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“Truth and Reconciliation”: Workers’ Fear of Conflict in Groups

Helene Kendler

ABSTRACT. This article explores workers’ fear of inadequacy or ineffectiveness in addressing conflict in groups and makes five recommendations for tasks and skills that workers must employ in addressing conflict. It focuses on conflict that can arise as a result of descriptive differences among members, and uses process excerpts from a New York City-based drop-in support group created in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. [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>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

No amount of professional experience will ever fully banish the group worker’s fear of addressing conflict in groups. Nevertheless, the distinctive potential and power of a group to foster personal growth and to allow mutual aid to thrive among its members absolutely relies upon the worker’s comfort and skill in doing precisely that.

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Workers with groups need to make conscious efforts to come to grips with their own fears and struggle to do so even after years of group work experience. Time and experience in leading groups surely and gradually help workers to overcome their aversion to conflict so as to be able to hone their skills and interventions. But time and experience alone are not enough to bring workers to a level of personal awareness and professional appreciation of conflict as a positive force in the life of a group. What is necessary is engagement in a process of introspection that gives workers permission to be honest about the depth and origins of their fears. Lack of such conscious awareness and exploration can lead a group worker not only to evade or suppress conflict in the group, but also to skirt the central questions of when, whether, and how to confront or manage it.

This article will explore the worker's fear of inadequacy or ineffectiveness in addressing group conflict. Five recommendations will be made for addressing conflict in groups: (1) do not cut off confrontation too early, before the members have arrived at the heart of the conflict; (2) do not allow confrontation to continue for too long, to a point at which members denigrate each other or to a point at which the nonparticipating members who silently observe the conflict are no longer able to tolerate its presence; (3) empathize with and validate the feelings of each member; (4) point out the commonalities in the group; (5) refer to the overarching purpose of the group.

The article draws on the author's own progress in addressing conflict. The group under discussion was a support group formed to help New Yorkers cope with trauma and stress in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. The conflict under discussion centered upon descriptive differences of race, ethnicity and age among group members.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Group Workers' Fear of Conflict

A great deal of literature addresses workers' fear of and discomfort with conflict in groups (Bernstein, 1973; Brandler and Roman, 1999; Mitchell and Mitchell, 1984; Northern and Kurland, 2001; Reid, 1988; Secemsky, Ahlman, and Robbins, 1999; Shulman, 1999; Steinberg, 1997, among others). Seasoned workers and social work students alike experience these fears, and the literature confirms this author's own ex-

perience that classroom exercises that focus on conflict management, observation of groups in the field, effective supervision, and ongoing opportunities to lead groups over time are all necessary to the worker's growth in this area.

Among the more disconcerting types of conflict workers must address is conflict that arises as a result of descriptive differences among members, especially with regard to race and ethnicity. If a worker who happens to be white tends to avoid or suppress conflict in general—conflict in and of itself, no matter what the content may be—then she will be particularly challenged by the emergence of conflict that has its roots in the long history of slavery and oppression that continues to have devastating consequences and implications for collective life in America today (Kurland and Salmon, 1992). Particular attention, therefore, to nonracist practice and to understanding the group as a microcosm of the larger society (as discussed by, among others, Brown and Mistry, 1994) is essential. Equally essential are self-awareness, the conscious exploration of one's attitudes toward people of different race and ethnicity, and comfort with one's own racial and cultural background, as discussed by Pinderhughes (1989).

Conflict and the Stages of Group Development

The literature is replete with delineations, descriptions, and discussions of the stages of development that occur in the life cycle of a group, whether they be single-session, short-term, or long-term groups (Berman-Rossi, 1993; Brandler and Roman, 1999; Garland, Jones, and Kolodny, 1973; Northern and Kurland, 2001, among others). For the purposes of this article, the author employs the three-stage model of beginnings, middles, and ends.

