A MUTUAL-AID MODEL FOR SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS

DOMINIQUE MOYSE STEINBERG

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Group work is a popular and widely used social work method. Focusing particularly on the central role of mutual aid in effective group work, this text presents the theoretical base, outlines core principles, and introduces the skills for translating those theories and principles into practice.

A Mutual-Aid Model for Social Work with Groups will help readers to catalyze the strengths of group members such that they become better problem solvers in all areas of life from the playroom to the boardroom. Increased coverage of evaluation and evidence-based practice speaks to the field's growing concern with monitoring process and assessing progress. The book also includes:

- worker-based obstacles to mutual aid, their impact, and their antidotes;
- pre-group planning, including new discussion on curriculum groups;
- group building by prioritizing certain goals and norms in the new group;
- the significance of time and place on mutual aid and the role of the group worker;
- maintaining mutual aid during so-called individual problem solving;
- an expanded discussion of anti-oppression and anti-oppressive practice;
- unlocking a group's potential to make difference and conflict useful;
- special considerations in working with time-limited, open-ended, and very large groups.

Case examples are used throughout to help bridge the gap between theory and practice, and exercises for class or field help learners to immediately apply conceptual material to their practice. All resources required to carry out the exercises are contained in twenty appendices at the end of the book. Key points at the end of each chapter recap the major concepts presented, and a roster of recommended reading for each chapter points the reader to further resources on each topic.

Designed to support ethical and successful practice, this textbook is an essential addition to the library of any social work student or human service practitioner working with groups.

Dominique Moyse Steinberg is former chair of the group work sequence at Hunter College School of Social Work in New York City, USA, and currently sits on the executive committee of the International Association for Social Work with Groups, Inc.

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A MUTUAL-AID MODEL FOR SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS

Third Edition

Dominique Moyse Steinberg

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dominique Moyse Steinberg, DSW, CSW, ACSW, is retired from faculty at the Hunter College School of Social Work in New York City, where she chaired the group work sequence and also taught research and writing for publication. She continues to offer training and consultation to agencies in developing, conducting, and evaluating group-based programming and serves as thesis research advisor to MSW students from Smith College School of Social Work in Northampton, Massachusetts. Since her retirement from faculty life, Dr. Steinberg has devoted her time to developing a number of informational and transformational resources (customeldercare.com) intended to help older adults and their caregivers maintain quality of life. Dr. Steinberg is an editorial board member of *Social Work with Groups* and the *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*; a Fellow of the Academy of Certified Social Workers; an executive committee member of the International Association of Social Work with Groups; and a principal in the Project for Team Conferencing and Social Group Work. She is certified in professional mediation from the UCLA School of Business, the New York Center for Divorce Mediation, and the American Association of Family Conciliation Courts and is the author of *The Social Work Student's Research Companion* and *Blanche: World Class Musician, World Class Mother (Noteworthy Lessons for Living in Harmony with Self, Others, & the Universe)*. Dr. Steinberg commutes between New York City and New England.

PREFACE

Do it right because it is beautiful and you love it.
Blanche Honegger Moyse (1909–2010)
Artistic Director and Founder,
New England Bach Festival

Welcome to the third edition of *A Mutual-Aid Model for Social Work with Groups*. To the extent that groups vary in form, practice must also vary in its application of theory and principles so that our work with groups can have real-world logic, not just theoretical propriety. With that in mind, this third edition builds on the previous editions in the following ways. First, there is some brand new material, such as an entire new Chapter 3 that identifies a number of worker-based obstacles (and antidotes) to mutual aid. Also, there are exercises (one to three) for each chapter but one. Additionally, new content as applicable has been integrated into each chapter, such as deconstructing the use of keys as metaphors in dealing with conflict (Chapter 9) and expanded discussions, such as Chapter 8 on authority and Chapter 14 on evaluation, among others.

This edition continues the format of "themes and variations," with four chapters that provide implications for practice with group types that differ in some significant way from the classic long-term, closed, and stable system upon which the fundamental theories, concepts, principles, and skills of mutual-aid work are based. And, as in the previous editions, themes and variations remain the same, with variations drawing from Chapter 6 (impact of time and place on mutual aid) to examine the special challenges to mutual aid in group types that differ from the classic small, closed group—variations that are becoming increasingly ubiquitous while the classic group type is becoming ever more rare.

Where practice principles remain constant, they remain as identified in the previous editions. Where further reflection is indicated (as in the discussion on working with curriculum groups in Chapter 4), the discussion integrates some new thoughts and suggestions for tweaking practice to meet new mandates or situations.

That each chapter but one has one or more exercises creates in this edition, I believe, a text that goes beyond informational to one that is potentially transformational. That is, each exercise helps the learner to apply and integrate the material into his or her own practice in an immediately useful way. Thus, in addition to offering theories, practice principles, and skills this third edition now provides the classroom with tools to structure transformational opportunities through which learners, in the company of others in the same boat and in the safety of the classroom, can apply the information in an immediately useful way to their work setting while also hearing about its application to other settings.

