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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.]*

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INTRODUCTION

Taking time to share the reasons for a group's formation and the history of its development has a powerful effect on its members. Such sharing reduces anxiety and ambivalence, establishes commonality and increases the chances that members will engage in the type of participation necessary to receive the full benefit of group work. By incorporating such an intervention into first sessions, workers can skillfully engage members in the process of identifying the need for which they came to the group and help them build confidence that the group has the ability to meet that need.

Members enter groups with ambivalence and anxiety. They wonder if the group can really help them. They wonder if they can make a valuable contribution to the group. They may have been involved in other groups, natural or formed, in which they did not feel they fit or were accepted or valued. On the other hand, they may have had previous group experiences that they cherish. Their lives may have been profoundly altered by positive interactions with groups and they may wonder if this new group will measure up. New group members are reaching out to the group, saying, "Help me, accept me, let me join you." Simultaneously, they are thinking, "I'm afraid to get close. I'm afraid you can't help me."

Workers enter the group having spent many hours on its planning. Perhaps this is the first group of this nature at the agency. Perhaps the worker has facilitated dozens of groups facing the particular social issue with great success in helping members achieve their goals. Perhaps the structure and content planned for the group have been in reaction to a previous group's failure to achieve its purpose. When the planning is complete and the first session occurs, workers are faced with their own anxiety, thinking "Will the members participate, will the group fulfill their needs, will they respond well to what has been planned?"

Every group has a rich history that led to its formation. By sharing this history with group members, workers can more easily facilitate the tasks of the beginning stages of group work. As members learn about the thinking that went into the group's formation, they are invited to join the collaborative process of mutual aid and become more likely to participate fully in the work that lies ahead.

This paper will examine ways in which workers can share the reasons for a group's formation and the history of its development at the first session in order to facilitate the tasks of the beginning stage of group work practice. It will focus on positive outcomes that such sharing has

on members, as well as those aspects of a group's planning process that are helpful to share. Group examples will be presented to illustrate the intervention and its benefits.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature on group work practice is rich in its discussion of the developmental stages of groups (Brandler and Roman, 1999; Ephross and Vassil, 1988; Garland, Jones, and Kolodny, 1973; Hartford, 1971; Northen and Kurland, 2001; Sundel, Glasser, Sarri, and Vinter, 1985; Toseland and Rivas, 2001). The planning process of a group is time consuming and delicate and is directly tied to its success (Kurland, 1978). Discussion of the planning process is abundant in group work literature; absent, however, are suggestions to share this process with group members.

Whether the literature identifies the first session as being part of the inclusion-orientation phase (Northen and Kurland, 2001), the pre-group convening stage (Hartford, 1971), forming (Mills, 1964), the pre-affiliation stage (Garland, Jones, and Kolodny, 1973), or the formative phase (Sarri and Galinsky, 1985), there is general agreement on the tasks that need to be completed. Kurland (2001) summarizes these tasks by stating that workers need to orient the members to themselves, to each other and to the structure and content of the group. Workers must clarify the purpose and goals of the group and establish the common need of members to achieve these goals. Group norms and patterns of communication must be formed. The roles of worker and members are to be clarified. Workers need to help allay anxiety and enable members to communicate with the group. Toseland and Rivas (2001) add that workers need to increase members' motivation to participate fully in the group process.

Social group work literature's discussion on beginnings is often focused on desired skills and qualities of the worker as well as the state of mind of the members (Berman-Rossi, 1993; Garvin, 1997). To facilitate the first session, the literature suggests a range of activities, such as introductions, eliciting members' expectations of the group, statement of purpose, simple activities, discussion of confidentiality, and setting group goals. Attention in the literature is given to what the workers need to do. However, little attention is given to how they should do it.

Shulman (1999) does illustrate specific interventions to be used during first group sessions. As illustrated, workers carry out straightfor-

ward interventions that accomplish many of the stated objectives for the beginning phase. Although specific interventions are presented and analyzed, no interventions in which the worker shares the reasons for the group's formation and the history of its development are included.

Brandler and Roman (1999) illustrate a worker's skillful introductory remarks during a first session. Included in their recommended intervention is the sharing of the history of the group's formation. The authors highlight the reciprocal value of such an intervention as well as the value of the worker modeling the sharing of how the group came into existence so that the members can follow suit and speak frankly about their own reasons for coming to the group.

