

# The Essential Power of Group Work

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**SUMMARY.** For almost two decades, leaders in the field of social group work have been warning that the foundational principles and practice of group work as a modality are in danger of being absorbed into generalist social work practice. This paper expands upon the appeal of leaders in the social group work field to generate an environment in which group work is recognized as an integral method in social work practice and education. This paper examines group work as a powerful methodology in social work practice with a specific theoretical framework and skill base that is fundamental to the social work profession. The characteristics of group work's strengths are explored with a comprehensive overview that inspires renewed commitment to preserving, practicing and promoting social group work as a viable and integral part of social work practice. [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>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Social group work, mutual aid, stage management, social work curricula, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

## INTRODUCTION

For the past fifteen years Kurland and Salmon (1992, 1996, 2002, 2004) along with Middleman (1990) have been warning practitioners

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that social group work theory, principles and practice are in danger of being absorbed and dispersed into the greater social work field as generalist practice becomes the current predominant approach to services and to social work education. In three separate addresses to the Annual Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG), Kurland and Salmon (1992, 2002, 2004) appealed to social group workers to strategize to create an environment in which group work is honored in its right as an integral method in social work practice and education. Middleman (1990, p. 30) made a call for action fifteen years ago, beseeching group workers to go forth and “be noisy” articulating our understanding of the values and knowledge of group work. Kurland and Salmon call for a “Joyful Noise” about group work (1992, 1996).

This paper seeks to be loud and clear about the reasons group work is a powerful method with a specific theoretical framework and skill base that is fundamental to the social work profession. The components of group work’s strengths are presented with the intention of providing practitioners and agencies with a comprehensive overview that inspires renewed commitment to preserving, practicing and promoting social group work in its undiluted entirety.

### ***THE DECLINE OF SOCIAL GROUP WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE***

There is an abundance of literature on the principles and efficacy of social work with groups (Cohen, 1995; Dies, 1995; Garvin, 2001; Getzel, 2003; Gitterman, 2003; Kurland and Salmon, 1992; Middleman and Wood, 1990; Northen and Kurland, 2001; Shulman, 1999). Nevertheless, there is a continuing omission of comprehensive group work curricula (Birnbaum and Auerbach, 1994; Steinberg, 2002).

The decline of social work education in group work began in 1969 when the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) decided to integrate casework, community organizing, and group work into one generalist method (Kurland and Salmon, 2002; Magen, 1998). The percentage of social work graduate programs that had concentrations in the group work method went from 76% in 1963 to 22% in 1981, and in a 1992 survey of graduate schools of social work, the percentage had dropped to an alarming seven percent (Birnbaum and Auerbach, 1992). The continuous diminishing of group work’s importance as a specialized modality in foundational curric-

ula relegates the methodology to a status that appears to be regarded as peripheral to social work practice.

The decrease in social group work visibility and presence in social work curricula may have led to fewer social workers who view group work as an effective response to client needs (Cohen, 1995). As a result, group work is frequently marginalized as non-essential and less serious and substantive than casework (Kurland and Salmon, 1992; Cohen, 1995). The marginalization of social group work within the social work profession may indicate a fundamental flaw in the perception and perspective on where social group work exists in relation to casework, community organizing and administration.

Social group work challenges the dominant political sensibilities of individualism, competition, dualism, and authoritarianism. The exclusion of social group work curricula and the dilution and distortions of group work theory and practice may be reflecting the current political climate, policy, and national events, all of which impact social work (Middleman, 1990).

Social workers who are group workers struggle with agencies to legitimize and include social group work as a crucial method of practice. This struggle for legitimacy parallels the struggles that many of our disenfranchised clients face. Ironically it also parallels the struggle that the social work field has faced since the early nineteen hundreds when Flexner (1915) publicly posed the question whether social work was a profession.

### ***PRINCIPLE POWER***

At the 2005 Annual Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG), Dominique Moysé Steinberg eloquently referred to the “magic” of group work in her tribute to the legacy of Roselle Kurland. The magic she is referring to is the power that is created by skillful practitioners who adhere to the basic precepts of social work with groups. Social group work principles, theory, and skill bases formulate a powerful potion for spelling and dispelling the forces that obstruct the growth and freedom of the people we work with, our agencies and ourselves.

These elements of social group work are remarkably effective when combined and practiced in the cauldron of the contemporary social work milieu. The resulting “brew” benefits and enhances not only the individual participants’ social functionality but the agency’s functional-

ity as well. Conscientiously practiced social group work improves all of the systems it is practiced in and the synergy of the systems as well.

