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The Personal in the Political: Exploring the Group Work Continuum from Individual to Social Change Goals

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SUMMARY. This article analyzes three examples of group work practice in order to examine the relationship between internal and external change goals across the practice continuum. Using the conceptual framework of the British model of self-directed group work, the authors explore the potential of social action groups to meet individual, interpersonal, and social needs. The three practice illustrations include a poetry group in a service center for homeless and low-income adults, a peer support group in a recipient-directed mental health agency, and a community meeting group in a homeless shelter. [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.]

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Group work has been described as falling in the middle of the social work practice continuum. The literature on generalist social work practice conceptualizes group work as *mezzo* level work, falling in between *micro* (individual and family change) oriented interventions on one end and *macro* (community and social change) oriented intervention on the other (Parsons, Hernandez, and Jorgensen, 1988). There is a long history of debate within social work as to the relative importance of different parts of the continuum (Bisno, 1956; Cloward and Epstein, 1965; Lee, 1930; Schorr, 1959; Specht and Courtney, 1994), with individual change and societal change framed as dichotomous goals.

There is a parallel continuum within social group work, ranging from the remedial model, emphasizing individual change, to the social goals model, emphasizing social change. Falling between them is the interactional model, emphasizing mutual aid and interpersonal growth. All three represent abstract conceptualizations of group work associated with particular theoretical traditions (Toseland and Rivas, 1998). In practice, however, group models are not necessarily so systematically ordered. If we blow up the photograph to a larger size, a finer grain appears which reveals that many groups actually represent an overlap of approaches. For example, a remedial model psychotherapy group may incorporate an educational component, use skill building activities, and foster mutual aid. Similarly, a social action group might use program activities and encourage the development of mutual support among group members.

This article will explore the relationship of group work models to “real world” group practice. It may be that the theoretical models, as currently articulated, fail to do justice to the “fine grain” of actual group work practice. Workers may use techniques and styles eclectically, in response to changing member needs, rather than maintaining a rigid allegiance to a single model. This non-partisan approach would certainly be in keeping with Wood and Middleman’s (1989) principle of “following the demands of the client task” (p. 35) and Breton’s (1995) caution against workers preempting the direction of group work by pigeonholing groups through a taxonomy of models. This interpretation raises several questions, however. Does this flexible approach lead to the models becoming blurred beyond recognition? And, alternatively, do broad models remain clearly discernible in practice, with groups moving along a continuum of models, changing focus as dictated by the needs of the group?

Before probing these issues further using several group examples, a brief overview of the traditional models of group work will provide contextual grounding for our discussion.

THE REMEDIAL MODEL

The over-arching goal of remedial model group work has been described as restoring and rehabilitating individuals who are “suffering from some form of social maladaptation,” (Papell and Rothman, 1966, p. 71) or “behaving dysfunctionally” (Toseland and Rivas, 1995, p. 53). The authors most often associated with the remedial model include Garvin (1987), Vinter (1974) and Yalom (1985).

Members of remedial groups have individual treatment plans, generated and executed by the worker (usually a group therapist), which determine their goals within the group context (Reid, 1991). Papell and Rothman describe the worker-determined, individual treatment goal as the “central and most powerful concept” in remedial group work (1966, p. 72). Remedial groups are highly leader-directed with the therapist actively intervening in and managing group processes. Vinter (1974) describes multiple roles for the remedial group leader, including: functioning as the object of member identification and drives, acting as the agent of group-legitimate norms and values; defining individual tasks and goals, and controlling members’ roles in the group.

THE INTERACTIONAL MODEL

The primary goal of interactional group work is the development of a mutual aid system among group members. Often referred to as the mutual aid model, it is associated with a number of theorists, most notably Schwartz (1961) and Gitterman and Shulman (1994). Interactional group work incorporates some of the remedial model’s concerns with individual change, but has as its primary focus the interpersonal dimension of group work. The group worker in the interactional model is seen as having two clients, the individual group member and the group as a whole (Schwartz, 1961; Shulman, 1992). A primary role of the worker is to mediate between these clients, “search(ing) out the common ground between the individual and the group” (Schwartz, 1961, p. 21). Another important worker role is facilitating the development of mutual aid as it unfolds within the group (Shulman, 1992).

THE SOCIAL GOALS MODEL

The social goals model has roots in the settlement house tradition and in the social movements of the 1960s (Papell and Rothman, 1966). Referred to in more recent literature as social action group work, the central goals of this model are social change and the empowerment of oppressed populations. Proponents of empowerment-oriented approaches to social action group work include: Breton (1995), Cohen (1994), Cox (1991), Gutierrez and Ortega (1991), Lee (1994), and Mullender and Ward (1991).

