

MUTUAL AID/ SUPPORT GROUP WORK PROJECT FOR MSW I STUDENTS: AN EXCITING ENDEAVOR

Janice R. Gagerman, Ph.D., California State University, Sacramento

This article discusses a program that MSW II students in a graduate curriculum organized and how they facilitated mutual aid/ support groups for entering MSW I students. It describes the events, processes, what and how each step occurred, and analyzes the reactions and responses from both the student group members and facilitators.

Introduction

A major passion of my 28-year career as a social worker has been organizing and facilitating support, mutual aid, and treatment-oriented groups. Group work represents the essence of social work practice: one must employ the full range of interventions on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels for a successful outcome, both for the social worker and most importantly, for her group members and/or communities. Group work also represents various opportunities to educate, lead, collaborate, help members cope with stressful life events, develop clients' awareness of their interpersonal and internal functioning, change behavior, increase members' social skills, and improve the daily lives of clients, families, agencies, and communities (Toseland & Rivas, 2001). This article will present one of the most exciting group work programs I've ever initiated and became a part of, utilizing every skill, knowledge base, strategy, strength and intensity of my personality, identity, and sense of self as a social worker and professor.

History

Since receiving my MSW in 1975 and Ph.D. in 1991, I have organized and led a multitude of groups for adolescents and adults with a variety of presenting problems: youth with legal constraints and gang affiliated activities; survivors of trauma-related groups including molestation, physical violence, childhood abuse, neglect, incest, and/or domestic

violence; single parenting, married couples, in-patient adolescent and family group therapy, and, of course, support/ mutual aid groups. Each experience had a unique quality, not only because of the particular focus, its members' demographics, its setting, duration, or gender-related themes, but also because of my own life experiences, energy, and career-related opportunities.

I received an appointment at California State University, Sacramento as an Associate Professor of Social Work in 1993. I asked for and have taught our Advanced Group Work Methods Course each semester since then. The three main required texts have included *Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (Yalom, 1995), *An Introduction to Social Group Work Practice* (Toseland & Rivas, 2001), and *Group Work with Populations at Risk* (Greif & Ephross, 1997). I required further readings, mainly from *Social Work with Groups* and the *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*. This literature provided a broad spectrum of various theory bases from which to practice group work and group psychotherapy. Requirements included a midterm, a final paper, and attending a support group during class time from weeks five through fourteen for the last two hours of each three-hour class period. Students' evaluations consistently reported being in a support group as one of the most rewarding experiences. Comments included:

"The class was one of the best I've ever taken. Thank you for the opportunity to be in a group. It really drives the theories home when you see them unfold in group.... This class was great!"

"I have found myself using the theories and philosophies in my own (support) groups... I was nervous about facilitating in front of my colleagues but now I am SO GLAD I did."

"Groups were a great experience."

"I know how to express myself now and am in tune to others' feelings and am interested in others' feelings."



Beginning of Support/ Mutual Aid Groupwork Project for MSW I Students at California State University, Sacramento – Spring, 1999

Towards the end of the Spring 1999 semester, many students reported how valuable being in a mutual aid group (Gitterman & Shulman, 1994) would have been had they had this opportunity during their previous semester as entering MSW I students. This led to brainstorming discussions, arriving at possible strategies for a program which would meet the needs of the next incoming cohort of MSW I students, to provide advanced training in group work for these current students during the Fall 1999 semester of their MSW II year; and receive credit toward their MSW degrees by organizing and leading the groups for the incoming MSW I class.

The excitement was contagious. Eight students requested that I discuss this possibility with the current chair of our Division, Dr. Joseph Anderson. Well known for his expertise and enthusiasm for groupwork, we met to dis-

cuss my proposal.

