

Introduction

Whatever else can be said about the human condition, the irreducible state of human life is membership. . . . The [task] of social work practice is to render professional aid in the management of membership.

—Hans Falck, 1988

Belonging in small social groups is the means through which human beings experience personal growth, social development, and socialization and sustain relevance to and influence on the society in which they live, throughout their lives. When the social skills for participating in group life are not developed and available, people who most need the socializing, sustaining effects of group belonging are unable to access and benefit from membership in successive small groups.

In recent decades, social work practice has moved increasingly into settings serving socially less able populations. Many practitioners struggle with the dilemmas faced in practice with socially disabled populations. A methodology for working with them needs to be made visible and accessible. The Mainstream practice theory of social work with groups contains a methodological gap for practice with populations whose lack of social competence impedes their capacity to form groups and therefore to benefit from the social influences inherent in group belonging (Papell and Rothman 1966). The requirement is for a practice methodology that focuses precisely on the social interactional dilemmas of socially unskilled populations and works with these to enable access to, entry into, and benefits of group life for persons who need it most and who have the greatest difficulty in constructing social relationships.

This book describes a specialized methodology designed for use with populations who lack social competence sufficient for constructing and using group. The methodology is shaped by two major sources: the Broad Range Model of practice in the social work group (Lang 1972) and the Mainstream Model of practice with groups—the dominant, enduring practice modality unique to the profession of social work (Papell and Rothman 1966).

The Broad Range Model

The Broad Range Model provides an analytic framework within which a practice can be located, based on the functioning capabilities of individuals and the characteristics of the social form generated by the adequacy of their social functioning. The model identifies essential elements of the social work practice technology across a continuum of individual and group functioning. The framework offers a means to classify, characterize, and describe in detail specific practices with groups in relation to the social functioning capacities of the participants and the associated tasks of the social worker.

The Specialized Methodology presented in this text elaborates the elements in the Broad Range Model in the particular instance that the social disablement of participants achieves only an allonomous (worker-directed) group form and requires major help from the social worker to overcome social deficits that limit the group experience.

The Mainstream Model

The Mainstream Model was forged in the early practice of social group work, evolving with socially able populations in community agencies and enduring through time. It is notable for its adaptability as a group work practice to group purposes and populations, and for its potency as a helping modality. It encompasses a range of purposes, from social growth and development of members in group to social action as group in the impinging environment. A small component of the Mainstream methodology is concerned with assisting less able group members to find their place in the life of the group and to achieve functional participation.

The Mainstream Model contains the view of an integral, balanced relationship between the content and process of the group experience, recognizing their mutual interaction and influence, progressing as “two movements in process together,” each driving the other in development and elaboration of the group experience. The social worker treats content and process as of equal importance, tracking and comprehending how they are interrelated and how they drive the group experience, and recognizing where professional influence can be added.

The practice is characterized by its focus on working with social interaction, activities, group processes, and elements of group life to achieve group experiences functional for the participant members and for the enveloping community. It is this interventive pattern that the Specialized Methodology incorporates from the Mainstream Model.

The Specialized Methodology

The methodology presented in this book is identified as a Specialized Methodology precisely designed to meet the special needs of socially unskilled populations. The methodology is a paradigm shift (Kuhn 1970; Axelrod 1979) from the Mainstream Model, adapted for particular populations. It evolved in practice experience, in response to the special needs, anomalous functioning, and social dilemmas of socially unskilled persons and has been conceptualized from that practice.

The nature of the paradigm shift springs from the lack of applicability of a practice theory founded on the presumption that socially competent skills are in place and in use. The anomaly of socially unskilled functioning of would-be group members and the misfit between theory and practice provided the thrust to develop a new practice paradigm applicable to populations lacking social competence. The paradigm shift retains some elements of the original Mainstream methodology but is combined with new elements essential to practice with socially unskilled persons; hence it classifies as a paradigm shift rather than a full new paradigm.

The Specialized Methodology elevates work with individuals, acknowledged in the Mainstream Model, to a major, central component, a necessity of the practice. It provides for a pregroup experience in a presocial period and focuses on remedial provisions to prepare for and facilitate social functioning. It deals with dysfunctional individual behaviors that interfere

with social interaction and assists social interaction to become functional. It provides a route for evolving toward adequate social functioning and makes visible a presocial process that proceeds in an order different from the typical social processes of the socially competent in their progression to group forming and functioning.

