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ONAL RESOURCES

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Anti-Oppressive Practice With Groups

Group work has a long history in social work practice, particularly as reflected in the Settlement House Movement (SHM). Working with groups can provide an opportunity for increased participation from the population or community, which is a significant factor in AOP work. Often a jumping off point for community or social movement mobilization and activism, groups can target systemic social justice issues. Groups can take a variety of forms for a variety of purposes, including personal growth, psychotherapeutic, task-centered, mutual-aid, self-help, support, educational, psycho-educational, structured, specific activity, self-directed, and social action/social change. The purpose and organization of a group can also be a blend of types.

HISTORY OF SOCIAL GROUP WORK

The development of individual work and casework is typically attributed to Charity Organization Societies, while group work stems from the Settlement House Movement. Writing on the "Value of Social Clubs," Jane Addams (1990) recounts the history of various clubs at Hull House. She notes that the opportunity to socialize and learn with and from one another supports members of the community to grow emotionally, to become more accepting of difference, and to prompt engagement in social action:

Thus the value of social clubs broadens out in one's mind to an instrument of companionship through which many may be led from a sense of isolation to one of civic responsibility, even as another type of club provides recreational facilities for those who have had only meaningless excitements, or, as a third type, opens new and interesting vistas of life to those who are ambitious. (Addams, 1990, p. 365)

Initially, social group work was seen as community-focused, as recreational, and as a venue for self-improvement. Philosophically, it was based on the idea that social relationships

benefit human development. It was not until the influence of psychodynamic theory that groups began to shift toward a therapeutic model. These early groups were located in settlement houses, the YMCA/YWCA, and 4-H. The function of these groups was social development and education, which was often tied to creating well-rounded individuals who would be more likely to participate in the community and engage in social action.

While there was a common theme in these earlier groups, variations developed which contributed to the development of a more diverse range of group work. Some of these differences were based on physical location—some groups were centered in one building (such as a YMCA), while other groups utilized shared spaces—and groups were both locally and nationally organized. Additionally, groups utilized a combination of volunteer leaders and paid leaders; provided services to disadvantaged and middle class members; focused on specific racial/ethnic groups or were open; catered to various age groups; and had “healthy” versus “problem” memberships (Alissi, 1980; Lee & Swenson, 2005).

Early group work developed from various ideological foundations. The SHM workers and YMCA/YWCA were influenced by Christian theology and often had the goal of rescuing groups from sin and inculcating Christian beliefs in newly arrived immigrant populations. Additional influences of humanism were seen in the SHM where there was a primary focus on the living and working conditions in the poor areas rather than a direct focus on religion. As groups developed, there was also a focus on self-help and the growth of mutual aid philosophies. Group work was also influenced by Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, social psychologist, and philosopher who is considered by many to be the father of sociology. It was Durkheim who suggested that groups are greater than the sum of their parts, and by creating attachments and relationships, groups can counter alienation and isolation (Alissi, 1980). The SHM groups also drew on theories of John Dewey (an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer) and the progressive education movement which stressed that people learn best by doing and that education must take into account the whole person, including social and emotional factors. In this movement, education was seen as a pathway to participatory democracy. Dewey served on the first board of directors of Hull House and often attended groups held there.

The SHM was active in both educational groups and recreational groups, and successfully established the first public playgrounds and recreation programs in addition to starting many summer camps. The social action work of the SHM movement, including labor movement activity, was often supported through group work, which then translated into community organizing (Alissi, 1980; Lee & Swenson, 2005).

Group work became more professionalized in the 1930s, during which time some of the variations in the goals and approach became more contested. In 1935, the National Conference of Social Work (NCSW) group work section was created and they began to debate preventative and educational goals versus therapeutic and corrective goals. The next year, the 1936 American Association for the Study of Group Work (AASGW) formed. The activities of these new organizations contributed to an increase in both training of professionals in group work and research on group work, which began in earnest in the 1930s.

was “a service for individuals who, through normal satisfying group activities, are encouraged to grow and develop socially and emotionally and to participate responsibly in society” (Alissi, 1980, p. 17). Grace Coyle, one of the early proponents of social group work, believed that it was an “educational procedure” that could lead to social change (Alissi, 1980, p. 17). However, group workers in the 1930s tended to downplay the programmatic, educational, and therapeutic elements of group work as they did not want to overshadow the relationship elements, which they believed to be more foundational to the purpose of groups.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the focus returned to the therapeutic purposes of groups, influenced in part by the alignment of social work with psychodynamic theories as a way to gain increased professional legitimacy, and by the impact of McCarthyism in the 1950s, which seriously hindered group work focused on social action. Additional shifts included the increased development of technical skills and research on group work as well as the development of non-voluntary groups, which in many ways was counter to the original purpose of social group work. In 1943, Bertha Reynolds, a progressive social worker, stressed that group and community work should be at the forefront of the social work profession (Lee & Swenson, 2005). In 1946, ten years after forming, the AASGW became a professional organization renamed the American Association of Group Workers (AAGW). At that point, divisions occurred and some members moved to the newly formed American Association for the Study of Community Organization.

These divisions were directly related to the rifts developing between social action and community focused group work and therapeutic and treatment-focused group work. In 1949, the AAGW published this official definition: “the group worker enables various types of groups to function in such a way that both group interaction and program activities contribute to the growth of the individual and the achievement of desirable goals” (Coyle as cited in Alissi, 1980, pp. 23–24).

In 1955, the AAGW merged with six other organizations to become the NASW, solidifying group work as one social work method. Following this shift, in 1956 the NASW definition of group work was drafted:

A service to groups where the primary purpose is to help members improve their social adjustment, and the secondary purpose is to help the group achieve objectives approved by society . . . The definition assumes that the members of groups receiving social group work services *have* adjustment problems. It further assumes that there is a diagnostic process through which the worker is aware of the nature of the problems of the members, and that the programming in the group is determined by the findings of the diagnosis . . . The skills used in this process are acquired through application of a wide variety of knowledge in clinical training of social group work field instruction (Alissi, 1980, p. 24).

Less than one-fifth of the membership of the group work section actually agreed with this definition. In response, the group work faculty at the University of Pittsburgh drafted a position paper stressing the social action component of group work.

Writing in 1959, Grace Coyle, a settlement worker, teacher, and leader in developing a scientific approach to social group work, reiterated what she saw as the primary benefits and purposes of group work, stressing that group interactions contributed to human maturation and development. While she believed society should be set up to provide these experiences naturally, she suggested that a highly urban and mobile society does not always provide these experiences. She also asserted that group work should be initiated to provide this social skills training for adult relationships, stressing the importance of groups for youth to instill these skills. She viewed group work as a supplement to other relationships, particularly for the elderly. However, she also believed that the critical role for group work was, and should continue to be, preparation to participate in democratic society and to build community (e.g., to cope with neighborhood tensions related to intergroup/interethnic/interracial tensions). Coyle acknowledged that group work could be used for institutionalized populations, but she suggested that this form of group work should focus on the social issues related to psychological distress and the impact of being institutionalized. A group worker's role is to be able to "establish a relationship with a group as a group" and to enjoy and be at ease with the "social interplay among members and to be able to perceive both individual behavior and its collective manifestations" (as cited in Alissi, 1980, p. 46).

In the early to mid-1960s, the group work section of NASW suggested five purposes of group work, which appeared to have moderate agreement among members (Hartford, 1980):

- Corrective
- Preventative
- Normal growth and development
- Personal enhancement
- Citizen responsibility and participation

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN GROUP WORK—MUTUAL AID AND EMPOWERMENT

The concept of mutual aid—the idea that group members learn from one another—is a significant component of group work and is viewed by many as one of the primary benefits of groups. The settlement house workers stressed that support and learning is a two-way process; not only do group members benefit from the knowledge and experiences of the other members and group leaders, the group leaders also learn from the group members. This notion is particularly evident in the teachings of Dewey regarding the role of mutual discussion in groups and in the educational process.

While mutual aid can be a component of any type of group, self-help groups that are peer-led are often seen as a primary example of a mutual aid group. Self-help groups began to blossom in the 1970s and 1980s, and have since become a significant part of professional practice in social work.

common ground, supports collective action, and relies on knowledge-based personal experiences. This group format can conflict with groups led by professionals, however, who respond to self-help groups with a mixture of hostility, disinterest, co-optation, or excessive enthusiasm (Lee & Swenson, 2005, p. 586).

The term *mutual aid* became more commonplace after William Schwartz introduced it in 1961 (Steinberg, 2010). Schwartz suggested that individual and societal needs are symbiotic. An individual needs health, belonging, and growth; society needs to integrate these individual parts into a whole. As Schwartz stated:

The group is an enterprise in mutual aid, an alliance of individuals who need each other, in varying degrees, to work on certain common problems. The important fact is that this is a helping system in which the clients need each other as well as the worker. This need to use each other, to create not one but many helping relationships, is a vital ingredient of the group process and constitutes a common need over and above the specific tasks for which the group is formed. (1961, p. 18)

Image 6.1 presents nine processes in group work that can be considered “mutual aid processes.”

Image 6.1 Nine Mutual Aid Processes in Group Work	
Process	Group Activities That Can Be Facilitated by Social Worker
Sharing data	Offering ideas, resources, and beliefs about coping—for example, sources of helpful community services and resources, ways to alleviate stress, and ways to navigate local institutions
Dialectical process	Discussing two opposing viewpoints with the possible goal of synthesizing them; deconstructing false dichotomies and thinking critically about contested issues
Airing taboo subjects	Broaching a sensitive or “hidden” subject; not shying away from taboo subjects
“All in the same boat” phenomenon	Sharing stories about similar experiences and emotions in order to break down feelings of isolation and alienation
Offering mutual support	Demonstrating empathy for a challenge or trauma faced by another group member; providing comfort and connection for group members, which contributes to a sense of belonging to the group
Demanding accountability	Holding one another accountable for their actions
Individual problem solving	Addressing members’ individual problems
Rehearsal	Role-playing a difficult situation to support a group member who is anticipating or planning an interaction
Strength in numbers	Harnessing group members’ strengths to pursue social action

Source: Adapted from Gitterman and Shulman, 2005, p. 21.

Empowerment theories (see Chapter 3) stress the importance of group work as a pathway to personal, interpersonal, and sociopolitical change. To maintain an empowerment perspective, groups need to include a focus on socioeconomic or political oppression and cannot be simply psychotherapeutic (Lee, 2001). As evidenced from the brief history of social group work, there are a variety of views on the function of groups in social work. In AOP practice, group work is considered an important mode of intervention, potentially providing an optimal environment to work on both the individual and the group or community levels, connecting the personal to the larger political arena.

GROUP SKILLS AND DEVELOPMENT

AOP group work practice depends on strong skills in facilitating groups. The basic AOP values and methods all apply, including self-awareness and commitment to social justice. In addition, group practice requires knowledge of group structure and how to develop group processes and goals that integrate social justice throughout.

Group Structure and Dynamics

When it comes to organizing the group, there are a number of variables and many possibilities. The “lifetime” of a group is one of them. Research suggests that for some issues, such as a temporary life transition or an orientation group, short-term, time-limited groups provide helpful structure and focus. Alternatively, a long-term or open-ended group may better serve members who require support for chronic or “intractable” conditions (Gitterman, 2005).

Group work literature often conceptualizes groups through a stage model in which there is a beginning, middle, and end of a group. During each stage, the group undertakes typical “tasks” (see Image 6.2). One group session can also contain elements of the

Image 6.2 Stages of Group Development

Stage	Group Tasks
Engagement	Boundary setting, trust building, goal setting
Work	Individual and group decision making, planning, action and implementation, conflict resolution
Reflection	Analysis of group's work, celebration, planning for termination or evolution of group

engagement-work-reflection stages. When creating a group, determinations about the length of group sessions and the entire group lifetime should take into account the stages of a group and the purpose of the group.

Another important element in organizing group work is the potential dynamics regarding group membership. A homogeneous group may be desirable—for example, a women's group on domestic violence. Some research has suggested that some types of homogeneous groups are more effective, such as groups structured by gender categories, particularly women's groups, and groups structured by racial/ethnic categories, particularly groups that are specifically focusing on issues related to oppression or racial identity (Brown & Mistry, 2005).

Many groups, by either choice or circumstance, will be heterogeneous—for example, a community group that formed to oppose gentrification in the neighborhood. There is certainly evidence that heterogeneous communities can contribute positively to reducing prejudice and racism, but it is important to avoid an expectation that traditionally marginalized and oppressed groups members will “teach” those with privilege.

Principles for engaging in anti-oppressive group work include the following:

- It is helpful for group workers to work within an organization that is empowering and supportive so that they feel more able to create empowering group settings.
- A group that is heterogeneous regarding race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion/spirituality, ability status, and so on should have a relative balance of members so that individual members do not feel alienated or singled out.
- The location should be as easy as possible for all members to access.
- The group plan or program should be flexible and negotiable.
- Rules about group behavior should be based in anti-oppressive principles.
- Group workers should be prepared to respond to oppressive or discriminatory remarks or behaviors, whether overt or subtle—for example, when historically privileged members, such as males or whites gradually begin to dominate the discussion.

Leadership

While it is imperative that an anti-oppressive practitioner develop an ability to engage in critical self-evaluation regardless of the arena of practice, working in groups is more “public” than working with individuals and families and thus is more likely to bring the practitioner face to face with her or his values and identities. A group practitioner must be able to be vulnerable in front of the group, to be flexible in the face of ever-changing group dynamics, and to effectively handle conflict (Drumm, 2006). The practitioner's personal understanding of her or his own attitudes, values, and history will assist in recognizing how one is engaging with co-facilitators, group members, and the group as a whole.

Before the group begins to meet, important decisions are made about whether a group will be led by a single facilitator or a co-facilitation team, will have shared/rotating leadership,

or will be leaderless. A group may be facilitated by a “professional” (social worker) or be a peer-led, self-help group. Regardless of the initial leadership structure that is established, groups may evolve and develop different leadership over time.

Co-facilitation of a group has several benefits, including shared responsibilities, varied experiences and knowledge, and the opportunity to model balanced and equitable relationships. But, there are challenges as well, including the extra time that is often needed for joint planning, potential rivalries and power imbalances, and lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities. Some recommend that a co-facilitation team should be heterogeneous (Brown & Mistry, 2005), which provides on-going opportunities to disrupt privilege based on gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class, among other categories of difference.

