Jewish Family Life Education: Its Group Work Roots and Group Process Implications*

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Introduction

In a brilliant analysis of Tolstoy, Isaiah Berlin (1957) delineates two types of thinkers: those who aspire to a unifying view, those who know "one big thing," and those who know a great many little things but have no unifying world view. The former he called *hedgehogs;* the latter, *foxes.*

There is a third group . . . who have tried to combine the two approaches—either as a compromise or as a hybird . . . For purposes of clarity, (if not elegance) we might term these workers hedgefoxes.[1]

Like virtually all professionals trained as group workers, the writer is proud to be a "hedgehog" most of the time, occasionally a 'hedgefox.' Once one understands the power of group membership to affect people, one knows "one big thing." In groups, individuals can learn, grow, change, gain insight, experiment with novel and varied roles and behaviors, test their self-concepts, learn from other members and from the group as a whole, and, as someone has said, provide themselves with a social history. Hedgehogs know that the kinds of groups social workers work in often serve as *transitory realities*, as laboratories for learnings which can then be carried

into other groups and life situations by each of the members.

One should not entirely slight the foxes. Their emphasis on the differences among various types of groups is important. There are indeed differences between therapy groups and educational groups, between support groups and social development groups. For the sake of the "foxes," and even of the "hedgefoxes", one should note that Jewish family life education groups are educational in focus, family-oriented in purpose, and reflect the nature of the agencies that sponsor them and the goals established by FSA. No group should try to be all things to everyone. However, Jewish family life education should be done in groups by professionals who are skilled, trained, and provided with consultative resources to support their group work skills. This is so because JFLE groups engage in processes which are similar in nature to those of all other groups. Participation in and learning from these groups can have markedly beneficial effects upon their members, and can provide opportunities for growth in areas including but not limited to the formal subjects and topics of family life education curricula.

Purpose

The purpose of this discussion is to sketch the application of group work knowledge, attitudes and skills to JFLE.

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[1] R. G. Gibbard, J. Hartman, and R. Mann, *Analysis of Groups.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973, pp. 2–3.

First, a bit of the history of group work will be traced in the hope that this will explain why group work concepts and skills are to directly applicable to JFLE. The next step will be to discuss specific skills which JFLE workers need to have and to develop. Finally, the complex processs of development of a particular JFLE group, one composed of parents of mentally retarded children, will be used as a case illustration.

A note of caution may be needed. As the example below will make clear, developing and working with any particular JFLE group may involve a worker in dozens—even hundreds—of discrete activities. As with all group practice, one needs to be free to use and respond to what Phillips called "the reality of the present"[2] A JFLE worker need not be bound by preconceived plans, but rather should use plans and curricula as bases for developing and carrying out JFLE programs while remaining flexible and adaptive to agency, community and group needs.

Group Work and Education

Social group work had its origins in progressive, informal, and adult education, in recreation, in camping, in settlement houses and Ys, and in youth-serving organizations. Much of the support, research, programming and education in group work has taken place outside of the boundaries of social work and much continues to do so, particularly in the field of education. Partly for these reasons, group work and educational objectives have always been compatible. Whether these objectives are defined, as they used to be, as "citizenship training" or "character building," or as they now often are as "creative problem-solving" or "family life education,"

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[2] Helen V. Phillips, *The Essentials of Social Group Work Skill.* New York: Association Press, 1957.

there is a fundamental fit between group work and learning objectives. Perhaps this is because group work, more than other social work methods, views group members as learners, whose behavioral repertoires need to be enhanced and enlarged. Individual group members are viewed as creating and, in a sense, owning their group. Symbolically, group workers are sometimes uncomfortable with the term, "client," preferring "member"; for similar symbolic reasons, many family life educators refer to group members with the words, "person" or "adult learner."

Another aspect of group work's history which has relevance for JFLE is its historical association with the Jewish community. This is not remarkable, given the traditional premium Jews have placed on learning, both formal and informal. Indeed, not only Jews who had practiced in Jewish agencies but also Jews who had fled Nazi persecution in the 1930's contributed immeasurably to the development of group work theory and practice. Their intellectual descendents continue to do so today.

