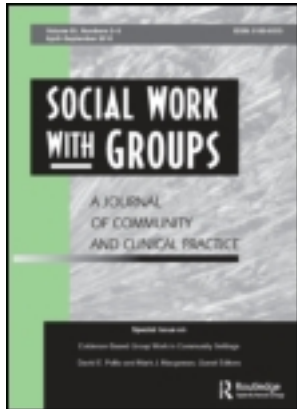


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Concepts for Effective Facilitation of Open Groups

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Despite a lack of literature on open groups, groups with open and changing membership certainly take place in practice. Some practices with open-ended and single-session groups, detailed in the literature, have relevance for open groups. Four concepts that can help workers address the unpredictable dynamics and diverse membership characteristic of open groups are planning and preparation, worker self-awareness, worker flexibility, and group cohesion. Helpful illustrations of each concept draw on the author's experience with open groups for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adolescents. A suggested framework for facilitating a session of any open group is offered.

KEYWORDS *open groups, open membership, LGBT youth, practice skills, group cohesion, open-ended groups, single-session groups*

INTRODUCTION

Although analyses and accounts of open-ended groups and single-session groups abound in social group work literature, writings on open groups are few and far between. To illustrate, the *Encyclopedia of Social Work with Groups* (Gitterman & Salmon, 2009) includes only one sentence related specifically to groups with open membership (p. 256). As the opposite of *closed groups*, *open groups* can be defined as those in which new individuals may join at any time and members can come and go throughout the life of the group (Tourigny & Hebert, 2007). In this context the word *open* refers to membership, whereas the same word in the term

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open-ended group refers to duration; an open-ended group is one whose sessions have no predetermined end date. Because of their fluid membership, open groups are characterized by change and heterogeneity (Keats & Sabharwal, 2008).

Fortunately, much of the literature on open-ended and single-session groups has relevance for open groups. Although open groups may be open-ended or closed-ended, analyses of open-ended groups often pertain to open groups because both can involve significant turnover in membership over the course of the group (Steinberg, 2004). Similarly, though open groups may run for many sessions, some concepts for single-session groups, which meet only once, apply to open groups, because the two share key characteristics, namely new membership composition in each session and the presence of members who may be in the group for the first and/or last time (Ebenstein, 1998).

This article seeks to expand the body of literature on open groups by providing background on this unique format, by developing four concepts that can serve as helpful guidelines for workers facilitating open groups, and by offering specific ideas for structuring an open-group session based on these concepts. It draws on the limited existing literature on open groups while tying in relevant elements from the existing literature on open-ended and single-session groups to create a complete picture. As a student, my group work experience has involved working with groups of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. As a result, the examples in this article reflect this specific experience, but the concepts introduced pertain to open groups in general, regardless of population or setting.

BACKGROUND

With high demand for services and increasing emphasis placed on efficiency, open groups provide an attractive alternative to closed groups (Keats & Sabharwal, 2008). Based on review of articles as well as conversations with my classmates, I believe that open groups have become a common format in many settings, such as hospitals (Arndt, Murchie, Schembri, & Davidson, 2009), college counseling centers (Keats & Sabharwal, 2008), and psychiatric rehabilitation programs (H. Newman, personal communication, May 11, 2010). Although Tourigny and Hebert (2007) found that open and closed group formats achieve the same positive outcomes when used as interventions with sexually abused adolescent girls, research such as this on open groups remains scarce, unfortunately.

Open groups present benefits and obstacles for facilitators, members, and agencies. For example, Schopler and Galinsky (1984) maintained that groups with changing membership, including open groups, can more easily accommodate facilitator turnover and therefore support the training of new

group workers. However, Keats and Sabharwal (2008) presented a different opinion, asserting that the unpredictable dynamics of open groups call for highly skilled facilitators with training and experience. Some literature proposes that open groups offer advantages to members through flexibility and immediate availability (e.g., Arndt et al., 2009; Tourigny & Hebert, 2007). In addition, Arndt et al. (2009) suggested that mutual aid can occur through the realization of shared experiences and that diversity among the participants, including different levels of experience in the group, provides a significant learning opportunity. On the other hand, members may not feel comfortable with self-disclosure in open groups, may not build meaningful relationships with one another, and may not have opportunities to build on knowledge or therapeutic growth from one session to the next (Arndt et al., 2009; Tourigny & Hebert, 2007).

