Offensive Behavior in Groups: Challenges and Opportunities

Julianne Wayne
Alex Gitterman

ABSTRACT. This paper discusses offensive behaviors that often occur in groups. The sources and meanings of such behavior both to the individual and the group are explored. Principles are presented to help workers decide when to respond to the more serious underlying personal and group issues these behaviors may express, and when to confront them directly. The authors also examine the reasons why it is so difficult for workers to deal with offensive behaviors and conclude with practice examples that illustrate ways to use challenging behaviors as stepping stones towards positive individual and group development. *[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> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Limit-setting, acting-out, testing behavior, normative crisis

Even the most seasoned practitioners may feel discomfort when faced with offensive behaviors from group members. Many instinctively respond by trying to control and inhibit the expression of crude language, rude actions, and interpersonal conflict. Unwittingly, work-

---

Julianne Wayne, EdD, MSW, is Associate Professor and Alex Gitterman, EdD, MSW, is Professor, University of Connecticut School of Social Work, 1798 Asylum Avenue, West Hartford, CT 06117.

Social Work with Groups, Vol. 26(2) 2003
http://www.haworthpress.com/store/product.asp?sku=J009
© 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.
Digital Object Identifier: 10.1300/J009v26n02_03

ers may even respond in a punitive manner when confronted by such actions. Reasons for these reactions range from moral indignation to a desire to help members set limits on offensive and destructive behaviors that impede the development of effective social and interpersonal skills. While these motivations are understandable, seemingly "inappropriate" behaviors often represent disguised calls for help, and provide social workers with opportunities to explore hidden communication, and to demonstrate unconditional acceptance of group members. When workers can see beyond the social infractions and respond to the underlying meaning of the challenging behavior, they create positive turning points in the group's movement towards an environment of safety and mutual support (Gitterman and Wayne, 2003).

This article examines offensive behavior in groups as expressed through rude behavior, obscene language, sex and sexuality, and ethnic prejudice. It explores the challenges and the opportunities for positive group movement these behaviors present to workers and group members and offers implications for practice.

THE CHALLENGE OF OFFENSIVE BEHAVIORS IN GROUPS

Social work practitioners know about the need to understand and to not personally react to clients' provocative behaviors. Yet not over-reacting becomes hard to do when the behaviors overtake the professional perspective workers expect of themselves.

The tendency to over-react is often greater in work with groups than with individuals. A social worker experienced in individual work demonstrated this point when one of the authors asked her, "What would you do if an angry teenager in a group turned to you and blurted out *fuck you*?" She replied, "I would make it clear that we don't talk that way in the group." When asked how she would respond to the same language in the context of her individual practice, she replied, "I would explore the anger." Social workers with groups must reach for the same depths as they would in practice with individuals.

Within Group Influences on Workers' Reactions

There are many reasons for workers to feel especially challenged by offensive behavior in groups. The simultaneous flow of comments and member interactions in groups can cause workers to experience uncertainty about their ability to focus and direct interventions. This fear of "losing control" can lead to over-control (Sullivan, 1995). Worker visibility, group contagion, the expectations for "public" behavior, and concerns about members hurting each other are additional factors that contribute to a greater concern with maintaining propriety in groups than with individuals. In relation to visibility, workers naturally feel pressure to appear in control when all the other members (and possibly agency representatives) are watching to see how they will handle challenges to their authority. Feelings of self-consciousness often lead to defensive behaviors in the face of what feels like a public attack.

The fear of group contagion also influences workers' interventions. Workers fear that if members see another member "get away" with offensive behavior, other group members would interpret this as a weakness, and join the behaviors. The expectations of a "public vs. private persona" can easily be generalized from social situations to social work situations. In private conversations, people are more likely to lower standards of propriety than they do in larger groups. This social phenomenon can influence workers to set limits on behaviors they would accept in one-to-one practice.

Finally, workers are more likely to intervene quickly if they believe that one member is offending another. In these situations, workers may inadvertently move away from the *mediator* to the *protector* role. Sometimes this is done prematurely or "over-protectively" and thus workers close off opportunities for helping members work through interpersonal conflicts (Gitterman, 2003; Shulman, 1967; Steinberg, 1993). Ironically, the factors that could serve as constraints to open, honest expression in groups can also increase the ability to break through members' destructive behaviors and defenses. For example, the visibility of the worker's nonjudgmental stance towards a single member helps the others to experience the group as an arena of safety and acceptance.

