Transcending Differences:
Using Concrete Subject-Matter
in Heterogeneous Groups

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ABSTRACT. The need to conduct social group work with heterogeneous members is a reality. Yet the social work literature does not offer much guidance in how to work with diverse groups of people. This paper illustrates a method of social group work that utilizes tangible and palpable subject matter as a therapeutic vehicle to create strong group cohesion with heterogeneous group members. It aims to explain how and why using non-personal subjects as the heart of the group helps people connect to themselves, to the world and to each other in a personal way. The examples given are from two groups that are very different in their compositions and very different from each other. One is a psycho-educational group at a Continuing Day Treatment Program for severely and persistently mentally ill elderly and the other is a group with adolescent and pre-adolescent females in a community center. Four benefits of using this method of social group work are outlined. *[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.]*

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INTRODUCTION

Despite personal differences, heterogeneous group members can find connectivity by focusing on tangible subject matter. Among the mani-

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fold functions group membership affords individuals, none is more important than a sense of group cohesiveness. To obtain this feeling of social collectivity, many believe the group's composition must be homogeneous (e.g., Richards, Brulingame, and Fuhriman, 1990; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). In fact, this is not the reality. Social workers are more often than not faced with the challenge of creating groups with clients of varying backgrounds, behaviors and attitudes. Groups may need to encompass members of different age, ethnicity, race, gender, mental health diagnosis, intellectual capacity, language, life experience, emotional connectivity, personality, and values, to name but a few. This is the essence of social work–to create an environment that is sensitive and respectful of all differences among people, and then to help individuals thrive in that environment. To do this, one needs to ditch thinking that sameness is necessary and begin to understand social group work from a different perspective.

In this paper, heterogeneity is defined as consisting of dissimilar or diverse elements or parts. There are no groups that are completely heterogeneous or completely homogeneous because there are no two people who are exactly alike or completely different. This paper explores how to work with groups whose members are much more different than they are similar.

The idea for writing this paper stems from the author's experience with the challenge of creating groups for members from various backgrounds, abilities, beliefs and attitudes. It was important for each group to address the needs of all its members, but given the disparities, this seemed a daunting task. While struggling with this challenge, the author uncovered a method of social group work that decreases the differences among group members by focusing on a common out-of-group experience.

This paper will illustrate a method of social group work that utilizes tangible and palpable subject matter as a therapeutic vehicle to connect heterogeneous group members. The examples used are from Animal World, a psycho-educational group at a Continuing Day Treatment Program in Manhattan for severely and persistently mentally ill elderly and from The Fashion Show, a group created with adolescent and pre-adolescent females in a community center in the South Bronx. Both groups focused on using the non-personal to get to the personal. Both groups were formed with members of diverse backgrounds. And, after utilizing this methodology, both groups fostered a strong sense of group cohesiveness that allowed the members to connect to themselves, to their world and to each other.

At first glance, the make-up of each group would seem to be homogeneous, one group with all members mentally ill and elderly, and one group with all members adolescent and pre-adolescent females. However, the actual group membership included clients with an array of differences including, but not limited to, age, ethnicity, race, gender, mental health diagnosis, intellectual capacity, language, life experience, emotional connectivity, personality, neighborhoods and values.

Through examples from both groups, it is hoped that the reader will gain an understanding of a social group work methodology that is not entirely psycho-educational, not entirely therapeutic in the traditional sense and not entirely activity based, but which encompasses all three modalities using a new lens through which to focus. The paper aims to explain how and why using non-personal subjects as the heart of the group–such as animals or a fashion show–help people connect to themselves, to the world and to each other in a personal way.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Group Cohesiveness

Group cohesion, group bond, and group connection are terms used to describe the social collective phenomenon that occurs in a successful group environment. Used interchangeably, these terms appear in group work literature as a prominent, if not essential, part of any group (Glass and Benshoff, 2002).

Middleman and Wood (1990) describe group cohesion as "the glue that makes the group want to stick together" (p. 101). Groups of people who meet will either become more interconnected or remain separate entities. Without a bond, they will not be connected to one another and will not likely develop the trust necessary for mutuality. But if group cohesiveness is present, then the cohesion is the emotional force that promotes trust among group members and helps develop the "group energy."