One agency benefit is that open groups can be easily implemented and accommodate new clients without waitlists (Tourigny & Hebert, 2007). Additionally, a study by Keats and Sabharwal (2008) found that open groups at a college counseling center displayed historically higher levels of attendance than closed groups and appealed to administrators for their efficient use of resources. Nonetheless, as Schopler and Galinsky (1984) pointed out regarding open-ended groups, a collaborative environment in which staff can make appropriate referrals is necessary for groups with changing membership to succeed.

FOUR CONCEPTS

Importance of Planning and Preparation for Open Groups

Sufficient planning on the part of the worker is critical for all types of groups (Northen & Kurland, 2001). However, open groups require unique forms of preparation in the areas of need, purpose, composition, and content.

According to Kosoff (2003), effective facilitation of single-session groups demands that workers thoroughly research the population's expected needs to be able to carry out successful "here and now" facilitation in the session (p. 33). This applies equally to open groups, which involve the possibility of new composition of members in each session, necessitating the facilitator's anticipation of members' needs to respond appropriately to the specific dynamics of each session.

Emerging directly from need, a crucial part of planning for any group is the development of a clear, concise, and specific purpose (Kurland & Salmon, 2006). In the case of open groups, clarity of purpose becomes particularly important, because workers must be able to communicate the purpose straightforwardly for each new composition of members. Furthermore, as Steinberg (2004) recommended in her discussion of the mutual aid approach to open-ended and single-session groups, purpose

should be revisited, clarified, and reconsidered in each session with new members.

In addressing the shifting-membership composition in open-ended groups, Schopler and Galinsky (1984) called for facilitators to prepare for groups with divergent needs and capacities by building their skills to conduct on-the-spot assessments of individual and group needs. In the same way, open-group facilitators need to anticipate and respond to changing composition in which varying themes and concerns may emerge.

In terms of content preparation for open group sessions, Keats and Sabharwal (2008) recommended a “highly structured pre-planned agenda of activities” that still makes room, however, for the unique composition of each session (p. 301). Additionally, Kosoff (2003) highlighted the importance of keeping content directly related to the group’s purpose in single-session groups; similarly, in open groups each session may be the first, last, or only one for one or more members, which means the worker must take responsibility for focusing on group purpose and goals to maximize the benefit for all participants.

In my experience cofacilitating an open group called the Young Women’s Group, my cofacilitator and I needed to prepare for an especially complex and shifting composition of members. Despite the name, the group was open not only to biological females but also to anyone who identified along the feminine spectrum in some way, whether in body, gender identity, or both. The membership included young transwomen who were born male but identified as female, young transmen born female but identifying as male, and gender nonconforming individuals in addition to female-bodied, female-identified participants. The group’s purpose was to help members to define their own identities, especially those related to gender and sexuality, and to form a community through relationships with one another. With feedback from members, my cofacilitator and I refined this purpose over the course of the group, making it broad enough to encompass the needs of all members but specific enough to shape the content of the group in meaningful ways. In addition, my cofacilitator and I took into account the unique constellation of members in preparing content for each session. The following example illustrates the importance of preparation for open groups in the areas of skill and content.

During a discussion around gender identity, my cofacilitator asked members to share what it means to be a woman based on their experiences. At that point the group was composed entirely of individuals who were female bodied and female identified. Two members began to express the importance that they attach to physical aspects of womanhood, such as menstruation, and several other members voiced their agreement. During the middle of this thread of conversation, a male-bodied transwoman entered the group and began listening. Having carefully considered the content of this group in the context of a changing and heterogeneous membership

beforehand with my cofacilitator, I began asking for alternative viewpoints from members, a skill that Middleman and Wood (1990) called “reaching for difference” (pp. 133–134). One of the female-bodied members spoke up and began to describe her own experience as a butch-identified lesbian whose associations with being a woman revolved around her attitude and inner strength rather than her body. After this comment, the transfemale member shared her perspective, describing emotions and attitudes that she equates with femininity; she even burst into song as a powerful illustration! The other members responded with warmth and support, with several of them expressing similar feelings. By reflecting on content and having prepared for diversity among participants in gender identity and biology before this particular session, my cofacilitator and I were able to apply specific skills to create an atmosphere that supported members’ differences while still maintaining unity.

