

# Social Group Work in the Global Context

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## **Abstract**

*We humans are a living connected community and therefore group work is endemic to our existence. Group work makes sense for social work, as humanity spends a good deal of their lives living, working, and evolving in the context of groups. Social work is the profession that focuses on the person within the context of his or her environment. Social work, whether at the level of practice or education, is known to be influenced by local variations related to cultural, legal, spiritual, political or organizational contexts. So how do we place Social group work in a global Context? Social work is an international profession and has changed and developed through the exchange of ideas. This occurs through research, publication, student exchange and international conferences. Therefore we see it is a profession responding to global social problems such as civil war, ecological disasters, economic deprivation, international trade in people and mass exodus of people. In seeking a global context for Social group work, we must look into the primary fact that Humans are social by nature and look to work, stay and interact in groups. These interactions may differ from one region to another and is determined by the cultural context of the interaction. It is seen that group work in western Industrialised countries essentially takes the form of small group intervention in task and process groups, and in many countries of the Southern World (less industrialised and technologically advanced) it takes on different ideologies that relate to larger systems and that may be more politically radical.*

*As various populations become increasingly transnational in nature—that is, they frequently move across boundaries and nations—social work will need to learn how to be transnational as well. Group workers in the future will be called upon to use new Internet based technologies, such as video conferencing and inexpensive telephonic communications, to facilitate group processes for individuals living in different countries. In today's scenario the unsettling trend of terrorism and hatred is throwing up its ugly head, as also ecological*

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*disasters are on a large scale resulting in loss on unfathomable levels, effecting people economically, socially and psychologically. Hence group work in dealing with disaster management and trauma is also taking centre Stage. However with the shortage of helping professionals over the larger number of affected, the group work process seems to stand tall.*

**Key Words:** *Group Work, Social Change, Medium of Change, Transnational, Virtual Group*

## **Introduction**

As early as the sixteen century the famous English Poet John Donne spoke about this very concept of the belonging of man to a group. He says that no man is an Island entire of it but that every man is a piece of the continent. Man has always a sense of belonging to the larger whole and therefore when one hears the church bells toll – an adage used when an individual has arrived at a certain milestone in life such as birth or death, he say “never send someone to know for whom the bells toll, it tolls for thee.” These heavily loaded words express just how much an individual is part of the whole and how much we are connected to the group we belong to. Hence understanding that we are a living connected community and therefore group work is endemic to our existence. The family being the first Unit and with the progression of modern telecommunication, satellites, cloud interface, barriers and boundaries have coalesced into each other which makes group work not only inevitable but a necessity.

But what is the nature of group work? For our purposes, when we refer to a group, we are referring to a social work practice group. In sociology, political science, and common everyday language, the term “group” has different meanings than it does for social work practice. The word “group” often refers to an ethnic group or a large number of people who have similar historical and cultural experiences. Schwartz (1971) provides a simple definition when he notes that a social work group is “a collection of people who need each other in order to work on certain common tasks, in an agency hospitable to those tasks” (p. 7). Anderson (1997) observes that social work practice with groups is a methodology for the empowerment of group members to improve the quality of their lives. The focus is on members’ growth. The intent is to stimulate their autonomous growth process through participation in a group process. Shulman (2006) views the group as an enterprise in mutual aid, an alliance of individuals who need each other, in varying degrees, to work on certain common problems.

Social workers are called on to run groups in all settings. When one considers the prevalence of task groups in administrative life and case conference groups in

which clients are discussed, it is hard to imagine a social worker who is or will not be part of groups frequently. Social workers are called upon to run groups at the micro and the macro levels. Social workers, work in groups as therapists, advocates, organizers, leaders, brokers, facilitators, and collaborators.

Group work makes sense for social work, as humanity spends a good deal of their lives living, working, and evolving in the context of groups. Social work is the profession that focuses on the person within the context of his or her environment. That is, social work not only helps individuals adapt to their environments but also helps environments adapt to the needs, dreams, goals, and aspirations of individuals. It is this person-in-environment orientation that makes groups especially valuable as a tool of social work practice. Think of the group as a microcosm of society, and group work as an opportunity to help individuals improve their social relationships and resources through their interactions in the group. Imagine a group as a potential catalyst for social change, in which individuals come together to develop effective strategies for changing their external social worlds. Alternatively, envision a group as a place where people suffering from a serious disease can come together for support, acceptance, and hope. These are some of the many potential uses for groups

### **How do we place Social group work in a global Context?**

Social work is an international profession and has changed and developed through the exchange of ideas. This occurs through research, publication, student exchange and international conferences.

