Concurrent Interventions
in Multiple Domains:
The Essence of Social Work
with Groups

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ABSTRACT. The paper examines intervention in social work practice with groups, as it has been conceptualized in the practice theory literature. Some unique features of social work intervention in groups are identified, which have received scant attention in the literature. The paper documents what constitutes the mainstream practice of intervention employed by social workers in adequately functioning groups, highlighting a methodology characterized by spontaneity, creativity, and social inventiveness, in the activation and use of group. *[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

The paper characterizes the mainstream methodology of social work practice with groups in a new way. Important characteristics of this practice are identified, to make its nature clearer and to highlight it as the most complex and powerful methodology in the repertoire of social work practice with groups. The materials recognize a high risk, ad hoc methodology which works with spontaneous, inventive social interaction of members and worker in an evolving content and group process, in a 'developing present,' rather than the employment of a pre-set curriculum as its modality. Intervention in critical or salient moments in situ characterizes this methodology.

Practitioners and educators need to preserve and use this special methodology, which is unique to the social work profession, and which contains the most powerful avenues in our possession for growth and change of members, group as a whole, and community.

As practices proliferate which are short-term, pre-planned, curricular, psycho-educational, worker-driven, and which use the group only as context [Vinter, 1967], there is a tendency to substitute these simpler technologies for the mainstream social group work methodology, which is the top of the repertoire for practice with social work groups. In this shift, the profession loses or eliminates the stunning possibilities of group creating, generating its own unique experience, processing its own issues in its own way, in its own order, in its own time, creating possibilities not-dreamed of, and having the inputs of the social worker as a component in that process.

The paper is focused on *intervention* by social workers in practice with groups.

The materials examine dictionary and professional definitions of the term 'intervention'; review terms and perspectives represented in practice theory to describe the activities of the social worker with groups; explore alternative descriptors of the professional contribution of the social worker to group life; and identify unique features of social work intervention in groups, which have received scant attention in the literature.

The mainstream, central repertoire of interventions employed by social workers in adequately functioning groups is identified. This repertoire is extended to document interventions appropriate for use with socially non-competent populations who require specific help to function socially, to become able to form group, and to participate in and benefit from group life and group experience.

DEFINITIONS OF THE TERM 'INTERVENTION'

The verb "to intervene," from the Latin inter and venire, means literally "to come into" or "to come between." The verb has multiple meanings and uses, of which many are classificatory in nature, and a few are relevant:

- to come in, as something extraneous, in the course of some action, state of things, etc.
- of a person, party or state: to come between in action; to interfere, interpose; also to act as an intermediary; to take a share in (obsolete).
- to come between; to intercept; to interfere with; to prevent, hinder, *(The Oxford English Dictionary,* [1989], v. 8, pp. 2-3).
- to come in or between by way of hindrance or modification *(Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1977, p. 605).

Oxford [1989] defines intervention as "the action of intervening, "stepping in" or interfering in any affair so as to affect its course or issue" (v. 8, p. 3).

Elsewhere there is a definition of the verb to intervene as "to come into, for purposes of influencing." All dictionary definitions of intervention carry the implication that whatever intervenes may be of a different order from that with which it intervenes.

Intervention in the Profession of Social Work

While dictionary definitions make clear that something which intervenes may be neither benign nor beneficial, and may be positive or negative in nature, the term intervention in the profession of social work carries a specialized meaning and a positive connotation. Intervention is seen as the activity of the social worker "coming into" practice situations for purposes of influencing, helping or assisting, through inputs designed as beneficial contributions to the problem-solving of person(s) using social work help.

Barker [1987, p. 82] defines intervention as:

> *Intervention:* Interceding in or coming between groups of people, events, planning activities, or an individual's internal conflicts. In social work, the term is analogous to the physician's term "treatment." Many social workers prefer using "intervention" because it

includes "treatment" and also encompasses the other activities so-
cial workers use to solve or prevent problems or achieve goals for
social betterment. Thus it refers to psychotherapy, advocacy, me-
diation, social planning, community organization, finding and de-
veloping resources, and many other activities.

