

# An innovative approach to support social groupwork: A university groupwork club

Cheryl D. Lee<sup>1</sup>, Eliette del Carmen Montiel<sup>2</sup>, Jamie Atchison<sup>3</sup>, Paul Flory<sup>4</sup>, Jessica Liza<sup>5</sup>, and John Valenzuela<sup>5</sup>

**Abstract:** This article discusses a creative endeavor to establish a university social groupwork club affiliated with the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups, an international professional association. The club's purposes were: 1) to nurture social groupwork; 2) to engage students, practitioners and academics in a collaborative groupwork experience, and; 3) to link members to an international social work organization that supports all aspects of groupwork. The planning, stages, mutual aid and evaluation of the club are described. A longitudinal survey design was used to evaluate members' perceptions of the club. Feedback questionnaires (N = 129) were analyzed for a one-year period. Results indicated that club members benefited from mutual aid and experienced professional growth.

**Key words:** Social groupwork club; AASWG; groupwork; diversity; groups

1. Associate Professor, Dept of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach
2. Psychiatric Social Worker, Los Angeles County Dept. of Mental Health
3. Children's Social Worker, Los Angeles County Dept. of Children and Family Services
4. Personal Service Coordinator, Mental Health America - The Village
5. Foster Care Social Worker, Zenith Foster Care Agency
6. MSW Candidate, California State University, Long Beach

**Address for correspondence:** Cheryl D. Lee, Ph.D., MSW, Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Blvd, Long Beach, CA 90840, USA. Clee6@csulb.edu

## **Introduction**

Groupwork is a popular and respected social work methodology. In order to cultivate this method of practice, a professor and a group of university students and social work practitioners initiated a groupwork club. Since the advent of generalist social work practice, groupwork has received less attention in social work curricula throughout the United States (Birnbaum & Wayne, 2000; Lee, 2005). Some social work programs do not offer groupwork courses in spite of social service agencies increasingly offering groupwork services to assist consumers. A concurrent loss of members in the international social groupwork organization, the Association for the Advancement of Social Work and Groups (AASWG), has taken place. The association is a professional organization dedicated to the promotion of groupwork and the use of ethical multi-cultural groupwork practice (Sullivan, 2006).

This article describes the development of an innovative response to the needs of students and practitioners who want to further their knowledge of groupwork and gain support from one another as well as to the Association's needs for new members. The evaluation of the club's first year is also presented.

## **Planning and background**

In order to initiate a successful group, adequate planning must take place (Kurland, 2005; Lazar, 2007; Sloane, 2003). Kurland and Salmon (2005) outlined eight elements of planning – social context, agency context, the need for the group, purpose, composition, group's structure, content and programming, and pre-group contact. The groupwork club was situated in a large, diverse urban area at a university. The agency context consisted of the university's large social work program, and the planners considered the department's mission and vision - to educate students who can practice competent and ethical social work with diverse populations in multiple systems. A groupwork professor/ first author, who was on the international AASWG Board, initiated the idea for creating a groupwork club because students and practitioners were voicing concerns that they were facilitating groups with minimal knowledge and training.

Bergart and Simon (2004) encourage social groupworkers to form support groups, as these workers often feel isolated in agencies. Simon, Webster, and Horn (2007) recommend connecting students to professional organizations such as AASWG as it provides support, mentoring opportunities, and networking. Birnbaum and Wayne (2000) and Lee (2005) discuss the decline of social groupwork education in academic curricula. Gitterman (2005; 2006) discusses the importance of establishing clear and concise purposes in groups. A group of social work students and practitioners helped plan the club with the groupwork professor/first author. There were discussions among the planners and later in many club meetings regarding the group's purposes. In the beginning, these meetings were facilitated by the groupwork professor/first author and eventually by an elected chair of the groupwork club. The group members decided on the following purposes:

- to nurture social groupwork,
- to engage and enhance members' groupwork knowledge and skills while participating in a collaborative groupwork experience, and
- to link members to AASWG.