Group work requires workers to bring the underlying and hidden issues and feelings to the surface in a public way (Shulman, 1998). Middleman (1990, p. 24) states, “it takes guts to work with individuals while others watch what you do.” Breaking taboos such as talking about sexuality or abuse in front of others deviates from societal norms. The exposed nature of social work groups’ reciprocal exchange is outside the boundaries of our individualistic and dualistic conditioning. The ability to shatter false dichotomies is a skill of the adept group worker who facilitates a process that bursts the bounds of teacher-student, doctor-patient, parent-child power dyads (Shulman and Gitterman, 2003).

Social group work has been characterized as being in the swamp, or the muck, or the mess (Schon, 1987) because it embraces the get down and dirty of relating and struggling with problems in meaningful ways (Kurland and Salmon, 1992). Truth and conflicts are brought to the surface and participants are guided to examine and grapple with all of the positions and options involved.

Practitioners are required to be able to be vulnerable and flexible and able to take and give up control in ways that benefit both the group and its individuals. The worker deals with confrontation in front of witnesses. The presence of witnesses carries a power in a culture where conflict is interpreted, convoluted, denied or smoothed over, mostly behind closed doors by the formal power holders.

When the group is worked by a practitioner with a grasp of the principles, the work of the group attains dimensions it cannot have otherwise (Kurland and Salmon, 2002). Purposeful application of group work skills and theory enables groups to move beyond the illusion of work where groups led by non-skilled facilitators often stall (Shulman, 1999). Effectual group workers make a “demand for work” (Schwartz, 1971, p. 11) and clients are guided to wholeheartedly work on the issues they came to work on with forthrightness and clarity.

Some of the factors that make a group a *social work group* are the awareness and employment of the following principles:

- *Inclusion and respect.* Groups validate every person’s voice and honor each participant’s view by exemplifying faith and belief in each individual’s capability of constructive contributions (Kurland and Salmon, 2002; Dies, 1995).
- *Mutual aid.* Mutual aid involves fostering people’s ability to conceptualize and to articulate their own needs, and to recognize and

respond to other group member's needs. The principle of mutual aid has been alluded to as the most important concept of group work (Northen and Kurland, 2001; Shulman, 1999; Steinberg, 2002). Mutual aid creates the conditions in which people can support and assist one another with their personal goals. Being able to recognize and empathize with others, to listen to others and express one's self, and see the commonalities with other group members empowers participants to interact more effectively in their varied social arenas (Schwartz, 1973; Shulman, 1999).

- *Stage Management.* Effective social group workers recognize and make use of the various stages of group development, and use the products and by products of energy generated by the interactions of the group in *beginnings*, *middles*, and *ends*. Studies show that group development can traverse these stages in a cyclical manner, and that timing interventions to stage development is important (Garvin, 2001; Shulman, 1999).
- *Use of Conflict.* Facing and exploring conflict is core to the expertise and effectiveness of group work (Bernstein, 1973; Northen and Kurland 2001). This can involve "tuning in" (Schwartz, 1971), or understanding euphemisms and codes that group members use, and helping members see contradictions, commonalities and differences.
- *Conscious development, use, and implications of purpose.* Skilled facilitators regularly bring members' awareness to defining and developing the group's changing purpose (Kurland and Salmon, 1997). Consistent agreement and crystallization of purpose adds to group cohesion and the group sense of self determination.
- *Breaking taboos.* Group work practitioners develop the ability to say the things people have the hardest time saying, and naming the "pink elephants" in the room. At times the things that some individuals regard as shameful, deviant, or abnormal are normalized by the practitioner's ability to break taboos (Shulman, 1999).
- *Value of activity.* Social learning theories have taught us that there are major differences in learning styles. Use of art, music, writing, playing, and acting are invaluable in reaching varied populations, meeting people where they are at, and using clients' strengths (Wright, 1999; Northen and Kurland, 2001).
- *Problem-solving.* Practitioners regularly are called upon to guide the group through decision-making and problem-solving processes. A mistake commonly made by the non-educated group worker is to leap to resolution and solution of the presenting issue

without benefiting group members with a proper exploration of the issue (Kurland and Salmon, 1999; Northen and Kurland, 2001), or framework to use in the future. Kurland and Salmon (1999) present a five-step process based on the work of John Dewey.