In effect, the typical processes of interacting, building relational ties, identifying common purpose, evolving the structures and processes of group functioning, selecting content forms appropriate to the group purpose, and undertaking the productive work of the group are upended and reversed in work with socially noncompetent persons in an intending group, occurring in an inverse order to that recognized as normal social group processes.

The book makes visible the pregroup processes of socially unskilled populations and highlights the nature of the professional role and tasks in work with nonsocial processes in entities less developed than group. In addition to providing a methodology for work with socially unskilled persons in the context of their participation in an entity—collectivity or group—the book contributes to practice theory, elements of practice with individuals, judged to be underdeveloped or missing from the Social Goals and Reciprocal models (Papell and Rothman 1966). Although the text is focused on practice with socially unskilled persons, it contains materials relevant to all social work practice with groups.

Part of the Specialized Methodology contains materials missing in the Mainstream Model. These have been evolved in relation to socially unskilled populations and are specific to enabling individuals to achieve social competence, function socially, and become able to form group. Despite being located in the Specialized Methodology, the materials have relevance and applicability for Mainstream practice with mostly competent members, in groups that may include some socially less able members and in groups whose members have yet to accomplish all the social tasks leading to the achievement of a mature social group form and functioning. Thus the Specialized Methodology is capable of contributing back important methodological directives to the Mainstream Model.

In being defined as a separate practice, the Specialized Methodology can be seen to have redefined the Mainstream Model, articulating elements not specified in the original formulations of this practice, and extending the range of its applicability and use. The Specialized Methodology and the Mainstream Model *together* define a practice employable broadly with

many populations and provide important knowledge and technique for all practitioners. The text itself reflects this, particularly in the theoretical materials contained in part 2, which are relevant to the range of practice represented by the Mainstream Model and the Specialized Methodology, and in the materials in part 3 focused on work with individuals in the context of their group membership.

Many social workers who work with socially unskilled persons in groups and grouplike entities are encouraged to contribute to the literature portraits of their practice adapted to these populations.

Some Preliminary Considerations

A Continuum of Social Functioning

On a continuum of social functioning, all persons can be seen to possess some range of social competence and some inadequacies or ineptness, displaying both strengths and weaknesses in social interaction. As reported in the literature review in chapter 1, the “modal state of affairs is relative competence,” such that “we are competent in interaction some of the time in some situations” (Bradac 1989, in Wilson and Sabee 2003:4). At the lower end of the continuum, social competences may be less developed, fewer, less manifest or in use.

The capacity to form group, to engage with others socially and relationally, appears to be one very precise marker of social competence, developed and in use; it may be the definitive element, the divide separating relatively socially competent from socially less competent persons on the continuum of social functioning.

The Strengths Perspective in This Practice

The practice represented in this book subscribes fully to the strengths perspective (Saleebey 2009), its goal being to enable socially unskilled persons to uncover, mobilize, develop, and own their own strengths and competences for living rewardingly in the social world.

Social work with groups has held a strengths orientation inherent in its practice throughout its history, stemming from the nature of the practice.

Although not always articulated specifically, its presence as an enduring focus is contained in the creation of small groups as real-life entities, living out in microcosm a live group experience in interaction together, and within this, fostering needed modifications and improvements to social functioning.

Practice with socially unskilled populations seeks to mobilize the strengths of individuals, sometimes unknown to themselves until the practice situation of the special methodology makes them visible, activated and known. In the problem to be served in this practice, initially the strengths may lie dormant and unknown. One of the tasks of the practice is to enable individuals to discover, mobilize, and own their strengths. Problem focus may be more prominent at the outset, but strengths and social competence are emergent in this practice, becoming established and in use.

Defining Condition Differentiated from Deficit Label

The descriptor “socially unskilled” employed in this book acknowledges an existing condition identified as requiring special help. It is recognized as the initial, defining circumstances for initiating a professional practice designed to alleviate that condition. It is a precise, accurate descriptor, as differentiated from “deficit label,” and is intended to create a clear view of a disabling condition that can be addressed and altered. Without adequate social competence, individuals may not be able to know, access, and employ their strengths.

Definition of Social Competence and Social Noncompetence

The central concept of social noncompetence has been derived from an extensive review of literature on social competence, presented in chapter 1. A preliminary definition is presented here as part of the practice explicated in this text. Chapter 1 defines the nature of social noncompetence in greater detail.

Social competence is defined as possessing an adequate degree of capability for interpersonal engagement in social interaction and for functioning ably in the social world: “the ability to interact with other people in a way that is both appropriate and effective” (Segrin and Givertz 2003:136).