When discussing the first session, Northen and Kurland (2001) suggest, "A good starting point for the worker is to relate to the members how the group came about, to recount the thinking and events that led to its formation and to its composition. An understanding of the group's history gives grounding to the group and reduces the anxiety the members are likely to feel in the beginning."

DISCUSSION

Sharing with members the reasons for a group's formation and the history if its development has four positive outcomes: (i) it helps the members overcome ambivalence; (ii) it helps the members connect with the purpose of the group; (iii) it facilitates the establishment of commonality; and (iv) it aids the members in their active participation in the group process.

Relating how the group came about can include a number of areas. Among them are the history of the agency and its mission, the thinking behind the formation of a particular group, the experience the agency has had with other similar groups, and the history of how social group work has addressed the needs that the group aims to meet.

Overcoming Ambivalence

The conflicting thoughts and feelings that members experience upon entering a new group are generally characterized as ambivalence. Members join groups for many different reasons. Some members have reached out for help with a particular social issue. Others are assigned to groups as part of a treatment program or because of an issue identified by an authority figure, such as a teacher or case manager. Still others

may have joined the group to alleviate social isolation, to participate in a desired activity or to get support for a particularly difficult life situation. Regardless of how the member found out about the group or the reasons for his/her attendance, a person invariably joins the first session with the desire to approach the group, yet that person simultaneously wants to avoid intimate affiliation.

As befits the beginning developmental stage of group work, workers strategize to intervene in ways that will help members feel comfortable in the group and begin to communicate effectively. Such strategies typically include asking members to introduce themselves to the group, to share their reasons for coming to the group and their expectations of how the group can meet their needs. Often, when such a request is made, members respond with brief answers that indicate their ambivalence. In addition, the first member to share his/her reason for coming to the group will often be followed by the rest of the members sharing that they came to the group for the same reason. All this really accomplishes is the reinforcement of members' ambivalence by their mimicking the initial respondent's reply (approach) and not sharing their own unique situations (avoidance). By including the reasons for the group's formation and the history of its development, workers help members examine their individual reasons for coming to the group. Often, they respond by expressing hope that the group will meet their needs.

For example, at the first session of a group for members at a drug and alcohol outpatient rehab, the worker shares with members the history of how such groups have helped people in recovery:

Worker: Some of you may be wondering why it's important to have a leisure time group as part of your program of recovery. Throughout the history of social work with alcoholics and addicts, groups like this have helped members connect with leisure activities that they may have enjoyed in the past but put aside when their alcohol and drug use began to interfere with their ability to do such activities.
Mary: You mean like horseback riding and playing tennis?
Worker: Are those leisure activities that you used to enjoy?
Mary: Yes, I used to love doing stuff like that. But I haven't in many years, and it's just like you said. . . . I stopped doing stuff like that when my drinking got out of control.
Worker: Exactly, and this type of group has not only helped people in recovery re-connect with enjoyable activities, it has helped them develop a sober support network, too, which is a very important tool for recovery.

Mark: You mean like doing stuff with people after AA meetings?

Worker: That's right. We're kind of borrowing from a long tradition in AA where members would plan social activities together, known as "fellowship." And when AA members get together for coffee and to talk about recovery, it's sometimes called "the meeting after the meeting."

John: I'm not sure I know what I like to do for fun anymore.

Allison: Me neither.

Worker: Well, that's often how people feel at the beginning of the group. We're going to look at some of the stuff you used to do for fun, or some of the things you always wanted to do and never did. Then we'll look at how to really do them. Almost always, members of this type of group find new and exciting leisure activities to plan. Then when they follow through on their plans they not only have fun, it becomes easier and easier to stay sober.

Allison: Oh, I see. So even if I feel like there's no fun in my life right now, I can learn how to do stuff that would be fun. Without drinking.

John: I kind of miss doing the stuff I used to enjoy when I was a kid. Before I started smoking weed all the time. I'd like to go back to drawing and maybe writing.

Mary: I hope I can learn to do some of that stuff again.

Mark: Me too.

