# REVIVING GROUP WORK IN JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS

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*Until the 1960s the Jewish Community Centers were seen as the embodiment of good group work practice, but changes within the field and within group work practice and education contributed to a decline of the saliency of group work within Centers. This article describes a project designed to revitalize group work within Centers by facilitating a collaboration between a school of social work and Centers, raising awareness of the importance of group work skills among Center professionals, and establishing a curriculum and methodology for training such professionals in group work.*

## THE ROOTS OF GROUP WORK IN JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS (JCCS)

JCCs had their genesis in the Young Mens' Hebrew Associations (YMHAs), first established in the middle of the nineteenth century, to improve the social, moral, and mental condition of young Jewish men (Kraft, 1967). By the end of the nineteenth century the YMHAs began to respond to the large waves of Jewish immigrants. Helping newly arrived Jews accommodate to life in America occupied the early JCCs through the first two decades of the twentieth century. By the 1920s, the strengths of the JCCs lay in their continued ability to change priorities as new needs emerged (Kosansky, 1978). Among these new needs were economic and social problems generated by the Depression of the 1930s, the rise of Nazism, and the Second World War, which caused a serious challenge to the democratic way of life.

From the 1930s to the 1960s, the teaching of democratic values and practices assumed a central priority for JCCs. Through group experiences members could learn to function democratically and prepare for civic responsibilities. Group work became the basic training recommended for professionals in or seeking to enter the field and was recognized as the core discipline of JCCs (Pine, 1993).

The mid-1930s to the late 1950s were the golden years in the relationship between JCCs and social work. As Solender (1955) indicates,

> Group work training enables workers to apply to the Center program social work knowledge about individual growth, group experience, and community life. Together with the group worker's specialized skill in working with people in groups this "know-how" is one of the Center's particular attributes. While the Center utilizes such other important fields as physical education and preschool education, social group work is its central area of competence.

The JCCs were seen as the embodiment of good social group work practice; they were at the leading edge with quality programming and uncompromising professionalism (Reisman, 1972). They were ideal field placements for social group work students, and the academic connection gave status to the agencies.

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## THE DECLINE OF GROUP WORK WITHIN JCCs

The decline of group work started in the early 1960s. Four major forces reflecting changes within the JCC field and group work education and practice contributed to this decline:

1. increased role of other disciplines in JCCs
2. greater emphasis on Jewish programming in JCCs
3. shift in group work practice from settings serving individuals with normal developmental needs to those dealing with individual problems in social functioning
4. decline in group work education in graduate schools of social work

The widespread growth of JCC facilities with expanded programs in health and physical education, early childhood education, the arts, and camping called for professionals specially educated in these areas. No longer was group work the core discipline.

The Janowsky report commissioned by the Jewish Welfare Board in 1945 and published in 1948 recommended a greater emphasis on Jewish programming. With growing concern about Jewish identity and continuity and increased support for the State of Israel, the goal of JCCs became clearly defined as providing service to the entire Jewish community and making Jewish knowledge and understanding an integral part of the Center program.

Berger (1981, p. 37) comments on the Janowsky report and its future influence: "The final recommendation definitely pointed in a Jewish direction.... But it would take two more decades, the advent of the 1967 War in Israel, before this emphasis became pronounced in every facet of its staff, operation, and influence."

Some manifestations of the increased emphasis on Jewish programming were *Shlichim* programs in which Israeli professionals were employed by JCCs for a two- or three-year period, an increased number of trips and missions to Israel for staff, board, and members, and the creation of a new staff position of Jewish education specialists. The number of such specialists has risen from 18 in 1990 to 68 in 1996, including one full-time scholar-in-residence.

In addition, JCCs have increasingly adopted the corporate approach to the creation of new categories of professionals, such as development director and director of marketing.

