A MUTUAL-AID MODEL FOR SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS

THIRD EDITION

DOMINIQUE MOYSE STEINBERG

ROUTLEDGE

A MUTUAL-AID MODEL FOR SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS

Third Edition

Dominique Moyse Steinberg

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A MUTUAL-AID MODEL FOR SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS

Group work is a popular and widely used social work method. Focusing particularly on the central role of mutual aid in effective group work, this text presents the theoretical base, outlines core principles, and introduces the skills for translating those theories and principles into practice.

A Mutual-Aid Model for Social Work with Groups will help readers to catalyze the strengths of group members such that they become better problem solvers in all areas of life from the playroom to the boardroom. Increased coverage of evaluation and evidence-based practice speaks to the field's growing concern with monitoring process and assessing progress. The book also includes:

- worker-based obstacles to mutual aid, their impact, and their antidotes;
- pre-group planning, including new discussion on curriculum groups;
- group building by prioritizing certain goals and norms in the new group;
- the significance of time and place on mutual aid and the role of the group worker;
- maintaining mutual aid during so-called individual problem solving;
- an expanded discussion of anti-oppression and anti-oppressive practice;
- unlocking a group's potential to make difference and conflict useful;
- special considerations in working with time-limited, open-ended, and very large groups.

Case examples are used throughout to help bridge the gap between theory and practice, and exercises for class or field help learners to immediately apply conceptual material to their practice. All resources required to carry out the exercises are contained in twenty appendices at the end of the book. Key points at the end of each chapter recap the major concepts presented, and a roster of recommended reading for each chapter points the reader to further resources on each topic.

Designed to support ethical and successful practice, this textbook is an essential addition to the library of any social work student or human service practitioner working with groups.

Dominique Moyse Steinberg is former chair of the group work sequence at Hunter College School of Social Work in New York City, USA, and currently sits on the executive committee of the International Association for Social Work with Groups, Inc.

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PREFACE

Do it right because it is beautiful and you love it.
Blanche Honegger Moyse (1909–2010)
Artistic Director and Founder,
New England Bach Festival

Welcome to the third edition of *A Mutual-Aid Model for Social Work with Groups*. To the extent that groups vary in form, practice must also vary in its application of theory and principles so that our work with groups can have real-world logic, not just theoretical propriety. With that in mind, this third edition builds on the previous editions in the following ways. First, there is some brand new material, such as an entire new Chapter 3 that identifies a number of worker-based obstacles (and antidotes) to mutual aid. Also, there are exercises (one to three) for each chapter but one. Additionally, new content as applicable has been integrated into each chapter, such as deconstructing the use of keys as metaphors in dealing with conflict (Chapter 9) and expanded discussions, such as Chapter 8 on authority and Chapter 14 on evaluation, among others.

This edition continues the format of "themes and variations," with four chapters that provide implications for practice with group types that differ in some significant way from the classic long-term, closed, and stable system upon which the fundamental theories, concepts, principles, and skills of mutual-aid work are based. And, as in the previous editions, themes and variations remain the same, with variations drawing from Chapter 6 (impact of time and place on mutual aid) to examine the special challenges to mutual aid in group types that differ from the classic small, closed group—variations that are becoming increasingly ubiquitous while the classic group type is becoming ever more rare.

Where practice principles remain constant, they remain as identified in the previous editions. Where further reflection is indicated (as in the discussion on working with curriculum groups in Chapter 4), the discussion integrates some new thoughts and suggestions for tweaking practice to meet new mandates or situations.

That each chapter but one has one or more exercises creates in this edition, I believe, a text that goes beyond informational to one that is potentially transformational. That is, each exercise helps the learner to apply and integrate the material into his or her own practice in an immediately useful way. Thus, in addition to offering theories, practice principles, and skills this third edition now provides the classroom with tools to structure transformational opportunities through which learners, in the company of others in the same boat and in the safety of the classroom, can apply the information in an immediately useful way to their work setting while also hearing about its application to other settings.

