

Planning: The Neglected Component of Group Development

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SUMMARY. This article identifies pregroup planning—the thinking and preparation done by the social worker in developing a group program—as a neglected area of social work practice. Though the importance of planning is recognized by many writers, little is said about the planning process itself that can help direct and guide the thinking of the social work practitioner. Possible reasons for this gap in our literature and practice are presented. Development of a model of planning for group practice is called for. Components of such a model are drawn from social work writings on work with groups and from research, and a tentative model is suggested. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by *The Haworth Press, Inc.* All rights reserved.]

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Planning for group practice is one of the most neglected areas in social work with groups. The thinking and preparation done by the social worker in undertaking to offer group service too often consists only of cursory attention to such questions as meeting place and time and whether to serve refreshments.

The price for lack of thorough and thoughtful planning is high. Frequently, it is paid in groups that terminate prematurely, groups in which attendance of members is sporadic and irregular, and groups that are felt by practitioners and group members to have failed in meeting the needs of group members. It is paid also in a lack of worker confidence that results in practitioners who shy away from working with groups because they see themselves as incapable of group leadership.

The importance of planning in social work practice with groups, as well as with individuals and families, is recognized by many writers. Some of the profession's most basic definitions include planning as an important social work activity. Bartlett (1958), for example, in the working definition of social work, states: "Social work method includes systematic observation and assessment of the individual or group in a situation and the formulation of an appropriate plan of action" (p. 7). Boehm (1958) considers planning one of four core activities in social work. The importance of pregroup planning is stated most directly by Brody (1974):

The most important activities of a worker engaged in group work with institutionalized older adults (as with all clients) are those that occur before any formalized meeting with group members ever takes place. . . . The worker activities that often get the least attention and which are the most crucial to the outcome of the program are related to the thinking, planning, and preparation that occurs prior to the convening of any meeting. (pp. 125-126)

But, while the importance of planning in social work is recognized, little is said about the planning process itself that can help direct and guide the thinking of the social work practitioner before he initiates direct service with groups. The lack of content on pregroup planning represents a serious gap in social work literature, and it is this gap that may be one of the reasons for the paucity of attention to planning by social work practitioners.

A possible explanation for the lack of attention paid to planning is offered by Dewey (1938), whose writings significantly influenced social group work practice. Writing on progressive education, Dewey ex-

plains that weakness in control in the classroom most often goes back to lack of “sufficiently thoughtful planning in advance” (p. 57). He then explains, “The causes for such lack are varied. The one which is peculiarly important to mention . . . is the idea that such advance planning is unnecessary and even that it is inherently hostile to the legitimate freedom of those being instructed” (p. 57). Dewey goes on to say:

Because the kind of advance planning heretofore engaged in has been so routine as to leave little room for the free play of individual thinking or for contributions due to distinctive individual experience, it does not follow that all planning must be rejected. On the contrary, there is incumbent upon the educator the duty of instituting a much more intelligent and consequently more difficult kind of planning. He must survey the capacities and needs of the particular set of individuals with whom he is dealing and must at the same time arrange the conditions which provide the subject matter or content for experiences that satisfy these needs and develop these capacities. The planning must be flexible enough to permit free play for individuality of experience and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of power. (p. 58)

Dewey’s words seem equally applicable to social work as to education.

Rosenthal (1973) offers a similar explanation for the lack of attention to the planning phase in work with groups. He states:

The artificial group has been recognized in social group work in the expression formed group, but the implications of formed in terms of artificiality or creation by design have not been explored. . . . One reason for these blind spots is that the directiveness and subjective desire that seem inescapable from the deliberateness involved in forming a group . . . are considered negative. They are regarded as being close to manipulation, and manipulation must be avoided at all costs in social work. (p. 61)

Rosenthal’s explanation may be correct. Perhaps the lack of attention to pre-group planning results from the social work profession’s emphasis on client self-determination. Perhaps planning has been viewed as client manipulation and hence as a negation of this important social work value. But one could certainly argue that pregroup planning does not diminish, but instead enhances, the opportunities for client self-determination. The increased clarity of purpose for the social work practi-

tioner and the client that results from careful planning increases the client's ability to make a clear and informed decision about whether he wishes to participate in the service offered and thus lessens client manipulation and domination by the worker and increases client self-determination.

The National Association of Social Workers' (1964) publication *Building Social Work Knowledge* offers another clue as to the possible reasons for the lack of attention paid to planning in the social work literature. Social workers, the publication notes, are more interested in action than in developing and testing knowledge to make that action more effective. Perhaps social workers too often equate helping with "busy-ness" and see the amount of help as being in direct proportion to the amount of activity of the worker. Perhaps planning is viewed as a rather "passive" activity, one that takes time away from the real and "active" work that is done directly with clients. Perhaps in their haste to "get busy," social work practitioners and writers as well have too often cut short the planning process or aborted it altogether.

Development of a model of planning for social work with groups would be an important first step in filling this gap that exists in both our literature and our practice. Such a model would help guide the thinking of the social work practitioner regarding group formation and would furnish needed practice knowledge in this area by providing requisite conceptualization of the planning process.

Clues as to the components of a pregroup planning model are present in social work writing and research. Although there is a paucity of writing on social work practice that addresses planning directly, some authors write about areas that might form components of a planning model. See, for example, Bernstein, 1973a, 1973b; Glasser, Sarri, & Vinter, 1974; Levine, 1967.) Of the writers on social work with groups, for example, Northen (1969) and Hartford (1971) include the most comprehensive material on planning. Northen's work includes the components of purpose, group composition, initial organizational structure, application and intake, and social diagnosis as elements to be considered in planning. Hartford explicates a "pregroup phase" and states:

Who makes the decision to have a group, the suggested purposes of the projected group, decisions about who should be informed that there might be a group, and how they are to be informed or selected, and by whom, has a great deal of effect on what happens later when an actual group comes into being. (p. 70)

Hartford sees group purpose, program, composition, size and meeting place, space, time, and duration as interdependent and interrelated factors that must be thought through by the worker.

No social work research has been carried out on comprehensive planning for direct practice. But consideration has been given in research to some of the elements that might form part of a model of planning for social work with groups. These include clarity of purpose; individual and group goals; group composition and membership selection; client expectations of social work service; and individual diagnoses.

Garvin's (1968) research on complementarity of role expectations in groups between worker and members includes many implications for pregroup planning. Garvin emphasizes the need for early knowledge on the worker's part about member goals and expectations. Such knowledge, he states, is important because it helps the worker to better understand member-worker interaction, indicates how unified the group will be in attempting to solve problems, and offers clues about the degree to which a given member will be invested in pursuing different kinds of group goals. According to Garvin, the social worker's correct perception of members' expectations leads to more skillful worker performance and movement in group problem solving.

Garvin also stresses the importance of clarity of goals. He states:

For too long, the assumption has been made in much of group work service planning that the group can and should represent a "smorgasbord" in which virtually any need of the members can be met so long as the necessary requirement of group attendance is maintained. (p. 201)

Current thinking, he explains, places more emphasis on a precondition of clarity of goals as a means of goal achievement.

Garvin's research thus indicates that early knowledge of member goals and expectations as well as clarity of goals should be included in a pregroup planning model.

Research on client expectations also has important implications for a pregroup planning model. It shows the need for the worker to have early information regarding client expectations, and points to the importance of congruity of expectations between worker and client. Briar (1966) notes, "There is strong evidence, both from casework and psychotherapy research, that clients are more apt to continue in treatment when they and their therapists share similar expectations" (pp. 25-26).

Main's (1964) research on the beginning phase of social group work also contain implications for a model of planning for social work with groups. She concluded that the degree of development of individual and group diagnoses, treatment goals, and plans were positively associated with the degree of appropriateness of the worker's use of self with a group.

Main also raises an important question regarding the connection between planning and diagnosis. She asks, "If practice theory more clearly defined and refined the process of preliminary treatment planning . . . would individual treatment goals and plans be more fully developed in the beginning phase?" (1964, p. 75). She concludes that social group work theory and practice have not yet given sufficient consideration to the interdependence of worker's individual and group diagnoses and treatment planning and to the means for their synthesis. Thus, Main's research implies that early diagnosis of group members should be incorporated in a model of pregroup planning.

Research by Boer and Lantz (1974) underscores the importance of including factors related to group composition in any model of planning for social work with groups. Research they conducted in which group composition in one group was unplanned and in another planned led them to conclude that "The groundwork of membership selection that occurs before the group has as much importance in determining member commitment, attendance, and therapeutic results as does the ongoing group process" (p. 176).

Social work writing on work with groups, social work research, and social work practice experience all imply that six interrelated and interdependent components would comprise a model of planning for social work with groups. These components are need, purpose, composition, structure, content, and pregroup contact. Thorough and thoughtful pregroup planning would give consideration to the following questions:

-Need. What are the needs of potential group members as perceived by them? by the worker? by the agency? by other relevant persons? What is the need for the group as perceived by potential group members? the worker? the agency? other relevant and/or knowledgeable persons? Can these needs best be met by the group modality?

-Purpose. What are the goals of potential group members as perceived by them? by the worker? What is the tentative conception of the group purpose as viewed by potential members? by the worker? by the agency?

–Composition. How many group members will there be? What will be the characteristics of the group members in regard to sex? age? homogeneity/heterogeneity? educational, occupational, socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and cultural background? previous group experience? What are the characteristics of a worker who would best work with this group? Will there be one worker or more than one?

–Structure. What will be the duration of each meeting? of the total work? Where will the group meet? How will members get to sessions? What are the resources and supplies that are needed? What is the budget for the group? How will confidentiality be maintained? cooperation and communication with other relevant professionals? Will membership be open or closed?

–Content. What will go on at the meetings? What supplies and/or equipment are needed? How and by whom will content be planned?

–Pregroup Contact. How and by whom will intake, screening, recruitment, and orientation to the group be carried out? What will be the content of intake, screening, recruitment, and orientation processes prior to the first group meeting?

Further work needs to be done in explicating additional components of a pregroup planning model, in discovering the interrelationships among them, and in developing a set of principles to guide the social worker in the actual process of planning.

In 1962, Hartford stated:

There is no single comprehensive formulation of group formation process in social science literature. The literature on small group theory and research contains references to group formation and indicates some of the elements of group development, but these are not organized or completely consistent from one author to another. Similarly, there is no clearly formulated or consistent set of principles for group work practice in group formation. (p. 8)

The gap that Hartford reported 15 years ago remains unfilled today. Development of a planning model that would guide the thinking and preparation of the social worker prior to the first group meeting is needed. Thorough and thoughtful pregroup planning is a necessary prerequisite for group formation that contributes mightily to the success of social work groups. We can ill afford to continue to neglect this important component of practice.

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