Group cohesion was identified as a theme in social group work as early as 1935 when Newsetter defined a group " . . . first, in terms of aggregation or compresence; second, in terms of interactions between members of the group; third, in terms of consciousness of kind, a "we" feeling by means of which it distinguishes itself from all others. This latter we may call a bond" (p. 292). In talking about the origins of social group work, Briar (1970) differentiates social group work from social casework, stating that settlement houses at the turn of the twentieth century embraced

group work's ideas of putting a higher emphasis on social participation and association. Yalom (1995) identified cohesiveness as one of the many healing factors in a long-term psychotherapy group. In fact, group cohesiveness has been identified as a central theme and curative factor in group dynamics throughout group work history (e.g., Northen and Kurland, 2001; Malekoff, 1997; Middleman and Wood, 1990; Shulman, 1999; Budman, Soldz, Demby, Feldstein, Springer, and Davis, 1989).

Northen and Kurland (2001) capture the essence of what is meant by group cohesion:

> Group Cohesiveness–the group bond. The mutual acceptance of members and commitment to the group make the group attractive to its members. When members feel they belong to a group that has meaning for them, they are influenced by other members and by the norms of the group. When the members provide mutual support, the group fulfills the basic human need to belong, sometimes referred to as social hunger. (p. 25)

Group cohesion is an energy, a force, a vibrancy, which encapsulates the feeling group members cultivate over time among each other and towards the group. It does not just happen, it must be fostered, and when it is, the magic of the group begins.

HOMOGENEOUS VS. HETEROGENEOUS GROUP COMPOSITION

Homogeneous Group Argument

Much of the literature supports the importance and value of homogeneous groups, which are defined as groups with purposely similar membership. The members are handpicked for the group because they each have something in common that will be addressed within the group. For example, a homogeneous group may encompass only people who are suffering with schizophrenia so that, as a group, they can cope with the illness.

There has been a push for homogeneous groups in agencies, treatment centers and counseling centers (Richards, Brulingame and Fuhriman, 1990) because it is believed that this sameness will expedite treatment. The justification stems from a belief that group cohesion will be fostered more quickly and the group bond will be stronger if the

group members have more in common. For example, when discussing the benefits of a homogeneous group, Kruglanski et al. (2002) state: "a homogeneous group . . . may agree on the same basic premises and fundamental assumptions. Accordingly, the group may quickly reach consensus on attitudes and opinions that such premises imply" (p. 650). Kruglanski et al. (2002) suggest the commonality of experience will allow for a commonality of opinion and therefore a more satisfying group experience. Some believe people identify with those they view as similar because such identification conveys an all-in-the-same-boat mentality (Frances, Clarkin, and Marachi, 1980).

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory has been used to substantiate the argument for homogeneous groups (Perrone, 2000). The theory describes identity as embedded in feeling connected to social groups and believing those groups to be valuable. The social component of identity is derived from many subcultures, including race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious group, occupational group or community (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Therefore, employing social identity theory to group work, it could be assumed that the more group membership focuses on "social identity" similarities, the more the members will feel connected to one another. This suggests that the heterogeneity of the group will cause members to identify with those who are like them and reject those who are not. This separation will affect the group cohesiveness and subsequently the group's work (Kruglanski, Shah, Pierro, and Mannetti, 2002).

Heterogeneous Reality

It may be true that groups will come to decisions faster if members have more in common, but this is not the reality of social work practice. Embedded in social work ethics is a dedication to serve a multitude of people from every background, life experience, developmental stage and value structure. This service is expected to be delivered without bias and without judgment. Social workers strive to encourage cultural sensitivity and acceptance of difference (Mattaini, Lowery, and Meyer, 2002). Group work with a heterogeneous membership embraces that code of ethics and promotes its realization.

Furthermore, the reality of today's political economy means social workers need to serve more people with less resources (Fabricant and

Fisher, 2002). Staffing limits and lack of funding call for creativity of services. Group work, at its premise, delivers services to more than one individual at a time, thus helping relieve economic pressures. But with this comes the reality that groups will not be homogeneous because the clients are not all the same (Oxman and Chambliss, 2003).

