Intergroup Dialogue: A Group Work Method for Diverse Groups

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In congruence with social work's core mission, culturally competent social workers must be able to work with diverse groups in varied contexts. Sometimes group work involves conflict (Corey & Corey, 2006) that is based on stereotyping and prejudice. Bargal (2004) advises group workers to develop a "repertoire of interventions" (p. 293) to work directly with intergroup conflict. Instead, however, he notes that group work is largely focused on "intragroup structures and processes (and) ... interpersonal and intrapsychic problems" (p. 304). Intergroup dialogue is a non-therapeutic group work method designed specifically to address intergroup conflict. It is useful in education, community, advocacy and other social work contexts involving diverse groups.

Intergroup dialogue consists of "face-to-face, focused, facilitated, and confidential discussions occurring over time between two or more groups of people defined by their different social identities" (Schoem, Hurtado, Sevig, Chesler, & Sumida, 2001, p. 6). Dialogue focuses directly on race, ethnicity, culture, religion, disability or other social identities (Schoem et al., 2001) associated with historical or current intergroup conflict. Dialogue versus discussion or debate is emphasized. Participants are urged to listen deeply to others' experiences to try and understand their meaning rather than to judge, challenge or debate. Participants are "more likely to think together" if they listen carefully and "create shared meaning" (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006, p. 304). This shared meaning contributes to reduced prejudice and conflict. To be successful, intergroup dialogue facilitators must be familiar with long standing group work concepts such as the stages of group development and participant contracting as well as having basic generalist social group work skills.

Intergroup dialogue developed from a large body of theory and research known as contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). Contact theory postulates that if diverse people meet under specific conditions their prejudice is more likely to be reduced than if contact occurs outside of these conditions. Military and athletic contexts provide two good examples of intergroup situations that adhere to the central "contact conditions" and tend to reduce prejudice (Pettigrew, 1998). In both cases, contact occurs under the following five contact conditions in which participants (a) are of equal status (belong to the same military branch or athletic team); (b) pursue common goals (to succeed in battle or win a game); (c) meet under the auspices of a respected institution, law, or custom (national military; athletic team sponsor); (d) share "common interests and common humanity" (all are soldiers together or athletic team members) (Allport, 1954, p. 281); and (e) are likely to see each other as potential friends (Pettigrew, 1998). Intergroup dialogue is structured to create these five central conditions.

Intergroup dialogue usually involves people from groups that have historical or current conflict or tension. Reduced prejudice is its main goal but its rationale is social justice. The method provides a forum to examine issues associated with inequality, privilege, discrimination, and oppression (Zuniga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002). It increases the intergroup communication skills required for collaborative social justice work and is well suited to social work's social justice mission.

Within social work, intergroup dialogue has been utilized in educational, community, non-profit and advocacy settings (Alvarez & Cabbil, 2001; Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006; Nagda, Kim & Truelove, 2004; Nagda, Spearmon, Holley, Harding, Moiseswanson, & DeMello, 1999; Rodenborg, 2006). It has been used in a variety of

other settings including education, community groups, non-profits, leadership training, public policy and conflict resolution, and has focused on topics such as abortion, environment or race (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006; Pettigrew, 1998). A large body of international research has documented its effectiveness at reducing prejudice among diverse people (Pettigrew, 1998).

Intergroup dialogue facilitation follows a stage model through which participants learn to see each other both as unique individuals as well as representatives of their social group. Similar to many group work methods, facilitation begins by reviewing ground rules and establishing norms of trust, confidentiality, and listening. In the first step, participants learn the difference between dialogue and discussion or debate. Facilitators help participants recognize each other as human beings with unique personal, cultural and social identities. Participants may begin to see each other as potential, while not actual, friends. A second stage moves to direct sharing of experiences rooted in social identity. Facilitators may ask about experiences of discrimination or privilege and invite participants to share experiences as a child, during pivotal times in their lives, or from their current life. Sometimes a third stage is added that focuses on specific difficult topics, such as affirmative action or abortion. Some groups may address an issue pertinent to their unique context (e.g., discrimination in local government or neighborhood safety). The final stage includes action planning and next steps. Participants may choose to remain together as a continuing advocacy or identity group (Rodenborg & Huynh, 2006) or the group may disband. Either way participants leave the group with personal plans and greater skill for ongoing social justice work. The overall facilitation goal is to increase understanding and reduce prejudice among diverse people.

Intergroup dialogue is not without its challenges. A critical ethical consideration is intergroup dialogue's impact on oppressed populations. Some research suggests that dominant groups benefit more than non-dominant groups (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006). Especially in non-voluntary settings, practitioners must be careful not to victimize members of oppressed groups by encouraging the sharing of difficult personal experience, which can educate dominant culture listeners but exploit the speakers. Social workers must insure that intergroup dialogue adheres to the two core values outlined in the Standards for Social Work Practice with Groups: rigorously respect the autonomy, worth and dignity of each group participant and remember that the goal of the group is to create a socially just society (Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups, 2006).

Documenting intergroup dialogue's effectiveness through rigorous research is a second challenge. Initial effectiveness data have been anecdotal or case examination. Research rigor should be improved and should examine intergroup dialogue's effectiveness for dominant and non-dominant participants, its flexibility across multiple settings, and its limitations (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006).

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