### ***FORCES AT WORK***

There are many factors that distinguish social group work from other groups. Social work groups are complex systems with multi-dimensional tasks. Group members assume different roles that generate varied interfacing and interactions. The effectual group creates norms and develops its own culture. An important tenet of social group work is that the group itself is an entity with its own lifecycle. Therefore the social group worker attends to each individual in the group as well as the group as a whole. There are dynamics, patterns, and stages evolving thru the life of a group, be it fifteen minutes, or fifteen months (Northen, 1987; Shulman, 1999; Garvin, 2001). Social workers' awareness of how people behave during each of those stages can greatly benefit any group. People are put at ease during *beginnings*, and encouraged to air conflict and explore issues to resolve problems during the *middle* stage by knowledgeable group work practitioners. Group workers learn to contextualize and point out contradictions, make connections, and illuminate bonds and differences advantageously.

A group worker can be working the group and creating the magic of groups without having a recognized leadership role. Staff meetings and meetings in general can become more effective groups as a result of a group worker being present using their skills (Rubin, 2002).

Dies (1995) found empirical evidence documenting the value of group work for clients suffering from alcoholism, sexual dysfunction, depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, and bereavement. Other populations that group work is used with include battered women, children, rape victims, victims of mass violence, people living with diseases, old people, and prisoners (Northen, 1987; Northen and Kurland, 2001). Types of groups that are utilized by social work practitioners include closed membership short or long-term groups, open short-term or long-term groups, support groups, psycho-therapy and activity groups.

### ***EFFICACY***

In a review of the literature addressing the effectiveness of group work, the pragmatic benefits mentioned included affordability to clients and staff efficiency (Dies, 1995; O'Conner, 2002). Dies (1995) cautions practitioners that the potential effects of group work may be watered down when agencies have waiting lists for individual services and offer groups as a second best alternative. He further posits that the client's view of the treatment may impact its effectiveness and how agencies present the modality makes a difference. The likelihood of a group's success within an agency is compromised when the agency regards groups as non-essential. Unfortunately, agencies often cut groups first during uncertain financial times (Getzel, Kurland, and Salmon, 1986), sending a message that groups are adjunct to the work of the agency.

Groups foster an understanding that one is not alone in their suffering by universalizing the issues members face (Shaffer and Galinsky, 1989; Northen, 1987). Theorists recognize that the mutual sense of identification group members receive in groups fosters a sense of belonging (Northen, 1987; Shulman, 1999). Belonging and relating to a peer group reduces anxiety, increases self-expression and willingness to try new ideas (Northen, 1976; Shulman, 1999). Northen (1987) attributes an improvement in members' self-esteem to when they see that others who have the same problem are likeable.

A frequently mentioned benefit of mutual aid is the sense of altruism gained from helping others (Kaul and Badner, 1978; Steinberg, 2004). This includes the skills and abilities that group participants acquire to listen and understand others. Members learn to express helpful feedback, give support, share time responsibly, and explore differences and commonalities (Dies, 1995). Shaffer and Galinsky (1989) remark on the gains made when members can work through their relationships in the context of treatment, instead of just talking about them.

A reduction of problems is attributed to the validation members receive in groups as well as their opportunity to ventilate (Northen, 1987; Shulman, 1999). Theorists often allude to the fostering of hope that occurs in groups when members observe each other's progress, and the worker encourages members to share their coping strategies (Northen, 1992; Garvin, 1997). Members learn problem solving skills through employment of a consistent formula, and the successful resolution of conflict empowers them to deal with subsequent similar challenges (Bernstein, 1973; Northen and Kurland 2001).

Group work is empowering in its avoidance of patient-therapist dependency (Shaffer and Galinsky, 1989). The required power sharing that the worker must do in creating mutual aid groups strengthens the participant's sense of self-determination (Middleman, 1990; Gitterman and Shulman, 1994). A sense of ownership and investment in the group empowers participants.

### ***THE CENTRALITY OF GROUP WORK IN SOCIAL WORK***

Empowerment and strengths-based principles of the social work profession are fundamental in a perspective which conceptualizes the client's involvement as co-creators with the social worker (Falck, 1983). Empowerment is also conveyed by the message group work gives; that each individual has something constructive to contribute (Kurland and Salmon, 1996; Dies, 1995).

