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THE DEFINITION OF SOCIAL GROUP WORK: A COMMENT

by
M. BOPAPE

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THE DEFINITION OF SOCIAL GROUP WORK: A COMMENT

- by Moses Bopape

The definition of social group work, as a primary method of social work, is encompassed by the definition of social work which consists of five components, gathered together in a "constellation". The content and configuration of this constellation, H.M. Bartlett tells us, distinguishes social work practice from the practice of other professions, which however can and do include some of the same components. The five components referred to here are: value, purpose, sanction, knowledge and method.¹⁾ Thus, basically, social work practice can be seen as the action of the practitioner, directed toward some purpose, sanctioned by some auspice, carried on under the conscious guidance of knowledge and values, and patterned to some extent by method and technique. Social group work aims at serving individuals within and through small face-to-face groups in order to enhance the individual member's social functioning. Another aim of social group work practice was directed toward the development of the group as a cohesive and contributing social unit. The social group worker is, therefore, committed to two tasks, namely, formulation of goals for each individual, and the focussing on movement of the group toward a higher level of development. This latter effort was regarded as a particular domain of the social group worker, for it is in the promotion of group life that he is uniquely skilled. According to Wilson and Ryland, his distinct role was in encouraging the development of mature groups capable of constructive participation and meaningful action toward desirable social goals.²⁾

This point of view is conveyed in the definition of social group work, formulated in 1947 by the American Association of Group Workers, which reads in part: "... the group worker aims ... to promote those relationships with other groups and the wider community which contribute to responsible citizenship, mutual understanding between cultural, religious, economic or social groupings in the community and the participation of groups in the improvement of our society toward democratic goals."³⁾

In 1948, H.B. Trecker, defined the function of the social group worker as follows: "motivation of the individual toward improvement of society", "opportunity to participate as a responsible citizen". He also refers to the desirability of "constantly improving" the society.⁴⁾ From this statement we infer that social group work is primarily aiming at serving the broad requirements of a democratic society to citizen participation in the attempts of a nation at enhancing its living conditions.

The same contention was reiterated some time later in 1957 when social group work was defined as "... a process based upon a belief in the ability of the individual and the group to take responsible action towards achievement of a democratic society."⁵⁾

This concept is generally stressed in the current social group work literature. Grace Coyle maintained that group goals were the essential element in social group work when she declared, "... it is essential that leaders in constant contact with groups of mature people should recognize their opportunity for the promotion of interests in current economic issues... This means a constant alertness to the problems they are confronting, the stimulus to interest, and the provision of resources for intelligent action... The social group worker has a responsibility to stimulate community participation as his groups can be interested in local and national issues."⁶⁾

It is of considerable interest to note that although many social group workers would cite Gertrude Wilson as responsible for defining the function of social group work as solely the adjustment of individuals, in the explanation which accompanied the questionnaire distributed by the NASW Group Work Section to highlight the difference between social group work and work-with-groups Gertrude Wilson said: "For purposes of this questionnaire Social Group Work is defined as a service to groups where the primary purpose is to help members improve their social adjustment and the secondary purpose is to help the group (whatever its structure) to achieve objectives approved by society". She also stated: "It is important to point out that the determination as to whether one is practicing social group work is made on the basis of the structure".

The gist and importance of this statement lies in the fact that the purpose of achieving objectives approved by society is part of social group work. The nature of the group, be it psyche or social, is not the determinant of whether or not social group work is practiced. The value orientation of social work and the overall philosophy of the profession are guidelines for deciding what is socially approved.

In 1959, the Younghusband Report defined social group work in the following terms: "Group work as a form of social work is directed towards giving people a constructive membership in a group, so that they may develop further as individuals and the better able to contribute to the life of the community."⁷

Upon this brief statement of the aims and objects of social group work, the Younghusband Report brings together a number of important points in a concise form. These are:

1. Social group work involves working with people in a group to enable them to function more effectively in society.
2. That the worker using this form of social work must be trained in group work skills and must make conscious use of these skills and group relationships.
3. It is implicit in the report that social group work is a method of social work in its own right. If it is a method, then the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for its practice can be formalised and taught to students.