What are some of the dynamics to pay attention to in a co-facilitation team? What are some of the ways that privilege and oppression may be demonstrated in a group setting that you are co-facilitating with a facilitator who is

- a. a different gender;
- b. a different race/ethnicity;
- c. a different SES (socioeconomic status) background;
- d. a different age (and there is a large age gap);
- e. a previous group participant (and you are an “outsider”); and
- f. a nonnative English speaker.

What are some ways that a co-facilitation team may overcompensate for oppressive dynamics or differences?

Shared leadership—with the group as a whole rather than simply a team of co-facilitators—presents another opportunity to develop an anti-oppressive practice. Collective leadership can contribute to a sense of group cohesion and belonging. Leadership can be shared from the start of a group—for example, with individual group members in a psychosocial educational group rotating responsibility for providing an educational component each week. Or a group can shift from sole or co-facilitated leadership to collaborative leadership as it matures or prepares to become a self-help group. In either case, group members need to be cognizant of roadblocks to collective leadership, which include the following:

- Dominance by one or a small group of members, which may be based on power and privilege
- Development of “factions” of group members, which makes collective leadership and

- Silencing of group members for holding dissenting views
- Lack of engagement by some members due to previous history (within group or in other situations), fears, or lack of self-confidence

What are some additional issues that may develop in a group that is structured as a collectively led group?

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRINCIPLES IN GROUP WORK

Reclaiming the historical imperative that group work incorporate and inspire social action, in addition to promoting self-awareness and self-development, is at the heart of anti-oppressive group work. Prioritizing the development of critical consciousness is one way that AOP group facilitators can demonstrate a commitment to social justice and action. Paolo Freire (1970/2009) called the process *conscientization*. In social movement work in the 1960s, conscientization work was at times integrated with empowerment group work, and that method continues (Lee, 2001). This blending consists of the workers "tuning-in" to the language and experiences of people in the group and then the group using their life experiences to create visual understandings (drama, pictures, charts) of these experiences. Thus, "silenced" groups become "conscious makers of their own society" (Lee, 2001, p. 307) and they can use this developed consciousness and understanding to create action.

To apply this concept to group work, it is important to be clear initially about the "context" with the group: what is the purpose of the group, what stake in the group do the agency and the social worker have, and what are the participants' stakes? In an empowerment group, "the *purpose* is multilevel empowerment; *the process* is dialogical encounter and mutual aid in the process of working on concerns, discussion, debate, action and reflection; *the worker's role* is as a coequal teacher/learner/participant in dialogue who also has specific tasks in facilitating the work" (Lee, 2001, p. 313).

The tuning-in process typically takes place in the initial group meetings. The group leader engages in participant observation and group engagement to begin to understand experiences and "distill" themes for the group. In the group's early stages, the leader may bring in issues of oppression, discrimination, prejudice and "pride in peoplehood," but as the group coheres, they can work together to determine the empowerment purpose of the group (Lee, 2001, p. 308). As the group proceeds, the group worker continually asks critical questions, using social work skills to attend to group dynamics and to help develop the potential for mutual aid and power sharing in the group.

In the working phase of the group, the group develops "codes," which are tools to evoke narratives and storytelling. These "codes" are used to get the group to approach and examine

a problem. A code is a way to capture the themes that the group worked on in the previous stage. For example, if the group focused on the problem of accessing quality education in a low-income community, they develop symbols and scenarios that represent this experience which allows them to translate the themes into a material representation of the issues. An important part of this process is translating a personal issue into a political issue. Using pictures, photos, music, poetry and other means that evoke emotion, these codes contribute to developing consciousness, which then allows the group to develop personal, institutional, and cultural/political action plans. These codes "stimulate thinking, feeling, and acting" (Lee, 2001, p. 322). Group members then take action and reflect on actions taken. In addition to promoting action, codification promotes group cohesion and belonging among group members (Lee, 2001).

Another tool in the development of critical consciousness is the Freirean process of *problemization*, in which individuals "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 1970/2009, p. 83). The 10 conditions that can support the practice of problemization include listening; dialogue; care for the ways to participate in dialogue (equalizing language); communication; humility and respect; critique; silence (time for self-reflection); concretization of current and specific situations; reflexivity; and openness to possibilities (Montero, 2009).

Building on these principles and concepts, the group leader can pose questions to contribute to the development of critical consciousness.

- What did I learn from the group today?
 - What did I teach others in the group today?
 - How are we oppressed by society and others?
 - How do we oppress each other?
 - How do we allow ourselves to be oppressed?
 - How did the group help me re-enforce or liberate the oppression I experience?
- (Brubaker, Garrett, Rivera, & Tate, 2010, p. 128)

Image 6.3 outlines the Dimensions of Social Justice Model which provides a framework for integrating AOP into social group work (Ratts, Anthony, & Santos, 2010). The model can be applied to a variety of group types. The model delineates five different "dimensions." Although they are numbered here, these dimensions do not necessarily take place in this order and may be used to varying degrees based on the trust and comfort level developed in the group.

Since AOP group work is not directly served by the dimension of naïveté, AOP groups usually begin with Dimension 2, multicultural integration. Four of the five dimensions detailed in the image can be challenging and often require a genuine and continual commitment to rethinking and reinventing social group work. In the final dimension, social justice advocacy, honest appraisal regarding both gains and potential losses is an important component of this dimension. Facilitators must also be prepared for challenges from other professionals who take a more introverted approach to social work and remain work and who may

Image 6.3 Dimensions of Social Justice Model

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Tasks and Challenges</i>
Naiveté	Focuses exclusively on intrapsychic work; does not attend to social, political, economic, and cultural factors.	A group that operates on this dimension tends to generate self-blame in group members and does not contextualize individual challenges, strengths, histories, and stories within categories of gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, ability, and so on.
Multicultural integration	Considers the uniqueness of individual experiences based on a variety of sociocultural factors. Group members are supported in developing self-awareness and group-awareness through the lenses of each member's unique social locations and worldviews.	Groups at this level examine and develop a greater appreciation of diversity. It is important for group members to recognize the influence diversity has on their own personal experiences and on the group's developing dynamics. A model of power sharing begins to develop at this stage.
Liberatory critical consciousness	Focuses on the sociopolitical context that surrounds individual lived experiences. This is the level at which Freire's critical consciousness is developed.	Group members are encouraged to examine the ways in which systemic disparities—racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, and so on—contribute to their life histories and experiences. Once they develop critical consciousness, they can move beyond self-blame and acknowledge the significance of environmental factors. The group's work on this level can lead directly into a desire to take action to dismantle oppressive social structures.
Empowerment	Supports development of advocacy skills and action planning; builds increased sociopolitical awareness and the desire for action.	At this stage, the group may discuss how to identify allies, how to build coalitions, and how to identify potential goals and challenges in creating advocacy action plans. Brainstorming, roleplaying, and research are important activities in this dimension.
Social justice advocacy	Motivates group members and leaders to move outside the bounds of the group to engage in action and advocacy.	Group work in this dimension continues to be an exploration of goals and challenges so that group members can troubleshoot before, during, and after they take action. It is important for group facilitators to step back and support the group members to develop and execute their own plans.

