

The advantages and benefits of a student mutual-aid group in developing groupwork skills

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Abstract: *There is a growing consensus in the literature that there is a crisis in groupwork education due to the limited internships that offer students the opportunity to practise with groups. In response to this crisis, the authors developed a model for teaching groupwork skills in the classroom using mutual-aid groups. This paper presents a study (n= 192) of social work graduate students who participated in the mutual-aid groups. The findings demonstrate that the majority of the students (90%) rated the mutual-aid groups as an excellent to good method of teaching groupwork skills and group dynamics.*

Keywords: *groupwork; group work education; mutual-aid groups; social work students; stress management groups; experiential learning*

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Introduction

The social work educator's challenge to teach social work students group theory and groupwork practice is well-documented (Kurland & Salmon, 1998). Educators cannot always rely on the students being able to practise groupwork skills since many field instructors themselves have limited experience and education in groupwork (Cohen & Wayne, 2009). To deal with this issue, many educators have employed the use of role-plays in the classroom instruction (Moss, 2000; Pollio & MacGowan, 2010). However, not all students find this method of instruction effective complaining about the artificialness of the experience and preferring to be in 'a real group' (Humphrey, 2013). As a result, the authors propose another approach to teaching groupwork skills that have students facilitate mutual-aid groups in the classroom setting.

Kropotkin was the first to use the term mutual-aid to analyze social advancement and biological evolution (Kropotkin, 1908). Although William Schwartz (1961) was not the first to identify mutual-aid as an important component for facilitating groupwork, he was the first to introduce the term to social work (Steinberg, 2004). In later years, Gitterman and Shulman expanded on the concept and wrote extensively on mutual-aid groups (Gitterman & Shulman, 1994). More recently, Steinberg has written about the dynamics of mutual-aid and the mutual-aid model in groupwork practice (2004; 2014).

Literature review

Approximately twenty years ago, Regan (1992) studied the effectiveness of using mutual-aid based group role-plays in the classroom as an educational tool. The study revealed that 80% of a sample of 250 students found these mutual-aid groups very helpful. However, these groups were based on doing role-plays and not on participating in experiential mutual-aid groups. More recently, Clements and Minnick (2012) conducted a study (N=61) in which rural BSW students participated in mutual-aid stress-management groups to learn groupwork skills. The results of the study showed that these groups reduced stress, taught self-care strategies and groupwork skills to the students. However, these

groups were not conducted in the classroom setting in contrast to the approach that is discussed in this paper.

Cohen (2011) described another teaching method that she utilized in the classroom. She uses task groups to teach groupwork concepts to MSW students in her groupwork courses. She concludes that 'in view of the current crisis in group work education it is particularly important for students who are lacking group work experiences in the field to have the opportunity to experience the dynamics of group work' (p.59). Although she stated that the assignment is effective in demonstrating the concepts of group norms and roles as well as group development, one limitation of this method is that it did not teach groupwork skills.

Experiential groupwork education

Social work educators are well aware of the importance and benefits of experiential methods in the teaching of groupwork. Birnbaum (1984) discussed the importance of experiential learning in teaching students about group process and skills. Rivas (1981) indicated that experiential methods help students better integrate the concepts they are learning. Studies have shown that students who participate in experiential learning by facilitating student-led groups are more likely 'to have adequate knowledge of group processes and state they intend to engage in groupwork practice in the future' (Clements, 2008, in Humphrey, 2013, p.63). Recently, Humphrey (2013) conducted a study of BSW students who participated in an experiential group to decrease stress and found that the students gained knowledge and skills about groupwork while benefitting personally from the experience. One of the most widely used experiential learning models is Kolb's (1984). Kolb's theory describes four stages including a concrete experience, reflection about the experience, conceptualization and developing ways to improve the experience (Humphrey, 2013).

In spite of the use of experiential teaching methods in groupwork education, little is known about the use of mutual-aid groups in the classroom to teach groupwork skills. There appear to be only a few studies examining students' experiences and satisfaction with student mutual-aid groups in groupwork courses and each examines mutual-aid from a different perspective. This study will examine whether teaching groupwork skills using mutual-aid groups is an effective method from

the students' perspective. This study examines: (a) how students rated their experience in the mutual-aid group; (b) the groupwork concepts and practice skills students learned in the mutual-aid group; (c) whether group experiences improve their confidence levels for facilitating groups; (d) the inclination to join other groups in the future; and (e) satisfaction with learning groupwork skills in a role-play or in a mutual-aid group. The authors use Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model to teach students groupwork skills through their participation in a mutual-aid group.

Method

Study Design and Participants: This study involved 192 graduate students attending a social work school at a large public university in the southeast, U.S.A. After gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board at the university, one researcher distributed the self-administered questionnaires to 8 different classes totaling 192 students enrolled in the Clinical Practice with Groups classes. The recruited students enrolled in eight classes were taught by four different professors. Students were promised that their information would remain confidential and no names or identifying information would be gathered and participation in the surveys would not affect their grade.

