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She's Doing All the Talking, So What's in It for Me?

(The Use of Time in Groups)

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SUMMARY. This paper discusses the use of time in a group and suggests that practitioners conceptualize group time pluralistically rather than distributionally or linearly. Examples of each approach are presented and implications for practice are drawn. [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>>* © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

PROLOGUE

The other day, as I went over to help a small working group of students in my research class, I overheard their conversation, which went something like this . . .

Uh . . . who wants to go? I don't know. Do *you* want to go? I don't know—do *you* want to go? I don't know—do you want to go? I don't

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know. Who *else* wants to go? *You* want to go? *I* don't care. Should *I* go? *You* go. *You* don't mind? No, *I* don't care. Okay . . . should *I* go . . . ?

Fortunately—for it was closing in on the end of class, someone finally “went!”

* * *

As humorous as this example is, more often than not this is the way people—including people who work with groups—tend to think about group time; and concerned with their ability to meet the needs of their members, groups often struggle with time management in just this way.

“How should we use our time together?” workers wonder. “How can everyone get their share?” “Should everyone get equal time?” “Should the one who needs it most get the most?” “How do we know who needs it most?”

Meanwhile, group members also wonder about group time. “When is it going to be *my* time?” they ask, and “If Miss X is doing so much talking, what's in it for *me*?”

* * *

After overhearing these endless “I don't know” in class, I sat with the group; and while questions were asked and answered of the person who “went,” I couldn't help but interrupt the process every few seconds to ask, “See how this applies to you, as well, Tom?” or “See how you need to do that too, Dick?” or “Isn't this basically the same issue you face, Harry?” I felt like I was working up a sweat, but the reward finally came, for as they began to discover their common ground, their heads began to bob in excitement and their pens began to “furiously” take notes.

* * *

INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, the management of group time is guided by the assumption that whatever time one person “takes” or “gets” in the group is time that other group members will, in fact, have to “give” or “give up.” And viewed in this way, that is, as a question of distribution, group time does indeed seem to pose an unresolvable dilemma.

The purpose of this discussion is to propose that rather than struggle with how to distribute time, practitioners shift the way they think about time. Just as in the song which says, "My time is your time, and your time is my time," this paper suggests that there is, in fact, always a multiple engagement of time in a mutual-aid system, no matter who seems to have the floor and that the most pressing practice question is less one of distribution than it is how a group gives any of its time whole-group meaning.

Time is central to social work with groups and to a great degree dictates the look and shape of a group. The passage of time has been offered as a paradigm for shaping expectations and interventions (see, for example, Berman-Rossi, 1992; Garland, Jones, and Kolodny, 1978; Glassman and Kates, 1983). The implications of time on pre-group planning and on goal-setting have also been explored at length (see, for example, Hartford, 1978; Kurland, 1978; Lowy, 1976; Northen, 1988), while some implications for using time also have been suggested by the literature on communication patterns and decision making (see, for example, Kurland and Salmon, 1992; Lowy, 1978; Middleman, 1978; Toseland, Rivas, and Chapman, 1984; Tropman, 1981, 1987).

However, even if it can be argued that at the broadest level all of the group work literature addresses time in one way or another, virtually none of it discusses the use of time with any specificity.

A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD PROBLEM

A number of strategies exist for managing time in groups, ranging from the "equal time for all" approach to the "squeaky wheel gets the grease" approach. The problem for practice is that none of the options which conceptualize time as a resource to be distributed in some manner are very satisfactory.

If time is distributed to group members in a so-called equal way, for example, how meaningful can content—particularly the talking type of content—be? Once we discount warm-up and ending time of even a 90-minute meeting, each of seven people is left with about ten minutes to call his or her own. Can any group, no matter how skilled the practitioner, truly do justice to any issue of importance in ten minutes?

On the other hand, if the "squeaky wheel" strategy is used to respond to competition for time, and if all the group members except the squeaky wheel think of themselves as being on hold or in "waiting" time for their turn, how can they help but feel like losers? Who knows if the

group will ever get to “their” time or if their time will even come *in* time?

The following two excerpts illustrate this dilemma very clearly:

Excerpt One

Worker: I would like to bring something up with the group. Some people have mentioned to me that there isn’t always enough time for them to talk. Sometimes many people have pressing concerns, and we only have an hour and a half. I wonder if the group has ideas to deal with this problem.

June: You are saying that for my benefit because I told you the other day.

Worker: Yours and other people who mentioned it to me.

Gloria: Well, I know I talked a lot when my daughter got in trouble but maybe the person who needs it most . . .

Worker: How could we determine that?

Helen: We could ask everyone, go around.

Claire: Why don’t you just pick?