The initial planners, who wanted the club to be successful, decided to build in an evaluation component to gain feedback about what was working and what needed to improve.

The groupwork club included members who reflected the diverse community and was open-ended. The planners decided to hold meetings at a community center instead of the university in order to attract practitioners and make it apparent that this was not solely a student organization. Meetings were held once a month on Friday evenings to fit the schedules of practitioners and students. For the first few meetings the groupwork professor/first author was the meeting facilitator who arranged activities or speakers, and mediated mutual aid. After three group meetings, members nominated and elected officers from the group including co-chairs, a secretary, a treasurer, and a historian. A graduate social work student, who was not a member of the club, expressed a desire to be the evaluator and subsequently worked with the groupwork professor/first author as co-researchers for the club. An outside evaluator brought objectivity to the evaluation process, while

the inside evaluator provided insight from planning and participation.

The officers facilitated the club meetings; nevertheless, group members actively participated, suggested icebreakers and activities and volunteered to lead them, and secured groupwork speakers. Members brought dinner to share at every meeting. Some group meetings were dedicated to peer-consultation. Members actively recruited potential new members. In addition, they circulated fliers about the club at the university and social service agencies to attract new members.

## **Stages of group development**

The literature is replete with discussion of groupwork stages (Anderson 1997; Berman-Rossi, 1993; Gitterman, 2005; Kurland & Salmon, 2005). One model of group development is the 'Relational Model' (Schiller, 1997; 2007). In this model the stages of development are: pre-affiliation, establishing a relational base, mutuality and interpersonal empathy, challenge and change, and separation/termination. This feminist approach which focuses on developing relationships, and members' connecting with one another rather than challenging authority, seems to be a fit for the groupwork club. The majority of the members were women and members of different ethnic/racial minority groups which have collectivist cultures in which harmony and wisdom derived from age and experiences are values. There was a norm of equality in the group despite different professional statuses such as academics, practitioners and students. The groupwork professor/first author strongly believes in Freire's philosophy elucidated in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2007). The philosophy of equality that teachers can learn from students and other oppressed groups was adopted as a group norm. Even when other academics came to the group who sometimes attempted to dominate, the norm prevailed.

A stable group of members came to most meetings. They developed close relationships with each other as well as welcomed new members in the establishing a relational base stage. Members shared 'icebreakers' that they thought appropriate to foster connections with one another. For example, at one meeting a member asked if she could begin by leading an icebreaker. The icebreaker consisted of members describing a meaningful object they had with them. Members bonded while

learning they had similar values, religions, family compositions, and/or communication styles. Even after the meeting's conclusion, members continued to talk with each other about similarities they discovered. During the third stage, mutuality and interpersonal empathy, which developed toward the end of the first year, the group decided to participate in a social justice activity. Different members brought ideas to the group for consideration such as walking as a group and raising funds at a victims' rights walkathon, fundraising for ovarian cancer victims, marching in the Gay Pride Parade promoting equality for all, or helping support people released from prison with resources. Members had diverse views on the meaning of social justice and what cause should take priority as the club's social justice activity. There was a rigorous discussion where members disagreed with each other but were still able to respect and listen to one another. After processing the discussion, members reached consensus on the Gay Pride Project as the first social justice event of the club.

The groupwork club has not yet reached stages four or five of the Relational Model. The club has only existed for a full year and conflict and change has not yet occurred. The group plans to exist for many years so the separation and termination stage may not be appropriate.

## **Members' diversity**

The diversity of members can have a profound effect on a group's functions and processes (Brown & Mistry, 2005). Diversity of members means more than ethnicity, gender, and age; it also includes: physical and mental ability, sexual orientation, religious diversity, socio-economic status, professional orientation and experience, and geographical location, among others (Toseland & Horton, 2008). Heterogeneity vs. homogeneity of group composition has been discussed in the literature. Although it has been found that homogeneity of membership may lead to less conflict, greater focus, and less replication of oppressive behaviors found in the larger society, it also conflicts with the reality of society and the mandate of social work to serve diverse populations from a multitude of backgrounds (Fluhr, 2004).