External Influences on Workers' Reactions

Professional judgments are not made in a vacuum, but are influenced by many factors, including past experiences, professional education, and the organizational context for practice. By the time they enter into professional education, social work students have been socialized into certain codes of conduct. These codes, passed on from families, peers, and one's reference community, create personal lenses through which workers evaluate their own and their members' behavior. Once in practice, professionals bring varying levels of tolerance for offensive actions. These can range from mild discomfort to intense panic and moral out-

rage. However, the professional's goal is to filter these personal feelings through a lens that assesses individual and group needs. The worker must respond to those needs, rather than to the inner social self that finds the lack of civility so distasteful. The worker must find and react to the victim within the perpetrator.

Professional socialization also has a profound impact on practice judgments. Social workers recognize that their professional mission includes upholding behavioral standards, and setting limits on behavior that would be deemed unacceptable in the broader social environment (Kurland and Salmon, 1993). Looking past the offensive behavior could create a momentary value conflict for the professional who is dedicated to helping individuals function successfully in the world around them.

The organizational context shapes problem definition, assessment and interventions. Social workers must often manage conflicts between organizational, professional, and client interests. However, their accountability to the organization can foster a greater focus on maintaining its culture than fulfilling its mission to meet client needs. For example, social work groups in schools often are structured to follow a classroom format and a "behavior management" approach. There is often little tolerance for the normal testing behavior that many children and youth exhibit, let alone the acting out of those with behavioral problems (Fast, 1999; Noguera, 1995). School social workers, (and others), frequently begin their group by developing a curriculum and establishing classroom type rules of behavior, e.g., "raise your hand before speaking, do not interrupt, only one person can speak at a time, no getting out of your seat." Such a focus on a long list of rules diverts attention from the goal of spontaneous, honest expression of thoughts and emotions, including those that the children have learned are "not nice" to have. The irony of this situation is that many children are referred to social work groups because they have demonstrated an inability to follow these rules throughout their school careers. Within minutes of the new group experience, they become delinquents, once again in need of external control. Also, the very thoughts and emotions that they are discouraged from expressing may, in fact, be at the root of the behavior that needs to be addressed. Workers who feel bound by the organizational rules of decorum may need to focus less on learning to "control," and more on creating a group structure that is both safe and spontaneous.

One of the authors began a group service in a school and after a session in which painful material was uncovered and addressed, the children were noisy in the hall. Consequently, the service was discontinued.

The worker learned that he must limit expressions of anger in school-based groups. Yet, it was the expression of the anger that in this instance was a key therapeutic factor for the children.

OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY OFFENSIVE BEHAVIOR IN GROUPS

Social workers must judge when offensive behavior provides an opening and opportunity to reach for significant underlying issues it represents for the member and for the group. The following examples illustrate this point.

Example 1. Beth, a member of a group for mothers in need of parenting skills, began to read a newspaper during a discussion in the group's second meeting. The worker asked her to please put down the paper. A debilitating power struggle ensued, and Beth did not return the following week.

Example 2. A worker informed a group of pre-adolescent boys that she needed to miss the next two meetings and that a staff person would meet with them instead. The group members sat in silence except for Lenny, who became very angry and quickly blurted out, "That sucks. What kind of bullshit is that? Fuck that!" The worker quickly let Lenny know that his language was unacceptable–that cursing was not allowed in the group. Lenny knocked over his chair and ran out of the meeting. The other group members sat in silence for the remainder of the meeting.

In both of these instances, the workers' preoccupation with manifest offensive behavior closed off exploration of underlying latent messages. Opportunities for meaningful work were missed.

Purposefulness of Offensive Behavior

Beth's reading a newspaper during group discussion and Lenny's profanities signify deep latent meanings and serve a purpose for them and the other group members.

First, their *offensive behaviors divert attention from their more significant personal issues*. When members have uncomfortable feelings and thoughts that they do not want to face nor reveal to others, they often act them out through diversionary behaviors. The group member who is reading a newspaper is wearing a large sign that says, "I am go-

ing to advertise that I don't accept you as someone who could help me, or as someone I even like. This group is not working for me, I am feeling troubled, and I hope you notice and react to me." The youngster who curses because of the worker's impending absence is wearing a sign that says, "I am scared that you won't come back like other adults in my life. How dare you spring this on us without any preparation–that's how I was removed from my home." Lenny defends against the pain of being abandoned, unloved and unlovable by acting out his pain. His feelings of anger are more accessible to him than his feelings of rejection.

