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Social Group Work as a Method of Social Work

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Introduction

Social group work is a primary method of social work. In this chapter we briefly see how social group work became a part of social work and how it established itself as a method. We will discuss the concepts by first understanding what social work and group work are and the present trends in group work.

Social Work and Group Work

Group work is a method of group leadership used in organizing and conducting various types of group activities.

Giselle Konopka defines group work as a method of social work which helps individuals to enhance their social functioning through purposeful group experiences and to cope more effectively with their personal, group and community problems.

Trecker gives the following definition " Social group work is a method in social work through which individuals in many groups in a variety of community agencies settings are helped by a worker who guides their interaction in program activities so that they may relate themselves to

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others and experience growth opportunities in accordance with their needs and capacities to the end of individual, group and community development".

Allan Brown says "group work provides a context in which *individuals help each other*; it is a method of helping groups as well as helping individuals; and it can enable individuals and groups to *influence* and *change* personal, group, and organizational and community problems."

A definition of social work prepared by the National association of Social workers in 1956 considers five attributes as being basic to the practice of social work. These attributes are:

1) Values

2) Purpose

3) Sanction

4) Knowledge

5) Method

All these attributes influence each other. Values of social work practice influences the purpose of social work and method used to achieve them.

You are already familiar with various definitions of social work and social group work. Here we review some of the definitions of group work.

We will see how the each of these attributes finds its expression in practice of group work. We will also see briefly how historically social group work and social work evolved separately and how in course of time group work became accepted as a method.

Values

The values of social work are rooted in the democratic and humanitarian principles. The inherent value of the human being and his dignity regardless of his status, position and his actions are recognized. Social work believes in equality, justice and freedom. Social challenges structures, institutions and practices which prevent individuals, groups and communities from realizing these goals. Therefore it can be said that human rights values are important part of social work values also. Another important value is the recognition that everyone has the inherent capacity to resolve his or her problems. Thus given the right conditions that person can successfully resolve his problems. The values of social work are codified as professional ethics which is implemented by the professional body. The principles of social work such as principles of acceptance, individualization, self determination, confidentiality, non judgmental attitude and controlled emotional involvement are derived from these values.

Group work values are the same as the generic values of social work. Gisela Konopka describes the three humanistic concerns of group work. They are (i) individuals are of inherent worth.(ii) people are mutually responsible for each other; and(iii) people have the fundamental right to experience mental health brought about by social and political conditions that support their fulfillment.

These values find its expression in the practice of group work. Group work emphasis on voluntary participation by the members. Group workers are sometimes do work with involuntary groups due to statutory or agency demands. But that is not the norm. Secondly, the social worker values the decisions made by the group-the

principle of self determination. The group members are encouraged by the group workers to participate in the planning and implementation of group activities, even if there are disagreements between the group and the worker regarding the effectiveness of the activity, the worker will not impose her decision on the group. Negotiation and discussion are the means that the worker uses to help the group understand her point of view. Similarly, decisions regarding the group have to be made by the group using democratic methods. Participation by all members is stressed. everybody has equal right to contribute to the discussions in the group. fourthly, the group has to maintain the principle of confidentiality- members' opinion and feelings which are shared in the group should be kept confidential and should not be revealed outside the group. However the group worker unlike the caseworker has to depend also on the group members to achieve this aim. Therefore often a confidential clause is attached in the contract. Social workers take special care to ensure that confidentiality working with children who have difficulties in doing that.

Purpose

The purpose of the group work is the way in which it contributes to society and derives its legitimacy. People and agencies accept groups as a method by assessing to what degree group work is able to achieve the aim it has set for itself.