In the first edition of this book over fifteen years ago, I stated that I thought it was both the best and the worst of times for groups, to borrow a phrase from Charles Dickens. In the second edition I stated that I was still under that impression, because on one hand one could hardly open a telephone book or newspaper without finding a group to join but, at the same time, the social work field was increasingly driven in its use of groups by efficiency rather than by effectiveness. As I write this preface, some ten years after the second edition, my perspective remains the same. It continues to be the best of times, because groups abound, but also the worst of times because incompetence in working with groups also abounds. The good news is that so many groups in so many service settings provide many opportunities for consulting, training, and mentoring.

What I have come to see, after ten more years of reflection since the previous edition, is that professionals who are trained in social group work generally and in the value of mutual aid more specifically must learn to be better communicators. Those of us who are trained in mutual- aid practice must learn to share our knowledge with the many practitioners who are mandated to work with groups without the benefit of education or training. I believe that we can do this; I believe we can and must be both proselytizers and champions of this form of practice by taking each and every opportunity to "share a little something" with our colleagues and representatives of the settings in which much group work takes place. In a keynote address at the 29th Annual International Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work With Groups in New Jersey a few years ago, Robert Salmon and I put it this way:

> We must learn to speak in the many tongues or idioms of the many systems that share the field of social welfare. Funding. Service. Treatment. Advocacy. Education. Medicine. Psychology. Each of these and many other disciplines with which we collide on an everyday basis has its own world view with special ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. To talk money is off-putting to a clinician but piques the interest of an administrator. The power of mutual aid may inspire a social work practitioner but raise the hair on the back of the warden's neck! In brief, we must learn to shape the way we think and the way we talk according to whatever *other* is in the communication loop of the moment.
>
> If we can make this effort we will have an unparalleled opportunity to intervene in ways that have both direct and far-reaching indirect impact.

I hope that, in some way, this book will help us to do that. There is no doubt in my mind that in some way or other, people who can communicate with their peers—be it verbal or nonverbal—can engage in mutual aid. Clearly, participants in mutual aid need the capacity to express and to both take in and respond to the expressions of others. Setting never inherently dictates capacity for mutual-aid practice, only the kind of mutual aid that might be catalyzed. In other words, no group is ever devoid of potential. Mutual aid is the normal stuff of groups; and as Clara Kaiser (1958) indicated, helping groups develop their unique potential is about approach, not where or with whom. If it seems as if a group is not acting as a mutual-aid system, then I continue to believe that the most likely explanation is lack of skill, and I continue to hope that the manner in which theory and practice are joined in this book throughout both the discussions and the many exercises offered will make a difference.

Reference

Steinberg, D. M. and Salmon, R. (2007). Revisiting "Joyful Noise." Gateways from Singing the Blues to the Hallelujah Chorus (*Talking in the Idiom of the Other: A Necessary Skill for Responding to the Current Crisis in Social Work Practice*). Opening Plenary Address, 29th Annual International Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work With Groups, Jersey City, New Jersey. Also in (2012) *Groups: Gateways to Growth: Proceedings of the XXIX International Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups*, Eds. G. Tully, K. Sweeney, and S. Palombo, pp. 10–24. London: Whiting & Birch Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

Key Concepts of This Chapter

Aggregational Therapy of Individuals (Hartford 1978)
Capacity to Communicate and Interact
Casework in a Group (Kurland and Salmon 1992)
Democratic-Humanism (Glassman 2009)
Exchange of Strengths
Group Purpose
Group as a Second Client
Groupness (Middleman and Wood 1990a)
Group-Specific Skill
Practitioners as Workers, not Leaders
Multiple Helping Relationships
Mutual Aid
Open-Ended Groups
Setting the Stage for Mutual Aid
Sharing Authority
Short-Term Groups
Single-Session Groups
Thinking Things Through
Very Large Groups

The Purpose of This Book

Groups abound today, and although an impressive body of professional literature on social work testifies to the centrality of catalyzing mutual aid in practice with groups, the gap filled by this book is as a resource that makes the link between the descriptive and prescriptive of mutual-aid practice—that bridges theory (i.e., the descriptive component of professional practice) with practical information (i.e., the prescriptive component of mutual-aid practice). By describing and discussing theories, concepts, and practice principles specific to mutual aid, this book provides a foundation for practice. And by offering a number of exercises for the classroom, it provides opportunities for learners to practice in the safety of the classroom with others in the same boat.

At the time of this third edition, several books continue to offer a foundation for practice with groups but continue to assign mutual aid only partial attention along with the many other important aspects of practice. In contrast, this book makes mutual aid its principal

subject, encouraging further study in each of the key areas of mutual-aid practice by referring the reader to specific literature at the end of every chapter. In addition, it attempts to combine the why of mutual-aid practice with the how-to in some immediately useful manner by offering case examples of practice that are both productive and counterproductive to mutual aid along with the numerous exercises.