In 1963 Gisela Konopka expressed a similar philosophy in Social Group Work, a Helping Process.⁸ She comments, "Social group work is a method of social work which helps individuals to enhance their social functioning through purposeful group experience and to cope more effectively with their personal, group and community problems". This definition parallels closely the one given by Helen Harris Perlman when she describes social casework, the oldest method of social work. The first part of this definition places social group work within the context of social work as one of the methods through which this profession renders its service. Social group work as a method of social work is only a recent concept. Originally it was conceived of as a movement, a way of democratic action, and a part of several fields of social services. Foremost among these were informal education, youth services, recreation, camping, the labour movement, settlement houses and community centres.

The social group work method originated from social settlement, in recreation, and in secular and religious education. As it emerged it absorbed

knowledge from the social and psychological sciences. Because social group work was concerned with the facilitating of citizen participation in decision-making it found a compatible framework in social work. Present day social group work theory and practice strongly reflect these multifarious influences. Throughout its development, one concept has remained unaltered in the growing and changing body of theory, that is the commitment of social action in working toward socially desirable goals. Until recently no definition of social group work was complete unless some statement of this aim was included.

Social Group Work is Inclusive of Social Action

Social action is the concept commonly applied to that aspect of organized social welfare activity directed toward shaping, modifying, or maintaining the social institutions and policies that collectively constitute the social environment.⁹ This aspect of welfare activity was always regarded as inherent in social group work practice for many reasons. Most important were (1) the values underlying service to others which regarded service and social betterment as interdependent, (2) the belief in democracy which rested upon respect for the individual as a participating member of society, and (3) the premise that there is a concomitant relationship between positive health supports in the environment and the positive health of the individual.

The preceding discussion suggests that the goals in social group work practice are threefold in nature: (1) enhancement of the individual's social function through group experience, (2) development of mature functioning groups, and (3) participation of such groups in actions directed toward social betterment. Social group work must relate to all three dimensions of the human life experience for they constantly interact and are by their very nature inseparable. A change in any one affects the others, as well as the totality. A healthy individual does not exist in a social vacuum. He must in relationship with others strive to create and maintain a healthy environment. Thus an opportunity for experiences in social action on the part of the group becomes a mandatory goal, for within it, social group work practice denies the meaning of social experience in a democratic society. The social group worker who ignores the interdependence of the individual, the group, and the environment in which it functions fragmentizes his effort. His diagnosis will be piecemeal, his planning isolated, and his outcomes unpredictable. Social group work must be directed towards effecting change which encompasses more than individual functioning if its results are to have any lasting value. Individual growth must be fostered in a healthy developing group motivated toward responsible social participation.

In citing history the writer does not intend to turn back the clock. One cannot maintain that because social group work was thus-and-so, it must remain so for evermore. History should never be an argument against change. However, to endorse change for its own sake or to equate it with progress is equally unjustifiable. Most professions legitimately refine their practice with time, experience, and the acquisition of new knowledge. This process involves discarding old methods in the light of new discoveries. In the opinion of the writer many of the changes which are occurring in social group work are not of this sort. Social group workers have not moved to find better ways for achieving their ends. On the contrary, they are abandoning their social goals and making a fetish of method. Social group work is no longer regarded by many as a field, nor in some quarters as a process. It is now defined solely as a method. As such it is a means.

While a means can be designed to fulfil certain objectives, it has no purpose inherent in it. This approach to practice is logical if we perceive social work as a set of techniques and the worker as a technician, but by so doing social workers will lose professional identity. A profession must render a service directed towards a well defined and acknowledged goal. 10)

The present trends in social group work represent change, but not progress. To substantiate this standpoint let us examine briefly some of the current trends of change.

