Competition as a Factor in Mutual-Aid and the Pursuit of Social Justice

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ABSTRACT. Social workers tend to view competition negatively. This paper argues that competition is an intrinsic element of mutual aid groups, as well as a factor in the pursuit of justice. Competition is discussed as a product of scarcity of resources, and the paper looks at how it affects mutual-aid, partnerships, and policy-making. The risks and coordination costs associated with the competitive aspects of collective action are considered. The paper concludes with an assessment of inter-group solidarity as requiring the acceptance of the realities of competition and coordination costs. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

A characteristic of mutual-aid groups is their dual power to heal and to liberate. This paper argues that competition is also a characteristic of mutual-aid groups and that this competition is an intrinsic, functional, and productive aspect of such groups.

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The dual power of mutual-aid groups rests in part on the competition that exists between facilitator(s) and group members, and between group members themselves, as all take on the role of helper and have the opportunity to be producers of help. Furthermore, when mutual-aid groups are empowerment-oriented, they necessarily compete with other groups that seek to influence public policies; that competition is an important source of their liberating power.

Bringing about public policies that advance social justice calls for collective action through the use of groups mobilized and organized for such action. But there are risks associated with the competitive aspects of collective action and there are strategies to handle those risks. Mindful of these competitive aspects, this paper considers the coordination costs associated with collective action strategies. It concludes by pointing out that realities such as competition and coordination costs, though not often examined, are nonetheless realities one cannot ignore.

COLLABORATION, COOPERATION, AND COMPETITION

Social workers prize cooperation and collaboration (Bronstein, 2003; Steinberg, 2004), and tend to view competition negatively. That cooperation and collaboration are increasingly important to the success of our professional efforts is not in question, nor is it suggested here that social workers compete with service users in the sense of engaging in "me-tooism" of any kind: "You think *you're* having a hard time with your kids, you listen to *my* story!" It makes no sense, however, to deny that competition exists in all families, in all groups, in all communities, and indeed in all social systems. Social workers indirectly recognize that fact when they acknowledge the existence of "sibling rivalry," "status jockeying," and so on.

The problem is that in general, competition is seen as something dysfunctional even though natural (as in sibling rivalry) or inevitable (as in status jockeying in the beginning stages of groups). It is something to be discouraged or overcome because it is seen as inherently destructive, whether at the micro level of practice as in the examples mentioned, or at the macro level, where competition is perceived as a malevolent component of capitalism. Social workers have not been socialized to see the positive and constructive side of competition. It is as though competition is necessarily "cut-throat," that it necessarily stands for aggressive personalized rivalry, for conflict, or for egotistic seeking of the limelight. The idea of competition as a force or as a mechanism that ulti-

mately gives more power–that is, more choice–to third parties, is not part of our philosophical, ethical or analytical outlook and models.

To create empowering situations for people through the use of mutual-aid groups, however, it may be critical to look at competition not as psychologists and psychiatrists have traditionally done, but as economists do, that is, as a product of scarcity. In the context of mutual-aid groups, scarcity refers to the limits of social workers' as well as group members' knowledge and experience. Were it not for that scarcity, there would be no point for workers to facilitate groups, and no point for individuals to join groups. It is because support is scarce, for example, that individuals join mutual-aid support groups; it is because expertise in facilitating the small group processes and the mutual aid dynamics that lead to the sharing of support is scarce, that professionals work with these groups.

The idea that competition can bring out the best in people or systems is also missing from our models, though we readily accept that when we write and hope to be published, or when we practice and hope to be promoted. We are competing with other writers and practitioners not because we do not like these people (in the case of being published we may often be unaware of who our competitors are, and in the case of promotions, we often compete with colleagues and friends) but because there is a scarcity of space in journals and a scarcity of top jobs in social work agencies. Presumably, that competition pushes us to do our best, and to actualize our potential competence. In that sense, competition is empowering.

MUTUAL-AID AND COMPETITION

In the mutual-aid group model, it is widely accepted that an effective group worker does not only facilitate the process of member-to-member helping. She does not simply stay on the sidelines when members try to solve problems, or when they seek and share information. She actively participates, gives her opinion, and shares relevant information. The members rightly expect her to contribute her professional knowledge and expertise. The group as a whole thus engages in a collaborative effort to gather information and find solutions to problems. The process of collaboration, somewhat paradoxically, produces competing perceptions and competing analyses among members as well as between members and facilitator(s). It is that competition that gives individual members-third parties, as it were–the opportunity to choose between the various perceptions and analyses offered.