The composition of the groupwork club included undergraduate and graduate social work students, practitioners, and faculty members.

Members represented various age groups, ethnicities, genders, disabilities, sexual orientations, religions, and countries of origins. There were few overt conflicts around diversity issues and/or power struggles as members came to meetings to learn and gain support from one another. Instead positive feelings were generated due to the strengths created by the multi-cultural nature of the club.

### **Obstacles encountered**

Several obstacles affected formation of the club. The group struggled with formulating a purpose that fitted the needs of members who were diverse in their groupwork experience and expectations. They unified behind the belief that groupwork was a beneficial way of helping diverse populations in their community. Recruitment and maintaining members was another obstacle. Many members were students with busy schedules that included study, work and family responsibilities. The same was true for practitioners. In addition, there were transportation barriers in the large metropolitan area with little public transportation.

Budgetary constraints were another obstacle as the only funding was voluntary contributions or money from fund raisers such as raffles at the monthly meetings. At times it was difficult to find volunteers to speak at meetings. Members were proactive in locating speakers for meetings as well as flexible if a speaker cancelled. In order to ensure the progress of the club, its work was evaluated from the outset.

### **Sample**

There were 129 feedback questionnaires completed over the course of the nine meetings. Some of the questionnaires were completed by the same members who might have attended all or multiple meetings. The questionnaires had no personal identifiers; therefore, it was not possible to track how individual members viewed different meetings throughout the first year. The general orientation meeting included 25 members. Session 2 with a speaker on multiculturalism in groups included 19 members. For Session 3, about children's groups for siblings of people with disabilities, there were 11 members. Session 4, regarding groups

for victims of human trafficking, included 17 participants. Session 5 was a state chapter meeting and included 10 club members. Session 6, focused on a sharing groupwork experiences' meeting, included 11 members. At Session 7, club members who attended the AASWG conference in Germany reported their experiences to 12 members. At Session 8, nine members shared group experiences and planned future meetings. Finally, the ninth meeting, the last in the first year evaluation period, was a beach bonfire gathering attended by 15 members.

One of the strengths of the club was ethnic/cultural diversity (Table 1). Forty percent of the club members were of Latino descent, 32% were European Americans, 11% were Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, 6% were African/African Americans, 6% were bi-ethnic, and 1% was of Native American descent. The majority of participants were social work students, and ages of members ranged from 21-60 ( $M = 32$ ,  $SD = 13$ ).

## **Evaluation design and instruments**

To evaluate the groupwork club, a quantitative/qualitative longitudinal design was employed. The research questions were:

1. What was the satisfaction level of the members?
2. What were the strengths of the meetings?
3. What suggestions did members have to improve the club?
4. Was there an increase in AASWG's membership as a result of the club's existence?

No groupwork standardized instruments were found appropriate to evaluate the Group Work Club. The current social groupwork instrument created by MacGowan (Macgowan, 2003) unfortunately was not a fit for the club because it was geared toward treatment groups. Therefore, the researchers selected a widely used measure from an allied profession. The Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ-8, Attkisson, 1985) is an eight-question scale measuring consumer satisfaction with services rendered. One question was: 'To what extent has the program met your needs? (4 = almost all of my needs have been met, and 1 = none of my needs have been met.)' Scores could range from 8-32, and higher scores equated with greater satisfaction with the services.

Table 1. Ethnicity

Ethnicity (N = 96) <sup>1</sup>	N	%
Latino (El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru)	38	40
European American	31	32
Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders (China, Japan, Philippines, Vietnam)	11	11
African/African American (Nigeria)	6	6
Bi-ethnic (part Latino)	6	6
Jewish	3	3
Native American	1	1

\*Ethnicity was not collected in the first two sessions.