Demographic Variables: The only demographic variables asked of the students were their gender, age, and race/ethnicity.

Instruments:

The researchers informed by the literature developed the survey. The survey was a seven-item questionnaire that asked the questions set out in Table 1 overleaf.

Procedures:

The School of Social Work has one concentration in clinical social work for the second year and advanced standing graduate students. The course titled 'Clinical Practice with Groups,' was a required graduate course

Table 1. Questions					
1. How would you rate your learning experience in the 'mutual-aid group' that you participated in during class?	Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor
2. What are some of the things you learned in the 'group' that you were reading about in your textbook or other required course readings?					
3. What were some of the things that you learned in the 'group' that you were listening to in the lectures/class discussions?					
4. Did the 'group' experience improve your confidence in facilitating groups currently or in the future? Please explain	A great deal	Somewhat	Not at all	Other	
5. As a result of this mutual-aid group experience, are you more inclined to join other groups in the future? Please explain.	Yes	No	Maybe	N/A	
6. Do you prefer to learn groupwork skills using the 'mutual-aid group' or in a typical role-play? Please, explain why.	Role-Play	Mutual-aid Group	Both	Other	Neither
7. Please write any other comments you have about the 'mutual-aid groups.'					

offered in the concentration year. The course teaches students about groupwork practice and skills across the stages of group development, and various clinical groupwork models with an emphasis on the mutual-aid model. Steinberg's textbook, *Mutual-Aid Model for Social Work with Groups* (2014) is one of the required textbooks for the course.

On the first day of class, the professor tells students that they will be given the opportunity to participate in mutual-aid groups throughout the semester as a way to learn about group dynamics and groupwork skills. The class meets weekly for three hours and the students facilitate mutual-aid groups in the last hour of class every week. The class usually has about 30 students, and the students select which of two groups they want to join. On the first day of class, students think about what

they have in common with one another and determine the theme of their mutual-aid group. The professor suggests that one of the options might be a mutual-aid group to address the stress of being a graduate student. The students usually select this type of group. The students are instructed to select the week they want to be facilitators, and with whom they want to co-facilitate. All facilitators are responsible for planning the session and co-facilitating. All students get a chance to co-facilitate at least once during the semester. The rest of the time, they participate as members of the group, or they observe the other group. The two groups of about 15 students take turns participating in a mutual-aid group every other week. Both groups participate in six 40 minutes mutual-aid group sessions. At the end of each group session, the professor asks the facilitators to comment on their practice skills. After the facilitator and co-facilitator speak, the group members provide feedback. Next, the other group of observers and the professor then share their feedback. The instructor does not grade the group facilitators on their performance so that students are less anxious about facilitating. There is an assignment that consists of a paper analyzing the mutual-aid group that is graded by the instructor. Some of the topics that students have chosen to discuss in the mutual-aid groups include the stress of relationships, stress of being away from home, stress of having roommates who they do not get along with, and finances. Other topics also included: juggling school, work and family responsibilities, stress of writing papers and meeting school deadlines, coping strategies to relief stress, self-care, eating healthy foods, exercising, relaxation techniques and time management.

Data analysis

Basic descriptive statistics were used to examine the findings. A content analysis was completed on the open-ended responses. The qualitative data were first analyzed using an open coding strategy to tease out general themes of concern (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Following the open coding, axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was initiated to determine overall categories and subcategories. As many descriptive categories as possible were generated to order the data. After the data had been classified and labeled, different categories were refined. Descriptions of the experiences in the mutual-aid group were outlined

highlighting what the mutual-aid groups were like from the student's point of view. To further analyze and interpret the data, the presentation of particular themes from emergent patterns in the data were organized and reported as major trends.

Six thematic areas arose from the analysis. The themes included: (a) concepts and theories learned in the mutual-aid groups; (b) concepts and skills learned in class discussions and practised in the mutual-aid groups; (c) mutual-aid groups improved confidence in facilitating groups; (d) mutual-aid groups made students more inclined to join other groups; (e) students preferred mutual-aid groups vs. group role-plays; (f) additional comments about the mutual-aid groups. To inform the reader of the students' perceptions of the mutual-aid groups the findings are presented in narrative style. Identified themes include quotes that best describe or summarize the content areas.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics

The majority of students were female (71.4%, n=137) between 22-25 years old. The race/ethnicity of the students was Caucasian (49.0%, n=94), African American (16.7%, n=32), Latino (10.4%, n=20), Asian (3.6%, n=7), Biracial (2.1%, n=4), Native American (0.5%, n=1), and missing data (17.7%, n=34). See Table 2 for a description of the demographic characteristics of the sample. Table 3 below summarises the students' responses.