Acknowledging competition as a positive mechanism that produces more power or choice for individual group members adds to the healing power of mutual-aid (inherent in the "sharing information" dynamic) which comes when one's voice is heard and taken seriously, and when one's story is received respectfully and accepted as a significant contribution. A different kind of healing occurs when an individual, who has previously been seen as incapable of making rational choices, or has been denied the opportunity to do so, becomes aware of having the freedom and of being expected to exercise the freedom to choose between points of view, perceptions of issues, and approaches to solving problems.

Choosing is part of the decision-making process, a process recognized in the social group work literature as not only an intrinsic feature of all well-functioning groups but a crucial one. Decision-making has the potential to contribute enormously to the empowerment of members when the element of competition is openly acknowledged–when, in other words, members become conscious that they are in a position to deliberately choose between points of view, analyses, and solutions that are competing with one another for their assent.

Furthermore, as the dialogical dynamic of mutual-aid teaches us, competing analyses and points of view are not necessarily irreconcilable nor do they necessarily lead to conflict. The dynamic, though it contains the phenomenon of competition, does not name it, referring only to the presentation of *opposing* views (thesis, antithesis) which, when aired and accepted as a basis for constructive discussion, leads to a synthesis (see Shulman, 1999; Steinberg, 2004).

The essence of conflict is a suppression or a breakdown of communication and dialogue. As long as there is a willingness to discuss and to deal openly and directly with competing views, there is no situation of conflict. There can be confrontation and strong expressions of feelings, and there often is, but while ideological and emotional confrontations can lead to conflict, they need not do so. In other words, the competition that exists in mutual-aid groups (between worker and members as producers of help, and between points of view) need not be zero-sum games, nor be approached with an either/or logic.

Recognizing competition as a positive force in mutual-aid groups would help workers and members to deal with the seemingly unwieldy and usually drawn out matter of the management of authority in small groups–a matter which keeps getting enormous attention in the group development literature (Garland et al., 1965; Kurland and Salmon, 1993; Kelly and Berman-Rossi, 1999; Schiller, 1997; and Sullivan, 1995). It

would do so without drawing workers and members into zero-sum games, as so often seems to be the case (see references above). Competition, identified as the necessary by-product of a scarcity of resources, is moreover a morally neutral and impersonal concept which, unlike that of authority, is not lodged in individuals–neither in their social status nor in their personality. As such, it is less prone to activate long-lasting feelings of envy, vulnerability, resentment, anger, etc., in people, feelings that tend to leave scars on groups and hamper their ability to function even after they have been vented and supposedly resolved.

COMPETITION AND PARTNERSHIPS

Just as competition and mutual-aid may seem at first glance to be opposites, so too would many social workers instinctively think of competition as alien to the concept and to the development of partnerships. If one believes, as does this author, that empowerment-oriented groups require that members and facilitators perceive themselves as partners, this matter must be addressed.

There is no reason why partners cannot be competitors. In groups, such partnerships are effective as long as members and facilitators pursue the same goals (in terms of the work to be done in and by the group), and respect each other and their competing points of view or analyses of situations.

There is one caveat–and that is that partnerships be fully equal, and that all partners can compete with each other. In unequal partnerships, in which some individuals are perceived as "senior" and others as "junior," the senior partners compete with each other and the junior partners compete with each other: this is the phenomenon labeled horizontal competition in theories dealing with the subject. In that partnership model, group members, for example, would have the opportunity to compete with group facilitators in the area of the help or support provided in the group, but not in the area of policy-making regarding matters relevant to the group. That would be deemed an area where expertise lies solely with the facilitators, or indeed only with their superiors (supervisors or managers).

Social work organizations that follow an empowerment approach (see, for example, Shera, 1995)–organizations that are equally open to the input of service users, staff, supervisors, and managers in terms of decision-making regarding policies as well as programs and practice approaches–are systems that promote equal partnerships and allow for vertical competition, that is, for competition between the views of indi-

viduals at all levels of the organization. Without equal partnerships and vertical competition, groups tend to concentrate on the healing power of mutual-aid, and to neglect its liberating power by keeping policy-making outside the realm of group business.