Source: Ratts, Anthony, and Santos, 2010.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN GROUP WORK

In an impassioned plea for social work to reprioritize group work as central to the discipline, Kris Drumm (2006), a social group worker and activist, points out that since 1969 there has been a decline in social work education in group work and a danger of group work being absorbed into a generalized practice model. She posits that this decline has led to struggles for social workers who engage in group practice to find legitimacy in agencies where group work is pushed to the periphery. Stressing that group work can challenge "the dominant political sensibilities of individualism, competition, dualism, and authoritarianism" (p. 19), she sees group work as holding a key position in a "natural progression of social work services" (p. 24).

Group work has maintained a place in a number of arenas, including work with persons living with HIV/AIDS, and such subgroups as heterosexual women, teens, and HIV negative partners of HIV+ persons; LGBTQI individuals; elderly persons; caregivers; and with persons affected by war, terror, or ethnic strife. It is often helpful for these groups to be non-therapeutic to counter the tendency to pathologize members merely due to group status. For example, group work with older adults can include a broad spectrum of types, such as reality orientation groups to help deal with disorientation to time and place; remotivation groups; psychotherapy groups; and reminiscing groups to "enhance sense of belonging and renew their sense of community" (Pandya, 2005, p. 601).

Additionally, technology is now incorporated into group work. For example, phone groups or computer groups provide support for isolated individuals, ill individuals, and individuals who request a level of anonymity not afforded in a face-to-face group. Although these technologies have the potential to support people who may not be able to participate in a group in person, they also pose some disadvantages. For example, using technology for group work may delay group development because of limited personal contact; moreover, techniques for balancing technological and personal contact need to be developed. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that anonymity may also pose unforeseen risks that have yet to be determined (Pandya, 2005).

STORIES FROM THE FIELD: ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE WITH GROUPS

1 Promoting Survivor Leadership Within a Support Group Setting, by Crystal Tenty p. 248

This story involves the process of how a domestic violence advocate formed a support group for and with survivors of domestic violence who were involved in prosecuting their domestic violence cases. The support group environment provided the women with a place to express frustrations about the criminal justice system, a place where survivors could talk about their feelings and experiences, vent their frustrations if needed, and also get accurate information about

the criminal justice system to help empower them in their decision making. This group was facilitated and led by the survivors of domestic violence themselves, not by the social work advocates at the agency. The survivors, who had already experienced the prosecution process, served as facilitators, co-facilitators, and peer mentors to other group participants.

- 2 Woman-Centered HIV Prevention—Women on Top: Loving Ourselves to Love Others, by Carly Goldberg p. 251

This story highlights the process of forming a group workshop that was aimed at raising awareness and encouraging empowerment among women about women's health, as well as HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) prevention in a local community. This interactive workshop provided women of all ages a safe and open space to assess their knowledge of HIV/STI (sexually transmitted infections) and risk reduction behaviors, as well as voice their concerns as they pertained to their sexual health, growth and development as women of all ages. The goal of this group was to enable and support women to feel empowered around their sexual behaviors and choices.

- 3 Support Groups: Manifesting the "Spaces Between" Through the Power of Relationship, by Emmy Ritter p. 253

In this story, Emmy Ritter shares her first experience as a group facilitator for survivors of domestic violence. She locates herself and her feminist approach in the work that she does, while discussing some of the challenges of group work with survivors of domestic violence and her strategies for navigating them. Emmy highlights the importance of relationships within and between group members and the transformation that occurs in the "spaces between."

- 4 And All Voices Shall Be Heard: The Illumination of the Intersections of Privilege and Oppression in AOP Group Work, by Allison Sinclair p. 256

In this story, Allison Sinclair shares her experiences as a co-facilitator of a group of older adults who volunteer in schools located in rural communities. Allison describes her transformation as a group facilitator from embodying a space of power and privilege to how this social location prevents her from engaging in authentic social justice group work. She shares the voice of one of the group members, whose self-reflection and marginalized status served as a catalyst for change, creating the space for a group discussion about privilege and oppression and shifting the dynamics of the group.

- 5 We Are Leaders: Women Working for Change, by Jean East p. 259

In this story, Jean East describes her experiences as a group facilitator with women who are financially vulnerable, isolated, and striving for empowerment of themselves and others in the community. She highlights five key components of the group's format of activities that promote a social justice agenda. Jean locates herself in the group work that she does and shares the ways in which she has been transformed by her experience.

1

PROMOTING SURVIVOR LEADERSHIP WITHIN A SUPPORT GROUP SETTING

CRYSTAL TENTY

I had been advocating for survivors of domestic violence who were involved in the prosecution process for about a year when my little “ah ha!” moment arrived. I had been listening to my participants’ frustrations with the criminal justice process and found many similarities in the struggles they experienced. Their expectations were often very different from the reality. Sometimes that meant feeling like the criminal justice system was not doing enough to protect them or their children, or enough to hold the offender accountable. Other times it meant feeling like the consequences for the offender were too severe.

And it’s frustrating for me as an advocate sometimes too because I don’t always understand how the criminal justice system works or feel satisfied with the outcome of prosecution either. The prosecution process is not as victim-centered as I’d like to see it and I don’t believe that it is always the safest option for survivors. So it can be difficult to support survivors through a process that I don’t even believe is very effective sometimes.

At my agency’s Holiday Program, where our participants get to pick out gifts for themselves and their families, one survivor I had been working with for a while struck up a conversation with another survivor that my coworker had been working with. The two women just hit it off instantly and were venting about their experiences in prosecuting their abusers. It was so awesome for me to see these two women connect over a common experience—not just the experience of being survivors, which can create strong connections between women, but also the shared experience of dealing with a very frustrating and daunting legal system.

My coworker noticed the women’s instant connection too, and she and I talked about it later and how great it would be to create an environment where that kind of personal connection between the various participants we worked with could take root and grow. That gave me the idea to create a support group specific to survivors who were prosecuting domestic violence cases. They have to face things that I don’t think anyone else can really understand unless they have been through it.

One common issue I was hearing about a lot in conversations with survivors was a lack of understanding about how the criminal justice system works. And there were a lot of mixed feelings too, such as fear, guilt, anger, and sadness. They were further complicated by the witness tampering that occurs, either directly by the offender or by offenders’ families and friends. Then there is the coercive nature of the criminal justice system. Finally, survivors don’t typically get a lot of support from their own friends and family, and they are sometimes even discouraged from prosecuting.

When it is all said and done, no matter what the outcome of the case, I have found that survivors rarely feel fully satisfied. What they are really looking for, in addition to accountability, is restorative justice and healing, but those things rarely come out of prosecution. What survivors want is for the offender to say sorry, to apologize and be sincere. What they want is for the abuse to have never occurred. They want their families restored, and some sense of normalcy in their lives. So survivors often experience a deep sense of loss throughout the entire prosecution process, and sometimes it is even more pronounced because of the prosecution. The intensity of emotions stays with survivors long after prosecution ends.

I wanted to create a supportive group environment where survivors could talk about these feelings and experiences, vent their frustrations if needed, and also get accurate information about the criminal justice system to help empower them in their decision-making. But, I didn't just want the group to be facilitated by advocates. And even though I have been working as an advocate for a few years and "get it" to an extent, I myself haven't had to personally go through such an exhausting process. I can only speak to what I have witnessed. I wanted survivors who had already experienced the prosecution process serve as facilitators, co-facilitators and peer mentors to other group participants—to provide emotional support and encouragement and to share information and personal experiences of working with the criminal justice system.

