

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PROBLEMS OF SOCIAL GROUP WORK IN JAPAN

by
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Group Work is a method of Social Work. Along with Case Work and Community Organization, it forms the three major divisions taught in most graduate schools of social work in the United States. This is a comparatively recent development during the last fifteen or twenty years. For many years group work followed a separate growth and development of its own, quite apart from the field then publicly recognized as social work. Group work really began with the establishment of Toynbee Hall Settlement House in the slums of London in 1860. The purpose for which Toynbee Hall was begun had a quite different emphasis from the alleviation of poverty. The university students, who went there to live among the working men, were moved to do so through a desire to share their superior spiritual and cultural advantages with the underprivileged, as well as to work with them to improve the harsh physical conditions in which they lived and worked. In other words, it was with the whole personality of the individual in the slums with which the Settlement House workers were concerned. And they found that one of the most effective means of reaching these individuals was to join with them in a natural group of their friends, after first winning their confidence and trust. Those from the more privileged backgrounds provided leadership, but a leadership dedicated to the encouragement and training of leadership from among the groups of working men who came to the Settlement.

Social Group Work as it is known in the United States today, constituting a distinct body of knowledge and definitive method, has been nourished from the compounded experience

over the years of many separate, spontaneous efforts on the part of individuals or groups of individuals. These persons or groups have been deeply concerned for working for the betterment of democratic society and have organized together
5 to meet the needs of various groups in society. A few of these separate movements which have fed the main stream of group work need only to be mentioned. The Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Association organized to meet the needs of young men and women factory workers living in
10 the big cities; Later came the different influential youth movements such as Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4-H Clubs. These organized to meet the needs of youth in character building and citizenship; The Playground Movement, organized to sponsor public recreation for all age groups as increasing im-
15 portance was placed on the part of healthful and creative use of leisure time for the complete development of the individuals.

Group work is sometimes defined as "character education" because such a large segment of its experience has been with youth groups of which large purpose is the building of social-
20 ly responsible character in individuals within groups. Group work is also sometimes called social education because its character building programs have emphasized the individual's responsibility to the community in which he lives and to the larger social units beyond, to his nation and to the inter-
25 national community. And because the group work method has proved to be one of the effective means of social education, professional educators have long been interested in it. With the growth of the progressive education movement (in the United States) and its emphasis on child-centered education,
30 and the education of the whole child, that is, the intellectual, social, emotional and physical aspects of growth, the informal group method was incorporated into the techniques of the formal educators or schoolmen. And through their study and research, the techniques and basic knowledge in the social
35 group work field have been greatly enriched in recent years.

Not only in theory have the two fields of education and group work been closely associated, but in the schools there have been increasingly introduced student activity programs using the group work method. These include student government and a great variety of student clubs. (Student Government is a democratically elected group of student representatives who carry responsibility for making some of the school rules and school programs, not related to course work.)

Since the war in Japan interest in the field of group work has been encouraged by the Education and the Social Welfare sections of the Civil Affairs Teams of the Occupation in each prefecture. And group work as an academic study is one of the requirements for a graduate school of social work in the three schools where these courses have been set up. One reads in the papers that the Boy Scout and Girl Scout Movement has been revived and now has a large and growing membership. In both private and public schools "Home Room" programs have been introduced along with student government and there are more clubs of every kind than there are weary over-worked teachers to advise them. Buddhist temples as well as Christian churches are increasing their efforts to organize youth groups. And among westerners interested in this field of social work, I have heard it said in a discussion of the difficulties of introducing the techniques and methods of western social work to Japan, that Group Work should be easy to establish in Japan. I think this only superficially true. Certainly if the prevalence of groups, or the ease of organizing groups, or the influence of groups were criteria for judging, then it would be possible to say that Japan was indeed "group-work minded." However despite the fact that the "group" is the tool through which the group work method operates, it is equally true that wherever there are groups organized and unified there is not necessarily there the social group work process at work.

What then are the criteria which must be met if actual

group work is to take place? A full discussion is not possible here but briefly stated, they are as follows:

The ultimate objective of group work is the development of the individual by means of the group. Thus the methods used are devised to encourage individual initiative, individual thinking, individual leadership through the framework of the group.

In Japan where group life is very strong the opposite objective seems to have been more often the dominant pattern, the objective being to develop the strength of the group through subordination of the individual, and to discourage individual initiative, individual thinking and any leadership not given arbitrary authority from above (from a person on a social and intellectual level above that of the group).