This is the first book to bring under one cover the most salient historical and contemporaneous discussions on the role of mutual aid in social work with groups. Until now it has been necessary to sift through mountains of literature merely to understand the ways in which mutual aid has been conceptualized throughout decades of professional growth—a tedious and unwieldy task. For example, as a social group-work concept, the term mutual aid was first coined by William Schwartz (1961). The process, however, has been recognized as an important group-work dynamic since the early 1900s by such professional leaders as Coyle, Hart, Newstetter, Lieberman, Slavson, and Cantor, all of whom, among others, have struggled to identify and articulate a specific knowledge base and scientific body of practice principles for systematic and purposeful social work practice with groups.

Through many rich examples of actual practice interventions, some of which were gathered through an empirical study (Steinberg 1992) and others that were collected through informal dialogues with colleagues, this book aims to help people who work with groups understand the essential and distinctive dynamics of an approach to practice that seeks to help people help one another. Furthermore, in contrast with books that tend to offer only examples of "correct" practice, it juxtaposes examples of interventions that are counterproductive to mutual aid with those that are productive in order to illustrate the impact of various professional behaviors on small-group process.

The Mutual-Aid Model

The mutual-aid model of social work with groups is based on the belief that we work with groups precisely because of their potential for mutual aid. What is mutual aid, exactly? Unadorned by professional jargon, mutual aid simply refers to people helping one another as they think things through. Helping people engage in mutual aid is no simple matter, however. In addition to the need for knowledge about small-group dynamics, mutual-aid practice takes a certain vision to exploit group process as the powerful helping medium it can be. It calls for a shift in the way we regard and use our authority and requires the purposeful use of group-specific skills—a whole body of skills that extend beyond those we use in work with individuals.

In its utilization of group process as the primary means for helping and so in direct contrast to the "individual-work-in-a-group" style that overwhelms much of practice today, mutual-aid work is truly group work. Not only are the individual members our clients but also the group as a system is our client—our second client (Shulman 2011). Thus, while one eye looks to the needs of the individual to help members shape and use process toward mutual aid, the other eye attends to the nature and quality of that process.

Whenever people come together there is always group process at work, of course, whether we attend to it or not (Middleman 1978). Process can take on many different looks, however, not all of which promote mutual aid. For example, mutual aid relies on spontaneous communication and interaction among members and has little room to develop when they interact primarily with the worker while others watch and listen (Middleman and Wood 1990b; Papell and Rothman 1980; Kurland and Salmon 1992). It also relies on the exchange

of strengths and thus has little room to develop when the practitioner is regarded as the principal helper (Newstetter 1935; Trecker 1955; Hartford 1964; Schwartz 1976; Northen and Kurland 2001; Breton 1990; Middleman and Wood 1990a; Shulman 2011). Finally, mutual aid needs a democratic-humanistic culture (Glassman 2009), an environment in which everyone has the right to be heard and in which everyone's needs and feelings are taken into account in all of the group's decision-making processes.

The Theoretical Basis for Mutual Aid

As the recommended further readings at the end of each chapter and the bibliography at the end of this book make very clear, the theoretical justification for mutual-aid work with groups is rooted in social work. In fact, in no other profession does mutual aid play such a pivotal role (Glassman 2009). Nonetheless, although using group process specifically to catalyze mutual aid is a unique social work mandate, the practice skills that we use to help people engage in mutual aid are useful for work with any and all groups that aim to maximize their human resources. In other words, mutual aid is just as relevant to organizational committees and social-action groups, children's activity or sports groups, and political coalitions, for example, as it is to groups formed expressly for therapeutic or socialization purposes.

The Conditions for Mutual-Aid Practice

What about the fact that we practice in so many different types of settings? Can mutual aid be developed in any setting, in any group, under any conditions? Yes. It is true that work with a wide variety of groups in different settings demands many areas of content- and setting-specific expertise; but it is also true that enough generic group-work skills have been identified to help maximize the mutual-aid potential of any group with which we work. Henry Ford used to say, "Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success." Although Ford was referring specifically to corporate teamwork when he said this, the principles to which he alluded most certainly speak to the value of mutual aid.

Mutual aid happens at many intensities and in many ways, both during the life of one group and across different groups (Gitterman and Shulman 1994). Furthermore, some groups experience all of the dynamics of mutual aid (see Chapter 2), while others experience only some aspects. Although one group may experience mutual aid very intensely, others may experience it to a lesser degree. A reminiscence group of elderly persons may experience "all in the same boat" more than it does mutual demand, for example. Or individuals in groups for disabled or severely ill persons may be so highly preoccupied with their own health or well-being that they can interact only at a fairly superficial level. Or a group for persons with mental illness may engage in much debate while another group experiences this dynamic less than mutual support. Does this mean that mutual aid is not playing a significant role in these groups? Absolutely not! Does it mean that one of these groups is experiencing more or even a more "serious" level of mutual aid than another? Again, absolutely not! What these nuances reflect is that mutual aid comes in many shapes and sizes, and a group need not experience the full range of possibilities or interact at only the deepest affective levels in order to qualify as a mutual-aid system. Just as J. S. Bach wrote some "lovely little pieces" for early piano study in addition to his architectural masterpieces, there exists a wide range and variety of and potential for mutual aid. We might not think that Bach's "little" piano pieces

are as structurally intense as his B Minor Mass, but we would nevertheless not suggest that they are not music. Likewise, mutual aid may come from intense debate, but it can also come from a better understanding of difference, a pat on the back, a glance of understanding, or a quiet but comfortable sense of belonging. Thus, all groups have the potential for mutual aid; the central issue for practice is that whenever an opportunity for it arises, the worker should be able to recognize it and help members seize that opportunity.

