An Experiential Approach to Group Work
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An Experiential Approach to Group Work

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This book is about developing group work skills. It is different from many group work books in its emphasis on practical skill building and its focus on experiential learning. Experience has taught us that to become a group leader, you need to lead groups. Merely learning the theoretical rationale for group leadership or coming to understand how one should behave is not nearly enough. Students must be helped to develop a complex set of behaviors that facilitate change within the group context. Written this simply, this may seem obvious. However, many social work programs do not adequately prepare students for practice with groups, because they do not provide them with the context to master group skills. It is often assumed, it seems, that faculty can teach students theory and place them into a group setting for a few weeks, and somehow they will learn how to lead groups. Experience has taught us that teachers must deconstruct each specific skill and help social work students practice these skills in vivo. Hoping students are able to bridge the gap between practice and theory in the field leaves too much to chance. In this book, students and practitioners will find dozens of exercises that build practice-tested skills related to important aspects of group work practice. You will learn to modify your skills for practice with different groups of clients in diverse practice settings. A benefit of this experiential, skill-based approach is that it is congruent with the competency-based approach to social work education, which will become the standard for accreditation over the next several years.

There are several important reasons why those who seek to learn group practice must have a good deal of experience practicing the skills of group leadership. First, while many people have years of experience being helpers in one-on-one situations, few have such opportunities that group leaders have. In our everyday lives, we are called upon to help friends, colleagues, and others. Helping others in one-on-one situations is natural and almost routine. Such is not the case with our group experiences. While we all have experience being members of groups, rarely do we learn to be change agents in groups. We need to learn what skills are needed to facilitate change within groups, and to practice these skills. Second, what might constitute good helping behaviors in one-on-one dyadic situations differs from what is effective in groups. Third, most social work field experiences emphasize individual and family work rather than group work; educational programs must help students gain mastery of group skills. Fourth, group work is a wonderful means of bridging the too often artificial divide between micro and macro practice.

At the beginning of each chapter, we briefly explore the most salient concepts taken from empirical research and theoretical writings related to the subject of the chapter. This is followed by experiential exercises, reflective exercises, case studies, and other exercises, each of which is designed to help new and experi-
enced group workers expand and deepen what they already know. The chapters help build upon your existing strengths, reframing generalist and advanced skills toward effective group work practice.

This book is designed for both foundation and advanced courses in group work, as well as those courses that have or need significant group work content. For generalist courses, this book may stand on its own. For advanced courses, while this book contains enough theory to be used on its own, it is ideally suited for instructors who will either use a book heavily anchored in theories of change or teach theories of change themselves.

This book is organized into three parts. The first part addresses each of the stages of group practice. We find that helping students sequentially practice the skills associated with each stage of group development allows them to more fully learn each skill. In this part, we have a chapter dedicated specifically to group evaluation, a feature not found in some group work books. Throughout each chapter you will note a focus on developing the capacity for self-reflection and the professional use of self. Of particular note is our focus on the psychosocial and emotional aspects to ending individual group sessions and terminating groups. The second part consists of chapters that explore the major types of groups. We begin with an in-depth discussion of the skills that apply to all groups and then discuss the refinement of these skills as they apply to support (mutual aid), treatment, psychoeducational, and task groups. The last part provides examples of group work practice with some important special populations. In this part, as in others, you will find case examples that bring to life the practice skills we explore. You will develop an understanding of how culturally competent practice can be applied with these populations.

Each chapter begins with a brief discussion of the skills that you will learn from that chapter. These discussions provide the intellectual foundation for your experiential work. At times, we will discuss important findings from research; at other times, we will explore theoretical or ethical concerns. In each chapter, we shall briefly highlight some of the important practice considerations of which you need to be aware. Each provides different types of guidance for group work situations. Following each introduction, you will find exercises that are designed to build your skills in relation to the topic, problem, or population that is presented. In each chapter, you will find exercises that you can do by yourself and exercises to be conducted in class. These exercises will be an important part of your development of group skills, as increased practice will lead to increased mastery. Finally, you will also find exercises that you can use as you lead your own groups. Please share these with your colleagues, and feel free to adapt them to the needs and demands of your agency and group context.

The exercises in this book have been classroom tested. They have been honed over the course of twenty years of combined teaching experience in human service, BSW, and MSW programs. They are based upon our experience as
group work practitioners with children with mental health disorders, adults with HIV/AIDS, Latinos suffering from substance abuse, and many other practice contexts.

The exercises are also based upon our recognition that regardless of the theoretical orientation that a social worker holds, the use of self and self-awareness is an essential practice skill. You will find many opportunities in this book for self-reflection through writing exercises, classroom discussion, and critical reflection upon lived practice experience. You will be guided through exercises and asked to reflect upon your own practice, which will help you integrate new skills into your behavioral repertoire. You will also have the opportunity to develop your own philosophy and theoretical framework for group practice.

Following the introduction to the tradition of groups in social work provided in chapter 1, chapter 2 addresses issues around planning a group. Too often, group leaders neglect this all-too-important part of the life of a group. Workers who spend time planning their groups feel better prepared than those who do not. Ironically, the more planning the worker does for his or her group, the more he or she may be free to let go of those plans and act with spontaneity when that is called for (Kurland, 1978).

