

THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS

A Systematic Approach

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in the first meeting, for the worker to suggest some way for members to get to know one another. This might be a traditional 'round' of introductions; or it might take the form of some kind of joint action or activity necessitating exchange; or it might — more rarely — involve some more structured exercise or game (Drum and Knott, 1977; Schroeder and Pegg, 1978). But, whatever form the introduction takes, one use made of it by the worker is noting similarities, analogous problems, like experiences, common anxieties and other areas of potential fellowship and commenting on these in ways tending to increase members' awareness of them.

During the meeting, other opportunities of furthering cohesion arise. Members' awareness seems initially to be focused either on their private distress or on their attempt to place the worker and to relate in some individual and personal way to him. It seems to require both time and freedom for members to register and relate more to the others in the group. The worker, however, being oriented towards the group as a whole, hears many signals about commonality which the members, who initially are inwardly directed and guarded, tend to miss. He comments on these by 'linking' them together, indicating commonality and aiding the exploration and discovery necessary for the development of the group bond.

'You and not I', he tells them, 'have both the problems and the answers, and since you are in similar positions you may both understand and help one another.'

EXAMPLE 7

An open counselling group of post-operative mastectomy patients was commenced in the cancer department of a large national hospital. The group was led jointly by a social worker and a physiotherapist. The main aim of the group was to help the patients express and work on their extensive and intense feelings — horror, fear, traumatic change — and bring to a manageable level their anxiety about returning home.

During the early part of the first meeting the members were silent and inhibited. They exchanged but few words with each other and seemed very dependent upon the workers' directing the situation. They had had surprisingly little contact with each other on the wards. To the extent that they were able to comment on the group situation they drew attention to differences in their ages and in their backgrounds, some coming from cities and others from the remoter rural and coastal districts. During the first half-hour, members' remarks were addressed exclusively to the workers.

During the first hour the workers had helped all members to say

Chapter 4

THE FIRST MEETING

So, enough people said 'yes'. We have planned and prepared as well as we can, and we and our butterflies are now going to meet the group. It is both possible and valuable to consider the first meeting of the group separately from subsequent meetings. There are tasks and aims specific to the first meeting. There are recurrent themes in its possibilities and problems. There is an identifiable set of dynamics.

MEMBERS SEEK COMMONALITY AND MEANING

While it would not be true to say that the subsequent potency of the group process is decided here, it is certainly true that the ease and the tempo with which group process may be mobilized is strongly influenced by the qualities of the first meeting.

Behaviour in the first meeting of any kind of group is exploratory in nature. In new social situations we need to orient ourselves in relation to the others present, the range and nature of permitted behaviour and the degree to which the group's aims are compatible with our own. Some authors have stressed that this exploration is a 'search for commonality', a hope of discovering sufficient likeness to facilitate mutual acceptance, relationships, and common objectives (Sarri and Galinsky, 1975 — discussed in Heap, 1977b). Other authors, though agreeing with the observation that exploratory behaviour predominates, attribute this to our reluctance to commit ourselves to affiliation until we are assured that the conditions and sacrifices of membership are not unreasonably high compared with its gains (Kolodny, Jones and Garland, 1965).

THE WORKER AIDS INVOLVEMENT AND EXPLORATION

These interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Both imply tasks which are in practice common to the first meetings of client groups. The worker's function here is both to aid the search for commonality and to help members perceive the gains of involvement in the group.

This takes several forms. For example, it is common practice, early

at least something about their situation. While this was for the most part reticent and limited comment, a number of important things were said — 'This whole thing is so fearful and distasteful to talk about'; 'I daren't even look at myself or even think about it'; 'We only have one child, we'd meant to have more, but now that I'm like this God only knows how it will go'; 'I am the youngest and only single one here. Most of my money goes on clothes. They interest me, I work in the trade and style matters to me. Maybe I'll have to find something else.'