Heterogeneous Argument

Group work with heterogeneous groups goes beyond pragmatism. Diverse group membership affords the opportunity to know and experience a variety of ideas and points of view (Erickson, 1986). "Differences among group members give rise to varied ideas, perspectives, knowledge and skills that can improve their ability to solve problems and accomplish work" (Polzer, Milton, and Swann, 2002, p. 296). Multidimensional membership provides group members with a microcosm of reality.

> In an almost experimental framework, the members have a chance to develop and test patterns of behavior that can help them to realize themselves in social context. The multiplicity of the member's interactions leads to an increase of the "intensity of reality." (Battegay, 1986)

There is not much literature that describes the best way to work with heterogeneous groups. The literature that attempts to appreciate the benefits of diversity is based in understanding how to capitalize on diverse employees and increase work productivity (e.g., Taylor and Strassberg, 1986; Polzer, Milton, and Swann, 2002).

DISCUSSION

This paper will explain a method of social group work that embraces the heterogeneity of group members and focuses on fostering their group cohesion. Illustrated are four benefits of the use of tangible and palpable subject matter to enhance cohesiveness among heterogeneous group membership: (1) tangible content is non-threatening; (2) non-personal content helps clients discuss taboo issues; (3) concrete subject matter brings clients to a common focus; and (4) specific material levels the playing field, reducing differences among group members. The reader will better understand these benefits through examples from the

Animal World and Fashion Show groups. Short descriptions of each group follow.

Animal World

At a Continuing Day Treatment Center for the severely and persistently mentally ill elderly on the upper west side of Manhattan, the author was told to create a group for all of the clients who were in the community room during the 11:00 AM-12:00 Noon Wednesday time slot. After sitting in the community room during this time, the author quickly realized this would be no easy task. The clients (soon-to-be members of a group) ranged in type of mental illness, age, intellectual capacity, physical functioning and emotional bandwidth. Some clients were withdrawn, others more outgoing. Some clients could not speak and others could speak, but did not speak English. No two clients were alike, yet the group had to include everyone.

A weekly psycho-educational experience called "Animal World" was proposed. The author chose something she was interested in and something she presumed would be of interest to most members. Animals were chosen because the author believed strongly in the connection people have to the animal kingdom and because animals were familiar to everyone. Yet no one in this group knew everything about the subject, including the author. The group was designed as an hour-long educational discussion about a different animal each week.

The purpose of the group was to add value to the daily programming, and thereby the clients attending the program, by increasing the clients' knowledge of the animal kingdom. Through the exploration of the animals, participants' understanding of the world would increase. As a group, the clients could better identify their emotions and daily obstacles through the animals that were introduced. In short, this group would use the animals as a non-threatening and non-personal "therapeutic vehicle" that would assist the clients in getting in touch with the personal aspects of their world, each other and themselves.

The Fashion Show

The Fashion Show group formed out of an existing Ladies Night group at a community center in the South Bronx of New York City. Ladies Night met on Tuesday evenings from 6:00-8:00 PM and was open to any female attending the community center. Ladies Night had been a group for three years, but had difficulty attracting a consistent follow-

ing. The members expressed interest in having a Ladies Night (a group that allows females to come together in a safe environment separate from males), but the content never seemed appropriate for all members. Part of the challenge was finding a subject matter that appealed to older adolescents (14-19), younger adolescents (12-13) and pre-adolescents (7-11), three groups of females that are in very different development stages. Group members came from different family structures (some intact, some abusive, some in foster care), different ethnic backgrounds (primarily Latino and African American), and were at various educational levels; some were affiliated with rival gangs and each brought their individual life experiences. It is also important to note the young women were from rival neighborhoods. The umbrella organization had two community centers, one in the South Bronx, and one in East Harlem, and this group incorporated young women from both.

After spending a few months struggling with getting this group off the ground, the author realized the entire approach needed to change. Something needed to transcend differences and allow the group members, as different as they all were, to come together. A colleague was a fashion designer and had the idea of putting on a fashion show. A plan was created to have the young women design and make the clothing as well as plan and execute a fashion show to be put on at the center.

The purpose of this group was to use the creation of a Fashion Show as a non-threatening and non-personal "therapeutic vehicle" that would assist the young women in getting in touch with the personal aspects of their world, each other and themselves. Additionally, the group aimed to develop such skills as teamwork, better hygiene, time management, completion of a task from start to finish, work ethics, and possible future education opportunities.