Beginning in the 1950s, attention shifted from group work in traditional group service agencies to group work in specialized settings, such as hospitals, psychiatric facilities, and institutions serving individuals with problems. The developmental model of group work in which members come to traditional group service agencies for activities providing social enrichment and to utilize agency resources was deemphasized (Rhudy, 1981).

In 1969 changes in curriculum policy by the Council on Social Work Education led social work schools to embrace generic education and move from teaching specializations in casework, group work, and community organization. A 1991 survey of social work graduate schools revealed that graduate education had practically eliminated group work as a specialized area of study (Birnbaum and Auerbach, 1994):

> Most schools offer group work only as an elective, and few students graduate with a course in this subject. Additionally, students in foundation courses learn little about group work theory and have limited or no group field work experience in which to develop practice skills (p. 325).

As a result, the bond between social work and JCCs weakened, and group work was no longer a primary concern for Center practice. With some exceptions, standards for student placements deteriorated, and Centers lost their position as a prime training and field work resource for graduate social work students.

These trends are reflected in the decline in the number of JCC staff with an MSW degree. In 1955, 58 percent of professionals in JCCs were MSWs, most with a specialization in

group work (Reisman, 1992), in contrast to only 9.7 percent in 1996.

Figure 1 graphically illustrates the decline from 1982 to 1996 in the percentage of JCC staff with a professional degree. More than 70 percent of current Center professionals do not have more than an undergraduate education.

## WHY RETURN TO GROUP WORK NOW?

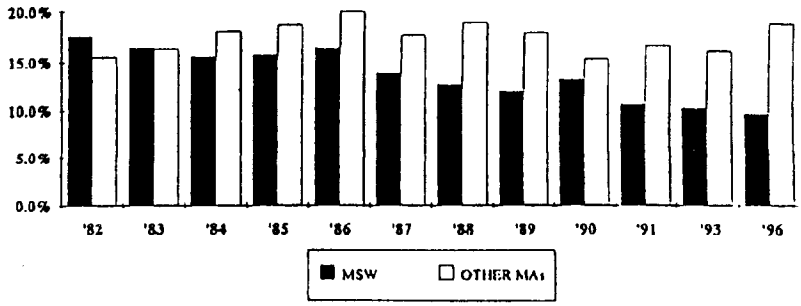
Despite the successful programs of JCCs and the presence of knowledgeable specialists on staff, many Center professionals may lack a vital ingredient—the understanding of individual and group behavior principles (Dubin, 1980). The fact remains that groups are used for all Center populations, and Center goals are accomplished through group activity. Group services help strengthen the Jewish family, for example, through family life education and couple groups for families expecting their first child: "Parenting skills for Jewish families help them become more effective parents and develop Jewish life styles...with special attention given to the blended family and the single parent" (JWB Agenda for Action, 1990). Groups for intermarried couples provide opportunities to question, clarify, and seek support and guidance in a nonjudgmental atmosphere (JWB Agenda for Action, 1990). Centers provide group services to populations with special needs, such as children and teens with learning disabilities and their families. Groups for acculturation of Russian teens, adults, and elderly immigrants are prevalent. Teen departments rely on groups to provide leadership training, conduct intergenerational programs, and stimulate interest in Israel experiences. The elderly are served largely through discussion, activity, intergenerational, and social action groups.

The Center is unique for its inclusion of members in group decision-making and leadership roles:

> Centers have continuously cherished the principle that members have a stake in *what* is being done, *how* it is being done, and *why* it is being done, and that the decisions governing these activities require the members' input and the Center's respect for this input. We have in our Centers a simple equation which states that people plus other people want to come together to share among themselves and with still others, to listen and to act and from such interrelations come respect, interest and understanding (Kosansky, 1978, p. 307).

A major reason why group work should return to JCCs is that its methodology focuses on the growth and development of members and the relationships between them. As Dubin (1993) writes, "Simply, we need group work now to bring us back to individualization, relationship between staff worker and member, and to struggle against the natural tendencies toward producing numbers and activities rather than relationships that impact on growth and development."

*Figure 1. Percentage of JCC Professionals with MSWs and other masters 1982–1996. (Courtesy of Edward Kagen, Director of Research, JCCA.)*



A gap exists between the proliferation of group services within JCCs and the preparation of staff to work with groups. Staff from disciplines other than social work usually receive no training at the undergraduate and graduate levels in group work. With the decline in group work education, even Center professionals with a degree in social work may not receive such training (Birnbaum and Auerbach, 1994). In addition, in-service training in JCCs rarely incorporates group work content. Staff institutes offered by the JCC Association (JCCA) have dealt largely with Jewish concerns, board-staff relationships, immigrants, and Israel and peripherally with group work per se. Contributing to the problem is the avoidance of discussion about group work within the Jewish communal service field. Table 1 reveals the decline from 1972 to 1996 in the number of articles dealing with group work.

We believe that the lack of attention to group work may be part of what Bubis (1994) refers to as a process of deprofessionalization in Jewish communal services. Symptoms include the lack of agreed-on standards for practice and continuing education requirements.

This article describes a project designed to strengthen professional standards by (1) facilitating a collaboration between a school of social work and the JCC field, (2) raising awareness of the importance of group work skills among JCC professionals, (3) developing a planning process to identify training needs, and (4) establishing content and methodology for training Center professionals in group work.

## ORIGINS OF THE EFFORT TO STRENGTHEN GROUP WORK IN JCCs

Several forces have combined to revive an interest in group work in JCCs today. One is the establishment of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG), an international grassroots organization, today consisting of 1,500 members and 14 chapters. The organization promotes group work practice, education, and research. It conducts annual symposia and publishes a newsletter, conference proceedings, and monographs. A number of Center workers are members. In 1985, a linkage between AASWG and the JCCA was initiated, resulting in a panel presentation at the 9th Annual Symposium on Social Work with Groups in Boston that dealt with the past and present status of group work in JCCs.

Another force is the creation of the Beate and Henry Voremberg Chair in Social Group Work at the Wurzweiler School of Social Work in 1989. One purpose of the Chair is to advance group work in JCCs. A third factor is the interest of key organizations in the JCC field: The Association of Jewish Center Professionals (AJCP), the JCCA, and a group of agencies in the Northeast region.

An ad hoc committee was formed in 1991 to assess current interest in group work with representation from AASWG, AJCP, JCCA, the Wurzweiler School for Social Work, and executives from five agencies. It established these three guidelines:

1. For group work to be relevant to JCCs, it must be related to the present environment, rather than its past history in JCCs.
2. Although group work is historically identified with social work, it is a generic method that is connected to the work of all JCC disciplines.
3. Efforts to revive group work should be based on staff experiences in working with groups, thus strengthening their existing skills in this area.

The committee planned a demonstration training program, *Strengthening Your Group Work Skills,* at the 1991 AJCP Annual Conference, which attracted 50 professionals of various Center disciplines. It included a presentation on what group work is, practice examples to illustrate the use of group work skills, and discussion on how these skills relate to the participants' own practice. Participants were highly enthusiastic, noting that they gained a greater awareness of the group work skills they were currently using. Those with formal

*Table 1.* Journal of Jewish Communal Service *Articles Relating to Group Work, 1972–1996*

| | Average Number of Articles Per Year | Average Number per Year on Group Work, Jewish Centers, and Social Work | Average Number per Year on Group Work Issues |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1972–1989 | 40 (100%) | 8 (20%) | 3.2 (8%) |
| 1990–1996 | 40 (100%) | 3 (7.5%) | 1.7 (3.8%) |

group work training felt the experience helped refresh their skills.

**Development of a Committee to Strengthen Group Work in JCCs**

The success of the seminar provided the impetus to form a permanent committee sponsored by AJCP, the Wurzweiler School of Social Work, and the JCCA.

