

Preface

The materials in this text are a product of more than a decade in full-time direct practice with multiple groups, and extensive years of teaching about practice with social work groups. The text undertakes to conceptualize practice theory pertaining to group work with socially unskilled populations. It has been developed to give visibility to, and to make accessible, a specialized group work practice methodology focused on the acquisition of social competence by the group members.

Developed from practice with one socially unskilled population—emotionally disturbed children—the range of applicability is extended through scrutiny of practice descriptions with other socially disabled populations and knowledge of other populations.

The route to articulating a special methodology for use with socially unskilled populations began with many years of direct practice. Multiple groups composed of an at-risk population were in need of opportunities for group belonging and of social workers capable of enabling group members to find their way relationally and to become well embedded in their groups. In some sense this practice was normative and provided necessary opportunities for children, adolescents, and their parents to advance normally through important group belongings. The practice had many attributes of Mainstream group work but focused on work with individuals as needed

to ensure their effective participation in group life—elaborating that less well formulated part of the Mainstream model of social work practice with groups. This at-risk population was at the margin of adequate social functioning but was able to use the group experience to advance in social competence, with help in making friends, managing their behaviors, finding their place in groups, and functioning ably with their peers. The yield of these years in direct practice was an extensive practice knowledge of social work with relatively able groups at each age-stage, and a well-honed practice methodology.

The Specialized Methodology of the book originated in this extended practice with groups that were relatively normal in their functioning, with children and teens who needed small assists to become socially able, functional, and well embedded in their groups. Rich knowledge of normative group functioning and worker role in social work groups and a well-developed practice methodology were the legacy of these years in practice, generating a clear exemplar of the possible in practice with marginally normal populations. Together, these constituted a *normative practice framework* against which the anomalous functioning of socially disabled populations could be assessed, and the distance measured between the level at which they functioned and the level they needed to attain.

On moving to a setting with socially unskilled persons, I found that my well-developed practice methodology would not be usable because it had been matched to a relatively able population, capable of forming and using groups. The new population to be served functioned so far below “social,” so far behind in social development and social functioning, that it required a whole new practice methodology appropriate to their needs and capabilities.

There was little literature at the time about group work with socially dysfunctional populations; hence focused inquiry into what worked well in this group work practice became urgent. The process of developing an appropriate, specialized practice methodology gradually evolved, through trial and error, in practice; through documentation of the practice in written, detailed process recordings; and through conscious, deliberate efforts to identify and articulate elements of a group work practice related to the special needs of the population. A cadre of university students employed as summer and part-time group leaders participated in this process. As the central elements of this practice emerged and were documented, a *Specialized Methodology* was recognized, potentially capable of adaptation to

other socially dysfunctional populations. With the recognition of a special methodology oriented to the particular needs of socially disabled populations came the need to share this practice knowledge in a form useful to other practitioners.

The pattern of conceptualizing from practice in ways that advance the practice theory of social work with groups is a proud tradition among group workers. Its yield is a practice theory emanating from our own professional practice with groups, not borrowed or imported from elsewhere.

In the early years of the profession, when sociology and social work were closer together, some of our first theoreticians valued the possibility of evolving theory from practice, and from qualitative forms of research into practice. Many of them used documented process recordings of group work practice as source materials (Newstetter 1930; Newstetter, Feldstein, and Newcomb 1938; Coyle 1937; Wilson and Ryland 1949; Konopka 1949; and notably in more recent times, Garland, Jones, and Kolodny 1965, 1973).

In the early 1960s a remarkable undertaking occurred within chapters of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW): a concerted effort among group workers to identify the significant features of social group work practice, culminating in a document entitled *Working Papers Toward a Frame of Reference for Social Group Work* (Hartford 1965). This theory-building effort propelled the articulation of Models of Practice (Vinter 1965; Schwartz 1962, 1971; Papell and Rothman 1966; Garvin and Glasser 1971; Tropp 1971) and a proliferation of model-building efforts (Gitterman and Salmon 2009; Garvin, Gutierrez, and Galinsky 2004). Also during this period, the work of Garland, Jones, and Kolodny (1965, 1973) developed, from records of practice, a model of phases of development in social work groups, stimulating ongoing efforts that still continue. A number of practitioners have reworked pieces of this theory in order to reflect variations known to them in practice with particular populations (Kelly and Berman-Rossi 1999; Schiller 1997, 2002; Berman-Rossi 2002).

The greatest need of our profession is for persons steeped in practice and capable of articulating and advancing the practice theory of the profession, forged within our own practice and crafted from our own expert experiential knowledge of a group work practice unique to social work.

There are several elements in a career that can lead to a developing capacity for theory building. The elements are simple, accessible, and available, but they do require some effort to provide them. The first is a *setting* that provides the opportunity to become steeped in group work practice

focused on populations in need of group service. A second requirement is for a setting that has a primary *orientation of inquiry* into the ways in which group practice with a given population plays out. Without this stance, a service may be delivered but the additional steps may not occur, of monitoring and conceptualizing from practice, experiential knowledge capable of advancing our practice theory. A challenge to translate and rework knowns in a new setting with an unfamiliar population and problem asserts the ongoing need for *focused inquiry* in order to develop an adequate practice methodology for new circumstances. What works well with one population may require major alterations to the practice methodology in a new setting.

A third requirement is the provision of opportunity for *a great deal of practice* with many groups, through which the practitioner can gain an extended view of the characteristics of the practice and the variations within it. An additional dimension to the requirement for extensive practice is one that is achieved through remaining in the practice *over a long enough period of time*. It is through in-depth practice over a period of several years that the practitioner can amass perspectives on practice with groups that define themselves as contributions to practice theory. Many practitioners change jobs after a year or two and may not enter the realm of extended knowledge arising from practice in depth over time. It has been said that practitioners become useful contributors to agency practice after their first two years in the setting.

A stance of inquiry combined with opportunity for a great deal of practice extending over several years appears to be an essential combination for contributing to practice knowledge. Extensive and long-term practice can create an *evolving capacity to articulate the characteristics of a practice*, moving experiential knowledge into a form able to be shared. The process of writing a practice paper for the profession and the necessity of describing elements of practice to teach new staff or students both have the effect of crystallizing unarticulated knowledge and putting it into words. A further requirement is a conscious, deliberate provision for *writing about one's practice*, one that designates a time and place for writing and recognizes "writing to write" (Howard and Barton 1986; Murray 1982) as a beginning process, not a final draft. A final requirement is that of achieving intimate *familiarity with the past and current literature* on social work with groups, in order to be aware of the state of our knowledge and of areas where additional knowledge is needed.

It is hoped that making the Specialized Methodology visible will encourage practitioners to undertake practice with other socially disabled populations, and that this text will provide practice guidelines for proceeding with populations whose greatest need is for help in becoming socially able, socially functional.

As this is a first articulation of this special practice with persons who need group belonging the most, it is hoped that practitioners will test out this methodology with other socially unskilled populations and make their own contributions to the verification and extension of this practice theory.