The literature is also replete with discussions of the inevitability of conflict in the life of every group, and the worker's need to recognize that conflict is—or can be, if addressed skillfully—a necessary, productive, positive, and functional force for the group as a whole and for its individual members (Bernstein, 1973; Brandler and Roman, 1999; Cowger, 1979; Garvin, 1997; Kormanski, 1982; Middleman and Wood, 1990; Mitchell and Mitchell, 1984; Mondros, Woodrow, and Weinstein, 1992; Northern and Kurland, 2001; Rybak and Brown, 1997; Steinberg, 1997; Wall and Nolan, 1987; Yalom, 1995). It discusses the skills and attitudes the worker must possess to explore conflict in a way that will enhance both the members' interactions with each other and each member's self-awareness and personal relationships outside of the

group. With the basic understanding that the worker must strive at all times to ensure the healthy functioning of the group-as-a-whole even as she must attend to the situations and responses of each individual member, the literature emphasizes that the worker's task is to: minimize conflict in the beginning stage; make productive use of conflict when it occurs more overtly in the middle stage; and, at the end stage, assist the members in recognizing and incorporating the growth and interpersonal skills they have gained, which would include gains made as a result of successfully negotiating conflict among themselves.

When the social work literature notes that it is not uncommon for group workers to fear the emergence of conflict in the groups they lead, it does not usually look at narratives that delve into the origins or history of an individual worker's fears. This article will not do so, either. However, it is important to emphasize that neither literature, nor classroom, nor agency supervision, nor years of experience in leading groups are enough to vanquish these fears. Moreover, it may not be necessary or even possible to vanquish them fully. To advance one's practice and sharpen one's skills, it is necessary that workers give themselves permission to be honest about how paralyzing these fears can be; to admit that these fears are widespread, though their origins and the degree of difficulty they pose will be quite different and unique from one worker to the next; and to recognize the extent to which they lead many social workers to avoid group work entirely.

THE WORKER'S FEAR OF INADEQUACY OR INEFFECTIVENESS IN ADDRESSING CONFLICT

Many group workers worry that they will be neither courageous nor skillful enough to help members explore conflict in a productive way when it arises. They are concerned that they will not be able to prevent members from hurting each other's feelings or insulting each other and that, therefore, they will not be able to foster group trust and cohesion. Moreover, when the nature of a particular conflict involves the expression of racial differences, workers' fears of inadequacy multiply: What if they mishandle the potentially explosive material that is being presented? If they are white social workers, they may fear that their attention to and exploration of racial bias and issues of power and discrimination have not gone far enough or deep enough, and that their efforts to counter the ills and consequences of white-skin privilege when working with groups of mixed membership with regard to race,

class, or ethnicity will prove to be inadequate or ineffective in helping the members to address the strong and deep-seated conflicts that such differences can generate. There is the particular fear that this kind of conflict will escalate quickly into derogatory language, or shouting without listening, or scornful interactions among members.

The following excerpts are taken from successive meetings of a weekly, open, drop-in group led by two workers, one of whom is the author of this article. From this point on, the author will use the first person in the description and discussion of her work with this group.

The needs of the members and the purpose of the group arose in response to the very subject that is at the heart of this article—conflict, but on a global scale. The group was formed in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. The agency setting was an industry-related employee assistance program. The group's purpose was threefold: to help people to understand the range and normalcy of, and learn how to lessen the symptoms of, acute stress and trauma that they were experiencing in the wake of the attacks; to lessen their isolation and fear; and to provide support and mutual aid to each other as they attempted to move through this very dark time. The members were also coping with the additional stress of lost employment (their industry was significantly affected by the attacks and many people lost their jobs as a result).

Primitive aggressive instincts of rage and hatred—that were *not* under control and *were* to be feared when they are let loose in the world—had affected us all. I was struggling with many of the same symptoms and emotions that the members were dealing with. But being in the role of worker in the group was an antidote of sorts. It allowed me to participate in a communal response to the devastation, to step into my role so as to help others instead of remaining overwhelmed within. But this did not mean that my fears of conflict were gone—far from it! Because the aim of the group was to help the members to quell their fear, to manage stress and anxiety, and to help them take care of and nurture themselves, I was particularly worried that conflict or confrontation would be counterproductive and antithetical to the group's purpose. The group's drop-in format meant that my co-leader and I had to approach each meeting as if it were a single-session group. We could not know from one week to the next who would attend, and we were required to maintain a higher level of worker activity and intervention than would have been desirable in a long-term, closed group format.

During the eighth and ninth group meetings excerpted below, my co-leader was on vacation and so I was—for the first time since the

group's inception—the sole worker. This magnified my fear of conflict, because if it did arise I knew that I would need to help the members address it without my co-leader's assistance.

