inSocialWork Podcast Series

Episode 78 - Dr. Lawrence Shulman: Leading Mutual Aid Support Groups: Exactly How Can People with the Same Problems Help Each Other?

[00:00:08] Welcome to Living Proof. A podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad that of you were glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work, research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives.

[00:00:29] This is your host, Adjoa Robinson, and I'd like to tell you about a new feature we have at the Living Proof podcast series. And that's the listener comment line. You can call us at 716-645-3322 and leave a comment or suggestion. And who knows, maybe in the future podcast, we may feature your comment on the air. The number again is761-645-3322. Call us. We love to hear from you.

[00:01:03] Hi. From Buffalo, where we're still coming down from our yearly free picnic in the Park Jazz Festival, the Pine Girl Jazz Reunion this year featuring Houston Person and Melba Joyce. I'm Peter Sobota.

[00:01:17] Our good friend and colleague, Dr. Lawrence Schulman helps us celebrate our third anniversary of our podcast series by discussing his research and considerable experience in leading mutual aid groups. Dr. Schulman clarifies in the most practical terms what mutual aid is and how it helps people help each other. Of course, group leaders have a role in the group or process. And Dr. Shulman's supplies plenty of recommendations of how to integrate evidence based practice with mutual aid and mutual aid with evidence based practices.

[00:01:49] He also discusses the false dichotomy between the individual and the group that has come to be accepted and offers insightful suggestions for common problems and challenges in group or practice. Finally, for practitioners who are anxious about leading groups, Dr. Shulman provides convincing arguments that many of us already know more about group leadership than they realize and why. Dr. Lawrence Schulman is a retired professor who gets more done in retirement than many of us get done in a year. And former dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, Dr. Shulman has written extensively. He's the author of many books and numerous articles. He has written and done extensive research on the core helping skills and social work, practice, supervision, child welfare and group or practice. His contributions to the field and activities could be the focus of an entire podcast. We're grateful that he's returning to our series. I'm Peter Sobota, clinical assistant professor at the UB School of Social Work, and I spoke with Dr. Shulman by telephone.

[00:02:53] Hi, everybody. Our crack team here at the Living Proof podcast series has managed the impossible. We've persuaded our colleague and friend Larry Shulman to interrupt his tennis game long enough to help us celebrate our third anniversary of our podcast series. Thanks, Larry.

[00:03:09] You're welcome.

[00:03:11] I, I like this final serve. Go.

[00:03:14] Oh, wait. Go ahead. Go ahead. I'm kidding. Our topic today is leading mutual aid support groups. And actually, I know you've written extensively and I know that in retirement you probably get more done than most of us. And I also know that you have to brand new books published this year.

[00:03:31] Right. The skills of helping individual families, groups and communities in its seventh edition right this year. And the dynamics of skill and skills of group counseling. That's correct. Yes. Right. So if if folks want more information about our topic today. There it is.

[00:03:49] It's published by Cengage. That's right. But you're right on that page. You'll see the books. My name.

[00:03:56] Thank you. I've heard the term mutual aid referenced, you know, quite a bit. And a lot of times I hear people refer to it simply as support. And I imagine you have a lot more to say about what mutual aid really is.

[00:04:10] I do. And I think is more than just support. Let me go through it just briefly. The concept of mutual aid and group practice really involves what I consider a major paradigm switch kind of change in thinking about what the helping process looks like in group. The basic concept is that the clients who have similar issues and problems, for example, moment of life cycle issues such as those faced by new parents, substance abuse recovery, coping with a school, violence issues, etc., they can often be of great help to each other, even more helpful than the group leader who is often an outsider. So the core of the paradigm shift I'm talking about is in the following question, who owns the group and the model I'm describing? It's the members who own it, not the group leader. So the job of the group leader in this model is essentially to help group members provide that help to each other and to create a functioning nutroots support group. Certainly a social worker leading a group or a counselor is also going to provide ideas and suggestions of help. But the core of the help really will come membered.

[00:05:17] Remember, the leader almost has to get comfortable with not being the expert in the room.

