A model for working with the group life cycle in each group session across the life span of the group

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Abstract: Developmental stage theory has been well attended to by groupwork theorists. A neglected area in the group work literature is the stages, or phases, of group development in each group session. The paper provides a holistic model for sessional groupwork practice that includes tasks and skills in the beginning, middle and ending stages of individual sessions, problems typically encountered in sessional work, transition between sessional stages and connectedness between sessions.

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Introduction

Stages of group development theory is central to the knowledge base informing groupwork practice. The theory identifies developmental stages that the group moves through over its life span. Despite the differences in stage theories, groupwork theorists recognize the group life cycle as having beginning, middle and ending stages across groups (Garland, Jones, & Kolodny, 1965; Hartford, 1972; Henry, 1992; Tuckman, 1965.) Identified in each stage are group characteristics, tasks to be accomplished, and the role of the worker.

Groups do not automatically progress from one stage to another. Certain tasks must be accomplished before the group advances to the next developmental stage. For example, a primary task in the beginning stage is establishing clarity about group purpose and group agreement on a common group purpose. Groups may also oscillate between stages and experience regression.

The groupworker has an essential role in facilitating group development. As Hartford (1971) indicates:

Understanding of group phases as a natural and expected aspect of group development and functioning from beginning to end should enhance the social worker's activity with groups. He may act more purposefully and feel more secure as he recognizes the appearance of predictable phenomena. Mastery of this kind of knowledge in practice should improve his skill in all group experience both as worker and member, but particularly where he is attempting to help the group to become the viable instrument of service, whether in the member-directed group for help or change of the person, or in the task-directed group for problem solving or community action. (p.93)

Developmental stage theory has been well attended to by groupwork theorists. A neglected area in the groupwork literature is the stages or phases of group development in each group session. Significantly, group movement through the total group experience, is affected by group development in individual sessions. As Birnbaum and Cicchetti (2000) suggest:

Individual and group development is enhanced when the group worker recognizes that single sessions have beginning, middle and ending phases.

Each session is viewed as a whole with interrelated parts (Schwartz, 1971). In the beginning phase, the work of the session is defined and agreed upon by the worker and members. The middle phase focuses on doing sessional work while attending to the group process. In the ending phase, the group evaluates and reflects upon its work and makes connections between sessions. Through completion of the sessional phases, the group life cycle is experienced in each session. (p.37-38)

The paper provides a holistic model for sessional groupwork practice that includes:

• Tasks to be completed in the beginning, middle and ending stages of individual sessions.
• Skills applicable to each sessional stage.
• Problems typically encountered in sessional work.
• Transition between sessional stages.
• Connectedness between group sessions.

The article addresses the concept of the group life cycle as it applies to the single session. It includes a holistic perspective that implies completeness with every group encounter.

Discussion of the ending stage of the model is based upon a study with 18 student volunteers to test the conceptual framework of purposeful sessional endings. 'Overall, participants found the sessional endings to be a positive addition to their group practice skills in a variety of settings and with diverse client populations' (Birnbaum, Mason, & Cicchetti, 2002, p.3).

Discussion of the beginning and middle stages of the model is based on the authors' professional experience, reports from colleagues and students, and a review of the groupwork literature.

Significantly, the model enables practitioners to understand that the group life cycle can be completed in individual sessions: a concept that has special applications for working with short term and open-ended groups.

Literature review

The life cycle in each group encounter was most thoroughly explored by Schwartz (1971). He recognized that stages of group development also pertain to individual group sessions and viewed each group encounter as having a preparatory beginning, middle and ending phase, stating that, 'work remains to be done in testing out the details of this conception in action'. (p.13.) Since Schwartz's initial conceptualization, little work has been accomplished in developing and testing the life cycle model in each group session. Evidence for this is seen in a review of the major groupwork texts.

Social work texts are an indicator of how group life cycle theory is covered and taught in social work education. The following groupwork texts were reviewed for content on the group life cycle; Brandler and Roman (1999), Brown (1991), Garvin (1997), Glassman and Kates (1990), Hartford (1971), Henry (1992), Konopka (1983), Northen and Kurland (2001), Shulman (1999), and Toseland and Rivas (2005).