Tangible Content Is Non-Threatening

Both Animal World and The Fashion Show were based on tangible content. The realness of the material allowed group members to wrap their minds around the purpose of the group. The focus of the group was non-threatening. Often, therapy groups can disengage clients who are not ready to reveal themselves, but groups that use a non-personal therapeutic vehicle make it possible for members to feel at ease in the group setting. Anxiety levels go down when the focus is away from the personal and towards something more concrete and non-personal.

Clients in the Animal World group, for example, found a voice through the animals being discussed. Quiet and introverted clients who

did not usually speak (some because they were introverted, others because they had mental retardation and still others because of years of medication) felt comfortable asking concrete questions about animals because of the non-threatening nature of the subject. Members who were intimidated in therapeutic groups felt comforted by the visual subject matter.

An Animal World member named Jimmy rarely contributed to groups, especially large groups. Jimmy has been diagnosed with Schizoaffective disorder and has significant mental retardation. He is a sweet introverted client who attends program regularly and was thought to get a lot out of just being around others during the day. Workers encouraged Jimmy to join groups, which Jimmy did, but never with an active role. He seemed aware of his mental capabilities and wanted to hide behind his silence so as not to attract attention from other clients. He did not want people to know he could not read–claiming to forget his glasses when called upon–and he did not want people to know of his mental retardation.

However, in Animal World Jimmy began to speak up. He was in a different world during this group experience. He felt he could ask questions and contribute to discussion because animals were not a threatening topic. His ideas and thoughts were just as relevant as everyone's in the group.

One day, while the group discussed the intricate methods volunteers use to protect the baby sea turtles on their journey into the ocean from the beach, the group leader noticed Jimmy's hand was raised. Surprised, both because Jimmy had never contributed before and because the clients had not established the norm of raising hands in order to speak, the leader hesitantly called on Jimmy. Jimmy responded:

Jimmy: What about hawks?

Leader: (A bit surprised) What do you mean, Jimmy?

Jimmy: Well, you said the baby sea turtles have to make their way from the beach to the ocean, do they ever get eaten by hawks?

Leader: I think that is a great question and I don't know the answer. What do the rest of you think?

(The group talked it over and decided that birds of prey are likely predators of baby sea turtles. Jimmy listened as the group came to this decision.)

Jimmy: (Without raising his hand) What about Bald Eagles? (Hesitation) Can we learn about Bald Eagles one week?

Leader: I think that is a great suggestion, Jimmy. We can definitely learn about Bald Eagles next week. In fact, if any of you have animals you want to learn about, please share them with us.

And so began the tradition of group members requesting animals they wished to learn more about. The most quiet and most introverted member of the group started this group norm. Jimmy remained in his protected corner of the room, and from there he would speak up if he did not understand something or if he had an observation about a particular animal. He even shared a few personal experiences he had with animals. For Jimmy, the non-personal content created an environment that was non-threatening and this helped him find his voice.

The members of the Fashion Show group were also comforted by the tangible content. For these young women, support groups and self-esteem groups were the norm. The organization that sponsored the community center in which the group took place was dedicated to a holistic, community-based approach to helping families and children in need. The youth who attend the community center had been labeled as "at risk"–that is how they got to the centers in the first place. They each had been asked to attend support groups and were familiar with their structure. But many of the young women did not *want* a support group. They may have needed to boost their self-esteem, but that was a need they had not recognized.

The Fashion Show group offered something different. The members of this group were not threatened by the concept of designing and creating clothing. On the contrary, they were excited about the project. They knew the purpose of the group was to better their connections to themselves, their world and each other, but the tangible content of a fashion show was not an intimidating forum through which to connect. It was

fun, it was creative, it was new and, most importantly, it was not threatening to them.

