Social Groupwork: Unique Tool for Decolonizing and Re-Membering the Social Work Profession

Excerpts from Position Paper, *The Democracy of Social Groupwork as Essential Ethical Knowledge and Practice for All Social Workers: A Critical Analysis for the Decolonization of the Social Work Profession*

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> *Alex Gitterman (2005): I was exposed to a very different notion of helping than my casework peers. They were learning to develop diagnoses and treatment plans; I was learning about helping <u>a neighbor/a member who came on some hard times. We were being socialized to what felt like two different professions</u>. At that time, I did not understand the divergent roots of the Charity Organization Societies and the Settlement Movements... the settlement house shaped my view of social work practice.*

SOCIAL WORK HISTORY WE NEVER LEARNED IN SOCIAL WORK SCHOOL

The discovery of remains of unidentified graves of Indigenous children in residential school sites in Canada and the United States brings physical evidence to support the Indigenous oral tradition of literal and cultural genocide by our settler churches, governments, colonial society and professions – **most shamefully, social work, the one profession that should have been dedicated to solidarity, support and equity for poor and marginalized populations in society.**

Therefore, we need to understand (1) how the social work profession became complicit in North America's indigenous tragedies, (2) why the profession continues to be supportive of other longstanding "harms of colonialism and racist policy" (Stratford, Personal communication, Jan. 18, 2024), and (3) why **social**

groupwork - the unique way that social work approaches working with groups - **has all but disappeared** from the broader profession and educational institutions. To answer these questions, we need to revisit the profession's history and to recognize that **two diametrically opposed cultures fragmented the profession from its beginnings:**

> *Jane Addams observed in 1902 that "the neighborhood mind is at once confronted not only by the difference of method [between the settlement practice and the Charity Organization Society], but <u>by an absolute clashing of two ethical standards".</u>*

Today, social groupwork has disappeared from the broad professional landscape of the profession of social work in North America. IASWG is reaching out to social groupworkers around the world who have much to contribute to our practice. However, most of the 700,000+ social workers on this continent are not aware of social groupwork as social work's own method of working with groups.

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

Forty years ago, at the 6th Annual Symposium of the Advancement of Social Work with Groups in Chicago, Judith A.B. Lee called on social work to step up to our social justice history in her plenary paper: "Jane Addams Won't You Please Come Home".

> *My work on the front line tells me that the profession of social work itself is guilty of stating values on the one hand and denying them in programs, practice, and policy on the other...We have all stood by and watched. We need to clean our own house, even while we address the larger issues. (1984)*

The fragmentation in social work began when Mary Richmond sowed the seeds in 1917; the Canadian Association of Social Workers reaped the blighted harvest 100 years later with its **apology** for the profession's decades-old role in supporting the devastating system of residential schools and child welfare for Indigenous children. **Enhancing the status of the profession**, then and now, has

been given priority over social justice value-based social work practice. Social work talked the social justice talk, but did not walk the talk in its clinical practice. That practice was designed in 1917 to professionalize its practitioners by primarily appropriating content from what Mary Richmond and the Charity Organization Society visitors perceived as higher-status professions such as psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychology, as opposed to Settlement social work. By presenting ourselves as an integrated profession, we have been deceiving ourselves and the public for a century.

A critical issue for social work is the question: **Are social problems and their solutions primarily located in the individual and family,** as the Charity Organization Society and the clinical casework path believe? Or are they **primarily located in the systemic constructions and profound intersectional inequities that are generated by abuses of power and oppression of minorities and the poor?** Structural inequities such as gendered violence, racism, poverty, housing and healthcare disparities, war, and climate change are all reflected in the decolonizing perspective of the settlements and of social groupwork. We are distinguishing social groupwork here from the broader *field of groups* as practiced by other professions.

If social work is to shed its colonial (individualized/hierarchical/pathology-based) approach to human problems, it must recover its social justice, democratic, value, and strengths-based foundation – and be true to its avowed emphasis on the complexities of person-in-environment. It will also need to reincorporate community-based, empowering, nondeliberative social groupwork into its education and practice. Ours is the only profession that can skillfully bring people together to advocate for equitable social policy at a time when social justice is likely to be more severely threatened than ever.

The perspectives of social workers who are Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour (BIPOC) can impel and aid social work to move from a focus on assimilation and colonial thinking to anti-racist, decolonized, and anti-oppression approaches that recognize BIPOC's rich legacy of mutual aid and community resilience. For millennia, many Indigenous practices have been collectivist,

nondeliberative, and group-based. **In many respects, human history is the history of *mutual aid in groups.***

Another critical issue that directly impedes social work's ability to dismantle its colonial thinking is that social work with groups is absent from the awareness and practice of a large majority of social workers. Social groupwork's democratic, non-hierarchical, mutual aid and strength-based method of working with groups is also a decolonizing path to the integration of social justice within the profession, but is underutilized with all populations. The reason for the loss of social groupwork practice stems from the 1970s, when most schools of social work that had taught social groupwork along with community organizing and social policy as distinct methods, stopped doing so. The change reflected a flawed belief that a generic practice would train generalist social workers to deliver services to all populations.

