

Social Work with Groups

Social Justice
Through Personal,
Community, and
Societal Change



Nancy E. Sullivan • Ellen Sue Mesbur • Norma C. Lang
Deborah Goodman • Lynne Mitchell • Editors

Social Work with Groups
*Social Justice Through
Personal, Community,
and Societal Change*

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Foreword

Social Work with Groups: Social Justice Through Personal, Community, and Societal Change! was the theme and title of the 22nd Annual International Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG), held in Toronto, Canada, in October 2000. This collection of papers, selected from the more than 150 prepared and presented by social group work practitioners, educators, and theorists at the symposium, retains the title.

In opening a book thus titled, one may ask oneself, “What is the meaning of the concept of social justice? What does this collection of papers purport to say that will explain and illuminate the concept, which is surely value-based? What do social workers who work with groups know about such a value concept?” Surely social justice means very simply that it is desirable for a society to make its resources available to all people equally and fully, and, yes, that includes social work services, which certainly are, or ought to be, available to all people.

In viewing the contents of this book, one is immediately struck by the breadth and complexity in the application of the concept. Herein, it seems to refer to a range of people, for example, adolescent youth confined to a residential setting, First Nations people and their cultural activities, sexually abused African-American children, older women and their reclaimed lives, parents who use a food bank for their children, fathers of children with spina bifida. The implication is that persons such as these, and many others addressed in these pages, are deprived of societal resources and affected by societal injustice.

This could bring the reader to question further, “What do these social workers who offer their services in groups know about this subject?” There must be more to it. As one begins to read further, one discovers the depth of philosophical, societal, social, and psychological knowledge and insight that guides the professional skill of these authors whose work is assembled here. They seem to be presenting, in many different ways, some very important understandings about the human condition:

1. Social justice is a process, not an absolute. Achieving it is hard and ever-continuing work.
2. Human needs are not finite. Human situations create new needs to be addressed by society equally and fully.
3. A society requires structures that are continually vigilant to all human needs, past, present, and future.
4. Social work is such a structure, always seeking a just society and always alert to new needs and new injustices.
5. Social group work, working from a democratic value base with mutual aid goals, is intrinsically concerned with equality and inequality.
6. Social group workers, always cognizant of human situations that produce new societal needs, reach out to help people, and to help people help each other.
7. The group is a unit in human societies that embodies the potential for social justice encounters and, in achieving its groupness, represents relationship in vivo.
8. In the group, humanness is rooted and humanity can be realized.

This is a remarkable collection, informing the reader about the values, knowledge, and skills of social work with groups through the presentations of practice, the education of social workers for practice, and the application of theory in skillful practice. It is a contribution to the dreams and goals of humanity, demonstrating that social justice can be enhanced.

The profession of social work, and particularly those social workers who believe deeply and work skillfully in offering human services in groups, can be proud—as am I in accepting the invitation to write this foreword.

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Introduction

From its origins in the Settlement House Movement of the late nineteenth century, social group work has served as a means to assist people to integrate into or rejoin society, and to enable people who are marginalized and devalued, due to economic, emotional, or other social circumstances, to gain a sense of inclusion as participants in community with others. Our group work heritage prepares us to work with people based on values that accept difference among them, acknowledge and respect their personal realities, and shape our professional role as a collaborative resource working with them. Groups in social work can and should redress social injustices as part of our profession's mission toward the goal of a more equitable life for everyone.

The theme of this symposium, *Social Work with Groups: Social Justice through Personal, Community, and Societal Change*, was chosen by the aptly named Genesis Committee, a task group launched by the Toronto Region Groupworkers' Network, the Toronto Region Chapter of AASWG, and composed of a cross section of practitioners and academics in the Toronto area. At a time when social work's focus, settings, and modalities of practice are so diverse, the symposium planners wished to profile the centrality of social action and social justice as unifying foundation elements of our work, whether it be in direct practice with groups, research, theory-building, or teaching. The Program Committee, in its early formulating meetings, undertook the exercise of looking at the practices of those around the table for evidence of social action and social justice elements. Amazingly and reassuringly, in even the most "clinical" practices represented, we could reframe or discover these elements present in each example. The hope and goal of the symposium planners was then confirmed: that participants would leave the symposium with a renewed realization that social justice can and should be present as an objective in social work with groups.