Recently the Group Work Section Practice Committee of the NASW issued a statement which postulates a frame of reference for social group work practice. The document delineates a "range of purposes of the groups in social group work". Examination of the manner in which these purposes are spelled out shows that they are detailed not in terms of goals but in relation to methodology. Thus the reader concludes that the social group worker's purpose in helping members to "learn to participate actively in group life" is so that he may "learn to lead and to follow, to delegate, to assume responsibility", etc. But to what end? Apparently the group worker focusses exclusively on "how" group members function with no regard for the "why" beyond individual needs. And so means become ends. The fact that a group meets under the auspices or sanction of an agency which has a formulated policy and philosophy and articulated purposes seems therein unrelated to the social group worker's *raison d'être*, despite his having been employed by the agency. What is social group work practice by this definition? The obvious deduction is that, social group work practice, in its sum total, is a method. Practice has been confused and confounded with method.

The Role of the Worker

Another marked trend today is the emphasis placed upon the worker as the central person in the group. For example, M. Murphy says that the social group work process means that the group process is consciously influenced by the social group worker with specific aims in mind. 11) This makes the group a worker-centred operation rather than a member-centred group. What the social group worker does is termed an intervention and his approach is called a "strategy of intervention" based upon his diagnosis and treatment plan. Such thinking is in contrast to the concept of a social group worker's role in which the focus is upon helping the group move toward goal formation, self-determination and eventual group autonomy. The social group worker utilizes the following for helping individuals and groups:

1. Relationship factors
 - (a) Creative Response
 - (b) Empathetic Response
 - (c) Accepting, enabling
 - (d) Supporting, limiting
 - (e) Guiding, alleviating
 - (f) Interpreting
 - (g) Transference
 - (h) Interviewing
 - (i) Agency
 - (j) Knowledge
2. Social Processes
3. Programme Activities

4. Social Structures

5. Environmental Manipulation

6. Group Culture

This interventionist approach tends to violate the integrity of the group and its members. The worker becomes the sole arbiter of what shall happen, why it happens, and how. In other words it amounts to the fact that the operating of the group work process is the entire role and skills of the social group worker. The social group worker engages in a constant diagnostic process, prescribes, and intervenes to his predetermined ends. The group and the group member then are influenced accordingly and may be rendered important by a strong central figure, the social group worker. There is a super-imposing quality to this formulation which is somewhat akin to unilateral manipulation. The whole approach is contrary to the principle of democracy which has been a character of all the past definitions of social group work.

Past literature on social group work used to speak of "enabling", a concept in which group members are viewed as the actionists and the group as a functioning unit capable of movement and growth. The writer holds no brief for the term itself. At times its use was vague and weak, but the underlying principle was sound. It implied that group action was the province of the group members as individuals with a potential for self direction. In abandoning this principle Sirls and others suggest the notion that it is the worker who effects change; he is referred to as "the change agent". 12)

Lippett in his early writings in group dynamics used the term (the change agent) legitimately. It has since taken on a controlling and worker centred meaning as it is being applied in social work literature. In this modification of approach, at least the theorising about it, the group process is no longer at the centre of the social group work process. There is more than semantic confusion in asserting that member behaviour is influenced by group process while advocating that the worker's role is to direct the process toward his goals. In the latter instance the group process is no longer determined by the group members. One should be more accurate in stating such a formulation if he were to say that the worker takes over control of the group process and uses it as a tool to accomplish his ends. This observation of practice seems to be substantiated in the current NASW Group Work Practice Committee statement which gives cursory acknowledgement to democratic action in its value statement but neglects to use this concept as a frame of reference in the actual description of practice. Note the wording of the Practice Statement: "To help group members learn to participate actively in group life as experience in developing a sense of responsibility for active citizenship, and for improving the nature of participation in social action ...". The intent of the statement is elusive, while placing focus on training and experience that will lead to action, it avoids espousing social action as an inherent goal in social group work practice. Thus we see a point of view in which the group is reduced to a mechanism employed by the worker. The group itself becomes insignificant with no purpose beyond enhancement of the individual member.