For a number of years now, the social work profession has debated questions around claims to universality as a profession versus contextual influences. The International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG) has laid down certain standards for Group work. The Standards focus on central distinguishing concepts of social work with groups and highlight the perspective that social group workers bring to practice. By design, the standards are general rather than specific and descriptive rather than prescriptive. They are applicable to the wide range of groups encountered by social group workers in a variety of practice settings. These groups include treatment, support, psycho-educational, task, and community-action groups. The Standards draw heavily on the Code of Ethics from the National Association of Social Work (United States), group theory from the social sciences, knowledge of individuals and the environment, the historical roots of social group work practice, current practice with groups, and practice research. Thus, they are based on practice wisdom, theories of group work practice, and empirical evidence. They emphasize the understanding and use of group processes and the ways members help one another to accomplish the purposes of the group. The role of

the worker, as articulated in the standards, reflects the values of the social work profession generally as well as the unique features associated with social work with groups.

Various comprehensive perspectives of social work practice provide a broad underpinning of the values and knowledge bases of social group workers' practice.

The phases and the associated tasks described in these standards are guides for practice. They represent the wisdom that has been acquired from practice, theory, and research. However, each group is different and practitioners must apply these standards in terms of their appropriateness for each group and its particular members.

At the same time, it recognises that standardized education and practice cannot be achieved: due to the diversity of spoken languages internationally, the variances in economic and geographical contexts, the regulation of the profession, and the different cultural norms in place. Indeed, as Hugman (2005) and Yip (2004) argue, global standards are not always internationally applicable, which makes their use difficult. Spolander et al (2011) also explains that many differences appear in training in the different countries so that it cannot be expected that all Social Work Schools prepare their students under the same intervention model. Thus, practice is likely to vary from one region to another.

That said, little research has so far attempted to explore social work with groups as observed in different parts of the world and how local differences may or may not influence the forms social work with groups can take (Rice, 2004)

### **Early history to understand global trends in group work practice: Indian Scenario**

India has a long History of social work and social welfare, which is evident in the group approach to charity, the ashram culture, the gurukula system of education, mobilizing people for the freedom struggle, Sarvodhya and Bhoodhan movements and much later on the Panchayath system are examples. However group work as a method of Social work practice can be seen only in the context of social work education in India. The Association of Schools of Social Work jointly with the Technical Cooperative Mission (USA) laid down minimum standards for group work practice acted a benchmark to the developments in India. Mehta V D (1987) and Helen Joseph (1997), two social workers who attempted to trace the historical development of group work in India.

The practice of social group work in India is generally limited to correctional and other residential institutional setting, hospitals as well as non institutionalised groups such as street children and self help groups in the urban areas. The general activities

undertaken were recreational, educational and cultural in character. Group work method was also practiced in community work, as in the case of mahila mandals , yuvak mandals, the balwadi system for children, but it was primarily recognised as community work. Practice of group work is also given emphasis through the fieldwork programme in some schools. Students placed in agencies and open communities work with groups of children, youth, adults and elderly who are either ill or healthy in urban and rural areas. For instance, the students of social work in School of Social Work, Roshni Nilaya placed in open communities, are engaged in organising groups for children from balwadi's and government schools in the Panchanyath areas and also for adult women (self-help groups) in the disadvantaged neighbourhoods, adults with addiction in de-addiction centers, skill enhancement and stress management for workers in the industry. Such groups have a combined objective of socialisation, structured recreation, functional literacy, awareness generation on diverse issues such as effective parenting, health and hygiene, environment and local self governance as well as other socially relevant issues. In the recent years, groups of adolescent girls and boys too have been organised in the villages as well as schools in the city, to deal with issues pertaining to life skill development making them adept at managing a home, vocational guidance, knowledge of reproductive and sexual health, sexuality, family planning methods, etc.

### **Western World's Scenario**

In the western World social work approaches are rooted in the group activities of various social agencies that arose in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Social upheaval and new found demands as a result of post civil war industrialization, migration and immigration created many individual and societal needs. Some of these needs were met through group work endeavors found in settlement houses as well as religious and charity organizations. The settlement house movement on one hand leaned towards social reform and on the other hand utilized the power of the group to provide education, training and skills of daily living directed towards emancipation of the poor ( in England) and new undereducated immigrants ( in the United States) In the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a change in the emphasis towards recreational and service activity oriented geared to serve the troops returning from world war - I. Later the international influence of group work saw the impact of Psychoanalysis from Europe and social group work extended itself to incorporate group treatment and therapy (Coyle 1948; Konopka 1949; Shaffer and Galinsky, 1989) This development was reinforced by the Mental health needs of the soldiers in Britain and US returning from the world war II and the limited resources for treatment. New models of group work emerged in psychiatry and influenced Social group work to become treatment oriented. ( Bion 1961; Foulkes and Antony, 1957) .

Refugees from Europe challenged by the rise in National Socialism, such as Gisel Konapka and Fritz Redl made great contribution to the development of group work with children and adolescents.