The Advanced Group Work Training Project

A. Project Purpose

1. To provide further training/ experience in groupwork for current MSW I students who have successfully passed Social Work 225 this last semester, Spring, 1999.
2. To provide support/ mutual aid groups for incoming MSW I students who so choose.
3. To provide EITHER:
 - a. thesis project for the MSW II students, i.e., engaging in some type of research regarding the support groups which they will lead
 - b. three units as elective credit towards their MSW II Fall, 1999 semester

B. Roles/ Responsibilities of Professors

1. Thesis professor of students' choice if MSW II student desires #3a above.
2. Dr. Gagerman
 - a. to assist in overall coordination efforts of MSW II students
 - b. to lead a consultation group every Wednesday from 11:00 a.m. – 1:30 pm. with the MSW II students who are leading the MSW I support groups

C. Qualifications/ Screening Criteria for the MSW II Students:

1. Complete Social Work 225 Spring, 1999, with a grade of "B" or higher.
2. Meet with Dr. Gagerman every Wednesday for consultation during the Fall, 1999 from 11:00 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.
3. Limit to 10 MSW II students.
4. Choose either Social Work 299 elective credit or Social Work 500 thesis credit for project participation.
5. Provide a vita and complete a questionnaire.
6. Needs to be available to lead the MSW I groups on Mondays, Tuesdays, or Wednesdays when the MSW I classes are

normally scheduled. Should be available for evening times also.

7. Needs to consult with MSW II faculty field instructor in field placement regarding flexibility in schedule so s/he can lead the support group on days normally required for MSW II field placement.

D. Activities/Tasks to Complete

1. Janice and Joe will write a one-page proposal and disseminate to the SW 225 Advanced Group Work class.

2. Janice and Joe will develop the questionnaire for the students to complete.

3. Janice will collect the information/ applications from the students by June 30, 1999.

4. If more than ten students apply, devise a rating scale to choose top ten.

5. Send out letter regarding acceptance to project by June 15, 1999.

6. Joe requests SW 500 thesis professors to begin work this summer for interested students.

7. Janice will send out correspondence regarding:

a. time lines for organizing groups

b. arrange action plan for support/ mutual aid groups to begin by mid-semester, Fall 1999

c. collect/ analyze data from support groups at end of project, Fall 1999

8. Janice and Joe maintain on-going contact and collaboration.

9. Consider presenting results and/or activities of groupwork project at Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups or at CSWE.

10. Write a pedagogy grant for continuing this activity (if response is positive) in order to release me from 3 units of time.

11. Check into space and time availability for rooms for MSW I groups during Fall, 1999.

Normally, my energy has been exhausted at the end of every academic year. Grading

final papers, wrapping up committee work, planning for graduation, writing letters of recommendation for students, cleaning out my desk and file cabinets, advising/ mentoring junior faculty on plans for their publications and tenure/ promotion activities for the summer, and being available for extra office hours – all completely fill my life. However, at the end of this particular semester, I had a tremendous burst of excitement instead of the usual exhaustion. During finals week, I mailed a questionnaire to my eight interested students, asking them to return their responses by June 15, 1999. I asked:

1. Why are you interested in participating in this project?

2. What skills/ experience do you bring into this project?

3. What skills/experience would you like to learn from this project?

4. How do you see yourself, once you receive your MSW, using the knowledge and skills from this project?

5. Is there any other information you would like me to know about?

Five students returned the questionnaire, and ultimately four students became involved in the Advanced Groupwork Training Project. Over the summer I called these students to confirm their interest, plan our first meeting a week before the fall semester began, and inform them they would receive credit for this project as an independent study elective course, with my being the professor of record.

It has been my experience that ultimately the positive outcome of a group has always involved putting an extraordinary amount of time, effort, and creativity into the pre-group planning stage. This is the “macro” job of groupwork – organizing. My own intuition has always suggested that 75% of the work towards a successful group occurs during this time: building a strong foundation by attending to the multiple details of 1) advertising the

group, 2) specifying its purpose, 3) identifying recruitment procedures, 4) setting criteria for group composition regarding size, age, gender, race, parenting, and partnering status, 5) time and place, 6) agency representation, and 7) financial issues. Finally, a critical piece which is sometimes overlooked is the chemistry between people working together. I knew from the beginning that my four MSW II students, Adelle, Sheri, Patricia, and Rachel, would develop that chemistry, which would enable both emotional and educational growth from and for each other.

