have done so much to advance the joy, aliveness, and emancipation of oppressed people everywhere. On the group therapy side, I honor white Jewish men Irvin Yalom and Melyn Leszcz, who have articulated how an interpersonal approach to healing people in community. While we're at it, I'd like to acknowledge the trans, genderqueer, and other gender outlaws who have borne up my trans identity through their steadfast and courageous commitment to be themselves and tell other people all about it: Leslie Feinberg, Kate Bornstein, Jamison Green, Lou Sullivan, Martha P. Johnson, Susan Stryker, Julia Serano, Darcelle XV, Virginia Brooks, and the countless others, living and dead, who have had the courage to be themselves in this utter mess of a gender culture. And also to the countless indigenous, enslaved, and pre-colonial people who were erased and subjugated by cisheteropatriarchal colonialism and genocide— and to those who live on. And to all the lesbian, gay, bi, queer, kinky, and otherwise transgressive ancestors, all the AIDS victims and caregivers, all the activists and strategists and survivors— our story is their story, too. May we do them honor and build on the joy, compassion, bravery, and resilience of their lives.



## Sample Group Norms

### Process Group Orientation

- Use the group as a living laboratory for understanding self & others
- Explore feelings, needs, and relationships in the here-and-now
- Discuss our lives and our experience of the group and of each other

### In General

- Go from manners to feelings
- Put thoughts and feelings into words
- Work to understand self and others
- Share the talking time

### Group Guidelines

- Observe privacy: Don't share about other members outside the group (it's okay to talk about your feelings and experiences, but not other people's)
- If you meet outside the group, report back to the group about it
- Keep discussions about the group in the group
- No romantic or sexual relationships with current group members
- No employment or long-term housing arrangements with current group members
- Come to group sober and don't use drugs or alcohol during group
- If you are thinking of leaving group, talk about it in group as soon as you're thinking about it so we all have time to discuss it

## Possible Prompts for Today

For T/GNC folks:

1. What do you like about being trans?
2. What's hard about being trans?
3. What can we do to make things better?

For cis folks:

1. What is easy about being cis?
2. What's hard about being trans?
3. What can you do to make things better?

Remember to talk about feelings, especially in the here-and-now!

## Group Phases

There is a classic group phase formulation around 'forming, norming, storming, and performing' (Tuckman, 1965). I move my group along a continuum from structured to free-form. When I start a group, it has a 12-week format with a tighter structure: a check-in, eliciting topics, addressing the topics, and a check-out. Later, when membership stabilizes and the group deepens, I gradually reduce the structure, move from 12-week cycles to rolling admission, and promote an interpersonal frame with more here-and-now emphasis.

T/GNC group members benefit from a lot of safety and structure at first. When things begin to feel stagnant and under-stimulating, I generally reduce structure and increase tension to provide optimal stimulation. Tension should neither be over- nor under-stimulating for members and for the group (cf. Siegel's window of tolerance model, 2020).



## Group Therapeutic Factors and the Interpersonal Approach

In their classic text on group therapy, Yalom and Leszcz (2020) articulated 11 therapeutic factors in group work. These factors synthesize the group therapy clinical and research literature, as well as the authors' extensive clinical and teaching experience. Although the authors espouse an interpersonal approach to group therapy, these factors cut across different theoretical orientations to group therapy. Below, I briefly define each factor, and articulate its applicability to group work with T/GNC people.

