

CHAPTER 21

ASSESSMENT OF GROUPS

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Group-level thinking develops through the careful observation of group interactions and the application of group-focused knowledge. This two-step process requires social workers to develop an awareness and appreciation of the interpersonal dynamics occurring among people. Social workers must then access knowledge to help explain their observations. Eventually, the knowledge can be applied toward understanding the dynamic forces that occur when people gather into groups.

Social work knowledge about groups has developed over the past century. Such knowledge emerged through many simultaneous processes. Initially, social workers and other professionals observed group phenomenon. Observations lead to potential understandings through the development of theories that can be shared. Such theories provide the foundation for many group articles and textbooks. This level of knowledge is often referred to as “grounded theory,” meaning that the theoretical understandings are based on careful observation.

After theory development, knowledge building requires increasingly more rigorous observation. Such observations occur through empirical studies. These studies require social scientists to develop methods for careful and precise observation. In recent years, the technology for this level of observation has increased, resulting in multiple empirical studies of group dynamics. This level of knowledge building allows social workers to contrast grounded theory with rigorous observations.

This chapter operates in concert with the next chapter to highlight empirical observations that can solidify our understanding of groups. This chapter briefly explores the history of our theoretical understanding and common themes. The common themes are presented as considerations that can be used to assess group dynamics. These considerations provide a framework for understanding and applying the empirical information.

Historical Background

Our understanding of group dynamics is heavily influenced by: the sociotechnical systems movement, the recreational movement, and the group psychotherapy movement. While there are other influences, these three movements have been instrumental in

building our knowledge of how groups operate. A brief discussion of each movement is provided to identify diverse contributions and common dynamics that can be used for assessment.

The sociotechnical systems movement has a long history of using groups to humanize industrialized work settings. This movement began with the Hawthorne studies when researchers studied how the organization of work and working conditions influenced worker productivity (Mayo, 1933; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). These studies found that the use of work groups enhanced loyalty to the organization and resulted in superior productivity. Based on these findings, researchers recommended using groups in the workplace to counterbalance the dehumanizing aspects of industrialization.

A team at the Tavistock Clinic in England expanded the Hawthorne findings by conducting experiments on how groups can support workers and compensate for work conditions (Emery, 1978). These researchers argued that the workplace should be democratized by allowing teams of workers to cross-train for any job (on the team) and make critical production decisions (Herbst, 1962; Trist, Higgin, Murray, & Pollock, 1963). This democratization of production maximized interdependence, investment, decision making, and mastery among the workgroup members (Emery & Emery, 1974; Trist et al., 1963).

After the Tavistock contributions, much of the industrial group-work research focused on issues of leadership. Using groups to enhance productivity was an underlying theme of most sociotechnical systems research. Critical elements emerging from this knowledge base include valuing participation, democracy, self-direction, and mastery. Such concepts, while initially divergent in their application, are consistent with social work values. In the earliest application of group work, social workers were also interested in using democratic group processes and fighting the dehumanizing influence of industrialization (Konopka, 1963).

The second movement, recreational group work, focused initially on youth-focused social and recreational groups (Coyle, 1948). Social workers were using groups in their community and shelter practices to help youth and immigrant families adjust to the United States. Social workers subscribed to Dewey's (1933) assertions that small leisure groups should be part of a progressive educational system and Follett's (1920) arguments that groups are central to solving community problems. Social work allied easily with these philosophical positions and incorporated group work into community level activities.

As the recreational movement progressed, the work of Kurt Lewin (1935) provided theoretical constructs to understand the group-level dynamics. Authors such as Grace Coyle (1948) carefully observed youth groups and solidified some of the principles of group-based recreation so they could be communicated to future workers. Coyle paid close attention to types of groups and how they formed. She took a particular interest in the facilitation of cohesion in the group.

Concurrent with Coyle, group theorists focused on how to effectively intervene with groups. Wilson and Ryland (1949) and Konopka (1963) outlined general principles of group intervention. Such authors provided program media and shared records of practice to illustrate the most effective methods for understanding and influencing group processes. The focus of many group workers at this time was on group-level dynamics such as climate, subgroups, values, and democratic processes within the group (Coyle, 1948). Social work became heavily involved in expanding the grounded theory for understanding and influencing groups.

With the level of group knowledge expanding, Papell and Rothman (1966) identified three models of group work prevalent in social work: the reciprocal, remedial and social action groups. The distinctions outlined in this article identify three critical influences in the group movement: groups seeking to change individuals, groups focused on empowerment and social change, and groups traditionally associated with the recreational movement. The inclusion of remedial groups was a reflection of the third movement starting to influence social work practice.

This third movement is referred to as the *group psychotherapy movement*. This movement was heavily influenced by the writings of Freud (1922). While the recreation movement focused on the group as a whole, group psychotherapy focused on the individuals and how they responded in the group. Freud noted that the leader influences the group members and they, concurrently, influence each other. Many group therapists adopted a leader centric based on an assumption that the leader must be strong to harness the volatile psychic energies of the group members.

Bion (1961) blended a focus on group dynamics with the leader-centric focus. Bion assumed that the group members experienced a need for a protective leader. Therapeutic influence emerged from the discovery that the leader could not meet the group members' needs producing a subsequent shift toward self-reliance. The group therapist focused on the transference relationship between the members and the leader because members recreate earlier life conflicts through the group relationships (Foulkes & Anthony, 1957).

When group workers joined the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in 1955, there was an increased exposure to clinical caseworkers and subsequent interest in clinical work. At this time, group psychotherapy was gaining momentum, providing a clinically focused group method for social workers to explore. Many group workers began using the group method to change individual group members (Gilbert & Specht, 1981). The increased clinical focus drew many group workers away from using groups to mobilize collective group action. Papell and Rothman (1980) consequently revised their initial typology to include group psychotherapy, structured group approaches, and the mainstream model of group work.