In the first edition of this book over fifteen years ago, I stated that I thought it was both the best and the worst of times for groups, to borrow a phrase from Charles Dickens. In the second edition I stated that I was still under that impression, because on one hand one could hardly open a telephone book or newspaper without finding a group to join but, at the same time, the social work field was increasingly driven in its use of groups by efficiency rather than by effectiveness. As I write this preface, some ten years after the second edition, my perspective remains the same. It continues to be the best of times, because groups abound, but also the worst of times because incompetence in working with groups also abounds. The good news is that so many groups in so many service settings provide many opportunities for consulting, training, and mentoring.

What I have come to see, after ten more years of reflection since the previous edition, is that professionals who are trained in social group work generally and in the value of mutual aid more specifically must learn to be better communicators. Those of us who are trained in mutual- aid practice must learn to share our knowledge with the many practitioners who are mandated to work with groups without the benefit of education or training. I believe that we can do this; I believe we can and must be both proselytizers and champions of this form of practice by taking each and every opportunity to "share a little something" with our colleagues and representatives of the settings in which much group work takes place. In a keynote address at the 29th Annual International Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work With Groups in New Jersey a few years ago, Robert Salmon and I put it this way:

> We must learn to speak in the many tongues or idioms of the many systems that share the field of social welfare. Funding. Service. Treatment. Advocacy. Education. Medicine. Psychology. Each of these and many other disciplines with which we collide on an everyday basis has its own world view with special ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. To talk money is off-putting to a clinician but piques the interest of an administrator. The power of mutual aid may inspire a social work practitioner but raise the hair on the back of the warden's neck! In brief, we must learn to shape the way we think and the way we talk according to whatever *other* is in the communication loop of the moment.
>
> If we can make this effort we will have an unparalleled opportunity to intervene in ways that have both direct and far-reaching indirect impact.

I hope that, in some way, this book will help us to do that. There is no doubt in my mind that in some way or other, people who can communicate with their peers—be it verbal or nonverbal—can engage in mutual aid. Clearly, participants in mutual aid need the capacity to express and to both take in and respond to the expressions of others. Setting never inherently dictates capacity for mutual-aid practice, only the kind of mutual aid that might be catalyzed. In other words, no group is ever devoid of potential. Mutual aid is the normal stuff of groups; and as Clara Kaiser (1958) indicated, helping groups develop their unique potential is about approach, not where or with whom. If it seems as if a group is not acting as a mutual-aid system, then I continue to believe that the most likely explanation is lack of skill, and I continue to hope that the manner in which theory and practice are joined in this book throughout both the discussions and the many exercises offered will make a difference.

Reference

Steinberg, D. M. and Salmon, R. (2007). Revisiting "Joyful Noise." Gateways from Singing the Blues to the Hallelujah Chorus (*Talking in the Idiom of the Other: A Necessary Skill for Responding to the Current Crisis in Social Work Practice*). Opening Plenary Address, 29th Annual International Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work With Groups, Jersey City, New Jersey. Also in (2012) *Groups: Gateways to Growth: Proceedings of the XXIX International Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups*, Eds. G. Tully, K. Sweeney, and S. Palombo, pp. 10–24. London: Whiting & Birch Ltd.

CONTENTS

About the Author x
Preface xi

Introduction 1

Key Concepts of this Chapter 1
The Purpose of this Book 1
The Mutual-Aid Model 2
The Theoretical Basis for Mutual Aid 3
The Conditions for Mutual-Aid Practice 3
Implications for Practice 5
How This Book is Organized 5

1 The Mutual-Aid Model of Social Work with Groups 8

Key Concepts of this Chapter 8
Chapter Materials 8
Mutual Aid: Roots and Raison d'être *9*
Mutual Aid Defined and Described 9
The Mutual-Aid Mind-Set 13
The Primary Functions of Mutual-Aid Practice 14
The Notion of Group-Specific Skillful Practice 18
Key Group Values, Norms, and Dynamics Compared 19
Key Points of This Chapter 21
Chapter Exercise 22
Recommended Further Reading 23