1. **Instillation of hope** - I.e., hope that things can improve.  
The hope that one can make progress in gender transition, rebuild community, get through conflicting feelings about transition, and succeed as a T/GNC person in the world.
2. **Universality** - Members' concerns are shared—the member isn't alone with their feelings, and they are connected to other members.  
Other people share in the different feelings and experiences that happen to humans, and furthermore these other T/GNC humans understand my gender position and experience.
3. **Imparting information** - Psychoeducation, resources, etc.  
Information about transition, supportive healthcare providers, community resources, books, podcasts, theoretical perspectives and emancipatory frameworks, good places to shop, how to learn to apply makeup, which apps to use for dating, etc.
4. **Altruism** - Giving rise to compassionate urges and helping other group members.  
Trans people helping other trans people feels very good in the group, especially when people are otherwise isolated from other trans folks.
5. **The corrective recapitulation of the primary family group** - Working through family transference with the group by reliving it in a corrective manner.  
Having a group 'family' experience that is accepting and supportive of members' T/GNC identity
6. **Development of socializing techniques** - Getting better at connecting with others and practicing social skills in a safer and more supportive context.  
This includes expanding one's social skills palette beyond one's original gender socialization.
7. **Imitative behavior** - Learning by group members and facilitators as role models and incorporating their strategies and styles into a behavioral repertoire.  
This includes different gender performance possibilities and attitudes.
8. **Interpersonal learning** - Learning about self and others through interpersonal connection and corrective social experiences.  
Becoming comprehensible to oneself through the experience of being understood by other people who can understand your gender position and experience. Learning about oneself and one's own gender position by hearing and learning about others' gender experiences.
9. **Group cohesiveness** - The experience of belonging, the group holding together, and building relationships through trust, self-disclosure, empathy, and acceptance. The ability to work with conflict and benefit from it.
10. **Catharsis** - Experiencing and expressing feelings accompanied by reflecting on one's emotional experience. This include catharsis about one's pain, anger, sadness as a T/GNC person, and catharsis around T/GNC oppression.
11. **Existential factors** - Reckoning with the existential givens of injustice, pain and death, aloneness, and responsibility. T/GNC-specific existential factors might include lost time, not being able to change some aspects of one's body, always having to reckon with cisheteropatriarchy, and transition as a lifelong journey.



## Nieto et al.'s (2014) Social Justice Skills Development Model

Leticia Nieto and colleagues (2014) articulated a model for social justice skills development. There are two skillsets. One skillset is for Agent group members, who are routinely accorded higher social rank due to systemic privilege. The other skillset is for Target group members, who are routinely oppressed in social rank systems. This model acknowledges that individuals have multiple social group memberships, such as those articulated by the ADDRESSING model (Hays, 2016). This aligns with an intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989).

The different Agent and Target skills are nested: people who have gained access to more developmentally advanced skills are still able to use earlier skillsets, either when they are needed or when under stress. Thus, members of either group may sometimes find themselves using more basic skills.

Each skillset has a turning point where the skills shift from oppression to liberation.