Members were instructed to answer the questionnaire regarding their satisfaction with the club meeting. In this context, satisfaction scores indicated: 1. they perceived the meeting was a valuable place to learn about groupwork practice; 2. they believed that their needs were met and to what extent; 3. they would recommend the club to colleagues and; 4. they would return to future meetings for further support and knowledge. The measure's reliability has ranged from .86 to .94 in previous studies (Attkisson, 1985). The reliability of the scale for this sample was excellent (alpha = .92). In addition, the CSQ-8 has good concurrent validity (Attkisson, 1985). A global question was also asked regarding the quality of the meeting: 'How would you rate the quality of tonight's meeting? (1 = very poor to 5 = outstanding).' The last two questions were: 'What were things that you liked about our meeting?' and 'What are your suggestions for future club meetings?'

## Data collection and analysis

At the end of each meeting, the participants completed a questionnaire, which included the Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ-8, Attkisson, 1985) and open-ended questions developed by the researchers. In addition, sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Demographic questions, reflection narratives and AASWG records



provided additional data.

The quantitative data was analyzed using the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS 16). Satisfaction Scores were obtained as an aggregate for the entire sample as well as for individual sessions. Themes were identified and tallied for the two open-ended questions. Two researchers reviewed the open-ended responses in order to establish inter-rater reliability.

## Study results

Mean scores for the CSQ-8 were obtained for each of the nine sessions (Table 2). The means ranged from 26.35 ( $SD = 4.45$ ) to 30.93 ( $SD = 1.44$ ) out of a possible 32 points. The global question regarding quality of the session resulted in mean scores of 4.0 ( $SD = 1.0$ ) to 4.8 ( $SD = .41$ ) out of a possible 5 points.

Table 2. Member Satisfaction with Group Work Club ( $N = 129$ )

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Session Number	CSQ-8			Meeting Quality Question		
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Session 1	25	26.35	4.45	25	4.00	1.000
Session 2	19	27.32	3.65	19	4.47	.513
Session 3	11	28.70	3.50	11	4.45	.688
Session 4	17	28.00	3.72	17	4.24	.752
Session 5	10	27.30	3.23	10	4.30	.675
Session 6	11	27.91	3.56	11	4.45	.522
Session 7	12	28.50	4.42	12	4.42	.669
Session 8	9	27.67	4.62	9	4.62	.744
Session 9	15	30.93	1.44	15	4.80	.414

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Two qualitative questions asked participants the strengths and suggestions for meetings. There were 83 responses to the strengths question (Table 3). The strengths were organized into themes: social environment ( $frequency = 23, 28\%$ ), structure/logistics ( $f = 18, 22\%$ ), speakers/presentations/topics ( $f = 17, 20\%$ ), groupwork ( $f = 7, 8\%$ ), food ( $f = 7, 8\%$ ), interaction ( $f = 4, 5\%$ ), link to AASWG ( $f = 3, 4\%$ ), networking and sharing resources, community involvement, evaluation of meetings,

Table 3  
Things You Liked About the Meeting

Strengths <sup>1</sup>	<i>f</i>	%
Social Environment (welcoming, friendly, intimate, make friends, relaxing, fun, openness)	23	28
Structure/logistics (i.e. meetings at a restaurant or beach)	18	22
Speakers/Presentations/Topics (having different speakers in the meeting, human trafficking, etc.)	17	20
Groupwork (techniques used, passion, like-minded, people, benefits, etc.)	7	8
Food	7	8
Interaction (interaction between members)	4	5
Link to AASWG (discussing organization, conferences, etc.)	3	4
Networking (meeting new people, sharing resources)	1	1
Community (community involvement)	1	1
Evaluation of Meetings	1	1
Collaboration of different entities (working with chapter, student organization)	1	1

1. Multiple responses were possible.

and collaboration of different entities ( $f = 1$ , 1% each).