Social noncompetence is defined as lacking the characteristics subsumed by the term “social competence”: the absence of social skills sufficient to engage well in the social world, and the presence of some behaviors that are dysfunctional to the social task.

Because of complications in how the term “socially noncompetent” has been understood, the term “socially unskilled” has been selected as a substitute. Technically, the term would be “socially nonskilled,” to denote the absence of characteristics of social competence, but socially unskilled is employed as a familiar colloquial term. Definitional materials are elaborated in chapter 1.

Socially Unskilled as the Norm

There is some suggestion that “socially unskilled” is becoming the norm in North American society. Behaviors that formerly characterized specific populations lacking in social skills are now seen to be becoming prevalent in previously normative settings such as schools, universities, and community agencies, to an extent that interferes with teaching and learning. Some universities are offering seminars “to teach students how to build social networks in person” and “to learn how to engage with the real world, instead of just the virtual world”; many students are required to take courses in interpersonal skills (Levey 2009:39).

Organization of the Text

The book is organized in three parts. Part 1 addresses the concepts of social competence and social noncompetence and their behavioral manifestations. Part 2 brings together some essential theory for social work practice with both socially competent and socially unskilled populations. Part 3 focuses on the Specialized Methodology essential to working with socially unskilled persons in collectivities and groups. A brief summary of chapters follows.

Chapter 1 reviews multidisciplinary literature concerning social competence and social noncompetence and identifies a developing literature of social work practice with entities composed of socially unskilled populations.

In chapter 2 the importance of social competence is explored as the entrée into successful and rewarding social life, the necessary condition for group forming and functioning. A typology of the social behaviors of children in groups typical of each age-stage is presented. From these materials, a set of social tasks is identified, specific to and worked out at each age-stage, using the group experience to work out each task. Progressions in the capability of the entity are seen as matched to and reflecting the developmental progressions in social competence of the individual members. Thus the small group form is recognized as containing social developmental progressions linked to individual social development, advancing in complexity and capacity with the social functioning level of its constituents. These materials, derived from extensive practice experience with multiple children's groups, provide a tool for assessing the social functioning level at which socially unskilled persons may be arrested, and for indicating the social tasks yet to be accomplished.

Chapter 3 examines the nature of socially noncompetent interaction, which creates a class of threshold entities unable to become group. Populations are identified whose circumstances may account for alterations to normal social interaction. Two typologies are developed: the first portrays a classification of social functioning categories, normative to variant; the second categorizes features and qualities of flawed or aberrational interaction.

Chapter 4 includes a review of social science literature on the potency of the small group, followed by a view of the domesticated small group for specialized professional purposes found in the social work literature. Distinctions are made between self-forming groups reconstituted with a social worker and those that are professionally assisted in their formation.

Chapter 5 identifies the special characteristics of intervention in social work with groups, derived from the necessity of attending multiple aspects of individual and group life concurrently. The interventive pattern is employed in both Mainstream practice and the Specialized Methodology.

Chapter 6 presents a portrait of a set of special norms emanating from the professional function of social work and influencing both the social worker and the group participants. They have the power to create a group form unique to the profession of social work and tend to generate an egalitarian group well adapted for helping purposes. The norms have an impact on purpose, relationships, group structure, and functioning and the ways in which the content of the group experience is shaped.

Chapter 7 presents the Broad Range Model on a continuum of three group forms, each reflecting a range in the social functioning capability of the participants and each requiring adaptations in the role and tasks of the social worker. The range is from allonomous groups to autonomous groups, each requiring a distinctive practice methodology, with an intermediate transitional group form that incorporates aspects of both methodologies. The allonomous group is seen as the most likely form achievable by socially unskilled persons.

Chapter 8 reviews the Mainstream Model of practice in social work with groups, and in chapter 9 the Specialized Methodology to promote social competence is introduced.

Chapter 10 provides an overview of features of the Specialized Methodology. Chapter 11 presents the requirements for the specialized practice with respect to the agency and the practitioner. Professional expectations and technology are examined. Chapter 12 examines the essential elements to be worked with in advancing social competence: the individual's relationship to self and to others. It identifies a class of forerunner interventions in a pregroup period while these two relationships are evolved.

Chapter 13 examines the place of actional modes in engaging socially unskilled persons toward (re)establishing a sense of effectance with their world, the prelude to relating to others. The use of activities as the preferred content form is explored. Chapter 14 explicates the route and processes through which social competence can be achieved in this practice. Finally, chapter 15 provides a portrait of a socially noncompetent entity in its progression toward group.