Second, Beth and Lenny's actions serve as a *test of the limits of acceptable behavior, and reflect normative group processes* (Berman-Rossi, 1993). Before groups can progress, some testing of the boundaries of acceptable behavior must occur. Often, the testing behavior will appear unrelated to the deeper and more significant issues that brought the members into the group. When these testing behaviors are socially offensive, and workers respond with immediate disapproval, they may, in a sense, fail the test, and slow the group's progress. Reading a newspaper and cursing in a group can be a test of the worker's ability to deal with difficult content and situations and to offer unconditional acceptance to these troubled members, and indirectly, to all members. If the worker is angry with Beth for reading a newspaper, how will she ever be able to accept the angry feelings Beth has towards her child? Reading a newspaper is a far milder offense than cruel parenting. For Lenny, his bad language may well be covering his self-image of an unlovable person. If the worker cannot get past the language, how will Lenny ever be able to present the parts of himself that he believes are even harder to accept than his unfortunate choice of words?

When workers make it clear that the usual expectations of "public" behavior are different in this group than in other formal groups, they create "normative crises," i.e., turning points in the group's norms (Garland, Jones and Kolodny, 1973; Malekoff, 1997). It is through such events that the foundation for serious work is laid and that the serious work can begin.

Third, *Beth and Lenny are speaking for the others in the group.* A view of the group as a social system points to the inter-connectedness of members to each other. Rarely will any single member have a feeling that no one else in the group has. The other group members share aspects of the concerns that Beth and Lenny have acted out. It is too early in the group's life for the more compliant members of Beth's group to be sure that the worker will unconditionally accept them and help them become better parents, but Beth is able to do the testing for them. Lenny is speaking for other members who, unlike him, deal with their hurt and anger through silence. Both of these "deviant" group members are acting out a group and life theme. A response from the worker that communicates understanding and acceptance of the offending member sends a message to all group members. This dynamic serves to shift a group norm of withholding true feelings to one of open expression.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTION

Workers are correct in recognizing that offensive behaviors need to be addressed. The skill remains in determining at which point it is to be addressed and in what manner. At any point, it must be done in a non-retaliatory and non-punitive manner.

Guidelines for Addressing Offensive Behavior

The worker must take immediate action if there is any physical threat to individuals or property. If Beth had rolled up the newspaper and had begun to use it as weapon against the other members, she would have needed to be immediately stopped, as would Lenny, if his anger had erupted into violence. Both of these members would need to know that the worker could not permit them to hurt anyone and that their remaining at the meeting was contingent upon their ability to control this behavior.

Offensive behavior can be directly addressed when workers believe that members have come to feel unconditionally accepted by them. Sometimes a simple reminder, within the context of a trusting relationship, can be helpful to a member who is carried away by the emotions of a moment. If the worker believed that the above groups had reached a stage of intimacy and trust (Garland et al.), they could say, " Beth, come join us. We miss your participation," "Hey Lenny, calm down. I know you and some others are upset about my missing the next meeting. Let's talk about it." In these cases, the workers' responses serve to redirect the behavior without group members perceiving any chastisement or punishment.

It becomes easier to address offensive behavior when behavioral change is part of the group's working agreement. Too often, civil behavior is listed as a rule rather than a goal. If Lenny's group had as one

of its goals to deal with anger in constructive rather than destructive ways, then the worker could have more easily pointed out at a later point that Lenny was engaging in the very behavior he had agreed to work on changing. If "proper language only" had been one of the rules, then the worker becomes a rule enforcer rather than an enabler and the exchange becomes more difficult.

There are times when members engage in undesirable behavior with little or no awareness of the impact it has on others. In moments such as these, a worker may want to give immediate feedback about the impact of the behavior in an objective non-judgmental manner.

Revisiting Beth and Lenny

Beth, who was reading the newspaper during the group meeting, should be invited to join the discussion, and to express her dissatisfaction. "Beth, we would be interested in knowing your thoughts about the issue we're discussing." If Beth remains unresponsive, the worker could add, "It looks as if the group is not working for you and probably others. Help me understand what you don't like about the group?" If Beth still cannot respond, the worker can simply accept her peripheral position in the group and say, "Beth, if you feel like joining the discussion later, you'll be welcome at any time." Such an exchange could create a normative crisis that would let all the members know that one does not have to behave in socially conventional ways in order to be welcome in the group. If seemingly "rude" behavior does not turn the worker against them, then she probably won't reject them after hearing of their problematic parenting behaviors. As members witness the worker's non-punitive acceptance of Beth's rebellious behavior, they too will be more ready to risk honest expression.

The worker with Lenny's group could acknowledge how angry her missing some meetings makes Lenny and probably others. She could then invite a discussion of all the thoughts and feelings her impending absences raise for them.