Fifteen individuals were selected with a balance between executive and line staff and representation from the various JCC disciplines. The committee was co-chaired by the Voremberg chairholder and a representative of the JCCA. Its formulated purpose was to provide in-service training for professional staff of all disciplines that would focus on the present use of group process in their work and enhancing this use in the future. Finding ways in which staff could educate lay leadership about the importance and use of group process was seen as a byproduct of the training.

The committee struggled with several issues as it deliberated about how to organize the group work training. For instance, should the training be specialized, focusing on particular disciplines, or should it be generic and team-related? Should the training be short term with single sessions, offered to a number of agencies or long term concentrating on a few agencies?

It was recognized that JCC staff within each discipline tend to identify with their own specialty, rather than with the agency as a whole. This suggested the need for encouraging teamwork among the staff and led to the decision to connect all the disciplines together within a Center by concentrating on common skills in working with groups. The decision to offer extended rather than short-term training was based on a desire to have a greater impact and to be able to test the effectiveness of the training.

Two agencies were targeted for training each year over a two-year period, using the following criteria for selection: (1) commitment to make use of the training, (2) agency stability, (3) presence of a staff representative of the different Center disciplines, (4) support and involvement of the executive director, (5) either a city or suburban agency, and (6) lack of internal resources to provide group work training on its own.

The committee identified the following group work principles around which to develop the content for training:

1. clarification of group purpose and formulation of group goals
2. promotion of social interaction
3. support for democratic/Jewish values
4. management of group conflict
5. development of member and group responsibility
6. conscious use of self

It was agreed that group planning meetings and training sessions would serve as a reference for learning about group process. Training would largely be experiential, drawing upon the trainees' existing knowledge and experience in working with a variety of groups and showing how group process is a natural part of their work. Each agency would appoint a training coordinator who would serve on the committee and be a part of the training team.

**Planning Process within the Agencies Selected for Training**

Agency-level work started with a telephone conference between the co-chairs of the committee, the agency coordinator, and the executive director to clarify the purpose of the training and review criteria for agency participation. Agency planning meetings followed with a mixture of key staff from different disciplines and included the executive director. The agenda included groups that staff work with, satisfactions and dissatisfactions derived from work with groups, relevance of the training principles to agency groups, additional ideas for training content, and structure for the training. Plans were made to conduct five three-hour sessions in each agency.

The agency planning meetings, in addition to demonstrating the use of group process, built support for the training, helped the trainers become familiar with staff, and generated ideas for training content. Team work among the staff, working with ethnic diversity, the formation of task groups, and roles of group members were identified as topics to be included in the training.

## TRAINING CONTENT AND METHODOLOGY

The training staff consisted of the committee co-chairs and the agency coordinator. Members of the committee rotated as observers and recorders. The agency executives participated actively, which did not seem to inhibit staff involvement. Rather, their presence throughout added to the prestige of the project.

Each session began with a review of the training plan and included a mini-lecture on one or more of the principles stressing their application to Center groups and experiential exercises; each ended with an evaluation and time spent planning for the next session. Participants helped determine the sequence of subjects for each session, and they were involved in the preparation of vignettes of actual group situations that were used for role plays and group discussion in each session. The following vignette about member roles, for example, was written by a cultural arts teacher skilled in her field but with no group work background.

> In an ongoing art class, which tends to be quite social, one member demands an inordinate amount of attention, asking repetitive questions and requiring constant reassurance and approval. She monopolizes the instructor, leaving less time for the other students who find her irritating and resent her behavior.

A role play was constructed around this situation with parts for the students in the class, the problem student, and the instructor; it generated a lively discussion of alternative solutions. The trainees thought the teacher should speak to the student privately after class, stressing her strengths and ability to work more independently.