The convergence of these three movements provides social work with a rich foundation of group knowledge with multiple potential applications. Each movement provides a specific perspective on knowledge. Sociotechnical systems focus on

promoting outcomes; group psychotherapy expands knowledge on member experiences; and the recreational approach advances our knowledge on working with the whole group. These contributions notwithstanding, most of our historical knowledge remains grounded in theory. To continue the knowledge building, this chapter draws on empirical literature to provide additional evidence for group assessment.

The remainder of the chapter uses the overlaps and convergences among the three movements as a framework for discussing group dynamics. Given that these dynamics are so central to understanding groups, this chapter discusses empirical evidence associated with each dynamic and explores how the evidence can be used to assess social work groups. The dynamics used throughout the chapter include:

- Group engagement.
- Group cohesion.
- Group climate.
- Group interaction.
- Group leadership.
- Group development.

Summary of Current Evidence and Applications to Group Assessment

To organize the available group knowledge to assess groups, this section is organized into nine subsections based on well-established group dynamics. Each group dynamic is presented as a consideration during group assessment. While this framework presents each consideration separately, it is important to remember that group dynamics are interrelated. As you read each consideration, try to integrate your understanding of previous subsections to understand the interrelationships between the group dynamics. The nine considerations include:

1. *Group definition*: Groups can fail because they do not constitute a workable group. Workers must sometimes assess whether or not the collective meets the criteria for a group.
2. *Group pragmatics*: Planning decisions can make it difficult for group members to participate. Workers must sometimes assess the timing and structure of the group to identify barriers to group success.
3. *Group composition*: Often, the array of people entering a group creates dynamics that inhibit group success. Workers need to understand how the members' traits can influence the experience of group members and subsequent dynamics.
4. *Group engagement*: Members must find a reason to continue attending the

group and form a commitment to shared goals. If multiple people drop out or attendance is inconsistent, it is difficult for other group dynamics to develop.

5. *Group identity/cohesion*: When people form a group, a shared identity and sense of closeness develops. The shared identification and relationships keep the group membership committed to the group.
6. *Group climate*: An interpersonal atmosphere develops among the members, reflecting the emotional elements of the group. Workers tune into this group climate to understand the shared emotion among the members.
7. *Group interactions*: The exchanges among the group members form patterns. Some patterns indicate problems in the group while others reflect group health. Workers monitor interaction patterns to identify potential group problems.
8. *Group leadership*: The formal group leader and the members themselves all play leadership roles in a group. Group leadership refers to both the emergent leadership and the approach that professionals assume when leading a group.
9. *Group development*: The group dynamics change over the life of the group. Group development is the term used to describe the normative patterns of change associated with the passage of time in a group.

Group Definition

When assessing group level problems, it is helpful to first consider whether you have a group. There are collectivities that do not achieve the criterion for a group. We are all thrust into situations where we are with other people (e.g., in an elevator) but do not have enough in common to be considered a group. Consequently, identifying whether your collectivity makes the criterion for group consideration is used here as the first level of group assessment.

Finding evidence-based practice (EBP) for assessing group criteria is difficult because there have been no studies addressing this specific question. There have been studies where researchers exclude groups that do not achieve some basic criteria of “groupness.” This section draws on two studies that identified criteria for group consideration. There are four simple criterion that can help make this determination:

1. *Minimum size*: It is commonly accepted that there should be at least three people in the group. If the number falls below three, there are not enough relationships to achieve the dynamics common to groups. If the group you are assessing does not have enough members to be considered a group, you may want to address the membership issues before using group dynamics to assess the problems.
2. *Common interest*: Groups have a shared or common interest. Group members share this interest and have an investment in the group outcomes (Kenny &

LaVoie, 1985). When assessing a group, try to identify the common interest or investment. If there is no commonality at this level, you may not be assessing a group.

3. *Shared beliefs*: Groups have some shared values or beliefs that help identify members of the group from those outside of the group (Moritz & Watson, 1998). These beliefs may cause problems for the members or may be a source of pride. For example, in a staff group there will be shared professional beliefs and values while in a group of batterers, there will be a different set of shared beliefs that help identify the group.
4. *Interdependence*: Groups work together to accomplish some goal or outcome. Members' efforts combine to achieve the outcome in a way where each person must contribute for the group to be successful (Moritz & Watson, 1998). If each person can go off and do his or her own work with no consideration of the others, it is unlikely that a group has been formed. This is often a problem in student projects where groups simply divide up the work. In the final product, some members are upset because other people have not made their efforts interdependent with others.

When using these criterion to assess group problems, it is useful to first screen for the existence of criterion. If criteria are identified, then other group assessment considerations can be useful for understanding group problems. If the group criteria are not evident, you will likely need to consider the decisions and priorities that were used when establishing the group. Most often, if the collectivity you are assessing does not achieve the criterion for a group, problems will be associated with decisions made when forming the group. Consider the decision making carefully; if there are competing priorities used to establish group membership, you may need to explore the implications of each set of priorities.

Group Pragmatics

Often social workers plan group sessions based on agency considerations such as room availability and worker schedules. While such considerations are important, they are not shared concerns with group members. The timing of group meetings can influence group member motivation and attendance. Several researchers have found that establishing a suitable meeting time was one of the most common challenges to participation (Bogenschneider, 1996; Spoth & Redmond, 1996; Tolan & McKay, 1996).

Pragmatic concerns include client travel, childcare, and language (Spoth, Redmond, Hockaday, & Chung, 1996; Tolan & McKay, 1996). Programs that plan around client realities (e.g., needing childcare or using public transportation) tend to be more successful in terms of attendance and participation (Kirchenbaum, 1979; Lengua et al., 1992). Similarly, group programs that accommodate minority status and language

differences also appear to enhance member attendance and participation in the group program (Herrera & Sanchez, 1980).