For group work, practicing democracy in groups is not a luxury. It is part of the group work method itself. Involvement of the group in decision-making, fostering maximum participation, contracting, enabling members to experiment with new behaviors in an atmosphere of safety, exploring mutual learnings—all of these basic principles of group work are completely applicable to JFLE groups.

The role of the JFLE worker can also be described as closer to that assigned the worker by the group work tradition than that of the caseworker or therapist, in the writer's view. In group work, a worker is viewed as what has variously been called an "enabler," a "mediator," a "facilitator," and an "orchestrator." The purpose of a group worker, like the

purpose of a JFLE worker, is to help group members learn and grow from their experiences, not particularly to provide those experiences him/herself. The worker needs to be responsive, in JFLE as in all group work, to the needs of the members, the topic of the group, the goals of the sponsoring agency, and the norms of the community. Also, of course, the worker needs to be responsive to the stages of group development. Commonly, a worker is most active in the pre-group and early group stages, with the group taking on progressively more responsibility for managing and monitoring its own processes as it moves toward maturity.

One additional group work principle deserves emphasis because it is so directly applicable to Jewish family life education. It is referred to by Emanuel Tropp as "member and worker in the same human condition."[3] The same principle is implied in the title of the late William Schwartz' most famous article, "The Social Worker *in* the Group"[4] (emphasis added). What both Tropp and Schwartz stress is that there is no inherent difference in status or in humanity between the worker and the group's members. The worker is a group member with a specialized role, but a participating and interacting member nonetheless. P. H. Ephross and P. R. Balgopal have pointed out the fact that a passive, reflective, "therapeutic" mode of worker behavior is often not appropriate for practice with various kinds of groups and that workers need to be comfortable with a range of role behaviors rather than insisting on one

particular kind of behavior as "professional."[5] In summary, to apply group work premises to family life education is to try to incorporate role flexibility, responsiveness to stage of group development, and an ability to be comfortable with the shared human condition between worker and members. One needs to treat group members with respect for their group, not as an artificial stance, but as a genuine component of the group's life.

As for the participants, the group members need to be viewed as motivated and competent people who are choosing to take part in learning experiences. They learn from each other through informal group interaction, as well as from a process of motivated inquiry.[6] The primary task of the group leader/worker is to motivate, to facilitate, to promote, and to orchestrate teaching and learning resources. The subject of the learning—the course topic—is important for two reasons, both for its own values and as a vehicle around which interpersonal learning, role elaboration, and behavioral modelling can take place.

JFLE and Agencies

Agency purposes, structures, and processes have always influenced work with all types of groups[7] and there is no reason for JFLE groups to be any different. It is useful to remember that all groups are formed to achieve specific

[3] Emanuel Tropp, "The Developmental Approach", in R. Roberts and H. Northen, eds., *Theories of Social Work with Groups*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1976.

[4] William Schwartz, "The Social Worker in the Group," *New Perspectives on Services to Groups*. New York: National Association of Social Workers, 1961.

[5] Paul H. Ephross and Pallassana R. Balgopal, "Educating Students for the Practice of Creative Group Work," *Journal of Education for Social Work*, 13, 3 (July 1978).

[6] See Louis Lowy, *Adult Education and Group Work*. New York: Whiteside, Morrow, 1955; Herbert A. Thelen, *Education and the Human Quest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.

[7] Charles Garvin, *Contemporary Group Work*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981, Chapter 2.

purposes. It is difficult if not impossible to think of group work as taking place in the abstract, just as it is impossible to think of JFLE in the abstract. Both require a particular objective, in the case of JFLE a particular curriculum. In other words, both the context of a particular agency and community and the structure provided by a particular topic are necessary in order to give shape and meaning to the processes which take place in a JFLE group.