The role of the worker in this model is less directive (though no less active) than in the other two models. This is consistent with the emphasis on empowerment, which has been defined as “having the choice to participate in the decisions that affect one’s life, and the life of one’s society and community” (Breton, 1994, p. 27). The role of social action group workers includes facilitating opportunities for the empowerment of group members, assisting group members with the process of determining social action goals and strategies, and challenging internal and external forms of oppression.

Over 30 years ago, Papell and Rothman (1966) pointed to a lack of adequate theoretical underpinnings in the social goals model. Since that time, a sound theoretical framework for social action groups has been developed which integrates feminist and empowerment practice theories with the century old social action tradition in social group work. As Lee (1994) describes, an array of empowerment-oriented approaches to social action group work emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, in North and South America, France, and Britain.

SELF-DIRECTED GROUP WORK

One of the most fully developed of the empowerment-oriented social action approaches is the British model of self-directed group work. Formulated by Mullender and Ward (1985, 1991), self-directed group work targets external goals identified by group members through a process which involves them in focusing, in turn, on *what* are the major problems in their lives, *why* these exist, and *how* to tackle them. A notable feature of the approach is a clear value-base which is outlined in the form of six practice principles emphasizing: the avoidance of labels, the rights of group members, basing intervention on a power analysis, assisting people to attain collective power through coming together in

groups, opposing oppression through practice, and group workers facilitating rather than leading (Mullender and Ward, 1991).

Inherent in these values is an assumption of a social structural analysis of the issues facing marginalized groups. Self-directed groups do not have therapeutic purposes. Indeed, the groups seek to challenge the fact that group members may have become, or could potentially become, negatively labeled as a result of interventions that inappropriately seek change at the individual or family level, rather than working to empower the group to tackle wider injustices. Intrapersonal and interpersonal change may, however, come about as a consequence of participation in self-directed groups.

One critique of the self-directed model (Norwegian group work educator, Ilse Espelund, personal communication) is the limited attention paid to the affective content of group process, something which is bound to be a major factor in the functioning of even the most task-oriented and sociopolitically aware groups. Revisiting and re-analyzing the self-directed group work model may help to explore where, and to what extent, personal and interpersonal issues might be addressed within groups primarily focused on social change goals. It might be that a single group work model can span a larger section of the group work continuum than has hitherto been suggested, without blurring the defining features which distinguish it as being predominantly one kind of group or another.

Group work is, after all, a fertile, living medium whose exponents continually develop fresh responses to the challenges they encounter in practice. It would be unrealistic to suppose that all that has been published about groups, to date, fully represents all that has been actually achieved in group work practice. Group workers in the "real world" are in the vanguard of creativity and innovation. Researchers and theorists have the arguably less difficult task of observing, analyzing, and making sense out of what happens in practice. Conceptual taxonomies have their place in advancing our understanding of group work practice but they may of necessity be rather bald generalizations. It is valuable to revisit and refine them periodically to insure that they remain reflective of the realities of practice.

We offer three practice illustrations as a point of departure in our exploration of the group work continuum. Our primary emphasis will be on examining the relationship between the observed groups and the theoretical model of self-directed group work. We hope that this inquiry will shed light on the connections between the affective content and mutual aid function inherent in all groups and their specific role in social

action groups. In particular, we will demonstrate that all three levels of involvement (personal, interpersonal, and social) can be present in groups that might be assumed to be working at just one level. From these practice examples, we will draw the inference that the traditional categorization of groups fails to capture their complexity and recognize that these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Finally, we will draw on social work theory to explain the unique properties of social action groups which enable them to incorporate personal, interpersonal, and social change concerns.

THE POETRY GROUP

A poetry group at an agency serving homeless people was the practice example which first suggested to us that remedial, interactional, and social goals models were not necessarily mutually exclusive. The Poetry Group appeared to be working at all three levels. This was a group with explicit social action aims which also celebrated and worked on feelings and relationships.