Before starting the group up, I had a lot of conversations with survivors I had worked with for a while. I have one participant in particular who I frequently turn to for "advice." She jokingly tells my colleagues that I am always asking her for "favors" because she is my go-to person, my "survivor informant" to an extent. I go to her for feedback regarding various ideas for services or projects related to domestic violence and sexual assault because she is intelligent, strong, and open to sharing her story and has expressed interest in doing advocacy and activism work as part of her healing process. And she is very vocal about her experience with prosecution. So I approached her in the beginning and asked her if she thought doing a group specific to survivors going through prosecution was a good idea. I really wanted her feedback about how the group should be structured and what types of topics she thought were important and ran some of my own ideas by her. I asked her if she would ever be interested in co-facilitating the group at some point or serving some sort of mentor role and she was totally into it.

Now the group has been going for about a year, and this participant, as well as a few others who have been attending regularly this whole year, are guiding the group structure. They are not afraid to speak up about how the group process is going and make suggestions for change and offer support to one another outside of the group. It is refreshing to be able to work with survivors who are comfortable giving you their honest opinions about how you are doing as an advocate and group facilitator and telling you when they are feeling like group meetings are "getting too boring" and suggesting solutions.

I value the perspectives of survivors and believe their feedback should be used as much as possible in the design and implementation of programs and services created for them. And I believe they feel empowered by knowing that their lived experiences give them unique knowledge and insight, that their voices are valid and that their opinions matter.

Soliciting feedback from survivors also changes the power dynamic from strictly service provider versus service consumer to co-creators of knowledge and mutual empowerment. This new approach allows reciprocity. People always want to feel like they are contributing something, that they are giving back. So I try, when appropriate, to provide opportunities for individuals to do that. This entire movement was led by survivors, and I want to honor that. Even when soliciting feedback from survivors, there still exists a power dynamic because I am still their service provider and the "expert." But, when survivors are in a place of healing, where they longer need immediate support services or crisis intervention, when they no longer are in desperate need of something from the provider, the power dynamic can be shifted and survivors can use their own experiences, knowledge and skills to provide leadership or mentorship to others, if they choose.

I love it when participants teach me. They will recommend a new book they are reading about trauma or domestic violence or share some new insight they had about abuse dynamics or will tell me something about their experience that really shifts my lens and perspective about something, and I can say "wow, that is really cool, I never thought of that!" It is very inspiring to witness this transformation. So this is my approach to advocacy.

1. What are some of the "mutual aid processes" exemplified in Crystal's story?
2. How does the author of this story develop empowerment and shared leadership within the group?

2

WOMAN-CENTERED HIV PREVENTION—WOMEN ON TOP: LOVING OURSELVES TO LOVE OTHERS

CARLY GOLDBERG

I've worked in the field of HIV and AIDS for over 10 years. The last few years I've worked in HIV and AIDS prevention. At the agency that I was working for, which was in a major urban area, I received funding from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the state to implement a new prevention department. We were a team of seven women, including myself, assigned to create a new way to provide outreach. The two types of populations that we generally worked with were individuals who were HIV negative and at high risk for acquiring the virus and individuals who were already HIV positive and at risk of infecting or becoming re-infected.

Even though we were catering to approximately 60% women and 40% men, at the time there wasn't an intersectional lens from which to understand the services that we were offering these individuals. So, we would say, "We are meeting with women. Let's make sure they understand how to use this female condom or let's try to talk to them about negotiating safer sex practices because we know that could be a barrier." Or "maybe she is a sex worker. How do we help her understand her behavior in terms of risks?" But, in my mind, that's not enough. We really need to talk about women's understanding of agency and of self, and take the prevention one step further. HIV prevention among women must be closely examined and redefined. I wanted a group workshop to be aimed at raising awareness and encouraging empowerment among women about their health, as well as HIV prevention in our local community.

When I proposed my thoughts and ideas, I got a lot of backlash from the people in charge at organization, who said, "Carly, you can't develop that." Then, when we actually did develop physical materials to use as a collaborative tool to learn about women's experiences and co-create knowledge, the people with power in the organization would say, "You are going to too far afield, that's not prevention." I resisted their responses and discouragement, because I firmly believe that if we don't acknowledge all of the intersecting identities that inform women's lives and their experiences, then we cannot understand what kind of prevention services they need. It wasn't the same for every woman and it certainly wasn't the same for the male population that we were seeing as well.

Out of my resistance and desire to re-conceptualize what prevention meant and really looked like, various things manifested. The first was a specific group for women that I and my colleagues at the agency developed. We facilitated a workshop at various locations around our city—community colleges, a local cosmetology college, and conferences of providers of HIV/AIDS services—where we tried accessing different populations of women. We also accessed other communities of marginalized women.

The name of the workshop was Women on top: Loving ourselves to love others. "Women on top" meant we are giving you space to access your power and authority, but then, you can literally be sexually on top. We used the title of the workshop to pose questions like: Do you want to be on top? Is that the position you are putting your body in? Are you on top of the knowledge? If women don't love themselves and acknowledge themselves in the world then they can't love others and they can't be safe in HIV prevention.

This workshop was designed to assess, educate and empower women's understanding of HIV and safer sex. This interactive workshop provided women a safe and open space to assess their knowledge of HIV/STD and risk reduction behaviors, as well as voice their concerns as they pertained to their sexual health, growth and development. The goal of this workshop was to enable and support women to feel empowered around their sexual behaviors and choices.

In the group workshops with women we all talked about a continuum of mostly heterosexual behaviors from "no risk," such as holding hands or snuggling with your partner, to "high risk." Now, we know that unprotected anal penetration is a really high risk behavior. But, we didn't tell the women that it was no risk or high risk at first. We would say, "Here is the list of behaviors, what would you feel comfortable doing? What feels right for you?" Women wouldn't get very much past the "low to medium risk" column. The very high risk, seemingly dangerous sexual behaviors like anal penetration weren't something women wanted to engage in.

In this moment, this exercise at least gave the women in the group the opportunity to begin thinking, "I'm willing to do this and this is where my comfort zone is. Should I find myself in a position where one of the less comfortable options is being suggested to me, I can take a minute to think about if I'm ready to do this or not." When a woman didn't have time to think of what she wanted for herself or figure out how to negotiate her safety, she could simply tell herself, "Wait, I already acknowledged that's something I don't want to do." This activity empowered the women and gave them the power to think for themselves. The workshops were safe places to think and decide what to do; they could receive information and carry it with them as a tool in order to make decisions down the line.

So, the group workshop went on in this manner. I think that if we hadn't acknowledged the range of intersectional experience and various locations of the women and men who were receiving the information, the women wouldn't have received HIV and AIDS prevention information in a way that honored their agency and choices. The group activities encouraged the women to think about their personal and sexual comfort zone, increased self-awareness regarding the limits of their personal choices, and assisted them in negotiating and discussing these limits with their partners and within the context of their relationships.

It was important bringing this workshop into various communities throughout our city and seeing how transferable it is to the multiple intersecting ways women experience themselves. The group activities were about providing a safe space to think through potential sexual choices and giving the participants the agency to make decisions on their own. I would describe the process as giving them a cognitive behavioral anchor. We even had bracelets that we gave out that the participants could wear to remind themselves that they had given their sexual choices some thought.

What was powerful about the group workshop was the opportunity for participants to experience and discover new ways to think about their own sense of boundaries and safety. Also, the group workshop was a chance to provide our organization, the workers and the participants with the ability to broaden their definition of HIV prevention from a strengths-based perspective.

