

Real Cases Project: **Social Work with Groups**

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INTRODUCTION

A. Overview of this Course within the Social work Curriculum

This course is designed to increase students' knowledge and skill in social work practice with groups. Covered are the generic knowledge and skills that social workers require to work in groups with vulnerable populations. An aim of the course is to assist students in recognizing the efficacy of practice with groups in a variety of clinical and community settings. Emphasis is on the necessary skills for influencing individual change through small groups. Special issues include values and ethics in group work practice and social justice concerns. This is an elective course that builds upon the knowledge and skills acquired in the first year Foundations of Practice courses.

A. Relevance of these Case Studies to this Course

Each of the three case studies will be used on many levels in this course. For example, aspects of each case will illustrate the need/opportunities for various types of groups such as socialization groups, therapy and counseling groups, support and self help groups, and task groups. The relevance of each of these types of groups will be discussed and explored in detail, specific to the cases; how group work can be helpful to the family members and staff involved in these cases. These cases will show how specific types of groups are indicated with problems such as abuse/neglect, mental illness addiction, depression, physical illness, parenting, and social isolation, and other key issues presented in the cases.

The cases will be used to teach social group work concepts including: agency context, need, purpose, composition, structure, content, pre-group contact, and evaluation. Problems present in these cases where social group work may be indicated as an intervention include: Andrea's history with mental illness and subsequent feelings of isolation, Vincent's experiences of having a mentally ill mother, Anne M's history of domestic violence and the associated feelings of isolation, shame, and self blame, and Jason's experiences having an abusive grandmother and unstable home environment.

Social workers working with each of these three cases could benefit from support groups as well to help manage the emotional stress of their jobs.

B. Specific Learning Objectives Related to Using the Cases in this Course

- Through careful discussion of the cases, students will gain an understanding of the roots of social group work, particularly its emphasis on work with poor and oppressed populations, for example children, adolescents, people struggling with mental illness, people experiencing trauma, people who are in foster care, homeless, and people with health problems.
- Students will learn about various client needs and how group work can meet some of these needs, for example mental illness, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, isolation, addiction, foster care, homelessness, lack of social support, and depression,.
- Students will develop an ability to articulate the potential benefits of a group experience and when the group is the preferred modality in social work practice.
- Students will be learn about different types of groups, for example socialization groups, therapy and counseling groups, support and self help groups, and task groups and will generate group examples from each of the three cases.
- Students will learn specific group work dynamics, including all elements of the mutual aid process, and will become practiced in various group work skills, particularly those pertaining to latency aged children, cases of abuse/neglect, mental illness and domestic violence, isolation, depression, autism, and other issues.

C. Overview of What is Included in this Guide

This Teaching Guide includes an overview of the course, Social Work with Groups, the learning objectives for incorporating the three cases into the course, a discussion of how the cases will be used as a semester-long centerpiece to teach many core group work concepts and skills, and a discussion also about how the cases can be used in a single class session to more deeply illustrate group work concepts “in action.” Suggested readings are also included.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

A. Strategy One: Course-Long Integration of Cases

The three cases will be the centerpiece of this course. Various group work concepts, theories, skills, and ideas will be illustrated through a discussion and careful examination of the cases. Specific course-long themes include: The Process of Forming a Group Within an Agency; Planning: Composition, Structure, Content; The

Dynamics of Mutual Aid; The Beginning Stage of Group Development; Power and Control; Mutuality and Work; Separation, Termination, Transition.

1. Area/issue of the case studies to be highlighted:

Students will be asked to identify the problems in the cases and identify missed opportunities for group work intervention. Students will be asked to identify client needs and go through the planning of various groups for these cases. Students will explore these questions: What is the client need? How does it fit into the agency context? How can group work be helpful? What type of groups are indicated and for whom? What are the barriers or obstacles to the development of groups in these cases? How will the obstacles be overcome? What is the group's purpose? What are the recruitment, composition, leadership and evaluation strategies?

Students will be asked to select a client from one of the case studies, for example, Andrea, Vincent, Anne, Mary or Jason, and to identify ways that group work could have been implemented into the service plan. Problems that could have been addressed through a group work approach include: Andrea's long history with untreated mental illness and subsequent feelings of isolation, failure, and low self esteem, Vincent's feelings of isolation associated with being the child of a mentally ill mother; Vincent's experiences with autism and his need to connect with others with similar diagnoses and experiences; Anne's experiences with domestic violence perpetrated against her by her husband and the associated feelings of pain and her desire to protect her children from harm; and Jason's experiences with an unstable and abusive grandmother and his need to connect with others in similar circumstances.

Students will also have opportunities to explore reasons why groups were not initiated into the cases. One area of focus will be the stress associated with child protection work and the possible need for staff groups on Vicarious Traumatization as a way of providing staff with emotional supports to allow them to be as effective and responsive as possible in these (and all) cases.

2. Timing within semester:

Each of the three cases will be used as a centerpiece throughout the whole 14-week course. It will also be used in more detail for one or two class sessions, for example a class devoted to Dynamics of Mutual Aid and a class on group work with populations including children and adolescents and domestic violence

3. Teaching methods:

This course will use multiple teaching methods including short lectures, small group discussions, role play writing and performing, class discussions; the course itself will be run as a group as a way of modeling, through the parallel process, group work in action. For example, at the beginning of the class, careful attention will be paid to atmosphere in the class. The teacher will model core group work skills such as engagement, contracting, encouraging a safe, open

exchange of ideas where everyone's voice is valued, much like what would occur in a social work group. The teacher will pay close attention to both the process and the content elements of the class, and will encourage students to help each other through their learning process by directing them to speak to each other not just to the teacher. Confidentiality, mutual respect, cultural sensitivity, and demand for work are examples of what will be carefully emphasized in the class, as model for the students to see good group work in action.

4. Materials:

Multiple Copies of the cases; dry erase board, flip chart with paper, chairs that can be moved into a circle. For every class, the chairs will be arranged in a circle or semi circle to allow maximum eye contact and communication among the students and teacher. At the beginning of the semester, the three case studies will be distributed to students along with the syllabus. During various class sessions, the dry erase board (or flip chart) will be used to help students record answers to questions asked of them during various in-class exercises: such as: What is the client need? How does it fit into the agency context? How can group work be helpful? What type of groups are indicated and for whom? At various points in the semester, the students will use the dry erase board and/or flip chart to generate lists that will then spring board to larger class discussions.

5. Supporting readings:

- a. On Group Work/Mutual Aid: [These provide an excellent overview of social group work, group stages, group formation and the mutual aid process.]

Northern, H. & Kurland, R. (2001). *Social work with groups, 3rd Edition*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Shulman, L. (1999). *The skills of helping individuals, families, groups, and communities*. Itasca, IL: F.E. Peacock.

Steinberg, D.M. (2004). *The mutual aid approach to working with groups*. New York: Haworth Press.

- b. On Groups with Teens: [These build on a group work foundation and provide an understanding of the unique needs/tasks of the adolescent and pre-teen in group and for the group leader.]

Abrams, B. (2000). Finding common ground in a conflict resolution group for boys. *Social Work with Groups*, 23(1), 55-68.

Malekoff, A. (2002). The power of group work with kids: Lessons learned. *Social Work with Groups*, 25 (1/2), 73-86.

c. On Addictions and Women:

Sauliner, C.F. (2003). Goal setting process: Supporting choice in a feminist group for women with alcohol problems. *Social Work with Groups*, 26(1), 47-68.

d. On Trauma and Abuse: [This is a classic in the field of trauma and will provide students with a solid framework for understanding a range of human traumas.]

Herman, J. (1997). *Trauma and recovery*. New York: Basic Books.

e. On Worker Stress and Vicarious Traumatization: [This is a relatively new area of study where the effects of the work on workers are given careful attention. Group workers and workers in child protective fields need to be educated in this area.]

6. Evaluation plan:

The course will be evaluated at two points in the semester: the mid-point and the last class. Students will be asked to provide anonymous, written feedback on the course, specifically the integration of the cases into the course and their experiences with achieving the stated learning objectives. At the midpoint and the end point in the semester, students will be given a Mid-semester Feedback Form and a Final Feedback Form. After the forms are handed out, the student will be asked to take a few minutes to provide written feedback on the course. After a few quiet minutes of writing, the students will then be asked to also provide verbal feedback on their experiences in the class. This is an important component particularly in a class on group work. Student feedback is often elicited and is woven into the overall class experiences. These forms will be distributed at the end of the 7th class and at the end of the 14th class. A sample of the form is attached.

B. Strategy Two: Elements of Mutual Aid and Group Formation

1. Areas/issues of the cases to be highlighted:

Using one of the cases as a backdrop, students will be asked to create a group that could have been implemented in this case. For example, Anne M. could have joined a group for women survivors of interpersonal violence battered women where she will begin to explore her feelings associated with her relationship and the violence in her home. Through talking openly with other women in similar circumstances, she will learn that she is not alone and that others share her feelings of fear, pain, and isolation. Through sharing these feelings, she is mobilized to grow and change.

Through the creation of a hypothetical group, students will learn about dynamics of mutual aid that would have informed a group with Anne (or any other family member). These dynamics are:

- 1) sharing data: the power of introductions, sharing basic facts about ourselves and our lives in a group setting;
- 2) discussing taboo areas, where group members explore topics such as authority or substance abuse that they perceive as forbidden in the outside world; the “all in the same boat” phenomenon, experienced when group members sense that they are not alone in their feelings;
- 3) developing a universal perspective, is especially relevant with oppressed and less powerful populations, is likened to consciousness raising and involves replacing self blame with a broader understanding of societal forces contributing to one’s circumstances;
- 4) mutual support, where members are encouraged to openly express their feelings and demonstrate genuine empathy for each other;
- 5) mutual demand, where members pay attention to and are invested in the growth and accomplishments of individuals and members of the group as a whole.