Organizing, Fall 1999

At our first meeting September 1, 1999, the five of us met for four hours, attending to the above items and examining every possible detail. As their consultant, I also attended to their feelings and encouraged their expression. They shared their anxieties, excitement, joy, concerns, fears of failure, and support of each other. I asked them to think about how they were feeling this time last year, i.e., beginning graduate school, which helped them appreciate how their future group members would be feeling and acting. I also reported that no matter how many groups I had organized and facilitated in my career, I too had similar feelings during this time of pre-group planning. I normalized their experiences, which brought laughter and relief for all of us. Finally, I emphasized the importance of the first "attachment experience" the MSW I students would have toward them, and to consider how they would want to begin recruitment for the groups.

The flyer we placed in every MSW I student mailbox addressed all the issues reported above in the pre-group planning stages.

The Division of Social work would like to offer you an opportunity to join a mutual aid/support group during your first semester in the MSW program. A mutual aid/ support group emphasizes emotional

support, develops a sense of community and belonging, and provides a climate that encourages open sharing, common understanding, support and communication among its members.

During their first year of graduate school, many students have reported a need to assist them in their adjustment to the general experiences of returning to school; juggling their various responsibilities with families, work, and school; and general stress reduction. Your mutual aid/ support group will address these needs, and others.

The groups will:

- 1) be voluntary*
- 2) maintain all values and ethics of social work practice, emphasizing confidentiality*
- 3) be organized and led by MSWII students who have taken SW225 – Advanced Groupwork Methods*
- 4) be scheduled on days you are here for class: Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays*
- 5) meet 90 minutes each week for a minimum of 8 weeks*
- 6) number between 5 – 10 students*
- 7) only require your time and commitment each week – no written assignments*
- 8) begin during this semester, Fall 1999*

You will be offered more information and an opportunity to sign up for these groups during September. Watch for details in your mailboxes. Please contact me if you currently have any questions. I look forward to seeing you and your participation in this project.

Dr. Janice R. Gagerman, Professor of Social Work Coordinator of Mutual Aid/ Support Group Project

The MSW II students (hereon referred to as group facilitators) then asked the MSW I professors with whom they had developed previous relationships to present this information and disseminate the above flyer and applications to their new MSW I students in their classes during the 2nd and 3rd week of school. Presentations were made in MSW I Practice, Human Behavior, and Policy classes. Ultimately, we found this to be one of the best recruitment procedures: making face-to-face contact with potential group members and, most importantly, having the encouragement and support of these MSW I professors in their classrooms. The application was kept short and assisted us considerably in formation of the groups.

MSWI Mutual Aid/Support Group Information

As you begin your MSW Program, you have the opportunity to participate in a Mutual Aid/ Support Group for first year MSW students. A Mutual Aid/Support Group emphasizes emotional support, develops a sense of community and belonging, and provided a climate that encourages open sharing, common understanding, support, and communication among its members.

During their first year of graduate school, many students have reported a need to assist them in their adjustment to the general experiences of returning to school; juggling their various responsibilities with families, work, and school; and general stress reduction. Your Mutual Aid/Support Group will address these needs and others.

(Name and other fact sheet information at this point)

Groups will meet once/week for 90 minutes

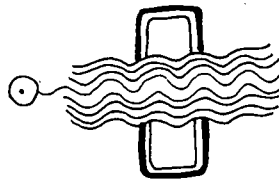
(A grid of 90 minutes periods which we asked the MSWI students to check regarding their availability)

Please return this information form by Tuesday, September 28, 1999 by 7:00 p.m. in the box on the table in the Student Mail Room labeled "Group work Project Applications."

A group facilitator will contact you by Wednesday, October 6, 1999. Groups will begin the week of October 11, 1999 and run for 8 weeks.

If you have any questions, please contact one of the four facilitators:

(In this part of the application, we gave the names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of Adelle, Sheri, Patricia, and Rachel.)



We hope to see you there!

After receiving over 42 applications, we met to divide up the groups, using criteria related to demographics of the students and, most importantly, which times they were available to attend. The facilitators then chose the times that best fit their own schedules and made personal contact with each possible group member. If face-to-face contact was not possible, phone calls were made. Various questions and concerns were addressed during the initial contacts, along with re-stating the eight items from the flyers. If a better

time was more suitable for the group member, the facilitator informed the group member that she would refer him/her and to expect a call from the facilitator of that time period. This process took five weeks and involved significant time and effort on the part of the facilitators in addition to our weekly meetings.