1. How does the author of this story re-conceptualize HIV prevention through a collaborative group process?
2. Why does the author believe that this redefinition is more in line with an anti-oppressive approach to working with groups?

3

SUPPORT GROUPS: MANIFESTING THE "SPACES BETWEEN" THROUGH THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIP

EMMY RITTER

In 1995, I facilitated my first support group for survivors of domestic violence. I spent most of the day before group memorizing, word for word, the group guidelines. "Confidentiality, Confidentiality means that what is said in here stays in here . . ." and planning a very structured psycho-educational activity that included the power and control wheel, a tool for understanding the dynamics and patterns of battering.

The site supervisor assigned to me by my MSW program had allowed me to shadow her groups for a few months and I was in awe of how she wove a magical spell, creating a playful and safe space for women. I remember vividly how she used an "ice breaker" of 101 ways to use a paper clip. I thought she was brilliant. New to group work and studying the different group theories in school, I did not think I could pull it off and felt very dependent on her guidance. Then she moved across the country. Even in that first round of panicked memorization, I realized that the magic had very little to do with my supervisor or me, and I began learning from the experts: the women that began joining me three to four times a week, all with potent stories of abuse and survival.

I realized that providing and maintaining a safe space was my essential role, and it had different components. Those group guidelines were fundamental and deserved repeating at each group, redundant as that is. That said, I did not need to preach them; the group needed to create them, buy into them and hold themselves and each other accountable for them. The emotional safety relied on how well I prepared people before they entered the room and the gentleness I used to interrupt and redirect when the energy shifted away from safe communication. The physical safety was always a risk; although we met in confidential spaces, we all wandered into dark parking lots behind churches after the meetings. What were we thinking?!

The balance of having an open group, which all my groups were, but not opening the door to chaos, proved to be a constant dance between structure and flexibility. Some nights thrived with the ideal group size of 5-8 women, and other nights we brought in extra chairs. Tuesday night group busted at the seams at times and no convincing could bring the women to move to a different day. Overall, I probably leaned too far toward flexibility. Sometimes the openness compromised the sense of boundary, an important concept for women moving away from abusive or controlling relationships. Over a decade later, I have gotten more "strict" about allowing in new group members.

But, something seemed to be going right in that room each week on Tuesdays at 7:00 pm, despite the bits of chaos. The group participants felt safe and heard, and I watched the empowerment process flow. Women went from feeling isolated, self-shaming and confused about their role

in the abuse, to feeling compassion that extended to their fellow group members and back to themselves. They became mentors to newer group members and active advocates within our agency, as well political advocates for the cause.

The energy of the group had a potency. As a facilitator, I manipulated just enough to help energy flow in and through each woman who was either contributing to the dialogue with words or quietly listening. Interrupting and feeling the conversation back on topic became my place in the relationship. To be sure, often I would find myself on my domestic violence/feminist educational soapbox and would have to catch myself and toss ideas out to a group member or the group as a whole to bring the real relevance to the theory. Truly, the more I was doing less, the better the group. And each week, I would end the night with a stomachache and euphoria.

What was happening within that circle that exhausted and energized me, that challenged me and felt so organic all at the same time? I knew something amazing was happening, and I needed to examine this with a lens outside my facilitator role.

As a social work student and a feminist, I was fascinated by how these two closely linked philosophies influenced my work with survivors. I knew that my personal was my political, and that is what drew me to become a social worker over other career choices. In fact, even writing the words, "career choices" seems to be outside what drives this work for me and many of the social workers whom I deeply respect. I also knew that building a relationship with women in a therapeutic setting is as much, if not more, about the space between the counselor and the client as it is about the skills brought to the table. Groups manifest that "space between" while simultaneously, silently allowing the "counselor" to fade into the background and let the relationships take over.

Relationships. As women, we thrive in relationships. I acknowledged that my facilitator role was merely to provide safety, streamline the flow of information and, tease out the commonalities. These responsibilities nurtured relationships, and thus, each woman's sense of self flourished.

The group form allowed for women of varied identities to build this mutual support, though slowly and self-protectively. This is not to say that all the women of color who opened the door to a room full of white women left the group at the end feeling understood. Or that women experiencing violence in their lesbian relationships used pronouns. One young African American woman reminded me of the obvious disconnect I had because of my white privilege. She told me that she did not have as great a sense of safety in this particular group as she had in another one that was smaller, yet with greater diversity. At the time, I was still blinded by my position of privilege. Although I actively listened and worked through options with the women, I did not have an understanding of the nuances and power differentials that come with who I am in the group. The manner in which I facilitate safety through the use of language, awareness of oppression, and a humble approach to individual's life experiences sets the stage, to the best of my ability, in providing the relationships that hopefully transcend the differences.

I began researching and reading about the ideas behind what I was experiencing as a group facilitator. I stumbled across the Stone Center writing piece, *Women's Growth in Connection* (The Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at the Wellesley Centers for Women (WCW) where I found my feminist theory illuminating the power of group. One chapter articulated a theory of women's development as "an experience of emotional and cognitive intersubjectivity;

the ongoing, intrinsic inner awareness and responsiveness to the continuous existence of the other or others and the expectation of mutuality in this regard" (Surrey, 1991, p. 61). Not only did this feel like the heart of why support groups for women who have experienced intimate relational abuse are so potent, but it also explains that despite the devastation of an abusive partner, women seek mutual ground in intimate relationships. There is an expectation that mutuality should exist. When mutuality doesn't exist in an intimate relationship, a woman will first see the missing element as a reflection on the failing relationship, likely a reflection on themselves, before they see it a reflection on the abusive partner's behavior choices.

In another spot in the Stone Center book, another contributor writes about how, "when empathy and concern flow both ways, there is an intense affirmation of the self and, paradoxically, a transcendence of the self, a sense of the self as part of a larger relational unit" (Jordan, 1991, p. 82). Again, the power of group is invoked; women grow in relationship. Having sought out that self-growth in the intimate relationship and finding just the opposite, women were able to begin rebuilding that damage through the relationships that were fostered in the group. I would even go so far as to say that the relationship each woman had with the group itself would be reparative.

Though these were my epiphanies over a decade ago, the truth of this gender-based philosophy still rings true today, through all my group experiences since those early years. Now when I train new advocates about support group strategies, structure and guidelines, I intentionally infuse these values into my presentation. Now when I supervise group facilitators I am privileged to glimpse their exhilaration as they witness the magic.

1. How does Emmy's approach to group facilitation change from what she was trained to do and how she felt a group should be facilitated?
2. What are some of the challenges of group work with survivors of domestic violence?
3. How does Emmy share power with the group members?
4. Discuss the importance of relationship, particularly for survivors of domestic violence.
5. When Emmy discusses the "spaces between," what is she referring to?
6. What are some of the key features of group work from a feminist AOP approach?

4

AND ALL VOICES SHALL BE HEARD: THE ILLUMINATION OF THE INTERSECTIONS OF PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION IN AOP GROUP WORK

ALLISON SINCLAIR

Anti-oppressive group work is critical in the field of social work. In fact, I would argue, it can be one of the most illuminating and healing shared experiences one can participate in—richly beneficial, regardless of the role you play. Understanding aspect of groups is critical to ensuring you are conducting AOP work. Understanding that you are there to participate as a group member ensures that you are not letting your own privilege get in the way. It ensures you remember you are a member of that group, ready to engage and learn, just like everyone else.