On the other hand, a few conditions do need to co-exist for mutual aid. To begin with, we need to be willing to consider ourselves as only one of many possible helpers in the group (Middleman and Wood 1990a). It is not by accident that social work with groups refers to the practitioner as a worker rather than a leader (Trecker 1955). Yes, the practitioner brings his or her own expertise to the group, but so does every other participant in some unique way, and it is those areas of expertise that form the basis for mutual aid. The more we assume the role of the group's only or even primary helper, therefore, the more difficult we make it for members to identify the strengths they might use to help themselves and one another.

Mutual aid also requires a democratic-humanistic culture (Glassman 2009), in which everyone has a real say in the group's affairs and in which everyone's feelings are taken into account when decisions are made. Hence, the practitioner also needs to be willing to share authority with the other participants so that whatever leadership skills members possess can be used to the group's advantage. How do we share our authority? Very simply, we encourage and help members take part in all of the group's decision-making processes (see Chapter 8).

Furthermore, members need to have some capacity to communicate and interact with one another (Newstetter 1935; Trecker 1955; Hartford 1964; Schwartz 1976; Breton 1990; Middleman 1982; Middleman and Wood 1990a; Shulman 2011). Therefore, although we would not prevent a person with limited communication skills from participating, since helping people develop such skills is one of the great benefits of group membership, neither would we expect persons with no capacity to interact, verbally or nonverbally, to come together for purposes of mutual aid.

In addition, it is important that the group have a purpose, a common cause that binds members' individual goals to one another (Kurland 1978; Lowy 1976; Galinsky and Schopler 1977; Papell and Rothman 1980; Northen and Kurland 2001; Glassman 2009). Only through a sense of community or we-ness will members come to acknowledge and accept one another as potential sources of help. In fact, the precise nature of their common cause matters less than the fact that they have one, since mutual aid can be useful for achieving all types of tasks and goals, be they labeled support, insight, action, education, or recreation. True, conscious and specific attention to process may slow down task achievement to some extent, but we have only to look at Japanese industrial protocol to see how mutual aid in action on a large scale benefits all of the participants in production-oriented ventures. We have all heard the old joke that a camel is a horse designed by a committee. Clearly, that was no mutual-aid committee!

Finally, no matter how genuinely we may desire it, mutual aid requires group-specific skill. Only through the purposeful use of such skill can we help a group become a Group, as Margaret Hartford (1978) put it. If we do not have the skill to attend to group process or, as Middleman and Wood (1990b) state it, to attend to the groupness of a group, we may end up doing more harm than good (Galinsky and Schopler 1977; Hartford 1978; Tropp 1978; Meddin 1986; Glassman 2009). We need skill that goes beyond what we use in individual work—skill to help the vision of mutual aid take on real-world characteristics.

Thus, if we relinquish the role of sole or even primary helper, if we encourage a democratic-humanistic culture, if we work with persons who can interact with their peers, if the group has a common purpose, and if we have group-specific skill, we can help any group actualize its particular mutual-aid potential. Setting and population provide us with a framework in which we need to carry out our planning process, yes (see Chapter 4); but in the end, as Clara Kaiser (1958) argues, mutual-aid practice is more a question of how we approach our work than where we do it.

One problem with many approaches to working with groups today is that they do not, in fact, attend specifically to group process. In fact, even those who claim to believe in mutual aid still tend to focus on individuals in the group (Rooney *et al.* 1981; Birnbaum *et al.* 1989; Middleman and Wood 1990b; Wayne and Garland 1990; Kurland and Salmon 1992; Steinberg 1992). However, labeled long ago as aggregational therapy of individuals (Hartford 1978) and, more recently, as casework in a group (Kurland and Salmon 1992), this type of work is actually "mutual-aid-less" (Kurland and Salmon 1992, p. 8)! Perhaps practitioners misunderstand the concept of mutual aid. Or perhaps they lack the skill to bring it about. In either case, when we merely carry out individual work against a group backdrop, we attend to neither the quality nor the capacity of the material at hand (Phillips 1957).

Implications for Practice

A mutual-aid model for group work carries many implications for practice. First, we must understand the theoretical basis for conceptualizing groups as mutual-aid systems and the many different dynamics, or facets, of mutual aid. Then, we must be willing to adopt a mindset in which we are neither the be-all nor end-all of any group process. We must take time to set the stage for mutual aid by specifically working toward group goals and norms that most promote mutual aid. We must appreciate the relationship between group development and mutual aid and understand how our participation influences group process and progress. We must know how to set into play and keep in motion the kind of problem-solving process that harnesses a group's mutual-aid capacity and understand the impact of group autonomy on its ability to develop mutual aid and the impact of its decision-making process on climate. We must be able to help each group reach beyond its particular obstacles to its own unique mutual-aid potential, help it discover and reach its potential for common ground, and help it use its differences in a productive way. Finally, we must be willing to adopt a consumer-based and process-oriented framework for evaluating group success as a mutual-aid system.