The aims of group work according to Alan Brown (1992).

a)   Individual assessment

Groups are used to assess individual behaviour. This assessment is based on the data made available by worker's assessment, member's assessment and group member's assessment. Group assessments can be used to obtain

data in juvenile delinquent centres, residential care centres and centres for elderly care.

b) Individual support and maintenance

Groups provide psychosocial support to the members who are undergoing stressful situations. Groups are formed for individuals suffering from disability, caregivers of dementia patients and students with learning difficulties.

c) Individual change

i) Control of deviant tendencies in the individuals. For example, child abusers can be training to exercise control over their behavior.

ii) Socialization of individuals to learn social skills for living in the community.

iii) Improvement in interpersonal relations

iv) Improvement in the economic area. For example, self help groups.

v) develop better self concept and feelings. for example women in neighbourhood discussing common problems

vi) personal growth and development encounter group and T group.

d) Educational, Information-giving and training groups

e) Leisure/ Compensatory groups for recreation and enjoyment.

f) mediation between individuals and social systems. For example, group worker may prepare the patients for discharge by training them to live outside the agency.

g) group change and/or support. Working with natural or existing groups to improve a specific aspect of the group or to resolve a problem. Family therapy to improve the communication is one example.

h) Environment change Groups formed to demand facilities and services from government and non governmental organizations.

i) Social change. These groups raise the consciousness of the members, organize them and help them fight unjust structure in the society.

Sanction

Social group work as a method of social work is recognized as a primary method by various professional bodies - National Association of Social Workers, British Association of Social Workers, Australian Association of Social work and others.

Group work is used in various settings of social work- health settings, school settings, industries, families and child agencies, de-addiction centres, communities, homes of elderly and juvenile reform centres.

Group Work Education

An international study on the presence of social group work in Schools of Social work in different countries of the world reveals the following. Of the 135 schools that participated in the survey the number of teaching faculty was 2497 and 174(7percent) were group work instructors and teachers. Group work was taught both as a separate course and as part of generic courses. the emphasis of group work in most places seems to be on individual needs such as support, therapy and self development. (Mayadas et al.)

In India, group work is suggested as a separate paper in UGC model curriculum. Most universities and colleges teach group work as a method in India

Method

Method means "a way of doing things" "a set of skills and techniques". But then everybody has a way of doing things which is based on his/ her theory of action. His assumptions regarding the situation guide his actions.

A use of the method distinguishes itself from the spontaneous actions of a non professional in the following way

1) It is informed by the value system of the profession which has been arrived at by consensus of the members.

2) The method is used deliberately and purposefully by the profession to attain the treatment goals

3) Its practice is supported by the knowledge base which constantly increases by research and sharing of knowledge by professionals

4) It is recognized as a method by competent authorities.

5) The practice of the method helps the clients and through it the society.

According to Schwartz a profession should have three attributes-

1) A function to perform in society to which it is held accountable.

2) Performance of this function involves certain modes of activity- a certain pattern of actions.

3) These actions are performed within the systems in which it takes place.

Further, Schwartz says that "method is function in action".

Now what are the tasks of social work in our society?

Schwartz identifies the following tasks-

1) Search for common ground between the client's perception of his own need and the aspects of social demands with which he is perceived.

2) Identify the obstacles which prevent people from harmonizing their own self interests and the needs of others.

3) Provide data-ideas, facts, value concepts which are not available to the client who will help him resolve the problems.

4) Give the client a new vision (hope) and confidence about the future.

5) Maintain a professional relationship with the client.

Advantages of Group Work

1) Groups are natural places in which people live and grow. Families, peer groups, workplace groups and neighbourhood groups are central to the social life of an individual. If these groups have significant influence on our personalities, can't groups be used to change the behaviour of the members? Group work aims at achieving these aims in different settings.

2) Group members who have similar interests and problems can help each other by sharing their experiences and their problems. The principles of mutual aid and self help are emphasized. Group work's major advantage over casework is that each member becomes a helper and a helped in the group. Thus help is given and taken in a spirit of equality.

3) Group members empower members by increasing their consciousness and awareness. People's personal

problems are made public and when it becomes known that large number of people is involved. Solutions are then discussed and further actions planned and implemented.

4) Groups are used to elicit opinions of the members in the agency regarding the services provided.

5) Group work is able to show in practice the democratic principles.

6) Group work is very effective for certain groups of people like adolescent, children and women. These groups find it more comfortable to get help in groups as their need for security and belongingness is fulfilled in groups.

7) Group work is economical and time saving as a number of clients are treated at the same time.

Disadvantages of Group Work

1) Confidentiality is difficult to achieve as personal knowledge is shared with the group.

