

# Groups in the Human Services: Some Facts and Fancies

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**SUMMARY.** Many misconceptions are associated with the use of groups in social work practice, especially by those practitioners who do not have a grasp of small group theory and leadership methods and skills. Historically, social workers have believed that collective behavior could change attitudes, give participants a sense of support and belonging, develop new knowledge, socialize behavior, and influence systems and organizations. The growing body of small group research, and research on practice with groups in social work and other professions, can remove some of the mystery and make possible more deliberate and definitive use of groups. Furthermore, a worker needs a commitment to values in the use of groups, and a grasp of the dynamics of helping the participants to make use of their group relationships to achieve their goals. We have the knowledge and skill at our fingertips to provide an instrument which many people in society are seeking. [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>> © 2005 by *The Haworth Press, Inc.* All rights reserved.]

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Because of the kinds of things which can happen to people *in* groups—or the things which can happen *as the result of groups*—there is sometimes a great sense of mystery and magic about groups, or even the belief that groups all unto themselves can work miracles, or that if you just bring people together for a group something great will happen. This is only partly true. While groups have power to heal, to nurture, to develop, to educate—they also have the power to destroy their members and those outside. And usually groups do not just happen. They take deliberate work on the part of both leadership and membership.

It has become obvious to social workers that there is a rapidly expanding extension of the uses of groups in all of the human services. The decade of the 1960s has been referred to as the period in which social workers discovered and rediscovered the group. Not only did we discover that there were some personal and social needs and problems of individuals that responded better to group methods, but we also rediscovered the political force and power of organization and collective action in community efforts for system management and change.

The social democrats and adult educators of the 1920s—Lindemann (1924), Harrison Elliot (1928), Coyle (1930, 1937), and Sheffield (1922, 1929)—the trade unionists, the settlement workers in ethnic neighborhoods, the feminists first time around—knew the value of collective behavior for changing attitudes, for helping people gain a sense of belonging, for developing new knowledge, for socializing behavior, but also for bringing about societal and institutional change. And the designers of the youth movements, Ys, Scouts, and Boys' and Girls' Clubs, had some ideas about the meaning of belonging for influencing values and behavior of the young. All of these streams of goal-directed group use—or purposeful development of groups for specific objectives—laid the foundations for present-day group uses.

Yet, today many people are seizing upon the group as an instrument for help or change, action and growth, as if the group were newly invented. People are picking up techniques and gimmicks—which may lead to good or to questionable results with people in groups—but without the theoretical underpinnings to understand why they are using these methods or what may be the potential outcomes. Activities that we engaged in as parlor games and icebreakers when we were kids have been legitimized into group techniques, such as the blind walk, games of trust, or feeling and touching—and a couple we called “sardines” and “post office.” They *do* encourage interaction.

There is a growing body of knowledge about small group behavior (Hare, 1976), based not only on hunches and armchair theory develop-

ment and upon findings of experimental collectivities of individuals convened for research, but also empirical research on groups constructed for treatment, help, growth, change, and self-management. *The Journal of Group Psychotherapy* is full of reports on such researches, and Lieberman, Yalom, and Miles (1973) have presented a substantial study, *Encounter Groups: First Facts*, which appeared in *Psychology Today* and now has appeared in a book, a carefully documented piece of research. They found through an extensive study of various types of encounter groups that simply getting people to feel or to act out in a group did not bring about change in people, but rather group members needed help cognitively to gain insight. Analyzing what had taken place and reflecting on it brought more lasting benefits (something we have used in both individual and group work for some time in social work). They also found that expressing anger in groups may be more dysfunctional than helpful, may drive people from groups and be personally destructive—and that people seem to learn better, grow and change more in an atmosphere of love and support.

There seems to be an increasing use of groups on an experiential level, without benefit of the available knowledge. One of my esteemed colleagues on the East Coast who is a well-known practitioner, writer, and teacher said to me recently, “You know there is no theory of small groups. The only way you can learn about groups is experientially—by being in one—learning by trial and error.” His view is shared by many. I think that there may be a growing gap between the existing knowledge that is available to us for deliberate and definitive use and the experiential or feeling action and reaction that it is “just good to get people together in a group and something helpful will happen with little guidance or leadership.”