All of the texts devote considerable content to stages or phases of group development over the life span of the group. Only Shulman (1999) focuses on each group meeting as having beginning, middle and ending stages. He recognizes the importance of sessional work, devoting a chapter to sessional phase work including: contracting in the group, the work phase in each group session, and sessional endings and transitions.

Brown (1991) alludes to sessional stages and mentions the tasks of the ending stage. He writes:

> Each time a group meets, there is a beginning, a middle and an ending. The beginning may require an introduction about the agenda, if it is a task-oriented group, or some comments by the groupworker to set the tone for a treatment group. It is a time to clear the air or prepare the group for what comes next. The middle is obviously when the problem solving is done. During this period, work of the group should be consistent with the expectations set up in the beginning. The ending should include a summation of what happened and plans for another session. (p.219)

Glassman and Kates (1990) refer to the sessional ending under 'good and welfare'.

> This technique is used to help the group members gain closure of a meeting whether or not there is unfinished business. By providing the members with this structure and approach for expressing their reactions to a meeting at the conclusion, the practitioners' intention is to prevent dissatisfaction and interpersonal tensions from festering between meetings and into the next one. (p.142)

Toseland and Rivas (1995), in reference to task groups, discuss sessional stages, emphasizing the tasks of developing an agenda in the beginning stage and helping the group follow its agenda in the middle portion of the meeting. In a chapter on Ending the Group's Work, the authors, in addition to discussing endings as a developmental stage, also mention endings in individual group meetings. They describe four worker tasks for ending group meetings: (a) closing the group's work, (b) arranging another meeting, (c) preparing a summary or report of the group's work, and (d) planning future group actions. (p.395)

This paper builds upon the work of Schwartz (1971, 1994) and Shulman (1999) in developing a holistic model for sessional groupwork practice.

What follows is a description of the sessional beginning, middle and ending stages.

Beginning sessional stage

Schwartz refers to the sessional beginning as '… the stage of work that describes the entrance of the helping person into the group process, both in the first contact and in all subsequent openings, meeting by meeting' (Berman-Rossi, 1994, p.147).

Sessional beginnings serve as a prelude, setting the stage for the work that is to occur, clarifying and defining the direction the session will take. The primary task is sessional contracting. As Shulman (1994) writes:

> … thus, each meeting has a beginning phase in which the central task is

to identify what the individual members, or the group as a whole, will work on in that session. Because of the many individual ways in which individuals and the group itself may raise issues, the worker must be tentative in the first part of each session, listening carefully to pick up the often difficult to perceive thread of the current theme of concern. Therefore, it is important for the worker not to latch onto a concern too quickly until he or she really knows what the group is working on. (p.38)

The sessional beginning allows for the evolution, over time, of the group contract established in the initial stage of group development. Establishment of a group contract in each session helps to continually clarify group purpose, identify member expectations and responsibilities and further define the role of the worker. The ongoing contract assures members their needs will be met. Through collaborative decision making sessional contracting contributes to individual and group empowerment. A purposeful sessional beginning entails:

- Worker and group collaboration in developing an agenda for the work of the session that considers issues of interest to the worker, individual members, and the group as it relates to group purpose;
- Deciding on the order of the work;
- Establishing connections with the work of the previous session.

Connections between sessions could involve content from the previous session, discussion of unfinished business and for the worker to acknowledge mistakes and express feelings about the previous session.

Consideration also needs to be given to ongoing issues that affect sessional beginnings, such as referring to group purpose and reviewing group rules and norms.

Problematic sessional beginnings

Sessional beginnings are problematic when they do not contribute to development of a collaborative agenda and provide direction for

the work in the middle stage. Examples of problematical beginnings are:

- Purposeless go-round or check in,
- Extensive reporting of member concerns,
- Premature discussion of individual concerns,
- Control of the agenda by the practitioner.

The purposeless go-round occurs when the practitioner asks members to report on their weekend or ask how they are feeling today, without a follow-up connection to the work of the session. As a worker put it: 'I have done this in group and it serves no purpose nor guides the group in any direction.' On the other hand, the go-round, or check in, can be valuable when it is used to help individuals and the group to articulate their concerns and to find a connecting theme (Duffy, 1994).