At a later point, workers would seek to help Beth and Lenny to find more socially acceptable ways to express their discontent. After discussing the many issues her leaving raised for the members in Lenny's group, the worker could review the entire incident in that or in a subsequent session. Expressing concern that it is just these kinds of outbursts that "get them into trouble" in school, the worker can now focus on helping members help each other to separate having angry/hurt feelings and acting them out.

USING THE OPPORTUNITY: PRACTICE ILLUSTRATIONS

The following practice examples illustrate the application of the above discussion to difficult group situations.

A recently graduated social worker, Pat, leads a group of late adolescent single mothers. The group had been meeting for several weeks, when their original worker, Phyllis, left the agency. The members had been quite fond of her, and were sorry she had to leave. Pat is young, dresses conservatively and in general, has "the {upper middle class} girl next door" look. The group members are all street-wise young women from working class backgrounds who look and speak differently than Pat. In spite of their differences, the meetings appear to be going well. Pat noted how quickly the group seemed to have accepted her, and how much the members had learned about child-rearing approaches. They were repeatedly relating incidents that demonstrated the constructive ways they were dealing with their children's difficult behaviors. Just as Pat was beginning to think that perhaps the transition of workers was going too easily, the critical event that Pat believed the group needed, occurred.

One of the members, Brenda, had not been as pleasant as the others since the day Pat entered the group. Suddenly, in the middle of the third meeting, Brenda looked at Pat and blurted out, "I bet you don't even know what *giving head* means." Brenda wanted to shock Pat. While Pat was quite taken aback by the crude remark, she instinctively realized the significance of the testing behavior. She believed that this incident was not about language. It was about the social class difference between her and the members. She sensed that Brenda feared it would stand in the way of permitting the members to discuss their most intimate feelings and concerns about themselves as mothers and as young women in a difficult situation. She also sensed that Brenda's comment addressed the other members' concerns as well. Could they really talk about their messy lives as teenagers and mothers with a worker who seemed to be "Miss Perfect"?

Though momentarily taken aback, Pat offered an honest response. "Wow, what a question! I certainly wasn't prepared for it. As a matter of fact, I do know what it means, but I'm interested in knowing why you think I don't. Do I seem square to you?" Brenda replied, "Well you look so perfect–so proper." Pat turned to Brenda and the others and asked, "Are you concerned that my life is very different than yours and that I won't understand your lives like Phyllis (the prior worker) did? That I won't understand what it's like to be in your shoes, and how hard it is to

want to have fun like other teenagers and still be good mothers?" And the conversation began.

At her first meeting with a group of white working class adolescent girls in the inner city, Reva was taken aback at their use of derogatory references to various minority groups, including those of her own Jewish descent. Not knowing that Reva was Jewish, the girls made frequent use of the phrase "Jewing down" anyone from whom they had made a purchase. Reva concluded that the girls were almost unaware of how harsh they sounded and decided to move ahead in her relationship building with them and bypass any discussion of their offensive language.

After months of meeting, the group had become cohesive and open with Reva and each other about the growing up issues the group had been formed to address. Reva and the group had planned an overnight at the settlement house sponsoring the group. As the girls were getting ready to fall asleep, Jenny spontaneously and playfully asked Reva to sing a lullaby to help them fall asleep. Though she said it somewhat jokingly, her request reflected the warmth and feelings of closeness in the room at the time.

Reva recognized that the group was at a stage in which they could engage in meaningful discussions of important issues. Reva also sensed that some personal self-disclosure could be helpful to the group's progress. She said that she would sing them a song that her grandmother had sung to her when she was a little girl. The song was an old Yiddish lullaby. She explained that Yiddish was the language spoken by many Jews from certain countries in Europe. The girls were shocked to learn of Reva's background, and curious to hear the song and the language. After Reva sang the song, the girls admitted to their embarrassment about having used anti-Semitic phrases. Reva told them that she had noticed the way they spoke of so many other groups as well and wanted to know what their experiences with other people had been. What followed was a discussion of differences and of how people could misunderstand and hurt each other. The girls were open to look at themselves their experiences and their attitudes, and the work began. If their language had become an issue before the relationship had begun, this story could have had a very different ending.

CONCLUSION

Every professional correctly feels the need to address behaviors that could prevent group members from functioning successfully in the social environment. However, to be the most effective workers must put aside the shock and distaste they feel from the offensive behaviors and judge when they are indeed the major issue or a diversion from more serious ones.