Another myth is that if a worker collects an aggregate, that is, gets people together in the same place, and responds to them individually in the presence of each other, something significant and helpful will occur. It may and it may not. It may be good and it may be harmful for individuals in a gathering to observe a therapist responding to one and then another in sequence, but it is not working with the group and it is not maximizing the full potential of having the group begin to work for itself. It is rather doing what I call “aggregational therapy of individuals.”

Let me clarify: by the concept *group* I am referring to two or more (and usually more) people interacting with and reacting to each other in such a way as to have meaning for each other and influence over each other, and developing a sense of uniqueness about the relationships that sets this collectivity apart from all other collective relationships of the

people who are a part of it (the traditional sociological definition) (Hartford, 1971). This definition does not, therefore, cover people together in the same room unless something is happening among them—some sense of “we” developing.

Let me cite some examples of what I mean by the use of theory to improve practice with groups. Extensive research on spontaneous and autonomous groups, as well as on groups that have been specifically collected for particular purposes, suggests that all groups go through a series of phases in their development from the moment they are convened for the first time and engage in certain social rituals and pastimes—from their initial formation process, through one or several storming periods, on to getting to work on both the *content* for which they were convened and the *development of the group* itself, to planning for termination and the final termination (Tuckman, 1965). While these phases seem to be inevitable in some form in all groups, knowledge of their existence, and the kinds of individual and interpersonal behavior that may occur in each of the phases, provides a worker with some guide to his interventions and activities with the collection of people or with individuals at given points in the group life cycle (Northen, 1968).

Furthermore, knowledge of certain group processes and their interrelatedness may give a worker more skill in helping the group to become a viable instrument for help or change. For instance, the worker’s proactive behavior in composition (if there is a choice of deciding who should participate) related to agency or worker service objectives for the group, and related to decisions about frequency, duration, and size, and determining possible individual participants’ expectations for the group, may lead to a more compatible group entity. A group may coalesce more rapidly and get to work on achieving that which it was set up to do (whether therapy, task achievement, or system change). That is, if we anticipate and plan for goal-directed activity, think through to the possible end, we may be able to convene a group with a fairly clear contract, and help it to form and then let it flow toward goals that are compatible with the expectations of all participants.

Or if we use theory to think about co-leadership, co-therapy, or team teaching for that matter, we must recognize that we are introducing into the group a two-person subgroup which must be dealt with by all of the participants, as well as by the co-therapists themselves in order to construct a productive group form.

We may choose to have an open-ended group that has a constant turnover in membership. While it is the most effective form (or only possible form) in some settings, this means that the group will have low

cohesion and experience some storming each time it adds or loses membership, and that the worker will have to remain fairly central and provide continuity.

For all these examples just stated, there has been enough research and theory development for us to be more and more definitive about our worker activity in using groups (Hartford, 1971).

We are living in an era when groups are being used for or are credited with a great many kinds of human endeavor. The great wave of sensitivity groups, swinging singles, swinging couples, nude workshops, drug drop-in center groups, lay therapy marital couples groups makes us alert to the phenomenon that is sweeping the country. People are seeking personal involvement and belonging of greater depth through various types of group forms. People of all ages—but especially youth, young adults, and older adults or aged—are reaching out, and group solutions are being sought for various kinds of relationship needs. People subjected to computers, social distance, and faceless communications media are reaching for a personalized response through some type of group experience. People automated into stereotyped roles and surrounded by chrome, glass, and concrete are trying to find warmth, personal worth, and affectionate involvement in groups. Perhaps this is a substitute for the extended family of the past.

On the other hand, well-heeled and well-educated youngish middle-aged men testify at Senate hearings that they were led to engage in subversive and criminal acts because it was part of the culture of their group. They trusted their leader and their friends, and it was more important to be somebody in the group than to follow individual values (Dean, 1976). (Didn't we get this message from the street gang members a decade ago?) (Spergel, 1966). And the young people who got involved with Manson and committed crimes justified their behavior as part of the group activity and belonging to "the family." The young political participants testified that they learned their "dirty tricks" in campus organized politics (*West Side Story* in button-down collars). These facts make us pause to give some thought to the care that we must take in our deliberate use of groups as the instrument of help, growth, change, rehabilitation, and social action, social change, and community development. A group can become a tremendous force on its members. The group experience can influence its members even when they have left the presence—for if it has been well formed the socializing effect causes the members to carry group values, norms, and influence with them wherever they go. The group can also carry strong weight in society.

