TOWARD A STRATEGY OF GROUP WORK PRACTICE

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In the long history of the helping professions, it has been only recently that the working processes of the practitioner have been accepted as an appropriate field for scientific study. Once it has defined its body of knowledge, its social aspirations, and its goal-commitments, a profession must say something equally precise about the ways in which these entities are put to use in the working relationship between the practitioner and his clients.

In the group work segment of the social work profession the methodological problem had not yet become apparent when, in 1948, a committee of the American Association of Group Workers issued the now classical “Definition of the Function of the Group Worker.”¹ This statement, used as a basis for teaching and interpreting group work practice during the past decade, has until recently served as an excellent model of the state of professional thinking. In its time, it served to formulate social goals, define the field of operations, stake a claim to certain kinds of expertise, and reveal some basic assumptions about people and groups in a democratic society.

What it did not do was to make the necessary distinctions between means and ends which could have helped to dissipate the strong teleological emphasis and to challenge the intrenched assumption that professional skill was somehow inherent in the worker’s goals, his knowledge, his feeling for the client, his value-commitments, and certain of his personal attributes. The gap between the worker’s intent and his effect was bridged with terms like “enables,” “provides for,” “functions in such a way that,” “aims to,” and other phrases that produced closure without coming to grips with the theoretical problems involved in designing a strategy of professional practice.² The difficulty was aptly summed up by Louis Towley, who pointed out in 1957 that “this specialized field is rich in democratic concepts; it has a wealth of examples; but in professionally unique concepts, ‘method theory,’ it has been curiously poor.”³

The newer interest in the systematic study of professional practice is part of a similar impetus in social work as a whole. Although there are those who see

this development as a "retreat into technique" and as a distraction from the "real" purposes of the profession, practitioners and teachers are gradually becoming excited by the possibility of finding out, after many years, what the exact nature of group work skill is, what it looks like in action, and how it can be conceptualized and taught.

How does a profession proceed to develop and systematize its concepts of practice? To say that it needs to build a more intimate working relationship with science is only the beginning of an answer. Certainly the liaison of science and practice is a historic one; professions that do not keep pace with new knowledge soon cease to be professions. But it is also true that an orientation to scientific inquiry does not provide a simple method of converting facts into acts, scientific findings into appropriate professional behavior. The transition from knowing to doing is more complex.

The complexity arises from two major problems faced by all the human-relations professions as they survey their appropriate fields of knowledge. One is that the body of potentially useful information is encyclopedic, encompassing every conceivable aspect of human development and organization; the other is that action cannot be deduced directly from knowledge, no matter how vast that knowledge may be.

In relation to the first problem—the overwhelming array of pertinent information—Max Millikan has pointed out that the Bavelas-Perlmutter experiments at the Center for International Studies suggest that "an individual's capacity for making sound judgment about a complex situation may be seriously impaired by supplying him with a lot of information which he believes should be relevant but whose influence on the situation is not clear to him."4 Harold Lasswell comments that "the idea of strategy does not depend upon omniscience."5 The dilemma Millikan describes, a familiar one to group workers, seems to stem directly from the fact that the worker finds himself burdened with a great many answers for which he has no questions. He can make little use of such information until he has ordered his experience into some coherent frame of reference from which he can develop his questions and focus his inquiry into the undifferentiated mass of scientific data. Thus the search for significant problems—for the questions that will draw forth the kinds of information most needed to throw light on the practical tasks of the group worker—calls for a theoretical effort designed to develop a system of interconnected concepts drawn from the experience of practice.6

It is when we question what these concepts shall be about that we come to the second difficulty mentioned above—that action is not deducible from knowledge. Those who assume that scientific evidence carries within it its own implications for behavior make the same mistake made by those in an earlier time who believed that action flowed inevitably and appropriately


from one's convictions about values and goals. It is what Millikan refers to as the "inductive fallacy—the assumption that the solution of any problem will be advanced by the simple collection of fact." The fact is that the gap between what is known and what should be done is invariably bridged by value-goal orientations, often implicit and unformulated. When knowledge is converted into action on the basis of subtle and unstated values, the principle is unverifiable, except by those who unconsciously share the same assumptions. When creeds and valued outcomes are made explicit, practice principles are verifiable by all, on the basis of whether, given the first two variables—a fact and a valued outcome—the third will provide the implementing force. Practice cannot be "testable" in any other sense.

It is, therefore, suggested that practice theory, or method theory, can be defined as a system of concepts integrating three conceptual subsystems: one which organizes the appropriate aspects of social reality, as drawn from the findings of science; one which defines and conceptualizes specific values and goals, which we might call the problems of policy; and one which deals with the formulation of interrelated principles of action. Each of these constitutes a major area of investigation, each has its own conceptual problems, and each is related to the others within a total scheme. The purpose of this paper is to point up some of the major conceptual problems in each of these areas and to show how each area depends upon the others for its own clarity and coherence.


PROBLEMS OF SOCIAL REALITY

As we turn to the social sciences for information about human behavior and social organization, our task is to establish those lines of inquiry which emerge most directly from our experiences with people. Gordon Hearn has suggested some proposals to focus the study of social work practice in general8 and Robert Vinter has discussed some lines of work within the context of his frame of reference for group work.9 From my own orientation to the tasks of the group work practitioner,10 the following are suggested as some of the central themes around which the struggles of practice have taken place.

*The individual and the social.*—Probably the most enduring and pervasive methodological problems have stemmed from an inability to develop an integrative conception of the relationship between individual need and social demand. This is the difficulty that gives birth to the issue of "content versus process"—the dilemma wherein the practitioner is forced to make impossible choices between the functional necessities of individual growth and the social requirements of the culture in which he operates. The early efforts of


Sherif,\textsuperscript{11} Mead,\textsuperscript{12} Kropotkin,\textsuperscript{13} and others to effect a workable synthesis were significant, but group workers were not yet in a position to formulate their problems so that these concepts could be used. In recent years, social scientists have come alive to the issue. Alex Inkeles' attempt to analyze this work without regard to internal professional boundaries has been helpful.\textsuperscript{14} For practitioners, the present problem is that much scientific work is pegged either at a very high level of abstraction or at empirical laboratory efforts with artificial groupings that are difficult to translate into terms relevant to group work experience. As in so many other problem areas, the need is to break down the general question into some middle-range propositions that can be tested in our own situational field. Lippitt, Watson, and Westley have suggested work on the "forces toward innovation" through which people attempt to use, control, and change the people and things around them.\textsuperscript{15} Another more specific line of inquiry might consist in the effort to develop motivational typologies with which to ascertain elements of consensus among group members and agency personnel.


\textsuperscript{13}Peter Alekseevich Kropotkin, \textit{Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1917).


From my own frame of reference, which assumes a symbiotic interdependence between the individual and his culture and which conceives the agency as a special case of the individual-social engagement, my prediction would be that mutually perceived "success" would take place primarily in these areas of motivational consensus.

The group work setting—as a living laboratory of the individual-social encounter—has failed conspicuously to produce its own research and add to the systematic study of this relationship in action. The field was so completely captured, early in its development, by the character-building, social-conformity pressures of the group work "movement" that the need to change people far outweighed the need to understand them and to examine carefully the ways in which their natural tendencies carry them into the society in which they develop. Thus, the move was made from socialization as a process—which needed to be analyzed and understood—to socialization as a demand. From that point, the road was a short one to the dilemma of "content versus process" and, ultimately, to the individual versus the group.

