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Group Work’s Place in Social Work:  
A Historical Analysis

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This paper uses a political/economic lens to explore the relationship of social group work to the larger social work profession. The author studied the group work collection at the Social Welfare History Archives, the journal THE GROUP from the 1940s and 1950s, the proceedings of the re-born group work organization, Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups, and interviewed several prominent group workers who were active in social group work from the 1940s. The author concludes that group work’s decision to merge with NASW in 1955 provided the hoped-for professional identity. However, there were consequences for group workers that were not anticipated and, ultimately, resulted in the disappearance of group work as an integral part of social work education and practice.

We held hands fast, joined in the circle,  
and stood facing one another,  
links of a chain.  
World stood around us, ourselves we must release.  
One laughed and laughed  
and surrendered.  
Yet another tore and tore,  
and a bleeding red wound  
opened  
as he tore the chain that bound us.  
In gray work he unswervingly creates,  
yet red drops run unceasingly.

Gisela Konopka, age 15 (Schiller, n.d.)

There is great value in reading, studying, and analyzing history for what it can help you understand about the past and
inform you about the present. Studying history provides several challenges. No historian's account ever really corresponds with the past. The past was not an account, but rather a series of events, interactions, and situations. No matter how carefully one studies primary documents comparing one to the other, interviews persons who have knowledge of the subject, and sifts through relevant secondary sources, the end product is a personal, ideological construct. This construct is open to change and inevitably will be as new knowledge, perspectives, and simply the passage of time affect it.

This paper is a story of social group work over time and its relationship to the burgeoning social work profession. Particular focus is on three periods of time: (1) the formation of a group work association, 1930s; (2) the merger into the National Association of Social Workers, 1950s; and (3) the rebirth of group work, 1970s. Documents utilized included the NASW Records' section on the American Association of Group Workers at the Social Welfare History Archives; readings from The Group (1940s and 1950s) and other journals of that era; published proceedings from 1979 onward of the reborn AASWG; secondary sources on group work, and interviews, non-randomly selected, with five prominent group workers to whom I am particularly indebted. Paul Ephross, Hans Falck, Gisela Konopka, and John Ramey, were interviewed in 1998; Ruby Pernell was interviewed in 1999. Their perspectives cover a period of 60 years of social group work practice.

Political/Economic Perspective

Looking at social group work from a political/economic perspective helps clarify the role of group work in the larger organization of social work. Professions cannot be seen outside of their social, political, and economic context. Under this definition, an organized group or occupation is a profession when it has obtained control over the production, distribution, and consumption of a commodity that society has indicated that it needs (Wenocur & Reisch, 1989; Larson, 1977). Supporters of this perspective have made sound arguments for studying professions not just in the context of a division of labor but as part
of a network of social and economic relations (Andrews, 1984). To be able to control a market of professional services, a profession must establish sufficient expertise, appeal and legitimacy to attract consumers to use their services. The successful claim to a monopoly leads to higher economic rewards and prestige; in exchange, society asks for responsible performance of a socially required function.

Professions, which are directly related to social class, must align themselves to a sufficient degree with the dominant, elite group to achieve stature and receive needed sanctions. Social group work and the larger profession, social work, have class interests on the one hand; on the other hand, they have humanitarian and democratic ideals, which can conflict with their aspirations toward professionalization (Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). Thus, a political/economic perspective assists us in exploring and understanding the complicated relationship between social group work and social work.

Historical Overview of Group Work in the United States

The continuity of social group work is clearly articulated in the documents. Group work was seen as a movement before it became a field. From a field, it became a method, and back to a field (Papell in Middleman and Goldberg, 1988). Group work played an important role in dealing with a number of shifts in U.S. society in the late-19th century and early-20th century: the industrialization of the U.S.; large population shifts from rural to urban centers, and; the enormous wave of immigration, mainly to U.S. urban areas (Konopka, 1972; Garvin, 1997). Group work emerged out of several organizations including both those which focused on self-help as well as those which focused on recreation and informal education: settlement houses, neighborhood centers, Y's, Jewish centers, camps, scouts, and labor union organizing.

From its beginnings, group work practice and theory has been rooted in "social reform; social responsibility, democratic ideals, and social action as well as social relatedness and human attachment" (Lee, 1991, p. 3). The work done in groups was seen as purposeful activity that involved a process that considered both the individual in the group as well as the group as a whole
as well as the larger community. It was not until its affiliation with social work that it became defined as a method of social work practice. Even as late as the 1960s, it was acknowledged that “[g]roup work as a method of social work is only a recent concept” (Konopka, 1963, 2).