The unfocused beginning occurs when members spend excessive time reporting on feelings, concerns, and telling stories. As a result, member work issues are not defined and group themes do not emerge.

The premature emphasis on individual work, starts with the worker asking, 'Who would like to work today?' and begins to work with the first member who volunteers to present a concern. This beginning lacks group collaboration in developing a sessional agenda that includes issues of other members. A student working with the chronically mentally ill, reported that in the sessional beginning when he encouraged all members to present their issues, it prevented a few members from monopolizing the group and enabled non-participating members to speak up.

Another problematic beginning is when the practitioner determines the sessional agenda by introducing a topic or activity without discussion of how it relates to group purpose or goals. Members are not engaged in shaping the work to reflect their needs and do not have a voice in planning the sessional agenda.

Variations in sessional beginnings

An important consideration in sessional contracting is group type

and population. A current issue in group-work practice, are groups with pre-determined curricula, where each session has a prescribed subject. Caplan and Thomas (2003) indicate the following limitations of curriculum-based groups.

> In a didactic group model, inasmuch as a specific structure must be adhered to (a different topic is assigned for each week), the following two practical problems arise: (1) the group facilitator is clearly designated as a leader (teacher) who must assume control of the group, if only to present the assignment and guide the group in learning the material; and (2) the clients can develop the expectation of being led, and this perception can inhibit their taking responsibility and feeling some ownership in the process. This dynamic reestablishes power differentials that already exist in society. (p.9)

In response to the above article, Galinsky (2003) addresses the challenge to practitioners who use prepared curricula. She writes:

> What we need to do now is ensure that persons who use prepared curricula are skilled in developing the group, in fostering group relationships and mutual aid, in addressing group issues and problems, and in presenting content in a way that it is adapted to the current needs of group members and to the stage of development of the group. We need to educate practitioners on the application of prepared curricula so that the group processes are recognized and utilized and so that content is not rigidly presented. (p.17)

A practitioner working in a parent education group with mandated clients illustrates a way in which the group process can be used to include members' needs.

> *I have to be as creative as possible to incorporate members' contribution to the agenda. Although I have a set agenda with stated goals for each session, I ask members which topic they would like to discuss first. The stated agenda is then changed according to the members' request and flows from their discussion and needs. The members decide in which order topics will be discussed. Members then feel that they are directly involved in planning each session and show more interest because their voices are being heard. This technique has proved to be empowering and fosters ownership of members to their group.*

Different groups may require flexibility by the worker in establishing a sessional agenda. For instance, populations with special needs such as the mentally ill and developmentally disabled, may normally be dependent on the worker in the beginning stage of group development. Initially the worker can present choices for activity, with the expectation that, as the group matures, members will assume greater responsibility for sessional contracting.

Beginning sessional skills

Useful skills in beginnings are: (1) allocation of time, (2) shaping norms for sessional contracting, (3) inviting full participation, (4) slowing the agenda building process.

In allocating time, the worker should be sensitive to how much time is required to establish the work of the session. While no hard and fast rule exists, the following principles are suggested to inform decision making about the amount of time to allocate. The first is that the worker and members need to be clear about the agenda for work in that session. Secondly, there should be sufficient time remaining to accomplish the work and reflect on the session as a whole.

Norms need to be shaped that stress the importance of a purposeful sessional beginning, and how members present their concerns to the group with specificity and brevity. Inviting full participation means the worker encourages all to participate in agenda building and is sensitive to members who, over time, have not voiced their issues.

Sessional middle stage

The social groupwork model in the middle stage provides a generic framework that can be applied to different group types and modified to accommodate the needs of the members.

For most groups, problem solving is the framework for work in the middle stage. Some variations are psychoeducational groups with predetermined curricula and groups where the expression of feelings is a major objective, such as support groups for cancer patients and bereavement groups.