Chapter 3 explores how to begin a group. The primary purpose of the beginning stage of group is group formation. The early sessions of group life can be very stressful for workers and clients alike. As clients adapt to the nature of the group, they begin to find ways of investing in the group versus maintaining their autonomy. In this chapter, you will learn how important it is for group leaders to explore their own perceptions around what groups are, and you will engage in exercises and experiences that will help you learn some of the key skills for starting a group.

Chapter 4 focuses on the working stage of the group. In this chapter, we continue the exploration of group dynamics and processes that were discussed in the previous chapter. We also explore the importance of group leadership. Even in groups in which the group worker sees himself or herself as more of a facilitator, the manner in which the group worker leads is important.

In chapter 5, we address the importance of group workers evaluating their own behaviors in group and the outcomes of clients. As evidence-based practice and other research-based models become more influential in social work practice, social workers will increasingly be called upon to assess their interventions. Practice evaluation is particularly important in group practice, where the worker must attend to many complex processes. By consciously and systematically building evaluation into your practice, you will become more responsible for client outcomes.

Chapter 6 concludes this part of the book with an exploration of endings. Whether it is in the end of a session or the entire group, endings are difficult for
many group leaders. In this part, we explore the reasons why this is so and present concrete suggestions and exercises to help workers develop the skills they need to navigate endings.

In the next five chapters, you will learn the differences between some of the key types of social work groups, and information on how they work. You will also engage in exercises that will help you learn how to lead these groups.

While the whole book is focused on helping you develop the skills and competencies that you will need for group practice, in chapter 7, we explore some of the key skills that you will need to develop as a group leader. It will set the context for subsequent chapters. It is helpful to think of the skills that you learn as tools for a metaphorical toolbox, a toolbox that will teach you to apply core competencies to unique and novel practice contexts.

In chapter 8, we address support groups, which also are called mutual aid groups. These groups have an especially important place in social work practice. Shulman (2006) believes that the mutual aid aspect of group life lies at the heart of the utility of group work for the profession. In this chapter, we explore the importance of empathy and problem solving. We look at the nature of the leader’s role, which is to remove barriers to mutual support. We also discuss the nature of the client’s role, which must be carefully deconstructed for clients in order for the mutual aid groups to be successful.

Chapter 9 explores treatment or clinical groups. As the profession of social work has moved increasingly toward evidence-based practice, clinical services have become increasingly important. This chapter presents research on treatment groups and helps workers develop some of the requisite skills for leading these groups.

Chapter 10 explores the value and importance of psychoeducational groups. Psychoeducational groups are important in a variety of settings and demand that social workers develop a different set of skills from what they use in other types of group settings. In psychoeducational groups, the worker must learn to be an effective teacher so group members can integrate new knowledge for improving their thinking, feeling, and behavior.

In chapter 11, we explore task groups. Task groups are an essential part of organizational life in all social service agencies. When run effectively, task groups are a wonderful means of pooling collective wisdom, energy, and skills in service of the completion of key organizational aims. When done poorly, task groups can be a source of endless frustration and can do a good deal of harm to an organization’s culture. In this chapter, we explore some of the important tools and skills needed to conduct and participate in successful task groups.

Following chapter 11, we move from the discussion of different types of groups to examples of group work with different populations. Group work has been allied to work with many populations; it is beyond the scope of any introductory
book to discuss work with all populations. As such, we have relied on our expertise and practice experiences to present you with chapters that illustrate group work with six different populations.

Eating disorders are an increasingly common type of psychological disorder that social workers need to address. Anorexia and bulimia are not only psychological disorders, but problems with strong social causes and effects. Social norms around body image and gender have strong implications for group workers who are called to work with those suffering from these ailments. Chapter 12 presents guidance on the types of groups that have been shown to be effective with persons suffering from eating disorders.

One of the contexts in which group work has maintained a central place is in the provision of services to persistently mentally ill adults. Community mental health centers have long used psychoeducational and support groups in working with persons suffering from severe and persistent mental illnesses. Chapter 13 demonstrates the scope of group work with this vulnerable population.

In chapter 14, we explore a highly specialized group: conflict resolution groups within elementary schools. With the increase in highly publicized incidences of school violence over the last several years, creating safe and nonviolent school contexts is extremely important. However, as schools contend with increased demands and expectations to provide more with less, fewer non-academic personnel may be available to provide direct services. As such, we anticipate the role of such groups to take on increased importance over the next several years.

Other important and highly specialized groups are those designed to provide services to pregnant teens. Pregnant teens, who often feel isolated and alone, can receive a great deal of mutual support and acceptance and practice skills in groups. Chapter 15 addresses the complex developmental and social needs of these young women.

Latinos are now the largest minority population in the United States. A diverse population, Latinos are expected to constitute nearly a quarter of the population of the United States within the next several decades. In chapter 16, we explore how groups can be valuable in work with Latino clients. Social workers who have linguistic and cultural competence to work with Latinos will find themselves in high demand.

Chapter 17 explores group work practice with HIV-positive clients and clients with AIDS. While HIV/AIDS has received less attention in the popular media over the last decade, within some communities, its prevalence is rising.
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Rich Furman

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Diana Rowan

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