\textit{The structural and the dynamic.}—Our historic tendency has been to rely heavily on structural descriptions—"diagnostic" typologies—to describe the people with whom we work. The study-diagnosis-treatment model—based partly on the physician's detection and cure of disease and partly on the methods of research—is built from the assumption that these structural characteristics are stable enough for workers to base predictions, referrals, and "treatment" decisions upon them. However, it has been difficult to show
that this model bears any practical relation to the moment-to-moment, situationally fluid realities of the helping process in action. Hubert Bonner reports that "research has shown that it is difficult to predict the behavior of persons in a group from pre-measures of personality variables," and Gordon Allport has scored the "faddism" involved in the "overemphasis on diagnosis." "It is simply not true," he states, "that successful treatment invariably presupposes accurate diagnosis."17

Interest is mounting in elaborations of a newer approach, which has particular implications for the situational field in which the group worker operates. This approach points up the "circular, reciprocal relations . . . through which the component members of the field participate in and thereby create the field of the whole, which field in turn regulates and patterns their individual activities."18 This model calls attention to the interdependent transactions within a functional system—an organic whole "within which the relations determine the properties of its parts."19 The emphasis on relational determinants of behavior, while at the same time subjecting structural determinants to more critical scrutiny, has a strong potential impact on all group work practice conceptions. It may provide the stimulus for closer analysis of the differential forms of stress, social demand, and social opportunity offered by the various settings of group work practice.20 It may also stimulate the development of terminology—and perhaps new typologies—that will help us to express relations as well as structure and to distinguish more clearly between the two.

The group as "it" and as "they."— We have not yet developed a working conception of the group as a whole which might help the group worker to implement his traditional claim that group work skills are directed to the group as well as to the individuals within it. If the small group is a system which—like society itself—both integrates and differentiates its parts,21 group workers remain far more perceptive about the attributes of individuals than they are about the activity of the group as a whole. Familiar evidence is found in recorded anthropomorphisms like "the group laughed," in references to the group as "they," and in models of confusion, like "the group looked at each other." This failure to distinguish between the attributes of members and those of the collective has made it difficult to isolate and describe those professional skills which are designed to affect the system itself rather than any of its component parts.22 Efforts have been made to use the wealth of em-

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20 Robert D. Vinter's conception of "indirect means of influence" is an effort in this direction. See his "Small-Group Theory and Research . . . ," *op. cit.*, p. 128.


The recent work of the organizational theorists, the developing insight into the interdisciplinary implications of the system construct, and other integrative attempts now offer group workers the opportunity to analyze the group work experience in a new way. In the process they may begin to make their own unique contribution to this field of inquiry. The growing diversity of small-group systems in which they operate gives group workers the chance to observe both similarities and differences in the ways in which different kinds of groups integrate and differentiate their human components and relate themselves to the larger systems in which they operate.

*Internal and external determinants of change.*—Much of the discussion on "self-determination versus manipulation" has been carried on in a high moral tone, while a great deal of work needs to be done in studying the specific conditions under which people enlist the aid of others in their attempts to solve problems. The group worker is in a unique position to study the uses of help and the nature of influence, since he works within a system the essence of which is that people create many helping relationships in addition to, and concurrent with, the one formed with the worker. The problems of the group members in using each other are co-existent with their problems in using the worker. The group worker has an opportunity to examine in microcosm a very old idea, long since forgotten in a highly specialized civilization. This is the idea that the client-worker relationship is simply a special case of what Kropotkin described as the evolutionary theme of mutual aid—that is, the social devices through which human beings establish conditions of mutual support in the struggle for survival. More specifically, the group work situation offers the conditions for studying peer help and professional help within the same dynamic system, guided by the strong possibility that these two sets of movements have much in common and that, in fact, the latter may be a stylized, intensified version of the former.

**PROBLEMS OF POLICY**

The relationship between science and policy is reciprocal. Science takes its cues from human problems and yields its best answers to those who are disciplined and urgent in their search for solutions. The contribution of science to policy is to define boundaries, limit expectations, and clarify the range of alternatives. This idea of knowledge as a disciplining, limiting force is important in each of the problems to be discussed briefly below. It should be remembered that we are still in the

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23 See, for example, Mason Haire (ed.), *Modern Organisation Theory* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1959).