Staff were encouraged to report on how they applied what they learned in the training sessions. At a subsequent training session, the cultural arts teacher reported the following:

> Somehow, it had never occurred to me to address this problem with the hope of a solution or at least some improvement. I just kept putting up with it. Shortly after my workshop I used my new-found skills and confronted my student. During our conversation she admitted that her behavior inhibited her success in many aspects of life. I praised her abilities and assured her that identifying the problem is more than half the battle. I urged her to try to overcome her insecurities, trust her own judgment, and become more independent. The art class noticed her modified behavior and became more accepting of her.

### Group Work Practice Principles

*Group Purpose and Goals*

The session on Group Purpose and Goals stressed the value of the agency, worker, and members being in agreement about the aims of the group and how a lack of understanding

can affect group functioning.

Staff recognized how often the groups with which they work lack clear goals. One common error is selecting individuals for committees before the group purpose is made clear. The following experience of a Health and Physical Education committee was presented as an example of this problem.

> The committee consisted of a vocal group of people, each with a separate special interest. One cared only about the pool, one the basketball league, one the weight room equipment, etc. Each joined to promote or complain about the area he or she cared about. There was no common interest that held them together, and meetings jumped from one issue to another. Each person felt his or her needs weren't being met. Some felt frustrated and dropped out. The committee chair, an excellent, committed person, did his very best to bring people together, but the lack of a common purpose made that impossible.

Discussion of the above situation clarified the group purpose as enhancing the health and physical education program for the Center and all of its members. Once the common purpose is clarified by the chairperson, the members should be involved in developing goals to accomplish it.

*Social Interaction*

Social interaction content emphasizes how "contact among persons results in a modification of the attitudes and behavior of the participants" (Northen, 1988). A climate of peer support encourages group members to try out new ideas and behaviors. The role of the worker is to facilitate communication among members while conveying respect for different points of view.

A vignette of a "Mommy and Me," parent education group helped illustrate the worker's role.

> In a discussion on disciplining young children, a parent advocated physical punishment. Some members seemed neutral to the idea, whereas others objected to hitting a child. The worker agreed with those who objected and was critical of the parent.

Discussion of social interaction principles helped staff realize their role is not to be judgmental, or to take sides, but, as in this case, to encourage all group members to share ideas and experiences with discipline and to raise issues about child rearing for group consideration.

*Democratic/Jewish Values*

The training in this session dealt with the humanistic and democratic value base of social group work that stresses the interdependence of human beings and their responsibility toward one another, the dignity and worth of all individuals, and respect for different points of view.

Connections were drawn between social group work values and Jewish values of pluralism—exposing people to diverse points of view and embracing Jews of different perspectives (Dubin, 1991). The training promoted the idea of the group worker embracing and espousing these values as a way of shaping group norms (Kolodney, 1993).

Considerable discussion occurred about what to do when group members express values that differ with the worker's personal and professional values. Should the worker intervene? What should he or she say to the group? What about the worker's feelings of being rejected? Such issues and concerns were explored as dilemmas the worker faces. Certain principles were established. When members express strong prejudices, the worker should intervene. Otherwise, silence may be interpreted as agreement. Various options were identified for the worker's response. One is to bring the issue out in the open for discussion, another is to ask whether different points of view exist in the group, and a third is to raise questions about how such attitudes contradict democratic/Jewish values. In an open discussion it may sometimes be appropriate for the worker to express his or her values.

*Teamwork among the Staff*

The staff was viewed as a group, with teamwork being essential for group functioning. Principles for effective teamwork, such as an understanding of the mission and goals of the Center, primary identification with the goals of the Center rather than with the goals of one's department, open and honest communication, cooperation between staff, and respect for individual difference, were delineated.

In small groups staff discussed what meaning these principles have in their work and what obstacles interfere with the achievement of teamwork. Ideas to improve communication between staff were frequently identified:

- sharing of information about what is happening within departments, particularly committee activities
- regularly held staff meetings
- use of staff meetings for problem solving

Sentiment was expressed that cooperation and respect for differences are likely when staff are aware of one another's activities and concerns. Group members recognized that teamwork among the staff can contribute to creating a sense of community within the Center.