Thus, the pre-group planning stage and organizing the groups had ended. The mezzo work/ group work for the MSW I students was ready to begin. However, we were doing macro, mezzo, and micro work from the start of this process. We were organizing, we were meeting in our planning group weekly, and I was attending to the feelings/ experiences, providing supervision, and attending to the intrapersonal as well as the interpersonal processes going on within and between my four facilitators. I was also meeting with my colleagues and announcing the progress of this project during faculty meetings.

The Mutual Aid/ Support Groups for MSW I Students

Twenty-nine MSW I students committed to attend five different groups (Patricia facilitated two groups). Ultimately, twenty-three students attended beginning week 7 of the semester, October 12, 1999. Demographic data included twenty-one females and two males. Thirteen students identified themselves as students of color. Adelle's group of eight members, Sheri's group of two members, and one of Patricia's groups were all female. Before the first meeting, my own notes referred to twelve major categories which I reminded each group worker to attend to, consider, and/or watch for. Some would be more important for the beginning stages of the group, others for the middle and closure stages.

1. Introductions and check-ins
2. Reiterating purpose and organizational items

3. Gate keeping responsibilities (time, room arrangement, attendance, confidentiality)

4. Self-disclosure

5. Consideration for referrals to University Counseling Center if any personal issues of the group members require more in-depth individual attention by the Counseling Staff

6. Stage of development – attachment/ engagement with each other – and with you

7. Content

8. Affect

9. Behavior

10. Closure

11. Your own experience

12. Your recommendation/ considerations for next group session

Each facilitator chose an opening exercise for their first group session which facilitated interaction, allowing members to get to know each other and begin to find their commonalities. While re-reading the final papers of the facilitators, and my own case notes of each weekly consultation/ supervision meeting, I found myself smiling and just shaking my head at how each group, each facilitator's experience, and each weekly meeting exemplified mutual aid, support, and group work process. Curative factors (Yalom, 1995) were identified each week: universality, catharsis, instillation of hope, imparting information, existential factors, cohesion, and interpersonal learning during here-and-now experiences.

Higher levels of self-disclosure towards the middle and end stages occurred in four out of the five groups. Sheri initially expected five members to attend; however by the first meeting, only two group members showed up. She wrote,

"I was really disappointed that only two people showed up. One of my guys dropped and I was concerned about the one guy left in my group...I don't know what happened to the others... The group went very well. We

did the sentence completion exercise. All were enthusiastic, honest, open, and shared easily. Universality emerged with each of us moving to Sacramento for school...I found myself very comfortable facilitating...I was affirmed at the end when the members said they were glad the group stayed small."

Sheri had only these two group members the entire eight weeks, while the other four groups had eight, four, five, and four members. I make this point because in the final evaluation, the students who participated did report having a positive experience. Patricia reported that one of her groups was not successful: lasting cohesion was never established and she could not determine what, if any, curative factors were at work within this disjointed group. She believed that lack of consistent attendance, subgrouping, maladaptive early self-disclosure, and character logical "splitting" by one member interfered with providing a positive experience for this group.

Middle Stage Topics/ Issues

While most group texts report that themes of power, autonomy, differentiation, and conflict are expected during middle stage processes (Anderson, 1997; Toseland & Rivas, 2001; Yalom, 1995), Schiller (1997) discusses the relational model of women's groups. Middle stages involve "establishing a relational base; mutuality and interpersonal empathy; and challenge and change." Adelle's women's group and one of Patricia's women's groups reported this experience. Adelle wrote that for her group, "there were no obvious group conflicts or friction... (but rather)...high levels of self-disclosure, emotional expression, and cohesion."