Group members' pragmatic concerns are accentuated if they have lower incomes or are otherwise disadvantaged (Home & Darveau-Fournier, 1990). Several researchers have identified problems in attendance, participation, and outcomes when group members experience economic or functional social disadvantages (Andra & Thomas, 1998; Dumas & Wahler, 1983; Lorion, 1973; Lorion & Felner, 1986; Ross, Mirowski, & Cockerham, 1983). The implications for social work groups are profound given that we traditionally work with disadvantaged populations.

Pragmatic problems most often are observed in attendance rates, dropout rates, and level of active participation (Andra & Thomas, 1998; Dumas & Whahler, 1983; Kazdin, 1990; Webster-Stratton, 1985). The assessment implications of these findings focus primarily on the structure of the group program or planning decisions. There are four types of issues to consider carefully when assessing a group program. These include:

- *Motivation issues:* Motivation levels are associated with the group member's life situation. If the client situation is prone to lower levels of change motivation (e.g., court referred, addicted), group pragmatics will become an excuse for dropping out of the group program because there is minimal potential investment in the group. It is important to schedule meetings when deterrents are minimized (e.g., not during rush hour or after public transportation has ended). It may also become necessary with problems that have fluctuating motivation (e.g., substance abuse treatment) to use motivational enhancements such as prompts and reminders (Lash, Burden, Monteleone, & Lehmann, 2004).
- *Life stress issues:* Depending on group members' life situations, motivation and attendance will change. For example, parents with younger children do not often like attending meetings in the evening because of childcare concerns. Similarly, parents of school-aged children often resist committing to meetings right after work.
- *Pattern of life issues:* There are times of the day, week, month, and year that make it more difficult for group members to attend. For example, during summer people often take vacation and during late December people have family obligations.
- *Cultural issues:* There are language, values, and other barriers to service based on cultural differences between the agency, staff, and clients. You will often have to consider the cultural groups in your community and assess your program decisions based on the experience of clients within each cultural group.

While pragmatic concerns are not the only considerations that influence absenteeism and dropout rates, these considerations are easy to assess because the information needed for assessment is readily available. You will already know the time, location, decision-making priorities, and information on client needs. If it appears that

group concerns are associated with pragmatic issues, you can immediately explore options for renegotiating these elements of the group program.

Group Composition

While many agencies do not screen potential members before including them in the group, the research literature indicates that group composition decisions can influence group functioning. In a study of 99 undergraduate teams, Molleman (2005) found that groups often divide based on cultural identity, ability, and personality traits. When such divides become structural in a group, they often disrupt group effectiveness (Molleman, 2005).

Composition considerations begin with the group worker's demographic traits. Two studies have found that people assume reciprocity when a group leader shares an identity group membership (e.g., race) with a subgroup of members. However, people with no shared identity with the group leader assume fair treatment simply based on their joining the group (Duck & Fielding, 1999; Tanis & Postmes, 2005). These findings suggest that the initial impressions based on leader traits begin unspoken expectations that must be navigated with care.

Concurrent with group leader traits, many studies have explored diversity issues among group members. A laboratory study of work groups comparing Chinese and caucasian leadership behaviors found that caucasians are more likely to assume the group leadership roles (Kelsey, 1998). Studies have concluded that race-related issues of status and power are a consideration for minority group members when they join a group (Lucken & Simon, 2005). After joining the group, racial balance fluctuations influence decisions to leave the group (Prislin & Christensen, 2005) and levels of enjoyment for minority group members (Paletz, Peng, Erez, & Maslach, 2004).

Gender also emerges as a composition consideration. In laboratory studies with students, researchers find that increases in the proportion of men in the group correspond to increased levels of interrupting and power displays (Karakowsky, McBey, & Miller, 2004). In similar research, a laboratory study of gender composition and gender-related attitude found that the gender composition influences the conflict resolution strategies used by the group (Becker-Beck, 2001). This same study found that gender attitudes can polarize the group when traditional values are in conflict with more liberal attitudes. In a study of group risk tolerance, researchers found that men are more influential than women in making risk-taking decisions (Karakowsky & Elangovan, 2001).

Status and power are important considerations when assessing the group composition (Tyler & Blader, 2002). Group participants tend to share more with people perceived as having equal (or less) power than they themselves (van Dijke & Poppe, 2004). Group members may set higher expectations for higher status members. One study found that group members assume that higher-status people are more competent (Lovaglia, 1995). Concurrently, behavioral breaches of higher status members (e.g., false

representation) receive higher levels of condemnation by lower status group members (Birchmeier, Joinson, & Dietz-Uhler, 2005).

A final membership consideration is group member personality. There have been multiple studies on the impact of personality on group dynamics. The following emotional and personality traits are found to influence group dynamics:

- Emotional stability, agreeableness, and confidence are associated with participation, collaboration, and positive outcomes in the group (Halfhill, Sundstrom, Lahner, Calderone, & Nielsen, 2005; MacNair-Semands, 2002; Oetzel, 2001; Perrone & Sedlacek, 2000).
- Personality variability is associated with conflicted criterion for success, poorer task accomplishment, and conflict in the group (Halfhill et al., 2005; Mohammed & Angell, 2003; Priola, Smith, & Armstrong, 2004; Schei & Rognes, 2005).
- Personality differences influence the preferred structure for the group with intuitive members preferring a loose structure and analytic members working better with imposed structures (Priola et al., 2004).
- People high in power needs speak more often (Islam & Zyphur, 2005), overrate the level of conflict, and underrate the level of group support (MacNair-Semands & Lese, 2000).

Diversity-related problems appear to be associated with group balance and openness. There is a tendency for people to prefer homogeneous group membership that reflects their own personal traits (Kruglanski, Shah, Pierro, & Mannetti, 2002). When this tendency causes some group members to homogenize the group based on their personality traits, group problems will occur (Halfhill et al., 2005). When there is sufficient shared experience and common ground, diversity can be positive and promote group creativity (Choi, Price, & Vinokur, 2003; Miura & Hida, 2004).