How This Book is Organized

This book has fourteen chapters, eight of which are devoted to a key component of basic mutual-aid practice and collectively guide the reader through the fundamentals of thinking about practice with groups from a mutual-aid point of view to actually evaluating a group's success as a mutual-aid system. One of these fourteen chapters is new: Chapter 3 identifies, above and beyond obstacles noted by Shulman (2011), ten worker-based obstacles to mutual aid along with their impact and antidotes. Years of additional classroom experience since the second edition of this book indicate that in fact, while some obstacles originate with potential group members, many more originate with workers who intervene in group process in a way that makes it virtually impossible for mutual aid to take root. Four chapters then make up "variations on a theme," describing and discussing the special challenges to

mutual-aid practice with groups whose characteristics do not resemble those of the classic system upon which most of the fundamental theories, principles, and skills are based, and offer specific skills to meet those challenges.

Chapter 1 offers a theoretical justification for using mutual aid as a framework for practice by reviewing the historical development of mutual aid in social work with groups, by discussing its role in social work with groups today, and by articulating the professional mindset needed for helping any group become and function as a mutual-aid system. Chapter 2 discusses in some detail the different dynamics, or facets, of mutual aid. The particular group-specific skills that best help set into motion and sustain each of the dynamics are also identified. Chapter 3 identifies ten worker-based obstacles to mutual aid, the impact of these obstacles, and their antidotes. Chapter 4 examines the impact of pre-group planning on a group's ability to develop a mutual-aid climate and identifies specific pre-group planning skills as well, giving particular attention to the concept of group purpose and an expanded discussion of the impact of curriculum-based practice. Chapter 5 identifies early group goals and norms that best set the stage for mutual aid and describes how working toward certain goals and helping the group to establish certain norms creates a climate that is conducive to mutual aid. The chapter also identifies group-specific skills for helping a group work toward certain goals and establish certain norms. Chapter 6 describes the relationship between group development and mutual aid, with a special focus on how the passage of time generally governs a group's ability to make use of the dynamics. The worker's role and expectations are also addressed in this chapter. Chapter 7 proposes a shift in thinking about and in approaching the use of group time for individual problem solving and offers cases in point and counterpoint to make explicit the implications for practice of such a shift. Chapter 8 discusses the relationship between the worker's exercise of authority and a group's capacity to develop mutual aid, expanding the discussion into issues of anti-oppression and anti-oppressive practice. This chapter also identifies group-specific skills for helping a group both assume responsibility for its affairs and carry out its decision-making processes according to democratic-humanistic values (Glassman 2009). Based upon the assumptions that (1) the members of any group inevitably bring with them some manner of difference and (2) those differences can help them think about new ways of being and doing, Chapter 9 presents seven keys for helping a group use its differences to work toward, rather than away from, its mutual-aid potential. It has also been expanded to include a discussion of the use of keys as metaphors for "unlocking" the potential of conflict to promote mutual aid.

The next four chapters then represent "variations" on the themes of practice that originate from the small, closed classic group. In recognition of the mandates for time-limited practice in many settings today, Chapter 10 outlines the special considerations of catalyzing mutual aid in single-session groups, and Chapter 11 addresses the principles of working with short-term groups, with each chapter identifying the group-specific skills that are special to that form of practice. In recognition that many settings are also offering open groups today, Chapter 12 then presents the special obstacles in helping open-ended groups develop and maintain a mutual-aid rhythm in spite of constantly changing faces, offering a number of group-specific skills for helping each *groupe du jour* realize its unique potential. Finally, based on the growing use of very large groups in some settings, such as institutional floor meetings and "psychoeducation workshop" type groups, Chapter 13 describes the particular obstacles to catalyzing mutual aid in large systems and identifies a number of group-specific skills to help promote a climate that is both humanistic and democratic (Glassman 2009).

Beyond these four chapters, the last chapter, Chapter 14, proposes a consumer-based and

process-oriented approach to evaluating the group's success as a mutual-aid system. This discussion has been expanded to identify the special characteristics of mutual aid that make it possible to conceptualize mutual-aid practice as inherently research based and evidence based. The chapter includes an evaluation chart which, when used comprehensively, creates a matrix that allows the observer to assess both the quantity and quality of mutual aid that is taking or has taken place. Group-specific skills are identified for participants to carry out that process.

Finally, all chapters but one offer exercises for the classroom that provide opportunities for learners to make an immediate transfer of theoretical material to practice. Each exercise requires group participation in some form or other, also allowing the participants to experience small-group process. Although it is not the intent of these exercises to provide "secondary" lab experience, participants can be asked to debrief process in addition to sharing the results of their work, which can provide new insights about practice to those who are new to both the look and feel of mutual aid.