Self-Awareness of the Open Group Facilitator

In describing the skills necessary to facilitate single-session groups, Kosoff (2003) explained that empathy, which stems from actively noticing one’s own feelings and reactions, takes on particular importance in the single-session format, because each session represents the sole opportunity for the facilitator to connect with the group and to help members connect with one another. Open groups also have a critical need for an empathetic worker who can quickly relate to and form bonds among heterogeneous members there perhaps for the first time, perhaps for the last time, or perhaps there for the one and only time. This can be achieved through the practice of self-awareness, which can help facilitators to discover similarities between them and the population from which the group is drawn, which can then be used to foster commonalities among diverse members (Kosoff, 2003). By identifying with members’ feelings in this way, the open-group worker takes on a collaborative role, exhibits the ability to listen fully to the members in the moment, and maximizes the potential of each unique session (Kosoff, 2003).

In describing her experience in developing self-awareness and empathy and discussing their importance, Bitel (2002) stated, “It was my job to use myself; to take in, to understand, and be sensitive to the experiences and needs of the members and, using the group setting, to assist the group members to gain the ability to practice empathy with each other” (p. 54). As Steinberg (2004) explained, mutual aid cannot occur without purposeful use of self by members, a process composed of self-reflection and talking about personal experiences. To facilitate mutual aid in open groups, workers must also practice and model purposeful use of self and perhaps even more visibly than in other group formats.

I very quickly learned the significance of self awareness in working with LGBT adolescents, only through self-reflection and deliberate openness.

I was able to connect with the diverse and changing membership with sensitivity and understanding. For example, I recalled and drew on my own concerns and insecurities in adolescence to empathize with the feelings of group members, although I was careful to keep the emotions engendered by that recall at bay so that they would not interfere with my ability to address the particular group process of each session and to respond with appropriate levels of equanimity, compassion, and authority. I also drew on my own intellectual and emotional exploration of gender and sexuality as a way to relate to members. For example, my experiences in college as a member and then facilitator of a peer-led group on female sexuality helped me adopt inclusive language with ease, such as using the term *partner* instead of *boyfriend* or *girlfriend* and asking members to share their preferred gender pronoun rather than assuming that “he/him” or “she/her” would apply. By tuning into my own experiences and feelings, I was better able to accommodate the fluctuating and heterogeneous membership composition and to create a basis for mutual aid in each session.

Worker Versatility in Open Group Sessions

Schopler and Galinsky (1984) asserted that open-ended groups demand “a leadership style that is adaptive to changing conditions” to uphold the group’s purpose and to further mutual aid (p. 13). Likewise, open group facilitators must adapt to shifting and heterogeneous membership composition, requiring workers to transition smoothly between more and less active roles according to group dynamics (Schopler & Galinsky, 1984). For example, the beginnings of single-session groups often necessitate some direction to introduce purpose, norms, and activities and to foster cohesion, whereas less active facilitation is needed to empower group members during the middle or “work” stage of the session (Kosoff, 2003). Similarly, I have observed that open group sessions with new members often need active facilitation at the beginning but do well with less structure during the middle of the session, and as previously noted, planning before each session can give the worker the kind of flexibility that balances structured facilitation with spontaneity.

Putting this concept into practice requires a sophisticated understanding of and comfort with the role of authority in group work. As Kurland and Salmon (1993) proposed, many students of group work relate to the authority that is inherent in their role with some aversion and confusion. However, as they noted, only by accepting their authority and its resulting responsibilities can group workers create a sense of safety and security for members, which becomes particularly critical for open groups with ever-changing dynamics that may make it difficult for members to feel comfortable. When the worker provides structure and direction as necessary but then relaxes control at other times when the group seems to be doing well without

active direction, however, the worker can maintain responsibility for group safety without inhibiting process.