POLICY-MAKING, MUTUAL-AID, AND COMPETITION

This is perhaps less a question of group facilitators' preferences than of the "general culture of dependency on experts and on technologies" (Rappaport, 1985, 16). Combatting this dependency has been a sine qua non of liberation movements. Whether breaking the monopoly of experts on speech, to use Leonardo Boff's (1986) expression, and insisting that a multitude of voices be heard, or breaking the monopoly of dominant cultures on social life and insisting that a multitude of cultures be accepted, the liberation of individuals and of cultures must acknowledge *competing* voices and cultures. One aspect of recognizing a multitude of competing voices and cultures is to recognize multiple types of competing knowledge. This recognition, which creates an opportunity for members and facilitators of mutual-aid groups to learn from each other, is a first step in preparing them to take on the role of equal partners in the design and implementation of policies (see Breton, 2002; Chapin, 1995; and O'Donnell, 1993). That first step, because it entails cognitive restructuring, will therefore involve a more or less prolonged period of consciousness-raising, often on the part of facilitators as much as members. It is wise to plan for and to provide the time and attention necessary for the process of consciousness-raising to be productive.

To be productive of empowerment–to lead to empowerment–consciousness-raising involves not only a personal process of cognitive restructuring whereby views of oneself and the world change. It involves a politicization process whereby one sees the need for action at the personal, the interpersonal, *and* the socio-political levels (Breton, 2002; Cox, 1991; Du Bois and Miley, 1999; Gutiérrez, 1994; Lee, 2001). For example, a group of women who live in abject housing conditions would first come to realize that they are not personally responsible for the social problem of an inadequate supply of affordable housing, and eventually they would connect their situation to the larger socio-economic-political situation. At that point, they would have come to what Paulo Freire (1970/93) called a "naïve" awakening to reality. Many consciousness-raising groups never get beyond this point. It is not surprising that a recent study would conclude that even the linkage of per-

sonal to political issues "has fostered a renewed emphasis on individual rather than collective solutions to social issues" (Reisch, 1998). To move beyond this first level of awareness, and seek collective rather than individual solutions, the women in the example above need to see themselves as capable of acting, and as having the right to act on the socio-political scene in order to influence public housing policies. Beyond this, they need to act.

In an empowerment-oriented group, the dynamics of mutual-aid (for example, mutual demand, mutual support, rehearsal, strength in numbers, to name but the most obvious) are channeled to facilitate action: to ensure that members mobilize, create the necessary partnerships, and take the collective action needed to bring about change at the socio-political level. The demand for action, which follows a group's reflections on the need for change at the socio-political level, the actual taking of action to bring about that change, and the consequent reflection on the action taken, constitute what the liberation literature refers to as *praxis* (see for example Breton, 1989; and Freire, 1970/93). Freire's view of conscientization (that consciousness-raising which leads only to interior awareness and leaves the outside world unchanged is nothing but verbiage) and of praxis (his insistence that action without reflection and reflection without action are unjustifiable) are essential building-blocks of empowerment-oriented practice (Breton, 1994).

Part of the initial reflection on the need for societal change must include reflection on three types of public policies: those policies that need to be changed because they lead to social injustice, those that are just but still lead to social injustice because they are not implemented, and those that need to be designed and implemented because their non-existence leads to social injustice. Reflection on the collective action needed to bring about societal change–on the action needed to influence the design and implementation of social policies–must include reflection on alternate courses of action and their costs (see Breton, 1995; and Garvin, 1991).

COLLECTIVE ACTION AND RISK-TAKING

Because the consequences of any action the group might choose are "incompletely known" (Arrow, 1971, 1) to the members and facilitator(s) as well as to the organization in which they operate, the group's reflection will necessarily be couched in terms of probabilities. Probabilities–relations between the evidence and the event considered–"are

not necessarily measurable" (Arrow, 1971, 16). The group and its sponsoring agency need to distinguish between "measurable risks and unmeasurable uncertainties" (ibid), and come to terms with the amount of risk and uncertainty they are willing to live with.

One of the risks the group is sure to face is that which goes with competing with other groups, lobbies, or special interests also attempting to influence social policies. Those other groups may want socially unjust public policies to continue because they profit from their existence, they may want to block the implementation of policies deemed detrimental to their own interests, or they may fight for the creation and implementation of just social policies but in a different domain than the one the group is concerned with: one group fights for just housing policies, another for just educational policies, or just health care policies–the list is practically endless. Knowledge of theories of competition (see, among many, Smith, 1776; Schumpeter, 1911; Stigler, 1951; and Breton, 1996) compels one to recognize that these various groups or lobbies, whether or not they fight for just social policies, represent competing interests. Public resources being scarce, they *will* compete with each other for the continuance, design and/or implementation of those policies best suited to their particular interests or values: policies which either protect resources they have, create resources they need, or facilitate their access.