Hollis and Woods [1981] describe intervention as a general term,
widely in use in practice (pp. 5-6), to designate the particular contribu-
tion of the social worker to the helping endeavor.

The Term "Intervention" in Social Work with Groups

Intervention may be an inaccurate term to describe the activity of the
social worker in groups.

The social worker is an internal participant in the whole group expe-
rience as a *member* with a differentiated role and function, and partici-
pates and shares in all that takes place as the experience of the group.
Thus the contribution of the social worker, in those salient moments
when professional inputs are needed, constitutes points at which the
practitioner's specialized function is activated as a particular needed in-
put designed to facilitate or enhance the interaction.

Intervention is defined as "coming into" a situation for purposes of
influencing it; in the circumstance of the social worker with groups,
he/she is already there, and may choose to enter or not enter into a par-
ticular interactional exchange as it is taking place, but shares the experi-
encing of it. The social worker is aware of and participant in all that goes
on in the life of the group, but activates his/her professional contribution
selectively, as needed.

The sense then is of a professional constituent whose expertise is acti-
vated whenever the circumstances require it, but who is also a part of the
whole group experience and who monitors the whole, in order to be ready
to contribute specialized inputs in salient moments as the group-as-a-whole
and its constituent members require specific assistance. The social worker
has a share in the life of the group and is seen by the members as an internal
constituent. In effect, the social worker is party to everything that happens
in the group but may activate his/her professional expertise intermit-
tently.

A second reason for seeking an alternative term for describing the ac-
tivities of the worker is that intervention carries the meaning of an "ex-
traneous element" which "intrudes" or "interrupts" or "comes between"

or "interferes." In the circumstances of social work practice with groups, the social worker's contribution is usually timely, necessary, appropriate, and useful because it arises out of ongoing monitoring and comprehending of and participation in the group experience. It may have the effect of redefining the situation and enabling group members to find alternative and superior resolutions, thereby enhancing the life of the group and facilitating its progression.

In effect, the worker "comes into" the entire group experience, then engages in particular moments of group interaction which require professional assistance to resolve well. If group can be helped to function well, its socializing influence on its members can be assured. Because the social worker is "part of the action" throughout the life of the group, his/her contribution is unlikely to be intrusive or interfering, particularly if it is directed at enabling the group experience to flow more ably, more smoothly, and to resolve what is conflictual, problematic, or impeding the progression in group experience.

Further, every member's actions has the potential to influence the group and its members; worker actions are only one of many contributions, but differentiated by the professional role and function.

In *the special circumstance of a preparatory pre-group experience*, the worker contributions will have stronger influence because the entity begins as an unformed group, exists as a collectivity, and is in use as a *learning and practicing modality*; because the members are unable to generate groupness until their necessary social competencies are developed and in place, elements of individual and entitative influence are not yet functional.

A Special Category of Interaction

In social work practice with groups, intervention may be understood as a *special category of interaction*, through which the social worker adds an order of input or influence distinguishable from that contributed by the non-professional participants. It is contributed with the intention of adding a useful, needed component, capable of improving something in the person, the interaction, and/or the situation. It is this difference which distinguishes the interaction between the professional worker and the members of the group, from the interaction among the members, and between member and group.

CONCEPTIONS OF THE TECHNOLOGY
OF THE SOCIAL WORKER WITH GROUPS

In the literature on social work practice with groups, intervention has been described in terms such as:

• acts	• skills	• means of influence	• procedures
• actions	• tasks	• helping media	• techniques
• activities		• practice principles	• technical skills
		• strategies of intervention	

It is notable that the earliest of these descriptors are expressed as verbs, and reflect the actual doing by the worker in action, expressed in actional terms.