Non-Personal Content Helps Clients Discuss Taboo Issues

Non-personal content acts as a therapeutic shield, helping clients talk about taboo issues. A particularly poignant moment occurred in the Animal World group during a seemingly mundane discussion about the Ostrich:

> Leader: Herman, you were asking about the Ostrich's life span earlier, why don't you read that section for us?
>
> Herman: Life Span: An Ostrich will live to be 50-75 years old in the wild, and about 40 years old in captivity.
>
> Megan: (interrupts and looks at the leader) Why does it live longer in the wild?
>
> Leader: I think that is a great question. And I don't know the answer to it. Does anyone in the group have a possible answer for Megan?
>
> Rose: Maybe they don't get enough exercise in captivity. They run really fast and maybe in the zoo they can't so they die earlier.
>
> Joan: Or maybe because they don't have their normal food . . . they have zoo food instead and they don't have their normal food so they can't prosper and grow.
>
> (The group members mulled over these suggestions and decided, as a group, that these were the reasons for the discrepancy, until . . .)
>
> Herman: Maybe they just aren't happy. Earlier this morning during our word group we were talking about the word inspire. Maybe in captivity they don't feel inspired because they don't have all of their normal things around them. They don't feel ambition to live and inspiration to live. Maybe the zoo environment doesn't keep their spirits up.
>
> (The group ingested what Herman just said.)

> Sal: When I was in Rockland State [hospital] for five years I didn't feel any inspiration. I lost my will to live and all of my ambition. I would just sit in the day room for hours and do nothing. I know if I was to have stayed there any longer I would have died much younger too.

This moment was valuable for the entire group and particularly for Sal. Sal had talked about his five-year stay in Rockland State before, but he typically talked about it as a positive experience, saying things like, "It was beautiful up there–the grounds with the trees and the flowers, and the people were nice and the food was great. I felt challenged by the work they had us doing like cleaning and cooking. . . . " Rarely had Sal said anything negative about his experience. Never had he revealed hardship as he did in this group. The non-personal content helped Sal talk about the taboo issue of being institutionalized.

A second example from Animal World illustrates how non-personal content helps clients discuss taboo issues. It is from a group focused on Peafowl (the proper name for both the male and female bird commonly known as Peacock, the male gender of Peafowl).

> During this group, the members were learning how the male flares his beautiful feathers to attract the female. Ruth, a cynical intelligent woman suffering from bi-polar disorder, uttered under her breath "Apparently no humans understand this." When asked to elaborate, Ruth began talking about how in our species the women are the ones who beautify themselves to attract a mate. From this statement, clients engaged in a ten minute conversation about societal gender stereotypes and how they are the same or different from male-female roles in the animal kingdom.

> Members shared personal experiences with not being "womanly or manly" enough. They talked about the need for women to wear make-up and the pressure for women, more than men, to remain thin. They talked about painted fingernails and the desire to have long luscious hair. The non-personal content increased the group cohesion and made it easier for clients to explore the taboo issue of gender classification.

The examples from Animal World were likely connections. Going from caged animals to "caged" people is a somewhat natural progres-

sion. The following example from The Fashion Show group is an example of the non-personal acting as a gateway to a less likely taboo issue.

> Before we began teaching the young women how to make clothes, we had two weeks of design sessions. During these sessions, the girls were told to transform a plain white t-shirt into something unique and all their own. They were given a piece of paper with a t-shirt template and markers, pencils and crayons so they could put their designs on paper before putting them on actual t-shirts.

> Some of the members drew hearts on their templates; others drew tributes to their favorite rap artist. Some drew a reference to their boyfriends and their best friends while others indicated places they would attach ribbon or lace or how they would tie the t-shirt on the side to make it more form fitting.

> One girl drew a t-shirt design that focused on remembering those who died in the 9/11 tragedy. She drew a picture of the American flag with the words "In memory of the people in the World Trade Center" written across the middle of the template. She too drew where she would cut the t-shirt or attach other material, but her t-shirt opened the group to something much more than t-shirt design.

> From this, the group engaged, on their own, in a discussion about the attacks and their feelings regarding safety. They talked about where they were on 9/11 and what they remembered from the day. They talked about violence in their respective neighborhoods and some even talked about family fights they had observed. The leader sat back and watched as this interaction occurred naturally. All of a sudden it did not matter what age they were, what their home life was or what their life experience had been. They found a personal connection to each other (a strong group cohesion) by way of a non-personal means. They were talking freely about taboo topics because the group content began as non-personal. As opposed to asking the young women to talk about their feelings regarding 9/11, the non-personal material of t-shirt design allowed the members to get there on their own.