This group has been described as having “. . . the following mutually agreed on goals: to meet weekly to write together, to organize poetry readings for the public, (and) to educate the public and to counter negative stereotypes about homeless people by giving voice to their experiences . . . ” (Cohen and Johnson, 199, p. 134). These goals reflected members’ interests in creativity and self-expression as well as community action. While framed as a self-directed group, weekly group meetings consisted of writing individual and group poems. The group’s more external focus was realized at periodic poetry readings which were open to the public. The group facilitator and many of the group members saw poetry readings as critical opportunities for educating the wider community about the realities of severe poverty. This goal was not uniformly shared within the group, however. Some of the participants at weekly group meetings were drawn to participate solely out of a desire to write and receive feedback on their work. Others attended because the group was a warm and welcoming place where they received support and encouragement. In practice, the group’s external and internal goals were not dichotomized.

The Poetry Group was developed as a self-directed group and the facilitator consciously sought to embody Mullender and Ward’s six practice principles. The group incorporated a conscious social structural analysis which can be discerned in some of its poetry, for example:

Billy

When Billy turned five and started school the teacher asked,
 "What do you want to be when you grow up?"
 And these are the things that Billy didn't say:
 "I want to be a junky and a dope addict.
 I want to get married too young and beat my children and my wife.
 I want to sell my body to perverts in the park
 for twenty bucks or crack cocaine.
 I want to live on welfare, food stamps
 and be a burden to my fellow man.
 I want to beg for quarters
 so I can buy some beer.
 I want to sleep under bridges
 and have young punks call me bum
 I want to stay in shelters
 and slowly go insane.
 I want to drink cheap wine
 and puke and piss my pants.
 I want to eat in dumpsters and soup kitchens
 and smoke cigarettes that I find.
 I want to be called lazy and shunned
 by so-called gentlemen.
 I want to smell of unwashed skin
 and grow to hate my fellow man.
 I want someone to kill me for the things I've become.
 I want to be called a vagrant and a bum."
 The things that Billy did say
 are irrelevant because he's dead.
 Killed by the hero of the town ("Zeek," as quoted in Cohen and Johnson,
 1997, pp. 136-7).

Group readings of poems such as *Billy* generated powerful discussions about the oppressive nature of homelessness, the rights of poor people to full participation in their community, and the need to educate members of the public with class privilege about the realities of life in the streets. The group's social change focus coupled with the worker's clarity about her role as group facilitator and consultant, rather than group leader, establishes this group as self-directed in orientation. Although the medium through which the group worked was that of an activity group, and some members were drawn by the activities rather than

the broader social action objectives, the social goals level was clearly present in the group and had been mutually agreed to and actively pursued by group members.

The group was externally focused, with a goal of community education. At the same time, it carried both individual and mutual aid elements in that members had a weekly opportunity to explore their own internal creativity in the company of like-minded individuals. Whereas there can be social goals in a group accompanied by individual growth and mutual support, the converse is rarely true of groups developed with the primary intention of achieving individual change or mutual aid. Indeed, it is quite unusual for a therapy or support group to incorporate social change goals. In contrast, a group working towards social change inevitably achieves individual growth as a by-product of its work. Not only do groups aimed solely at individual change fail to achieve social goals, they sometimes serve to “keep the lid on” social problems by helping people feel a little better about adverse situations rather than seeking to change them.

This group example confirms Mullender and Ward’s (1989) contention that the personal benefits for members of self-directed groups are considerable. The proponents of self-directed groups may appear to understate the importance of intrapersonal and interpersonal processes, due to the model’s strong emphasis on groups’ external agendas. In fact, internal group dynamics in self-directed groups are as rich as in any group.

The creative energy, the engagement with feelings, and the development of mutual support through writing about painful experiences were all important elements of the Poetry Group’s process. They served to revitalize rather than distract from the externally focused activity of the group. Because the group worked on so many levels at once, members were able to take different things from it at different times. This fits Breton’s (1994) observation that “Good empowerment work . . . requires that all levels of work, the personal, interpersonal, and structural/political, be addressed” (p. 31). At its core, however, the Poetry Group remains a self-directed group with lessons to teach us about the affective content of such groups. Though anger and despair are writ large in the poetry and were evident in the group’s discussions, the members did more than get in touch with and support each other through these emotions. The group moved into an enthusiasm for struggle and pursuit of social change, *taking control* of their own group goals and *taking action* toward meeting those goals.

THE PEER SUPPORT GROUP

This second example, like the first, demonstrates that the same group can have the potential to combine all three levels; personal, interpersonal, and social. But, in this case, the group members themselves decided not to work on social goals. The example is an important one because the organizational context of the group was highly conducive to pursuing social action aims. There was a radical feel about the setting, far more, in some ways, than the Poetry Group. Placing the two examples side by side points up the importance of looking into the heart of what a group is actually working on, its stated purpose, and what level of change members have signed up for.