John: I was wondering what this group was all about. Now I see how it can help.

By sharing the history of how social group work has addressed the need for recovering alcoholics to explore sober leisure activities, the worker helps members to reflect on the reasons for which they came to the group. Mary, upon hearing how such groups have helped other recovering alcoholics, tentatively asks about certain activities she is thinking about. She relates to the worker's description of how such groups have helped others. Later, she expresses hope that the group will meet her needs. John and Allison express uncertainty about knowing what to do for fun. They wonder if they can do the work that the group will demand. The latent content of these expressions indicates uncertainty that the group will meet their needs. The worker responds by acknowledging their uncertainty and comparing it to feelings expressed by members who have participated in similar groups. Both John and Allison respond by expressing hope that the group can help them. The expression of hope is a clear indication that ambivalence has been reduced.

Connecting with the Purpose of the Group

Helping the members connect to the purpose of the group is an important task of the beginning phase of group work practice. By explaining to members the thinking behind the formation of the group, workers take the members on the journey they themselves took during the planning process. While on this journey of discovering and connecting to the group's purpose, members react by deepening their emotional investment in completing the work necessary to achieve their goals.

Planning a group is an arduous task. In involves "hanging out" with potential members and assessing their needs. It can also include justifying the formation of the group to the agency's administration. A planning model developed by Kurland (1982) includes planning elements of need, purpose, composition, structure, content, pre-group contact, and agency context. Using this model can help workers develop more successful groups and a deeper understanding of the individual members and the societal and environmental factors affecting the group's population. By taking the model one step further and sharing with members the thinking behind the planning process of the group, workers can help the members connect with the group's purpose. The outcome is that members increase their stake in the group.

At the first session of a group for developmentally disabled adults, for example, members openly discussed their not understanding the reason (purpose) for coming to the group:

Michael sat straight up in his chair, raised his voice and said, "How did we get here?" When I asked him what he meant, he said that he wasn't sure why he was in this group or why he was switched out of the art group that met at the same time. He also stated that he wasn't sure if he was going to stay in this group or that it would be able to help him. Julio said that he thought he understood why they were here. He said that we were here to plan a trip, but that he wasn't sure what trip it would be and said that he was afraid to travel very far. Doris said that she wanted to go on a trip but that she didn't think she could plan it all by herself. I explained to the group that over the last several months I had noticed that many of the clients often spoke about not doing anything with their free time, and that they said they felt bored and lonely, espe-

cially during weekends and holidays. I said that I thought about how to help with this problem and decided that it might be a good idea to start a field trip group to help the members learn how to structure their time and plan activities that were fun. I asked the group if they remember when I began speaking with them about how they spent their time and they said that they wanted to plan things to do but that they weren't sure what to plan or how to plan it. Everyone nodded their heads yes and I said, "Well, sure you all want to learn how to plan activities, and since none of you seem to be doing it on your own, we are going to work together in this group to learn how to do it. That's why this group was formed. That's how we got here." Michael said, "Now I get it. We're in this group so we can learn to plan a trip together. Then we can plan other stuff to do so we don't get so bored or lonely." Doris said, "That sounds good. I always get lonely. I'm gonna like this group." Julio said, "I might not be afraid to travel around the city if we all do it together." I asked Michael if he still wasn't sure if he was going to stay in the group or not. He said, "Oh no, I'm not going to leave this group now. I want to learn how to plan a trip!"

Sharing the thinking that went into the group's formation had a powerful effect on the members. By explaining the group's planning process and his perception of members' needs, the worker helps Michael, who was ready to drop out, make a connection with the group's purpose. When this connection is made, Michael makes a clear and emphatic statement of the purpose of the group, "so we can learn to plan a trip together . . . so we don't get so bored or lonely," and exclaims his desired participation, "I want to learn how to plan a trip!"

Doris expresses fear that she might not be able to accomplish the tasks necessary to achieve the group's purpose. Similarly, Julio is fearful of the content of the group, and states that he is "afraid to travel very far." The worker addresses their fear of planning or taking a trip by referring back to his thinking during the group's planning process. By explaining an important aspect of the group's content—that they would be planning and taking the trip together—he helps Doris and Julio connect to a very important aspect of the group's purpose. The effect is the dissipation of their fears, as both Doris and Julio make motivational statements about their participation in the group.