To unravel some of the descriptors of intervention, *tasks* specify the things the practitioner must do; *skills* are the competencies with which the professional tasks are carried out; *acts*, *actions*, and *activities* are the actual things the worker does, those actional forms of intervention in the concrete, live moment. *Helping media* identify the locations within which worker action can be staged, as well as specifying *content forms* capable of influencing the group; *practice principles* are abstracted, conceptual directives intended to guide the practitioner in his/her actions; *procedures* and techniques address ways of doing. *Intervention* appears to be an umbrella term, subsuming worker actions.

The complexity of group life may be a strong factor in determining how intervention has been conceptualized in a variety of ways. The existence of several frameworks for practice have played a part also in how intervention has been defined, as have a range of supporting theories.

Most pervasive in all the definitional efforts is the view that if the social worker assists the group with its group processes, the group itself will implement its own powerful influences on the members, that is, to facilitate the functioning of the group itself is the primary function of the social worker, activating the group's own significant capabilities for impacting its members and the wider world [Coyle (1959); Wilson and Ryland, (1949); Trecker, (1955); Phillips, (1957); Konopka, (1963); Klein, (1972); Schwartz, (1961); Vinter, (1967); Papell and Rothman, (1966); Garvin, (1997); Lee, (1994); Steinberg, (1997); Northen and Kurland, (2001)].

The primary task of the social worker is to facilitate the group process, so that the group truly becomes a prime influence on the behavior of its members. [Northen and Kurland, 2001, p. 80]

. . . the primary skill is the ability to establish a relationship with a group as a group. This involves the capacity to feel at ease, and, in fact, to enjoy the social interplay among members and to be able to perceive both individual behavior and its collective manifestations (for example, to be aware of the morale of the group or its network of interpersonal relations) as well as to become a part of the relationships and to affect them. [Coyle, 1959, p. 100]

Probably Middleman stands alone in her efforts to identify practitioner skills in relation to group-as-group and to group-in-action, in her articles on 'Think Group . . .' [Middleman, 1986, 1987], and in the joint efforts of Middleman and Goldberg-Wood [1990] in their book *Skills for Direct Practice in Social Work*. These skills are described concretely, actionally, and specifically in relation to particular professional tasks.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVENTION IN SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS

The materials in this section examine the nature, features, and patterns of social work intervention in group. The special features of this practice derive from the necessity of attending to multiple aspects of member and group life *concurrently*.

The requirement of the social worker is to be oriented and attuned *at the same time* to all aspects of group life: the individual members and their needs; their interpersonal, interactional engagement at individual, sub-group and whole group levels; the functioning of the group as an entity; the interaction of the group with its wider environment; the full content and process of the group experience. This represents a considerable demand on the worker's conscious awareness of, sensitivity to, and comprehension of everything that goes on in the group. Within the enormity of the professional task in social work groups, the social worker is protected from overwhelming demand on his/her expertise by the fact that not all parts of the group system require intervention; that needed interventions do not occur simultaneously; and that as group life plays out, the interventions of the social worker are located variously, when

and where needed. The interventive domains are boundaried also within the systems of the group, which limits them to a manageable universe.

Nevertheless, the demand on the social worker is that he or she monitor and track sensitively and with conscious awareness, and comprehend all of the interactional processes taking place in the group, so that an appropriate actional response can be made at critical or salient moments. The necessity is to be attuned, concurrently, moment by moment, to a *compound* of individual and group needs in multiple domains.

Readinesses to act [White, 1963] are generated from sensitive monitoring of group interaction processes, and from accumulating knowledge and understanding of the group and its members, converting to an operationalized appropriate actional form at critical moments when worker input is triggered.

The progression from pre-operational to actional occurs as an intuitive, pre-conscious, rapid response, probably right-brained, and informed by knowledge of persons/situations. It appears as an unpremeditated, swift response, in place before it can be deliberated, but flowing from comprehension of the persons and processes involved.

