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Learning from Social Group Work Traditions

Margot Breton

SUMMARY. This paper raises issues that spring from the three fountainheads of social work with groups: the settlement movement, the recreation movement and the progressive education movement.

The first set of issues deals with the social self and the perception of individuals as members of social groups and cultures affected by the social, economic, and political conditions in which they live. The second set deals with the total self and the rights of individuals as human beings versus the needs of individuals as victims. The third set deals with the relation of the small group to the community and discusses the need to develop a non-narcissistic concept of mutual aid which would include both intra-group solidarity and inter and extra-group solidarity. [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.]

Margot Breton is on the faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.

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One of the most vigorous traditions in social group work is that of discussing and analyzing our traditions (Alissi, 1983; Garvin, 1984; Schwartz, 1986; Lee and Swenson, 1986). Calling attention to our traditions and what they imply for current group practice goes back at least as far as Trecker's (1955) edition of *Group Work: Foundations and Frontiers*, in the second part of which a number of group workers speculate on the future of group work and the need to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Many points were made which are still relevant, but I signal only two. One is an admonition: "Now the task is to re-examine and clarify and deepen the effectiveness of our practice, relinquishing if necessary some of our familiar past, adding and incorporating the new learnings and the gains that have been made." The other is a warning: "The clarification of our own professional problems will progress soundly, only if we hold on to what has been the healthy core of our learning . . . , and see to it that it will be enriched. This enrichment cannot come only from the other specializations . . ." (Trecker, 1955, p. 377).

Both points involve looking at tradition not as the preservation of the past, but as the manifestation in the present, in whatever form, of prized ideas or behaviors—something more akin to the greek concept of *entelechy*, a spirit that informs, than to the concepts of imitation or repetition. At the same time, we are reminded that we will end up having no distinct social group work modality if our innovations are inspired mainly from other "specializations" and not from our own "core of learning." In this paper I raise some issues that spring from the three fountainheads of social group work practice: the settlement movement, the recreation movement, and the progressive education movement.

THE SETTLEMENT MOVEMENT

The pioneers in the settlement movement chose to perceive people not only as individuals but as members of social groups and cultures affected by the social, economic and political conditions in which they lived. To this intellectual position, they added the moral one of calling for changes in conditions identified as unjust. They finally held the strategic position that the people affected by unjust conditions should themselves be involved in efforts to change these conditions, and they facilitated this involvement. One recognizes the three stages of seeing, judging, acting—a hallmark of modern youth movements as well as of present-day 'liberation' movements. Underlying the intellectual, moral and strategic positions of these workers was their genuine desire to

break down the barriers that separated them from individuals who came from different classes or cultures, “making real friendships with the poor and learning at first hand their way of life” (Schwartz, 1986, p. 13). I raise two issues which relate to the awareness that people belong to various social groups and cultures, and to the desire to learn about people, and about social groups, and about cultures.

The desire to learn about others, about different groups and cultures is laudable but does not suffice. I think most social workers would agree that it is not good enough, for example, for men to learn about women; men need to learn from women. The consciousness-raising and women liberation movements have awakened us to this reality. However, I am not sure how far we are willing to go in this type of thinking. Do we agree that a majority culture needs to learn not only about a minority culture but from a minority culture? That the powerful need to learn not only about but from the powerless? Do we agree that experts need to learn from lay people, and professionals from non-professionals? Do we believe that social workers need to learn not only about but from their clients, and not only about but from group members? We have to ask these questions, for it is only when we are willing to learn from the poor, the powerless, the inarticulate, as well as from the non-professionals and lay people and from minority groups, that there is in our work a real sharing of control, a real sharing of power, and a real sharing of agendas, to paraphrase Schwartz (1986, p. 24).