After initial stage trust building, members' middle stage themes included:

1. conflicts in intimate relationships
2. divorce
3. significant loss/ deaths of loved ones
4. alcoholism/ substance abuse in fami-

lies of origin

5. pressures of school (amount of work, performance, expectations, papers)
6. field internships
7. content of social work classes provoking members' own personal experiences
8. life adjustments/ transitions
9. attachment issues
10. parenting stressors
11. pressures on maintaining current relationships
12. members' mental and physical health
13. juggling/ balancing all responsibilities
14. employment outside field internships
15. financial difficulties

Affective themes included:

1. tears
2. laughter
3. anger
4. anxiety
5. fears of failure
6. rejection
7. sadness
8. loneliness/isolation
9. excitement
10. overwhelmed
11. fear of failure about school
12. appreciation for each other

Closure, Evaluation and Results

At the final session of the eight-week groups, members addressed closure issues and were asked to complete a questionnaire. Shared feelings among group members and the facilitators were: 1) disappointment and sadness that group was ending, 2) enjoyment of the time together, 3) very meaningful, 4) family dynamics with holidays approaching, and 5) surviving the first semester of MSW school. Patricia's group decided to continue meeting the next semester with inclusion of one of Sheri's members. This speaks to the power of the mutual aid/support group process, along with Patricia's willingness to put

the time into this group, considering that her last semester of school is usually quite intense with thesis completion. Thus, this mutual aid group met for their entire MSW I year.

The questionnaire was designed to provide us with information regarding this new project. For purposes of this article, I have shortened the three-page questionnaire responses. N = 18 responses (five students did not participate).

MSW I Support / Mutual Aid Support Group Evaluation

(The first five questions used a likert scale from numbers 1 – 5, with 5 being “a lot.”)

How helpful was the group in:

1. Reducing stress:
Mean = 4.24
2. Feeling connected with others:
Mean = 4.82
3. Allowing you to share experiences:
Mean = 4.83
4. Allowing you to share feelings:
Mean = 4.83
5. Your academic achievement:
Mean = 3.88

(The following two questions were asked for descriptive responses. There were eighteen responses to question # 6 and twenty-one responses to question # 7. I chose only ten responses from each question for purposes of brevity.)

6. Would you recommend this other MSW I students? Why or why not:

“Yes. This group was a great outlet and source of support emotionally and academically.”

“Yes! The group was very helpful for me in reducing stress and showing me that I am

not alone in the struggles I am going through – not only in school, but with relationships and life in general.”

“Yes I would! The time the group allows you to process issues helps. You walk away released of stress and able to continue your journey.”

“Definitely yes! It was a great way to work out personal problems and feelings and also to grow. I learned a lot about myself as well as group dynamics. It’s a definite plus in experience for social work.

“Yes. Starting graduate school is a huge life change and anytime you experience change it is helpful to have others who share their experiences with students.”

“Yes, it helps to define who you are, where you are going, and support for the stresses that accompany the first year.”

“Yes...It’s a validation of the overwhelming feelings of being in this program. Great source of support!”

“Yes, because many new students feel isolated and think they are the only person having difficulty with the program.”

“I found this group wonderful - a must for all social work students.”

“Definitely – to be connected to a small group who is going through the same experience was very comforting. We could share our victories and worries.”

7. Do you have any comments regarding a) leadership, b) the group in general, etc.?

“The leader did a good job. She is very proficient at group leadership skills. I hate to see it (the group) end.”

"I thought (name of facilitator) did a great job as the group leader – she is caring and respectful, yet she challenged us in our thinking and encouraged us to explore our feelings. She seemed to care about each of us and she seemed genuinely interested in us and our lives."

"Our group was awesome! I felt safe and part of a unit. The leadership was great – it provided a safe, trustful atmosphere. Thank you."

"I felt our facilitator was very knowledgeable and skillful. Just watching her taught me a lot. Also being able to see how dynamics of the group work (who becomes outspoken, who listens, who leads) was interesting and insightful."

"The leader was wonderful in facilitating the group and was unafraid to explore issues and admit when she goofed on a question."

"One member dominated (a bit too much), sometimes this was okay, but sometimes I was not able (no time) to say what I would like to say re: me."

"(name of facilitator) was a wonderful leader. She kept the group focused."

"Can't say enough about the experience – thanks!"

"It would have been better if more people had attended each session."

"I'd recommend this program to not only MSW students – but to others as well."