Then another important criterion for judgement is that the type of group must be a relatively small (around 15 to 20 persons) as a voluntary group. Each member joins the group by his own free will and may discontinue coming to meetings when he loses interest.

The group must have a certain amount of homogeneity. This likeness among members may be related to their economic condition, vocation, experience with democracy, their intelligence, physical skill, or such. These expressed points of homogeneity are probably more important than age, nationality and sex.

This type of ideal group-work-group is not difficult to achieve in Japan. Such groups are everywhere and there seems to be no limit to those that can be created, but the critical need is for adult leadership, and this leads to the next statement of basic group work criteria:

If real group work is to take place the small, homogeneous voluntary group must have the help of a sympathetic adult who is usually called an "advisor". The English word "leader" is frequently used in Japan. But I do not like to use it because it creates confusion. Since one of the objectives

of group work is to develop leadership from within the group, then who does the leading, the member-leader or the adult helping the group? It is more true to say of the adult advisor working with a group that his role is one of helping-to-lead, of showing-how and when to lead. It is a role of encouraging and developing leadership. One of the effective means of doing this is through personal counselling with the potential or actual member-leaders of the group.

The general atmosphere of the group must be warm, friendly and informal. There must not be a great distance 10 felt between the advisor and the members of the group. It is at this key point of adult advisorship or leadership that I think the greatest difficulty is found in establishing genuine group work in Japan. The essence of this type of relationship between the helping-adult and younger person is expressed by 15 the phrases: "working with," "helping," which describe a for different process from "directing," "telling what to do." Also this process cannot take place when the younger people involved do not feel completely at ease in talking and expressing their opinions to the advisor, even feeling free to disagree 20 with him or her.

This advisor-member relationship is the one essential without which real group work cannot take place. The essence of it is not easy to explain and is best understood through experiencing it or observing it closely. It is the spirit in which 25 it is done that is so essential. It is a coming down to the level of the younger person and on the part of the child a going up to the level of the adult. And it is in this mutual effort to meet and understand each other that real trust is created and the adult from his superior knowledge and richer 30 experience can help the younger one to grow in personality and leadership ability with astonishing effectiveness. That this type of leadership involves some coming down to the level of the younger person is one of the stumbling blocks in the understanding of what this new type of leadership means. 35

It is hard for some Japanese to feel confident in any leadership which involves putting the older person and younger person on the same level in any way at all. They say "Yes, I see how such a leader could be friends with the young people, but I don't see how in such a position he could inspire or teach them." This difficulty in understanding comes I think from the fact that the group work type of informal, easy, friendly relationship between adults and younger people where they work, play, study and plan together is an unusual thing in Japan at least in recognized, consciously planned educational experience. Here in all types of learning situations whether at school, church seinen-kai, club or other group, if there is an adult present, he is usually in full command of the situation, he is in a position of authority over the group, the group looks to him for directions as to what to do, how and when to do it, and what to think about it. Most people in Japan understand leadership to be of this type only. Most younger people are trained to respond to this type of leadership from adults, and are a little uneasy and at a loss when they are thrown back on their own independent resources as they are when directed by a truly group work type of relationship with the older helping adult. But young people are flexible because they are young, and given encouragement to express their ideas as individuals and are patiently given repeated chances to use their own initiative, they show that they can respond to this new kind of freedom and can grow and learn successfully in this new type of group experience. Certain group work agencies in Japan such as the Young Women's Christian association which have had long experience in successfully using the group work method to achieve character building, religious and social education objectives with both young people and adults, have shown this flexibility and responsiveness of young people to the group work method in an encouraging way. They have found some adults flexible enough to provide this new type of leadership for the groups which

they sponsor. But I think they would readily say that the finding and training of such leaders is their most exacting task.

In conclusion I should like to state the essentials of the above discussion in the following way: 5

The objectives, philosophy and methods of Group Work are an outgrowth of the experience of a democratic society seeking to strengthen groups of individuals within it, and to prepare them — especially the youth — for the fullest realization or their personality. And because of the democratic back- 10
ground out of which it grew this group work objective invariably emphasizes the development of the socially responsible citizen and trains him for leadership in that society. The group work process involving members and adult advisor (and their relationship to the community) is essentially the 15
democratic process in miniature. This being so, one might say that in as far as social group work is increasingly practised in Japan it can be taken as both one of the fruits and one of the symbols of the growth and understanding of true democracy. 20