The reluctance to let go of some of our power as professionals may well be at the root of our present quasi-abandonment of work with social change groups. In their study of social group work practice in Montreal, Paquet-Deehy et al. (1985) found that work with social change groups accounted for a mere 7% of group practice, and they surmise that this may reflect both a “low priority on social reform in an era of budget cutbacks” and “an administrative choice to invest professional time in personal change groups, rather than in adult community groups.” However, as their study establishes that in social change groups, the centrality and the control of the worker is much less than in therapeutic or individual change groups, I suggest that administrative decisions also reflect social workers’ professional preferences for the exercise of more rather than less power. This is an issue I have discussed elsewhere (Breton 1989), and it continues to call for serious attention.

Our attachment to the exercise of professional power may help us to understand social work’s polarization between “people changing” and “system changing” (Alissi, 1983)—our humanist self-image longs for the latter, our professional ego demands the former. But understanding

is one thing, breaking down the polarization is another. Guided by the spirit of the settlement workers' strategy of involving the people affected by unjust conditions in the struggles for social change, but informed by contemporary approaches, I propose we make consciousness-raising a feature of all social work practice. I do not mean that all groups, for example, should be structured as C.R. groups; I mean that conscientization principles should inform all our practice. Thus change would not be thought of solely in terms of individual change (whether in attitudes, thought processes or behaviours): equal consideration would be given to changes in the social, economic and political conditions which affect individuals as *members* of social groups, races, classes, cultures, and sexes. We can also, in the same spirit, learn from contemporary liberative pedagogy (Freire, 1973) to conceptualize our practice in terms of empowering, rather than of assisting or helping. Then we will see group members and encourage members to see each other as active subjects rather than as objects of help. This type of thinking is clearly part of the social group work tradition, but at a time when increasing numbers of social workers are once more being seduced by the "glamour" (Trecker, 1955, p. 399) of clinical practice, it should not be taken for granted.

As to the settlement movement's awareness that people belong to social groups and cultures, I assume that most social workers today are "systems-thinkers" and are fairly sophisticated in the knowledge of how larger systems impact individuals, families and small groups. But unlike the settlement workers of yesterday, we often fail to use this knowledge to direct our attention to larger systems per se and to engage ourselves at the political level, getting involved and getting groups involved in social and policy change efforts. We use systems knowledge to better understand, assess and work toward changes in individuals, families and small groups.

One explanation for this difference is that "we have learned to specialize by numbers" (Schwartz, 1971, p. 19), and that, our sophistication about systems notwithstanding, the majority of us still leave 'macro' issues to those who specialize in policy and planning, just as we leave community related issues to those who specialize in community work (there are notable exceptions, see, for example, Lewis, 1983). However, another perhaps more basic explanation is that early settlement workers took a moral position when they judged certain conditions as unjust, and backed up their moral indignation with action aimed at righting social injustice. We, on the other hand, have opted for a scientific approach to problems and have interpreted being scientific as be-

ing judgement-free, or morally neutral; like many other disciplines, we are reluctant to concede that any prevailing paradigm reflects moral biases (Kuhn, 1970). Consequently, though we are conscious of the evils of poverty, racism, sexual discrimination and cultural elitism, fighting these evils has relatively little place in our practice approaches. It is not surprising therefore that so much is written about individual or group therapy and so many social workers aspire to be therapists. The glamour of clinical work derives partly from the perception that psychotherapeutic models are more 'scientific' than psychosocial or social work models. But more to the point, I suspect we take clinical practice, and 'science' for that matter, as an excuse to play it safe and to stay away from activism and from politically engaged and politically committed types of practice.

The trend toward therapy should not surprise us but it should worry us. It should worry us that social work is becoming "a form of psychotherapy" (Garvin, 1984, p. 15) and that consequently the role groups can play in changing their environments has more or less been lost. It should worry us because in the final analysis, if our actions do not reflect our concerns for social justice, we are irrelevant to the poor, the oppressed, the minorities and the marginalized.