In a silence late in the meeting one of the workers carefully and reflectively said: 'I've been sitting here and thinking about what has come up so far. Several of you have remarked on how different you are from each other and that is of course to some extent true. But, at the same time, you have all in different ways brought up similar issues that clearly distress you all. Much of what has been said, whether it has had to do with marriage or clothes or children, seems to start from a feeling that you have all been changed so drastically that life can't be the same again. You cannot be loved any more, cannot look good any more — as if one is less woman after this. Isn't that what you have all been saying? Aren't these things you can talk to one another about and help one another with?'

BUILDING ON MEMBERS' STRENGTHS

Such help in the search for commonality and stimulus to identification brings the group into the beginnings of co-operative work. This is because this function also gives the worker an opportunity to indicate recognition of members' strengths and to begin the conscious abrogation of his or her own central role.

It is hardly possible to overemphasize the importance of helping the group to gain confidence in their own ability to solve problems and to take decisions. This is part of the same process as decreasing their dependence upon the worker. There is an almost paradoxical situation here, since the authority may in the first meeting or meetings use precisely the authority with which the group invests him to direct them to an examination of their own resources. When he believes that the group concerned is rich in resources and well able early to take responsibility, he may combine this stimulus with an indication of the limits of his own function. He thus contributes to the clarification of contract. These themes give form to all first meetings and it is frequently possible to work on them together, as in the following case extract. This extract also exemplifies the process of 'linking'.

EXAMPLE 8

In the first meeting of a group of parents of mentally retarded, multiple-handicapped children, Mrs A (22 years old) said that she was 'at her wits' end'. She 'just couldn't manage any more'. She did not know whether the child's continual crying and sleeplessness were to be expected from all babies, or whether her baby was particularly in pain, or whether it needed something special because it 'is the way it is'. While she felt it was right to continue to pick the baby up, maybe it wasn't right according to the experts? What was more, she was sometimes so tired that she was worked up and desperate by the time she picked up the baby and then there was no chance at all that she could soothe it. The baby 'caught her mood'.

The child care worker leading the group said that she could see that Mrs A was in a dreadful situation. She could 'see that it must wear you down. And then you feel desperate and alone — especially during the nights, perhaps.' After a pause, she went on: 'What you have said reminds me very much of what Mrs B described earlier this evening. I remember, Mrs B, that you said that although you have successfully brought up several older children you feel helpless with your new baby. You know, I think something you can all gain from the group here is to listen and talk to each other, ask each other, compare experiences, ways of doing things — learn from each other, rather than asking me or other 'experts' for advice. It seems to me that the experts on raising and living with seriously handicapped children — if there are any at all — are to be found among you parents rather than social workers, doctors or psychologists. I'll come in whenever I think I have something useful to add, but the main idea of bringing you together is our strong belief that you can help each other.'

INFLUENCE AND ACTIVITY SHOULD BE SHARED

Another important feature of first meetings is also present in the foregoing case extracts. It will be noted that the worker in example 6 drew attention to the worth and relevance of a number of diverse contributions from very dissimilar members. In example 7, another worker responded directly to an individual's pain, then quickly 'linked' her with another member, whereafter she drew the whole group's attention to their ability to contribute usefully. This has also to do with the task of maintaining open structure.

This term refers to work with another regular occurrence in group process. A common observation is that the uncertainties of the

formative stage of group life leave available positions of influence and initiative in the informal structure of the group. Leadership is up for grabs. Tensions and feelings of both inadequacy and protest often bubble under the passive awkwardness of the first meeting in client groups. There is then a strong tendency for informal leadership to be accorded to somewhat aggressive, domineering or perhaps over-compensated active members such as the 'life and soul of the party'. This certainly helps the group to get started. But it also has the undesirable effects both of inhibiting the less secure members and of establishing early a hierarchical group structure. This is as difficult to change as it is effective in limiting openness, acceptance and freedom in the group. For these reasons, the worker demonstrates continually — but with particular emphasis in the first meeting — his respect for and acknowledgement of all contributions, especially those from members who seem quickly to be accorded low status or who clearly find difficulty in manifesting themselves. Sometimes it is necessary to respond somewhat differently to contributions from early active and early passive members. It is not necessary to focus group process on the former: their activity will continue. But if the self-effacing members do not receive a response to their few timid contributions they may well accept a low-status definition of their role for the remainder of the group's life. Thus they will gain less from the group and at the same time their potential contribution will be lost.