Worker: Well, I might on occasion, Claire. So, Helen mentioned going around. How so?

Claire: Well, just ask who wants to talk, or each person says a little.

Worker: Marie, what do you think about that?

Marie: There’s no way. The one who’s most upset should talk.

Gloria: Well, we’ll just ask who wants to talk at the beginning.

Worker: How will we help people who have trouble speaking up?

Claire: I’m not sure. We’ll ask around. I think we got a good idea, now.

Helen: Yeah, we get the idea.

Worker: Okay, we’ll discuss it again and see how it is working out.

Excerpt Two (A Few Minutes of Silence)

Claire: (giggles) Well, who’s going to talk today?

Gloria: I’m feeling really good. I had a good week. I’d like to listen to someone.

June: Well, I had some trouble with this guy at school . . . uh, is it okay for me to talk? (addressing the question to the worker)

Worker: Ask the group.

June: What do you think? Does anyone else want to talk?

Helen: Well, I do a little, but you look really upset. I'll talk after.
Marie: Go ahead June, you look upset.

In this example, the group has identified three possible options for managing its time. One possibility is that the person who needs it most be the one to get it most. This solution only leads to another dilemma, however, which is how the group will determine which member does in fact need it most and by implication raises another question as well, which is what will happen to those who need it "less?"

In response to this new problem, the group identifies a second and rather novel option, which is that the worker might simply pick group members at his discretion. Clearly, the worker is not thrilled with this solution, as he glosses over it quickly on the way to other possibilities.

The group continues its discussion and eventually identifies a third possibility, which is that each person have the chance to talk in each meeting. As Claire puts it, perhaps each group member could "say a little."

In this example, two versions of "squeaky wheel" and one form of "equal time" have been identified as solutions to the group's time-management problem. But are these three options really the only ones available? The mutual-aid approach to practice would argue that no, they are not. It would claim that another option exists. It would argue, in fact, that practitioners need to adopt another approach to the use of time altogether. Only by adopting a *pluralistic* rather than distributive approach to the use of time, it would propose, can we help groups create mutual-aid opportunities; and only by helping the group's time become *filled* time for each and every group member, it would further argue, can we help groups actualize those opportunities.

What does it mean to have a pluralistic approach to time and to help group time become filled time for every group member?

First, developed as a paradigm for analyzing organizational systems (Whipp, 1994), a pluralistic approach to the use of time posits that systems function not through any linear action and reaction of their subsystems but through parallel processes. Time should be conceptualized not as a resource capable of being partialized or distributed, but must, instead, be understood in its original metaphysical form as a dimension, inescapably and invariably used by all things at once.

The way in which time is used may vary from thing to thing, of course, or in the case of groups, from person to person. We may even attach value judgments to how time is used. We may, for example, refer to time "taken" or time "spent" or time "wasted" or time "killed." In fact,

we may even refer to “down” time. No matter how we judge the quality of its use, however, as a dimension, time does get used. Therefore, rather than think about the function of any system as a linear progression of its subsystems, it is more accurate to think about it as a reflection of simultaneous multiple activities.

To conceptualize time as a dimension and to adopt a pluralistic approach to its use also means (to borrow another concept, this time from economic theory) that time is always and automatically *fillable* (Owen, 1991). Filled time refers to time which is perceived as productive, while unfilled time refers to time which is perceived as wasted. If we perceive the use of time as being productive for us, then we perceive it as filled. If we perceive it as being *unproductive* for us, then we perceive it as unfilled. In other words, whether or not *any* time is filled is always in the eye of the beholder, as it were.

Conceptualizing time in this way, then—in terms of being filled or unfilled—suggests that the most pressing practice question regarding group time is less one of giving any one group member “enough” time than it is one of helping group process provide filled time for the whole group. No longer is it “to fill or not to fill” for any one group member, but *how* to fill it for every group member *all* of the time.

If a group fills its time one member at a time, as is often the case in the “presenter” scenario, for example, it is not unusual for group process to take on a one-way look; and it is not surprising that those group members who do not have the floor often feel as if their time is essentially unfilled. On the other hand, when a group fills its time with a search for mutuality—that is, when process takes on a two-way motion—then by providing an element of self-interest to each group member, the group has the potential to provide filled time for everyone in the group, not just the so-called presenter.

THE USE OF TIME TOWARD MUTUAL AID

Thinking about time as a dimension and capable of being perceived as filled or unfilled in plurality is particularly appropriate to helping groups engage in mutual aid. Take the case of Miss X, for example, who seems to be doing all the talking. Whatever type of group she is in, Miss X cannot help but do much of the talking as she describes her problem. And while Miss X may be using the time in a more *apparently* active way than are her fellow group members, they are never completely inactive. They must inevitably use this same time in some way. In some

groups they may use it to listen to Miss X as would a polite audience. In others, they may use it to formulate advice. In some, they may even use it in a totally unrelated silent activity.