25 See Kropotkin, *op. cit.*

26 Bertha Capen Reynolds' *Social Work and Social Living* (New York: Citadel Press, 1951) explores this basic proposition in detail.

27 For a detailed discussion of the science-policy relationship, see Millikan, *loc. cit.*, and Lasswell, *loc. cit.*
context of the study of practice, and these problems are viewed from that perspective.

Functional definition.—Much of the difficulty in understanding the nature of group work skill stems from the lack of a clear and limited statement about the unique, operative function of the worker in his group. Such a statement, made in terms of action rather than intent, of function rather than purpose, would provide a focal point for a general strategy of practice. The strategic lines of action would be appropriate to the worker's ascribed function, would be directed to certain tasks and not to others, would be related to the functional performance of the members, and would be directed to the specific and limited factors over which the worker exercises some influence.

The components of the functional statement would be drawn from three main areas of investigation: the specific problems faced by group members as they move to relate their own sense of need to the social demands implicit in the collective tasks of the group; the functional assignment of the agency within its own dynamic system of neighborhood and community; and the social function of the profession itself as it lends itself to the agencies in which it works. This general orientation to the operational problem offers many questions for study: In what precise ways does the practice of group workers reflect the degree of conflict—and consensus—about the proper function of the worker within the group, as viewed by group members, agency administrators, and the worker himself? What are the conditions under which certain kinds of group behavior may be functional to the members and dysfunctional to the requirements of the agency, or vice versa? Under what conditions is it desirable to convert latent functions into manifest ones?

Structural ordering.—The task here is to study the circumstances under which the group establishes and maintains its position within the agency, for these circumstances create the framework within which the worker interprets and performs his tasks. If the structure is unclear and ambiguous—as in situations in which the agency secretly aspires to build character while it teaches clay-modeling—the worker's function becomes diffuse and unmanageable.

Several aspects of the relationship between the client group and its host system seem profitable for study. One is the process through which the stage of group formation or group intake establishes conditions of consensus or conflict about the nature of the "contract" between the group and its agency—what each may expect from the other, the normative requirements to which each may be held, and other factors which bind them together. Another important structural aspect lies in the complex of prepared events, activities, and ethical commitments which agency

28 The distinction between purpose and function is helpfully discussed in Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), chap. i.

29 These criteria are elaborated in Schwartz, "Group Work and the Social Scene," *op. cit.*, pp. 130–32.
administrations perceive as integral to their function and as substantial elements in their contributions to group life. Under what conditions do these prepared events and prestructured experiences become functional or dysfunctional for the groups for which they are intended?

Much of this problem of structural ordering lies in the relationship between what George C. Homans calls the "external" and the "internal" systems of the group—between "group behavior that enables the group to survive in its environment" and "group behavior that is an expression of the sentiments towards one another developed by the members of the group in the course of their life together." The tension between these two systems of group behavior sets up some of the central methodological problems of the group worker.

Value orientation.—A great deal has been said and written about the worker's obligation to acknowledge values and to profess them openly. But these injunctions are hard to obey, because they suffer from the same shortcomings as do the value formulations themselves—that is, they are too global, internally inconsistent, and unrelated to the specific conditions of group life. The professional commandments to stand for absolute and overgeneralized themes like "Jewish belongingness" or "social maturity," to "bear" values but not to "impose" them, to uphold both religious and secular-humanistic values at the same time, to extol modesty and thrift to children whose family modes are prevalingly those of conspicuous consumption—these are very complex materials from which to compose a rationale for the position of values in the strategy of practice. At this stage what is needed is more exact information about the value themes which merge or conflict within the lives of different groups and about the conditions under which these circumstances vary from group to group and from setting to setting—the religious and the secular, the sectarian and the non-sectarian, the therapeutic and the recreational. Content analyses of group work recording may help uncover some of the conflicts and inconsistencies which have made it difficult to break up the problem of value orientation without seeming to attack value systems themselves. Most important would be an attempt to isolate and formulate value items of limited scope which apply directly to the life of the group itself, which are drawn from its own history, and which represent normative guides without which the worker actually could not function.