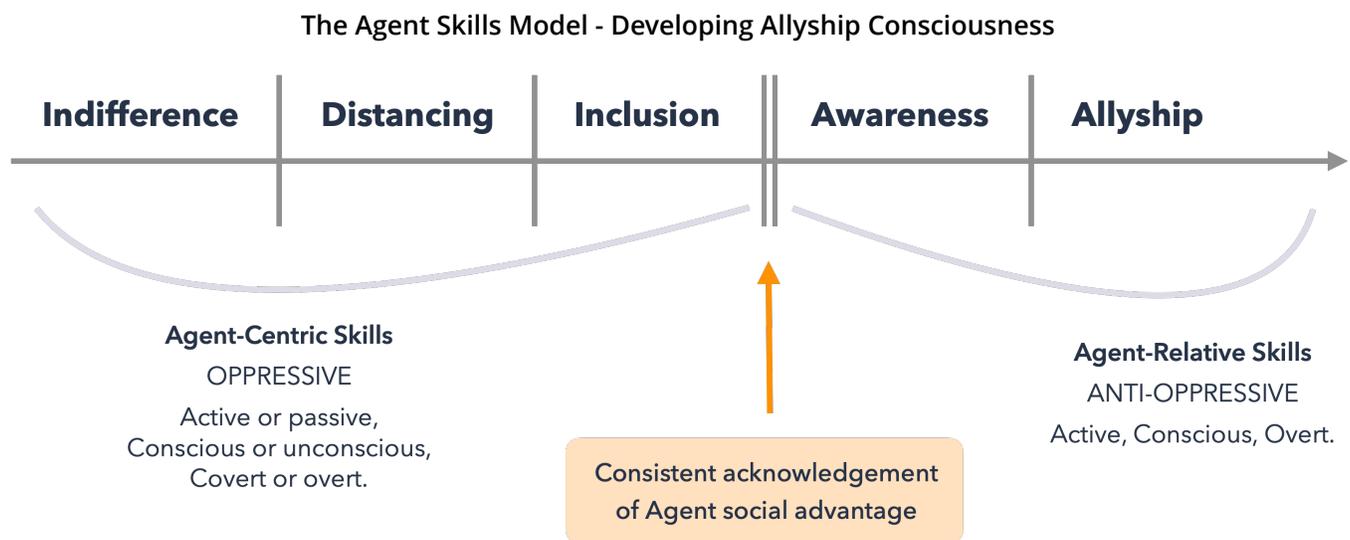


Figure displays the 5 Agent skills on a line. Figure is explained in text below. Adapted from "The Agent Skills Model" figure, Nieto et al., (2014), p. 103.

### Agent group developmental skills:

1. **Indifference** - Not noticing the presence or needs of Target group members
2. **Distancing** - Pushing away contact with and consciousness of Target groups
3. **Inclusion** - Emphasizing commonalities, ignoring the reality of oppression
4. **Awareness** - Recognizing that privilege and oppression operate constantly
5. **Allyship** - Awareness plus action. Using Agent group privilege to work for justice.

The first three skills are oppressive, Agent-centric skills. They can be active or passive, conscious or unconscious, covert or overt. Skills 4 and 5 are anti-oppressive Agent-relative skills, and are active, conscious, and overt. A major shift occurs for Agent group members between Inclusion and Awareness skills when they practice **consistent acknowledgement of Agent social advantage** in the social rank system. However, this is not a static ability, because people often fall back on earlier skills when under stress, duress, or cognitive load. Thus, recalling the reality of Agent social advantage can be a portal back into anti-oppressive consciousness, as well as the Awareness and Allyship skillsets.