As a group work student my experience followed the trend toward authority. However, through reading, coursework, and practice in the field, I was able to increasingly understand and strengthen my role as an authority and to become a more versatile facilitator of open groups. The discussion around coping mechanisms in one particular session of an open group with LGBT youth is a good illustration of this struggle.

The group's purpose was to navigate the coming-out process, which refers to identity development among LGBT individuals and typically occurs in stages referred to as realization, acceptance, and integration of sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Peters, 1997). This particular session was composed of three members who had never attended the group and seemed anxious about sharing openly. I began the session with setting some structure, following a statement of purpose and ground rules with a humorous icebreaker that helped us get to know one another a little. I continued to be directive in my facilitation as members eased into discussion with, at first, short and impersonal comments, such as "I write a lot" and "Me too." I made a special effort to reach for feelings and information while reflecting themes back to the group, and as I did so the conversation began to flow. Members began to speak to one another and not just to me, and in those moments I listened and observed the process without intervening. For example, in response to a member's description about punching walls as a way to deal with anger, another stated, "I used to do that, too, but now I just fight in the air as if I'm boxing my shadow or something." This prompted another member to say, "I keep my anger inside until it blows up . . . usually with my family, but maybe I'll try boxing with my shadow. Thanks!"

Promoting Cohesion With Urgency

Fostering cohesion represents a central skill of group work in general (Middleman & Wood, 1990) but takes on particular urgency in work with open groups because of the changing and often diverse membership. Steinberg's (2004) observation that open-ended groups struggle to "develop enough we-ness" as a result of their fluctuating composition pertains equally to open groups. Without a sense of unity, open groups—like open-ended groups—do not fully harness their potential for mutual aid (Steinberg, 2004). On the other hand, group trust and cohesiveness can develop in open groups under skilled facilitators (Keats & Sabharwal, 2008) through such techniques as "linking" (Kosoff, 2003). A central technique for nurturing cohesion in the single-session group, Kosoff (2003) defined *linking* as "the practitioner's conscious attempt to make connections between similarities in feelings or experiences that exist among members" (p. 35), a strategy

whose importance—especially in beginnings when the group is in search of common themes—is echoed by Ebenstein (1998).

Because of heterogeneity and fluctuation in membership of open groups, workers need to explicitly emphasize common ground among members to build mutual trust, to normalize feelings and experiences, and to provide hope, inspiration, and support (Kosoff, 2003). This development of community in the group represents mutual aid in action (Steinberg, 2004).

In my group work with the young women I described above, fostering cohesion was particularly important because of the diversity among participants, ever-changing composition, and the need for community by this often isolated population. To that end, my cofacilitator and I integrated activities into the group process that helped members to get to know one another and that emphasized common themes. For example, at the start of each session we introduced ourselves and answered a light “go-round” question (e.g., “What’s your favorite ice cream flavor?”), which we followed with an icebreaker activity, such as a word game or a short physical activity to foster participation and a sense of belonging to the group. During the central activity or discussion we also reflected on common themes to build cohesion. For instance, during a discussion about romantic relationships, my co-facilitator noted, “It sounds like many of you have difficulty finding other LGBT people to date or being able to tell if someone you’re interested in is LGBT.” Several members nodded or voiced their agreement in response, and one participant said, “I guess that’s what this group is for . . . well, maybe not for dating, but at least for making friends,” at which point the other members giggled. We also ended each session with an unstructured social time that included snacks to foster time for members to talk to one another informally, which my cofacilitator and I felt would help to promote a sense of unity, advance the purpose of the group, and foster mutual aid.

SUGGESTED FRAMEWORK FOR AN OPEN GROUP SESSION

This section presents a specific framework for facilitating an open group session in terms of the beginning, middle, and end stage of a session (Schwartz, 1971; Shulman, 2009) that might last from about 45 to 90 minutes.