1

THE MUTUAL-AID MODEL OF
SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS

In This Chapter

Mutual Aid: Roots and *Raison d'être*
Mutual Aid Defined and Described
   Mutual Aid and Communication
   The Mutual-Aid Climate
   The Need for Common Cause
The Mutual-Aid Mindset
The Primary Functions of Mutual-Aid Practice
   Harnessing Strengths
   Group Building
   Teaching Purposeful Use of Self
The Notion of Group-Specific Skillful Practice
Key Group Values, Norms, and Dynamics Compared

Key Concepts of This Chapter

Common Cause/Group Purpose
Communication
Dual Focus
Group Building
Group Climate
Group-Specific Skillful Practice
Harnessing Strengths
Holistic Use of Groups
Mutual Aid
Mutual-Aid Mindset
Psychosocial Practice with Groups
Purposeful Use of Self
Shared Authority
Strength-Centered Practice

Chapter Materials

Exercise 1: *Need and Potential—Possibilities Come to Life*
Appendix A: *Mutual-Aid Dynamics and Their Related Skills*

Mutual Aid: Roots and *Raison d'être*

Although not the first to identify mutual aid as the key to social group work, William Schwartz (1961) was the first to introduce the term into social work. By the time he adopted the term, however, not only had the concept long been recognized as central to social group work, it had been used in other fields as well. For example, mutual aid had already been used as a framework for thinking about biological evolution (Wilson 1979), as well as for analyzing social advancement (Kropotkin 1908). "Beside the 'law of Mutual Struggle,'" Petr Kropotkin wrote,

> there is in Nature the "law of Mutual Aid," which, for the success of the struggle for life, and especially for the progressive evolution of the species, is far more important than the law of mutual contest. I obviously do not deny the struggle for existence, but I maintain that the progressive development of the animal kingdom, and especially of mankind, is favored much more by mutual support than by mutual struggle (1908, p. x).

Mutual aid is not a fabrication of social work; nor is it a modern passing notion. The idea of people helping one another has been acknowledged for a long time as a human dynamic of some biological and social import. In terms of professional work with groups, a review of the literature reveals very clearly that mutual aid has always been at the heart of social group work practice. (See, for example, Breton 1990; Coyle 1949; Gitterman 1989; Gitterman and Shulman 1994; Glassman 2009; Hartford 1964, 1971, 1978; Konopka 1964, 1983; Kurland and Salmon 1992; Middleman 1978, 1987; Middleman and Wood 1990a, 1990b; Newstetter 1935; Northen and Kurland 2001; Papell and Rothman 1980; Phillips 1964; Schwartz and Zalba 1971; Shulman 2011; Wilson and Ryland 1949.) In the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, for example, settlement houses used mutual aid to help groups of immigrants acclimate themselves to new ways of life, with new challenges and expectations, by helping them help one another to meet all manner of social, educational, vocational, and recreational needs.

Today, mutual aid is acknowledged as the hallmark of social work with groups, as we have come to see that helping people engage in mutual aid meets several of the profession's most powerful mandates for practice. By attending to both personal and interpersonal needs, we carry out its mandate for a psychosocial perspective (Glassman 2009; Northen and Kurland 2001; Papell and Rothman 1980). By attending to the group as a system as well as attending to each individual in the group, our practice reflects a holistic use of groups (Newstetter 1935; Shulman 2011, Tropman 2006)—a duality of focus that greatly distinguishes social work with groups from other approaches (Glassman 2009; Hartford 1964; Middleman and Wood 1990a; Shulman 2011). Finally, by focusing on people's strengths instead of limitations, the mutual-aid model reflects a strength-centered way of helping people (Breton 1990; Glassman 2009; Middleman 1978; Newstetter 1935). In fact, group work is particularly well suited for meeting this last mandate, for in direct contrast to casework protocol, which requires that people assume and maintain a help-seeking position, mutual aid requires that they exercise and extend their strengths to help others as well as themselves.

Mutual Aid Defined and Described

So, what exactly is mutual aid? Mutual aid tends to be so misunderstood that we should begin with what it is not. Mutual aid is not a process of problem identification followed by

the gift of advice—an all-too-common phenomenon of so-called helping groups. Composed of several possible dynamics (Shulman 2011), mutual aid can be said to have many different faces or looks (see Chapter 2). Often, when people think of mutual aid, they think of it as a process, and even more specifically as a particular kind of problem-solving process, but while mutual aid is a process, problem solving is only one of its dynamics; there are many other dynamics as well, such as sharing information and mutual support. When one group member offers a co-member a simple touch of comfort or nod of understanding it reflects a dynamic or dimension of mutual aid. When a group comes together as a force of advocacy or change, that is mutual aid. When members talk about issues considered taboo in other groups, that is mutual aid. When a group provides a safe haven for its members to explore differences and to try new ways of thinking, being, or doing, that too reflects mutual aid. Note that all of these dynamics are member–member based, not worker–member based. That is the overarching distinction between a mutual-aid system and groups in which the helping dynamics emanate primarily from the practitioner.

In addition to being a process, mutual aid is a result. To the extent that it is comforting to be with others who share common concerns, when group members realize that their co-members do share common feelings, needs, or concerns, for example, that result reflects mutual aid. Or to the extent that any one member's concerns have been resolved through the group's collective problem-solving efforts, that result may be said to reflect mutual aid. To the extent that group members emerge from some process having gained greater insight into themselves or a greater capacity for empathy, that result is mutual aid. Or to the extent that one member's cause has been advanced through collective social action, that result too is mutual aid.