[00:05:22] That's exactly right. And in fact, in most cases they aren't the expert in the room because the clients. The experts in their own lives and even people who have been, for example, in recovery and read a mutual support group that have some experience, they share from that. But it's still different for the members each. Everybody has one of my co leaders said once in a recovery group, we read recovery is different for everyone. And he had been in recovery himself. So, yes, you're right. It's comfort with a different role in the group.

[00:05:53] In your research and your experience, how does this thing called mutual aid work?

[00:06:00] Well, there's a number of ways in which this member to member help is provided. I mean, just give a few. One of them that I think is very powerful is the all in the same boat phenomenon. Members suddenly discover they're not alone with their concerns, that they're shared by others in similar situations. It's a powerful healing process in itself when they understand that the feelings they're going through and the anxiety and the concerns and the struggles, they're not just theirs. Other people also experience it. I think all in the same boat is one of the most powerful healing processes in mutual support groups and others providing specific advice in their own experience. For example, I had a group that mentioned that briefly of people with AIDS, an early substance abuse recovery in Boston. That's the one where I had a co leader who was also in recovery and one of the members was trying to get out of a single occupancy hotel where drugs were sold and she was in their first year of recovery, which she called the year the feelings. Well, another member of the group had gotten into the residents sponsored by AIDS Action in Boston, a clean and sober residents, and she was able to provide her with all kinds of suggestions and ideas about how to get through the admission process to make sure she got into that residence. So there was facts and information which was extremely helpful. I'll give you another just a couple

providing support in the group in the form of group empathy. I remember a widows group I had once. We're at the beginning of the group. I used the rather tried opening, talked about the group being a place where they can work through their grief. And one of the members of the group with that man must've been about 30 at that time, looked at me and said, we don't work through our grief, Sonny. And she went on to say, We learned to live with grief. And at that point, members of the group were able to offer her a lot of support because they had been going through the same experience. I had not personally lost anybody at that point in my life. So that help had to come from each other.

[00:07:54] And I think the leader that is, I think, transparent enough to allow those kinds of things to happen probably wins credibility in a group like that.

[00:08:02] That's the interesting part. Most group leaders think that if they show their expertise, they get credibility. But it's really just the opposite. If they show their expertise in helping the group members help each other. And if they're honest with their feelings, you know, and and willing to admit mistakes and all the rest, that goes with leading a group, that's the thing that builds the credibility, not the opposite. Also, you don't have what I call the strength in numbers phenomenon. This is to me, one of my favorite processes in a mutual aid group, because there's more than one they can take the leader on. When anybody who knows about group development, if you go back to Benison Shepherd dangers of group development, a group doesn't really become a group until it can confront the leader and move past the authority team into the intimacy thing.

[00:08:48] Well, individuals have trouble confronting the leader, but a group can and I give some examples later with that very confrontation is when the most helpful things that could be done. There's also a nice group was led by a student of mine a number of years ago, and I described it in detail in both books at a Veterans Administration. It was a group she started because members of the of the ward on the ward, these were all people with psychiatric problems. We really started to complain about having groups, groups, groups every day, one after the other, nothing meaningful. And when she talked with the staff, that's what she got you got from the staff. The idea that they'd had very little faith that these people could really be helpful were the groups would be helpful. They were going through the motions. So she starts a newspaper. The newspaper ends up being called the War Memorial Gazette. And what they do at the very beginning and one of the early issues, they start to take on the psychiatrists and the staff. But in a sort of way, they have a joke column where other jokes is how many such characters does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but the light bulb has to want to change. So what you see is they beginning to assert themselves. And although the staff at first is a little nervous that the V.A. is a very large organization and a hierarchal, as they start to see these people come to life through the newspaper, then these people start to change their views about themselves. And so the staff, in fact, was very touching because five years later, the student got a letter from them inviting them to come back to factor for the fifth anniversary of the war memorial. So that's an example of what I call. Strength in numbers.

[00:10:30] Yeah. You know, it's interesting, I'm listening to talk. And while you're doing it, I'm thinking about some of my own experiences and some of the things that the students tell me here. And it's a tough one for, I think, a leader in a group to know in that moment, essentially, while they're being in their minds attacked, that this is actually a good thing in terms of the overall development of the group, but not something that's personally comfortable for the for the leader.