Students' learning experience

Students were asked to rate their learning experience in the mutual-aid group in which they participated. The majority of students' responses included: 'excellent,' (53%), followed by 'very good' (20%), 'good' (17%), 'fair' (10%), and poor (0%).

Table 2

Demographic characteristics of the sample

Sample characteristics		n	%
Gender	Female	137	71.4
	Male	16	8.3
Race/Ethnicity	Caucasian	94	49.0
	African American	32	16.7
	Latino	20	10.4
	Asian	7	3.6
	Biracial	4	2.1
	Native American	1	0.5
Age	22-25	80	41.6
	26-31	40	20.8
	32-41	20	10.4
	42-53	16	8.3
	54+	5	2.7
	No answer	31	16.2

Group concepts and theories learned in the mutual-aid groups

Students were asked to assess their experience in the mutual-aid groups in order to reinforce what they were reading in their textbook and other course readings. The students' answers were separated into a few categories. First, were theoretical approaches, second, concepts, and third skills. Some of the theoretical approaches they wrote about were mutual-aid model, empowerment model, feminist model, psychoeducational approach, cognitive behavioral approach, and solution-focused model. The concepts they read about outlined the stages of group development, models of group development, in particular the Boston model and the relational model, universality, importance of confidentiality, and influence of diversity on groups. The skills that they reported learning were interpersonal skills, how unconscious reactions affect group members, conflict resolution/management, group facilitation process, use of icebreakers, leadership styles and their effect on group dynamics. The students further stated that they developed new strategies to cope with stress as part of the mutual-aid groups.

Group concepts and skills learned in class discussions and practised in the mutual-aid groups

Students reported what they experienced in the mutual-aid groups that reflected what they heard in lectures/class discussions. Many of the same group concepts and skills they were learning in mutual-aid groups were reflected in the course readings as well as in class discussions. In addition, students added the following: mutual-aid dynamics, group norms, group member roles, role of groupworker, worker skills, structuring techniques, intervention strategies, use of silence, engaging silent members, 'round robin vs. free floating' discussions, spotting verbal/nonverbal cues, importance of empathy, and multi-cultural issues were also areas they examined. Students also reported that the self-care and breathing techniques they learned in the groups helped them deal better with stress.

Mutual-aid groups improve confidence in facilitating groups

Another question to which the students responded was whether the mutual-aid group experience improve their confidence in facilitating groups currently or in the future. The students' responses were as follows: 'a great deal' (49%), 'somewhat' (26%), 'not at all' (3%), and 'other' (22%). The majority of the statements they wrote to explain these answers indicated a favorable experience with the groups. For example: 'This class helped me prepare for the group I will be facilitating next semester;' 'Really helped me with the group I am facilitating at my internship;' 'Boosted my confidence to facilitate groups in the future;' and 'Helped me identify my strengths and weaknesses as a facilitator.' A couple of answers that were not favorable stated: 'Lacked authentic experiences of confrontations and client ambivalence,' and 'Reminded me why I dislike groupwork.'

Mutual-aid groups make students more inclined to join other groups

Students responded to questions about whether the mutual-aid group experience made them more inclined to join other groups in the future. The responses included: 'yes,' (62%), 'no,' (21%), 'maybe,' (15%), and 'not applicable' (2%). When asked to explain, most responses were positive. For example:, 'I like discussing issues with people experiencing similar

situations; 'group experience was very uplifting and pulled many outside resources;' 'I learned coping skills and made new friends;' 'I was able to overcome my anxiety and practise skills with direct feedback from the class and instructor.' Another student said that she would not be inclined to join a group for herself, but would be inclined to suggest groups for future clients. One of the responses was not positive stating that the student did not have a good experience with groups.

Students prefer mutual-aid groups to role-plays

Another survey question asked the students if they prefer to learn groupwork skills using the 'mutual-aid group' or in a typical role-play. The responses included: in a mutual-aid group (71%); in a role-play (7%); in both (6%), 'other' (14%), 'neither' (2%). Typical responses stated that the mutual-aid groups eliminated the need for performance and were more 'real.' They experienced the mutual-aid groups as more genuine, drew from real life experience, and did not require pretending. They stated the role-playing felt forced and fake and did not provide a good learning experience. However, one student stated that the role-play is a more organized way of learning new techniques.

Students' additional comments about mutual-aid groups

Students were asked to write any additional comments they had about the mutual-aid groups. Responses were all very positive stating that it is an excellent way to learn groupwork skills and group dynamics. Students stated: 'My group rocked;' 'Great experience;' 'It was beneficial to me both personally and professionally,' and 'Very helpful since I did not get any group experiences at my internship.' Overall, the majority of the students said they loved the course, it had exceeded their expectations; they loved the mutual-aid groups and planned to continue them in future classes.