We have a substantial philosophical and epistemological foundation for conceptualizing mutual aid as the key to social work practice with groups. And although implications for practice have been developed from a variety of perspectives (such as composition, stage theory, self-determination, communication, decision making, relationships, group building, structure, systems theory, or skill, to name but a few), all theoretical fingers point to mutual aid as cause and effect of social work with groups. As cause, mutual aid is why we use groups as a helping medium, why we plan our work with groups the way we do, and why we intervene in process the way we do. As effect, mutual aid is the result of our interventions—that is, what people experience as a result of having participated in the group. In essence, then, mutual aid is why we do what we do, and it is what happens as a result of what we do. "But there's more to social work with groups than mutual aid, isn't there?" someone once asked me. Still a doctoral student in search of a dissertation, I had not yet fully digested the vast body of social group work literature and so, not overly secure of my position, I responded, "Oh, of course." I still regret that response, for I have come to believe that exactly the opposite is true—that mutual aid is, in fact, the *sine qua non* of work with groups. In one form or another and at various levels of intensity, the opportunity for mutual aid exists from the moment a group meets ("Where do we hang up our coats?") to the moment it ends ("Must we say good-bye?"). At the same time, mutual aid does not come about automatically. It needs communication. It needs a certain kind of climate. And it is most easily actualized in groups that are formed around a common cause.

Mutual Aid and Communication

Before mutual aid can be a result, it must reflect a process. And because mutual aid occurs through direct member-to-member contact, group members must have both some capacity

and an opportunity to communicate and interact with one another. Further, they must have the freedom to do so if and when they believe they have a contribution to make to that process.

Not all forms of group process are conducive to mutual aid, as Middleman and Wood (1990b) point out. In fact, we can often gauge the value assigned to mutual aid by the way in which the members of a group do interact. For example, when the worker talks primarily to members individually, one by one, they are effectively denied any opportunity to talk with one another spontaneously and directly. This classic didactic style, labeled a maypole pattern of communication by Middleman and Wood (1990b), reflects the antithesis of the process most conducive to mutual aid. Or when group members are asked to take turns talking in relation to any given subject, for example, they may have occasion to respond to what others have said, but they are still denied the spontaneity so crucial to mutual aid. No matter if ideas spark other ideas; group members must simply "hold that thought" until it is their turn to talk. Thus, we would say that this style of communicating, labeled "round robin" by Middleman and Wood (1990b), also closes many windows of opportunity for mutual aid. The hot-seat syndrome (Middleman and Wood 1990b), which has also been called casework in a group (Kurland and Salmon 1992), can unfold into two slightly different scenarios, neither of which promotes mutual aid. In the first scenario, the worker engages in dialogue with a particular group member about that person's issues while others listen and presumably learn through self-directed analogy or osmosis. Because there is little room for member-to-member interaction in this scenario, there is little occasion for mutual aid. Sometimes, on the other hand, group members are also engaged in this process; and while this latter scenario may promote interaction and spontaneity, the quality of interaction can often become—as many group-shy people would undoubtedly testify—harshly confrontational and less than helpful.

The only communication style that inherently or automatically promotes mutual aid is a free-floating one (Middleman and Wood 1990b). By establishing a norm of speaking when there is something to say regarding to the subject at hand, a free-floating pattern of group interaction permits members both to interact directly with one another and to contribute spontaneously to the group's discussion.

Of course some room exists for groups to use a variety of communication styles, the choice of the moment depending on the developmental needs and skills of individual members (e.g., age), the needs and skills of the group as a system (e.g., how long the group has been together), and on the nature of the particular issues at hand (e.g., the type and intensity of the issues under discussion). It might not make sense for a problem-solving discussion to be carried out in round-robin fashion, for example, but it might make sense for the members of a new group to use such a format for introductions. Thus, although there may be moments in which other patterns of interaction make some sense, the free-floating pattern is still the most conducive to mutual aid as a general group norm.

The Mutual-Aid Climate

Although group members need freedom to interact, the quality of that interaction also needs to be conducive to mutual aid. It may be the quantity of interaction that sets the stage for mutual aid, but it is its quality that sets the tone for it. It is the quality of its processes that sets the mutual-aid system apart from, on one hand, the social tea group in which politeness reigns supreme and, on the other, so-called helping groups in which personal attack reigns

supreme. In fact, as Lang (1986, 2010) claims, it is the very quality of group interaction that determines whether people will be able to build a community or whether they are destined to remain in a state of mere aggregation.

Therefore, the climate of mutual aid may be said to be one of balance. Scales are weighted on one side with freedom to express real feelings and ideas, but they are equally weighted on the other with an obligation to respect the feelings and ideas of others. That is, we want group members to feel safe to express their honest opinions and attitudes without the fear of being so harshly judged that having done so once they never dare to do so again, but we would also ask that they listen to what others have to say with an open mind and sensitivity. A mutual-aid climate is generous in spirit, then, but its generosity is tempered with the demand for serious attention to those issues of common cause around which the group was formed in the first place.