2 The Nine Dynamics of Mutual Aid and Their Implications for Practice 25

Key Concepts of This Chapter 25
Chapter Materials 25
Mutual Aid: What It is, and What it is Not 25
The Nine Dynamics 26

Key Points of This Chapter 36
Chapter Exercises 37
Recommended Further Reading 39

3 Ten Common Worker-Based Obstacles to Mutual Aid, Their Impact, and Their Antidotes 40

Key Concepts of This Chapter 40
Ten Common Obstacles and Antidotes 40
The Mutual-Aid Practitioner 48
Recommended Further Reading 52

4 Pre-Group Planning with Mutual Aid in Mind 53

Key Concepts of This Chapter 53
Chapter Materials 53
Setting the Stage 53
The Role of Group Purpose in Mutual Aid 61
Retrospective Pre-Group Planning 67
Key Points of This Chapter 67
Chapter Exercises 68
Recommended Further Reading 70

5 Early Group Goals and Norms 72

Key Concepts of This Chapter 72
Chapter Materials 72
Goals to Emphasize in the First Session 73
Norms to Emphasize in the First Session 76
Key Points of This Chapter 80
Chapter Exercises 80
Recommended Further Reading 82

6 Mutual Aid, "Time and Place," and the Role of the Worker 83

Key Concepts of This Chapter 83
Chapter Materials 83
Time and Place 84
The Changing Role of the Worker 100
Key Points of This Chapter 101
Chapter Exercise 102
Recommended Further Reading 103

7 Individual Problem Solving with Mutual Aid in Mind 104

Key Concepts of This Chapter 104
Chapter Materials 104

Prologue 105
Common Problem-Solving Strategies 107
The Mutual-Aid Model 109
What Needs to Happen to Catalyze Mutual Aid 114
Key Points of This Chapter 115
Chapter Exercises 116
Recommended Further Reading 118

8 Mutual Aid and Authority **119**

Key Concepts of This Chapter 119
Chapter Materials 119
Having a Real Say and the Group's Need for it 120
Authority and Group Development 125
Helping the Group Exercise its Say Along Humanistic as well as Democratic Lines 127
Mutual Aid, Authority and Oppression 128
Group-Specific Skills for Decentralizing Authority and for Helping Maintain a Democratic-Humanistic Climate 131
Key Points of This Chapter 133
Chapter Exercise 133
Recommended Further Reading 134

9 The Role of Conflict in a Mutual-Aid System **137**

Key Concepts of This Chapter 137
Chapter Materials 137
Keys to Using Conflict for Mutual Aid 138
From Reaction to Response 147
Group-Specific Skills for Helping a Group Use Conflict 150
Key Points of This Chapter 150
Chapter Exercises 151
Recommended Further Reading 153

Variations on a Theme **155**

10 Mutual Aid Practice with Single-Session Groups **160**

Key Concepts of This Chapter 160
Chapter Materials 160
Time-and-Place Issues of the Single-Session Group 162
Implications for Practice 164
Key Points of this Chapter 168
Chapter Exercises 168
Recommended Further Reading 171

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11 Mutual-Aid Practice with Short-Term Groups 172

Key Concepts of This Chapter 172
Chapter Materials 172
Time-and-Place Issues of the Short-Term Group 173
Implications for Practice 175
Key Points of This Chapter 180
Chapter Exercises 181
Recommended Further Reading 182

12 Mutual-Aid Practice with Open-Ended Groups 183

Key Concepts of This Chapter 183
Chapter Materials 183
Time-and-Place Issues of the Open-Ended Group 184
Implications for Practice 186
Key Points of This Chapter 190
Chapter Exercises 191
Recommended Further Reading 193

13 Mutual-Aid Practice with Very Large Groups 195

Key Concepts of This Chapter 195
Chapter Materials 195
Time-and-Place Issues of the Very Large Group 197
Implications for Practice 198
Key Points of This Chapter 201
Chapter Exercises 202
Recommended Further Reading 204

14 Evaluation 205

Key Concepts of This Chapter 205
Chapter Materials 205
All Things Considered 207
Group-Specific Skills for Helping a Group Evaluate Mutual Aid 210
Key Points of This Chapter 211
Chapter Exercise 211
Recommended Further Reading 212

Appendix A Mutual-Aid Dynamics and Their Related Skills 214
Appendix B Generic Skills for Catalyzing Mutual Aid 218
Appendix C Assessing Group Purpose Statements 221
Appendix D Assessing Statements—Instructor Cheat Sheet 222

Appendix E	Exercise Guide: Transforming Statements into Statements of Group Purpose	223
Appendix F	Exercise Guide: Developing a Group Purpose	225
Appendix G	Case Record: Group Work v. Casework in a Group: Jim: Part I/Jim Part II	227
Appendix H	Case Record: Group Work v. Casework in a Group: Sara	229
Appendix I	Skills for Maintaining Mutual Aid During Individual Problem Solving	230
Appendix J	Skills for Decentralizing Authority	231
Appendix K	Exercise Guide: The Impact of Conflict Resolution Strategies on Mutual Aid	232
Appendix L	Skills for Maintaining Mutual Aid During Conflict	233
Appendix M	Exercise Guide: Applying the Keys to Dealing with Group Conflict	234
Appendix N	Exercise Guide: Catalyzing Mutual Aid in Single-Session Groups	236
Appendix O	Skills for Catalyzing Mutual Aid in Single-Session Groups	237
Appendix P	Skills for Catalyzing Mutual Aid in Short-Term Groups	239
Appendix Q	Skills for Catalyzing Mutual Aid in Open-Ended Groups	241
Appendix R	Skills for Catalyzing Mutual Aid in Very Large Groups	243
Appendix S	Exercise Guide: Introducing Mutual-Aid Practice into the Very Large Group	245
Appendix T	Mutual-Aid Practice: Ten Common Obstacles and Antidotes	247
	Bibliography	250
	Index	261

INTRODUCTION

Key Concepts of This Chapter

Aggregational Therapy of Individuals (Hartford 1978)
Capacity to Communicate and Interact
Casework in a Group (Kurland and Salmon 1992)
Democratic-Humanism (Glassman 2009)
Exchange of Strengths
Group Purpose
Group as a Second Client
Groupness (Middleman and Wood 1990a)
Group-Specific Skill
Practitioners as Workers, not Leaders
Multiple Helping Relationships
Mutual Aid
Open-Ended Groups
Setting the Stage for Mutual Aid
Sharing Authority
Short-Term Groups
Single-Session Groups
Thinking Things Through
Very Large Groups

The Purpose of This Book

Groups abound today, and although an impressive body of professional literature on social work testifies to the centrality of catalyzing mutual aid in practice with groups, the gap filled by this book is as a resource that makes the link between the descriptive and prescriptive of mutual-aid practice—that bridges theory (i.e., the descriptive component of professional practice) with practical information (i.e., the prescriptive component of mutual-aid practice). By describing and discussing theories, concepts, and practice principles specific to mutual aid, this book provides a foundation for practice. And by offering a number of exercises for the classroom, it provides opportunities for learners to practice in the safety of the classroom with others in the same boat.

At the time of this third edition, several books continue to offer a foundation for practice with groups but continue to assign mutual aid only partial attention along with the many other important aspects of practice. In contrast, this book makes mutual aid its principal

subject, encouraging further study in each of the key areas of mutual-aid practice by referring the reader to specific literature at the end of every chapter. In addition, it attempts to combine the why of mutual-aid practice with the how-to in some immediately useful manner by offering case examples of practice that are both productive and counterproductive to mutual aid along with the numerous exercises.

This is the first book to bring under one cover the most salient historical and contemporaneous discussions on the role of mutual aid in social work with groups. Until now it has been necessary to sift through mountains of literature merely to understand the ways in which mutual aid has been conceptualized throughout decades of professional growth—a tedious and unwieldy task. For example, as a social group-work concept, the term mutual aid was first coined by William Schwartz (1961). The process, however, has been recognized as an important group-work dynamic since the early 1900s by such professional leaders as Coyle, Hart, Newstetter, Lieberman, Slavson, and Cantor, all of whom, among others, have struggled to identify and articulate a specific knowledge base and scientific body of practice principles for systematic and purposeful social work practice with groups.

Through many rich examples of actual practice interventions, some of which were gathered through an empirical study (Steinberg 1992) and others that were collected through informal dialogues with colleagues, this book aims to help people who work with groups understand the essential and distinctive dynamics of an approach to practice that seeks to help people help one another. Furthermore, in contrast with books that tend to offer only examples of "correct" practice, it juxtaposes examples of interventions that are counterproductive to mutual aid with those that are productive in order to illustrate the impact of various professional behaviors on small-group process.

The Mutual-Aid Model

The mutual-aid model of social work with groups is based on the belief that we work with groups precisely because of their potential for mutual aid. What is mutual aid, exactly? Unadorned by professional jargon, mutual aid simply refers to people helping one another as they think things through. Helping people engage in mutual aid is no simple matter, however. In addition to the need for knowledge about small-group dynamics, mutual-aid practice takes a certain vision to exploit group process as the powerful helping medium it can be. It calls for a shift in the way we regard and use our authority and requires the purposeful use of group-specific skills—a whole body of skills that extend beyond those we use in work with individuals.

In its utilization of group process as the primary means for helping and so in direct contrast to the "individual-work-in-a-group" style that overwhelms much of practice today, mutual-aid work is truly group work. Not only are the individual members our clients but also the group as a system is our client—our second client (Shulman 2011). Thus, while one eye looks to the needs of the individual to help members shape and use process toward mutual aid, the other eye attends to the nature and quality of that process.

Whenever people come together there is always group process at work, of course, whether we attend to it or not (Middleman 1978). Process can take on many different looks, however, not all of which promote mutual aid. For example, mutual aid relies on spontaneous communication and interaction among members and has little room to develop when they interact primarily with the worker while others watch and listen (Middleman and Wood 1990b; Papell and Rothman 1980; Kurland and Salmon 1992). It also relies on the exchange

of strengths and thus has little room to develop when the practitioner is regarded as the principal helper (Newstetter 1935; Trecker 1955; Hartford 1964; Schwartz 1976; Northen and Kurland 2001; Breton 1990; Middleman and Wood 1990a; Shulman 2011). Finally, mutual aid needs a democratic-humanistic culture (Glassman 2009), an environment in which everyone has the right to be heard and in which everyone's needs and feelings are taken into account in all of the group's decision-making processes.

The Theoretical Basis for Mutual Aid

As the recommended further readings at the end of each chapter and the bibliography at the end of this book make very clear, the theoretical justification for mutual-aid work with groups is rooted in social work. In fact, in no other profession does mutual aid play such a pivotal role (Glassman 2009). Nonetheless, although using group process specifically to catalyze mutual aid is a unique social work mandate, the practice skills that we use to help people engage in mutual aid are useful for work with any and all groups that aim to maximize their human resources. In other words, mutual aid is just as relevant to organizational committees and social-action groups, children's activity or sports groups, and political coalitions, for example, as it is to groups formed expressly for therapeutic or socialization purposes.

The Conditions for Mutual-Aid Practice

What about the fact that we practice in so many different types of settings? Can mutual aid be developed in any setting, in any group, under any conditions? Yes. It is true that work with a wide variety of groups in different settings demands many areas of content- and setting-specific expertise; but it is also true that enough generic group-work skills have been identified to help maximize the mutual-aid potential of any group with which we work. Henry Ford used to say, "Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success." Although Ford was referring specifically to corporate teamwork when he said this, the principles to which he alluded most certainly speak to the value of mutual aid.

Mutual aid happens at many intensities and in many ways, both during the life of one group and across different groups (Gitterman and Shulman 1994). Furthermore, some groups experience all of the dynamics of mutual aid (see Chapter 2), while others experience only some aspects. Although one group may experience mutual aid very intensely, others may experience it to a lesser degree. A reminiscence group of elderly persons may experience "all in the same boat" more than it does mutual demand, for example. Or individuals in groups for disabled or severely ill persons may be so highly preoccupied with their own health or well-being that they can interact only at a fairly superficial level. Or a group for persons with mental illness may engage in much debate while another group experiences this dynamic less than mutual support. Does this mean that mutual aid is not playing a significant role in these groups? Absolutely not! Does it mean that one of these groups is experiencing more or even a more "serious" level of mutual aid than another? Again, absolutely not! What these nuances reflect is that mutual aid comes in many shapes and sizes, and a group need not experience the full range of possibilities or interact at only the deepest affective levels in order to qualify as a mutual-aid system. Just as J. S. Bach wrote some "lovely little pieces" for early piano study in addition to his architectural masterpieces, there exists a wide range and variety of and potential for mutual aid. We might not think that Bach's "little" piano pieces

are as structurally intense as his B Minor Mass, but we would nevertheless not suggest that they are not music. Likewise, mutual aid may come from intense debate, but it can also come from a better understanding of difference, a pat on the back, a glance of understanding, or a quiet but comfortable sense of belonging. Thus, all groups have the potential for mutual aid; the central issue for practice is that whenever an opportunity for it arises, the worker should be able to recognize it and help members seize that opportunity.

On the other hand, a few conditions do need to co-exist for mutual aid. To begin with, we need to be willing to consider ourselves as only one of many possible helpers in the group (Middleman and Wood 1990a). It is not by accident that social work with groups refers to the practitioner as a worker rather than a leader (Trecker 1955). Yes, the practitioner brings his or her own expertise to the group, but so does every other participant in some unique way, and it is those areas of expertise that form the basis for mutual aid. The more we assume the role of the group's only or even primary helper, therefore, the more difficult we make it for members to identify the strengths they might use to help themselves and one another.

Mutual aid also requires a democratic-humanistic culture (Glassman 2009), in which everyone has a real say in the group's affairs and in which everyone's feelings are taken into account when decisions are made. Hence, the practitioner also needs to be willing to share authority with the other participants so that whatever leadership skills members possess can be used to the group's advantage. How do we share our authority? Very simply, we encourage and help members take part in all of the group's decision-making processes (see Chapter 8).

Furthermore, members need to have some capacity to communicate and interact with one another (Newstetter 1935; Trecker 1955; Hartford 1964; Schwartz 1976; Breton 1990; Middleman 1982; Middleman and Wood 1990a; Shulman 2011). Therefore, although we would not prevent a person with limited communication skills from participating, since helping people develop such skills is one of the great benefits of group membership, neither would we expect persons with no capacity to interact, verbally or nonverbally, to come together for purposes of mutual aid.

In addition, it is important that the group have a purpose, a common cause that binds members' individual goals to one another (Kurland 1978; Lowy 1976; Galinsky and Schopler 1977; Papell and Rothman 1980; Northen and Kurland 2001; Glassman 2009). Only through a sense of community or we-ness will members come to acknowledge and accept one another as potential sources of help. In fact, the precise nature of their common cause matters less than the fact that they have one, since mutual aid can be useful for achieving all types of tasks and goals, be they labeled support, insight, action, education, or recreation. True, conscious and specific attention to process may slow down task achievement to some extent, but we have only to look at Japanese industrial protocol to see how mutual aid in action on a large scale benefits all of the participants in production-oriented ventures. We have all heard the old joke that a camel is a horse designed by a committee. Clearly, that was no mutual-aid committee!

Finally, no matter how genuinely we may desire it, mutual aid requires group-specific skill. Only through the purposeful use of such skill can we help a group become a Group, as Margaret Hartford (1978) put it. If we do not have the skill to attend to group process or, as Middleman and Wood (1990b) state it, to attend to the groupness of a group, we may end up doing more harm than good (Galinsky and Schopler 1977; Hartford 1978; Tropp 1978; Meddin 1986; Glassman 2009). We need skill that goes beyond what we use in individual work—skill to help the vision of mutual aid take on real-world characteristics.

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