Goal setting.—What kinds of knowledge would be best designed to help "place limits on the range of possible outcomes"? Here, as in the value question, the first requirement is that we begin with a willingness to drop exorbitant claims. Caught up early in the social promise of the small-group experience, it has been hard for group workers to give up the claim that the

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31 Millikan, op. cit., p. 166.
club group in the leisure-time agency alters personality, creates new value systems, and effects other profound changes in people's lives. This abstract and totalistic way of framing its objectives has prevented the field from examining the real, if limited, influence that skilful group work practice probably has, and the kinds of specific help that people in groups are actually able to use.

There are several lines of study that may help to bring practice goals closer to reality. There is, for example, the problem of separating worker goals from member goals, so that one can distinguish between the process of teaching and the process of learning—or, in social work terms, the dynamics of giving help and those of taking help. Study of the moment-to-moment interaction of these two processes should help clarify the means-ends structures of each and relate the desired outcomes more closely to possible ones.

A second line of inquiry may be directed toward the definition of outcomes that may reasonably be expected. If, for example, a worker aspires to help a group develop a wider variety of problem-solving devices, he may then create instruments to measure his degree of success. This is what Martin Wolins calls "a single, readily ascertainable development." By contrast, a change-objective like "achieving socially desirable goals" is both unmeasurable and unachievable since the behavioral indexes are undefined and, even if they were defined, they would still remain far beyond any conceivable range of influence to be expected of a single worker operating in a small sector of people's lives.

PROBLEMS OF ACTION

Given a body of knowledge about the social realities of group experience, and given a use of this knowledge to work out a realistic function and achievable value-goal objectives, one must next lay out a plan of action. Such a plan is essentially a way of breaking down a broad functional assignment into its component classes of activity.

At this point an organizing construct is needed from which to create the categories in which to gather up the various acts that the worker performs as he goes about his job. This is the point at which there might be advantages in using the "role" construct, an action-oriented idea designed to relate the worker's movements to those of others in a dynamic system. However, the term is so overladen with ambiguities and special uses that one experiences difficulty in using it without developing a specialized rationale for its meaning in this context. For the present, the term "task" may serve. Any function can be divided into a number of tasks necessary to perform it, and any specific act may be understood as related to one or another of these task headings.

Once having determined what these implementing tasks are, one must define and describe the skills necessary to carry them out. In this framework, then, the problems of action which climax the methodological study are those of task definition and skill definition.

Task definition.—The problems of task analysis revolve around three main
points. Each task (a) must emerge from the theoretical scheme to which it is related, (b) must be directed to the tasks of the group members themselves, and (c) must be broad enough to encompass a number of helping activities, which should be specifiable in concrete terms.

For example, if "the general functional assignment of the social work profession is to mediate the process through which the individual and his society reach out for each other through a mutual need for self-fulfilment,"38 we may then conceive of five implementing tasks: (1) to search out the common ground between the client's need-perception and the social demands with which he is faced; (2) to detect and challenge the obstacles that obscure this common ground; (3) to contribute otherwise unavailable and potentially useful data; (4) to reveal and project the worker's own feeling for the client and his problem; and (5) to define the limits and requirements of the situation in which the client-worker relationship is set.37 The analytic process in examining the second of these tasks, for example, would proceed as follows. It would begin by describing the ways in which this task is designed to implement the functional statement. It would then proceed to describe and document some of the specific social realities involved—the origin of obstacles, what they look like in action, and the forms in which they are perceived by the members. Finally, it would describe the worker's activities—revealing impediments to action, supporting the members as they enter the area of taboo, and protecting the focus of work, lest it be lost in the preoccupation with obstacles. This is of course a highly condensed account but it may serve to give some inkling of the possibilities offered in carving out limited areas for intensive study.