This pattern of intervention is essential in social work practice with groups which enables the group to become a live, living, manageable *microcosm of life* in the larger world [c.f. Erikson's (1963) concept of play as a miniature, manageable domain where life events can be reworked by the child]. In the group-as-life, life events are played out in miniature, in ways available to modification, improvement, growth, and development, through the impact of member, group, and worker input. This is the mainstream of our practice, in which events engage the members and group as *life*, *reality*, as *life experienced*, as distinct from practices which engage the members reflectively about their lives elsewhere.

The primary benefit of groups in which the *lived experience of group events* becomes real life to the members, is that the social worker is present, involved, and ready to intervene at optimal moments, in ways which may be crucial to the participants. Such moments when problematics are manifest, can be seen as unusually open to new learnings, new ways of doing, new competences to be tried out in the situation, *in situ*. The small, timely interventions of the social worker in real life events, happening here-and-now, add a special dimension to the experience, intended to improve, augment, moderate, modulate what is going on, to the benefit of individual members and group as a whole.

THE NATURE OF THE SOCIAL WORK CONTRIBUTION

Interventions in social work groups are of two orders: those which are lodged in the group's interactional processes occurring as impromptu responses to episodes of group life; and those which are *planned, larger responses*, flowing out of knowledge of group and member need, and presented as a particular, staged provision to particular group and member needs which can be addressed programmatically and in a more pre-meditated way.

Interactional Interventions

Worker contributions flow from professional knowledge of individual and group development and functioning, the nature of problem condition, and from specific knowledge of *these* members in *this* group in this situation with *these* dynamics in *this* moment. Readinesses to act derived from this knowledge provide the social worker with near-operational inputs which quickly convert to operational, actional form as needed.

Interventions in interaction in this practice may appear to be *ad hoc*, *impromptu*, *spontaneous*, *un-premeditated*, *unplanned*, except that they are *informed* by and flow out of the social worker's understanding of individual and group current needs, and are lodged in moments which are recognized as being needed. It is a *moment-seizing* kind of intervention.

Each intervention is located *in the moment*, *in the situation*, *in the concrete*, in the *here-and-now*, *as it happens*. Interventions can be seen as a *continually-adjusting*, *process-enhancing*, *outcome-altering process*, contributed in small concrete moments within small events. Each intervention may be *small*, *partial*, *piecemeal*, as responses to *concrete* occurrences, contributed as *small inputs*, *in process*, *in situ*, *in multiple domains*, and having *incremental*, *cumulative effects* for individual members and group as a whole. Intervention is seen as a *differentiated input*, not otherwise present, in response to immediate circumstances and situations in group life. Interventions are *individualized* and *tailored* to particular aspects of member and group need, and lodged in arising, *salient, teachable moments*.

Interventions are *lodged in multiple domains* of group life, as they present themselves as needing a professional input, occurring in relation to an individual member, in response to sub-group interchanges, in response to whole group or to content of the group experience.

The pattern of intervention derives from concurrent awarenesses of all parts of the group's systems, portrayed in *differentiating responses* to multiple parts of group life concurrently. This means that the social worker is balancing awarenesses of events throughout the group's complex systems, and adding professional inputs when and where needed. Thus, the social worker may act successively in many interventive domains, now attending to individual need, now to sub-group interaction, now to the content of the group experience, now to the functioning of the whole group.

As the group and its members grow, change, adapt throughout the group experience, there is a constantly changing set of interventive responses as the social worker keeps abreast of changes and progressions in individual and group functioning through the task of monitoring the interactional flow and the performances of individual and group.

Actual interventions are continually changing, as one set of dilemmas is taken care of, and new ones present themselves in individual and group growth and development. Each intervention may be complete in itself, adequate for the specific moment in which it is generated, but inadequate as an overriding encompassing response to the situation(s) or person(s) for which it is delivered.

Progressions are built through simple single actions in small concrete moments, cumulating over time, repeating or advancing with changing circumstances, and totaling to a *multitude of inputs* capable of guiding group and its members to new competences and performances. The nature of the practice requires time, multiple experiences, and multiple contributions from both members and worker, for socializing effects of the group experience to be fully effective.