During its early years, there was no particular professional identification among group workers; instead, they were far more likely to identify with their agencies. Group work’s eventual identification with social work was associated with the desire to professionalize and the need to “find a place” in the University. Some social work programs began offering group work courses by the 1920s and eventually group work concentrations. This moved group work closer to social work (Konopka interview, 1998) and, according to some (Falck interview, 1998; Ramey interview, 1998), blunted the radical spirit of group work. Inevitably, the University’s conservative culture affected practice and knowledge building (Falck interview, 1998).

Mary P. Follett (1926) and John Dewey (1933) provided important intellectual contributions to early group workers. Follett strongly believed in the power of the small groups formed in communities to solve social problems that neighbors had in common. Dewey, through his progressive education movement, advocated working with small leisure-time groups (Fatout, M., 1992). Their influence on leading thinkers in group work reinforced an individualist perspective that became engrained in group work (Falck interview, 1998).

After the National Conference on Social Work formed a group work section in 1935, group work became more closely associated with social work. This remained somewhat informal until 1955 and the founding of the National Association of Social Workers (Toseland & Rivas, 1998). A small cadre of group workers (15–20 people) met in New York City in the early 1930s to have informal discussions. This group proposed a gathering of group workers at the NCSW. As a result, a special meeting of group workers met at the Atlantic City NCSW Conference in 1936 with 50 people in attendance. This group created the National Association for the Study of Group Work under the leadership of Arthur Swift. “It was a ‘missionary spirit’ which motivated this early group” (Kraft, p. 13).
Some of this spirit was an outgrowth of being a relatively small group and of feeling under scrutiny by the far larger, more powerful caseworkers. For example, Gertrude Wilson, attracted to the belief in the importance of the group to promoting democratic ideals, was strongly encouraged to drop her interest in group work while a student at the University of Chicago in the 1930s. Sophonisba Breckenridge, one of her social work teachers, argued that Wilson was “wasting” herself by being a person who worked with groups (Gertrude Wilson memoir, 1979, p. 34).

When Louis Kraft, then Executive Director of the National Jewish Welfare Board, sat down in 1947 with an editor of The Group to reminisce about group work, he spoke directly to the passion of early group workers and their movement. “We were a group of zealots”, he said. He found the beginnings of the American Association for the Study of Group Work (NASGW) to be “one of the most satisfying associations of [his] entire career” (Reminiscing with Louis Kraft, 1947, pp. 12–13). This passionate expression is common in movements and causes. It has been present during several periods of group work history. It occurs when there is a sense of mission and, as Kraft indicated, a belief in “common elements in philosophy and method” (Kraft, p. 12–13).

By 1939, the organization had become the American Association for the Study of Group Work, and in 1946, the American Association of Group Workers was formed with membership reaching 1,811 by 1948 (NASW records, AAGW section description. P. 21, SWHA). The organization cut across all agency, religious, racial, and occupational lines. From 1936 to 1946, AAGW worked on knowledge-building and developing common objectives and common terminology (Neely, 1947). A description of AAGW’s nature and functions written in 1947 clarifies group work’s philosophy at that time:

Group work is a method of group leadership used in organizing and conducting various types of group activities. While group work developed first in connection with recreation and voluntary informal education... its use is not confined to those fields. It is increasingly being used in various types of institutions, in hospitals and clinics, in the extra-curricular activities of schools and in similar situations. The guiding purpose behind such leadership rests upon
the common assumptions of a democratic society; namely, the opportunity for each individual to fulfill his capacities in freedom, to respect and appreciate others and to assume his social responsibility in maintaining and constantly improving our democratic society (NASW records, AAGW section, folder 806, SWHA).

A milestone of group work history occurred in 1946 when Grace Coyle presented a paper at the National Conference on Social Welfare where she said that group work "as a method falls within social work as a method . . . " (Coyle, 1946, in Trecker, 1955, p. 340). Even though there were advocates within group work of achieving profession status by affiliating with other professions, after 1946, group work was on a direct path toward joining professional social work. Maintaining a separate autonomous group work organization that would result in professional status for its members was not seen as feasible. Group workers who strongly identified with social work dominated AAGW. Harleigh Trecker, for example, announced in The Compass in 1944 that “group work is a method in social work . . . not a profession—social work is the profession” (Trecker, 1944, p. 4).