## The Target Skills Model - Developing Recentering Consciousness

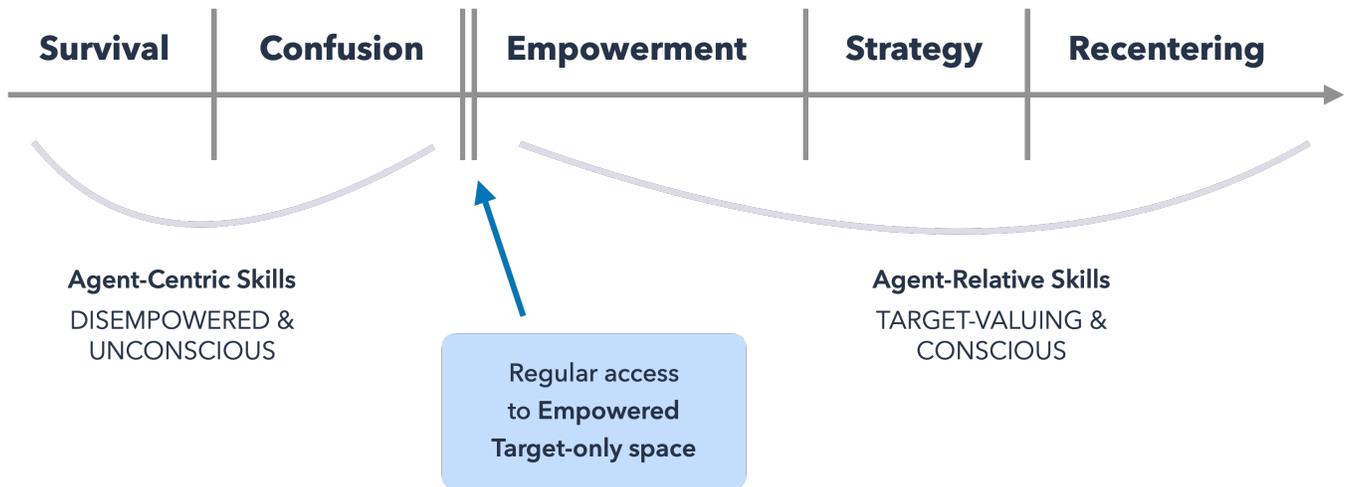


Figure displays the 5 Target skills on a line. Figure is explained in text below. Adapted from "The Target Skills Model" figure, Nieto et al., (2014), p. 145.

### Target group developmental skills:

1. **Survival** - Whatever it takes to make members of the Agent group comfortable
2. **Confusion** - Avoiding noticing oppression; ambivalence about oppression being real
3. **Empowerment** - Acknowledging oppression & confronting it directly; verbalizing & reflecting on incidents, expressing anger about oppression in supportive environments
4. **Strategy** - Choosing how and when to respond to oppression; designing effective responses for long-term results in systems, organizations, and culture
5. **Recentering** - Having a life, defining our own norms, focus on supporting members of our own and other Target groups. Viewing oppression as an Agent group problem.

The first two skills are disempowered, unconscious Agent-centric skills. Skills 3-5 are target-valuing, conscious Agent-relative skills. A shift occurs for Target group members between the Confusion and Empowerment skill levels when they gain **regular access to Empowered Target-only space**. This means social spaces in which Target group members can interact without having to meet the demands of Agent culture, and in which they can articulate oppressive incidents, vent their anger without having to suppress it for Agent culture, and build a shared analysis. This opens the way to creating strategies for resistance and liberation, and recentering Target group needs, culture, and community.

The premise of this workshop is that support groups for trans and gender-diverse people can provide a crucial space for the development of Target group skills for T/GNC liberation. T/GNC support groups should go beyond teaching coping strategies, seeking general group therapy goals, or mere technical support for transition-related activities, although these are all important. Rather, T/GNC support groups can and should provide a space for acknowledging and analyzing oppression, developing emancipatory ideas, creating strategies for resistance, and building communities of liberation.

In general, I prefer to run time-limited or ongoing groups with closed membership. This allows for relationships and group culture to build over time. Drop-in groups require repetition of group norms, recreating the group culture, and recreating safety each time a new member attends. Your setting and goals may influence the type of groups you offer.



## Common Facilitator Tasks in Therapeutic Support Groups

This is a rough outline of common facilitator tasks. Experienced group leaders will be familiar with many of these.

### Envisioning the Group

- setting the group size (6-10 is ideal for ongoing groups)
- securing the group space (and online vs. in person)
- selecting a group approach (as needed)
- ensuring you feel competent to offer the group

### Before the First Session

- marketing the group (whether to the public or within your work setting)
- recruiting and screening potential group members (and omitting/referring those who are not a good fit)
- selecting for group composition (heterogenous vs. homogenous identities, character types, chief complaints, interpersonal style, social skill level, extraversion vs. introversion, etc.)
- communicating the frame of the group to new members (educating group members/candidates about how your group works and how they should act so as to get the most benefit from group)
- preparing group guidelines (to be endorsed by the group members)
- setting fees, attendance policies, etc.
- obtaining signed informed consent and distribute needed documentation (in the case of clinical groups)

### First Session

- conduct introductions (names and pronouns if desired, an icebreaker question perhaps; nametags are helpful)
- reiterate the norms
- promote safety and social connection among members