The effect that such sharing has on a group can be non-verbal. In this instance, as the worker explained his thinking about the group's forma-

tion, members began to smile, excitedly darting their eyes back and forth to each other. The increased energy level of the members was palpable. It was clear they had made an internal shift and were beginning to emotionally commit to the group.

Establishing Commonality

A major factor for members continuing with a group past the initial session is that they sense something in common with other members and they develop trust that this commonality can help them meet the needs for which they came to the group. In beginnings, workers need to establish commonality so members become oriented to each other and can deepen the affective level of communication.

Shulman (1999) defines common ground as "the overlap or commonality between the specific services of the setting and the felt needs of the client." Workers can highlight the overlap of the services (agency) and the clients' needs by sharing the mission statement of the agency with the group. Many agencies have a rich history of working with a particular population or social issue and have spent time and effort in developing a mission statement that reflects its values and informs the design of its services. By sharing the mission statement with members, workers can orient them to these values. They respond by reflecting on how these values correspond with their own and connect with other members' common experiences.

At the first session of a support group for newly diagnosed HIV-positive clients, the worker shares the mission statement of the agency:

Worker: I'd like to start off by sharing the mission statement of the Center with you all. (Reads) "The Center provides a home for the birth, nurture and celebration of our organizations, institutions and culture; cares for our individuals and groups in need; educates the public and our community; and empowers our individuals and groups to achieve their fullest potential." Any thoughts or reactions to our mission?

David: Well, that's kind of why I came here, to be empowered.

Worker: Tell us more about that.

David: Well, since I found out I was positive, I've been feeling very powerless, like I don't know what to do or how to manage my life. I hardly know anyone else who's positive and I don't have much information about treatment and stuff, so I came here to get information and meet other people who are going through the same thing I am. I think that will be empowering.

Worker: Anyone else?

Alan: Well, I'm also looking to learn about treatment and stuff, but mostly I need somewhere to go where I can just talk about being positive. Like he said, I don't have many friends who are positive and I don't feel like I can talk to my friends who are negative. They just don't understand.

Gordon: I agree. I have some friends who are positive, but they've been positive for like more than ten years and we all just found out recently, so there's stuff I want to talk about that I'm ashamed to talk about with them. I kind of needed to meet other people like me.

Jeff: I feel the same way.

Marco: What about what it said about achieving my full potential? How am I gonna do that now that I'm sick?

Worker: That's a good question. What do people think about what Marco just said?

Gordon: I don't think we're sick. Well, we're positive but that doesn't mean we'll get sick necessarily. Not if we take care of ourselves.

Jeff: Right. Maybe we can learn to do that in this group.

Marco: I'd like to learn about nutrition and stuff, like how we can eat better to stay in good health.

David: Me too, and about what to eat that will go well with my medication.

Worker: OK, it sounds like several members of this group are looking for a combination of information and support from other folks who have recently been diagnosed as positive, like yourselves . . . and that's exactly what we were hoping to do.

The worker's sharing of the agency's mission statement serves as a natural jumping off point for the members to establish common ground. David responds immediately, by identifying how the mission of the agency is connected to his reasons for joining the group—to be empowered—and states some of his expectations of the group. Alan jumps in by relating his identification with what David has said. Gordon and Jeff chime in by re-stating the common need to share experiences with others who are newly diagnosed, as opposed to those who have lived with HIV for years. Non-verbal cues, including shaking of heads, leaning forward in seats, and intense intra-group eye contact were further indications that the members were connecting with common feelings and expectations. Rather than reaching for similarities, the worker needs

only to summarize the common ground that has been established in order for the group to begin its work.

Such sharing offers a focus for members to reach out and test the waters of the group. It creates a space that is just intimate enough for this developmental stage of the group. It allows the members to verbalize their reasons for joining the group, resulting in the establishment of commonality.

Aiding Active Participation

Early sessions of groups can have the tendency to lack active member participation. Issues of trust, combined with anxiety of the unknown situation the group presents, can cause members to draw back and withhold involvement in the group. The worker strives to draw members out by utilizing the skills of reaching for an information link and inviting full participation (Middleman and Wood, 1990).