This analysis should not be construed as an anti-science statement. On the contrary, realizing that we have lost much of the tradition of activism of the settlement movement, we have to move on and find an innovative way of reconciling a scientific or objective approach with a committed, engaged and, let's face it, a moral approach which identifies and judges social evils, and attacks them in deeds, not only in words. This will require more active mediating roles in the environment, such as proposed by Parsons (1988, p. 43) who noted, in her analysis of a low income minority girls' group, that there is a "need for workers to learn more about how to reach the poorest children and how to mediate effectively for actual resources . . ." I believe that effective mediation in the environment ultimately requires that political involvement become part and parcel of our practice paradigms and strategies and that we will have to accept the confrontations at the professional, institutional and social levels which are bound to follow.

THE RECREATION MOVEMENT

As the settlement movement draws our attention to the social self, the recreation movement reminds us of the whole self. It reminds us that ev-

ery individual has the potential to develop and to be creative. It is a reminder that we neglect at great peril. This is a time when social workers are faced with enormously complex problems and tasks. The world seems increasingly populated by victims: children who are physically and sexually abused, adolescents incarcerated in psychiatric institutions by parents because of rebelliousness, throwaway youth who turn to prostitution because they are hungry, women who get beaten up by their husbands or partners, homeless families forced to live in abysmal conditions, men and women who need mental health services but are left to wander the streets, old people who are forgotten by everyone, discarded refugees with battered hopes, and many more. Confronted with this misery, the idea that our work could have anything to do with the creative use of leisure-time activities and recreation may strike us as ludicrous; an idea that belongs to ancient history or at the very least to more innocent times and places. However, when we forget that victims are not only victims but above all are whole human beings with the same potential and aspirations as anyone else for development and creativity and with the same need to “find a fuller life in association with other people” (Cohen, 1952, p. 198), then we further victimize them. It is easy to become more interested in problems than in people, to find the victim in the individual more interesting than the human being. And so we concentrate on the debilitating effects of victimization, and turn away from a competency promoting and preventive type of social work with groups.

We need to recapture our interest in “primary and secondary prevention” which, as Middleman (1978, p. 19) points out, earlier on distinguished group work from casework, and went hand in hand with our “priority interest in the enhancement of normal growth.” Recognizing that growth stops only with death, this interest must apply to all group work, not only to work with children—though I confess that I am troubled by our virtual abandonment of “normal” children and youth, or more precisely, of the “normal” in all children and youth; I wonder if unwittingly we are contributing to the societal negligence of this segment of the population, a negligence that is a sad characteristic of our greedy age (on this point, see Kolodny and Garland, 1984; and Middleman and Goldberg, 1988).

Remains the question of finding a workable balance between paying attention to the victim (or the troubled, or the suffering, etc.) and paying attention to the whole person. I am convinced that one of the answers is to structure social work groups so that they are effectively “democratic and creative” groups, as Grace Coyle put it. In a paper enti-

tled "Groupwork as a Method in Recreation," Coyle wrote that; "One of the principles upon which group work as a method rests is its conviction that one of the chief sources of positive fulfillment for individuals lies in the deep delight available in the mutual interactions of a democratic and creative group" (Coyle, 1947, reprinted in Trecker, 1953, p. 96). I want to emphasize that this does not preclude addressing the *needs* of the victim, but it forces us to consider also the *rights* of the whole person. Indeed to my mind, Coyle's language speaks directly to contemporary liberation struggles, including the struggle to be free of labels, for it declares that human beings have the right to fulfill their potential as whole persons, and that they have the right to experience the "deep delight" of participation in a democratic and creative group.