The Jewish purposes of agencies need to be integrated fully into the lives of the JFLE groups. Sometimes this is easier to accomplish than at other times. For example, it is relatively easy to use "the reality of the present" around the times of Jewish holidays or crises in the Jewish community. It is sometimes more demanding a task to weave Jewish content, values, or traditions into ongoing discussions about topics such as normal growth and developmental processes or dealing with one's aging parents in a meaningful way. These groups simply require more creativity and awareness on the part of the worker. As with all group content, a worker needs to be sharply aware of one's own zones of comfort and discomfort if one is to be helpful to group members. Jewish identity is part of Jewish family life education in a natural and pervasive sense.

Structured Groups and "Mainstream" Groups

Family life education is provided through the use of structured groups formed around particular topics relevant to family life, family roles, life stages, handicapping conditions or particular life crises or stressors. The groups meet for a pre-planned number of sessions which generally ranges from one to twelve. Papell and Rothman note,

> The structured group approach ... is categorized into three basic types: (1) those aimed at helping individuals acquire important interpersonal life skills, e.g., assertiveness

training; (2) those directed towards enabling people to resolve and understand critical life themes, e.g., loneliness, death; (3) those designed to assist people in the making and completing of important life transitions, e.g., widowhood, retirement.

> These three types of groups, respectively, have a descending reliance on structure and a corresponding increase in use of member-initiated interaction and activity.

> All three types of structured groups share a compatibility with social group work and group psychotherapy in their concern with encouraging feelings and developing clarity of communication and skills in interpersonal relationships ...[8]

Family life education groups share many characteristics with what have been called "mainstream" social work groups, but there are also notable differences. Some similarities have been mentioned above; others deserve exploration as do the differences.

On the surface, JFLE groups, like all FLE groups, are educational, not therapeutic. A broader perspective, however, locates FLE clearly within the scope of social work with groups for several reasons. One is the emphasis in FLE groups on expanding interpersonal competencies, a goal which characterizes all social work with groups. Apgar and Coplon point out,

> Structured life education groups are not therapy but they are therapeutic. They do not use many of the techniques of therapy, but are successful in providing support, expanding awareness and teaching new skills.[9]

The values and ethical principles that govern work with FLE groups are those that pertain to all social work with

[8] Catherine J. Papell and Beulah Rothman, "Relating the Mainstream Model of Social Work with Groups to Group Psychotherapy and the Structured Group Approach," in S. L. Abels and Paul Ables, eds., *Social Work with Groups: Proceedings, 1979 Symposium*. Louisville: Committee for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups, 1981.

[9] K. Apgar, and J. K. Coplon, "Debunking Myths about Structure Life-Education Groups," in N. C. Lang and C. Marshall, eds., *Patterns in the Mosaic: Proceedings of the 4th Annual Symposium for*

groups. The processes that take place in FLE groups are those in general. As with all social work groups, there is a laboratory quality to the experiences that members obtain. That is, the group is viewed both as a site for gaining experiences which can then be applied elsewhere, in familial and other group situations, and as a place to gain experiences which are valuable for themselves. As in other forms of social work with groups, the activities (sometimes called program, or content, or in the case of FLE groups, curriculum) can be viewed both as valuable in and for themselves and also as means to ends of gaining interpersonal skills and enhancing competencies.

To join a JFLE group, unlike entering groups formed expressly for therapeutic purposes, one need not identify one's self as troubled. One need not assume the role of patient or even client. One is making a time-limited commitment. One is paying money for a service, in most cases. One need not view one's affiliation with an agency as stigmatizing. Thus, individuals whose motivation is limited or whose defenses are strong may be accessible to FLE groups and not to other forms of help. FLE groups may be used as stepping-stones towards more intensive group experiences or towards individual counseling where such are indicated.

The other side of the coin needs consideration as well. For some persons, JFLE groups carry the lower-prestige connotations of school rather than the higher-prestige connotations of treatment. A clear symbol of this difference is the reluctance of many insurance companies to pay for FLE groups, though they will pay in most instances for group therapy.