During the beginning stage of group work practice, workers need to establish group norms and guidelines for the structure and content of the group, as well as model patterns of communication for the members. It can be challenging for the worker to elicit member participation while attempting to achieve these tasks. When workers share aspects of the group's planning process, they send cues that invite members to become actively involved in the development of the group's norms, guidelines, structure, and content.

For example, at the first session of the HIV-positive support group mentioned above, members sat silently in their chairs, heads down, not making any eye contact with each other. The worker shared how another experience the agency had with a similar group affected this group's structure:

Worker: I wanted to take a moment to share with you a little bit about how this became an ongoing group. Traditionally groups at the Center are time limited and last for ten or twelve weeks. We have been trying to plan an HIV-positive support group for several cycles now, but it has not been very successful. During the last cycle not enough members registered for this group for it to happen, so the group was cancelled. The same thing happened the cycle before last. We want to have a support group for people newly diagnosed with HIV, but haven't been very successful at getting one started. Then we had the

idea of making it an ongoing group, so that even if only a few people registered by the start date, we could continue to do outreach for the group and members could join along the way. That way we can build the group and also have more time to develop group content and to do more creative programming like having outside speakers come in to share on specific topics.

David: Does that mean we're going to have lots of new members coming in and the group might get really big?

Worker: Well, let's talk about that.

David: I don't necessarily think that we should get too big. We might not all get what we need if there are too many people in the group.

Worker: What do other folks think about that?

Carmine: I think it was a good idea to make it ongoing. That way we can be here for other people like us who need this group.

Jeff: That's true. I wouldn't want to see anyone turned away from the group because of its size. Not if they need the support. That's one of the reasons I came here, not just to get support, but to give it, too.

Carmine: Can we get a doctor to come in and talk to us about side effects of medication?

(silence)

Marco: Well, what about the name of the group?

Worker: What about it?

Marco: Well, why is it called the HIV-Positive Support Group? That's not very private. We were talking about confidentiality and all, and it's not like I really want to walk around the lobby asking the front desk, hey, like can you tell me where the HIV-Positive Support Group is? I may as well put a big sign on me that says My Name Is Marco: I've got AIDS. I've been gossiped about enough already. I don't want no one all in my business, especially about this.

Worker: OK. What do other members think?

Alan: I kind of agree. Why don't we change the name of the group.

Worker: We could do that.

Alan: You know, to something more discreet, to protect our privacy.

Marco: I agree.

Worker: So what should we call it?

Marco: How about Circle of Friends?

Gordon: I like that. That's kind of what I'm looking for anyway. And it is more discreet.

Worker: What do others think?

David: That's good. It protects our privacy and it's a better name. Besides, who wants to go to the HIV-Positive Support Group when you can go to the Circle of Friends.

(everybody laughs)

When the worker shares how an experience with a similar group has affected the planning of this group's structure, David responds by expressing concern that the planning may cause the group to get too large, implying that his needs might not get met. What a wonderful expression of desire to participate in the group process! Carmine and Jeff respond by indicating that in addition to their need to receive support, they also have the desire to give support to other group members–another indication that members wish to participate in mutual aid. Despite issues of trust, so blatantly expressed by Marco, members begin to own the group by indicating they want to change its name. When Marco suggests that the name of the group be changed to protect the confidentiality of its members, he is following the worker's lead in establishing a group norm, as well as opening the door for members to participate fully in the group process.

By sharing part of the history of this group's development, the worker aids the members in participating in the forming of the group's structure, content, and norms. Such sharing has a positive effect on the group and facilitates a level of participation and cohesion not typically present this early in the development of a new group.

CONCLUSION

By sharing the thinking behind a group's formation and the history of its development, workers can harness a powerful intervention that aids in the facilitation of the beginning stage of group work. While many workers may spontaneously invoke such sharing, it is the premise of this paper that the purposeful use of this intervention will consistently yield positive results.

Exploring further sharing of different aspects of a group's formation and the history of its development will broaden workers' understanding

standing of the effect that such sharing has on members. Further inquiry, both formal and anecdotal, of the use of this intervention will fine tune its applicability across a broad range of social work groups.

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