The host agency in this example was a recipient-directed mental health organization with historic ties to the mental patients' liberation movement (Chamberlin, 1978). The setting itself incorporated Mullender and Ward's (1991) six practice principles: consciously avoiding the labeling of its members, emphasizing members' rights, promoting a conscious awareness of power relationships within the mental health system, advocating social action aimed at gaining collective power, and actively opposing oppression. In this sense, the agency operated as a self-directed group, with a strong board of directors composed of democratically elected service recipients exercising collective power in agency decision making. Service recipients, as board members and committee members, were in charge of all personnel decisions (hiring, firing, raises, promotions, etc.) which had the effect of transforming power relationships between service providers (staff) and recipients (members).

The Peer Support Group was developed and facilitated by a social work student. It was framed as a group where service recipients would provide support and mutual aid to each other in relation to personal and interpersonal issues of daily life. The worker saw her role to be primarily one of facilitating the development of a mutual aid system among members of the group. She had, in fact, as an agency staff member, responded to the request of several service recipients to begin a support group. The choice of the name "Peer Support Group" was intentional. The group purpose was, from the outset, related to the promotion of mutual aid. The group's name also conveyed the student's understanding that she was not responsible for providing support in the group, rather that her role was to assist the group in developing its own internal support mechanism. The group was planned as a time-limited, 10 week group, with the goal of providing a forum for members to share day-to-day

concerns within a climate of mutual aid. Most group meetings focused on problem solving and peer support around personal and interpersonal issues such as relationship difficulties, family problems, and dilemmas related to coping with disabilities.

It would have been unlikely for a group planned and designed in this fashion to work towards external change goals. Although broader societal issues, such as the oppression experienced by people in the mental health system, were raised in the group, these were discussed at the level of how the individuals who raised them might personally deal with them, rather than as shared issues to be tackled collectively. In effect, such a broadening of focus had been ruled out from the start by the short term nature of the group as well as by its name and stated focus. Members themselves had not expressed interest in an externally directed, activist focus, either when requesting the group or while participating in it.

The Peer Support Group did have some potential to develop into a social action-oriented group. Members occasionally raised and discussed issues of social injustice. One member, for example, talked about being stigmatized because of his psychiatric history. The group began (using Mullender and Ward's three questions) to talk about *What* was the problem—discriminatory attitudes in the mental health system and in society—and even touched on *Why* this problem exists—a medical model that individualizes and pathologizes mental distress. They did not, however, move as a group into owning this analysis as something around which they wanted to take action. They did not work on *How* it might be tackled. Social change interests might have emerged had there been more time for group members to explore their common experiences. This would probably have necessitated moving beyond straight discussion into the use of group work techniques that emphasize the *Why* question and help the group analyze its own response in a way that raises collective consciousness (Mullender and Ward, 1991).

This analysis reveals that the Peer Support Group, although member-directed, did not set externally focused, social goals. It had the defining features of a mutual aid group, with explicit interactional goals, rather than the defining characteristics of a social action group. This example provides useful clarification of the criteria for self-directed group work, as well as reflecting some of the richness of the interactional model. It also demonstrates that mutual aid groups can operate effectively within a context of awareness of social injustice and oppression.

THE COMMUNITY MEETING

This third example, in contrast to the second, is one where social change goals were given such a high profile that, traditionally, the personal and interpersonal content of the group would have gone unnoticed. Yet, they were clearly present and important to the group. The Community Meeting was organized as a weekly forum for service recipients at a homeless day shelter. Its explicit purpose was to increase recipient input into decision making within the host agency. The community meeting format was developed by two agency social workers who believed that the staff should share their decision making power with service recipients. Despite some initial resistance from other staff members (see Cohen, 1994), the group was successful in gaining a power base within the agency. Service recipients welcomed the opportunity to have a voice in agency decision making. The group facilitators helped members to set their own direction and goals. Over time, group members became secure in their ownership of the group and increasingly comfortable with the workers' nondirective, consultative roles. The community meeting achieved one of its original goals during its second year, the creation of two recipient seats on the agency's board of directors. A proposal for recipient inclusion had been soundly defeated prior to the community meeting group's inception. Community meeting members had advocated long and hard for direct representation on the board and had begun attending and participating in open board meetings even prior to the change in policy. Board members' perceptions of recipients improved as a result of increased social contact and they were finally swayed to include recipients on the board, albeit in a limited fashion.