Specific Skills for Working with JFLE Groups

Not enough has been done over the years to identify the specific skills that are needed for social work practice in general, for casework or group work in particular, let alone for JFLE. In recent years, though several lists have been developed. One of the best of these lists is the one developed by Ruth R. Middleman and Gale Goldberg, first for their book *Social Service Delivery: A Structural Approach*[10] and later as expanded by them. In fact, of the 63 distinct skills they have listed in their 1981 list, one could argue each and every one of them to be as relevant to JFLE group leadership at different times and in various situations.

By ruthless pruning it proved possible to develop a list of 32 core skills which in the writer's view are necessary for effective work with JFLE groups.* They are:

Perception Skills
  —Suspending judgment or evaluation of incoming stimuli
  —Confronting own personal and cultural biases
Cognitive Skills
  —Identifying key variables
  —Identifying extraneous variables
  —Noticing what is missing
Stage Setting Skills
  —Tone setting
  —Talking in the idiom of the other
Skills for Dealing with Feelings—
  —Reaching for feelings
  —Waiting out feelings
  —Getting in touch with own feelings
Skills for Dealing with Information—
  —Reaching for information
  —Partializing
  —Prioritizing
  —Giving Information
  —Modelling
  —Running out alternatives

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the Advancement of Social Work with Groups. Toronto: Committee for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups, 1982.

[10] New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.

* This list is shared for professional learning purposes by the generous permission of Professor Ruth R. Middleman of the Kent School of Social Work, University of Louisville.

—Pointing out possible consequences
—Checking out inferences
—Personal sharing
—Summarizing
Skills for Initiating Change—
—Questioning
—Probing
—Differing
—Challenging
Skills for Engaging Barriers—
—Referring to purpose
—Pointing out obstacles
—Challenging taboos
Skills Specific to Work with Groups and Families—
—Reaching for a feeling link
—Focusing
—Toning down strong messages
—Redirecting a message
—Delaying (preventing closure)

Each of these, of course, deserves detailed discussion for which space is lacking here.

Curriculum

There is no lack of curricular materials for Jewish family life education. Such materials have been developed by various writers and educators, and more are being produced all the time. Among the organizing principles which have been used for JFLE curricula are stages of the life cycle, characteristic life crises, specific situations, handicaps and illnesses, and interpersonal and intrafamilial skill development. Each of these organizing principles can produce useful curricula. However, each curriculum needs to be matched, tailored and adapted to each particular group, the community from which the group members are drawn, the length of time the group will be meeting, specific sensitivities and sensibilities of individual group members, and the interests and characteristic objectives of the agency. In the case of co-sponsorship, as with synagogues, for example, the identity and objectives of the co-sponsor also need to be taken into account.

In other words, obtaining a "canned"

curriculum may be useful but is hardly sufficient for planning a specific curriculum. Also, curricula should be viewed as basic plans, developed with a readiness for alteration based on the group's needs, interests, and stage of development. Non-verbal exercises, structured verbal exercises, assigned homework, role-plays and other simulations, and audio-visual presentations are some of the media available, while many communities contain a wealth of potential speakers and discussion leaders on virtually any imaginable topic.

Preparing for a Specific Group

Let us turn now to looking at some of the specific behaviors which are involved in preparing for a particular JFLE group. The group to be described is one of parents of retarded children. The following are the preparatory steps which were taken:

1. In July, 1982, a City Health Department social worker visited the agency in order to announce that state funds were available to provide a group home for deinstitutionalized retarded persons.

2. The Board of Directors of the agency was approached by staff for approval of a plan for a group home.

3. A needs assessment was conducted by a graduate social work intern placed at the agency. Those interviewed included parents of retarded people and professionals in the community such as rabbis, social workers, physicians, etc.

4. The needs assessment showed that the following services were needed: a) supervised housing, b) information and referral, c) babysitting services, d) support group.

5. An Alternative Living Unit was established, funded by state funds.

6. Members of the agency staff visited a sister agency in a nearby city to learn about the respite care program the latter agency had instituted.

7. A proposal was prepared for funding under a program established by the local federation to recognize innovative program proposals.