[00:10:58] If you shift paradigms, which is what I'm suggesting, and I think it's tougher. So you have to be able to deal with this at the very beginning of your training, because that's what you learn, you earn from that. If that confrontation comes in at that moment in the group, the leader is experiencing and feeling it. If they could be honest at that moment, they'll say it and they'll say, it's very tough to hear this. You know, I'm feeling challenged in the group. I'm not sure what it's all

about. And as they say, they begin to deal with it. Now, I take the position that in all of our practice, we're constantly making mistakes. And effective practice is when you go back and catch your mistakes. Even a week later. So your students myself. Even yourself, Peter, we're going to miss things in a session for sure. If we come back to next week and ask them at that point, the next we can say, look, I was thinking about last week, you guys were pretty hard on me and maybe it was the first step. And you really want to take control of the group. Well, that's very skillful practice. Coming back a week later, that's something that I think we ought to be teaching our students and leaders. And it's very hopeful for a beginning leader because you'll learn from those mistakes. You go back and you do it differently and you make more sophisticated mistakes. So I agree. But again, a lot of it's going to come down to spontaneity, your willingness as a group leader to be honest, to be spontaneous and to take risks.

[00:12:23] All of the things we're asking our clients to do at the same time, it's a great experience for clients also to on some level, have the experience of really making almost like an appropriate kind of confrontation of any kind of authority figure.

[00:12:39] When we talk later and we will about process and content, I'll get that in some ways in which learning how to confront the group leader. That process is actually an important part of the content because for many of the group members, there are other people in their lives they need to learn how to confront.

[00:12:55] And so this becomes really practice for developing the ability to be more more assertive and more direct. But I get back to that a little bit later. I think it probably comes at a different point of supportive confrontation is helpful when you have a D.W.I group driving while intoxicated or a DUI group depending what state you're in, driving under the influence and a members thought to deny right in the beginning to have a problem. I only drink on weekends. I don't have a problem. My problem is I got caught. And that is a member who's gotten caught already five times. It is so much different when members of the group who are in the group rather than the leader reference them, because that confrontation, if it's handled supportively, understanding why it's so important to denied. Put up that barrier that has a different impact than the weed confronting. That's another wonderful thing that happens in a mutual support group. And finally, I mean, there are others. But the one I give finally is rehearsal. I think it's terrific for people to be able to practice in a group. Something difficult they have to do. If I go back to that age group, one of the members just got out of jail. Young woman and needed to confront her boyfriend because of the way the boyfriend was treating her. And after a while, it became really clear that she was afraid to confront him because she was afraid that he would reject her because of her AIDS. And this was in the early stage of AIDS when the triple therapy was just coming along.

[00:14:19] So one of the members of the group is is a trans gendered actual comedians who actually was a comedian starts to give her advice about how to handle the conversation. And then she says. Don't say it before sex and don't say it to have the sex. And I spontaneously say, and not during sex as first member who is funny is or how it jumps up on the couch or begins to pretend she is having sex with us completely. Craster you up. But after that, after that young woman starts to practice how to talk to her boyfriend and how to be honest about her fears.

[00:14:59] It was a great session. Of course, we come in the next week and we found out she did just the opposite. She sent him an email, didn't do anything. We said we were hers that thought a group work through. That's kind of a breaking down of the processes of mutual aid, the way in which people get help.

[00:15:15] And I think that is not been done. I know I did a number years ago and a number of articles and research. And once you understand that, then the words support group as a totally different meaning.

[00:15:25] Yes. I mean, it's liberating for everybody. It's empowered and based practice. Collectively. Well, let's move out a little bit then. A majority of current research seems to be focused on evidence based practices such as CBT and solution focused motivational interviewing. Could you talk a bit about how mutual aid can be integrated in to those kinds of models and maybe even so, how those models can be integrated into the mutual aid approach?

[00:15:56] I think that should take care of it. First of all, I want to make clear I'm a believer that we ought to take the best concepts and interventions from evidence based practice and try to integrate them into all of our practice.