This symposium was the product of a corps of dedicated, hard-working volunteers, who contributed their competencies, energy, and

good humour in generous measure. As individual committees and the overall planning group, we welcomed the opportunity to host the 22nd Annual International Symposium of AASWG, and now to present these selected proceedings as a representation of the rich program of the symposium.

The book is divided into four parts. Section I contains four chapters addressed to social justice and its connections to social work with groups. Section II presents four chapters concerned with elements of social justice in the theory of social work with groups. Section III offers seven practice chapters, all of which address issues of social justice in some way, whether implicitly or explicitly. Section IV contains three chapters concerned with social justice in social work education and research.

In Section I, Stephen Lewis sets the context for the symposium and the proceedings, with his extraordinary global perspective on social justice from his extensive work with the UN and UNICEF. He presents a portrait of social inequities so vast as to render normal social intervention helpless. "We need voices . . . we need your voices," he states, calling for the response of the profession of social work to the tragedies of international civil conflict and atrocity, HIV/AIDS pandemics, poverty, and globalization. Ben Zion Shapiro explores the fragility both of social justice and of social work with groups, and presents an astonishing new conceptualization of the several forms of small groups that together constitute groups in society and in practice and serve as the varied entities with which we work. Alex Gitterman examines several types of social justice that impinge on the practice of social work with groups in various ways, providing rich practice illustrations. Paule McNicoll reviews some innovations in practice, both within the profession of social work and beyond it, which address social justice through social actions undertaken by groups in particular ways.

Section II begins with the writing of George S. Getzel, whose thinking about social justice is defined in the term *justice-centered group work*, and who identifies some tools for implementing social justice elements in practice. Sue Henry defines small-group experiences in and through social work with groups as the prototype of social justice encounters. She explores the concept of social justice in our literature and presents illustrative materials from practice. Flavio Francisco Marsiglia examines elements in contemporary society that

work against the achievement of social justice through social work practice with groups and presents materials on practice, which is culturally grounded. Dominique Moyse-Steinberg explores the relationship between mutual aid and social justice.

Section III begins with Susan Ciardiello's chapter describing her work with adolescent girls in residential care, using hip-hop therapy as the medium for helping the group members to deal with their important issues. Arielle Dylan presents an analysis of a First Nations form of group work known as Talking Circles, and compares it to social work with groups. Claudia Lawrence-Webb contributes new perspectives on social work with groups with sexually abused African-American children, highlighting culturally sensitive elements in the practice. Estelle Hopmeyer explores the nature of worker self-disclosure in social work with groups, developing guidelines for its use. Zelda Moldofsky and Sue Devor describe an innovative practice developed as a cooking group for parents of young children at a food bank, the group quickly moving beyond the need for low-cost nutritious meals to generate an entity with important social benefits for its members. Betty L. Welsh displays her continuing professional skills as a practitioner/educator in social work with groups, as she develops needed social group components in a retirement community in which she is a resident. Merike Mannik presents a practice with senior women in Australia, designed to enable them to regain independence, with small groups serving as the means of reclaiming their sense of themselves and their future lives.

Section IV begins with the chapter by Michael Phillips, Carol S. Cohen, and Linda Hutton on the field seminar in social work education as a significant group work experience bridging the passage from student to professional practitioner. Mari Ann Graham presents an innovative approach to teaching, which addresses issues of social justice in the classroom, and alters the role of the instructor. David B. Nicholas reports a research study of an online support group for fathers of children with spina bifida.

It is the hope of the editors that this book of selected proceedings will serve as a substantive sampling of the program of the 22nd Annual International AASWG Symposium, and will provide models and inspiration for the continuing efforts of professional social workers with groups to keep social justice prominent in our practice objectives.

The reader will note that there are a number of terms in use in this book to describe practice with groups. These include *social group work*, *group work*, and *social work with groups*. This range of descriptors reflects a change in the terminology of practice over time, from the earliest designation of *social group work* to the more current *social work with groups*. The term *group work* is sometimes a shorthand term, and sometimes a reflection of a practice with groups that is not informed by the practice theory of the profession of social work. For purposes of this text, these variations in terminology are taken to be equivalent to one another with regard to the group work practices that they describe.

SECTION I:
SOCIAL JUSTICE
AND SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS