SKILLS OF GROUP WORK PRACTICE: AN INTERACTIONAL APPROACH

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THE PHASES OF WORK

1. PRELIMINARY PHASE

TUNING IN. An exercise in which the group leader develops a tentative, preliminary empathy with the group members' feelings as well as those of the worker.

RESPONDING DIRECTLY TO INDIRECT COMMUNICATIONS. The skill of articulating a group member's, or the group's thoughts and feelings in response to indirect communications (e.g., the group members looking defensive or apathetic).

2. BEGINNING PHASE

CLARIFYING PURPOSE. The skill of making a brief, opening statement, without jargon, which helps to clarify the purpose of the group. Should be used when initiating a service (e.g., first group meeting) or responding to a client's request for service (e.g., "If you each can let me know what brought you in today we can see how the group might be able to help.").

CLARIFYING ROLE. The skill of describing in a brief, non-jargonized manner, the role of the group leader.

REACHING FOR FEEDBACK. The skill of encouraging the group members to explain their perception of the problem that brought them to the group and the areas in which they wish to receive help (problem swapping).

CLARIFYING MUTUAL EXPECTATIONS. Developing an agreement on what the group members may expect of the leader as well as defining the group members' obligations to each other (e.g., regular attendance at group sessions; maintaining confidentiality).

ENCOURAGING INTER-MEMBER COMMUNICATIONS. Encouraging clients to talk and listen to each other (e.g., problem swapping).

DISCUSSING AUTHORITY ISSUES. Dealing with any issues, raised directly or indirectly, which concern the authority of the group leader (e.g., the mandated nature of the service; the limits of confidentiality defined by the worker's responsibility as a mandated reporter; the client's stereotypes of authority figures or past experiences with social workers).

3. MIDDLE (WORK) PHASE

SESSIONAL TUNING IN. The skill of developing a tentative, preliminary empathy for issues, which may emerge at the start of a specific session (e.g., the impact of a traumatic event in a client's life; issues left over from the previous session; the client's potential reactions to information the group leader must share).

SESSIONAL CONTRACTING. A collection of skills designed to determine the issues or concerns facing clients at a particular group session. These may include: remaining tentative at the start of the session while listening for indirect cues; asking group members what is on their minds; raising previously agreed upon issues directly with the group and checking to see if they are still relevant; checking in with group members at the start of a session.

ELABORATING SKILLS. The skills required for helping group members tell their story (e.g., listening, containment, questioning, reaching inside of silences).

SUPPORTING THE GROUP-AS-A-WHOLE (THE SECOND CLIENT). Helping the group to develop a positive culture and to work as an enterprise in mutual aid.

EMPATHIC SKILLS. The skills which address the emotional content of the group member's experiences (e.g., reaching for feelings; acknowledging feelings; articulating the member's or the group's feelings).

SHARING WORKER'S FEELINGS. The skill of spontaneously sharing appropriate group leader affect which is in response to the productions of the clients. Boundaries need to be respected so that the sharing of group leaders affect is professional and responsive to the needs of the clients. Issues of counter-transference, group member stereotyping, inappropriate expression of the group leader's frustration, etc., need to be considered and closely monitored.

DEMAND FOR WORK. A facilitative confrontation in which the group leader asks a group member or the group to engage in the work agreed upon in the contracting stage. Specific skills can include confronting denial, reaching inside of a silence, directly raising a taboo issue, challenging the "illusion of work", etc.

PROVIDING DATA. The skill providing relevant, unavailable information that group members need to deal with the task. Data can include facts, values, beliefs, etc. Data should be provided in a manner which leaves it open to challenge.

SESSIONAL ENDINGS AND TRANSITIONS. The skills involved in ending a session. These skills may include summarizing, evaluating progress and discussion of transition issues (e.g., the next step; how to deal with "door knob" communications; role-play of anticipated future conversations based upon the work of the session).

4. ENDING AND TRANSITION PHASE

POINTING OUT THE ENDINGS EARLY. The skill of raising the impending termination of services in a timely manner designed to allow the ending/transition phase to be experienced as a process rather than an abrupt disruption.

IDENTIFYING THE STAGES OF ENDINGS. The skill of pointing out to clients the verbal and non-verbal clues which indicate the stages of the ending process: denial; anger; mourning; bargaining; trying it on for size; and the "farewell party" syndrome.

MUTUAL EXCHANGE OF AFFECT. The honest exchange of feelings by the group leader and group members, both positive and negative feelings, which may be associated with the termination of the group.

IDENTIFYING THE LEARNING. The skill of helping the group to review the work and to summarize the important ideas, insights and feelings which have emerged during the sessions. This process also involves the worker's crediting the group and individuals for their progress.

REACHING FOR POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES. The skills involved in helping the group to avoid an overly positive evaluation which ignores the negatives or an overly negative evaluation which disregards the positives.

IDENTIFYING NEXT STEPS. The skills involved in helping group members to identify the next steps they need to follow as they bring the helping relationship to a close (e.g., where a group member will get ongoing support after a group has ended; what a client must do to obtain specific, ongoing services).

PUBLICATIONS

1. Shulman, Lawrence. The Skills of Helping Individuals Families, Groups and Communities, 8th Edition, Cengage publishers, 2018.

2 . 3. Shulman, Lawrence. Supervision. In, The Encyclopedia of Social Work. National Association of Social Workers (NASW Press), Silver Springs, Maryland, 2018.

4 . Shulman, Lawrence. The Dynamics and Skills of Group Counseling. Cengage Publishers, 2011.

5. Shulman, Lawrence. Social Work Practice in Child Welfare: The Interactional Model. National Association of Social Workers, Silver Springs Maryland, 2015.