SUMMARY

The technology of social work with groups, then, is a *moment-seizing strategy*, delivered in a pattern of interventions which are *distributed, partial*, and *concurrent, lodged in multiple spheres* of individual, interpersonal, and group interaction. Each intervention may be a small input, one of many, each complete in itself, and totaling cumulatively to a powerful contribution to the social functioning of individual member and group as a whole.

The challenge to the social worker in social group work practice is to be concurrently aware of and keeping track of the whole and all the parts, to know how each is doing at the present moment, and to be ready

to contribute appropriate inputs "on demand" in multiple parts of the group system at necessary moments.

Planned, Programmatic Intervention

Planned, designed, pre-meditated interventions are presented as content specifically related to or in response to known needs of group and members which can be addressed programmatically, and, frequently, in the collective. These will be content forms, pre-existing or specifically designed or adapted by the worker in response to particular needs, and capable of delivering relevant experiences to all the members.

These may be age-stage, circumstance, problem, or situation-related programmatic provisions, capable of meeting common needs of the group as a whole. Brooks [1978] provides an excellent example in her work with isolated reclusive older men living in single rooms in a slum hotel. She designed a group for them initially to operate as a health club, using activity and exercise as a means of attracting them out of their rooms, eventually triggering a flow of communication and "a stream of mutuality" [p. 61] in the swimming pool, so powerful that it transformed the group.

Programmatic intervention that is more individualized is also a possibility:

> Worker had written a play using the ideas of the group members and incorporating as well, some possibilities for advancing individual members in their social development through the performances of their puppets in new roles. The play cast Bert, an extremely isolated, withholding child, as a genial host, welcoming people into his home. When worker read the play to the group, and came to the part about his puppet as the genial host welcoming people, Bert abruptly put down his work and came to stand beside the worker. "Read that part again . . ." he said urgently, leaning against her arm.

Besides serving as an illustration of a planned, programmatic intervention, this vignette reveals a rare moment in which the deeper hopes of a socially isolated group member became visible.

Programmatic planned interventions can take many forms, and represent the best understandings of the group and member needs, uniquely operationalized by the social worker at critical moments of group life in forms accessible to the participants.

In a group composed of children of single parent families, the interactional pattern of the members was one of continual uproar. Everyone talked at once, no-one listened, and it seemed impossible to bring to and sustain order in the interactional arena. The worker instituted a program of game-playing, using those social games which can contribute so much to the social constraint of extraneous, dysfunctional behaviors as well as engendering a game-related cooperativeness and the possibility of collective action. Within the games, members behaved like normal children, abandoning dysfunctional behaviors in the excitement of the play. Games, which create their own boundaries, their own demands for functional, disciplined performances and the sharing of roles, played a major part in moving the members forward to a more functional group life.

THE PATTERN OF INTERVENTION IN SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS– CARPE MOMENTUM

We tend to see the *defining unit of intervention* as a single incident or episode involving one or more group members, containing something problematic, and joined by the social worker for purposes of contributing a specific intervention designed to enable a good resolution. When intervention is viewed only as a single action taken in response to a single incident, and each incident is viewed only one by one, the pattern of intervention is not fully visible.

The *pattern of intervention* in social work groups highlights an extraordinary methodology, in its scope, its range, its differentiation of parts, its individualization of response in many domains, its demand for multiple interventive competences on the part of the practitioner, its requirement for readinesses to act in any of several spheres at any moment, its necessity to comprehend changing situations moment to moment to moment, and to respond usefully as needed.

The necessity to see the whole and all of its parts at one and the same time; to track each, moment to moment; to make swift judgments about where intervention is needed, when and in what way; and to be ready to act, *unrehearsed, ad hoc*, in multiple domains concurrently, characterizes this practice. The pattern of intervention, in its collective manifestations, portrays a *complex*, *sophisticated mobile methodology*, capable of responding to the whole and to all its parts, to the here-and-now and to new, transforming, and progressing, changing moments.