The mutual-aid climate is also one in which the need and desire for mutuality, cooperation, and companionship is balanced with the need and desire for individuality. Thus, while we discourage one-upmanship due to its inherent counterproductivity to community building, for example, we would still recognize, appreciate, and use group members' individual skills to help strengthen the group as a whole and recognize the value of bringing to light competing ideas in the service of thinking things through (Breton 2004).

One of the best uses for a group is to help people try out new ways of being, thinking, and doing. Thus, the mutual-aid climate is also one of creativity. Brainstorming is encouraged. All possible courses of action, no matter how implausible, are entertained, and through such activities as role play, psychodrama, various art forms, or even discussion, group members explore ways of being that make them uncomfortable or about which they disagree, or they adopt positions and counter positions in their struggle to locate their own way. At the same time, since the creation of new possibilities is always carried out with real-world living in mind, mutual aid also demands a measure of reality testing so that the passage into new territories is always balanced with an eye to real implications and real consequences.

Finally, the mutual-aid climate balances structure with flexibility. If the group decides that its purpose as originally defined no longer reflects its common bond, for example, it needs to have the freedom to redefine its bond so its process does not become "beside the point." Mutual aid is most likely to develop in a group with a clearly defined purpose, therefore, but a mutual-aid system still requires the freedom to change its purpose should a redirection seem to be in order. Or, should we be prepared to help the group carry out a particular manner of content or activity, for example, only to discover that members have changed their minds in favor of another form of content, we need to be flexible enough to entertain that possibility. If we are not, our practice simply becomes a reflection of professional oppression rather than a battle against all social oppression (see Chapter 8). Thus, although mutual aid requires a framework for practice composed of such factors as nature of practice setting, membership needs, group purpose, composition, and number, length, and timing of meetings, it also requires the freedom to evaluate that framework and to entertain the possibility of change.

The Need for Common Cause

Over the years one of the most pervasive myths about group work has been, as Margaret Hartford wrote in 1978, that "if a worker collects an aggregate, that is, gets people together in the same place, and responds to them individually in the presence of each other, something

significant and helpful will occur" (p. 9). Experience working with groups and analysis of that work has taught us, however, that although something significant and helpful may indeed occur under those circumstances, it usually does so haphazardly. Individual work with group members by the practitioner in the presence of an audience may be an acceptable norm in some groups, therefore, but if we want to establish a norm of mutual aid, we need to take a more planned approach. We need to offer new group members a common denominator that is both clear and compelling enough to draw them together and keep them invested in helping one another so that we, the worker, can "move to the back seat" in that process. We need to offer them a common cause, or, as it will be referred to from now on, a group purpose.

The concept of group purpose is central to the social group work method (see, for example, Galinsky and Schopler 1977; Glassman 2009; Hartford 1978; Kurland 1978; Lowy 1976; Northen and Kurland 2001). It represents the mission of the group as a system, and reaches beyond the scope of individual goals. Only when a group purpose has been established does a basis exist upon which members can develop mutual-aid relationships. In fact, mutual aid is less a reflection of the goodness of fit between method and population than a reflection of the goodness of fit between group members' needs and the group's purpose. Too often, however, group purpose is perceived as a relatively amorphous idea around which individuals collect none too neatly to realize their own loosely formulated goals, rather than as the powerful nucleus that, like the atom, tightly binds group members to one another and around which all things should happen. The problem of not having a group purpose, then, is that individual goal achievement takes center stage and, as a result, the group simply becomes a context for *casework in a group* (Kurland and Salmon 1992) instead of one for group work.

Although purpose is tentatively identified through individual dialogues with potential members about their needs and concerns, it is actualized as a group concept through *en groupe* dialogue or, as Middleman and Wood (1996) coined it, "multilogue." That is, it is brought to life for the group through in-group discussion about the commonality of members' needs and desires. Without this kind of dialogue, they are left to divine or fantasize about how they are each related to the others, the essence of what brings them together in this particular group stays unclear, and the group has difficulty locating a basis for group building. In short, the very foundation for mutual aid remains vague.

Speaking about the importance of group purpose might cause some to argue that it is "Standard Practice 101" to ask the members of a group to discuss their needs and desires when they first meet. But a purposeful and specific dialogue about how those individual needs and desires bind group members in common cause does not appear to be standard practice. The fact that so many practitioners articulate content (what members will talk about) when asked to describe group purpose (why the group will do what it will do) suggests that the concept of purpose is often misunderstood altogether.

The Mutual-Aid Mindset

From the very first group meeting, the social worker thinks about working herself out of a job. That is to say, she enables the group to increase its autonomy to its greatest potential. "Although therapy can be the content . . . some clinical work will fall outside the realm of social work, especially if the focus of the practitioner is limited to the treatment of individuals—casework in a group" (Middleman and Wood 1990a, p. 11).

The mutual dimension of mutual aid reflects the belief that, when we help others, we also help ourselves by giving ourselves the pleasure of confirming and sharing ways of being and