The first casualty of this shift in education was social groupwork. Why? Educators teaching generic social work tended to be early adopters of group practices from other professions, such as group psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, and manualized short-term groups. As with Mary Richmond and her rush to professionalize social casework in 1917, in the 1970s, **other professions were perceived as having higher status, and their practices were believed to be more desirable than integrated social justice-based settlement social work**. Similarly, the 1970s switch to "generic" radically altered the traditional social work knowledge base with the imposition of two now-disconnected streams: micro (or clinical) which redefined small group practice as part of direct social work practice with individuals, families and groups vs. macro (or social justice) community development and social policy programs.

Documenting the impact of this seismic shift, Sweifach's 2014 comprehensive study of social work education reviewed syllabi of 182 schools with accredited MSW programs and found that 61.1% of MSW programs do not require that students receive any substantive group work knowledge or skill (p.16) and that "more than 40%…of group work classes do not require texts from the social group work literature, preferring instead texts written by psychiatrists

or psychologists" (pp. 16-17). This loss of social groupwork as a method in schools of social work cemented fragmentation within the profession.

So, what is social groupwork? We have found that, from the time of Jane Addams, Neva Boyd, Ada S. McKinley, and the settlements, **social work with groups has been founded on a fusion of social care with individuals, groupwork, community development, and social justice advocacy, where social policy grows organically from community concerns.** Neither of the new jargonized "micro" and "macro" educational streams in generic education retained much social groupwork methodology. Nor does generic education recognize that, because of its foundation in social groupwork's values and skills, social work with groups is one of the most powerful **purely social work interventions** available to the profession. We **can transform any group in the helping field into a social work group** by adapting the framework to meet four value-based social groupwork practice skills: (1) generate a democratic, non-hierarchical social justice process in all groups (2) mobilize mutual aid within the group (3) create nondeliberative practice activities which are artful, actional and analogic to unlock the holistic range of ways that people can communicate and find solutions that are not exclusively talking or deliberating[1], and (4) promote a strengths-based environment.

But reclaiming social groupwork for social work is not the sole purpose of the position paper that this summary is taken from.

Because of the **loss of a unique social justice narrative within the dominant clinical path of the profession** (Breton, 2006) and the almost universal disappearance of social work with groups as a method in schools of social work, most social workers today carry no experience of social groupwork as a specific social work practice. Nor do they understand the genesis of social work's mandate for social justice, which comes from the Settlements and social groupwork's democratic, non-hierarchical practice that empowers mutual aid, nondeliberative, strength-based engagement that creates community. As Specht and Courtney (1994) assert, "**Social workers should not be the secular priests in the church of individual repair; they should be the caretakers of the conscience of the community**". Consequently, the more urgent purpose of the paper is to

decolonize and reclaim social work for social justice by providing a roadmap for integration of the profession.

For these reasons, the expanded position paper traces **the ethical, social justice value base of the profession to the settlement communities and to the social groupwork and social action that were integral to those communities. The literature also demonstrates the roots of colonization and fragmentation of social work's knowledge base from its inception to current practice.** With mutual aid and action, we can choose to follow the published signposts on the path to reintegration and decolonization.

We believe that IASWG, as the sole organization devoted to the preservation of social work with groups, will need to play a central role in advocating for social work to use the aforementioned roadmap to reintegrate the profession and make it uniquely relevant to our times.

CRITICAL TIMELINE

Is There a Timeline that Clarifies these Questions? Critical Turning Points

Despite a powerful practice, extensive literature, and an international organization, social groupwork *as a method* is little known today within the social work profession. Social justice is seen as "social work" but has no viable relationship to current clinical practice. What follows is a brief outline of critical turning points in the relationship between social groupwork, which is the genesis of democratic, non-hierarchical social justice practice in the profession, and the rest of the profession. This timeline is a reflection of **early and late fragmentation** that continues to this day.

YEAR	CRITICAL TURNING POINTS
1889	Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded Hull House in Chicago in 1889 after visiting Toynbee Hall, a settlement house in London, England. Hull House settlement became a legendary focal point for a North American movement based on the fusion of social care with individuals, groupwork, community development, democracy, and