The practice does not belong only to social work practitioners with groups. It is comparable to the functioning of parents with young children, of teachers with students, except that the group session may be defined as requiring "full performance mode" for the practitioner, to the extent that the participants require social work expertise to be "at the ready," at "red alert" throughout the time-limited period they are together. In contrast, parents and teachers, with their children and students over extended time periods, will have benign periods when no particular intervention is required and the interactional system is self-sustaining.

At its best, it is a methodology which creates a compound of responses, tailored to the needs of individuals and group. Novice practitioners may recognize in the "data" of group life, possible interventive points while not yet having in place all of the near-operational competences to act when needed. The recognition of "intervenable moments" is a first step to becoming a skilled practitioner. Experienced practitioners will have more responses ready in place at the moment needed; but in the complexity of group life, and in practice with new populations and problems, will continue to face moments/situations where interventive response is a challenge.

Learning to work first with socially competent individuals in "sufficient" groups provides opportunities to know what normative crises are likely to precipitate intervention in social work groups, and of what these interventions consist. This experience provides a normative base from which to recognize and comprehend the anomalies in the functioning of entities composed of socially non-competent persons.

"Sufficient" Groups

A "sufficient" group is one whose members have the social competences to evolve groupness, achieve group formation, develop appropriate relational, normative, structural, operational, and technical components of group life, so that the group experience can proceed normatively. Members possess social competences. The conflicts and struggles occurring in sufficient groups are amenable to being worked out by the members, with the intermittent assistance of the social worker being activated when needed.

Social Non-Competence

Social non-competence is manifest in three spheres: in individual functioning which is pre-social in nature; in ineffective interpersonal interaction between members; and in the inadequate formation and func-

tioning of the entity as a whole. *Social non-competence* refers to the absence of essential social skills and to the presence of dysfunctional behaviors which impede the construction of relationship.

Inexperience with Group Life

Populations which have had insufficient experience with group life may appear initially to be socially non-competent, but the provision of group experience may advance them quickly to adequate social functioning in groups. Currently, our society makes better provision for group experience for children than for adolescents and young adults. Even children's groups have become focused on specific sport or computer competence rather than in growth producing group life.

Social non-competence may be reflected in a compound of behaviors which may be inadequate, inappropriate, ineffective, or unrewarding. It may reflect deficits or incompleteness in individual social development, some deviance in socialization, manifest in dysfunction in social engagement and interaction. Social non-competence presents itself as a lack, ineptness, or absence of necessary means to navigate the social world successfully.

Social non-competence is the indicator of some failure in previous primary relationships to experience connection capable of nurturing, sustaining, enabling, and through which progressive social competences can be acquired. It may be reflected in flawed, marred, limited, or non-synchronous interaction. There may be multiple types of social non-competence, mirrored in behaviors which indicate competences not yet learned, partial; absence of knowledge of rules of social relationship and interaction; absence of motivation to be connected interpersonally; absence of empathy in interactional response to others.

Personality formation and development is the precondition and means for the construction of interpersonal relationships and the evolution of groups. In practice with socially non-competent populations in intending groups, *intra-personal matters* may impede sociality in some of the participants, a fact which generates a requirement for a level of intervention not usually needed in practice with groups, and for extensions of the practice methodology to meet needs *preceding* and *preliminary* to interpersonal engagement. When intra-personal matters are settled, interpersonal connection is facilitated along a social growth continuum.

Social non-competence is a limiting condition, both for interpersonal connection and for group belonging and group functioning. It calls for a

specialized use of the interventive patterns described in this paper, amounting to a second distinctive methodology of practice, in which the whole interventive response is stepped up, in frequency and foci.

SUMMARY

The paper has characterized the nature of the mainstream social work practice which makes full use of group processes, highlighting the nature of the intervention of the worker as ad hoc, spontaneous, in critical moments of group interaction, as well as in planned, improvised responses to known needs of members, and group as a whole. The paper recognizes the need to extend the methodology beyond use with adequately functioning groups, to use with socially non-competent populations who require special help to function socially, form group, and participate in group life.

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