Transition to the middle, or work, stage occurs when a clear agenda for work is established and agreed upon by the worker and members. Practitioners usually find the middle stage the most difficult. Schwartz mentions this:

> What assumptions are hidden in our definition of the term 'work'? What facilitates work and what inhibits it? And what, operationally, are the expectations and tasks of the helping person within this effort? (Berman-Rossi, 1994, p.163).

Difficulties in the middle stage of group development stem from a lack of understanding of the problems encountered, the tasks to be accomplished, and the necessary skills to navigate this complex and difficult stage.

Tasks to be accomplished

The following tasks require attention in the sessional middle stage: (1) maintaining continuity between the beginning and middle stages, (2) working with obstacles, (3) use of the group problem solving process, (4) attention to the here and now experience.

Maintaining continuity calls for a progression from identifying the work, to group engagement in doing it. Working with obstacles is a natural part of the work in the middle stage.

Schwartz mentions the potential benefits of working with obstacles:

> ... as obstacles arise to a clear view of the common ground, he hopes the members will achieve 'insight' – the awareness of the relationship between previously disconnected events. As one begins to connect a series of small events in one's experience, the mosaic of connectedness gets richer, the different parts of one's experience get clearer and the 'aha!' reaction signifies that new connections are visible. This somehow makes the obstacle less formidable, less frightening, and the valued outcome is that the members will resume the work as they rediscover their sense of direction. (Berman-Rossi, 1994, p.168)

Group problem solving is central to groupwork practice and

provides the foundation for work in the middle stage. The problem solving process has its origins in the work of John Dewey, a progressive educator and social scientist. Dewey (1910) recognized that 'the group problem–solving process, ideally developed and implemented, affords the opportunity for the members to invent a social solution, integrative in quality, that no one member would have been able to develop on his own' (Somers, 1976, p.343).

Dewey (1910) identified an orderly sequence of steps that guide the group in working with individual and group problems that include: (1) problem identification and clarification, (2) exploration of the problem, (3) generating possible solutions to the problem, (4) selecting solutions, (5) implementation of the solution, (6) evaluation of the results. An additional step in problem solving is the exploration of individual and group feelings.

Kurland and Salmon (1998) indicate that effective groupwork practice demands that workers fully understand and appreciate how to help a group engage in the problem solving process.

Obstacles to the problem solving process

Effective use of the problem solving process requires recognition of the obstacles likely to arise. They include: (1) insufficient exploration of the problem (2) premature solutions, (3) exploration without solutions, (4) insight without action, (5) expression of feelings as the solution, (6) judging solutions.

Exploration calls for understanding the causes of the problem, as well as its impact on the individual and the group. Exploration includes involvement of group members in examining their experience with the problem raised by another member. This aspect of problem solving reveals the interdependence and commonalities among members. Empathy is evoked as members identify with one another's problems.

A major obstacle in problem exploration is premature solutions. As Somers (1976) indicates:

It is important to note that Dewey recognized the initial emotional reactions to a difficulty that is *felt* or experienced, and emphasized that it was essential to inhibit the natural tendency to *act* immediately before

the problem is identified and clarified intellectually, and the process of inquiry set in motion and completed. (p.336)

Immediate action occurs when members prematurely give advice to the member with the presenting problem. The following example from the log of a second year groupwork student, working with a Chinese elderly population, illustrates the lack of exploration and the impact of premature solutions:

I recall a session of my group assignment in my first year placement, called Immigration Experiences. An old lady related how her son-in-law, with whom she was living, threw out her personal belongings one night. Immediately, other members were ignited with anger. Inexperienced, I didn't ask the lady to explore the matter, nor asked if group members faced such situations, or knew of such things among friends, relatives or neighbors. I was gratified with their heated participation and let them jump in to offer suggestions, like asking the son-in-law to pay her for bringing up his son, calling the police, going to a shelter, etc. After a while, the old lady withdrew, saying that she didn't want to break with her daughter yet; besides, she is not a citizen and economically independent. She didn't come back to the group. I have been puzzled over this case, since. Now, I realize this lady may have felt uncomfortable without knowing if others had come across such abuse and may have felt singled out and alone.

In this example, the worker could have intervened at the point where the members rushed to offer solutions, by reaching for members' feelings concerning what the older woman might have been feeling. A follow-up intervention would be to ask what the group was feeling in response to the treatment of this member by her son-in-law. The exploration of individual and group feelings would help the member not to feel alone and isolated with her problem and would provide a climate for generating solutions

Another obstacle is thinking that understanding and insight is enough to solve a problem. Current neuroscience research as well as behavioral therapies, indicate that insight by itself isn't enough for lasting change. Atkinson (2004), a family therapist, writes:

In the 15 years that I've been following developments in neuroscience, the most compelling clinical lesson I've learned is likely to rub you the wrong

way. An overwhelming body of research now suggests that we clinicians rely too much on insight and understanding – and too little on repetitive practice – in promoting lasting change. (p.43)

The following excerpt from a process recording with a women's substance abuse group, illustrates the issue:

Frances: *I'm feeling confused about my relationship with my sister. Her using crack in our house is going to affect me getting my kids back (they are in foster care), and I cannot have that. But at the same time I feel bad, because I don't want to kick her out and it's like I will be leaving her out there hanging and I can't do that. But I don't want my house to become a crack house where I can't even live, and I don't want to go into a shelter because there is nothing worse than not having a home.*

Barbara: *I have to ask you one question, what is more important to you?*

Frances: *I love my sister.*

Pat: *Do you love your self?*

Frances: *Yes, but its that I feel like I'm leaving her hanging, and then she'll have no place to go. I'm just confused.*

Pat: *Why are you feeling so confused, when your sister has already made her decision, and she has chosen drugs?*

Frances: *Right, you're right. So are y'all telling me to kick my sister out?*

Barbara: *No, we are asking you, what do you feel would be the best thing to do?*

Frances: *True, true. I have to think about it and just decide, because her being in my house is making me stressed and I already decided that I was not going to be smoking marijuana anymore; I have to get myself together. Thank y'all, everyone tells me the same.*

Worker: *It is understandable that this decision is going to be hard for you, but it is good for you to weigh your options and move on from there with what you feel is the best decision for you and your children. I want to thank you for sharing.*

Frances: *Yeah.*

The above example demonstrates insufficient exploration of Frances' problem and no seeking and practising solutions. With the help of the group, Frances needed to explore conflicts and dilemmas

she faces in relating to her sister. Similar struggles of other members and their empathic responses to Frances' situation would enhance the problem solving process. Through role-playing, Frances could practice possible solutions.

Considering the expression of feelings as the solution is an additional obstacle, as it inhibits working on solutions to the problem. Schwartz, in discussing valued outcomes in the middle stage writes: 'The emphasis here is on feeling in pursuit of a task 'and reflects that emotion taken by itself, the pursuit of feelings' devoid of substantive content, is a sterile, purely 'self' exploratory pursuit' (Berman-Rossi. 1994, p.167-8).

In the generating solution phase 'the group sets out in search of every conceivable potential solution to the problem; the imagination is permitted to run free, any guess, any hunch, any intuition is admissible' (Kurland & Salmon, 1998, p.52).

Judging solutions is an obstacle that occurs when members react by labeling solutions as 'good' or 'bad'. 'That will never work' or 'that is a crazy idea', are frequent responses to possible solutions, causing the group to reject ideas. Judging solutions also causes members to hold back in presenting their ideas and limits collective thinking.

Middle sessional skills

Important skills in the middle stage are: (1) shaping norms for problem solving, (2) making a demand for work, (3) illuminating group process, (4) keeping a focus on the work, (5) identifying obstacles to the work.

Group problem solving is an educational process likely to be unfamiliar to group members. To be successful, the worker must educate the group about how to engage in problem solving, like explaining the pitfalls of giving advice prematurely and judging solutions prematurely. To avoid these problems, the worker should encourage members to listen and recognize how an individual's issue relates to their life experience.

Making a demand for work is a skill the worker uses when resistance or obstacles arise to doing the work. While being supportive, the worker confronts the group to examine the obstacle. Schwartz suggests guidelines for such interventions.

It is particularly important to remember that the worker is not trying to remove the obstacles once and for all. All he is trying to do is help the members identify and examine its effects on their work, thus lessening its frightening aspects and making it possible to bypass it for now. The attempt to achieve permanent 'solution' of resistances simply leads to disillusionment on the part of the worker: he feels 'we covered that already,' 'we went through that; what's wrong with them? (Berman-Rossi, 1994, p.174).

Illuminating group process is a skill that accompanies making a demand for work. The worker contributes data to the group about how the group is functioning that allows the members to take responsibility for dealing with the obstacles. The data consists of observations the worker makes in the here-and-now of group experience that illuminates how the group is presently communicating. Process observations can be addressed to both individuals and the group as a whole. For instance, a worker might address an individual and the group at the same time by saying, 'I am aware that when we just discussed our fears about being more intimate with one another, John began to tell a joke. Was anyone aware of this?' Using this intervention, the worker is illuminating group process without judgment and inviting the group to examine the obstacle.

A concern practitioners have in heightening individual awareness is that it singles out and embarrasses the individual. Yalom (1975) points out that 'there exist powerful injunctions against process commentary in everyday social intercourse' (p.133). The worker has to understand that the skill is essential for dealing with obstacles to individual and group growth, and that it is used in the middle stage of group development when group maturity and a sense of trust exists.

Throughout the middle stage, the skill of maintaining a focus on the work is necessary. The worker has to be vigilant to distractions and the illusion of work as Schwartz states:

Not only must the worker be able to help people talk, but he must help them talk to each other; the talk must be purposeful, related to the contract that holds them together; it must have feeling in it, for without affect there is no investment; and it must be about real things, not a charade, or a false consensus, or a game designed to produce the illusion of work without raising anything in the process. (Berman-Rossi, 1994, p.11)

Sessional endings

The ending stage completes the sessional group life cycle. It provides a natural and specific opportunity to review and evaluate the session as a whole. This process offers many interrelated benefits that reinforce and integrate individual learning and group development. The benefits of purposeful sessional endings include reflection, transition between sessions, sessional closure, empowerment and a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

The following material on sessional endings is taken from the authors' published papers. The first, Birnbaum and Cicchetti's (2000) *The Power of Purposeful Sessional Endings in each Group Encounter*, aims to conceptualize the ending phase. The second paper, Birnbaum, Mason and Cicchetti's (2002) *Impact of Purposeful Sessional Endings on both the Group and the Practitioner*, reports on a study with eighteen student volunteers to test the conceptual framework of purposeful endings.

Benefits of sessional endings

Reflection

Sessional endings allow for reflection as members discuss what meaning the group encounter had for them individually and as a group. The reflective process entails (1) focusing on the group experience, (2) looking back upon the experience to assess its meaning for the members, and (3) examining what the members can take away and apply to their lives outside the group.

Students reported that asking questions such as: 'what did you learn today?', 'what stood out for you in the session?', and, 'how would you compare this session with previous sessions?', elicited reflections about group content and process as well as individual learning.

Transition between sessions

The work of the group is enhanced when connections are made between single sessions. Each session should provide direction for the next group encounter. Continuity is established between sessions as future group activities are identified and agreed upon by the group.

Shulman (1999) identifies this objective: 'To gain some consensus on the part of group members as to the specific next steps; for example, what are the central themes or issues with which they wish to begin the following week's discussion?' (p.317).

Respondents reported that the sessional ending experience enhances transition between sessions by 'eliciting suggestions for further discussion,' 'setting the pace for the next session,' and 'preparing members for the next sessions.'

Sessional closure

Closure means that when the session is over members have a sense of conclusion to and completion of the group experience. It involves identifying unfinished work for consideration during the next session. To achieve closure requires that the ending be structured to allow time for a debriefing and wrap up of the session.

A number of students connected the usefulness of sessional closure with open-ended groups, reporting that members who attend the group for only one session have the opportunity to reflect on what meaning the group experience had for them, allowing the group life cycle to be completed.

Empowerment

Feelings of powerlessness arise from a sense of dependency and awareness that one cannot influence or exert change over one's environment. The sessional ending provides a context to enhance the development of individual and group empowerment.