Thus the early history of Social Group Work reflects two strands of development : Activity, recreation and education-oriented groups which we can see reflected in the work of the settlement houses in England and the mental health and therapeutic programmes coming from the field of medical and Psychiatric service.

### **Present Global Scenario**

In seeking a global context for Social group work, we must look into the primary fact that Humans are social by nature and look to work, stay and interact in groups. There is a tendency in Human Beings to gravitate towards living, functioning and interacting in groups reinforces the concept of groups as the natural and desirable habitat of humankind. It is a universal recognized fact that all people interact and function in and through groups in a given society because groups provide security and support to humankind . These interactions may differ from one region to another and is determined by the cultural context of the interaction (Okum, Fried, and Okum 1999).

In order to further understand this, the applied science/art of social work has utilized and adapted findings of group activities, phases, development, structures, roles and goals to develop both professional interventions and methods of social group work. The question arises however is that whether these structures, processes, functions, roles and skills – identified by the North American Social work literature, equally evident and recognizable in other countries and cultures. It is seen that group work in western Industrialised countries essentially takes the form of small group intervention in task and process groups, in many countries of the Southern World ( less industrialised and technologically advanced) it takes on different ideologies that relate to larger systems and that may be more politically radical. They are also other forms of group work which are age old which have evolved naturally such as the Panchayath System here in India which is based on the ideology of internal self governance within the context of the Country's central government. Other ideologies that use basic group work strategies that are used globally are Community organization and community development ( Regan and Lee 1992)

### **Group work in an Individualistic Vs group oriented society**

When talking about social group work in the Global context, we can also examine the relationship of Individuals to groups and vice versa. At one extreme the locus of social control lies with the person and at the other extreme the group is regarded

as the unit of social control. A doctrine of Individualism suggests that the focus is on the individual and his/her social identity. The individualization of the person supersedes the power of the group identity. These groups enhance the individual well being. Eg: In the Northern American and European tradition the methodology and interventions of social group work are specially designed for the betterment of the individual, whether the goal is therapeutic change, social enhancement, interpersonal competence, skill acquisition or self help and support ( Edwards & Edwards 1984). Task and decision making groups are designed to increase organizational efficiency through concerted group effort to improve service delivery to clients, customers and patrons. This idea is found mostly in the western world where the dependency is on the natural groups ( family, close community, agrarians households) has decreased and the need for groups as an integral part of the human environment has become the medium of planned group interventions. Because groups are acknowledged as medium of change in individualistic societies, the role of the group worker in any group task or group process remains clear both for the group worker and its members and is directly focused on the techniques and knowledge that are recognized and required to achieve the desired outcome.

On the other hand in a group oriented society, the focus is on the group maintaining social control and the individual surrenders his or her respective identity to that of the group identity. Individual's differences are minimized if not ignored and personal interests, preferences, values, attributes and characteristics are relegated to a *persona non grata* status ( Chu and Sue, 1984). Individualism is not acceptable and is seen as going against the group and the outcome could be the person is ostracized from the group. Thus within cultures wherein the group is more important than its members and the individual a mere cog in the wheel, a new entrant such as professional social workers are viewed with suspicion and their presence regarded as an intrusion. Group oriented cultures behave as closed systems with esoteric norms, traditions, rituals and values that all members of the group must adhere to or lose face with the group. Such group oriented cultures set value on the group and the individuals only to the extent to which they follow the dictates of the group and set aside their own interests in the interest of the group.

With the social media developing and sending its tentacles all over the world, knowledge and skills are disseminated and we may see new trends developing and these trends should be further studied and used to develop modern group work skills.

### **Future trends**

What is the future of International perspective in Social group work?

All social group workers are being increasingly called upon to work with different cultural populations. The Latino population is now the largest ethnic minority group in the United States. Emigration resulting from genocide and famine in Africa has significantly increased the African populations too throughout the United States. Europe is seeing a lot of Moroccan and populations from the middle-east as emigrants due to the strife and terror causes by the ISIS group. As social workers are increasingly called upon to serve these populations, group workers must develop culturally competent group work skills.

Another major growing social issue is dealing with the elderly. Working with older people is as diverse as working with any other age range. It's important to remember that "older adults" aren't just one group of people with the same needs. Some may just need information and advice about universal local services and here mixed groups working on mutual aid principle cater to these needs. Others may need security support and friendship and opportunities to share and discuss. It is important to safeguard adults from harm, reviewing current care in place, carrying out a mental capacity assessment, and being the first point of contact. Focusing on wellbeing and seek to maintain and enhance their quality of life.