The above observations should not lead to the faulty conclusion that a group process cannot be democratic if a social group worker intervenes. Intervention in its purest sense merely describes the worker's action. The social group worker may and should intervene for the purpose of effecting a more democratic process on the part of the group. We should be concerned

with the fact that the social group worker participates in the group process; this is the core of social group work practice. We should be concerned, however, that his actions be guided by clearly defined goals for helping the group to function more effectively. We should be concerned also that he functions primarily within the group process and not generally by influencing it from outside of the group. This is not an either/or, since there are times when one strategy is preferable to another and is determined by the recognition and acknowledgement of the differential use of principles and methods in assisting the group and its individual members toward a better adjustment. When a worker moves in to direct and control the group, however, as an invariant aspect of method he becomes suspect, because such intervention cannot be supported by the democratic ideal. This ideal rests on acceptance of the concept that social maturity in society call for responsible self-directing individuals and groups.

Consequences of a Narrow Conceptualization

In the foregoing paragraphs an attempt has been made to elaborate upon the change of focus in social group work from concern with the individual, the group, and the social milieu to a single emphasis upon individual social functioning. This change to a single focus has had ramifications not only in the nature of practice but also in its impact upon the settings where practice traditionally was carried out. For instance, in America, the name Group Services Agencies has been adopted to replace Social Group Work Agency. The former is seen as encompassing a wide variety of agencies giving service to groups. Further outcome of this is the much pronounced dichotomy between social group work and work with groups. By implication, all group serving agencies work with groups, but considerably fewer practice social group work.

Most agencies that practice social group work refrain from incorporating their practice with work with groups, and the result thereof is confusion, for the aim of social group work is not only to enhance individual functioning. In this regard Clara Kaiser notes, "a distinction is now being drawn between 'work-with-groups' and engaging in the process of social group work. This distinction seems to me to be sound provided that it is based on methodology of the worker and not on the characteristics of the group."¹³ Nowhere in the social work literature is it stated that social group workers do not work with groups in practice. Helen Northern has explicitly stated the "Interrelated Function of the Social Group Work"¹⁴ includes working with councils, committees, and other similar groups. Again, we must be careful not to confuse a definition of method with a definition of practice, nor to characterize practice by one method utilized within it.

One consequence of the current contention as expressed in the Frame of Reference Statement is that social workers have all but renounced social action as part of social group work practice and theory. However, social work as a whole has not abandoned social betterment as a goal, although the Working Definition of Social Work Practice does not state it explicitly as a goal.¹⁵ The profession recognizes that any effort dedicated to improvement of the human condition within a christian or democratic society cannot ignore the necessity to involve people in constructive action. It must, however, be understood that social action is not the exclusive prerogative of social group work nor is it realistically a social work monopoly. But it would appear that by virtue of its inherent nature, social group work provides a direct and effective channel for stimulating such action. A relinquish of

this opportunity as part of social group work would impoverish, weaken and diminish the total social work effort.

The over-all results of the current trends in social group work have been deleterious. The social group worker's goal in working with the group toward responsible self-direction and social participation has somehow been placed in direct opposition to goals for the enhancement of individual functioning. Emphasis on the latter, gradually has become increasingly individual problem focused. Much of what is now described as social group work practice is treatment or therapeutically based. The value of employing the social group work method as a treatment approach cannot be denied nor can the restoration of adequate individual functioning be excluded from an enunciation of social group work practice. However, treatment goals must be seen in perspective, for they are but one segment in the total range of social group work practice purposes.

Restoration of individual social functioning is social in nature. The responsible participation of the individual in the improvement of his treatment environment is an appropriate goal in social group work practice. For example, Erving Goffman says, "First, total institutions disrupt or defile precisely those actions that in civil society have the role of attesting to the actor and those in his presence that he is a person with 'adult' self determination, autonomy, and freedom of action. A failure to retain this kind of adult executive competency, or at least the symbols of it, can produce in the inmate the terror of feeling radically demoted in the age-grading systems."¹⁶

So the question of treatment task fulfilment, and social action is not an either/or, nor are these functions mutually exclusive. These ends are inseparable in practice, and what one does in treatment groups is not therefore at variance with what one does in developmental groups as a social group worker.