	social justice advocacy. Neva Boyd developed social groupwork models at Hull House.
LATE19ᵀᴴ & EARLY 20ᵀᴴC	Pragmatist philosophy (Jane Addams & John Dewey), outdoor education (e.g., Scouts and Guides, camping), and labour union organizing influenced the growing social groupwork movement.
1890S	Also in the 1890s, Mary Richmond was the director, Baltimore Charity Organization Society. (Frederick Reamer [2014] describes this stage of the emerging profession as "the morality period" when "social work was much more concerned about the morality of the client than about the morality or ethics of the profession", p.166). Reamer is referring to social casework. Similarly, the original purpose of 'charity organisation societies' in England (mid-1800s) was *to screen out the "undeserving poor"*. "Friendly visiting" was used to assess the potential recipient.
EARLY 20ᵀᴴC	Both Addams and Richmond were affiliated with the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (NCCC) and were each advocating for their perspectives on the social work profession.
1915	Abraham Flexner was asked to speak to the 1915 NCCC on: "Is Social Work a Profession?" He said that, unlike medicine and law, "Social work could be said to have some of the characteristics of a profession, but it did not fulfill all the criteria."
1915	In 1915, Jane Addams became president of the NCCC, whose role included chairing the 1916 conference.
1916	The National Conference of Charities and Corrections changes its name to the National Conference of Social Work (NCSW)
1917	In a rush to capture professional status for casework, Mary Richmond published her classic casework text, *Social Diagnosis,* with themes and values derived from the medical model. This hierarchical casework orientation that locates the problem in the individual and family, which now forms the majority of direct "clinical" practice, regularly casts the social worker as a "therapist" to service users,

usually characterized as "clients". **The power differential in the relationship is mandated and regulated.** (Even the recent shifting from "what's wrong with you" to "what happened to you" does not nullify the hierarchy, although it potentially introduces a social justice perspective.)

1920s	Early influences on casework of psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalytic theory, and institutional specialization further skewed its focus away from social justice.
1923	Grace Coyle developed one of the first group work courses at the School of Applied Social Sciences of Western Reserve University, Cleveland, and in 1930 published a major text on social work with groups.
1916-1931	Jane Addams continued her settlement house and peace-building work, and in 1931 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
1937	Social groupwork continued to develop as a practice and an academic methodology with the founding of the American Association for the Study of Group Work (AASGW).
1946	The American Association of Group Workers (AAGW) was founded.
1955	AAGW joined the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) as part of the effort to unite the disparate streams of the social work profession. Methods such as casework, groupwork, community development, and social policy were taught in schools of social work.
MID-LATE 20C	Model-building to further professionalize social groupwork proliferated: social goals, remedial, reciprocal, developmental, organizational/ environmental, life, mediating, interactional, and membership models, nondeliberative practice theory, and evidence-based practice.
1970s	Shift from teaching methods in schools of social work to generic practice.
1978	Emanuel Tropp asks: Whatever Happened to Group Work? "Social work has paradoxically been eroding its own group work component

	in the past decade. The rise of generic training has resulted in a diminishing pool of qualified practitioners…and educators in (social) group work, as well as the virtual disappearance of group work articles in social work journals. This self-created gap has been filled by *borrowing* techniques from other professions." (Italics added.)
1979	Formation of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG). This organization is now the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG).
1990s-2020s	Despite IASWG's success in protecting social groupwork's identity, there has been continued attrition of social groupwork education, practice, and the awareness of social groupwork within the social work profession. In addition to Tropp, this loss is documented: Middleman & Wood, 1990; Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994; Falck (1998) in Andrews (2001); Simon & Webster (2009); Simon & Kilbane (2014); Simon, Kilbane, & Stoltenberg (2019). Sweifach (2014) reviewed 182 schools and found that more than **60% of MSW programs do not require that students receive any substantive group work knowledge or skill**, and more than 40% of group work classes that existed did not require social groupwork texts, instead preferring those by **psychiatrists or psychologists**.
2025	Social groupwork is no longer understood or recognized as social work's own method of working with groups. **Group formats from other professions predominate**.

Despite current assumptions, the awareness of social justice in social work did not start with the 1960s radical social work, critical race or feminist theories. As a profession, we are gaslighting ourselves by trying to graft social justice values onto hierarchical clinical practice with no acknowledgement of settlement social groupwork history and values. At the same time, social groupwork, with its emphasis on the practice of social justice in every group, is being written out of

the profession. As Andy Malekoff said, **"It's the Group Work that is a rare gem in the human services, yet faces extinction"** (AASWG, 2013).

So let's write social groupwork back into the social work profession. How?

Let's start by transforming every group in the helping field into a social work group by mobilizing 4 value-based social groupwork practice skills:

(1) generate a **democratic, non-hierarchical social justice framework** in all groups (e.g., not "leader", rather as Lang says, a groupworker is a group member with special roles).

(2) mobilize **mutual aid** within the group

(3) create **nondeliberative practice activities**[1] which unlock the holistic range of solutions that are not exclusively talking or deliberating, and

(4) promote a **strengths-based environment**.

We welcome all critical comments and support for these goals. **For more information about joining the Committee or to receive a copy of the position paper,** *The Democracy of Social Groupwork as Essential Ethical Knowledge and Practice for All Social Workers: A Critical Analysis for the Decolonization of the Social Work Profession,* **please contact joannesulman@ns.sympatico.ca.**

NOTES

[1] **Nondeliberative activities include** play, art, games, music, dance, drama, and roleplay etc. Norma Lang's nondeliberative practice theory **both describes and explains** all of the activity-based helping modalities such as art therapy, adventure therapy, music therapy, play therapy etc. These activities have been used in social work with groups since the time of the settlement houses.

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