If mutual aid is to occur, however, when Miss X talks, her fellow group members must listen in a very specific way. They must listen with what might be called a self-referential ear (Kurland and Salmon, 1992). And while the group's process may *appear* to focus more on Miss X than it does on her fellow members because her situation is what catalyzed the discussion, this self-referential way of responding to and exploring Miss X's situation actually provides filled time for everyone in the group, as group members actively listen in order to clarify the issues, as they actively think about their own lives, and as they actively share the floor with Miss X by sharing and comparing stories and experiences. In short, as the members of Miss X's group think about their similarities, examine their differences, and explore the personal meaning of their similarities and differences, time becomes well spent, or "filled" for everyone in the group.

This use of time for *active* (i.e., *shared*) self-reflection in the service of self and others is crucial to mutual aid, because only through self-reference can group members transform individual issues into their more generic form and as such make them useful to the whole group. In many approaches to the use of time in groups, on the other hand, the use of time begins and remains individually oriented. Time is used essentially to focus on and remain focused on the situation of the person who raises a problem or issue in the first place. In fact, even when group members are expected to learn by analogy, they are generally expected to do so in a quiet sort of way; for to actively share the floor with the person who initially "pre-sented" would be perceived as infringing on that person's time.

No wonder problem-solving time in a group is so often perceived as predominantly other-directed and basically unfilled by those who did not raise the issue or immediate question.

A CASE IN POINT

Let us take the case of Miss X, and let us examine how a group goes about transforming individual time into filled time for everyone in the group.

While Miss X takes the time she needs to fully describe her situation, her fellow group members fill their time by helping Miss X better ex-

plain herself so that they can better understand what she means and what she feels. They interrupt her with comments like, "I don't understand what you mean." They ask for clarification with questions like, "Can you be more specific?" or "Can you think of an example?" And they ask for elaboration with questions like, "Can you say more about that?" In other words, as Miss X's co-members listen and react to what she is saying, they use their time to expand their understanding of the problem as Miss X describes it and to see the issues as Miss X sees them.

It may appear as if the group's focus is completely on Miss X at this point, because she is doing so much talking. Even now, however, time can be conceptualized as filled for all of the group's members as they actively help Miss X better define the specific issues to be addressed and identify the more generic issues to be understood.

It is here that the mutual-aid approach to individual problem solving parts company from most other approaches to that process (Kurland and Salmon, 1992, pp. 9-10). In many other approaches, group members are expected to make sense of the issues raised by Miss X primarily for her sake; and as a result, once they believe they understand Miss X's problem, they move directly into searching for solutions and advice for Miss X, even if they have found food for thought on their own behalf. In a mutual-aid process, on the other hand, group members are expected to use their listening time to make sense of the issues for their own sake as well as for the sake of Miss X. Even when group members think they see the issues as Miss X does, therefore, their exploration process continues, and it continues with a shift inward.

As group members come to believe that they see the issues as Miss X sees them, they ask themselves questions like, "Have I ever been in such a situation?" "What was it like?" "What happened for me?" "How did it make me feel?" They use their time, in other words, to reflect on the ways in which their own experiences, past and present, are similar to or different from those of Miss X. Some group members may recall similar situations and similar feelings. Others may recall similar situations but different feelings. Still others may recall similar feelings but different situations.

The exact scenario of similarities and differences does not really matter. What matters here is that by providing time for self reflection, time continues to be "well spent" not just for Miss X but for all the group's members.

Again, it might continue to seem as if the group's focus is only on Miss X because this self-reflection process is a silent one; but in fact, time can still be conceptualized as filled for all of the group's members

as they begin to give the personal issues raised by Miss X whole-group meaning.

As group members think about their own lives and the ways in which their own experiences are like or unlike those of Miss X, they share their stories with one another. They bring to light some similarities. They bring to light some differences. And as the group seeks common ground, it explores the implications of its similarities and differences. Miss X's work of the moment is to use her life experience to inform and enlighten this process, while that of her fellow group members is to inform and enlighten it with theirs.

In other words, as their self-reflection process now becomes expressive, group members have an opportunity to deepen their understanding of themselves and their understanding of one another; and time continues to be filled for everyone in the group.

Once group members have shared their stories, the group does one of the things it does best: it brainstorms possible solutions to Miss X's problem. In their continued use of self-reference and self-reflection, group members revisit their own histories to contribute a variety of perspectives and possibilities for the group's view and review. "I remember when something like that happened to me," one group member might say, and go on to describe how the way in which he handled his own problem had worked out well. "I remember trying that too, but for me it didn't work so well," another might chime in and go on to share her own experience.