Beginnings

The beginning of an open group session should address purpose, expectations, and introductory activities. The beginning stage requires deliberate preparation by the worker with the primary aim of fostering group cohesiveness. First, as Steinberg (2004) recommended for single-session and open-ended groups, any predetermined purpose should be communicated in every session and revisited whenever new members join. Similarly, Schopler and Galinsky (1984) noted that it is important for expectations

of members to be clearly stated at the beginning of each session; this is important in open groups too as a way to establish and maintain safety and structure. For instance, the open groups I facilitated began with discussions around confidentiality, respect, attentiveness, openness, and sensitivity (along with statements of purpose), including why these factors were of value.

Also, activities that are appropriate to a beginning stage of development can spur mutual aid by helping members to engage with one another and by helping them to quell some of their fears and doubts about being in the group. For example, Kosoff (2003) described a single-session support group for adult cancer patients, to which she offered refreshments during the first few minutes of each group as a way for members to meet one another and ease into the work part of the session. Despite their heterogeneous and changeable composition, offering an open group a way for members who are present at that meeting to get to know one another, such as providing refreshments or icebreaker activities, can also help them to bond as a group.

Middles

Ebenstein (1998) contended that making the transition from the beginning stage to the middle stage in a single session represents a central challenge for the worker, because members need time to connect with one another, but there also must be enough time for work to take place. This challenge demands flexibility and self-awareness on the part of facilitators if they are to respond with empathy for members in any given moment rather than rush the process. Keats and Sabharwal (2008) proposed that facilitators plan activities ahead of time that are highly structured but still leave room for members' individual needs and interests. As in working with most groups, therefore, the worker should plan potential content thoughtfully but leave room for making the final decision with the actual members (Northen & Kurland, 2001), presenting ideas or plans to members but engaging in a collaborative process to determine how the specific session can best accommodate the needs of those members. The middle or "work" section of an open group session also provides a good time to connect material from past sessions to the present. As is recommended for open-ended groups (Steinberg, 2004) open group facilitators should look for and point out the common threads that link sessions together and ask any returning members to share examples from previous sessions that relate to themes in the current session, which can strengthen the sense of togetherness set into motion at the start of the session.

Endings

The ending of an open group session should focus on consolidating its accomplishments, on creating consistency through closing rituals, and on

transitioning into the next session. Keats and Sabharwal (2008), for example, described a structured closing activity that helped the members of an open group at a college counseling center to reflect on the learning that took place in/as a result of the session and to bring some balance to the emotional exchanges that took place.

Reflecting and evaluating at the end of an open group session can provide the worker as well as members with a sense of accomplishment, closure, and a sense of bonding whether members return (Birnbaum & Cichetti, 2000). By ritualizing the ending phase, even in open groups, a pattern forms that creates constancy in an otherwise unpredictable format and that can strengthen group cohesion (Galinsky & Schopler, 1985). Therefore, because one or more members may be in the group for the last time, time should be incorporated in open groups to help members to work through feelings, to engage in reflection, and to evaluate the group's meaning with members who are terminating and with the group as a whole (Galinsky & Schopler, 1985).

Furthermore, ending traditions that include a consideration of goals for a next session can encourage the flow of mutual aid across diverse sessions (Steinberg, 2004). In my experience with open groups, I found that incorporating time to reflect on potential goals for the next session increased the likelihood of members' return and helped to strengthen and maintain cohesion.

CONCLUSION

Open groups present complex challenges and significant rewards to their workers and members alike and provide rich learning opportunities for facilitators because their unpredictable dynamics and diversity of membership call for a well-honed set of specific skills. A successful open group requires that workers prepare thoroughly, that they engage in and even display a high degree of self-awareness, that they be able to shift flexibly between more and less active direction, and that they be able to foster group cohesion quickly. The framework suggested here can help facilitators of open groups to effectively navigate the changing dynamics throughout the beginning, middle, and ending phases.

Given the advantages that open groups can offer agencies, it seems likely that this format will become increasingly common. Hopefully, this discussion will add to the body of literature, which lags behind the developing knowledge base on other group formats, in a meaningful way. Research and theory building is greatly needed to support the many practitioners, clients, and agencies who are increasingly encountering the distinctive animal that is the open group.

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