Group composition issues have implications for group leadership. First, the group leader is charged with ensuring that there is sufficient common ground by balancing the membership (Halfhill et al., 2005; Miura & Hida, 2004). This often requires conducting selection or orientation interviews prior to the group to address and preempt potential problems (de Jager & Strauss, 1998; Evensen & Bednar, 1978). Group leaders must also monitor the potential for schisms so early intervention can occur.

Group Engagement

Group composition gives rise to engagement considerations as the members meet each other and must make a commitment to the group. Evidence of engagement by the fourth session is associated with positive group outcomes (Ogrodniczuk & Piper, 2003). In a study of engagement and therapeutic alliance, researchers found that engaged members with a high initial alliance who increase their alliance over time and patients with low initial alliance who decrease their alliance (but remain engaged) both have

positive outcomes (Piper, Ogrodniczuk, LaMarche, Hilscher, & Joyce, 2005). The critical element in this study appears to be that engagement, as indicated by a willingness to grapple with group issues, promotes positive outcomes regardless of the therapeutic alliance.

Engagement is most often indicated by continued attendance and participation. Engagement occurs early in the group based on member expectations and initial experiences in the group program (Kivlighan & Jauquet, 1990; Klein & Carroll, 1986; McCallum, Piper, Ogrodniczuk, & Joyce, 2002; Ogrodniczuk & Piper, 2003; Parloff, 1961). Initial experiences of acceptance and openness are associated with a commitment to the group (de Cremer & Tyler, 2005). When people don't feel they can share with the other group members, don't fit in, or are uncomfortable with the leader's style, they are more likely to drop out of the group (Parloff, 1961; Van Vugt, Jepson, Hart, & De Cremer, 2004; Yalom, 1966).

In the early group experiences, group members must form a confidence that the group will meet their needs (Baker, 2001; Pescosolido, 2001). When individual members feel empowered and believe that the group can achieve its goals, a broader group level confidence can develop (Jung & Sosik, 2002; Marmarosh, Holtz, & Schottenbauer, 2005). Group confidence is associated with increased intermember communication (Oetzel, 2001), group cohesion (Sargent & Sue-Chan, 2001), and group performance (Jordan, Feild, & Armenakis, 2002; Lee, Tinsley, & Bobko, 2002, 2004). If members form a belief that the group cannot meet their needs or develop negative feelings about the group, attendance tends to suffer (MacNair-Semands, 2002; McCallum et al., 2002; McKisack & Waller, 1996; Westra, Dozois, & Boardman, 2002).

To enhance engagement potential, group leaders often screen potential members to ensure that they understand the purpose, opportunities, and expectations associated with group treatment (Riva, Lippert, & Tackett, 2000). Some programs use orientation groups to enhance engagement and attendance (France & Dugo, 1985). Another engagement enhancement technique is to use phone contacts, providing prompts and feedback to the members (Lash & Blosser, 1999). In a survey of 75 randomly selected group leaders, researchers found that most workers used a selection strategy to enhance engagement and prevent group problems (Riva et al., 2000).

When assessing groups for engagement problems, it is likely that assessment will be prompted by poor attendance, high dropout rates, or poor participation. These dynamics are often symptomatic of procedural problems. The following list may help identify the nature of group elements that underlie engagement problems:

- *Intake procedures:* Consider how the group leader makes contact and explains the group to the potential members. Procedures that involve some pregroup contact that explains the group, provides feedback, and builds a pregroup relationship seems to enhance engagement (France & Dugo, 1985; Lash & Blosser, 1999).

- *Leadership style:* Given that people will tend to leave the group if they feel the leadership style does not fit for them (van Vugt et al., 2004), consider the leadership approach and reflect on the leader's methods as they might impact group members.
- *Messages about the group:* Given the importance of group efficacy, consider the messages relayed to the members when they first come to the group. Remember that members need hope that the group can meet their needs (Jordan et al., 2002; Westra, Dozois & Boardman, 2002).
- *Emergent leadership:* When group members assume leadership and express confidence in the group, group efficacy increases (Pescosolido, 2001; Yamaguchi & Maehr, 2004). Consider how the group program makes it possible for group members to assume leadership roles and influence the group.
- *Early group sessions:* Given that engagement occurs early in the group (Baker, 2001; Pescosolido, 2001), reflect very carefully on the early group sessions to ensure that members feel accepted and respected by the leader and other members (de Cremer & Tyler, 2005).

Group Identity/Cohesion

Cohesion refers to the sense of “we-ness” and the intermember bonds that cause members to remain in a group (Anderson, 1997; Cartwright & Zander, 1968). As the group becomes cohesive, there is an increase in caring among the members and a feeling that they are all in the same boat together. This is the dynamic that provides feelings that the group is different from the rest of life and important in achieving the group members' goals. There are several group features commonly used as indicators of cohesion:

- *Affect:* Members feel closeness to the group as a whole (Pollack, 1998; Rugel, 1987). There are feelings of wanting to come to the group and that the group is meeting some important need.
- *Openness:* Members feel comfortable in the group and decrease their attempts to manage other people's impressions (Pollack, 1998; Roark, 1989). They are able to be honest and forthright with the other members about their feelings and situations.
- *Investment:* Members identify part of themselves with the group and want to see the group members achieve their goals (Beech & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Rugel, 1987). Members are willing to risk and take action to ensure that the group and members are successful.
- *Focus/alliance:* The purpose and goals of the group are clear to the members and they are committed to fulfilling the group purpose (Marziali, Munroe-Blum & McCleary, 1997; van Anel, Erdman, Karsdorp, Appels, & Trijsburg, 2003).

Cohesion is considered by many to be one of the most important group dynamics. In outcome research, group cohesion is associated with the accomplishment of group goals (Allen, Sargent, & Bradley, 2003; Chang & Bordia, 2001). This finding is consistent in work groups (Pollack, 1998), treatment groups, (Beech & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Marziali, Munroe-Blum & McCleary, 1997; Tschuschke & Dies, 1994), and student seminar groups (Meredith, 1987). While the association between cohesion and successful outcomes is consistent, some findings suggest that the indicators of cohesion may change depending on the type of group (Stokes, 1983).