We see how older people seem to be written off by society. There are a lot of older people who are lonely, want companionship, and want to share their ideas, wealth of experience. This is an untapped field and prime focus is slowly turning to this group of Individuals. With much country's population ageing, this seems logical that social group work education and practice needs to be focused on and interested in older people.

In today's scenario the unsettling trend of terrorism and hatred is throwing up its ugly head, as also ecological disasters are on a large scale resulting in loss on unfathomable levels, effecting people economically, socially and psychologically. Hence group work in dealing with disaster management and trauma is also taking center Stage. However with the shortage of helping professionals over the larger number of affected, the group work process seems to stand tall. The first and second world wars threw up its own set of problems in a devastated world where people had to come to terms with a new world order, build up their lives again and it also gave rise to a large mass of displaced people fleeing communist regimes. Today with the new trend in fundamentalism we see again a mass exodus of refugees flooding the European continent as also the Indian subcontinent and certain countries around the Asia Pacific region.

The International Federation of Social Workers(IFSW) believes that work with refugees needs to be part of the mainstream of social work education and practice.



IFSW recommends that practical services, before settlement or resettlement, should include: Cultural orientation; adult literacy; language training; health care; skill development to enhance employment prospects; family life education; child care and education; development of creative abilities; recreational facilities; specific services for special or vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied women and children, elderly people, people with disabilities; and counseling, including counseling on re-adaptation for refugees who opt for voluntary repatriation.

IFSW recommends further, that special attention must be given in the case of refugees held in limbo, to: Morale maintenance; appraisal of limited options; establishment of a sense of community within the camp/centre; income-generating skills and opportunities; and sensitisation of the local population to the continuing presence of the refugees and to their needs.

IFSW supports the desirability of primary prevention through development and assistance programmes in regions of the world where disasters, conflicts and dire poverty are likely causes for mass exodus. Hence,

Social Group workers will work with various groups of populations in new ways. As various populations become increasingly transnational in nature—that is, they frequently move across boundaries and nations—social work will need to learn how to be transnational as well.

Group workers in the future will be called upon to use new Internet based technologies, such as video conferencing and inexpensive telephonic communications, to facilitate group processes for individuals living in different countries. For instance, migrant rights groups could be helped to work together through these technologies.

Like many other institutions and social structures, social work has been greatly affected by globalization (Furman & Negi, 2007) and has been increasingly internationalized. As many cultures of the world are far more collectivist (group and communally oriented) than in the western world like the United States (which is far more individualistic), group work is an appropriate method for international practice. For example, clinical groups are used for working with the poor in Singapore (Devan, 2001), and community empowerment groups have been an important intervention in organizing poor disempowered laborers throughout Latin America.

In North America, it seems that there is a need for training. As demonstrated by the literature, there is a need for theory building and a move to build research on group work practice as social work progresses to evidence-based practice. There is also

a need to develop indigenous models in different parts of the world that depart from the established psychosocial model.

Group work techniques and skills adapted to the Industry, in the field of Human Resource Management is another large untapped field which has great potential.

Finally the rapid growth in technology has opened new areas of practice for International Social group work. Web-enhanced, web-mediated, web-based groups have increased in recent years. They serve similar functions of support, education, and task to traditional groups. However they transcend time, space, and make group benefits constantly available to group members. They provide service to those who may otherwise find it difficult to attend meetings in physical places, these members include women with children, disabled, physically challenged or physically ill persons, people living in rural or far off places etc. These groups have mostly grown outside of the Profession of Social work and with no social group expertise on the part of the group owners/moderators, there is opportunity for social service agencies, medical hospital social work departments and psychiatric services to develop such lists as part of their regular service to clients.

Group work skills adapted to operating in a virtual group are required of the leader or the mediator. Dealing with communication that is not face to face is another challenge. Delayed responses and delayed feedback may present other problems. Access to technology is another hurdle sometimes. Nevertheless this is a new field that has great potential for international social group work practice and that is wide open for theory development and research.

Therefore we see it is a profession responding to global social problems such as civil war, ecological disasters, ageing population with special needs, economic deprivation, international trade in people and mass exodus of people. It is also exploring relatively new areas of working in Industries and operations of virtual groups.

In conclusion it can be said that man's constant travail to transform and evolve certain things remain the same. The basic need to connect, the humane need to reach out and be reached out to remains keeping in mind the developing technology at hand, the bridging of barriers, distances, the opportunities to learn and interact with varying cultures and traditions along with the growing needs. However the economic global markets too have an impact upon social group work which defines how the human race will develop, respond and what are the emerging needs and consequences that have to be handled. The recent economic depression and subsequent global recession will have a direct impact upon public spending for the next decade. During such times of economic depression there is an increase in

social problems. Poverty and crime will see a rapid increase and the gap between the have and the have not's widens. In the background of this global scenario Social group work is perhaps the need of the hour globally.

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