Concrete Subject Matter Brings Clients to a Common Focus

Think about what happens at a professional baseball game. The stands are filled with tens of thousands of people from every conceiv-

able background, value system, family structure, life experience, etc. But what brings them together? What is the link that makes it okay for a black upper class millionaire to sit next to and "high-five" a white blue-collar construction worker rooting for the same team? The game! The game is a concrete thing onto which all fans in the stadium can focus. The team is a concrete thing around which a diverse group of people can rally. The concrete subject matter dissolves the differences and increases the cohesiveness of the fans–they are all there to focus on one common thing.

In the Animal World group, the clients focused on one animal each week. The animal is a concrete "thing" around which all members can direct their attention. This common focus resulted in greater cohesion among the group members because they were all talking about the same animal. An example from Animal World exhibits the power of bringing the group to one common focus:

> In a session discussing Panda Bears, the topic of extinction and being endangered came up. Wilma, an intelligent woman suffering from schizoaffective disorder who was new to the group because she did not typically attend the center on Wednesdays, stated she thought the amount of money scientists spent to help Pandas get reintroduced to the wild was illogical. She felt the amount of money spent vs. the results produced, did not compute and that the money would be better spent to help human kind. Rosa, a client suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, disagreed, saying she would rather have pandas in our animal population and thought all the resources necessary should be used to help this happen.

> This spurred a conversation about responsibility to fix something that we have destroyed. The group talked about how Panda Bears are struggling because of human destruction of their habitat. Members batted around the idea of it being our responsibility to make right what we wronged. This initiated the counter argument of whether it made sense to use so many important resources to right what we have wronged when those resources could be used to keep something else from going wrong.

> The members never came to an agreement about this, but they did connect this concept to their own lives.

> Joan: There just isn't enough money to save them all.

Ralph: Well, I agree with Rosa, we shouldn't use it all on Pandas.

Wilma: This is like the choice I made today. I usually don't come here on Wednesdays, but since I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow, I decided to come today. I gave up what I normally do today so I was sure I could meet with my worker. Life is filled with choices like this. You need to give up one thing so something else can happen.

Rosa: Yeah, and I want a new pair of shoes but can't buy them right now. I don't have enough money for the shoes *and* food for the week.

Herman: Choices have consequences . . . we can't do it all.

The members were able to focus on an external group subject matter (Panda Bears) and bring that external focus back to their own lives. The concrete subject matter brought clients to a common focus that helped the group members discuss personal life choices.

The Fashion Show group was also focused on one thing, the fashion show. This concrete focus allowed the young women to connect to one another. The Fashion Show group was made up of young women from the South Bronx and from East Harlem. The umbrella organization had two community centers–one in each neighborhood–and the author worked with young women from both. The concrete focus of fashion was able to create cohesiveness for the toughest of group differences–even rival neighborhoods.

In urban life one's "hood" is often viewed as an extended family. Frequently, youth have a sense of pride in their neighborhood. When the author told each set of young ladies that the Fashion Show group was going to merge to include young women from both the South Bronx and East Harlem, many did not like the idea. The first time the two groups came together, however, it became obvious that the concrete subject of putting on a fashion show dissolved the geographic barrier and increased group bond. The first week the author introduced the young women from East Harlem to the young women from the South Bronx the following occurred:

The young women were slow to warm up to one another. When the two groups merged, the girls from the South Bronx sat together on one side of the room and the girls from East Harlem sat on the

other. Most of the first session involved icebreakers and introductions designed to bring these two groups together. Towards the end of the first session, the leader noticed the rift between the groups was fading, but still visible.

The leader outlined the plan for the weeks to come. She wanted input from the girls and wanted to set the tone for what was to happen over the next few months. The leader informed the girls that each would be given enough basic fabric and materials to complete the project. It was further explained that the girls would have the opportunity to buy more expensive materials with the "money" they earned by exhibiting good behavior, good teamwork, and positive attitudes.

As the group was finishing, the leader noticed two young women from rival neighborhoods deep in conversation in the back of the room. They were jotting something down on paper. After what looked like an agreement was settled, the two young women–one from the South Bronx and one from East Harlem–approached the leader:

Maria: (hesitantly) Tammy, can we pair up?

Yasmin: Yeah, we want to hang together.

Maria: We want to make only one outfit each using all the material and money we make so we can make one *really* nice outfit each. We figure with more stuff we can make it look better.