Beyond simply promoting positive outcomes, cohesion is associated with the member-group relationship and development of positive group processes. Several studies find positive influences of group cohesion:

- A study of 105 workers in 19 service groups found that cohesion is associated with a sense of belonging to the group (Pollack, 1998).
- A study of exercise classes found that cohesion is associated with a shared group vision (Burke et al., 2005).
- Studies of treatment and student groups found that higher levels of cohesion are associated with verbal risk-taking, here-and-now interaction, self-disclosure, and reductions in problem-maintaining thinking (Beech & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Rosenfeld & Gilbert, 1989; Slavin, 1993).
- Several studies found an association between high group cohesion, individual efficacy, and group confidence (Chang & Bordia, 2001; Grabhorn, Kaufhold, & Overbeck, 2002; Marmarosh et al., 2005).
- A study of 22 play groups each with 5 to 6 children found that low cohesion was among the group dynamics associated with intermember aggression (de Rosier, Cillessen, Coie, & Dodge, 1994).
- A study of treatment groups found a lack of cohesion is associated with subgroups and schisms in the group (Sani, 2005).

When assessing a group for potential problems, it is important to consider the potential indicators of low cohesion. The literature provides six clear indicators that there are problems with cohesion. These indicators include:

- *Negative emotion*: High levels of negative emotion in a group are associated with the development of schisms and factions that interfere with group cohesion (Sani, 2005). If negative emotion seems prevalent in the group, monitor for subgroups and factions.
- *Social loafing*: Members who participate very little and allow others to do the work are referred to as social loafers. In a laboratory study of high, moderate, and low cohesion groupings, researchers found that high cohesion groups had less social loafing (Karau & Hart, 1998).
- *Poor outcomes*: Groups that have high cohesion tend to have superior outcomes. In a study that observed 50 self-managed work teams (military officers) for a 5-week period, researchers found that cohesion contributed to

group performance (Jordan et al., 2002). Likewise, a laboratory study of 57 undergraduate groups produced similar findings (Allen et al., 2003).

- *Low interpersonal sharing:* Cohesive groups tend to have higher levels of sharing and personal interaction. In a study of 78 teams with a total sample size of 1,000 subjects, researchers found that frequent sharing was associated with higher levels of group cohesion (Carron et al., 2004).
- *Low consensus:* Groups that don't agree on goals, methods of goal achievement, and direction tend to have lower levels of cohesion. In a study of exercise classes, researchers found that groups with shared goals and demonstrated action toward meeting their goals had higher levels of cohesion (Burke et al., 2005).
- *Low interdependence:* Groups that have little in common or avoid working together on their goals tend to have low cohesion. Situational interdependence (e.g., all members experiencing similar situations) is associated with increased participation and cooperation among the members (Oetzel, 2001). A study of 57 work teams also found that task interdependence (members working collaboratively toward a goal) is associated with group cohesion (Kirkman & Shapiro, 2000).

Whenever problems are evident in a group, there will likely be threats to cohesion. However, cohesion is associated with engagement, composition, interactions, and other group elements. Consequently, an assessment of cohesion may require renegotiating leadership patterns or altering the interaction to increase sharing and interdependence. One may also want to intervene preemptively by meeting with potential group members ahead of time to promote a positive group identity (Marmarosh & Corazzini, 1997).

Group Climate

The group climate refers to the nonverbal, interpersonal feeling in the group (Alissi, 1982; Shaw, 1971). The relational climate is often the most commonly mentioned factor when members speak of their group experience in therapy groups (Johnson, Bulingame, Olsen, Davies, & Gleave, 2005; Shechtman & Gluk, 2005), work groups (Bain, Mann, & Pirola-Merlo, 2001), and training groups (Choi et al., 2003). Concurrent with influencing the member experience, the climate of the group is associated with innovation, confidence, and group outcomes in many types of groups (Bain et al., 2001; Bierhoff & Muller, 2005; Choi et al., 2003; Harper & Askling, 1980; Schiff & Bargal, 2000).

The group climate has an emotional and interactive element. A recent study of 43 student groups found that a climate of emotional openness and stability predicted performance (Bond & Ng, 2004). Conversely, a study of 33 group casualties identified a lack of support as the most frequent harmful dynamic (Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2001). A climate of persistent negative emotion and competitiveness in the group is associated with aggression in children's groups (de Rosier et al., 1994). While emotion is

a critical element of group climate, findings suggest that emotional elements are mediated by here-and-now exchanges, openness, and risk taking in the group (Bond & Ng, 2004; Kivlighan & Jauquet, 1990).

Several group dynamics are associated with the group climate. First, group climate appears to be associated with engagement. Early studies of group dropout rates found that individuals who perceive themselves as having a poor relationship with the group tend to drop out of treatment (Parloff, 1961; Yalom, 1966). The group climate is also associated with perceptions of group efficacy (Choi et al., 2003; Schiff & Bargal, 2000). Additional studies find an association with group cohesion (Dimmock, Grove, & Eklund, 2005; Pollack, 1998). Finally, group climate is associated with outcomes (Bain et al., 2001; Choi et al., 2003).

When assessing the group climate, there are several indicators of potential problems. These indicators are both verbal and nonverbal in nature. Group workers must often monitor the unspoken elements of the group to identify potential problems. The following five indicators can help identify climate problems. When using these indicators, remember that some indicators may pertain to more than one group dynamic.

- *Negative tensions*: Pervasive negative tensions in the group can indicate climate problems (Bond & Ng, 2004). It is important to monitor for consistent anxiety, anger, hostility, competitiveness, and other negative emotions.
- *Evasiveness*: If group members are not openly sharing, it may indicate problems with group support (Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2001). People are not likely to share unless the group feels safe.
- *Attendance problems*: When people do not feel comfortable in the group, they tend to stop attending (Yalom, 1966). If attendance is not consistent or there are dropouts, a group climate problem may be impacting engagement.
- *Here-and-now risk -taking*: Group members must be able to address the interactions, relationships, and attitudes among the group members. These interactions require risk taking. Such risk taking is a sign that the climate is good (Kivlighan & Jauquet, 1990). A lack of such risk taking, especially in the later stages of the group, may indicate climate problems.
- *Hopelessness*: A positive group climate is associated with group efficacy (Choi et al., 2003). If group members indicate a lack of hope in the group there may be problems in the group climate.