The five of us met to review and collate the data. While the facilitators internally "knew" the groups went well, their responses to the data were ecstatic; they felt tremen-

dous, accomplished, gratified, and relieved. Comments from their final papers (a requirement for their receiving elective course credit) and implications of the findings included:

1. Groups were very meaningful for us
2. A bond, support, safety, and professional skills were largely built within the supervision group
3. All were sad supervision was ending
4. All shared respect for one another as social workers and as people
5. Sad this was ending, but also thankful for the time to put toward thesis, job hunting
6. Appreciated personal feedback and support, especially based on my disappointing experience with my group
7. This project was educational and emotionally rewarding.
8. I learned a lot about group planning and formation
9. It was great to be able to consult about the group every week to report questions and get feedback about the process from the other facilitators and Dr. Gagerman.
10. I observed firsthand how groups are dynamic entities and that a variety of intervening factors can influence whether or not a group develops cohesion, facilitates growth and offers support to its members.
11. I learned the importance of working the transference and seizing the "here and now" opportunities. The members reported back to the group how these interactions helped them understand more about themselves and each other.
12. Model for social work collaboration and collegiality.
13. Learning from each other was invaluable.

**Presentation to Faculty: Spring 2000,
and Recommendations for Future of
Project**

Adelle, Sheri, Patricia, and Rachel pre-

sented the Mutual Aid/ Support Group Project to the faculty of our Division of Social Work. They discussed and provided eight pages of all forms, handouts, organizational work, stages of group processes, demographics of students, group selection, curative factors, what each learned from the process, the questionnaire, data analysis, and implications of findings. Each provided her own personal experiences/ meaning and role of supervision. Recommendations followed.

1. Make it a permanent structure of the program, including 299 elective credit
2. MSW II students can be leaders of group
3. Peer-led groups with this model
4. Faculty support is NECESSARY from the very beginning
5. Have more access and time to present project to MSW I incoming students/classes
6. The Division of Social Work needs to sanction time off from field work for the MSW II students to organize the project and facilitate the groups (currently, the MSW II students are in field placements Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays – the days the MSW I students are in classes when their MSW I student groups meet)
7. Keep it as a non-academic experience for the MSW I students
8. Start groups earlier in the semester
9. Mutual aid/ support groups are needed for both semesters of MSW I year
10. Should have collected data from students who were not in groups

Continuation of Project from Spring 2000 Through Fall 2000

The faculty agreed the project was a success and many reported that it exceeded expectations; they did not realize how much work was involved and, frankly, were not aware of the significance of the groups for their students until seeing the results of the collected data. I took my team out to lunch

and we celebrated a shared accomplishment. The glow and smiles on their faces, the laughter, along with recognition of their own creation of their mutual aid/ support group was inspirational for all of us. Even now as I reflect on that moment, I become teary eyed. This experience once again validates the importance of social work with groups that has become integrated in my lifelong professional work.

Following the recommendations and encouragement of our Division, I continued this project for another year. Changes made included:

1. Eight MSW II students (group facilitators) participating, and meeting twice on campus during the summer 2000.
2. Having these eight students meet with the incoming MSW I students during their required small group MSW I orientation sessions in August to present the project.
3. Having these eight students present the project a second time at the our Division's Annual Full MSW I Orientation/Welcome evening the Wednesday before classes began.
4. Having these eight students present the project in the MSW I HBSE, Practice, and Policy classes for a third time. By this time, the MSW I students had been informed three times instead of once as had previously been done.

Other than this, we followed the same procedures and received very similar findings as the first time: the qualitative and qualitative responses were nearly identical. The second set of data had an N=24 with slightly higher mean scores, along with adding a BSW group.

However, it is important to note the main difference which was the demographic characteristics of the facilitators and the group members leading five MSW I groups and one BSW group:

1. Eight MSW II facilitators led six groups (one was co-led)
2. One MSW II facilitator led a BSW group
3. Thirty-one MSW I students attended the six groups
4. Four BSW members attended their one group
5. Twenty-eight MSW I students were women; three MSW I students were men
6. Three BSW women and one BSW man attended their group
7. Thirteen MSW I group members identified themselves as "students of color"
8. Nineteen MSW I group members identified themselves as "anglo students"
9. One BSW members identified herself as a "student of color"
10. Three BSW members identified themselves as "anglo students"
11. Six MSW II facilitators identified themselves as "students of color"
12. Two MSW II facilitators identified themselves as "anglo students"
13. One MSW II facilitator was open regarding her lesbian sexuality
14. The groups began earlier and met for eleven weeks instead of eight weeks

What is significant is the multicultural/diversity aspect with this second series of groups. Hispanic, Hmong, African American, and Asian facilitators and group members were represented. For example, one group was co-led by an African-American woman and a Hmong male. The group members identified themselves as one Puerto Rican, one Black, and two Anglo – all women members, two of whom were parents. Another group was led by an Hispanic male with five women and two men, identifying themselves as one Chinese, one Chinese-American, one Hispanic, and four Anglo. A third group was led by an Anglo female and had five women members identifying themselves as one African, one

African-American, one Hispanic, and two Anglo. A fourth group was led by a facilitator identifying her sexuality as lesbian, with six group members female: two Hispanic and four Anglo.

Being in small groups for eleven weeks, self-disclosing personal issues, sharing affective states, coming to each other's support and aid during times of stress and hardship became key components in learning about each other's cultural experiences, along with a shared history of discrimination/marginalization. Empathy became a noteworthy feature for these groups, a quality that was somewhat different, but not any less, from that of the first series of groups.

Leadership/Supervision/Consultation for Both Years of the Project

It is critical to examine the role that supervision and consultation played in the project. In each of the student's papers, along with my own notes, comments were noted that lend themselves to the importance of leadership, especially when one begins a new program. How the leader uses and/or abuses her power, i.e., title, status, connection to resources, etc., can mean the difference between success and failure – whether it be in a neighborhood, a religious setting, a political organization, a huge bureaucracy, an agency, a new program, a long-standing existing program, or in a small group.

The supervisory relationship includes taking time to know your staff, offering clear instructions, providing a collaborative spirit, fostering a climate of collegial problem solving, discussing specific feedback, making suggestions, and arriving at mutual expectations (Brody, 2000). Consultation can be a component of supervision, yet implies equality in roles, and is more often than not freely sought (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998).

Thoughtful supervision and consultation on my part both required an added dimension to the success of this project. Foremost

in my mind was to allow the students their experiences. I reported numerous times that this was their project, their work, their groups, their learning – and for them to internalize that it was their hard work that led to the positive outcomes. It was their ideas on how to proceed, their organizing, their presentations to the MSW I classes, and their excitement, initiative and energy which would be most influential with their colleagues – not mine. I made sure they knew that they owned/designed the project, not me. During the pre-group and planning stages, I concentrated on remaining “backstage,” yet I was very clear in my role: to lead them in their creativity and to use my connection to resources, my experience, and my knowledge in whatever was necessary to complete their work.

Once the groups began, my clinical supervisory role added to the above-mentioned activities on which I concentrated. In our weekly two to three hour meetings, we addressed a multitude of issues:

1. Co-leadership
2. Facilitators’ anxiety
3. Transference
4. Counter-transference
5. Parallel processes
6. Role conflicts (both facilitators and members were MSW students)
7. Working alliances
8. Gatekeeping issues (attendance, time)
9. Facilitators’ styles of leadership
10. Their own reactions to my feedback/colleagues’ feedback
11. Subgroup among group members
12. Group conflict
13. Relational/intersubjective interactions
14. Cohesion in groups

The facilitators’ comments in their final papers (from the second year of the project) reflect many of these items:

“First of all I learned how difficult groups

could actually turn out from Lynette’s and Serge’s experience. From Cathryn’s group, I learned what it felt like to have a monopolizer in the group. From Alberto and Fong I got a picture of what co-facilitating would look like.”

“Supervision was important to me. I learned about silence in the group, and how to give members their full time in the group... I learned how to use here-and-now techniques and what intersubjectivity was all about. Consultation was very important to me because I was validated as a facilitator and was positively reinforced when I had done a good job. I also learned when I made mistakes, but was never attacked for my mistakes that were made. I was always encouraged and assured that I was doing a good job. I left consultation feeling as though I could be effective in my next group session.”

“The consultation was helpful to normalize some of the thoughts and feelings I experienced during the group process. Additionally, situations came up in my group that we just discussed in consultation, so I felt more comfortable and confident handling the situation. Additionally, consultation served as a support group and an opportunity to learn a little more about fellow MSW II peers.”

“Consultation was a time I looked forward to each week. I learned so much from my classmates and their experiences. Dr. Gagerman modeled how to run a support group by how she facilitated consultation. Not only did this help me with my own group, it also made me feel closer to my classmates... much of my learning came from feedback from my classmates and Dr. Gagerman. It was helpful to hear my classmates’ point of view about dilemmas I was having.”

Conclusion

After this second group of students reported their findings and made their final presentation regarding the Mutual Aid/ Support Groupwork Project at a faculty meeting, they reported a shared vibrancy, an excitement, and a sincere, warm-hearted caring for each other. The results were nearly identical to the first set of data except for the number of groups and students participating. Exhaustion was also prevalent, most definitely on my part. I offered my time without pay nor was I given release time for both years, but I was given less committee work for my efforts.

What is clear to me is the power of the group process – the mutual aid, the support, and the overwhelming positive experience each participant had: the facilitators, the group members, and I. All methodologies of group process occurred throughout the project: macro, mezzo, and micro interventions. In addition, my MSW II students realized that our weekly supervision/consultation meetings were a formation of their own mutual aid/support group – and the education and modeling that occurred for each of them regarding group dynamics were outstanding opportunities to experience and learn from each other.



Implications for Social Work Education

What is considerably important for social work education is that many of our own students come into our programs with very similar issues presenting problems for which our students see clients in their field agencies. We cannot ignore this significant matter, both as educators and as social workers. Finally, in a recent issue of *Social Work With Groups* (2003), Kurland and Malekoff's lead editorial expresses their concern regarding a lon-

gitudinal study examining publication rates of doctoral-conferring schools of social work, which did NOT include the *Social Work with Groups (SWWG)* journal nor the *Journal of Community Practice (JCCP)*. After inquiring as to why this was so, the response from the *Journal of Social Work Education* editors reported that the articles in *SWWG* and *JCCP* did "not meet the sampling criteria which require inclusion in the *Social Science Citation Index (SSCI)*." Kurland and Malekoff seriously question how "two major methods of social work practice are hugely underrepresented" and ask "...are articles written about group work and community practice not considered valuable? It is not surprising then, that schools of social work are having difficulty finding and keeping full-time faculty who are able to teach practice methods courses," and are often disadvantaged by the promotion and tenure process (p. 2). They essentially surmise that research methodology is thus being elevated: "to a position that overrides and negates the importance of practice in social work education and of practice expertise among social work faculty... [all too often]... it is contributing, we fear, to an ever-widening gap between practice and research and between social work practitioners and social work teachers. We find such an attitude and the kind of research that it spawns to be unacceptable" (p. 2).

A major concern for me also is the decline and lack of trained group workers in our profession. Thus, this project is an example of how I was able to integrate my two passions of education and social work with groups, and provide an example of the power of mutual aid and support for our students and, ultimately, for all their future clients. Finally, I am grateful for a social work publication such as *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* that supports exactly what Kurland and Malekoff state: narrative accounts of professional helpers who provide a

“fresh perspective about the practice of change.” This article has related a process of helping others - described events, conflicts, results, and complications - and allowed this group worker to provide a perspective which was most meaningful for my students and me.

References

- Anderson, J. (1997). *Social Work with Groups: A Process Model*. New York: Longman.
- Bernard, J., & Goodyear, R. (1998). *Fundamentals of Clinical Supervision*. 2nd Edition. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Brody, R. (2000). *Effectively Managing Human Service Organization*. 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Gitterman A., & Shulman, L., eds. (1994). *Mutual Aid Groups, Vulnerable Populations, and the Life Cycle*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Greif, G., & Ephross, H. (1997) *Group Work with Populations at Risk*. Oxford University Press.
- Kurland, R., & Malekoff, A. (2003) “From the Editors.” *Social Work with Groups*. Vol. 25 (4) p2.
- Schiller, L. (1997) “Rethinking Stages of Development in Women’s Groups.” *Social Work with Groups*. Vol. 20(3) pp 3-19.
- Toseland, R., & Rivas, R. (2001) *An Introduction to Group Work Practice*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Yalom, I. (1995) *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*. 4th Edition. New York: Basic Books.

Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.