You must walk where it is you want the group as a whole to walk and you must do so with grace and with the intention of hearing everyone's story; with the intention of encouraging the illumination of each person's experiences with the intersections of privilege and oppression. This is where all voices shall be heard.

Dropping Your Cloak of Privilege

A colleague and I conducted a presentation about bullying to a group of older adults who volunteer in rural community schools. The older adults' goal is to help provide support to kids, reduce bullying, and provide an extra outlet for struggling children. What began as a narrow presentation on how to both help support the bullied in school and help identity and stop those who bully turned into a conversation with breadth and depth that addressed multiple issues—racism, sexism, ageism, bullying, systemic shortcomings, multiple differences in cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and white privilege—that stretched to touch every single member in that room.

We began with our scripted AOP lecture, drowning out almost every person in the room and really missing the point, the issues and the people altogether. My privilege had me by the throat. I was the co-facilitator, the one brought in to educate this group on AOP work, and I was making one of the most critical errors: not locating myself in the room in its entirety. I was allowing my lens of privilege—a mental health professional with degrees and a wealth of experience—to both blind and hide me, at least parts of me. I was running from my intersecting identities.

And then a very brave, incredibly courageous woman placed her heart on the table. In the midst of our coverage of many intersections of privilege and oppression and how they impact and influence the problem of bullying, this woman attempted to express her feelings about her own experience. And she took my breath away. And, for a brief moment, I began to panic.

This very brave Hispanic woman spoke out, announcing it was the first time she ever felt

because of cultural differences and how that has impacted her ability to work with the kids and address instances when their voices, too, had been silenced by those with privilege. She told the group "Look around. I am the only person of color in this group. I have felt invisible this entire time. I have felt out of place. I have felt judged. I have felt as though I do not belong, as if I do not fit. And I have felt embarrassed every time we meet."

The remaining intersections of my own identity within the group revealed themselves, and I felt naked, unprepared, and inadequate. I could feel the hostility and denial quickly blow up in the room: "I have never been racist—I have never even acknowledged your color. I don't see color, I see people." Amongst the building chaos and the reinforcement of this woman's message about invisibility via comments that denied her experience and identity, it hit me—so hard I lost the ability to swallow momentarily. I realized what I had been doing wrong.

I remember clearly my co-facilitator turning around and looking over at me and I could feel her fear as strongly as I could feel my own. Here it was, smacking us both in the face—the moment to conduct AOP work—real, in the heat of the moment, AOP group work in the midst of the intersections of privilege and oppression. And we were scared to death. Why? Because we were going to have to stop hiding behind our own privilege and illuminate our own intersections if we were going to address, not just this immediate situation, but AOP group work in its most genuine form. We needed to locate ourselves in the room. I finally found my voice and joined the group.

I began to calm the mumbling and address this woman's experience of oppression in the group. I used an example from my own life to help bring myself into the group, as well as locate and illuminate my own experiences with the intersections of privilege and oppression. I shared a recent experience I had with my grandmother. She was talking about immigration, the economy and the upcoming presidential election. She said to me "I have always been someone who goes to church and I strongly believe in helping other people. But, not before our own. We must always take care of our own and put our own first." It was as delicate a situation as the one I was facing in that room. I told the group what I told my grandmother. "We have to recognize that sort of mindset is what has led to the oppression of large groups of people for centuries. We have to acknowledge that our systems, our institutions are built on that very premise—to put our own first. In this country, that has meant white heterosexual people from a primarily European background. Our systems inherently benefit that particular group, with the most privileges being afforded to the males in that group. Every other group, depending on their intersections, are oppressed on various levels."

I highlighted my intersecting identities to the group: my white privilege and my gender oppression because I am female. I linked another intersecting identity, my periodic nontraditional gender expression and the way society's prescribed gender boxes further my oppression, to the experiences of many middle school children these days. I highlighted how being a "tomboy" has been a sort of accepted form of gender expression for girls, but that society condemns any boy who steps out of their prescribed gender box. This, I explained, is part of the structural oppression the children you work with face every day. This is what lies at the root of the problem of bullying—structural forms of oppression.

My partner joined and we talked, as a group, about the comment "not seeing color." We discussed the notion of ignoring a part of someone's identity. A man in the group spoke up and

talked about how he felt his words and ideas in the group were often overlooked because he was shy and quiet. He did not fit into the traditional “macho” box the systems in society reward and that impacted his experience in the group. We acknowledged this statement, and he linked how his identity has impacted his work with the children. He admitted he walked away from many of the more overt bullying incidents because his voice felt invalidated in this group. We continued to dissect the intersections, person-by-person, group-by-group, until we had made everyone in the room visible, until all voices were heard.

Why the Recognition of This Deconstruction Is So Critical

The Hispanic woman's courage opened up an entire conversation about social justice, racism, sexism, ageism, privilege and oppression. In order to help effect change in these children's lives, this group needed to start from their own experiences in this group and in life in order to truly become AOP social justice advocates for these children. In other words, they could not grasp the root struggles of the population they were working with until they could understand the injustices occurring in their own group. And we could not participate and provide a framework for all of us to learn and grow and explore our intersections of privilege and oppression, if my partner and I did not do the exact same thing.

When all our voices are heard, we learn that AOP work cannot truly occur unless we are part of the movement. We learn that in order to conduct AOP work in the social work field, we must, as social workers, acknowledge and illuminate our own intersections of privilege and oppression. We learn that, no matter where you are, group AOP work can occur. We learn that it is imperative to create an atmosphere where all voices shall be heard, by locating ourselves in the room as a member and identifying our own intersecting identities. And, we learn that we are still learning.

1. In what ways does the one participant's voice in the group create a space for deeper dialogue on issues of racism, classism, sexism, and forms of oppression?
2. How do we see Allison's transformation throughout the process and what form does it take?
3. What stands outs for you in this group experience?
4. In what ways do members of the group connect individual oppression to structural oppression?
5. What are some of the lessons learned?

WE ARE LEADERS: WOMEN WORKING FOR CHANGE

JEAN EAST

"Above all, we all had a voice—we were all heard." This quote aptly describes the experience of women who have participated in the "We Are Leaders" group at Project WISE, a nonprofit organization working with women who are financially vulnerable, isolated and striving for the empowerment of themselves and others in the community. The philosophical and theoretical foundation of Project WISE is a feminist empowerment model of practice. This model supports empowerment as a process for individuals and groups to gain a sense of control over matters of concern to them. The model also takes into consideration key feminist principles, such as the personal is political, the validation of the non-rational, the understanding of power and oppression in the lives of women, and women's development in a self-in-relation model (Brinkerjenkins & Hooyman, 1986; Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999; Jordan, 2010).

The overall goal of Project WISE is for women to experience empowerment at three levels: personal, interpersonal and community/political. Services include individual counseling, groups, community leadership development and action for social justice. Participation in groups is encouraged as a way to learn new skills, decrease isolation and act collectively for change in the community.

The group model at Project WISE is based on the premise that empowerment groups work for both developing group power and meeting individual needs. The empowerment group "is not a support group or a mutual group, nor a therapeutic group, a consciousness-raising group or a critical education group, or a political action group. It is all the preceding, but in its unique combination of these it is more" (Lee, 1994, p. 224). The social justice group described here meets this definition.