Conflict *did* arise, a potentially explosive conflict related to descriptive differences among members with regard to age and race. Not only were the members able to withstand it but also they emerged from it and continued to process it in subsequent sessions in ways that actually strengthened the group's cohesion and their own ability to provide mutual aid in powerful ways. Rather than break apart as I had feared it might, the group emerged stronger than ever, and this was a direct result of having faced the conflict productively and honestly.

This was made possible in part because, over the previous weeks of this group's existence, a core group of five members kept returning. When new members were present (usually for anywhere from one to three sessions), the core group made room for and paid attention to them, and supported them without losing focus. So these five people got to know each other and, by the time of the excerpts below, they had entered a middle stage in the way they interacted.

Garvin (1997, pp. 91-92) notes that in a drop-in group of this sort, "[d]uring the 'power and control stage' when conflict is high, a new member might heighten the conflict." This is illustrated in the following excerpt, in which a first-time attendee provides the group with the spark that brings into the open a conflict that had begun to simmer in earlier meetings. For the sake of the newly arrived member, I had to (at least loosely) hold to a single-session concept that continued to require a higher level of worker activity, just as in the beginning stage of an ongoing group. As will be seen, this situation influenced the more active, worker-driven level of intervention I chose to employ.

In the eighth session, which I will recount and then examine, the five core members—Alan, Phyllis, Barbara, Sandra, and Lisa—were discussing what the past week had been like for each of them. A third of the way into the meeting, Mireille, who had not attended before, entered the room and apologized for being late. I welcomed her, and we all introduced ourselves and brought her in on what we had been discussing. Then I asked if she would like to tell us what brought her to the group that day. She was eager to talk and described a terrible trauma: She had been right across the street from the World Trade Center on the morning of 9/11, and her escape had been harrowing. The group was full of empathy and support for her, and she wrote down some of the suggestions people gave her for finding ways to relax, sleep better, etc. Then she

went on to tell the group what had happened to her twenty minutes before the first plane hit:

Mireille told us that she had been handing out literature for a candidate in the mayoral primary that was supposed to take place that day. "I was doing what I was legally entitled to do, standing where I was legally allowed to stand. But a white policeman came over and began to harass me. He tried to get me to move even though I was in the right spot and wasn't in anyone's way." Mireille is from Curacao, and as she spoke, both Barbara and Phyllis, who are African American, nodded knowingly: They were familiar with this. Mireille continued, "You know, all my life, for whomever I'm facing, I am that person's 'other.' In fact, I am *everyone's* 'other.'" Barbara and Phyllis continued to nod, they understood this, too. I also nodded once, silently encouraging her to continue on with this topic. Alan, Sandra, and Lisa, all of whom are white, were listening and looking at her but weren't nodding.

At this point, I scanned the group and became aware that I, the worker, was the only white person in the room who was displaying non-verbal understanding of Mireille's experience. I also knew, from previous sessions, that Sandra could at times display a lack of awareness of or sensitivity to the concerns and points of view that nonwhite members would share with the group, and I began to sense that she and Mireille, both of whom had strong and compelling personalities, were destined to have difficulty with each other. Despite my fears, I forced myself *not* to divert the group from this possibility. I continued to scan and listen as Sandra, who at 68, was the oldest member of the group (the other women were in their late twenties to late forties, and Alan had just turned fifty), broke in and interrupted Mireille:

With a quizzical look on her face, Sandra interrupted Mireille and said, in a challenging rather than questioning tone of voice, "I'm not sure what you mean by 'the other,' or 'everyone's other.' I'm not sure I understand what you *mean*." There was a silence. Phyllis and Barbara looked at Sandra, their expressions now neutral. Neither they nor Mireille responded, and neither did Alan or Lisa, who were looking into their laps. I scanned the group and waited a little more, and then Mireille—who had been looking at Sandra with a kind of 'what planet do you live on?' expression—fixed me with a 'please clue her in' look of exasperation.