Members enter into groups with feelings both of hopefulness that they will benefit from the new experience and concern that they could, in some way, be hurt within the group. They enter with caution and with the defenses they typically use in the face of social situations with many unknowns. These include being both polite and superficial, i.e., withholding of deeply personal material. Workers must respect these defenses and recognize that superficiality is not artificiality. In fact, professionals worry about people who cannot be superficial, who indiscriminately reveal their vulnerability to every one they meet. Workers know they must attempt to create an environment in which all members feel accepted as individuals with worth and dignity, even if they have done or thought about doing undignified things. It is often these undignified behaviors and thoughts that members come to the group to address, but which they cannot reveal until they believe they will continue to be judged as worthy by those around them.

The workers non-retaliatory and non-punitive stance in the face of offensive behavior helps the group progress to a stage of greater cohesion and mutual trust (Garland, Jones, and Kolodny, 1973). When the offensive behavior is no longer a "test" of the worker's unconditional acceptance, it can be addressed–either as it occurs or even retroactively (Irizarry and Appel, 1994). Our ability to recognize and respond to the most significant personal and group issues will help us become more effective practitioners.

REFERENCES

Berman-Rossi, T. (1993). The tasks and skills of the social worker across stages of group development. *Social Work with Groups*, 16(1/2), 69-92.

Fast, J. (1999). Where were you fifth period? Five strategies for high school group formation in the 1990s. *Social Work in Education*, 21(2), 99-105.

Garland, J.A., Jones, H.E., and Kolodny, R.L. (1973). A model for stages of development in social work groups. In S. Bernstein (Ed.), *Explorations in group work: Essays in theory in practice* (pp. 17-71). Boston: Milford House.

Gitterman, A. (2003). Dealing with group members' testing of authority. *Social Work with Groups*, 25(1/2), 185-192.

Gitterman, A., and Wayne, J. (2003). Turning points in group life: Using high tension moments to promote group purpose and mutual aid. *Families in Society*, 84(3).

Irizarry, C., and Appel, Y.H. (1994). In double jeopardy: Preadolescents in the in[illegible] city. In A. Gitterman & L. Shulman (Eds.), *Mutual aid groups, vulnerable popu[illegible] tions, and the life cycle*. NY: Columbia University Press. 119-149.

Kurland, R., and Salmon, R. (1993). Not just one of the gang: Group workers and the[illegible] role as an authority. *Social Work with Groups*, 16(1/2), 153-169.

Malekoff, A. (1997). *Group work with adolescents: Principles and practice*. NY: Th[illegible] Guilford Press.

Noguera, P. (1995). Preventing and producing violence: A critical analysis of re[illegible] sponses to school violence. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65(2), 189-210.

Shulman, L. (1967). Scapegoats, group workers, and pre-emptive intervention. *Soci[illegible] Work*, 12(2), 37-43.

Steinberg, D. M. (1993). Some findings from a study of the impact of group work edu[illegible] cation on social work practitioners' work with groups. *Social Work with Groups*, 1[illegible] (3), 23-39.

Sullivan, N. (1995). Who owns the group? The role of the worker control in the deve[illegible] opment of a group: A qualitative research study of practice. *Social Work wi[illegible] Groups*, 18(2/3), 15-32.

MANUSCRIPT RECEIVED: 02/20/0[illegible]
MANUSCRIPT REVISED: 07/08/0[illegible]
MANUSCRIPT ACCEPTED: 07/15/0[illegible]

How Did We Get Here? The Importance of Sharing with Members the Reasons for a Group's Formation and the History of Its Development

Craig Sloane

ABSTRACT. This paper examines the importance of sharing the reasons for a group's formation and the history of its development during the first session. It discusses four positive outcomes of such sharing: (i) helping the members overcome ambivalence; (ii) helping the members connect with the purpose of the group; (iii) facilitating the establishment of commonality; and (iv) aiding the members in their active participation in the group process. The paper's intent is to help group workers incorporate the purposeful use of such sharing into their practice to facilitate the tasks of the beginning stage of group work. *[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> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Beginnings, stages of group work, ambivalence, planning, first sessions, group formation, member participation, purpose, commonality

Craig Sloane, MSW, is a staff social worker, International Center for the Disabled, 340 East 24 Street, New York, NY 10010.

The author would like to express appreciation and gratitude to Dr. Roselle Kurland for her guidance and mentoring in group work education and the shaping of this paper.

Social Work with Groups, Vol. 26(2) 2003
http://www.haworthpress.com/store/product.asp?sku=J009
© 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.
Digital Object Identifier: 10.1300/J009v26n02_04