This direction, however, provided group work with some challenges. The challenges related to the nature of the work (which included games, social events, community activities and mutual aid), the setting of the work (more non-traditional settings with less traditional work hours and conditions), and the nature of the workers themselves (not necessarily trained social workers; included recreation workers, volunteer workers, street workers, etc.) (Ramey interview, 1998). Group work was “not just talking, but also painting, playing . . . It wasn’t just a method to be taught, but a philosophy that opened doors” (Konopka interview, 1998). As a result, group work was not seen by caseworkers as “serious enough” nor “intellectual enough” (Ramey interview, 1998). Students entering graduate social work programs in the late 1940s with a concentration in group work often felt they had entered a concentration that was rejected by the more dominant concentration, casework (Falck interview, 1998).

Ruby Pernell (interview, 1999), then a young social group worker, remembers the 1946 meeting she attended in Cleveland
where the decision to alter the name of the group work association from American Association for the Study of Group Work, to the American Association of Group Workers was made. She recounted that there was a big debate about the name change:

You have to remember that at that period the people who were interested in group work were not just people who were working in the social work field. You had social psychologists, the recreation people, the education people. They were all part of this. So, the question was should it become this kind of loose research kind of organization where people can develop their ideas, research or whatever, or should it become a membership organization. So, it became a membership organization.

Ruth Middleman (1992, p. 25) points out that group workers have always been a “special breed of social workers with different roots, traditions, history, and heroes.” Group work, rooted in liberalism, attracted liberal to left-leaning members. Many were immigrants. Immigrants brought experiences to this country that affected their decision to enter social work, particularly social group work. Group work agencies often served “sort of as halfway houses for immigrants who became social workers” (Ephross interview, 1998).

The philosophical underpinnings of group work were strengthened by the influence of Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution, such as Hans Falck and Gisela Konopka, who held strong humanistic beliefs in the rights of group members and a passion for democratic participation. Falck (interview, 1998), who emigrated to the U.S. in the late 1930s, decided to become a social group worker to “do something, as a Jew, about the problems of this country to make sure Hitler cannot happen here.”

Konopka (interview, 1998) escaped from Germany in the late 1930s after several years as a Nazi-resistance fighter and imprisonment, and eventually found a home in the U.S. in 1941. Her life experiences brought with her the strong belief in the humanization of all social services and the ability to enhance individuals while also helping them to be concerned for others. Her unwillingness to give up when hope seemed gone in her own life helped Konopka provide hope to others throughout her
group work career. "From the day the Nazi spit in my face", she says, "and I sat helplessly in the cell, I learned to say to myself, 'I may die here, unknown, unsung. But I may come out and then I'll be there!'" (Konopka, 1997, 58).

Within social work, Jewish men and women were drawn to group work because Judaism as both a religion and a culture is distinctly communal—"even if you're not a sinner, you're responsible for the sins of the community" (Ephross interview, 1998). Ephross explains that for Jews, group work enabled them to practice a commandment to "repair the world". This concept, akin to similar concepts in Catholicism and other religions, lends moral sanction to group work community building.

U.S. group workers learned from these immigrants the importance of community life and the strength of the group. At the same time, they also heard the "story of the disastrous power of group associations and of the skilled misuse that could be made of them . . . It forced them to look deeper into human movement to learn about the unique forces within each individual and not to rely alone on programs and group process" (Konopka, 1972, 6).

By the 1940s, particularly after the War, many activities engaged in by social workers, especially the practice and ideology of group workers, came under attack by anti-Communists. The post-World War II atmosphere of oppression received a boost by Senator Joseph McCarthy who, from 1950–1954, engaged in witch hunts that resulted in thousands of citizens, including many group workers losing their jobs. Group work, with its focus on humanism, equality, democracy and social action was particularly affected by McCarthyism (Andrews & Reisch, 1997). From group work's beginnings, it had been committed to such concepts as building relationships, mutuality, understanding others, and tolerance of diversity (Northen, 1994). These were concepts that became increasingly unpopular with many conservative elements at the time.

Harold Lewis (1992), himself a victim of an anti-Communistic witch hunt, suggests that group work was one of social work's first casualties of the Cold War period. He lamented:

This was a serious loss, since this method of social work was the most democratic in the profession. The core concept of group work and
the goal of its major proponents was participatory democracy . . .
What survived was the method's narrower function, therapeutic aid (pp. 41–42).