At this point I remembered the importance of fostering open communication in groups, of demanding work from the members, and of redirecting messages and amplifying subtle messages. I realized I needed to recognize the meaning of Mireille's "please clue her in" facial expression to redirect this to Sandra and then out to the group so that its meaning could be explored. However, overriding this knowledge was the equally important awareness that for Mireille this was a first meeting, a beginning stage *for her*, and I sensed that she was trying not to yell at Sandra; and I was also mindful that, for the other members, while the dynamic of the group had changed to reflect Mireille's presence, the purpose of the group remained the same for everyone in the room: to reduce stress and trauma. So, in the absence of any member responding to my scan of the group, I decided to clarify for Sandra what Mireille had said, in a way that would demonstrate understanding and empathy for Mireille:

"I think you're talking about race and ethnicity, aren't you, Mireille? That you've been perceived and treated as an 'other' many times in your life?" She smiled broadly at this, nodded emphatically and said, "That's right. And not only by white people, I must add. No matter *who* I'm standing in front of, even another person of color, I'm somehow the strange one, the other. Because it's not only about race: No one seems to be familiar with my accent." Barbara and Phyllis listened carefully and smiled and nodded again; the other members were listening, too, but with less nonverbal display of support or understanding. "And right now, in my job, I'm having a problem with a supervisor, a white supervisor, who might end up promoting me but who really doesn't *want* to promote me. The other managers who know my performance, and who are also white, they are pulling for me very much, they want him to promote me. But after a meeting with me, he said, 'What kind of name is that—MEE-RAY? I don't understand such a name.' I told him, 'That is my name—my real name, and I like my name.' But he said, 'Why can't you change it to Mary or Marie, or something?'" At hearing this we all, including Sandra, empathized with her outrage.

For the time being, I felt that some tension had been released and an explosion had been averted. Mireille had clarified that there were white people in her office who were her allies, and that she had also, at times, been treated as an outsider by other people of color. Sandra and the

other white members were able to join in wholeheartedly with Barbara and Phyllis in displaying empathy and support for the discrimination Mireille was encountering from her supervisor. The group as a whole had been able to empathize with her despite the tensions that had arisen. Inwardly, however, I continued to observe the split in the circle: The three members of color were seated next to each other; the facial expressions and body language of Alan and Lisa, who were routinely the more quiet members of the group, showed that they were more relaxed and engaged again but still a bit wary; and Mireille and Sandra now avoided looking at each other. And I avoided a demand for the group to look more closely at the dynamic that had occurred earlier. While this avoidance was prompted by my chronic fear of conflict, I was able to rationalize it to myself by focusing on providing support for the members, all of whom still suffered from, among other things, sleep disturbance, various levels of depression, crying spells, the inability to concentrate, fear of crowds and of air travel, lack of pleasure or interest in the activities they used to enjoy, and difficulty in motivating themselves to look for work.

As this session progressed, however, I was no longer able to justify continued avoidance of conflict. I finally recognized and felt, on a visceral level, that good practice *demand*ed two things of me in my role as the worker: (1) *to allow confrontation between members and not cut it off too early* and, simultaneously, (2) *to not allow the confrontation to continue to a point at which it would be detrimental to the adaptive functioning of the group-as-a-whole*:

Later on, toward the end of the meeting, Sandra told us about something that happened to her yesterday that really upset her. "Two 12-year-old boys started harassing me on the bus." She said that they kept at her and "their tones were very derisive when they said that they couldn't understand why an old woman like me would wear a sweatshirt that had an MTV logo on it. So I explained to them that one of my relatives works for MTV and had sent it to me as a gift, and so I'm wearing it. And then I got *really* scared because they *followed me off the bus*." Her eyes welled up with tears. "They kept talking to me and crowding me, and I kept walking faster but they kept up with me, laughing and shouting at me, and I didn't know what I was going to do!" Mireille's hackles were rising, she was restless, trying to contain herself. Barbara and Phyllis were looking at Sandra but seemed distant and unresponsive, both of them were sitting with their arms tightly crossed.