The We Are Leaders Groups

Several *We Are Leaders* groups are started every year. Each one is composed of 12 to 15 women between the ages of 20 and 50. They are racially diverse, approximately 20% African American, 30% Anglo, 49% Latina and 1% Native American. The structure of the groups can vary, but generally they have 3-4 meetings and a final all day or weekend retreat. Members self-select and are referred by Project WISE staff and other community partners.

Co-leadership is an important component of the group. Staff at Project WISE take an important role in creating and facilitating the group activities and process, but the women participants are also part of this process. As a group is being planned, women who have participated in previous years are selected to be co-creators of the group. Generally 3-4 women are paired with a staff member to plan and facilitate sessions. They meet, prepare materials and activities, and lead those activities for the group's duration.

Group Components

There are five key components of the group's format of activities that promote a social justice agenda within a feminist perspective:

- **Self and Critical Reflection:** Every woman is given an opportunity to take some quiet time to reflect on her life, the issues of concern to her, and her strengths. Usually there are guiding questions or creative activities to encourage this process. For example, there may be journaling questions, art projects, or readings to respond to. In the early stages of the group, these questions are generally open ended and allow women go with whatever speaks to them at the moment. As common issues surface, the critical reflection may involve a common concern or issue that has been raised, such as how they are treated by the public assistance case managers or the violence they experience in their lives. The women are encouraged to share whatever they are comfortable in sharing with the group members. The goal of the self and critical reflection is first to give women a space and a time of quiet to express themselves. Second, is to see the commonalities of the personal and institutional experiences that they may share.
- **Ritual:** The leadership group explicitly incorporates activities that validate the non-rational (Brinker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1986). Poetry, pictures, and rituals, such as singing, meditating, working with clay, or creating art using symbols of nature are built into the group experience. Women often bring in ideas or activities that honor their cultural heritage. Every group session opens with lighting a candle and some centering activity. The other rituals are woven throughout the sessions.
- **Interpersonal Skills and Growth:** A fundamental component of group work is the opportunity to experience oneself in relation to others. Interpersonal empowerment occurs when one has the opportunity to express ideas and be heard. Women often need skills to work effectively with others. These include skills in assertiveness, teamwork, communication, and advocacy. These skills are both taught and experienced in multiple ways during the group sessions. Role plays, skits, and presentations by group members are all examples of how skills are shared.
- **Consciousness Raising:** Based on the principle that the personal is political, the group activities and process include opportunities for the women to connect their personal experiences to larger social, economic, political and cultural contexts. Often a group session will begin with a probing question that one of the participants frames for the group. Examples include, "Why can't I get child care assistance if I choose to attend school?" or "Whenever I miss an appointment at the health center, they punish me and tell me I have to wait a month before I can reschedule." Everyone is asked to share any experience they have had with systems that has bothered them or that they have questioned. Then together group members analyze why this experience might happen, who has power and privilege in this situation, who does not have power, and how different forms of oppression are made evident.
- **Action Opportunities:** Taking action on behalf of oneself, one's family or the community is an important component of social justice. Each group session ends with a discussion of our action

at the local welfare reform board. At other times, action steps are individual like being an advocate at a child's school on a particular issue. A debrief of previous action events is a regular part of the group discussions.

Of these five components, ritual and action are included in every group session. The other activities vary depending on how the co-creators have decided on and designed the group session.

Several key skills are fostered in the facilitators, and some of them become part of the skills sessions or other training activities at Project WISE. These include developing cultural awareness and humility, facilitating discussions, paying attention to the group process, and raising difficult issues.

Privilege . . . and Being a Part

As one of the co-founders of Project WISE and a facilitator of and participant in the groups over the years, I have found the group experience to be very meaningful. Early on I wrote in my journal, "it has been a privilege to be a part of these groups." At the time of that writing, privilege meant honor.

There is also my societal privilege, or the unearned advantages I have. I am an Anglo female, an academic, a lesbian, and someone who has not often faced the struggles that the women who are involved in the project have faced. As a feminist who grew up in the years of the second wave of feminism, I have strongly believed that women have a bond that crosses class, race and sexual identities. It is not that I am unaware of the racism, classism and heterosexism embedded in societal structures. I think I naively thought they could be overcome by humility, sensitivity, engagement and the active use of the feminist principles we enacted in the group process.

But, I now think oppression is not overcome, it is lived. I have lived part of my life in the groups, and I am changed each time I have the opportunity to be a small part of women sharing stories, reflecting on realities, doing art projects together and creating actions for change. I continue to be honored each time I participate in the groups.

Being part of the We Are Leaders groups has also transformed who I am as a teacher and social worker. It has not changed my perspective that women do have commonalities that create bridges. The discussions, for example, about mother-daughter relationships have strikingly common threads. At the same time, the stark realities of oppression are never more real to me than when listening to a woman who has been made poor tell a story about her life. As a teacher and social worker, I am now more keenly aware of power and how it is embedded in so many relationships of helping. The women teach me this all the time. I cannot change the power I have in my position and roles, but I can work to dismantle this power in the context of my relationships, and the groups keep me on my toes in that work.

1. What are some of the key feminist principles that inform Jean's approach to group work, and how does she implement these through the examples described in her story?
2. In what ways do the five key components of the group's format promote a social justice agenda and how do these key components relate to the Dimensions of Social Justice Model (Image 6.3)?
3. How is power shared in the group process? With whom and how does Jean share power?
4. How does Jean discuss her own transformation as a group facilitator?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What feelings and thoughts were brought up for you in response to the stories in this chapter?
2. How do the group experiences that are described relate to the concepts of mutual support and enact participatory leadership?

ACTIVITIES

1. Think about a group you have been a member of and examine the group in relation to the nine "mutual aid processes" listed in Image 6.1:
 - Sharing data
 - Dialectical process
 - Airing taboo subjects
 - "All in the same boat" phenomenon
 - Offering mutual support
 - Demanding accountability of one another
 - Individual problem solving
 - Rehearsal
 - Strength in numbers
- a. Describe one to two examples of how the group demonstrated each process.
- b. Were there any processes that the group did not use? Why?
- c. If there were barriers to engaging in one or more of the mutual aid processes, what are some ways that these barriers could have been addressed?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Websites

<http://www.asgw.org/index.htm> (Association for Specialists in Group Work)

Films

Awakenings (1990). P. Marshall.

Dirty, filthy love (2004). A. Shergold.

- Freedom writer* (2007). R. LaGravenese.
- Girl, interrupted* (1999). J. Mangold.
- Kind of a funny story* (2010). A. Boden, & R. Fleck.
- Manic* (2001). J. Melamed.
- One flew over the cuckoo's nest* (1975). M. Forman.
- Rent* (2005). C. Columbus.
- 28 Days* (2000). B. Thomas.

Books

- Singh, A. A., & Salazar, C. F. (2011) *Social justice in group work: Practical interventions for change*. New York: Routledge.
- Sullivan, N. E. (2003). *Social work with groups: Social justice through personal, community, and societal change*. New York: Routledge.
- Yalom, I. (2006). *The Schopenhauer cure: A novel (P.S.)*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Yalom, I. D., & Leszcz, M. (2005). *Theory and practice of group psychotherapy* (5th ed.). New York: Basic Books.