For radical group workers, it was often the end of a career. "Left wing group workers—many of our leaders—got cleaned out of organizations. Rightly or wrongly, these people had achieved positions of power and ended up marginalized" (Ephross interview, 1998). Group workers Ira Krasner and Verne Weed were investigated for radical activities. Even Saul Bernstein had an article of his withdrawn from publication (later rescinded) because someone with the same name as his was an alleged communist (Andrews & Reisch, 1997).

During the post-War period, group work was acknowledged for its leading role in the promotion of democratic premises within social work, but criticism for not having a clear theory of practice continued. Their efforts toward clarification of the group work method were more successful (Garvin, 1997). Group workers were willing to speak up and take unpopular stands both in support of those with whom they worked and in support of larger social work issues. Thus, it is not surprising that a large number of social work leaders came from the group work field despite its minority status within the profession (Andrews & Reisch, 1997). Despite their small numbers, group workers "assumed leadership roles . . . far out of proportion to their actual numbers in the profession [and] played a vital role in the creation of NASW" (Middleman, 1992, 27).

The Merger—Formation of NASW

By the late-1940s, social workers were members of seven different practitioner organizations based primarily on fields of practice. Each organization had its own eligibility requirements. AAGW membership included anyone who worked in the broad area of group work: recreation workers, social workers, teachers, social psychologists, and volunteer workers, for example. With each organization specifically focused, they were able to be "a vehicle for the advancement of practice, and perhaps a lobbying force with the schools of social work to include and update practice content . . ." (Lewis, 1988, 219). The unanticipated outcome
of the merger was that group work's ability to continue having this kind of influence regarding curriculum content in social work education was blunted.

In the fall of 1947, the American Association of Schools of Social Work called a meeting to organize a procedure to become one unified professional social work organization. A committee was formed of members of the various social work associations. Not until 1950 did a more permanent organization emerge that became the Temporary Inter-Association Council of Social Work Membership Organizations (TIAC). Group worker Sanford (Sandy) Solender served as chair of TIAC from 1953–1955. Other group workers, as well, had major roles in the merger (Pernell interview, 1999). While many group workers were opposed to the merger, particularly the large cohort who were not professionally trained social workers, many desperately wanted the identification of the larger social work organization. The supporters were those who had been trained in schools of social work and saw themselves as social workers with a social group work concentration. Ironically, it is from this group of original supporters, that disillusionment soon set in.

The National Association of Social Workers was born in 1955 with five practice sections: group work, medical social work, psychiatric social work, school social work, and social work research. It was decided that community organization would be a committee rather than a section and could apply for section status at a later time (NASW, TIAC Papers, SWHA).

Group workers who were concerned about the merger received some comforting words from the TIAC representatives (who included H. Gibbs, J. Jorpela, J. McDowell, H. Rowe, S. Solender, and H. Trecker) who published a memo to all AAGW members (6-17-54) in which they assured group workers that they would be “blanketed in” to NASW and explained why the merger was good for them. They explained that NASW would provide better services to all its members, provide a united approach to common concerns, and eliminate overlapping efforts. “It represents our coming to maturity as a profession”, they proclaimed. They emphasized that the group work section would be able to concentrate on group work issues with “the advantages of increased staff service, travel budget, overall office operations.”
The theme of maturity was continued by the editorial committee (headed by Frank Fierman) of The Group (1954, 2) by underscoring the anticipation: “The present period of anticipation prior to the birth of NASW is not unlike the tense and happy months experienced by expectant parents who await the arrival of a new baby.” In explaining that The Group would no longer be published, he said, “It has served our field of social group work well during the adolescence of our profession, but must make way for our new tools which will serve us in our maturity.” Just as the era of The Group was ending, AAGW president Harleigh Trecker pulled together some of the most significant contributions to the journal since 1939 and published them in a book, Group Work: Foundations & Frontiers (Trecker, 1955).

Grace Coyle (1955, 7) announced in The Group: “Having decided by vote of the membership to throw in our lot with social work, we have accepted wholeheartedly an identification with its aims and its place in the community.” Yet, she warned that “. . . it has been clear, as the process of merger went on, that members of specialized groups must continue to have opportunity to study their specialized problems, to confer among themselves to develop research and written materials, and to represent their specialized interests in dealing with the field of practice and the other parts of social work.”