Alan and Lisa looked at Sandra and nodded their quiet support. Finally, Mireille broke in and said, with real irritation in her voice, "I don't get it: What were you *worried* about? They don't sound threatening to me—they were just *children*." Now Barbara and Phyllis became animated, lowering their arms and leaning forward in their seats. Throughout the weeks, Barbara had consistently been the most reflective, calm, and empathetic member of the group. But now, raising her voice at Sandra, she said, "*That's right*—it sounds as if they were just being friendly and good-humored, trying to communicate with you. What were you so *frightened of?*" Sandra sputtered in indignation and raised her voice, too, saying, "Maybe you're not *hearing* me and, by the way, these boys were *white*. And I *said*, they got off the bus when I did and they *followed me* down the street and kept at me, and they were *not* just having fun." But Mireille, Phyllis, and Barbara were talking over her, not listening anymore, and they continued to express skepticism at her interpretation of this incident. I listened and let their exchange continue for a little while longer. I noticed that Alan and Lisa, who were able to tolerate this at first, retreated far back into their seats now and looked down again.

During this exchange, it was obvious and instantly clear that as soon as Sandra had mentioned "two boys," Phyllis, Barbara, and Mireille assumed she was talking about young black men. Sandra's earlier lack of understanding of Mireille's description of herself as "the other" was the precursor to this exchange in which Sandra was being perceived as having a prejudice toward and fear of young black men. At this moment, Barbara and Phyllis, who were usually the two most gentle and supportive members of the core group, did not *want* to understand or empathize with Sandra's feelings of vulnerability as an older woman on the street. I understood what motivated them, and I understood that this conflict had been inevitable and should not be suppressed. At the same time, as Sandra continued to be attacked and shouted down by three members at once, I also understood that I could not let it go on much longer or farther. Also, I observed that Alan and Lisa wanted to "check out," they had reached a point of withdrawal. In addition, the group was supposed to end in just a few minutes.

Realizing all of this, I felt a great deal of fear and anxiety that paralyzed my thoughts about how to intervene properly. All I could think was, "Oh, no, oh, no: This kind of shouting and anger has *never* occurred between these members before, and I'm *all alone* with it, and it's

supposed to be a *trauma* group, for heaven's sake! I am *not up to this*, it's getting *totally away* from me—I've *really* screwed up, and there's no *time* left to this session. How am I going to retrieve this group?" But then, having reached its peak, fear suddenly drained away. The next thoughts were, "Okay, you know what? My fear is *not important*, it is irrelevant, it is beside the point here: I'm not a helpless little child anymore. *The group* is what's important. *These people*. Just do it, do your job." I decided to take the explanation-of-group-process route, especially because not only was there little time left in the session to have the members engage in exploration, but also because I knew that this group was, in fact, the first support group experience that most of the members had ever participated in:

I looked around at everyone with concern on my face and said, "You know, we're coming to the end of the meeting, and given this turn in our discussion, I have to say a few things here. This is a group whose aim is for you to feel better when you *leave* the room than when you *entered* it. Now, I don't know how everyone else is feeling at the moment, but *I'm* feeling quite a bit of tension." As I said this, I placed my hand on my stomach, a gesture that members had used many times when describing their own anxiety. I continued, "You know, one of the things about groups is that whatever goes on for any of us out in the world is exactly what we bring with us into the group, into the room." People nodded at this. "And I've noticed in the last week or so, as I go back and forth around the city, that although people are still cooperating with each other and pulling together to help each other out, part of the 'honeymoon' is over. People are showing each other on the subway again, yelling at each other more—sometimes *even more* than before September 11th, if you can believe that." People smiled and chuckled at this, recognizing it for themselves. "Because we're all still reeling from the 11th, and then from the anthrax scares, even though that's a remote threat. So there's all this fear and uncertainty in the air, it keeps getting to us."

In this opening part of the statement, I pointed out the *commonalities* in the group, the daily conditions of life in New York City to which all members were being subjected since the 9/11 attacks. As I continued on, I *empathized with and validated the feelings of each member* while continuing to observe aloud the commonalities:

I looked around and nodded at each person as I named her: "What I've heard in this room today is that Sandra certainly was the victim of age discrimination by two young men on a bus, and they frightened her. I know I'd be frightened if it had happened to me." Sandra nodded at this. "And what I've also heard is that Mireille, Barbara, and Phyllis all know what it's like to be victimized by racism." All three nodded at this. "So Sandra was targeted. And Mireille was targeted." Mireille nodded at this. I looked around the table at each person and said, slowly, "And on September 11th, *all of us* were targeted." Now everyone nodded. "So, I'm not surprised that these conflicts that existed long before September 11th—this is America, after all—have entered our discussion today. We can see them in the mayoral election we just had, in which all of the racial and ethnic tensions we've always had in this city have erupted in a very fresh way, on the surface." At this, Lisa, Mireille, Barbara, and Phyllis nodded emphatically; Sandra nodded, too, but less emphatically; Alan was still looking at his lap, but at least he was now nodding slightly and seemed less tense.