2) Forming groups can be difficult. Members often drop out, are absent and do not cooperate which can lead to dissolution of the groups

3) Agencies do not fully support group work as they are not clear about its usefulness.

4) Group work often degenerates into games and fun neglecting the treatment process.

5) Group needs resources like common time, place and resources.

6) Individual attention is missing and non participating members become lonely.

7) Group work can further the stigma and discrimination that the members face in society as they become identified with the group.

8) Professional expertise is often missing as group work is seen as being general skill everyone can master.

Knowledge

Knowledge is defined as the ability to understand.

The knowledge base of group work has been constantly increasing. The main sources of knowledge for social groups has been

1) **Knowledge of groups from other disciplines**

Sociology, psychology and social psychology study groups especially small groups. C.H. Cooley(primary and secondary groups), G.H.Mead(in groups and outgroups), Robert Merton(reference group), Kurt Lewin (group dynamics), Moreno(sociometry), Elton mayo(importance and influence of groups) and Simmel are pioneers in the field of the study of groups. Asch, Sheriff Festinger, Kresch and Tuckman have made significant contributions increasing our understanding about groups, its influence on the members, group development etc.

Another important source as in casework has been psychoanalytical school which has contributed group therapy.

2) **Knowledge from the Practitioners**

Gisela Knopoka, Grace Coyle, Josephine Klein, Gertrude Wilson and Gladys Ryland were earlier contributors to the group work practice. They documented their experiences and formulated the basic practices and rules of group work. Grace L. Coyle's (1948) *Group Work with American Youth: A Guide to the Practice of Leadership,* and Gertrude Wilson

and Gladys Ryland's (1949) *Social group work practice; the creative use of the social process* were the earliest texts. Presently journals Social work with groups, Small Group research and Group workers are published to disseminate the knowledge of groups.

3) **Knowledge from research**

Research in group work has been relatively less than in other areas of concern in social work. Most of the group work literature available is anecdotal and descriptive accounts of practice (Mayadas and others in Gravin; 2004, Brown 1992).

A study on the research work done on group work in the 1980s reveals that most research was done in the area of cognitive behavioural interventions among children. Researches on other approaches and for other clients were less. Further researches done were of groups which consisted of brief, highly structured, time limited and homogeneous clients. The relevance of these research findings to other groups require further analysis. In India the situation of research in group work is the same. Research based articles of social work are limited. A small number of PhDs have been done on the subject and these are mainly on the clinical side.

Three models have evolved in social work practice. Papell and Rothman (1966) have suggested three models:

remedial - where the aim on the part of the work/agency is individual social adaption.

reciprocal - where the aim is to strengthen mutual aid and to mediate between individuals and society.

social goals - where the concern is to further social justice often through collective, social action. (Mark Smith, 2008)

Thus there is a constant growth of knowledge regarding social group work and how to integrate theory with practice.

The knowledge base of group work has increased by the development of new research tools for evaluation of group work practice. A major lacuna in social work has been the lack of evidence on the effectiveness of its methods. In other words social workers have not been able to show conclusively those professional social worker skills and techniques applied deliberately in different situations have made significant difference to the clients. The growth of evidence based social practice is a response to these lacunae.

Social group work practice has also been influenced by these trends. New research methods have been identified which address this problem. (Gant in Gravin, 2004.)

Present Trends in Group Work

1)   Technology mediated group work

Many support groups are forming group on line. For example women suffering from breast cancer have online support groups. Most of these support groups offer information on the problem and about treatments methods. They also provide accounts of people who have dealt with the disease successful. Often there are sections called Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) where doubts and clarifications related to the problem/ disease can be asked. These websites are maintained by hospitals and support groups.

Conclusion

Social work as a profession and academic discipline is expanding. But there are still unanswered questions about the effectiveness about its methods even within the

profession. Research based finding has done little to clarify the position. It maybe because of the methodology that these researches use. Or it may be that the complexity of human behaviour makes it difficult to prove changes in persons. Group work as a method of social work seems to have the same problems. Social workers have to often rely on their personal experience and observation to establish that the method helps clients.

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