A basic aim of social group work practice should be the provision of services which promote individual and group development and work to prevent breakdown. Formulations limited to treatment goals therefore are unsuited to the agencies whose purpose are educational, developmental, and community service centered. Without a broader framework, social group work practice is in danger of becoming an effort devoted solely to helping sick people adapt to a sick society - a limited and uninspired goal!

In the light of the foregoing comments it has become abundantly clear that the objects of social group work are too complex to be reducible to "a few happy phrases". And in any case it is not necessary for a definition to do this. Social group work must be defined irrespective of setting - individual enhancement, group development, and environmental change are components of all social group work practice. This standpoint is in line with the activities of social work which can be grouped into three functions, namely, restoration of impaired capacity, provision of individual and social resources, and prevention of social dysfunction. In other words social group work must be broadly defined to include the following elements: the interdependent and interrelated between man and his social environment, social action, the democratic principle and the facilitating role of the social group worker towards both the group members and the group process to bring about change.

Using the above statement on the definition of social group work the following specific task of the social group worker is presented:

The social group worker has to consult with the appropriate persons in the social system in which the client exists. The objectives of the consultation being:

- (a) To determine the client system to be served;
- (b) To determine the specific client system problems and needs;
- (c) To determine perception of client system and relevant others in it as to readiness of client to engage self in process;
- (d) To assess the nature of support and cooperation available from the social system;
- (e) To assess the nature of potential for change in client system;
- (f) To gain necessary information on the basis of which to create the context of system for treatment (group formation);
- (g) To clarify with client's social system the roles which each participant is prepared to play in relation to helping the client system.

OPSOMMING

Maatskaplike groepwerk het van die begin af met die groep en die persone waaruit die groep bestaan, te make. In hierdie artikel word 'n kort geskiedkundige begripsbepaling van maatskaplike groepwerk gedoen en veral sal aangetoon word hoedat daar 'n klemverskuiwing van die individu, die groep en die maatskaplike milieu na slegs die maatskaplike funksionering van die individu plaasgevind het. Die voorgenoemde klemverskuiwing het tot vertakkings aanleiding gegee, byvoorbeeld maatskaplike aksie word nie meer as 'n inherente deel van die maatskaplike groepwerk beskou nie. Tog maak die Maatskaplike Werk nog steeds daarop aanspraak dat dit in die algemeen op maatskaplike verbeteringe ingestel is.

'n Ander hedendaagse neiging wat opvallend is, is die klem wat op die groepwerker in die groep gelê word. Dit het ten gevolg dat die groepwerker - en nie die groeplid nie - as die sentrale figuur in die groep beskou word. Ook hierdie gedagtegang is in teenstelling met dit wat as die kernrol van die maatskaplike groepwerker beskou word, naamlik om die groep tot doelvorming, self-beskikking en eventuele groepsoutonomie te help.

Die voorgenoemde enge begripsbepaling openbaar die volgende tekortkominge: Maatskaplike groepwerk word benadeel omdat beweer word dat groepwerkers slegs die maatskaplike funksionering van die individu wil bevorder of verbeter; maatskaplike aksie word nie meer as 'n inherente deel van maatskaplike groepwerk beskou nie; en die groepwerker se mikpunt, naamlik om die groep tot verantwoordelike self-beskikking en maatskaplike deelname te lei, word lynreg teenoor die doelwit wat die bevordering of verbetering van die menslike funksionering beoog, gestel.

Dit is die skrywer se standpunt dat die definisie van die maatskaplike groepwerk nie die beoefening van laasgenoemde moet inperk nie en ook nie waardes wat grondliggend van die Maatskaplike Werk-filosofie is, moet uitsluit nie. Die definisie van maatskaplike groepwerk moet dus sodanig wees dat dit alle aspekte ten volle dek, naamlik die onderlinge afhanklikheid en wedersydse verhoudinge wat tussen die mens en sy maatskaplike omgewing bestaan, maatskaplike aksie, die demokratiese beginsel en die rol van die

maatskaplike groepwerker om verandering by die groeplede en in die groepsproses, aan te moedig en te vergemaklik.

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