This is a serious restriction on the use of group process, since it is likely that the initially reticent members include the most pained, conflicted and self-critical. In the context of group work with social and health problems these are often precisely the members who have most both to gain and to give. In our competitive culture a tradition has established itself of affording influence and prestige to the active and the articulate and of ascribing low status to the passive and reticent. Un-learning this well entrenched custom is quite a challenge, but it is a prerequisite for the group worker if he is to be able to acknowledge the potential and encourage the activity of the initially passive members.

This problem of uneven contribution by members is sometimes compounded by the worker himself. Our own uncertainty, our need for response and our inability to tolerate silence may cause us to collude with the initially dominant members. We may actively enter into dialogues with them in order to maintain a high level of activity. But we thereby convey the message that we especially prize their contribution and are correspondingly unimpressed with others.

Coping with this requires, more than anything, the security which comes of having survived some difficult times in groups. Until we have this apprenticeship behind us, we will at times lean for support on

those group members who in fact should be stimulated least, and neglect those who most need our acknowledgement.

RELATIONSHIP OF WORKER TO GROUP

This of course introduces the whole area of our feelings about our clients and our attitudes towards them. I shall not add very much to the many volumes of words already written about treatment principles and the nature of helping relationships.

I shall limit myself to noting that the notions of acceptance, respect and non-manipulation and an approach based on active and sensitive listening and understanding are as vital to the outcome and value of group work as they are to any other treatment method.³ The worker's relationship with the members must continually reflect these qualities. Members' confidence in the worker, their ability to express painful feelings and impulses, the maintenance or growth of their self-esteem, and their possibilities for being open and honest with each other — all of these important qualities are conditional upon the worker demonstrating unambiguous respect and acceptance and manifestly giving his intense and undivided interest to what members say and do. While this is true of his relationship with the group during its whole life, it is of paramount importance in the first meeting.

It is in the nature of group norms that they become established very early in group life and that they quickly become subject to control. Certain attitudes and forms of behaviour are possible and approved. Others are frowned upon or forbidden. This being so, the worker's preparedness to listen and his use of his initially central role in actively demonstrating attitudes of acceptance, respect and understanding serve not only to establish his relationship with the members but also to influence the norms which will become established in the group. It is this process which lies behind such oft-heard remarks from clients as 'I could really say what I was thinking without feeling stupid or bad' and 'Everybody listened and seemed to want to help each other'.

THE ROUND OF INTRODUCTIONS

There is an important instance of this influence of norms and development of relationship which is peculiar to the first meeting. I am thinking of the use which may be made of the initial round of introductions.

What often happens is that the worker, after introductory remarks including some reminder of the provisional aims, invites members to introduce themselves. Members in turn then say who they are and something — much or little — about what brings them to the group.

It is commonly the case that the worker nods his thanks in acknowledgement and then invites the next person to take his or her turn. He misses an important opportunity in doing so. Let us consider an alternative. The concept of 'active listening' is important here. When members present themselves they usually say more than just their name, and indeed are often invited to say more. This 'something more' differs from member to member and seems very often to represent, if we can see it, a glimpse of each member's most pressing concern at the time of entering the group. Worries and experiences produce pressure which is slightly relieved by mentioning the problem in this way, and at the same time the member also indicates indirectly what he or she feels that they need help with. The 'something more' which members add is *not* determined by chance.