*Conscious Use of Self*

The conscious use of self concept resonated throughout the training. It enhanced learning by helping staff be more aware of their feelings and actions and the effect of their behavior on others. "Tuning in" (Shulman, 1992) to self and to the needs of others was applied to other principles, such as working with conflict, developing teamwork, and promoting democratic/Jewish values.

Before the session on the conscious use of self, participants were asked to prepare a written vignette of a group session that illustrated this concept. They also received a handout on the subject (Wilson and Ryland, 1949).

The following vignette is an example:

> A "committee" consisting of three members of the Center's large Immigrant Services Department angrily came to the worker to protest what they viewed as the agency's misuse of fund by providing cultural programs/concerts and poetry readings, rather than using these funds to provide translators to help the members with their basic needs and entitlements. The worker acknowledged their concern for more translators, but also explained the limitation of the grant, which was specifically for the cultural enrichment of immigrants. She discussed various options for obtaining additional translators, specifically using volunteers, such as family, neighbors, etc., which they refused to consider, continuing to blame the worker. The worker then suggested as a next step that they meet with administration. Although a meeting was scheduled, the "committee" did not attend. Some volunteers were later recruited by members of the "committee." Further, the protestors attended most of the subsequent cultural events.

Group discussion showed that the worker had acted consciously by acknowledging the members' legitimate concerns, explaining the conditions of the grant, and trying to find a common solution. An opposite response would have the worker becoming defensive of the policy and angry at the members' outbursts.

An Assistant Director of a teen department wrote in an evaluation of the training program how the conscious use of self has influenced her practice:

> When I was first told about the Committee to Strengthen Group Work, I honestly didn't know what I could possibly gain from it. Halfway through the first session I realized that I couldn't have been more wrong. For example, when we began speaking of the conscious use of self in group work, I began to see the same strategies I use during Teen Council meetings to not let my prejudices judge or taint how I run my groups, was what I was

> learning about. This helped me a great deal because although I have been using these practices, by becoming conscious of them, it made me more effective.

At the conclusion of the first year's training program, closing exercises took place at the Wurzweiler School of Social Work with lay representatives of each of the agencies, the leadership of Wurzweiler, and representatives of the three sponsoring agencies. A certificate of completion of the Group Work Skills Seminar was presented to each participant.

## IMPACT AND FUTURE OF THE PROJECT

Although this has been a limited effort in terms of the number of Centers served, it has sparked interest and enthusiasm in the field. The involvement and response of the participants in each of the four Centers were positive. Their verbal and written evaluations indicate some carryover in their subsequent work, helping staff as a whole deal with agency situations and sensitizing individual staff members in their own practice. For example, the director of a nursery school wrote,

> Following the training sessions, I began to examine the causes for the failure of the Nursery Parents Association and worked at reforming the group by enabling them to redefine their mission. The probability existed that the group's purpose was no longer satisfying to its members. Over the years the needs of the group had changed while its goals had not.

Through articles and presentations at professional conferences by members of the Committee to Strengthen Group Work in JCCs, the JCC field has been alerted to the value of incorporating group work and putting it back on the agenda as a valuable training module. The project has demonstrated the value of group work skills for all Center professionals within the context and reality of Centers today. It has begun to help raise standards for group work practice in Centers by identifying generic skills and demonstrating application to a variety of Center groups.

Plans for the future include the development of a Handbook on Group Work for All Center Professionals that reflects the training program. Another aim is to encourage schools of social work with an interest in group work to reach out to their local JCCs, establishing a program relevant to their community.

## CONCLUSION

The project indicates that the need for group work in JCCs exists, not necessarily as the core discipline of JCC work, but as a key element and skill in the artillery of all JCC professionals. It can rehumanize and strengthen the quality of service and permeate all aspects of Center work, affecting direct work with groups, supervision, special services, and work with lay leadership and community groups.

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