The 26 suggestions about meetings were grouped into the following categories: logistics/ changing day, time, or location ( $f = 7$ , 27%), publicity ( $f = 5$ , 19%), structure/different types of presentations and experiential exercises ( $f = 4$ , 15%), community involvement/social action ( $f = 2$ , 8%), and additional processing of meetings ( $f = 2$ , 8%). Individual members suggested: a specific speaker, changing the

evaluation instrument, teaching groupwork techniques, and providing opportunities for members to facilitate meetings. In reviewing statistics regarding membership in AASWG, as a result of the club's formation, the AASWG state chapter, which meets in a different city, increased its membership by one-third or 17 members during the first six months of the club.

Members were also encouraged to write reflections on their experiences at the club meetings (25 reflections were received). These reflections were reviewed and the following themes dominated: members learned and enhanced their groupwork practice knowledge and skills; they enjoyed interacting in a group of diverse members with varied experiences in groupwork practice; and, mutual aid was provided. The following quotes taken from these reflections illustrate different members' meeting experiences:

*After the facilitator explained the history of AASWG and announced the availability of becoming a member, I decided to join AASWG. I also decided to attend and be a volunteer for their international conference in Germany. I am interested in doing international social work in the future and going to the symposium in Germany is of great interest as a way for me to learn more about social groupwork in other countries.*

*Overall, I found the speaker to be effective at explaining her work with the Siblings' Support Group. I also admired the way the members listened and interacted with one another. For the most part, I believe that everyone in attendance was able to communicate their ideas confidently and tactfully, because the environment felt comfortable and welcoming to the free flow of ideas.*

*The group club meeting added to my awareness and understanding of human trafficking and support groups for victims of human trafficking. I hope our group meetings continue to integrate controversial topics along with guest speakers. Additionally, I enjoyed interacting with other professionals who are as passionate about social groupwork as I am. This is an amazing way to collaborate in a group setting with colleagues and service providers and exchange valuable information. I am excited to continue my participation in the group club meetings and eager to learn from these experiences.*

*I enjoyed learning from other club members who have groupwork expertise who*

*gave brief presentations on techniques that worked for them. I was reminded of the basic rules of facilitating a group with diverse members: respect, listening, sharing and mediating mutual aid.*

An excerpt from the audio-tape of the 8<sup>th</sup> meeting provides an example of how members interacted with one another at a club meeting and offered ideas of how to improve each other's groupwork practice. Members provided support to one another and expressed relief when having the opportunity to discuss challenges encountered when facilitating social work groups.

**M2:** *I am facilitating a women's empowerment group, and I do not feel I know enough about self-esteem and women's issues to be effective. The members will ask me a question, and I am not certain how to answer. I feel I need to respond and then they will look at me. I will say 'Is there anybody in the group who has gone through this experience?' Then, someone will say something and it becomes a domino effect and others offer expertise. I have been torn because I do not know all the answers. I talked to my field instructor and she said, 'It took me a long time to learn about women's issues and I am still learning. You are not going to know everything when you start a group, and no one is an expert in every field. It is okay not to know and solicit input from the group.' My main goal is to link members because they learn so much from each other.*

**M12:** *I am also doing a young women's support group. They share crises that they are going through and they are looking for answers. Just last week in the group, this young woman shared serious problems. She revealed that her mother killed her father while trying to defend herself. Her mother is now in prison, and she lost both her parents to domestic violence. She shared this situation with the group and she started crying uncontrollably. What was I supposed to do?*

**M2:** *We talked about this type of situation in groupwork class. It is difficult because you do not want to leave the member suffering alone but also cannot ignore the group.*

**M12:** *Yes, it was very difficult. Should I stop the group or should I go talk to her?*

**M11:** *What did you do?*

**M12:** *The field instructor was there since it was my first time facilitating the group, and she removed the member from the group to talk.*