Students will learn about these concepts, will learn how these specific mutual aid dynamics would be particularly relevant to each of the families and how they would play out in group. For example, isolation seems to be a relevant theme in Vincent’s life. A group, based on a mutual aid approach, would be instrumental in reducing isolation. The mutual aid dynamics can be applied to Vincent in the following ways:

- 1) All in the same boat: Vincent would feel a sense of collectivity when joining a group with others in similar abusive/neglectful circumstances. He may begin to realize he is not alone;
- 2) discussing taboos areas: Vincent’s mother is mentally ill who has been unsuccessful in her attempts to get treatment. Vincent is seriously negatively affected by his mother’s mental illness. He, likely, has no one to talk to about this, as children of mentally ill parents experience shame, self-blame, and isolation. Being with others in similar circumstances will help him open up and talk about his feelings about his mother’s mental illness and how it affects him;
- 3) mutual support and mutual demand: Vincent can receive support from the other group members and he will also be able to offer support to the others. This reciprocal process is the hallmark of mutual aid.

[Note: The above uses Vincent as the primary client. Any family member could be used to illustrate these Group Work concepts.]

Students will learn specific social group work skills needed to foster a successful mutual aid group. These skills include: engagement, demand for work, endings and transitions. Each skill area will be broken down into smaller parts for example, students will learn to be clear about purpose, to establish a caring, supportive, non-judgmental group atmosphere, to create group rules with an expectation of confidentiality, to attend to “two clients”: Vincent and the group as a whole; to allow silence, to scan the non-verbal forms of communication among the members; to encourage members to talk to each other (not only to the worker), to lend a vision, where worker shares hopes of the groups possibilities and capabilities, to foster group mending, group confrontation, and taking stock, which allows for successful termination and transitions.

2. Structure:

This unit (on the Dynamics of Mutual Aid) will cover 1 to 2 class sessions in a 14-week semester.

3. Teaching methods/activities:

This unit will include a brief lecture on mutual aid dynamics, how they are defined, what they look like. Students will be asked to write/create a Scripted Role Play exercise where one of the individuals in one of the three cases joins a Mutual Aid group. The Role Play script will need to show purpose, composition, and mutual aid dynamics. Class members will be asked to play various roles and the script will be read aloud and discussed as a class in reference to two specific areas: mutual aid dynamics observed and worker skill.

4. Materials needed:

Black board, copies of the cases

5. Supporting readings:

(Readings previously listed under Strategy 1, including the following Sections:

- a. On Group Work/Mutual Aid
- b. On Groups with Teens
- c. On Trauma and Abuse
- d. On Worker Stress and Vicarious Traumatization

In addition, for this section the following reading is also recommended:

On Mental illness: [This reading uses gender as a lens for conceptualizing group work. This may be specifically relevant to a discussion of any of the mothers in the case studies.]

Sherman, D.M. (2006). *I am not alone: A teen's guide to living with a parent who has a mental illness*. Edina, M.N.: Beavers Pond Press.

7. Evaluation plan:

The Mutual Aid unit will be evaluated at the end the two-session module. A one page Feedback Form will be distributed to students where they will be asked to provide feedback on their experiences with the 2-week Mutual Aid unit. Feedback

will be both written and verbal. After the forms are handed out, the student will be asked to take a few minutes to provide written feedback on the course. After a few quiet minutes of writing, the students will be asked to also provide verbal feedback on their experiences in the class. This is an important component particularly in a class on group work. Student feedback is often elicited and is woven into the overall class experiences.

CONCLUSION

A. Recap

This Teaching Guide shows various ways that each of the three cases can be woven into a Social Work with Groups course, specifically how there are missed opportunities for group work, how group work is often the best practice approach, how problems such as abuse/neglect, isolation, mental illness, domestic violence, health problems and parental stress can be addressed through a Mutual Aid group.

This Teaching Guide uses three cases to illustrate the dynamics of mutual aid and provides an assignment for students to envision, create, and evaluate a group for one or more of the family members in each of the three cases OR in one of the cases. The Guide outlines core group dynamics as well as worker skills.

B. Suggestions for Future Courses

Future courses, such as Foundations of Social Work Practice and Social Work with Trauma and Interpersonal Violence could also use these cases to highlight intervention theories and approaches to practice that are grounded in the reality of a specific case.

APPENDIX TO TEACHING GUIDE FOR SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS

Sample Final Feedback Form

Wurzweiler School of Social Work
Yeshiva University

Social Work with Groups
Final Feedback Form

Directions: Please take a few moments to provide feedback on your particular experiences in this class. Your feedback will be used to plan future classes. Thank you.

- A specific example of something that was particularly meaningful or important to me about this class...

 - A specific example of something that was less meaningful or less important to me about this class...

 - My experiences of the use of the three cases throughout the semester...

 - A suggestion I would make for improving this course...
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- Please add a few comments on the following class components:
 - Textbooks and other readings:
 - Written assignments:
 - Class climate/atmosphere:
 - In class exercises, including the three case examples:

 - Anything else you'd like to add...