Most group workers nonetheless applauded the creation of NASW. They believed that the union would enable them to continue to study their specific group work issues in the newly created practice sections of NASW. As the merger played out, it became clear that group work as a distinct philosophy would be diminished.

Catherine Papell (1997, 6) refers to that time as a “renaissance, a period filled with a new vitality in social work’s professional journey and a thrust toward integration, toward unification and finding the essence of the social work helping process.” At the same time, she acknowledges that there were “consequences for engaging so eagerly in the generic thrust” because “[g]roup work was a sector of the generic whole that was neglected” (9).

While Gisela Konopka later would reflect with concern about the merger and its consequences, she wrote in the first edition of her book, Social Group Work: A Helping Profession (1963, p. 13) that
One of the insights gained from work with groups is that any person entering a group constellation changes through his interaction with others: Social group work changed through its close association with the profession of social work and also with the older method, social casework. In turn, it changed the profession and widened the concept of the social welfare field. The recent trend of a more aggressive and more outgoing approach in casework is related, for example, to the original more informal and neighborhood-related practice of group work while the more conscious purposefulness seen in modern group work practice is influenced by the clear and more formalized approach of social casework.

She added, in parentheses, a criticism: “Caseworkers and group workers do not always credit each other for the help they gain from each other. Sibling rivalry also exists in the realm of ideas.”

At the time of the merger of these organizations into NASW, the membership of AAGW was 2,846 representing 44 chapter in major cities, a small minority of the larger social work membership of around 22,000. The small numbers made it difficult for group work to maintain its focus despite Harleigh Trecker’s (1955, 5,6) assertion that group work was merging at a time when it was at its’ strongest. He declared: “Never before has our Association been stronger. It has vigorous potentials for a rich and a growing future. [There will be] an opportunity for the group work section to concentrate on the development of group work practice, the enrichment of group work skill, and the deepening of group work research.”

Group worker Alan Klein (1970, 109) suggests that, because of its small numbers, “social group work, awed and influenced by social casework, demoted social action and prevention from their places of importance in its theory and practice in order to conform to the therapeutic and corrective stance of the majority specialization.” Gilbert and Specht (1981), too, found that group work lost an important element by attempting to “copy” casework:

Social group workers and community organizers tried to make their modes of practice look as much as possible like social casework. Thus, social group work gradually became more clinical and less focused on citizenship training and community action. (234–235).
The minutes of an AAGW Executive Committee Meeting at the time of the merger (1-13-55, NASW: AAGW Collection, folder 812, SWHA), underscored how important it would be for the new group work section in the larger NASW organization to continue relationships with allied professions. The Executive Committee was right to be concerned. It soon became clear that the merger into social work while providing an identity and a way to pursue issues from a stronger position, would, at the same time, cost group work its relationship with recreation and education.

As Pernell, (1986, 13) upon reflection, reports, "...social group workers made a historic decision about their identification and affiliation and let go the identifiable bonds with recreation and informal education." A result was that social group work moved closer to a problem oriented philosophy and problem oriented agencies and away from more leisure time activities and more recreational agencies. "[T]he richness of the varied membership we'd had before" the merger was now gone, noted Pernell (interview, 1999). Some saw it as "the death knell of group work as a unique methodology" (Glasser and Mayadas, 1986, 4).

Middleman (1981), talking to an audience of the first symposium of the newly formed AASWG in 1979, said out loud what many other group workers were thinking when she declared that while there were gains associated with merging into NASW, there were also significant losses, "largely not remembered or discussed" (198). She refers to four main losses (187–205):

*The flight from activities in favor of talk*

"To fit in, the social group workers played down their involvement with and knowledge about using activities and the special interests of group participants as a point of engagement and became, like case-workers, helpers who talked."

*The move beyond members' interests*

"In leaving education and recreation behind, group workers also interpreted more vigorously ‘starting where the person is’ to include subtle pursuit of more than the ‘where’. . . It was not unusual to find interracial objectives foremost to the worker and basketball winning foremost to the group members."
Study and research on group process.

"Group workers also parted company with the early group dynamics movement . . . social group workers increasingly used groups to help individuals grow and change and adopted new . . . theories to guide their work."

Focus upon the group to meet common problems and needs

"Instead of a focus on 'the group' and its potential and interests, the focus gradually shifted to the individuals in the group."

Gisela Konopka (interview, 1998) like many group workers who were also closely identified with social work, did not object to the merger when it occurred nor did she fight the push for a generalist perspective. She said, "Group work was not a cause for me. The ideas behind group work were my cause" (Konopka, 1998, interview). In retrospect, she feels that group work made a mistake aligning itself formally with social work. At the opening plenary of the first meeting of AASWG in Cleveland in 1979, she declared

The roots of social work are too closely anchored in authoritarian and bureaucratic historical developments. The acceptance of something as revolutionary as social group work was too hard for this profession . . . As a whole, the social work profession wanted its practitioners to be totally 'in charge!' The power of members was feared (1981,115).

In short, the merger of AAGW into the new, unifying organization, NASW, shifted the focus of group work away from social reform, community building and a more radical group work. Ramey (interview, 1998) believes that "It was not conscious on the part of group workers and I don’t know if it was conscious among the other groups, but the merger resulted in the de-radicalization of group work."

The End of Practice Sections in NASW and the Emergence of "Generocide" (Abels & Abels, 1981)

Group workers continued to hold out hope in the merger for the first few years. It soon became apparent that the void left by the end of The Group was not going to be filled by the new journal
Social Work. Many group workers felt that group work articles were few and far between and that articles that were published seldom, if ever, cited group workers (Ramey interview, 1998). The loss of The Group was doubly felt because The Survey, published by Paul Kellogg, ceased publication in the early 1950s. “The end of The Survey left a void in the literature that has never been replaced.” It represented “the progressive voice, particularly the settlement and thus, group work, voice” (Ramey interview, 1998).

The NASW practice sections remained the hope of group work identity. Yet, in 1962, the NASW Delegate Assembly voted to disband with sections in the name of unification. Ramey (interview 1998), who considers this period the biggest crisis in the history of group work, refers to the decision to abandon practice sections as “the telling event” and adds, “It was not an unconscious decision.” Group work, with its small numbers found themselves unable to mount a significant fight to maintain the group work section and thus, their identity. Pernell (interview, 1999) adds that “... we went through [the] problems of being first, a group work section, then becoming a group work commission to being nothing ... [It affected] what [we were] paying attention to and what [we] permit[ed] to happen without a lot of protest.”

The end of sections coincided with the decision on the part of NASW to view social work in the most generic sense by underscoring commonalities rather than differences. Separating methods through the various sections was no longer functional for the new generalist push. This resulted in a period in social work which “found many writers as well as group workers seeking to conceptualize social work as a single method” (Garvin, 1997).

Falck (interview, 1998) asserts that the abolishing of specialization resulted in a generalist perspective that was nothing more than “the same old thing with a few new words.” He reminds us that “the social work tradition is a group work tradition” and that the generic thrust “represents the dropping of tradition, starting anew” (Falck interview, 1998). The move away from group work concepts toward more practical, concrete areas was exacerbated by the decline and death of Gertrude Wilson whose book (with Gladys Ryland) Social Group Work Practice (1949), was referred to by many as the “Green Bible” (Falck interview, 1998). Ramey
(interview, 1998) saw group work being “washed out” of social work during this period of unification of concepts. Middleman and Goldberg (1988, 234) agree: “The outcome of this effort was catastrophic for social group work, as the supposedly generic was and continues to be weighed toward the side of work with individuals and families.”

The generic push resulted in social workers less likely to identify themselves as group workers. Group workers up until this time tended to be, according to Ephross, (interview, 1998), “very bright and committed, so that social group work was a first choice career for them.” As the 1960s moved into the 1970s, one seldom heard anyone described as a group worker. The more the generic perspective became accepted, the quicker schools of social work dropped group work sequences. Group work content, if offered at all, was included in generic practice courses (Garvin, 1997).

Ironically, as group work struggled to maintain even a small identity within social work, group workers themselves were actively theory-building and writing. In 1966, Catherine Papell and Beulah Rothman distinguished groups by articulating three models: Social goals, reciprocal, and remedial. This conceptualization became very important for understanding social group work. The social goal model took on strength from the activist nature of the 1960s. But, in the end, group work became less associated with this model as it became more associated with community organization (Gitterman, 1981). The reciprocal model became the mediating model and then the interactional model while the remedial model evolved into the organizational/environmental approach (Middleman, and Goldberg, 1988).

The Group Work Department at Boston University under the direction of Saul Bernstein engaged in serious theory building in the 1960s publishing their Explorations in Group Work in 1965. This monograph included a model for stages of group development (Garland, Jones, & Kilodny, pp. 12–53).

The War on Poverty in the 1960s energized group work for a period, particularly in the area of community groups. Well-known group workers like Gisela Konopka, William Schwartz, Helen Phillips, Hans Falck, Helen Northen, Ruth Middleman, Alan Klein, Robert Vinter, and others wrote many group work books in the 60s and 70s. Yet, to all appearances, group work was

The lively wave of group ideas became damned up in the 1960s . . . Group work's demise was not the result of any inherent error in moving into the generic approach, but rather, that group workers were so few in number that they were submerged by the numbers of caseworkers who were continuing the development of casework theory.

They referred to this as the "generocide of social group work" (10).

Group Work Comes Back

Much of the "rebirth" of group work can be attributed to the persistence and energy of Catherine Papell and Beulah Rothman who approached Bill Cohen of Haworth Press with the idea of a group work journal to be titled Social Work with Groups: A Journal of Community and Clinical Practice. It began its publication in 1978 with Papell and Rothman as editors. Shortly thereafter, at the Annual Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education, some group workers congregated under the leadership of Catherine Papell, Beulah Rothman and Ruth Middleman. They pulled in others including John Ramey, Paul and Sonia Abels, and Ruby Pernell (Ramey interview, 1998; Pernell interview, 1999).

Out of a concern that nothing was being presented at conferences about group work, the group decided to plan a group work conference. To continue to spread the interest, the originators posted a sign in the conference hotel lobby which said, "If you are interested in meeting about social work with groups, come to this room." Middleman (1992, 28), describes the meeting: "It was a dinner hour in a small room on an upper floor. About 60 people piled in, sitting on the floor and planning for a kick-off symposium . . . the rest is history." This historic meeting was similar to the earlier meeting of group workers at NCSW in 1936 who, like this group, were brought together by a spirited sense of mission.

The idea kept growing and, in the end, more than 350 people attended the First Annual Group Work Symposium where the Committee for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups
was formed. To honor the work of Grace Coyle, the conference was held in Cleveland, Ohio. Papell (1997, 10) remembers the “excitement and thrill which consumed the social group workers” at the conference. “It felt like a group work party!” she said.

Norman Goroff, Ruth Middleman, Beulah Rothman, Catherine Papell, Paul Abels and Paul Glasser incorporated the Committee in 1981. In 1985, when the membership voted to become a membership organization, the Committee became The Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups, International (although incorporation as AASWG took several more years) (Ramey, 1998b).

Conclusion

Group work has survived through difficult times. Its’ resiliency is a testament to the persistence of a core of people as well as the strength of the method (Ramey interview, 1988). What kept group work going during the “quiet” years were “individuals and legendary teachers and proselytizers like [William] Schwartz, [Saul] Bernstein, the [Sonia & Paul] Abels, and [John] Ramey” (Ephross interview, 1998). The people who came together to begin AASWG, with their “wonderful spirit of inclusion, validation and humanity that is imbedded in group work ideology” (Papell, 1997, 10) determined that group work should survive.

Group work ideology has stood up well over time because it is rooted in a clear understanding of the realities of human lives and the human condition. Concepts of citizenship, participation, community, mutual aid, and democracy are still powerful. According to Ephross (interview, 1998): “We were right then, we’re right now.” Middleman and Goldberg (1988, 234) remind us that “it is group work that has anchored and continues to anchor social work in its tradition of social reform and concern for oppressed people...”

Regardless of one’s perspective regarding ideological issues, most would agree that history has taught us that group work, with its small numbers, struggled to maintain identity in the midst of a large social work organization. The merger with social work led to the hoped-for professional identity, but at a cost. Social group work today continues to celebrate its philosophy
and practice through local workshops held by state chapters of AASWG, an international symposium held annually, and linkages with other professions who embrace group work. While "social group worker" is seldom the term applied to a professional position, many social workers (often with no training in philosophy and practice of the group work process) spend a substantial amount of their jobs facilitating groups. Yet, schools of social work seldom offer more than a foundation course in group work (if that); yet, a handful still offer a concentration in social work with groups and others are increasing their group work offerings. Let history guide us as we move forward to strengthen the place of social group work in social work.

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