

Purpose:
A Misunderstood
and Misused Keystone
of Group Work Practice

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines the use of Purpose in social group work practice. It identifies and discusses six common mistakes that practitioners often make in regard to this central concept. A group example is used to illustrate the paper's content. The paper's intent is to enhance workers' understanding of and ability to use Purpose skillfully in their work with groups. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com]*

Purpose is a concept in group work that is much emphasized in the literature but often misunderstood or even overlooked in actual practice. Attention to the development of clarity of group purpose frequently is neglected. One can get a sense of this neglect by asking practitioners: "What is the purpose of your group?" Often they will be unable to answer such a question, or their responses will be fuzzy or vague. The sad fact is that lack of clarity of purpose contributes mightily to the premature demise of many social work groups. Conversely, a clearly defined purpose is the powerful ally of group workers and members alike. It is crucial to the success of the groups with which we work.

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This paper will examine the use of Purpose in social group work practice. It will focus on identifying mistakes that practitioners frequently make regard to Purpose. A group example will be used to illustrate the paper's content. The paper's intent is to enhance workers' understanding of Purpose and their ability to use Purpose skillfully in their practice with groups.

A group's Purpose is defined as the ends which the group collectively pursue. It describes where the group will go—the group's aims and ultimate destination. Within the common group Purpose, individual group members may have specific expectations, individual hopes, and goals that they hope to achieve as a result of their participation in the group. These individual goals are encompassed within the overarching Purpose of the group. The Purpose of a group for blind elderly persons, for example, may be to help its members achieve increased satisfaction in their daily lives. Given that group Purpose is the personal or individual goal for one member may be to interact more with her family members while the individual goal for another member may be to overcome her fears of leaving her apartment by herself. "Individual goals reflect those personal needs and desires that group members bring to the group, and group purpose is the common cause that ties those needs and desires together" (Steinberg, 1997, p. 56).

Most textbooks on group work practice view clarity of Purpose as essential. (See, for example, Brandler and Roman, 1991, chapter 5; Henry, 1990, pp. 43-49; Glassman and Kates, 1990, p. 76; Garvin, 1997, pp. 2, 3, 51; Papell and Rothman, 1980, pp. 5-23; Malekoff, 1997, pp. 59-63; Shulman, 1994, chapter 9; Steinberg, 1997, pp. 52-62; Hartford, 1971, chapters 1 and 2; Northen, 1988, pp. 117-121.) Northen's statement (1988) well represents the view of Purpose that is prevalent in the group work literature. She states, "Clarity of purpose is essential: it provides the basic guide for both workers and the members of the group. It provides a framework for the worker's analytic and treatment activities and becomes a primary determinant of the group's motivation and focus" (p. 119). Research studies have substantiated the importance of clarity of Purpose to a group's success. (See, for example, Schmidt, 1969; Garvin, 1968, 1969; Main, 1964.)

Given the literature's unanimity of emphasis on Purpose, the misuse of Purpose in actual practice with groups is surprising. The mistakes that practitioners make reflect errors in workers' conceptualizations of Purpose and their actual practice interventions in regard to group purpose. This paper focuses on six common mistakes of practitioners:

1. Practitioners promote a group Purpose without adequate consideration of client need.
2. Practitioners confuse group Purpose with group content.

3. Practitioners state group Purpose at such a high level of generality that it is vague and meaningless and, therefore, provides little direction for the group.
4. Practitioners are reluctant to share with the members *their* perceptions and ideas about the group's Purpose.
5. Practitioners function with a hidden Purpose in mind that they do not share with the group.
6. Practitioners do not understand Purpose as a dynamic, evolving concept that changes over the life of the group. Instead, they view Purpose as static and fixed.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CLIENT NEED AND GROUP PURPOSE

When the first thought about the formation of a new group comes into the mind of the practitioner, it usually is stimulated by the worker's perception of client need. It is, in fact, client need that is the foundation upon which a meaningful group is built. Kurland (1982), in her pregroup planning model, emphasizes the centrality of need as the basis for the development of clarity of Purpose. Group Purpose evolves and flows from a need that is felt and understood by members and worker alike and the mutual wish to meet this need. If need is not established, understood and accepted by members, Purpose will be based on false premises and the group will fail.

A common error of workers in attempting to form new groups is to disregard the perceptions that potential members have about what they need. Workers often formulate Purpose on their own without involving potential group members in the assessment of need that is so central to the determination of a group's Purpose. At other times, workers may articulate a group Purpose without ever taking into consideration the felt needs of potential members. Even if a group's Purpose can be stated clearly, if that Purpose is not connected integrally to members' perceptions of what they want and need, if need is not identified, understood and acknowledged by members, the group is doomed to failure.

The failure may occur in the worker's inability to recruit members for the group s/he has planned. The worker may be unsuccessful in getting the group off the ground because s/he is unable to help potential members see how this group connects with their concerns, how the group might be helpful to them. Even if the group does begin, it will often disintegrate after a few meetings. Members will stop coming if they view the group as unconnected to their real needs and interests.

When a potential member is being recruited for a group, s/he may—and should—ask, "Why should I join this group? What is in it for me? What will it

do for me? Will it help me?" If these questions cannot be responded to, has not been established and no clear Purpose can evolve.

How do workers go about assessing need? Above all else, they need "hang out" and talk with potential clients. What do clients seem to want? What are their concerns? What kinds of problems or issues do they struggle with? Workers need to also talk with persons in the community (however, community is defined) and with relevant others (e.g., teachers, nurses, parents). They need to "tune in," to "imaginatively consider," to look at what has been done before, at what services currently exist and at what is lacking. They need to look for themes, things people say again and again. Workers need to formulate some ideas and then talk with people again—potential clients, persons in the community, other workers, relevant others—to test their tentative ideas, to see if they "click." Workers cannot begin to formulate Purpose without first knowing the need.

CONFUSING PURPOSE AND CONTENT

Practitioners frequently confuse group Purpose with group content. One way they identify the group's content—what the group will do—as its Purpose. They confuse means and ends, identifying the group's means as ends in and of themselves. Such confusion is evident in statements such as: "The Purpose of this group is to talk about difficulties being a single parent," or "The Purpose of this group is for members to express and explore their feelings about being caregivers of persons with Huntington's Disease," or "The Purpose of this group is to help new foster parents learn about regulations and entitlements of the foster care system."

In each of these statements, what is identified as Purpose (to talk about . . . to explore . . . to learn about . . .) actually is the group's content (i.e., what the group will do). Essential to the identification of a group's Purpose is a statement of the ends toward which the group will strive. In what ways, for example, is it hoped that talking about difficulties will be helpful to the single parents who are members of the group? Similarly, in what ways will expression and exploration of feelings be helpful to group members who are caregivers of persons with Huntington's Disease? What are the reasons that learning about the system's rules and entitlements is important to new foster parents? Knowing the reasons that they are being asked to talk, to express, to explore, to learn, and the ways in which it is thought that such talk, expression, exploration and learning might be helpful to them is crucial to the members of the groups with which we work. Members' motivation and the quality of their participation are greatly enhanced when they have a clear understanding. Knowing *what* they are going to do is not enough. They need to understand *why* they are doing it. Members' willingness to engage with

heartedly in the work of the group, especially at times when that work is painful or difficult for them, increases remarkably when they view what the group does and what they are being asked to do as purposeful and designed to accomplish specific ends. Having a clearly defined purpose also offers the group a tangible standard to be used in evaluating the success of its work.

PURPOSE THAT IS OVERLY GENERAL

A third mistake on the part of the practitioners is to state the group's Purpose at such a high level of generality that it means little to the group and its members. To merely say that a group's Purpose is socialization or education or therapy or support or counseling or self-help is not enough. Such statements may hint at what a group is about, but they are so global that group members cannot turn to them to find direction. Such generality does not provide focus. It does not allow for the inclusion of the goals of individual members nor provide a structure that is clear enough to evaluate the work of the group.

The degree of specificity of Purpose may differ, depending on the theoretical approach of the practitioner. Those whose practice is rooted in behavioral theory, for example, may advocate for greater specificity of Purpose, while for those whose practice is rooted in humanistic/developmental theory a more general statement of Purpose may suffice. The authors of this paper support a middle road here, on the one hand believing that a statement of Purpose that is overly specific may unnecessarily limit a group and its members and, on the other hand, seeing a statement of Purpose that is overly general as not providing a group and its members with the direction and framework that are necessary. In our experience, however, it is the overly general statements of Purpose that predominate.

Within such general purposes as socialization or therapy or support, it is necessary to define the meaning of these terms for the particular group with which one is working. The practitioner needs to ask her/himself what socialization or therapy or support would really look like in the particular group and for the particular group members with whom s/he is working. Socialization in one group, for example, might mean helping members to be able to more effectively listen to and interact with their peers, while in another group it might mean helping members to express anger and assert themselves in more constructive ways. Defining the meaning of a broad term such as socialization for a particular group and its members has important implications for the group's content. It also allows both the practitioner and the group members to know when the group's Purpose is being achieved. Thus, a statement of Purpose that has real meaning for a group and its members can serve to spur members toward its achievement.

RELUCTANCE OF THE WORKER TO SHARE IDEAS

A fourth mistake that practitioners often make in regard to Purpose is to share their thinking about the group's Purpose with the group members. Instead, workers often ask open-ended questions of the group, such as "What do you think the Purpose of this group should be?" Often, they sit quietly and say nothing while members struggle among themselves to figure out the group's Purpose. Such lack of help from the worker usually results in long and highly uncomfortable silences among the group members, especially in the beginning stage of the group, or alternatively may evolve into lengthy exploration, bargaining and confusion as goals are discussed. Direction and guidelines are essential when group members need the help of the worker, especially in the beginning stage of the group.

Some workers refrain from sharing their ideas about Purpose because they do not wish to impose upon the group and believe that for a group to belong to its members the defining of Purpose needs to be done solely by the members. Other workers believe that the members benefit and learn from their struggle, unassisted by the worker, to define the group's Purpose, and disagree with such viewpoints. Such practice, as we see it, represents a misunderstanding and misuse of the concept of client self-determination (Kurland and Salmon, 1990) as well as a misuse of worker authority.

We envision the worker's role as an active and participatory one, especially in the group's beginnings. If the worker has done the thinking necessary to plan and form a group, then it is probable that s/he has a vision for the group and ideas about the group's Purpose. To share those ideas with the group, and the thinking that gave rise to the group's formation is a way of including the members and, in fact, can help the group members to share their own thinking and ideas. Rather than imposing upon the group members, such sharing of her/his vision for the group on the part of the worker can serve to stimulate the thinking and the ideas of the group members. Perhaps the *art* of social work practice for the worker involves the use of self (through one's choices of words, tone of voice, and physical stance when one expresses one's thoughts and ideas) to communicate an invitation to group members to participate fully and to let the group members know that their ideas are needed, will be welcomed and appreciated. For the worker not to share her/his ideas and thinking about the group is to deprive the group and its members of valuable expertise and input.

HIDDEN PURPOSES

A fifth error of workers is to try to draw members into a group by stating a Purpose that they think will be inviting, using such a statement of Purpose

a kind of "bribe" to get members to come to the group. As the group continues, they keep hidden the real Purpose that they have in mind, trying to sneak it in whenever possible. The worker's *real* (hidden) purpose, which goes unstated, usually is something like "the honest expression of feelings by clients about what really is of concern in their inner lives." Workers may think that once the group gets off the ground and members are "hooked," then they will be able to let the members know what the Purpose really is. Such workers may be fearful that members will not come to a group if they know the Purpose that the worker has in mind. Or perhaps workers find it difficult to state directly words or ideas that are painful and difficult.

In an effort to make the group sound inviting, workers may altogether sidestep stating the Purpose. For example, a new mother of a child born with a cleft palate was asked to join a group. The fact that the group was for mothers of children born with cleft palates and aimed to address their special needs went unmentioned in the worker's invitation to participate. Examples abound of children in school or community groups who are never told directly by their workers that such groups aim to improve their behavior in school or their interaction with peers. Instead, workers emphasize that such groups will go on trips or participate in special activities. The difficulties such children may be having are evaded and go unmentioned. And rarely do practitioners who work with the elderly share directly with members of a reminiscence group the reasons for and benefits of reminiscing in the final life stage. Workers often may not realize that being explicit about Purpose may come as a great relief to potential group participants because they are hopeful that the group will be addressing needs that they see themselves as having.

When disparity exists between the stated and the hidden Purpose of a group, the important social work value of respect for the client is violated blatantly. For a worker to state—and for the members to understand—one Purpose and then for the worker to pursue another Purpose is highly manipulative and often results in clients being labeled as "resistant" or "not ready" when they object or refuse to go along with a ruse. Blaming the client for what is, in fact, the worker's unwillingness to be direct and honest is all too common in group work practice. There is a principle involved here: *If you cannot say it to clients, you have no right to try to do it.*

PURPOSE AS A DYNAMIC AND EVOLVING CONCEPT

Many practitioners believe it is necessary to clearly establish a group's Purpose as soon as the group begins. They mistakenly think that, once identified, a group's Purpose is immutable and unchangeable. They view Purpose as a hurdle to be overcome at the start of the group. They see it as a static

concept. Such an attitude was expressed clearly by a student who began working with a men's group in a long-term unit at a Veterans' Administration hospital. In a group work class after the first meeting of the group was proudly announced, "I told the group that the Purpose of this group was to help them adjust to being in the hospital. I asked them what they thought they all agreed that that sounded good. So then we moved on." He seemed relieved to think that Purpose would cause no trouble, glad to be able to report accomplishment in regard to a concept that his group work instructor had emphasized a great deal in class.

Often, workers fail to appreciate that Purpose is a dynamic concept that a group's determination of Purpose is an evolutionary process. Furthermore, many practitioners fail to appreciate that a group's Purpose can develop and change as the group matures. Most important, such practitioners do not see Purpose as the ally that it can be to a group's members and to the worker. When a group member asks, "What good is all this discussion?" says, "I don't understand what the point of all this is," workers often respond with such comments as threats and interruptions to the real work of the group. They fail to recognize that such questions and comments provide opportunities for the group members to enter into valuable discussions of Purpose, enable them to continuously clarify their needs and wants as well as their ongoing participation in the group in order to assure that their membership in the group will have significance.

EVOLUTION OF PURPOSE IN A DAY TREATMENT GROUP: AN EXAMPLE

The story of a group in a day treatment program for chronically mentally ill persons (Epstein, 1997) illustrates well a number of the areas that have been discussed in this paper, especially the connection between client needs and group Purpose and the way in which Purpose evolves over the life of a group. The group began as a socialization group. The worker, a second-year MSW student, was instructed by her supervisor to focus on the clients' "need of motivation and abundant free time." This was an open group that met weekly, composed of six to twelve members identified as "seriously and persistently mentally ill." Though composition varied from week to week, the group had a core membership of eight clients whose attendance was fairly consistent. Prior to starting the group, the worker spoke with clients informally as they ate breakfast, played pool and participated in games of billiards. During her conversations with the program participants, they described themselves as lonely, bored, and lacking things to do on the weekend. As a result of her contact with the clients, four themes regarding client need were identified by the worker:

1. need for increased and validating social contact;
2. need to practice interaction in social situations;
3. need for encouragement and support in the exploration of new activities;
4. need for practical suggestions about what to do with free time and ways to initiate involvement in free-time activities.

Given her observations of need, the worker tentatively formulated the group's Purpose as she saw it prior to the first meeting of the group:

To motivate and encourage members to partake in constructive social activities outside of the day program, to support members as they venture forth, and to provide and generate concrete suggestions of activities and involvements that are available to them.

The first meeting of the group, however, demonstrated to the worker that her initial formulation of Purpose failed to address the more basic and pervasive needs of the group members. In that meeting, it became apparent that the group members were unable to engage in successful interpersonal interaction. Some of the group members blurted out statements that had little connection to what was being discussed. Some laughed aloud at other members, while others said nothing. Some members continued insensitively to urge one clearly embarrassed member to talk about whether she was going to have sex with her boyfriend. The participation of the members in this first meeting was chaotic and confused. The members did not really talk to or hear one another. After this meeting, the worker noted:

The purpose statement that I had formulated reflected my needs and goals for the clients more so than it addressed *their* developmental and social needs and goals. I came away not knowing what would make sense in regard to Purpose but with the strong sense that the statement of Purpose I had formulated was way ahead of where the clients were, for they really seemed not to know how to interact with one another and were not ready to venture far beyond the day treatment program into other social situations, despite their saying they were bored and lonely.

The worker's experience with the group stimulated her continued thinking about the needs of the members and what the group's Purpose might be. Thus, she reformulated her conception of the group's Purpose:

To help members talk about their difficulties in making friends and feeling comfortable in social situations. To gain practice and experience in new social situations and to learn to cope better with loneliness and weekends.

Though more closely related to the group members' needs, this statement confused Purpose and content and also remained overly ambitious. In group meetings, members were unable to articulate or discuss their situation. A trip to Rockefeller Center clearly demonstrated that the members were yet ready or able to participate in activities outside the program. Following the trip, the worker noted:

The trip revealed that I am pushing too fast. The clients followed like sheep and showed little interest in anything around them. They seemed scared and relieved to return "home" to the program. My assumptions and goals are too high or at least too early. The clients are telling me a lot about their needs, not in their words but through their behavior.

Continued experience in and with the group led the worker to a third much more direct and succinct formulation of Purpose:

To improve members' abilities to interact socially.

This statement of Purpose had clear implications for what the content of the group might be. The group itself would become a place where members could learn, practice, and experience satisfying social interaction. The members' endorsement of this group Purpose was evident in the enthusiastic nature of their participation in the group as illustrated in the following process recording.