[00:16:08] But I do feel strongly that we can't be bound too much by the protocols or manuals. And that's where I think the problems often emerge when people are so restricted in the way they should work, where the group work or individual work. We're following the manual becomes more important than listening to what clients are saying or responding spontaneously, or, as I'll point out later. Integrating some of our unique artistry. So the question becomes, how do we use these practices without being bound by them?

[00:16:39] Did you want it to, Larry? Yeah, I did. But, Larry, there's such comfort in those meetings.

[00:16:45] You know, you take a look at data, I go off too much of this like they with group work.

[00:16:49] But if you take a look at the stuff from the National Institutes of Health, the very people who've spent billions to research these, what they're complaining about now and this stuff is how come even if we do a training program, supervision, they don't get sustained, that after a while people stop using them. And I think it's because, in my view, these agencies that I've done consulting at and workshops that is work is begin to feel so restricted by them. And so what you read in the literature often is, well, maybe we just not training them well enough or maybe you're not supervising them well enough. Well, maybe if they just followed the protocol. Exactly. And I read one thing in one of the mental health discussions from Naida and I triple. And they had a debate going on this issue. And so when I wrote, well, I think maybe some people feel that it's too mechanical. And then she gave the example of the reflections and how you're supposed to reflect two out of every three times that, that she's as she says in her article, in her response, she says, well, maybe people feel that's too mechanical. Whether it is mechanical. What I'm saying, in effect, is this good stuff in there? Well, we have to learn how to use it. So let me give you some examples. You have a group member, for example, who said school conflicts. You know, we ran and are still running programs for kids who are suspended for school for violence. So in a group, the group, we would say to this youngster, we have examples of this.

[00:18:17] Well, you were suspended a number of years ago, but you were able to go for a whole year without being suspended again. What was going on in your life that helped you avoid suspension? That that's that's a solution focused intervention.

[00:18:29] Yeah, it makes me or my substance abuse groups that I would with AIDS action. And when someone's been in recovery a period of time and they have a relapse and of course, in substance abuse, people believe if it's handled well, relapse is part of recovery. And so you go back instead of focusing on the relapse, what it is that cause the relapse, which most people will focus on. You talk about how long the person sustained the recovery. Again, that's a solution focus idea. Part

of the mutual aid is not hard at all. Let me give you another example of motivational interviewing suggests that we address the appropriate stage of change in the use purchase. Could be Clemente's model. When I go up so that we don't confront folks who are in the contemplation stage with an action confrontation, but rather help them to explore with each other what are the problems in their lives that they are experiencing that might lead them for brief contemplation to contemplation? One of the groups one of my students led was a young woman leading a group of about 20 angry guys who recorded ordered the contact group because of D.W.I. And she opens a session. She hands out the outline for the six sessions and the first guy in the front row scowls, rolls it up into a ball and tosses it behind him. Now, this is a time where I think a lot of inexperienced leaders will start to get into a battle of wills. And we use authority.

[00:19:53] And I have examples of that as well, to try to tell this guy that you guys reported to the judge, know this is etc. What this student does say, a woman is a relatively young group leader.