ASSESSING RISKS

The question thus becomes how groups assess the risks attendant to competing in the arena of public policy-making. First, the evidence has to be established. Groups will begin by finding out how often in their own environment other social work groups get involved in public policy-making, and with what results. They will enquire to what extent perceived risks are related to the fact that efforts to influence public policy necessarily take place–at least at some point–outside the confines of groups, and indeed, of the organizations in which groups are lodged. Is it the 'publicness' of those efforts that is considered a risk? And is that because it inevitably exposes to public scrutiny not only groups, but professionals and organizations?

Do group members and facilitators who engage in the pursuit of just social policies risk being branded as radicals willing to rock the boat, and therefore as "trouble" in terms of organizational peace and stability (see Breton et al., 2003)? What are the probabilities that social workers

thus engaged risk being fired, or passed over for promotion, or censured in one way or another?

As for the organizations which support groups engaged in the struggle for just social policies, to what extent do they risk being identified as untrustworthy defenders of the social system of which they are a part–as unreliable guardians of the status quo? What are the risks that they will then be identified as "poor bets" in the eyes of public and private funding sources (Breton et al., 2003)? Does that affect the type of collective action and the strategies groups choose and organizations support?

ASSESSING STRATEGIC EFFECTIVENESS

Once the evidence of risks has been established, groups will investigate how other groups have handled these risks, that is, they will verify the evidence of strategic effectiveness. It has been argued (Breton et al., 2003) that partnerships of various kinds (between groups and between organizations) diminish the risks and costs associated with the pursuit of social justice. Groups will inquire whether partnerships between groups (and/or between organizations) were a factor in the successful attempts at influencing policy-making and/or implementation and what kind of competition existed between the various partners. Was the competition in the area of perspectives on issues, in the area of preferred strategies, in the area of specific tactics, etc.? And finally, to what extent did that competition, by giving rise to more choice regarding collective action strategies, result in more effective (less time-consuming, bigger pay-offs) influencing of public policies?

COORDINATION COSTS

Having established the evidence of risks and of effective strategies, groups finally need to weigh the coordination costs of any strategy that involves partnerships (see Breton et al., 2003). Coordination costs are the costs involved in establishing and operationalizing links between various systems. Typically, they include: forging agreements on the division of labor or tasks; the time required to establish effective communication channels, for example, learning to trust the various partners, finding a more or less common language, and arriving at a degree of consensus on theoretical and methodological premises (Hardin, 2002); as well as the time to share information. Costs also involve assessing

what links might be more productive, i.e., might have the highest rate of return (for example, what level of government is liable to be more responsive to attempts to influence social policies in a particular domain). An additional cost is that of developing a mechanism for dealing with conflicts between various partners. Finally coordination costs include selecting, planning and taking collective action (Breton, 1995, 2004; Garvin, 1991).

COLLECTIVE ACTION IN A WORLD OF COMPETING INTERESTS

Collective action in a world of competing interests raises the following question: can competitors at some level collaborate at another level? The answer is yes, competitors can also be collaborators. For this to obtain, however, they need to coordinate.

The most productive coordination efforts between groups which compete for the scarce resources allocated to socially just causes and policies would be those aimed at moving the budget constraint outwards, as economists would say. In other words, groups should coordinate efforts to obtain a larger volume of resources or larger flow of funds for those policies that result in greater social justice (which, as we know, is multidimensional). This would take into account the reality of budget constraints (the reason why groups have to compete in the first place), as well as the reality of competition, but also the reality of mutuality of interest in the ultimate goal of social justice for all. The obverse face of the foregoing is the need to organize and coordinate opposition to groups or lobbies which pursue unjust social policies.

In another paper (Breton, 1995), this author contend that the "all in the same boat" mutual-aid dynamic can serve to motivate and embolden group members to take social action. This requires that groups think of mutual-aid as including not only intra-group solidarity but inter- and extra-group solidarity. In addition, groups which collaborate in solidarity with other groups in the pursuit of social justice for all need to take into account the fact that they are also competing with these other groups for resources. Inter-group solidarity entails accepting the realities of competition and of coordination costs attached to collaboration strategies and partnerships. Tough, and not generally pleasant, realities.

Group workers who are serious about social justice need to broaden their conception of mutuality and mutual-aid to include these realities. Competition has virtues as a positive force in mutual-aid groups per se,

and in the design and implementation of policies which lead to social justice.

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