Therefore the way we structure groups is all-important, for a group can be structured so that the whole person in each member is invited to participate, or it can be structured so that only the troubled, or broken, or hurt part of the person is invited to participate. In the first instance, the possibility of experiencing fulfillment and "deep delight" exists, in the second it does not. We therefore need to think of innovative ways of engaging the whole person: these include putting aside antiquated notions of motivation (Breton, 1985); becoming familiar with a social learning model of growth and change (Goldstein, 1988); understanding, respecting and making use of cultural idiosyncracies, as well as accepting and dealing with the discontent, the resentment and at times the rage of members of oppressed racial minorities (Davis, ed., 1984). We also need to think of innovative ways of making groups milieus where people can "become," which means milieus where they can "do" (Middleman, 1983). This will involve relearning not to be timorous in the use of activities, nor to be afraid of having fun; it will involve trusting in the healing and growth enhancing power of play *per se* versus believing only in play therapy. This thinking may well demand a thorough examination of the assumptions which have come to guide much of social work with groups as we have turned to what I would call deadly serious forms of group practice. However, we should remember that social group work owes much of its vitality and uniqueness to the theories about normal growth and development and the attending orientation to the total person which came out of its early association with the recreation movement. As we face the challenges of a changing social context, we would do well to build on the particular traditions that go back to this movement.

THE PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION MOVEMENT

The progressive education movement was influenced by the emerging social sciences (social psychology and sociology in particular) and their early formulations about the nature of the small group (Cooley, 1909) and its potential for education (Dewey, 1922). It was also influenced by Dewey's philosophical positions on the ideal forms of government and his views on citizenship. Thus, the followers of this movement (among whom group workers were prominent) saw the small group as an experience that prepared the individual for democratic participation in the affairs of the community. The small group and its relation to the community is the focus of this last section. I deal with two issues: first, how we conceptualize the power of the small group, and what mutual aid means to us at the present time; and second, the relevance of democratic participation to group work practice in a culturally pluralistic world.

The sociological and philosophical interest in reciprocity between the individual and society and between the small group and society was incorporated into the first attempts at systematizing a social group work approach, when Grace Coyle (1946) called for a knowledge base that would include community relations as well as individual behaviour, group process, program content and activities, and supervision. The importance given to external relationships grew to be recognized as a hallmark of group work, so much so that Alissi (1982, p. 15) would write that unlike all other group methods "in social group work the group itself is taken as a natural part of a larger whole and is to be worked within that context wherever possible." Seeing the group as part of a larger whole (systemic view) is assumed to lead not only to a better understanding of the group, but to the group effecting the larger social structure (Abels and Abels, 1980).

Pursuing the concept of reciprocity, Schwartz (1961) in "The Social Worker in the Group" set forth his pathbreaking ideas on mutual aid. Since then the dynamics and techniques of mutual aid in the small group have been researched and documented (e.g., Shulman, 1984; Gitterman and Shulman, 1985) and application of Schwartz's ideas in a wide variety of settings and with widely different populations are reported increasingly in the group work literature (e.g., Lee, 1986; Parsons, 1988; Shields, 1986).

I assume that today any social worker who has taken even a single course on group work is at least aware of the group as a system of mutual aid (this was not always the case, and Shapiro (1977) called atten-

tion to our neglect of this phenomenon more than a decade ago). But I think it is fair to say that mutual aid is seen nowadays largely as an intra-group phenomenon; what is recognized is the power members have to influence and to help one another. I agree that the recognition of this power constitutes a *sine qua non* of effective use of groups. I fear, however, that reducing mutual aid to an intra-group phenomenon has led us to concentrate on the healing power of mutual aid and to forget its liberating power. Liberating power is linked to extra-group and to inter-group solidarity, which leads to strength, action and change at the social, economic and political levels. Intra-group solidarity, which is how we have come to see mutual aid, leads mainly to strength, action and change at the personal level. Concern with personal strength, action and change is part of the very fabric of our profession, but it is simply insufficient if our work is to have any relevance whatsoever to the poor, the racially, ethnically or sexually oppressed, to exploited children, youth and old people, and to all the others who are relegated to the margins of society, and await opportunities for empowerment.