### Ongoing

- collect fees (if it is a fee-based group)
- modulate tension in the group (neither too much nor not enough— if group members are too anxious, they will not be able to tolerate the group; if they are too comfortable, they will not grow and group will become boring)
- balance structure and freedom, cohesion and tension, to match the group and members' needs
- help members connect with each other, discuss their experience in the here-and-now, talk about their experience of the leader, put their feelings into words, and talk about their feelings rather than act on them
- hold the session time boundary
- seek consultation and training as needed

### Special Activities in T/GNC Groups

- help members articulate T/GNC emancipatory frameworks and practices
- educate members about T/GNC topics, including privilege and oppression; re-frame some aspects of T/GNC struggle as due to oppression, rather than personal shortcomings or failures at being 'trans enough'
- serve as a point of reference for T/GNC technical topics (medical transition activities, HRT, community resources)
- maintain the group discourse center-of-gravity at Empowered, Strategic, or Recentering levels
- help members build community in ways that do not threaten group integrity
- balance personal disclosure and solidarity with the responsibilities of facilitation
- don't keep group members at a clinical distance; rather, be an approachable human being
- monitor the use of facilitator power to enhance solidarity and co-equality



## Further Reading

- Barker, M.-J., & Scheele, J. (2016). *Queer: A graphic history* (K. Jamison, Ed.). Icon Books.
- Bornstein, K. (2013). *My new gender workbook: A step-by-step guide to achieving world peace through gender anarchy and sex positivity* (2nd ed). New York, NY: Routledge.
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- Richards, C., Bouman, W. P., & Barker, M.-J. (Eds.). (2017). *Genderqueer and non-binary genders*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Serano, J. (2016). *Whipping girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity* (2nd edition). Seal Press.
- Siegel, D. J. (2020). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Strong, S. D., Wallace, S., Feldman, C., & Welch, J. R. (2022). Cultural competency with non-binary and genderqueer individuals: Results from a qualitative participatory action research pilot study. In M. N. Appenroth & M. do M. Castro Varela (Eds.), *Trans health: International perspectives on care for trans communities* (pp. 135–155). transcript Verlag. <https://www.transcript-open.de/doi/10.14361/9783839450826-011>
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## About the Presenter



**Sasha Strong, PhD, LPC, CGP (they/them, she/her)**

Sasha has been working with trans, non-binary, and gender-diverse psychotherapy clients in private practice since 2016, and they have several years' experience facilitating groups for non-binary and transfeminine adults. Sasha co-conducted a participatory action research study on non-binary cultural responsiveness in counseling. They have offered workshops and lectures to healthcare professionals, graduate students, and the trans community. She has also completed various transgender competency and clinical trainings, including WPATH SOC 7 certification. Sasha is a Certified Group Psychotherapist and offers clinical supervision, consultation, and training.

## Other Offerings

### Process Group for QT/GNC Therapists

I'm offering a [weekly online process group](#) for QT/GNC therapists, which is a great opportunity for training & support.

- Hone your skills for group therapy through immersive experiential learning
- Gain a supportive community of QT/GNC professional peers who get it
- Build solidarity, strategy, and analysis for QT-affirmative therapy and liberation
- Get support for yourself as a queer, trans, and/or gender-diverse therapist



Members of this non-clinical group may reside anywhere. This training opportunity may be eligible for professional development funds through your employer, and may qualify as a business expense.

### Cultural Responsiveness with Non-Binary and Genderqueer People

My colleague Caleb Feldman and I presented a poster summarizing results from a community-based participatory action research pilot study: 5 themes and 12 best practices to improve healthcare for NBGQ folks. Or [download the poster](#) ([the chapter](#) is also linked from there).



## Please Be in Touch!

I'd love to hear your triumphs, questions, challenges, or feedback.

You can reach me at [sasha@brilliancycounseling.com](mailto:sasha@brilliancycounseling.com) or [www.brilliancycounseling.com](http://www.brilliancycounseling.com).

Thanks for training with me!