8. A cash award was received by the agency for a program for families of mentally retarded people. The program has four components: a) baby-sitting service, b) a support group for parents, c) services for information and referral, d) training of staff to work with the retarded and their families.

9. The program began in the Fall of 1983 with the hiring of a half-time coordinator with advanced education in special education.

10. A decision was reached in November, 1983, for the JFLE Coordinator together with the special education staff member to offer educational programs for parents of the mentally retarded, ages birth–21 years, in conjunction with the baby-sitting service for retarded children and their siblings.

11. Planning meetings were held by the JFLE Coordinator and the Special Education staff member to discuss location, recruitment, publicity and logistics.

12. A massive publicity campaign was undertaken, including newspaper advertisements; radio advertisements; the agency's JFLE winter-spring brochure; mailing lists from the JCC, special needs camp, and the Board of Jewish Education class for retarded children; flyers distributed to all public schools serving mentally retarded children; visits to congregational sisterhoods; phone calls to social work staff and physicians at local hospitals that had diagnostic and evaluation centers for retarded children; as well as notification to other federation agencies.

13. JFLE staff utilized both own background in mental retardation and readings about stresses on families with retarded children. JFLE staff also began writing curriculum for the parents' group.

14. Curriculum for first session was reviewed to make sure it stresses "inviting trust gently"[11] includes didactic material as well as helping group with feelings.

15. JFLE staff met with outside experts before sessions at which they meet with group.

16. As special education staff member screened families who called on phone for age and handicapping condition; the program was interpreted to those who called.

17. Brief phone interviews conducted and

letters sent to each family by JFLE staff member before initial meeting. Fees were set with each family.

18. Handouts and articles obtained from Maryland State Department of Education were stocked for group.

19. A ride was provided by JFLE worker to handicapped parents of adopted retarded child because family lives in outlying suburb.

Throughout this lengthy process, communication and initial relationships were being established, the program interpreted, initial contracting between the program and the families undertaken, and a series of mutually exploratory contacts maintained.

Discussion

The organizing concept which guided the JFLE worker in this particular group is stage of group development, with the worker taking an active, at times directly teaching role in the first two sessions, and gradually moving into a more facilitative role as outside experts were brought in and the group became more able to handle its own discussion and express its own needs, concerns, and interpersonal processes. The focus on group supplements and integrates with the content of the group, so that the issue is not whether to focus on the content *or* the group, but how to focus on the content *with* the group.

Jewish family life education, like all FLE, is consonant with and grows naturally from the value premises, the methods and the definitions of member role that are parts of group member's past and present. One cannot assume that these orientations and ways of working will be present among all staff members of Jewish family agencies. Two adaptations seem possible and each is, in fact, in use in some places. Leaders for JFLE groups may be hired from the ranks of social workers—and others—in

[11] James A. Garland, Ralph L. Kolodny and Hubert E. Jones, "A Model of Stages of Development for Social Work Groups," in Saul Bernstein, ed., *Explorations in Group Work.* Boston: Boston University School of Social Work, 1965.

the community whose group work skills are well developed. Or, a program of orientation, training, and supervision/ consultation will enable the agency's staff members to acquire and polish the group work skills necessary. Either is possible, but one or the other approach is needed if Jewish family life education is to achieve the contribution of which it is capable.

**Twenty-five Years Ago
in this Journal**

Of course, the family is also a most important area of study in connection with a deeper understanding of Jewish observances or of Jewish identification. Finally, for the social scientist, the family is an important topic in and of itself. After all is said and done, the family is the primary social unit, the primary socializing agency, and the primary influence in personality development. Much of the riddle of American Jewish existence, present and future, could be unraveled if we knew more about the Jewish family in America. Yet, at the level of social research, there is hardly another topic about which as little of a factual nature is known with certainty. Given all of our Jewish family and social service agencies scattered throughout the length and breadth of this country, the paucity of up-to-date theoretical and factual knowledge concerning the Jewish family strikes me as being more anomalous than that Jews are by and large liberal-though-middle-class.

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Fall, 1960