Therefore, we need to challenge our present conceptualization of mutual aid so that it reflects all aspects of solidarity: intra-group as well as extra and inter-group solidarity. There is much in place already to guide us in this task, from broader theoretical building-blocks such as Germain and Gitterman's Life Model of Social Work Practice (1980) and the emerging Integrative Perspective proposed by Lee (1986) and others (Parsons et al., 1988), to historical and critical analyses of the concept of mutual aid per se (Lee and Swenson, 1986). We also can deduce from Lang's (1986) work on collectivities, Schopler and Galinsky's (1984) on open-ended groups, and that of many academics and practitioners on time-limited groups (see Alissi and Casper, eds., 1985), that the solidarity possible in these social systems, while different from the mutual aid which characterizes a fully developed, autonomous, stable and 'ongoing' group, can be harnessed for social and collective as well as for personal purposes. In addition, knowledge of network building as it relates to social group work (Abels and Abels, 1980; Shapiro, 1986) encourages us to think of solidarity between people as being more than a purely intra-group mutual aid process, and again to see in this kind of solidarity the potential for social as well as personal change.

Without these new ways of thinking, our perceptions and interpretations of mutual aid will grow increasingly narcissistic, and narcissism is dangerous in a culturally pluralistic world. This is one reason why our traditional commitment to democratic ideals and to democratic participation in and out of the group is of such importance at this point in time.

But we have to be ready to innovate also in this area, both at the conceptual and practice levels. We need to rethink “community” and ask ourselves what “community” means in a world where diverse civilizations, values and cultures collide in what have been called global cities and villages. We need to rethink “participation in community affairs,” and what this means to the segments of the population that are effectively disenfranchised (Breton, 1987). To address these questions assumes that we are still interested in social peace and social justice, not only in peace of mind and mental health. To begin to answer the questions assumes that we are ready to drop narcissistic interpretations of mutual aid whereby we encourage group members to care for the others who are “in the same boat,” but fail to awaken their consciousness of others in “other boats.”

CONCLUSION

To survive, cope and find fulfillment in a culturally pluralistic and rapidly changing world requires an awareness that one’s self-interest is linked to the welfare of the larger ecological system, not only to the welfare of one’s immediate ecological niche. It requires a willingness to accommodate to philosophical, religious, economic, social and political views that are different from the views of one’s own reference groups, without abandoning fundamental values regarding individual and collective rights and freedoms. This presents social group workers with a challenge which can be met providing we resolve certain issues.

I assumed throughout this paper that what makes social group work unique is its “combined focus on the individual and society” (Alissi, 1982, p. 10). Given that this assumption is widely held by social workers, it is an aberration that we have distanced ourselves from the social sciences (economics, sociology, social anthropology, social psychology), as well as from other disciplines such as education, forfeiting opportunities to influence knowledge as well as to be influenced by knowledge in those sectors, and have chosen instead not so much to dialogue with but mostly to listen to the psychiatric profession, and within that profession, to clinical not community psychiatry. I recognized earlier that action oriented toward social change leads to action at the political level and is much more risk-intensive for social workers and the institutions which employ them than action oriented toward personal change. Therefore it is to be expected that in conservative times such as the present one, the forces towards preserving the social status quo and

thus towards focussing on therapeutic approaches will be greater than usual.

However, if we are to find innovative *social work* practice responses to the challenges facing us, I believe we have to introduce social change and political commitment as an integral aspect of all our practice models. It seems to me that it is just not good enough to take comfort in the notion that *some* social workers *somewhere* are involved in community-sensitive and social action oriented practice, and therefore the majority can go on with forms of practice that are undifferentiated from individual or group psychotherapies. There is a concomitant and especially urgent need for research in social group work to focus attention on more than individual behavioral change and on more than small group processes that facilitate personal change.

We have in the social group work tradition a rich resource of wisdom and experience in working towards more fulfilling transactions between the individual, the small group and the larger community. We therefore have a critical role to play as a profession in making the new and increasingly complex world that is dawning upon us a better place for everyone.

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