Students identified the following factors as contributing to empowerment: (a) having members evaluate their own progress, (b) sharing what was most and least helpful about the session, (c) giving feedback to the worker and one another, (d) enabling quiet members to have a voice, and (e) fostering a sense of ownership of the group.

Sense of satisfaction and accomplishment

An overall sense of individual and group satisfaction and accomplishment evolves from purposeful sessional endings that include reflective thinking, the establishment of closure, and empowerment experiences. Contributing to this sense is the greater clarity members gain about how the session has benefited them. The

ending phase helps to increase understanding of the need members have for one another and the group as a mutual aid system.

Practice skills for purposeful sessional endings

Purposeful sessional endings require certain group practice skills. They include allocating time, developing norms, soliciting feedback, reaching for discrepant points of view and attention to both content and process.

Allocation of time

The allocation of time allows for a smooth transition between the work and ending stages. While no hard and fast rule exists, five to fifteen minutes for a 60 to 90 minute group should be considered for the ending phase. The worker needs to appreciate the relevance of the ending as part of sessional work. Otherwise, there is a tendency to stay with the demands of the middle phase, without allocating time for a sessional ending.

Developing norms

Brown (1991) discusses developing group norms for sessional endings.

> Setting aside ten minutes or so for summing up each session should be discussed with the group during early meetings, so that it is understood as part of individual and group development. If group members can agree that this is a valuable use of time, which needs to be protected, it will make it easier for the worker to restrict new and potentially time-consuming topics from being introduced toward the end of the meeting. The expectations about how to use the last ten minutes should be made clear. (p.219)

In establishing norms for sessional endings, it is important to consider that when the idea is introduced for the first time, members may express surprise, doubt and be oppositional. Usually a group is more accepting when the sessional ending is a part of the group contract from the outset of group formation than when it is introduced at a later time. Practice experience, however, suggests that as the group encounters the benefits of sessional endings they are likely to embrace

it. When introducing the concept, a worker might say, 'I think it would be beneficial if we took ten minutes at the end to talk about today's group. Discussing what occurred today in our group will be helpful in evaluating individual and group development.'

Soliciting feedback

Reaching for feedback about group progress and functioning can be intimidating because workers may fear that they will hear negative comments. Such fears tend to diminish as the group becomes accepting of the sessional ending and members use the opportunity to provide constructive ideas. As one worker noted:

> *Establishing sessional ending immediately lets it be understood that processing is part of the group experience. This is something I have struggled with. Asking for feedback scares me. I think I could have asked for more processing at the end of each session and have noticed that I have grown more comfortable and appreciative of its value to both the clients and myself as the worker.*

Reaching for discrepant points of view

In the sessional ending, the worker should encourage the expression of different ideas and points of view. This skill is particularly useful in the beginning stage of group developments, as it prepares the group for the expression and resolution of conflict. The following type of questions help to elicit differences: 'Are there other thoughts, feelings, or opinions about the session?', or 'While many of you have pointed out what you liked about group, I am wondering if there are any disappointments or dissatisfactions?' When this intervention is made in a group, it can lead to a group discussion of the worker's role and member responsibility.

Attention to both group content and process

In the ending phase, practitioners are likely to focus on group content covered during the session and avoid dealing with group process. Content refers to the topics or issues covered and the expression of ideas. Process refers to the group as a whole and its interrelated parts, such as social interaction, purpose, relationships, roles, norms, conflict, problem solving, and group cohesion that influence group functioning and development (Northen & Kurland, 2001). Attention

to both content and process is necessary if members are to experience the benefits of sessional endings.

The questions that the worker asks influence what direction the sessional ending takes. For example, asking members what they learned or for a summary of the session will likely evoke content-related reactions. On the other hand, asking for thoughts about how members communicated with one another will likely evoke process responses. The worker can intentionally ask questions that address content or process depending on his/her assessment of the session.

Conclusion

The paper presented a model for working with the group life cycle in each individual session; a conceptualization that is new to the groupwork literature. The model is holistic, connecting the beginning, middle and ending phases of individual sessions. It provides practitioners with knowledge about the tasks, obstacles and skills related to each sessional phase.

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