**M5:** *What would you have done if the field instructor was not there?*

**M12:** *I do not know.*

**M6:** *You do not have to have the perfect words. Just being there in the moment*

*with the member is sufficient. I am finding out a lot more it is not always what I say but just being present is more valuable, more than words.*

*M5: I think it is important also to point out members' strengths. Probably many traumas have happened to her. You can always use silence. So just be with her and let everything be quiet, but then it is good to say you are sitting here now and you came tonight. You are safe now and your life will get better.*

*M12: I was doing the best I could.*

*M8: Groupworkers are always learning. You are learning new information from the literature to use in your group but you have to also learn from the group itself.*

*M12: That is why I like coming to the club. I learn skills to use in my groups.*

## **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to explore if a groupwork club at a university would nurture social groupwork and engage students, practitioners and academics in a collaborative groupwork experience. An additional question posed was if membership in AASWG increased due to the club's existence. The results demonstrate that members learned and grew from the groupwork club experience and many joined AASWG. This finding conforms to the literature - students, practitioners, and social work educators often benefit from self-care in the form of supportive professional groups (Bergart & Simon, 2004; Simon, Webster, & Horn, 2007). Groupwork students and agency professionals benefit when there is ongoing education about groupwork and group process (Goodman & Munoz, 2004). Members in the group were able to provide mutual aid, receive support, and gain insight into groupwork practice that was not covered in classroom curriculum or obtained in work experiences.

Diversity can have wide ranging effects on group processes (Brown & Mistry, 2005). By having a multi-cultural group, members were able to learn and grow from each other (Toseland & Horton, 2008).

Research on groupwork has been increasing within the past decade; yet, there is still a great need for new research to evaluate the effectiveness of groupwork (Doel, 2008; Hoyle, Georgesen, & Webster, 2001; McGowan, 2003; Toseland & Horton 2008). By continuing to collect data and analyze group meetings, group processes will be better understood. Group members often drop out because their needs are not

being met, or they are in conflict with how the group is run (Smkowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2001; Toseland & Horton). The group process can be hard to measure; however, the groupwork club is keen on evaluation and continues to look for different more appropriate measures in order to improve the group's processes and evaluation quality.

There were several limitations in this study. The CSQ-8 instrument was not specifically designed to evaluate groupwork or a groupwork club. No standardized instrument could be found that was appropriate for evaluating a groupwork club. Responses on the evaluations may have been influenced by social desirability. A comparison group could not be found. Qualitative data interpretation may be biased; however, the two researchers who analyzed the qualitative data provided a check on each other. One of the researchers, the groupwork professor/first author, was an inside club member, which offered knowledge of the group's dynamics and also introduced potential biases; the other researcher/second author was an outsider/non-member who analyzed the results from the data but did not have participant observer experience.

The results of this study suggest that social work departments and schools could benefit by creating social groupwork clubs. If departments or schools develop groupwork clubs, they may want to consider what members of this club mentioned as strengths and also what suggestions they made for future meetings. Some of the most noted strengths were an open and friendly social environment, holding meetings in diverse venues such as at a restaurant or at the beach, and presentations on groups that reflect current community issues such as human trafficking. Members also gave suggestions on how to improve the groupwork club such as holding the meetings at a time that is convenient, providing more publicity in order to attract and maintain membership, and providing sufficient experiential exercises to promote learning and connection.

These groupwork clubs can be beneficial to students by enhancing their groupwork education and experience. The club provides a place where members can learn about groupwork from one another. The club has given members the opportunity to facilitate and participate in group meetings and programs and receive and give mutual aid and support.

The club has been able to overcome obstacles since its formation such as developing clear purposes, and finding volunteer groupwork speakers; yet, it still faces hurdles. Ongoing, are the challenges of bringing new members into the club, retaining existing ones, finding a

day and time that fits all members' schedules, and finding an evaluation tool that is tailored to the groupwork club. The stresses of managing busy lives within a sinking global economy strengthen the resolve of the club's members to create a groupwork sanctuary for students, practitioners and academics.

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