Those very elements in groups which can be positive and helpful may also be destructive and harmful to individuals and to society. So we need all of the knowledge that we can get, and we need to use it with planning, carefully and thoughtfully within the value framework that characterizes our profession. We need to examine the ethics of influence, and the goals or outcomes of our planned behavior with people in groups.

In our eagerness to get onto the group bandwagon, for whatever reason, we must become knowledgeable about group processes to make sure that our groups are helpful and useful, and not destructive or employed irresponsibly or outside of the context of values and skills which characterize social work. We have, for instance, values about the integrity of each individual, his right to expression along with his responsibility for the others in his interactions, his right to privacy and confidentiality so that he is made aware of the risks of some of his expressions in groups, his right to his defenses until he has better ways of protecting himself, his right to self-determination of the direction in which he goes so long as he is not destructive to others and to himself. Our common sense tells us (if we don't have the group theory to support it) that group contagion and group influence may cause people to expose their inner feelings or to act out in ways that are not helpful to themselves in the long run, that may harm others, and that may later be regretted. Some of the techniques in use with groups today (hopefully not in social work) would give sanction to such behaviors without a sense of responsibility to the person in or after the group. The social worker who is committed to his professional ethics must assume some responsibility for the behaviors in which he encourages the group to engage, and must use methods deliberately to facilitate and help the participants. He assumes some responsibility to help members when taking action about a faulty system or institution to present full knowledge that such action may bring on retaliatory effects. The social worker helps an activist group to have some foresight about the possible or inevitable reaction to their activity in order that they be prepared for the consequences when they make a decision to act. The social worker is aware of the resocializing effect and the influence which a group may have on its members, and is therefore aware that while a group can be an anchor and support to help a person to change some of his behavior for positive ends—such as breaking bad habits or kicking addictions—the same phenomenon may offer support to engage in delinquency—or result in brainwashing, or push toward undesirable conformity.

I would submit that just as there is an increasing body of knowledge which all social workers need to have about individual personality theory within its sociocultural context—and new methodologies for maximizing the human potential through various individual helping modalities and new knowledge about systems, societies, and communities—there is also a growing body of knowledge about small groups, their process, and the functioning of individuals in them, and various new methodologies for maximizing human potential and maximizing societal functioning through group processes. I have a growing concern about what we are not teaching social work students or not putting into staff development in our agencies as we encourage all social workers to use group methods. Speaking as one who has been instrumental in curriculum development at a school of social work and who teaches in the human behavior sequence, I am afraid that we are reducing the content about small group processes *by default* as we increase theory about individuals, families, social systems, and organizations—and have left small group theory as an elective. Furthermore, I was chairman of the development of social work practice methods sequence where we put together content on working with individuals, families, and communities through individual and group methods, and I have great concern that we are lessening the amount of knowledge we are teaching about small groups and some of the value questions about using group methods, just at the moment when we are expecting all social workers to use more group methods for work with individuals, families, institutions, and communities. I am puzzled at the inconsistency of our beliefs, behaviors, and expectations, and my only explanation for it is that we may ourselves be guilty of thinking that groups have a mystique and a magic, and that people brought together will somehow form themselves into a helping and helpful entity to work miracles for each other. Or else, perhaps we fail to understand the concept of group, and have not yet integrated our practice and our theory.

It is a fact that groups can and do exist, that there is a body of knowledge that can be understood, and that understanding this knowledge can lead to planned and deliberate behavior on the part of the social worker, who, carrying the ethics of his profession and the values regarding the outcomes of service, can help to construct groups for the benefit of the participants, and groups in which the participants are working to benefit society, community, or mankind. This is not a myth, nor a fancy. And the reality is that studied, proactive and active behavior by the social worker, based on knowledge, can provide him an instrument with a potential beyond what he has yet dreamed.

Groups as a means of social work service delivery, within almost every context—schools, hospitals, family counseling, child welfare, institutions, community services for the elderly, neighborhood organization, community planning—offer us a rare and valuable opportunity (Schwartz & Zalba, 1971). If we understand the resource we have, it will not be a fancy or a myth but a fact and a reality, a greater resource in helping people. The knowledge is there—we have but to reach for it, and to incorporate it into our practice and our teaching. And all over our society people are searching for an instrument which we have at our fingertips. Our responsibility is to make it available and to use it in our administration, our staff relations, our service delivery, and to keep people attached to something that has meaning and can be used as well to perpetuate a free society.

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