Yasmin: Besides, it's more fun to work with someone else. And I don't really know Maria even though we've seen each other a hundred times before. They always bring the South Bronx with us (the East Harlem center), but we never really get to talk.

Maria: We thought we could get to know each other while we make our outfits together. We'll do one at a time, first Yasmin's then mine. But we'll work on each together.

   The leader agreed and the two young women spent the next three months working on their outfits together. They eventually exchanged numbers and began a friendship over the phone as well. They met up

each time the two community centers came together and continue that friendship today. It was the concrete subject of putting on a fashion show that dissolved the geographic barrier between these two girls. They had wanted an excuse to get to know one another. The concrete subject of putting on a fashion show was that excuse and it brought Maria and Yasmin to a common focus.

Specific Material Levels the Playing Field, Reducing Differences Among Group Members

Jimmy, the quiet introverted client from the Animal World group described in the first section, was diagnosed with Schizoaffective disorder and has significant mental retardation. These two difficulties kept Jimmy from participating in large groups. Jimmy did not participate because he did not feel he had the intelligence to contribute anything meaningful. It was not until the specific material of Animal World was introduced that Jimmy felt he had as much to offer as the other members. The example given in the first section exemplifies the ability of specific materials to level the playing field. For Jimmy, talking about animals leveled the intellectual and mental illness playing field.

In the Fashion Show group, Janice, an eleven-year-old girl, felt the same effects of the leveled playing field as Jimmy:

> Janice who was underdeveloped physically, mentally, and socially, often acted out during the After School Program and Ladies Night. She was never able to sit still and had difficulty sharing physical objects such as crayons, paper and pencils, let alone anything emotionally personal.

> Janice had been through hell and back during her young lifetime. She was sexually abused, resided in multiple foster homes, witnessed the death of her mother and much more. She had unbelievable survival strength but did not recognize this and instead alienated anyone who came close to her, be it physically or emotionally.

> Janice's horrific history kept her from succeeding in the after school program because her chronological age of 11 was not her exhibited developmental age. Therefore she was put in groups with children her age but always left feeling not good enough or left out. Janice was a classic example of the "scapegoat" because she had difficulty acting in a socially appropriate manner.

The Fashion Show group changed this for Janice. One day while the members sat together around a table and practiced how to sew, the leader noticed a difference. Janice was at the end of the table, and for the first time was able to sit with the rest of the group. There was no forced group conversation. No topic identified, no agenda. Janice felt protected by the specific material of the group because, for her, it leveled the developmental playing field. She could sit at the end of the table, and therefore be a part of the group, but was not asked to perform any tasks that she could not complete. Janice was able to excel by learning a skill that everyone else in the group was learning as well. She did not act out and, instead, sat and worked intently on her clothes.

The group's cohesion was at a point the leader had never seen. This cohesion was indicated by the group's tolerance of Janice's participation. Typically the group whined when Janice would attend or asked the leader to move her next to another group member. But during this session, Janice was "allowed" to sit with the group and was even able to work with another member. The leader smiled as Janice asked for Margaret's help in measuring her garment.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Social group work means working with highly heterogeneous groups of people, with individuals who come from diverse backgrounds and who bring with them diverse experiences, problems, strengths and accomplishments. When faced with the challenge of facilitating a group with such heterogeneity, one can either throw her hands up and walk away, or roll her sleeves up and get to work. A worker must hone in on that tangible link that will dissolve barriers and promote the group bond necessary for group work to begin.

It is not necessary for the group worker to love animals or to have design expertise. It is important for the worker to understand group work with a twist, to look at social group work through a lens of palpability and a concretized focus.

The value of this method of social group work is in the use of a "therapeutic vehicle"–in this case animals and a fashion show–and its implementation. The value is in the strategic and purposeful use of non-personal content to aid the group process and the group cohesion that will ultimately

help the members feel comfortable to reveal the personal. Any external or out-of-the-group subject matter can be used. The author recommends the worker choose content in which the worker is interested.

Equipped with the knowledge that external subject matter enhances heterogeneous group cohesiveness, social group work with just about any group of people can be performed. This paper has demonstrated that palpable content fosters the group bond necessary for quality group work because it is non-threatening, because it helps clients discuss taboo issues, because it brings clients to a common focus, and because it levels the playing field and reduces differences among group members.

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