Finally, in the next excerpt, *I referred to the overarching purpose of the group*. I also ended with a specific question to be answered in a round-robin format. I did this to encourage group cohesion by gently demanding non-interruptive participation from all members, and also to specifically invite participation from Alan and Lisa, who had remained quiet throughout the confrontation:

"So all of this that's a part of our lives will be here in the room with us. And that's okay, that's real, we can work with it. But right now, because it's part of my job to help you talk about these things, I must apologize that I wasn't able to help you do so earlier in the meeting, and here we are now with our time growing short. So, I hope you'll return next week. We can pick up where we left off, or else we'll just see where we all are then. We'll start where we need to, with what's most pressing for people at the time of the next meeting. . . . But right now, because the *purpose* of this group is *supposed to be* to help people deal with the stress that we're going through,"—and now I purposely smiled with a somewhat rueful expression, and everyone smiled back and laughed a little—"I'd like to have some sort of ending ritual just for today. So, can we re-focus. . . . I'd like to ask each person to say two things, just two brief sentences: First, name one thing that you got out of the group to-

day"—at this, everyone laughed a little louder, acknowledging the difficulty of what had happened and trying to relieve the tension. I added, smiling at my own expense, "whether what you got here today was good, bad, or indifferent, *whatever* it is, you can say it; and second, tell the group one enjoyable or positive thing that you're going to do *for yourself* either tonight or this weekend in order to feel good and take good care of yourself." I scanned the group and saw hesitation, so I added, in a humorously grudging tone, "Okay, I'll start." People chuckled, tacitly agreeing that this was a pretty awkward, artificial ending, and so it was only fair that I was to be punished by having to go first. I said, "What I got out of this group is how grateful I am for everyone's presence, that each of you came here today and expressed yourselves in an honest way." Each member participated in this ritual. But as they left, my new fear was that none of them would return.

I was wrong. Not only did the members return the following week, but also they expressed their different experiences and worldviews more openly and directly than ever before during the life of this group. In this ninth session, I also observed a more profound and respectful level of engagement among them, even as their sometimes strongly divergent feelings and opinions were aired and explored. At one point, a former member who had returned said, "We're all now learning how to deal with this newer, higher level of anxiety for the first time in our lives, a level that may never end." While I responded to this by helping the group to damp down the anxiety and talk to each other about how to cope with it, I could see that Barbara was thinking over the member's statement; she seemed to want to say something but looked hesitant to do so. I gestured toward her with a questioning look on my face, to invite her to speak without pressuring her to do so:

In her usual gentle, thoughtful voice, Barbara said, "Well, you know—and everyone *please* understand that this is *not* a criticism—Americans are not used to feeling uncomfortable." I asked her to say more, and if she was referring to both physical and psychological discomfort. She said, "Yes, I mean both." She told us of her travels around the world and cited some conditions of life in other countries she was familiar with, "such as Mali, where they wash their clothes on stones and don't complain about it. And I was also in South Africa during the time of that panel after apartheid was over, those public hearings where people talked about the

horrendous things that had been done to them, all the killings and watching their children die in front of them, and terrible things like that—now, what was the *name* of that commission, what was it?" All of the members were very involved, even riveted to what she had said. She struggled to remember the name and I waited longer, hoping that one of the members would recall it and say it aloud. But no one did. So I asked, "Are you talking about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?" She smiled broadly and said, "Yes, that's it!" And now I saw Mireille smiling and nodding emphatically at this, and so was everyone else.

Inwardly, quietly, I marveled at this. During the entire session that day, "truth and reconciliation" were what the members had been demonstrating to and with each other after the previous week's angry confrontation. I realized that Barbara's own recollection of this post-apartheid commission was the manifest content for the other, latent content that had been carried over from the prior session. This ninth-session moment was not overtly dramatic as the eighth-session confrontation had been, but it was just as palpable. For the rest of the session, the members continued to explore their differences, political and otherwise, but they were doing it with mutual respect. They listened to each other, took each other seriously. There was plenty of disagreement about many things, including the true meaning, for each member, of the word "healing."