Schwartz (1971) defines social works' function as mediating the "... process thru which the individual and his society reach out to each other thru a mutual need for self-fulfillment." The overall goal for group participants is to become more effective in their lives within groups and systems to which they belong (Dies, 1995). These objectives place group work as foundational to the social work paradigm.

The work of social group work theorists and educators demonstrate why group work is an integral component of social work methodology. Social work with groups can be seen as an important step in a natural progression of social work services. This progression proceeds from casework to activism in the following manner:

#### ***Casework–Counseling–Group Work–Activism (Community Organizing)***

Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1966) as a lens to conceptualize social work and its modalities, the mutual aid system of group work is an ideal medium in which to satisfy individuals' social needs for affection, belonging, acceptance, self-esteem, and actualization (Figure 1).

The idea of successful group work leading to action is not new. Greenfield and Rothman (1987) give several examples of groups that decided to stay together and become social networks for each other as well as political action groups. They suggest that "transformation" be added to the stages model of group, postulating that a defining a new

FIGURE 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

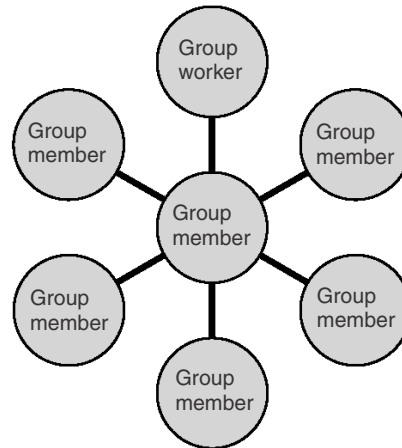
Maslow's Hierarchy	Needs	Service	Method
<b>Physical:</b> Physiological Safety Protection	Food, housing, health care, legal intervention, crisis intervention, needs assessment (clinical, mental health, GAF*)	Referral and information Access to resources Casework Advocacy Counseling Screening	Casework Case management Counseling, Small group work Planning
<b>Social:</b> Affection Belonging Acceptance	Validation, support Feelings of belonging, acceptance, membership Feelings of hope, love, connectedness	Getting support from peers as well as the agency Breaking isolation	Group Work (closed membership support groups, encourage intimate sharing and exploration, mutual aid); and/or open group work
<b>Esteem:</b> Self respect Autonomy	Resources, energy, connections, Friends, associates, social groups being with others	Organizational involvement Political participation	Activity groups Activity groups, community organizing macro groups, local, national, global
<b>Self actualization:</b> Doing Putting ideas into action			Praxis (reflection plus action)

\*GAF: Global Assessment of Functioning

purpose is highly plausible in a group that has experienced high cohesion, identification and strength (Greenfield and Rothman, 1987). In their view, the group itself progresses through Maslow's paradigm, and finds its self ready to act.

***THE PROCESS OF REFLECTION***

Part of the power of group work is in the reflection that occurs between each member of the group with each other and the group as a whole. The dynamic interchanges between each and all call forth the noticing of commonalities and differences, and a seeing of one's self in relationship. This multi-faceted mirror of perception between the individual and the group can create a powerful arena for creating self-awareness.



This portrayal of an individual’s opportunity to view themselves in relation to other group members and the workers is replicated with each participant.

### ***CASE EXAMPLE***

The following case example illustrates the reflective process in a support group of lesbians between the ages of seventy and eighty-five. They have been meeting for two months and are struggling with issues of intimacy. Wanting more meaningful friendships has been identified as an issue they want to struggle with. The group is an open one, meaning the membership configuration changes often, and new members may come and go.

At the group meeting prior, members shared memories of early rejection. Sheila, who is 74 years old, and a regular group member, has talked before in the group about feeling lonely. “I have to force myself to get up in the morning, because there is nothing for me to do,” she has said to the group more than once. In this case example, Sheila initiates a continuation of last week’s discussion:

“I have been thinking a lot about rejection since the group last week. I remembered having two girlfriends when I was a child, and we always played together. One day I discovered them playing jacks without me, and having a good time. I never knew they

played without me. I felt so bad. I feel like people only want to be friends with me to a point. I think I am not creative or intellectual enough, I don't know, like something is missing. I know, I know, my self-esteem is horrible." Patricia replied by telling Sheila that now she understood better why Sheila hasn't responded to Patricia's efforts to reach out. "I thought you did not like me," Patricia said, "Now I get that it is your insecurity." Sheila was surprised. "Really? You really were trying to reach out to me?" When Patricia assured her she was, Sheila replied, "Well try again!" Jewelle, who has known Sheila for more than twenty years looks at Sheila with disbelief. "I can't believe what I am hearing! You are so bright and confident. I never would think you had a self-esteem problem!" At this point the worker pulls the rest of the group in by summarizing and reaching for full participation (Middleman (1990). "That is a great example of a misperception of how people see us! Has anyone else ever been misperceived, or think they misperceived someone, or some thing?" Jane answered. "I never know what people are thinking about me. I was never wanted as a child, I was told that a lot. I never talked about myself and I stifled my artistic expression, because I felt so bad about myself." The mutual aid process engages here, and Tania, a very brusque woman, who claims she does not want any friendships, tells Jane, "Now you can change that. You can let your creative self out now! You have us, you know." Patricia relates to Jane as well. "You know Jane, my mother hated me, too. I think I know what you went through. I hated myself for so long. I had to learn the mantra 'I am good, I am good, I am good,' and I still have to do that sometimes." Jane said, "I am glad I came today. I am glad someone understands."

Building on Patricia's offering, the worker asks the group if there were other things that group members do that help negative self-perceptions. Sheila remarked that talking about it helped her put it in perspective, but that, "It was a lot easier to tell stories like that when we were younger." Jane agreed. "I think we keep the painful stuff in, and the more time goes by, the more we keep things in, until we hardly speak at all anymore." At this point, Rita, who has said nothing until now, tells about a childhood of severe and prolonged abuse, and then an abusive sexual relationship. "Now I watch people a long time before I get close to them. I want to see how they treat others first. I never talk about this stuff, you

are right, Jane. We keep it stuffed.” The worker commended the insight and the risk taking of the group members and asked Jane if there was anything more she wanted to share with the group. Jane said there wasn’t, and then goes on to say, “But I am very depressed you know. My mother always told me she wished she aborted me. She was very mean.” At this revelation, Tania explodes, “Your mother was a bitch! She had no right to be so fucking mean to you!” Jane smiled for the first time in weeks and said, “No she didn’t, did she?”

In this short example of a group interaction, the mutual aid process is evident in the support and validation members are giving each other. Group members reflect their impressions and observations as well as their own related experiences to their peers. Sheila received input on how she is seen by others, Tania breaks through her detachment to support Jane, and Patricia and Rita share painful experiences that have created obstacles to intimacy in their lives. The fullness of the empathetic understanding these women experienced in this group could not be matched in individual sessions.

### *CONCLUSION*

Contemporary society’s social workers face a vast array of challenges posed by the marginalization, isolation, deprivation, and stereotyping of the populations we work with. Social group work methodology and its principles exert extraordinary effectiveness in contradicting feelings of powerlessness and internalized self-hatred, and improving social functioning. It is alarming that this valuable social work method faces the danger of being diffused and robbed of its potency, of its magic when we need it most.

Group work is grounded in a substantial theoretical framework that has been established over the course of the last century. It is the embodiment of social work ethics and principles in action. The fact that the theory and skill base of methodology is in danger of becoming extinct in practice and social work education should create an outrage among all social work professionals. CSWE and NASW must be held accountable and pressured to ensure adequate group work theory and methodology is included in social work curricula.

Educational resources for those who wish to specialize in group work need to be established within schools of social work. The needs of people who are facilitating groups without education and training must be

considered. Continuing education courses in group work are needed for para-professionals as well as for Masters of Social Work who did not receive adequate instruction. San Diego State University, in conjunction with AASWG (2003) has created a model of this type of training.

It is apparent that groups have generative power when one considers the multi-dimensional, multiplying potentiality of social group work. This paper only touched upon the most basic reasons for group work to be used for individual change work. There is an equally compelling case for the role of group work in social change that has been made by leading educators and practitioners in the field (Gitterman, 2003; Getzel, 2003; Henry, 2003). When viewing the possibilities, the imagination can conceive of an exponential capacity for global understanding and change through the medium of social work groups.

There is an alarming trend in the devolution of group work as an effective and viable modality in the field of social work as evidenced by its invisibility in most of the social work foundational curricula and direct practice. Kurland and Salmon's (1992, 1996, 2002, 2004) warning that group work theory and principles may be absorbed into the generalist practice is one not to be reflected upon lightly. Rather it must be a catalyst for those of us who believe passionately in the magic and the power of group work to create a movement that elevates the method to its rightful central place before the practice of true social group work reaches its extinction.

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