Table 3. Survey Questions (n=192)						
	Question					
1	How would you rate our learning experience in the 'mutual-aid group' that you participated in during class?	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
		102 (53%)	38 (20%)	33 (17%)	19 (10%)	0
4	Did the 'group' experience improve your confidence in facilitating groups currently or in the future?	A Great Deal	Somewhat	Not at All	Other	
		94 (49%)	50 (26%)	6 (3%)	42 (22%)	
5	<i>As a result of this mutual-aid group experience, are you more inclined to join other groups in the future?</i>	Yes	No	Maybe	N/A	
		119 (62%)	40 (21%)	29 (15%)	4 (2%)	
6	Do you prefer to learn group work skills using the 'mutual-aid group' or in a typical role play?	Mutual-aid	Role-Play	Both	Other	Neither
		137 (71%)	14 (7%)	11 (6%)	26 (14%)	4 (2%)

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the majority of the students (90%) rated the mutual-aid groups as an excellent to good method of learning groupwork skills and group dynamics. This experiential method of teaching clearly helps social work students learn about the following: group processes, stages of group development, member roles, group norms, diversity in groups, how to deal with conflict, diverse theoretical models of groupwork, and groupwork skills for facilitating mutual-aid groups. One limitation of this teaching method is that it does not give students frequent opportunities to practise groupwork skills since they usually co-facilitate the groups only once or twice during the semester. Despite this limitation, the majority of students (75%) stated the mutual-aid groups improved their confidence in facilitating groups. Most students (75%) also reported being more inclined to join other groups in the future. Additionally, they said they would suggest groups to their clients, this suggests the mutual-aid groups helped students recognize the benefits of groupwork in social work.

While the authors believe role-playing has a place in education similar to other studies (Birnbaum, 1984; Rivas, 1981; Clements, 2008; Humphrey, 2013). The findings of this study demonstrate the value of using experiential methods to teach groupwork skills and group processes. This experiential method using Kolb's theory of learning (1984) allows students to be themselves in their group experiences, thereby anchoring important observations and group skills. The authors find this experiential method using mutual-aid groups to be an effective teaching method of groupwork. Clements and Minnick (2012), report similar findings regarding the effectiveness of utilizing experiential teaching methods to teach rural BSW students about groupwork skills. In this study, the graduate students themselves prefer learning about groups and practising group skills by participating in the experiential mutual-aid groups vs. a role-play. In fact, the majority of students (71%) stated they prefer this teaching method as opposed to role-plays. As Humphrey (2013) also found in her research, this study found that students 'prefer to be in a real group.' In addition to teaching groupwork processes and skills, the mutual-aid groups helped students deal with the stress of being in graduate school. Students reported they developed new strategies to cope with stress by learning self-care and

breathing techniques, and the groups were found to be beneficial both personally and professionally. Other studies have found similar results (Clements & Minnick, 2012; Humphrey; 2013). Such findings point to an important area for future research – the effectiveness of mutual-aid groups in the classroom setting to teach groupwork skills and stress management techniques.

When interpreting the findings of this study, several limitations must be considered. This study is an exploratory study using a nonprobability sample, which may have resulted in selection bias limiting the generalizability of the study. It is not clear whether the findings of this study regarding students experience in mutual-aid groups in the classroom could be generalized to other social work students. Another limitation is that there were eight classes taught by four different professors, and the study does not offer insight into any differences on students' responses in the different classes. The study also utilized a small sample which compromises the ability to generalize the findings to the larger population of graduate social work students. Future research would benefit by recruiting a larger sample in diverse university settings and geographical locations. Experimental designs comparing teaching methods would add insight into the most effective teaching methods. Because undergraduate and graduate students may differ in their personal and academic experiences, studies focusing on these two groups could yield important findings. In summary, the current study adds a positive alternative to the literature regarding teaching groupwork skills in graduate courses by using student-led mutual-aid groups in the classroom setting.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated the advantages and benefits of experiential learning to teach groupwork processes and skills. The use of student-led mutual-aid groups in the classroom taught students group processes and skills while simultaneously helping to decrease the stress of being a graduate social work student. Reflecting on the thematic areas of the data analysis, students were able to experience the following: (a) application of concepts and theories in their mutual-aid groups; (b) practise of groupwork skills and receiving feedback about their skills from

classmates and their professor; (c) increased confidence in facilitating mutual-aid groups; (d) desire to participate and facilitate mutual-aid groups in the future. After experiencing the mutual-aid groups, students reported that they preferred mutual-aid groups because the members of the group were able to select the focus of the group. Further, students were clear that group role-plays were artificial in comparison to mutual-aid groups that were about 'real' issues affecting their lives. Therefore, due to the lack of groupwork practice opportunities in field placements and the benefits of using mutual-aid groups to teach groupwork skills, faculty members in Schools of Social Work are encouraged to use mutual-aid groups in groupwork classes.

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