I wrote my new idea about Purpose on the board and read it slowly and distinctly aloud. The group members were attentive and looked as if they were trying to take in every word. Several members were nodding. Elaine proceeded to copy the statement on a blank piece of paper. We spent a little while talking about the Purpose statement. Unlike other times when I had tried to engage the group in discussion Purpose, they now participated actively. This Purpose seemed real to them . . .

I explained that I'd prepared a short demonstration of the kind of thing we might do in the group, but would need a volunteer. A volunteer volunteered gladly. Group members were laughing because they did not know what to expect. I described a scenario that Alice and I were going to role-play for the group. I asked group members to imagine that Alice was a client at the clinic who was very depressed. I would be playing another client who walks by her in the reception area and tries to comfort her. I emphasized to Alice and the rest of the group that Alice's character was not feeling like talking to anyone. She was simply sitting in the reception area, waiting to see her therapist. She was depressed and wanted to be left alone.

The skit unfolded as follows: I approached Alice and tried to get her to tell me what was wrong. I appeared to be very concerned, but frustrated in my attempt to elicit a response from her. When she kept her head down, I grabbed her and gave her a big hug. I then went on to tell her how I could understand how she felt and that I was having a hard time too. I began to speak louder and faster, going on and on about my boyfriend and how he hurt me and how bad I felt. I then stopped, calling, "time-out."

Group members jumped in right away with observations about my behavior and Alice's response. Most of the group members realized that my behavior was inappropriate, particularly in light of Alice's body language. Sylvia picked up on the fact that I turned the attention from Alice's problems to my own. Several group members pointed out that I never found out from Alice what was wrong, and yet I kept talking and shared a problem I was having that might have nothing to do with her. The most interesting part of the discussion centered around the hug. Alice and Gena thought that it was a nice gesture on my part. Several other group members pointed out that it was not appropriate. I picked up on this and pointed out that it is important to respect people's personal space. I pointed out that, in situations like this, when we don't know people well, we should never be afraid to ask them what they need or how they feel about receiving a hug or wanting to talk. I emphasized that asking someone what they feel comfortable with is always a good idea, no matter what the situation.

I was quite impressed with Alice's response to all of this. She said that she liked my hug and that she was the type of person who would do just the same to someone who looked upset. She reflected for a moment: "Maybe other people are not comfortable with that, though." She said something to the effect that she had never thought about that before. I pointed out to the group that Alice has a lot of warmth and affection to offer, but that she is right: that she (and others) must be careful about who this affection is offered to, and in what situations.

That the group's Purpose was now meaningful and real to the members was demonstrated by the nature of their participation in the group meetings that followed. A process excerpt from the group's eighth meeting well illustrates their involvement and interest, with one member even taking a risk to raise a highly personal concern.

I then introduced the role-play exercise that Ms. D. (co-leader) and I had prepared. I told the group that we would need a volunteer. Several people raised their hands. Ms. D. picked Elaine. Prior to enacting the role-play, Ms. D. explained the scenario to the group. The hypothetical

situation we constructed was to feature Ms. D. as the "friend" could not stop talking; Elaine, as the demure, polite, and timid friend and I as Elaine's conscience (or, the comic-book-like "bubble" as her head, verbalizing her "true" thoughts).

Ms. D.'s character talked and talked non-stop. She asked Elaine about her weekend, but interrupted her almost immediately, telling how she spent her weekend shopping. . . . She again interrupted Elaine and informed her that she "must" try meditation. I would interject every two minutes or so with something like: "God, why doesn't you just stop talking. I wish she would just shut up! I don't want to do about meditation. . . . Can't she see that I'm not listening to her anymore?" The group seemed to enjoy the role-play. They laughed, looked attentive, and clapped when it was over.

When the role-play was over, a lively discussion ensued. Group members picked up on the dynamic between Elaine and Ms. D. D. commented on how Ms. D. was clueless about Elaine's needs and not listen to her. All group members nodded yes and smiled when D. asked if they ever had experiences in which their unvoiced thoughts looked something like what I had been saying throughout the role play.

The most interesting part of the group came toward the end. I made a statement to the group. She said: "I feel like people roll their eyes when I talk and care nothing about what I have to say. . . . That's why I don't talk very much in this group. I often don't want to come. . . ."

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

It is a surprising phenomenon, considering the agreement on the importance of Purpose in the literature, that this concept is so often misunderstood or neglected, in actual practice. This paper has described six common mistakes that often are made in the formulation of group Purpose. These mistakes frequently lead to the failure of groups. This paper has focused on ways to rectify these practice errors, on ways to achieve greater clarity of Purpose in work with groups, and ultimately to provide more effective service to group members.

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