[00:20:05] She has a as she says to them directly, it looks to me like you're not too happy being here. And that opens up the whole discussion. You know, I always drink on weekends. I don't want I don't this that. You know, just because I got picked up with a DWI. And so she said, OK, well, let's start with that. And she writes on a flip chart, don't want what don't you want in this group? And one guy says, I don't want to be called an alcoholic. She writes it on the chart. What else does she want in the group? By the time she's finished. She's got a list. That is exactly the list that this guy crumbled and threw away. You're there. I'm saying it's a very creative approach. And so she says this is what we're going to look at. You've got picked up a couple of times. People call you an alcoholic. Are you really an alcoholic? You're saying you don't want to feel guilty? Well, a lot of people in situations like that begin to feel guilty about the impact of their on their family and their new lives in their jobs. So we could look at that issue of guilt and triggers come up as well. So she has a wonderful first session. Now, if that's not a good start in terms of motivational interviewing then, I don't know what is. I had one observation. I just want to share that some of the ways that people who train people in this stuff and who haven't had the personal experiences themselves, I haven't had the practice experiences. It's kind of a model or protocol. I observe once a guy from the faculty who is going to train substance abuse treatment agency that on the youth development stages of change, etc.. So he comes and he's got a group of about 40 workers sitting their arms folded, looking exactly right, like the group that they face when they do their alcohol, alcoholic groups. Now, half of these guys are professionally trained. They haven't, quote, walked the walk, talk, the talk. The other half have been in recovery themselves, don't have professional training. And that's a set of issues as well. So here's this professor. Come he starts the lecture. So they take him on and he gets into a battle of wills. And then afterwards there and he comes and I observe with him, as it once was about, he said, Sure. And I said, you know, I could be wrong. But I think the group you were just dealing with was in the free contemplation stage. And you were moving them too quickly into the action stage. He was modeling the exact opposite of what he was teaching. And we'll talk later about process and content. In my view, the people in the training group, that process was showing him exactly what they experienced when they started groups with men who had been arrested for DWI. And in effect, they were waiting. I'm not saying consciously they were waiting to see how we would handle it with them. So the process is the content.

[00:22:48] Aha!

[00:22:49] Well, Larry, you have to promise that you're not going to tell any more stories about me for the rest of the episode. That's a good issue you raise about reluctance to hold groups so I'm gonna hold on to that.

[00:23:03] Another example, the last one I had is a wonderful article when an earlier book I did Mutual Aid Groups, Vulnerable Populations on the Life Cycle by a guy named Jeff Albert, a

student of mine from Boston University at that time. And he uses a cognitive behavioral approach and the mutual aid support group. And he has wonderful process coding, showing how the members of the group, as they talk with each other in him, have developed cognitions views about them in their lives that then they can't get past. And so he helps them look at their internalized cognitions that affect their actions and their feelings and then how their feelings and their actions affect cognitions. And before you know it, we have a cognitive behavioral approach in a mutual aid support group. So this is just three examples of taking really good concepts and strategies, but not being bound by them. I also think when practicing in a more conventional form, when you BP model. Oh, that isn't too restricted. Let nothing stop us from considering the mutual aid as a tool. You know, we've had a lot of research recently on therapeutical science, what I used to call the working relationship in my early research back in the 70s. Now, the therapeutic alliance. But the literature is now pointing out to the whole area of group alliance that how the group members align with each other has a powerful impact on the outcome. Mutual Aid builds group alliance. So even if I was doing a traditional group in their occupational groups, I still want mutual aid in that by traditional I mean traditional DBT group. Anyway, that's my my reviews on that question.

[00:24:44] Mutual aid is really starting to sound like a kind of a very complex because issue. It sounds simple, but it really is very complex.

[00:24:54] I'll get to some of the reasons why it seems so complex and how to make it simpler. You know, and a lot of it has to do without without training. But what I tell people all the time in my workshops, if you've learned how to work with individuals, if you've learned how to work with families, then you have learned how to do group work as well.

[00:25:12] The only thing is you have to start to be aware of the fact that you have a second client and that client is a group. And people who have learned to do that family work, they see the family as a whole, not just individual members of the family can translate everything they've learned to group work. If the paradigm shift takes place.

[00:25:32] All right. You've reference this earlier in your comments, but I'm going to ask this one here. What are your thoughts on the differences, for example, between process and content? It looks to me like a lot of the groups that I've seen seem to be focused exclusively on one or the other.

[00:25:50] That's a very good observation. I've seen the same thing. Is a good example of what I like to call a false dichotomy. There's a lot of these. I address them more later on. The false dichotomy is when the social worker or even individually or in a group or family work or community work, by the way, begins to see a split dichotomy either or, you know, and that they have to make a choice if it's a false dichotomy. And I think process and content are an example of a false dichotomy. They'll never make the right choice. So let me just say a couple of things about it. I don't believe in a process group, which I read about all the time that has no other purpose than to discuss group process. What you get is interaction and a process that is often the direct result of the lack of an external purpose. And in most cases in the literature, a passive leader. So in effect, the group members are acting in a group without structure, which therefore leaves no freedom. And that's another false dichotomy. And the behavior in the process group is artificial. And I went through this training. I got my doctorate in educational psychology at Temple and I worked with all my faculty were Master Training Laboratory guys. So I went through a group, ethnic group, where we do these process groups. I mean, the passing people over our heads.