Interactive Processes

All groups contain interactive processes. Frequent and evenly distributed interaction among group members is beneficial to the group (Holtz, 2004). In a laboratory study of 189 students, researchers found that equal participation and respect among the members was associated with group satisfaction (Oetzel, 2001). An 18-month study of adults in group therapy found that speaking out in the group was associated with better

outcomes (Fielding, 1983). Similar findings were found in a study of undergraduate students in learning groups (Olivera & Straus, 2004).

Groups appear to have internal systems for managing the interactions of the group members. Within the group, there is a tendency for the interactive patterns to self-organize around the context of the group (Pincus & Guastello, 2005). One study found that in groups that value evenly distributed group-attention, members tend to balance themselves by waiting longer to talk after a lengthy disclosure (Kuk, 2000). Such reciprocal exchanges are associated with higher levels of trust and affective commitment in groups (Molm, 2003).

Group interactions often cluster around themes of conflict and closeness (Pincus & Guastello, 2005). Closeness themes of agreeableness and helpfulness are associated with increased collaboration among group members (Halfhill et al., 2005). Closeness themes are also associated with group cohesion (Bierhoff & Muller, 1999; Bond & Ng, 2004). Joking cultures (group-related inside jokes) can develop in groups helping to establish group boundaries, build affiliation, and control group members (Fine & de Soucey, 2005).

Conflict themes can be harmful to both the group and the individuals in the group. A study of 33 group casualties found that confrontation, criticism, pressuring, fighting, and nonhelpful feedback were the most commonly mentioned damaging interactions (Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2001). In a study focused on group functioning, researchers categorized groups based on functional levels. This study found that conflict was a common theme in the least functional groups (Wheelan & Williams, 2003).

Conflict sets up reciprocal exchanges where one member's attack results in a counterattack (Pincus & Guastello, 2005). A study of group conflict identified primary provokers (those who initiate problematic interactions) and secondary provokers (those who respond) in the problem sequences. Primary provokers tend to produce both friendly and hostile interactive themes. Conflict is most disruptive when the focus of the conflict is based on a lack of tolerance for demographic or personality differences (Bayazit & Mannix, 2003). Task-related conflict can be disruptive if avoided and allowed to escalate and interfere with problem solving (Becker-Beck, 2001). Researchers indicated that task-related conflict must be addressed early in the group.

Methods of nonconflictual decision making can also be problematic. Majority-rule methods of making decisions or resolving problems (e.g., voting) often fail to protect the group as these methods inherently exclude some group members (Schei & Rognes, 2005). In a meta-analytic study of group decision making, Orlitzky and Hirokawa (2001) found that evaluating the negative outcomes of alternatives, problem analysis, and having clear criteria for the solution were the critical components of positive outcomes.

When assessing group interaction, the above findings provide indicators of potential problems. The following list of seven indicators can be used to assess the group

interaction. Like other group dynamics, these indicators are not mutually exclusive and may also indicate problems with other dynamics:

- *Unequal sharing* (Holtz, 2004; Oetzel, 2001; Olivera & Straus, 2004): When some members never speak and others monopolize the group discussion, there may be interactive problems (Fielding, 1983).
- *Lack of support* (Molm, 2003; Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2001): When group members speak and other members respond with judgmental feedback rather than providing support, there may be problems in the group.
- *Emotionally volatile expressions* (Bayazit & Mannix, 2003; Bond & Ng, 2004): When group members exhibit high levels of emotional variability in their interaction, there may be problems. This is particularly true with themes of hostility and dependence.
- *Personal attacks* (Bayazit & Mannix, 2003; Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2001): When members attack each other with a focus on personality or personal traits, there are likely problems in the group interaction.
- *Pressuring members/Intolerance for differences* (Smokowski et al., 2001): If group members pressure others or focus on specific members due to personality or demographic differences, there may be an intolerance of differences governing the interactions.
- *Avoidance of problems* (Becker-Beck, 2001): When group members avoid bringing up differences or other tension provoking issues, there may be a problem in how the group approaches problems.
- *Voting rather than reaching for consensus* (Schei & Rognes, 2005): When decisions are made by a majority rule, subgroups are compromised in the group rather than being engaged in the decisions. This can become divisive in the group.

Group Leadership

There are two types of group leadership: formal and emergent (or indigenous). Formal group leadership refers to the actions used by the group worker to help the group achieve its goals. Emergent leadership refers to members assuming leadership roles in response to the needs of the group. Formal leadership has a strong influence on the climate and outcomes of the group (Bierhoff & Muller, 2005). Some group leader traits account for much of this influence. A study focused on task groups found that the leader's self-efficacy determines task strategies influencing group outcomes (Kane, Zaccaro, Tremble, & Masuda, 2002). The approach adopted by the leader also influences member attrition. A recent study found that autocratic leadership was associated with group member decisions to leave the group (van Vugt et al., 2004).

Some group level problems are an indication of member responses to leader actions. A study of "good" versus "bad" group sessions tracking themes of dominance and friendliness in leader-member interactions found that during "good" sessions leaders

were variable but balanced. In sessions identified as “bad,” leaders tended toward extreme positions in the areas of dominance versus submission and hostility versus friendliness (Kivlighan, Mullison, Flohr, Proudman, & Francis, 1992). A comparative study of 33 group casualties and 50 participants from groups with no casualties found that the leader pressuring members was the strongest discriminator (Smokowski, Rose, Todar, & Reardon, 1999). Other problematic leader behaviors included monopolizing the group, low support, criticism, and unhelpful feedback/advice.