The group's focus may appear to shift back to Miss X at this point, as group members actively search for solutions to her problem. However, while they are thinking about her immediate needs, they are continuing to search their own experiences to find ways to be helpful.

Even as group members look for solutions to a so-called individual problem, therefore, it can still be proposed that time is filled for every group member as each one reflects on, and contributes his or her own skills and strengths to, the group's collective thinking process.

Eventually, as Miss X's fellow group members try to help her develop a course of action, the group's focus does shift back to her, as the group helps her make some plans for action specifically related to her situation. Nonetheless, even at this point, it can be said that time continues to be filled for the whole group, as everyone in the group has the opportunity to make personal meaning of what has been said and heard. In other words, as they think through the implications of Miss X's choices, they think about them on their own behalf as well with

questions like, “What if I had . . . ?” or “What if I had to . . . ?” or “What if I were to . . . ?”

As group members talk about how the process of looking at Miss X’s situation has contributed to their own ways of thinking, being, and doing, this process comes to a close. What began as individual time has become whole-group time, filled with mutual aid as all group members think about how they might address an old problem in a new light or how they might face a new problem with new resolve.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

There are several practice implications to thinking about group time as proposed here:

1. Moments in which one group member’s issues appear to dominate must be conceptualized as windows of opportunity for mutual aid rather than as reflections of monopoly or “lopsided” group interaction.
2. Groups must be planned around strong commonality of need if we expect group members to use their time together to transform individual issues into collective food for thought. The stronger their commonality of need, the easier it will be for them to make such a transformation; the more abstract the commonality (e.g., “We all have human needs”), the more difficult it will be.
3. The group’s purpose must be both clear and relevant if we expect group members to use their time together to reach common ground. If its purpose is either too vague or too loosely conceptualized (e.g., “The purpose of this group is to help people improve the quality of their life”), group members will have to reach *too* far to discover their common denominator.
4. Prospective or new group members must be educated about how the use of group time looks from a mutual-aid point of view, including how “individual” problem-solving time can be used to the group’s advantage. We need to explain that mutual aid evolves not from equal presenting time but from using group time to explore and make personal meaning of so-called individual issues.
5. Expectations regarding the use of time must be included in the contracting process so that group members are prepared for the active pursuit of so-called individual issues rather than being left to wonder when it will be “their” time.

6. Whenever group members bring an issue to the group, this problem-solving approach must be initiated by asking them to talk more, not less. We must ask for information, seek closer scrutiny, greater clarification, and in such and other ways initiate the use of group time to give that issue the time it deserves. As we do this again and again, group members will come to learn that in the groups we have in mind, this kind of process is “normal.”
7. Whenever the group evaluates its problem-solving process, group members must be helped to gauge the group’s success by evaluating the quality of group time rather than the quantity of presentation time.
8. We must make particular use of those skills which help group members fill group time with two-way motion and which help group members identify common ground.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

In conclusion, traditional approaches to the use of time in a group may present more problems than they solve. Instead of approaching the use of time as something that group members have to “give” or “take,” time should be conceptualized as inherently accessible to and inescapably used by each and every group member. Viewed in this way, then, the only practice question which remains with regard to its use is how to help the group create time “filled” for each group member *all* of the time.

Anyone who raises a personal issue in a group is bound to do much talking, since describing it fully requires stating, restating, explaining, elaborating, clarifying, and other forms of enlightenment. While this person is using group time to talk, however, the other group members must also make some use of that time; and while there may be different options for using that time, a mutual-aid process fills it with self-reference and self-reflection as group members seek understanding and mutuality.

Even if all group members cannot reach back to similar situations, they can think of situations, past or present, which have evoked similar feelings. In either case, once self reference is set in motion, group members have opportunities to clarify their own thinking, attitudes, and feelings at the same time that they seek to better understand those of others. They also have opportunities to reconfirm jobs well done, so to speak, to reexamine those perhaps not so well done, and to strengthen their re-

solve for new jobs yet to come. In short, they have an opportunity to contribute to thinking things through together in a personally meaningful way. Using time in this way is essential for helping a group develop and maintain mutual aid; it is what helps prevent, as Margaret Hartford coined it, "aggregational therapy" of individuals (1978, p. 23).

It is hoped that this discussion will encourage people who work with groups to review the way they think about and use time in their own work. Rethinking time as a dimension, adopting a pluralistic approach to its use, and helping so-called individual time become filled time for every group member all of the time can improve our practice by permitting us to focus our attention on quality rather than quantity. If we remain preoccupied with the "distribution" of time, we will inevitably use our *own* time anxiously awaiting those "interruptible" moments instead of using our time to help the group discover mutual aid.

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