[00:27:10] And at the same time, I'm teaching during the day at that University of Pennsylvania. And I'm saying this is ridiculous. I was able to see how to do that.

[00:27:21] I would have the passive leader, for example, with these groups because they're often a passive leader. You know, they're very passive. This thought creates the authority thing. They become more dependent on him or her, not less.

[00:27:33] So, yeah, I get the process. Group is an artificial group. Not exactly mutual aid, huh? Not at all.

[00:27:39] On the other hand, a contact group. The other thing you talked about, in my view, based on a magical assumption that we faculty. We've had this for years that we present content. The members were here, understand? Remember and invest the content with effect. It really doesn't work that way. One of the examples is the group. We had it at the University of Buffalo as part of a training program a while back, a research grant from Deiter, a parent effectiveness training program. But the parents in this one group were mandated to come by child welfare. And in the very first session, the workers are looking and they should see these people with their arms folded, in effect, arms folded, just like the UI group. They're busily the workers because they're being videotaped. And I thought it was interesting, the group we used with videotape, but the group wasn't for analysis, waited to see whether or not they were sticking to the protocol. And the protocol required them to deliver certain content for a certain amount of minutes, a certain time, so that they would be consistent with the 15 other projects going on across the country this week, by the way, native funded. At that point, and they know as they're doing this that these women in the group aren't here to work. And they are skillful enough to know that if they could stop and address the mandated address, the resistance, just like in the D.W.I group, that they can actually get at the very issues these parents are concerned about dealing with, that cause them to be sent to the group in the first place. So just the differing content for what they call they still do dosage, integrity.

[00:29:24] And as Van and ignoring the content and assuming that because he gave the dosage, just like with a drug and injection, it doesn't even work there. You know, you think about it, people react differently to drugs. But that that to me is a classic example of the extreme dichotomy.

[00:29:44] So I'm saying that the mistake made by group leaders and one of the things that makes it hard to do this work is to focus on one or the other without understanding the integration of the two. We just give you an example and you can come in with your question. I had married couples group. I did as a very young man, and we videotaped them. And if you ever saw that one, the first session with this guy, then sixty nine year old, his wife will do sits there ringing a bell.

[00:30:09] Yes.

[00:30:10] So long ago that everybody smoking in the group. That's how long ago. And it was videotape that the Health Science Center at the. I was teaching at the time, University of British Columbia. And they come in and I got five guys and five women in very first session. Everyone's talking, almost all of them about their wives as the identified patient events. Talking about the years of taking his wife to a psychiatrist and her positivity. And he can understand what's going on, you know, and it's really her problem. That's what he's doing. So I show the first five or ten minutes of that in my classes when I used to use that and the women in my class would jump all over me. Why are you adding bed talk about his wife that way? Why don't you make him use I statements like that, which is very that is what the manual says.

[00:30:58] So I point, I say well is very fair. I'm always ready for this. It happens all the time. The very first 15 minutes of the group, the group members are showing me exactly what they can do, a group for their husbands that denying to have a part of the problem. They're blaming it on their wives, the wives. They're taking their anger and bury it under the depression. And now they march from psychiatrist to psychiatrist in order to get help for their wives. I said, how could I get angry at

them for having the very problem the group was set up to address? Maybe I should send them to another group first, get their marriages straightened out, then they'll know how to behave. So suddenly the light goes on. The process is the content. They are showing me exactly what they needing help with. Am my making sense. Peter.

[00:31:45] Yeah. Yeah. And. And I think especially, you know, I can remember back when I was new to groups and I think intimidated by them. And, you know, you kind of hang on to your inner your group purpose form and your agenda because it just feels so good in your hand and it's always there. And it took me a while to realize that that's not helpful.