The Community Meeting would appear to meet the criteria of a self-directed group, in terms of following the model's six practice principles and having an external focus rather than one which assessed members' life struggles as requiring therapeutic intervention focused on individual concerns. The group also demonstrated the potential of repeating the *What, Why, and How* steps of the model in further cycles, through naming, analyzing, and taking action on fresh problems when members began to voice broader structural concerns beyond the boundaries of the host agency. The organizational focus for change had been external to group members; the subsequent concerns went wider still, into issues such as the shortage of affordable housing, the stigmatizing and discriminating tendencies of the social service system, and the punitive nature of the city's workfare program. The group began to tackle this latter issue but quickly discovered that the public officials who ad-

ministered the system were immune to their arguments. This led the group to analyze the force of structural barriers erected against them, including the societal labeling of them as the problem, while recognizing that the restructuring of patterns of work and welfare is a global issue requiring large scale changes.

The Community Meeting was undeniably a self-directed group within a social action tradition. Its purpose and goals were externally focused and were set collectively by group members. Any individual gains by group members were serendipitous; they were not the key purpose for which the group was established. Although a strong mutual aid system emerged amongst members, and was encouraged by the workers, this internal support mechanism was secondary to the group's more activist goals. Mutual aid functioned in the service of these goals; in times of frustration and discouragement it was the glue that held the group together. Similarly, the group's attention to its own affective process was critical to the group's survival. For example, when Gabby, one of the group's original members, announced that he would be leaving town, the group initially was devastated. Gabby was a warm and charismatic man who had played a crucial leadership role in the group. Group members, with the support of the facilitators, were able to communicate their feelings of anger and love toward Gabby, openly expressing emotions of pain and abandonment. This uncensored process helped the group to renew their commitment to each other and to their shared goals, allowing them to move forward after Gabby's departure.

Mutual aid and affective expression were not the group's defining features, however. This was a radical, politicized group, characterized by and proud of its collective understanding and activism. It provides an excellent example of the multiple levels on which an effective group operates, with all that this implies for group facilitator awareness and skills.

DISCUSSION

All group members, whatever type of group they join, face personal and interpersonal issues in their lives—heavily labeled and oppressed people perhaps more than most. All groups, even self-directed groups, are bound to face personal and interpersonal issues because they are composed of human beings in struggle, whose pain and anger are brought to the surface in an inescapable way. The choice of collective action as a response to the struggle puts each group member in connection with others who offer shared understanding and mutual support.

A self-directed group does not tip over into being an interactional group just because it deals with interpersonal material or a remedial group because it deals with personal content. These elements, however, may be far more important to the functioning of the group than has generally been recognized in the social action literature. Conversely, there may be interactional groups, like the Peer Support Group described above, which despite a social structural analysis in the mind of the group worker and some preliminary discussion of societal issues in the group, never direct themselves towards external change goals. These groups do not fit the model of self-directed group work (Mullender and Ward, 1991), even where the group members have primary responsibility for the direction of the group.

The fact that we can detect varying degrees of individual, interpersonal, and socially-directed aspects in a range of groups, suggests two things. First, there may be more richness and potential in any one model than may be readily apparent, a possibility which lends itself to fruitful exploration. Secondly, Breton (1995) is correct in her suggestion that an overly-rigid taxonomy of group work models, which does not allow for this co-existence of levels within any one group, may be harmful, and may mean that the worker risks blocking the group from healthy development along a range of different levels.

This does not imply, however, that there are not distinguishable models within group work, nor that these cannot be represented diagrammatically. What it does mean is that rather than the familiar continuum of three mutually exclusive levels of operation: *personal, interpersonal, and social*, we might better reflect the complex world of practice if we think in terms of all groups having individual content, most groups valuing and utilizing mutually supportive interactional content, but only some groups reaching out beyond their own boundaries towards an external social change focus. We might diagram the range of group work models as follows:

Model	Focus of Goals	Content
Remedial	therapeutic	individual
Interactional	mutual aid	individual + interpersonal
Social Goals*	social change	individual + interpersonal + social

*includes self-directed and all other social action groups

In this reformulation, the defining features of the three types of groups are quite clear. Although they do not have mutually exclusive content or concerns, remedial groups seek change *solely* at the individual level while, at the other end of the continuum, social goals groups are the *only* ones to pursue social change goals. Interactional groups occupy the middle ground of the continuum, where they are primarily focused on fostering interpersonal growth and the development of mutual aid systems.