Autocratic leadership is identified as the most problematic style of group work. Autocratic group leaders tend to instruct, judge, limit the group focus, and control the criteria of success (Fiene, 1979; van Vugt et al., 2004). Such styles are associated with negative affect in the group, poor outcomes, and higher attrition rates (Bierhoff & Muller, 2005; van Vugt et al., 2004). Even when leaders consult with members, it is possible to withhold power from the group. A laboratory study of 144 subjects in three-way negotiation exercises found that leaders who caucus (selective feedback for decision making) retained power while joint decision making decreased leadership power (Mannix, 1993).

When leaders exert too much power over the group, interactive and emotional group processes are compromised. A study of 26 undergraduate task groups found that leader power orientation strongly influences the negotiating latitude of the group members (McClane, 1991). A similar study of 216 students found that during group conflict, leaders with high power needs inhibit the affective expressions of group members (Fodor, 1995). Research indicates that while both verbal and nonverbal leader power expressions influence the group, the nonverbal expressions yield the strongest negative affect in the group members (Driskell & Salas, 2005).

In contrast to autocratic leadership, democratic group leadership is frequently considered a superior approach. Democratic leadership is typically identified by leader actions that encourage and support group member input. A study of 33 college students found that leader support and encouragement was associated with increased member participation (Harper & Askling, 1980). This same leadership style is associated with member satisfaction (Foels, Driskell, Mullen, & Salas, 2000; Kushell & Newton, 1986; Meredith, 1987; Stitt, Schmidt, Price, & Kipnis, 1983). Satisfaction is strongest for female group members who tend to react most strongly to autocratic styles of leadership (Kushell & Newton, 1986).

Two elements of democratic leadership—encouragement to voice opinions and support—both receive support in the empirical literature. In a study of 169 training groups attending a 5-day workshop, researchers found that supportive leadership is associated with increased group self-efficacy and outcomes (Choi et al., 2003). A study focused on group stability found that when the leader creates an atmosphere where members feel that they have permission to voice dissent, negative emotion, subgrouping, and schisms are moderated (Sani, 2005).

A dynamic made possible in democratic groups is emergent leadership. Emergent leaders are identified by high level of group participation (Kelsey, 1998). A study of children's groups found that emergent task and relationship leadership is positively associated with group regulation, participation, and cohesion (Kelsey, 1998; Yamaguchi & Maehr, 2004). Emergent leaders often enhance the atmosphere of the group by promoting group self-efficacy and highlighting positive group elements (Pescosolido, 2001; Yamaguchi & Maehr, 2004).

In work groups, the concepts of autocratic and democratic leadership are seldom used. The most commonly used positive leadership style is transformational leadership, that increases members' commitment to, and identification with, the group. In a study of 47 workgroups from Korean firms, this style of leadership was related to member empowerment, group cohesiveness, and group effectiveness (Jung & Sosik, 2002). In studies of transformational leadership agreeableness, showing interest, reinforcement, and validation of the members promotes group cohesion and effective decision-making (Gardner & Cleavenger, 1998; Rozell & Gundersen, 2003). These tenants of transformational leadership are strikingly similar to descriptions of democratic leadership.

There is sufficient evidence to conclude that group leadership style can inhibit or promote helpful group processes. The following list of indicators may be used to assess the potential for leader related problems in a group. When using these indicators, remember that they may be associated with multiple problems given that group processes are interrelated. The indicators include:

- *Infrequent, limited, or strained member disclosures* (Harper & Askling, 1980; Kivlighan et al., 1992): If members are reluctant to share or respond to others in the group, changes may be needed in how the group is lead.
- *Drop-outs and absenteeism* (van Vugt et al., 2004): If members are not attending group meetings or are leaving the group, this may indicate dissatisfaction with the leadership style.
- *Acquiescence/conformity* (Grabhorn et al., 2002): Group members who feel they cannot speak their minds or fear repercussions may respond by conforming rather than voicing dissent.
- *Negative mood/dissatisfaction with the group* (Meredith, 1987; Sani, 2005): A pervasive negative mood or atmosphere in the group may indicate that the members are unhappy but are unable to openly express their discontent.
- *Development of subgroups of schisms* (Sani, 2005): While there are many possible reasons for subgrouping and schisms, use of power and inhibiting dissent can contribute to these dynamics.

When using these indicators, it is important to also consider the composition of the group. In a study of marathon groups, Kilmann and Sotile (1976) found that internalizers work better with an unstructured group approach while externalizers required more structure in the group. One might consequently expect externalized members to be more tolerant of an autocratic style. While females are less likely to engage in emergent

leadership, they have more reactions to autocratic leaders (Kushell & Newton, 1986; Yamaguchi & Maehr, 2004). Such membership dynamics may influence the group responses to leadership style.

Group Development

Group development is the final consideration because development involves subtle changes in all other group dynamics with the passage of time. Many discussions of group development are based on grounded theory. These discussions typically outline a model of stages and predictable changes that occur through the life of the group. There are also empirical studies that have assessed group changes over time. This section outlines some of these findings.

Three studies have identified developmental influences on engagement. The first study using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) found that members became more engaged, adopted realistic expectations, and demonstrated less avoidance as the group progressed (Kivlighan & Jauquet, 1990). A study of violence abatement programs found that early in treatment members prioritize problem awareness and understanding and later emphasize the emotional and interactive elements of the group (Roy, Turcotte, Montminy, & Lindsay, 2005). A similar study found that individual attributes are valued early in the group while the structure of the group is identified as important in the later group stages (Lin, Yang, Arya, Huang, & Li, 2005). All three studies demonstrate a shift from individualistic and safe pursuits to an increased collective and personal focus.

Concurrent with studying engagement, research has found developmental changes in the group climate. Kivlighan and Lilly (1997) assessed group climate changes by surveying 52 group members at scheduled time intervals. Findings indicated climate changes at the beginning, middle, and end of the group. The most significant changes were noted in the areas of engagement and conflict, with engagement decreasing in the middle stages of group development while conflict peaked in that same stage. This study found that group dynamics shift differentially depending on the stage rather than through linear increases over time.