EXAMPLE 9

In the round of introductions in a discussion group of pensioners meeting for the first time at a service centre for the elderly one member said: 'My name is John Smith, I'm only 65 but I've already been retired two years because of the way the fishing industry has gone'. Another member said, 'I'm called Jane Hansen, I've been a widow now for about a year.' And so it went on around the group. These old people were not just saying *who* they were. They were also telling where it hurt and were taking the risk of exposing some of their private pain to strangers. Had the worker nodded and said 'next please' she would have rejected a gift and given the impression that she could neither listen nor understand. But she indicated that she had registered the importance of what had been said and gave a response showing empathy and an initial attempt at understanding. Thus she hoped already to help each member to feel a sense of meaning, hope and belonging in the group. To John Smith she said simply, 'It sounds as if your working life ended earlier than you would have liked.' To Jane Hansen she said, 'So you're still trying to get used to being alone.' These were contributions to the establishment of group norms which would come to include mutual understanding and acceptance, response to others' contributions and the relevance of feelings.

It should be observed that the worker's comments in the above episode were brief and simple. In the context of the round of introductions they should be so, since it is not intended that the round of self-presentations should be halted for a deep and detailed discussion of one member's situation. The aim of these brief responses is simply that the members should understand that the worker is saying to them, 'I hear what you say, I wish to understand you and I respect you.'

In all of these exchanges and contributions a large part of the spectrum of problems represented in the group is displayed. The worker may well find this bewildering. He may even wonder if his planning was at fault, where composition in accordance with common need was a guiding principle. But it is in fact desirable that this rather confusing and frequent shift of focus from one individual problem to another should occur throughout the first meeting. It means that each member has used the opportunity to present his or her problem as it is currently experienced; it gives the worker the material necessary to aid members in their search for commonality; and it facilitates the review, confirmation and perhaps modification of the contract provisionally entered into during the offer of group service and intake.

THE CONTRACT IS REVIEWED

This affirmation of contract as a collective activity is another of the recurrent themes of first meetings. It will also be brought up subsequently, but during the first meeting this occurs by prior decision at the initiative of the worker. He will probably include an invitation to discuss this in his introductory remarks and will throughout the meeting help members to make their expectations, motivation and wishes as explicit as possible. He will attempt to link work with the issue of commonality with that of contract. Finally, he must gather and try informally to sum up the many problems raised and suggestions made at the end of the first meeting. While a broad display of problems and experiences is desirable in the first meeting, this should not be allowed to appear overwhelming and unmanageable in its diversity. The group needs evidence that the worker has managed, even if they themselves have not, to gain an overview of the issues raised. Thus, all are assured that their contribution has had some impact and may become an active component in the group's subsequent work. It is also desirable that members in this practical way are given evidence of the worker's competence, since they have usually a fairly high degree of dependence upon him during this formative stage of the group. Finally, this review may be used to help the group affirm what they are going to work on and how they are going to go about it.

SUMMARY

In summary we may say that the recurring themes and tasks of first meetings are the following:

short, clear self-presentation by worker;
self-presentations by members;

review and perhaps amendment of aims and working agreement (contract);
 identifying and articulating main problems and motivations;
 ordering overview of problems and needs presented;
 worker conveys to members: 'I listen to you, accept you, try to understand';
 worker facilitates interaction, aids search for commonality and for meaning;
 worker contributes to establishing purposive norms;
 attempt to maintain open structure;
 worker begins abrogation of 'central person' role;
 worker observes group and seeks supplementation, confirmation or rebuttal of previous diagnostic thinking.

Having survived the first meeting, we shall now go further and look at the working phase of the group.

NOTES: CHAPTER 4

- 1 For other examples and discussion of group work with mastectomized patients see Euster (1979) and Feinberg (1980).
- 2 For case studies of further group work in this area see Mandelbaum (1970) and Murphy *et al.* (1973).
- 3 Well regarded sources on helping relationships include Keith-Lucas (1974), Ferard and Hunnybun (1962), Irvine (1979), Brammer (1973) and Salzberger-Wittenberg (1970). In my own authorship, I have discussed this a little further in Heap, 1979, pp. 56-66.