Our analysis has demonstrated that social action groups have far more individual and interactional content than has been suggested in the literature. They can potentially span the entire continuum of levels of operation, from the intensely personal to the outwardly political. The same level of individual need might, in some cases, be met by any of these three types of groups but only the group with social change goals will meet it primarily by helping the person understand the wider structural causes behind the distress. Further work is needed to clarify which forms of personal distress are so internally caused (rather than internally experienced) that it would be irrelevant to respond to them at a combined individual/interactional/social level.

THE ROLE OF THEORY

The above formulation does not address the theoretical underpinnings that lead the group worker to favor one kind of group over another. It is inaccurate to assume that groups of different types are always established to address very different kinds of problems. A recipient of psychiatric services, for example, might just as readily be referred to a psychodynamic psychotherapy group at an outpatient clinic, a self-help group at a drop-in center, or a social action group at a mental health advocacy project. The biggest difference between these groups does not reside in the group members, who may have similar kinds of distress, be at similar points in their psychiatric careers, and be experiencing similar problems in their lives. Rather, the key variable here is the theoretical orientation of the group worker who chooses to facilitate a particular type of group because of a particular belief system regarding the causes of that distress, that psychiatric career, and those problems. The worker's theoretical biases are usually buttressed by the ideology of the particular practice setting.

What can be said about the theories espoused by workers in self-directed and other social action groups that lead them to choose these

models? Crucially, these are theories which deal with issues of oppression and empowerment (see, for example, Freire, 1972). An understanding of these theories reveals why self-directed and other social action groups work on so many levels. Thompson (1992), for example, illustrates how oppression and discrimination always operate simultaneously at personal, cultural, and societal levels. From this theoretical perspective, it follows that a self-directed group would span personal, interpersonal, and social elements of change.

Thompson's model is one of anti-discriminatory practice which rightfully challenges social workers to challenge the social injustices they encounter in themselves and their working environments. We can go further, however. Being empowered implies more than an absence of oppression. Within each area of oppression, there are now strengths-based theories which place the standpoint of the oppressed group at the center—making it the world view, rather than a deviation from a powerful norm. Some examples of such theories are feminism (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver and Surrey, 1991), the African-centered paradigm (Graham, 1999), lesbian theory (Gonda, 1998) and the social model of disability (Oliver, 1993). None of these perspectives is internally uncontested but each turns the world on its head by arguing that the hitherto dominant view does not equate with all available knowledge; rather, that new knowledge needs to be generated from new vantage points by asking new questions of previously silenced people. This is of immediate relevance to group work since it challenges notions of who owns the group's knowledge and understanding, as well as its goals.

The richest literature on *how* oppressed and silenced people can generate their own knowledge is that of participatory action research (PAR). PAR has three key elements which can inform our quest for what is specific to groups with socially directed goals. These three elements are *participation*, *action*, and *education*, in the sense of consciousness raising, which forms an essential bridge between the first two elements. It can take the form of participatory action groups taking on community issues, as has happened, for example, in Colombia (de Roux, 1991), or women's issues in India (Mies, 1991), or Aboriginal Canada (Match International, 1990). To achieve participatory action, group members and facilitators learn together and collectively generate new understanding, working as equals in this process.

PAR has a time-honored history on a global scale that illustrates what achievements are possible when people work together for change. In Western-style group work practice, the setting of social action goals

similarly flows from involving group members as full partners in analyzing and understanding their own problems. Thus, it is not just social change goals which make self-directed and other empowerment groups distinctive, it is the theory and process through which these goals are arrived at. This is always a *participatory* process and an *active* style of group work, based on a social structural analysis. Self-directed group work and PAR owe equal allegiance to Freirian theory. They simply apply it in different settings and often on a different scale, though for overlapping purposes.

CONCLUSION

The quest for democratically rooted understanding and collectively organized change was discernible in both the Poetry Group and the Community Meeting examples discussed above. The Peer Support Group traveled a similar road, and achieved some useful structural insights, but did not go the full journey toward social action based on collectively generated understanding. All three of these groups tell us something more about the external focus that makes self-directed groups distinctive. They also tell us what self-directed groups share with all other groups: the individuality of human experience at times of pain and distress and the resilience of the human spirit in fortifying others to survive that experience. These aspects of externally-oriented groups have not always been fully acknowledged or explored in sufficient depth. Having recognized that they are present in all groups, the challenge will be to appreciate their strength without diverting attention (in analysis or in practice) from broader goals of social change. We hope that our exploration of the group work continuum and the unique characteristics of self-directed groups will lead to further dialogue and practice-based analysis.

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