In the weeks to follow, the atmosphere of mutual aid and the depth of support for each person's problems deepened in proportion to the increasing freedom with which people felt it was safe to disagree with each other about "what Americans feel" and "what America stands for" and "what we're doing in Afghanistan." One thing that remained consistent was the growing bond between the members and the level of sensitivity they displayed when any one of them felt distress, anxiety, or grief. Slowly, everyone began to travel out of town again on planes, trains, and even boats. Slowly, a couple of people felt able to look for work. Gradually, Sandra did not feel the need to monopolize the group, and even Alan spoke up more. At the penultimate meeting, Sandra described an incident that occurred when she took a plane flight to visit her daughter the previous week:

Sandra told the group, "I was *profiled* at the airport security check—they stopped me and had me remove my shoes to see if I had a *bomb* in them. And let me tell you, I was really insulted! I

mean, it doesn't feel good to be profiled in this way!" She looked directly at Barbara and Phyllis as she said this. Barbara replied with an empathetic tone and a supportive remark. Phyllis said, "I can assure you that they didn't pick you out for any particular reason and that you shouldn't take it personally. I know this because one of my friends is a flight attendant and she told me what their process is, and even *she* was stopped recently, even though she was wearing her uniform and her airline identification badge and everything. She said that before each flight the security people are told numerically who to stop—meaning, 'stop every fifth person in the line' and so on. They have a formula. When my friend was stopped, she was angry and insulted, too." Sandra seemed reassured by this; she calmed down.

So the subtext of race had surfaced again with Sandra's talk of being "profiled," and those members who truly had been profiled all their lives came to her aid in this session. A few weeks ago, they had been very angry at her. Now they seemed to accept her despite her blind spots. Perhaps, however awkward it sounded, her use of the word "profile" was meant, consciously or not, to tell them that she understood, at least a little. The differences were there, the conflicts remained, but the tones and responses had opened up.

Toward the end of that meeting, there was no conflict whatsoever about something else that Sandra said: "The feeling I get when I walk into this room and meet with this group is the feeling of slipping into an old pair of slippers—it feels safe, warm, and comfortable. Coming here every week, listening to everyone and being part of this group, finding in this group such stimulating people with so many ideas, I have to say, I feel humbled, by what we've shared and what it's been possible to talk about here. It's been a lesson for me." Everyone took this in, everyone nodded. Their ability to work with, and in spite of, their conflicts and differences was an essential element that made her statement true.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Five recommendations have been illustrated here for addressing conflict in groups: the worker must not cut off confrontation too early, nor should she allow it to continue unchecked; she must empathize with and validate the feelings of each member, point out the commonalities in the group, and refer back to the overarching purpose of the group.

Some additional observations and conclusions can be made. If the worker is overly focused on her fears, she will not only be limited in her ability to address conflict, but she also may be unable to acknowledge its very presence and will suppress or evade it. Group workers would benefit from a more honest and open discussion among peers and supervisors of just how profound and reflexive some of these fears are. The more permission we give each other to be afraid and to explore the origins of our fears, the better able each of us will be to observe those moments when fear gets in the way of good practice. Such a focused exploration can assist the worker to increase her comfort level. The more comfortable she becomes, the better able she will be to work with conflict effectively. She will then have the privilege of witnessing how the members not only can withstand conflict but also can learn from it and use it to achieve group purpose. The literature is correct when it emphasizes that the worker's response to the emergence of conflict must depend on the stage of the group. The worker must continually assess the specific needs and circumstances of each group, and each group session; she must set the tone that will allow the members to explore conflicts and confront each other with respect and honesty when the moment is ripe for this.

Good social work practice is a lifelong pursuit. The nature of our work guarantees that we will be constantly challenged by our fears, emotions, and personal histories. If the worker is consumed by her fears and they remain unexamined, then her need to avoid conflict will trump the needs of the group. For the members to immerse themselves fully in the group process and reap the benefits of interpersonal growth and mutual aid that are the hallmarks of a successful group, the worker must help them explore not only what brings them together but also what keeps them apart. Only then will each member learn what the others have to teach.

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