Skill definition.—The difficulty in defining skill in human relations is the problem of describing an act in its own terms, rather than in terms of its results. One may jibe at the notion that "the operation was a success, but the patient died," but the fact remains that it is impossible to develop a communicable art of surgery until we are willing to admit that it is possible for an operation to be well performed and for the patient to die. All this means is that the human material has a dynamic of its own and that the process of helping consists of two interdependent processes—the offer of help (the worker's act) and the use of it (the client's response). To say that the skill of an act is to be measured by its effect is to equate skill with predictive certainty and to leave out the client entirely. Social work cannot use a model borrowed from those who work with completely controllable materials—that is, inanimate objects.

It is true, of course, that the concern with skill is designed to help us narrow the range of uncertainty—that is, to find those acts which go most directly toward their purpose. Such acts must reflect "the greatest degree of consideration for and utilization of the quality and capacity of the material,"38

37 Ibid., pp. 157–58.
but unless we can develop some descriptions of skilful activity, independent of effect, we cannot judge skill or order its "levels," or teach it; we certainly cannot, as we have often complained, interpret it to the general public.

This is a difficult job, but there are some indications that it is not an impossible one. We know, for example, that skill is an action concept. Skill is observable behavior of an actor-with-a-purpose toward others in a relational system. There are, of course, a number of mental acts—expressed mainly in the concept of "diagnosis"—but these have no value until they are translated into overt behavior guided by purpose. We know, too, that the factor of immediacy is important—that is, the further we move from the idea of present purpose, the "next step," the more difficult it is to define an act in its own terms. Thus, the ability to read a hidden message and to show the client his problem in a new form is a response to an immediate problem in helping. As such, it is definable, teachable, perhaps even measurable. By contrast, the attempt to formulate skills designed to "make the client more self-sufficient" is an impossible task.

A major contribution can be made in this area by those whose responsibility it is to educate for professional skill—social work teachers, agency supervisors, administrators of in-training programs. In this connection, an interesting attempt has been made by a group of field instructors to develop some models of group work skill, to make some determinations about levels of practice, and to describe the specific teaching and learning problems associated with the various models.

A NOTE ON RESEARCH

Despite the impatience of those who would like to move as quickly as possible into studies of outcome and effectiveness, our main progress for a time will probably be in studies of process and of limited effects.39 In the course of what Bartlett has called "learning to ask better questions,"40 our important devices are still descriptive, exploratory, and theory-developing; our major tools are still the group record, the life-history, the critical incident, and other techniques for codifying and conceptualizing the experience of practice. Perhaps our most critical problem is that so much of this experience is unavailable to us, since so little systematic and analytic work has been emerging from our potentially richest sources of information—the leisure-time agencies and their practitioners.

This is a period in which the social scientists are increasingly aware that the study of social systems—small and large—presents new challenges to the partnership of science and practice. Lawrence Frank put it this way to an assemblage of psychologists:

Perhaps we can devise new and appropriate methods if we will focus on the situation or difficulty, as in operations research, instead of relying so much on the assumptions and formulations of our discipline, especially since these offer little help in approaching organized complexities.

What the practitioner seeks is not merely a presentation of what exists or is occurring, or what trends may be revealed, no matter how

39 See Wolins, op. cit., for his distinction between "effectiveness" and "effect."

precisely these are measured or correlated. Rather, he needs a plan of action, a strategy for dealing with situations so that desired ends may be attained through a kind of action research which will help people to change their ideas, expectations, and behavior.41

It is this development of a "plan of action"—a strategy of helping people in groups—that represents the next major task of the group worker in social work.

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Received November 25, 1961

"Frank, "Research for What?" op. cit., p. 19.