Studies have also identified developmental changes in cohesion. A study of 89 group members in 12 short-term treatment groups found that member specific indicators of cohesion change as the group progresses (Budman, Soldz, Demby, Davism, & Merry, 1993). Another study of 38 men in violence abatement groups found that group cohesion develops after universality has been achieved (Schwartz & Waldo, 1999). In a similar study of short-term psychotherapy groups ($N = 154$ members), Kipnes, Piper, and Joyce (2002) found that intermember and member-leader cohesion increased across the 12 sessions while the member-group cohesion decreased. This suggests that the intermember bonds become stronger over the life of the group.

Some studies have identified interaction changes associated with group development. A study of self-disclosure and perceptions of closeness found that both

self-disclosure and feelings of closeness increase with group development (Bunch, Lund, & Wiggins, 1983). The content of interaction also appears to change. A more recent study tracked the percentage of statements focused on dependency, fight, and flight across time, finding that work focused statements increased with the passage of time while dependency, fight, and flight statements decreased (Wheelan, Davidson, & Tilin, 2003).

A final set of studies focused on changes in therapeutic factors. A study of 15 clinical groups used The Therapeutic Factors Inventory to assess developmental change, finding that perceptions of the group and therapeutic factors changed with elapsed time. In particular, guidance and catharsis increase in value at the latter stages of group development (MacNair-Semands & Lese, 2000). These findings are consistent with earlier studies (Freedman & Hurley, 1980; Kivlighan & Goldfine, 1991; MacKenzie, 1983).

The general patterns in the research suggest that early stages of development involve individually focused and shallower exploration. In these stages, members focus on increasing awareness and understanding. These are cognitive and individually focused pursuits. As the group progresses, there is more conflict and more engagement. During the later stages, sharing and work increase. During these latter stages there is an increased focus on the other members as intermember relationships elevate in importance and members spend more time guiding and supporting each other.

When assessing the group development, monitor for changes occurring across time. If changes are not evident, there may be developmental problems. It is also useful to contrast changes with what can be considered developmentally normal. The following list of indicators can be used to identify potential problems with group development. When problems are detected, it is usually necessary to consider the other dynamics to understand what may be interfering with development. Consequently, use these indicators to identify a problem and then use the other considerations to understand why the problem is emerging in the group. The indicators that can assist monitoring for developmental problems include:

- *Increases in self-disclosure* (Bunch et al., 1983): As the group progresses members should start sharing more of their personal stories and experiences.
- *Increases in closeness/intimacy* (MacNair-Semands & Lese, 2000): Group members should be more comfortable expressing emotion and taking risks as the group progresses.
- *Increases in work focus* (Wheelan et al., 2003): As the group progresses, distractions should start to decrease as more attention is focused on achieving the group goals.
- *Decreases in emotional dependency themes* (Wheelan et al., 2003): Early in the group, there is more impression management and efforts to be liked; these indicators of emotional dependency and insecurity should diminish as the group progresses.

- *Decreases in conflict* (Kivlighan & Lilly, 1997): While conflict is common in the early to middle stages of group development, it should diminish as the group progresses. If conflict persists, there may be problems.

Identified Needs for New Research

The current findings are consistent with many of the grounded theories in the field of social work. As such, past group wisdom about group dynamics is validated. However, there are practice developments that highlight a need for new knowledge. In particular, there are two movements in social work practice influencing how social workers conduct groups. The first is the managed care movement, creating financial priorities and limitations on group treatment. The second movement is evidence-based treatment, promoting manualized approaches to group programming.

The first movement, managed care, influences group practice in two ways. First, third-party reimbursement systems often limit the number of sessions and level of involvement. Consequently, many members will drop out of treatment not based on the utility of treatment but rather based on financial considerations. The second influence is for agencies to promote group programs because they can receive funding for multiple clients attending the group with a minimal personnel expense. Financial incentives can overshadow knowledge-based decisions through causing agencies to adopt procedures that maximize financial rather than treatment outcomes.

As a result, of these managed care outcomes, organizations and agencies may have hidden agendas when groups are formed or dissolved. While financial considerations are legitimate, they must not interfere with achieving group outcomes. One of the outcomes of administrative priorities is to admit all potential group members to the group with little consideration as to how the group members will function as a group. Concurrently, agencies may forgo pregroup screening and orientation sessions. One can expect problems with achieving group criterion, engagement, and climate if screening and orientation concerns are overshadowed by financial considerations. More research is needed to identify the impact of different member-selection strategies. Practitioners need researchers to explore the impact of these agency decisions so they can more effectively advocate for clients and ensure the most effective treatment.

The second need for new research is due to an unintended consequence of the evidence-based treatment movement. This consequence is that many groups are adopting manualized treatment approaches, shifting the emphasis from the group worker's skills to model fidelity. Some agencies purchase treatment packages, offering the program using specially trained paraprofessionals or volunteers. Such group leaders are trained in the manualized package rather than in understanding group dynamics and outcomes.

There is very little research on the group dynamics occurring within manualized programs and how leaders manage the group dynamics concurrent within the program structure. One may expect problems in leadership, cohesion, and group climate as the following the program overrides member concerns. As the field is increasingly influenced by manualized approaches, research into the ideal balance between group dynamics and the program is needed to guide practitioners. It is also important to understand the level of group knowledge needed by practitioners using manualized packages.

These two areas of concern have important implications for assessing groups. Our current research on group dynamics is grounded in groups that do not use a manualized system and are outcome, rather than financially, driven. Using the criteria outlined in this chapter for assessing other types of groups may be difficult because one must assume that all groups are equivalent. There may be other dynamics in manualized groups that promote success. Likewise, there may be dynamics associated with managed care that either inhibit or promote group success. Research is needed to test the nature of these influences on groups so social workers can be ready to assess and conduct all types of groups.

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