[00:32:08] No. And actually, you know, that raises another false dichotomy, the one between structure and freedom. I was joking before about the unstructured groups where there was the whole process without structure. There's no freedom to work effectively. But the wrong structure takes away freedom. So, in effect, what I teach, what I write about is how do you create a structure that at the same time frees the members and doesn't take that away from them?

[00:32:33] I think you're onto something when you say that most new leaders, the structure is important to them because it makes them feel more comfortable. But it's the kind of structure that doesn't allow. Let me put it this way. Behavior or behavior is a massive. To the group leader and to the other members. The problem is we don't always know what the message is. We have another example in the book. It's a really beautiful one of working with teenagers over a period of time who are survivors of sexual abuse. And one of the members it takes a while before these two young women leaders can create the trust where they can disclose what the abuse was like.

[00:33:11] And they need a lot of trust because although they may have disclosed it to a counselor, they haven't disclosed it in front of the members of the teenagers.

[00:33:18] And one by one, you could see them starting to feel comfortable. And the leaders are smart enough to realize they need to be in control of that disclosure. They weren't in control about what happened to them.

[00:33:30] So it's important to be in control of the disclosure as they start to talk about this one member's thoughts. It's wrong. She says she even ended up at one point dancing on a table, you know, and every time you are constantly disrupting.

[00:33:43] And at first, the leaders are very disturbed by this.

[00:33:45] But then they begin to think she's sending a message as they getting close to the difficult material. When we get close to the end of the group, she finally stops and she starts to share her disclosure as well. And as is often the truth, she's the one who probably experience the most horrible of the sexual abuse as a father marks the four border bar selling her and she danced on tables that process.

[00:34:14] And unless we step back and look for that, too, those connections, we're not going to see it. And the workers don't see it right away. That's why we're too harsh on ourselves. Yet to see a pattern over time. But eventually you begin to realize that what we're seeing in this group is the kind that the acting, our kids and our groups for kids suspended for school violence. They're showing us in the very first session what got him suspended. And so what? Why are we surprised? And why don't we address that rather and try to you know, what we usually do is try to get some control over issue because we're feeling difficult.

[00:34:49] The girl and the young lady dancing on the table. An example of a gatekeeper role. And so you get to talk about people who take this topic off. When we get at something painful, it's sending a message. But my position is and expand on that, then they're sending a message for themselves. They're sending a message for the second client, the group as a whole. What they're saying is there's a painful area. We're going to keep the gate closed until you, the group leader. Help us address how hard it is to talk about this that exalts.

[00:35:21] The examples are just really helpful. I think I'm also hearing lots of you here, especially in my work. I hear students talk about their anxiety about groups. And I'm going to ask you about this later. But they're they don't realize this. Like if you know something about family therapy and and, you know, enactment and and, you know, letting the family show you what their dilemma is rather than have them talk about it. These are very applicable to what you're.

[00:35:50] Absolutely. Absolutely. And establishing relationship and the empathy skills and the listening skills, all the things you have to learn to do at the very beginning as a student, you're contracting skills, making clear the purpose.

[00:36:01] All these things are individual work skills as well.

[00:36:05] The problem becomes you suddenly doing it in the group. And as many people who I've trained in group work go me, you know, there's so many of them and just one to me that they forget some of the very stuff they've already learned.

[00:36:19] Yep.

[00:36:20] Well, you've actually been kind of addressing these along the way. But I'm going to ask this to get more specific. In your opinion, what are the kind of the common problems or challenges that occur in group work? And, you know, I'm thinking of the usual suspects or the classics, if you will, you know, to monopolize or the scapegoat or the members that kind of aligns him or herself with you, as you know, the cult leader of the group.

[00:36:48] Or how about having a co leader of the group who's a problem that comes that their district?

[00:36:55] I would address that through because we'd look at who is supposed to make life more more easier. It often becomes the central problem in the group. But let me address that step at a time. The apples I've already given you to the false dichotomy between the individual and the group. Everyone examples I just gave. So, yeah, I got to take a second to talk about what I mean by the group. I think the major problem here is when the group leader sees his or her group as a collection of individuals rather than seeing the organism. I call the group as a whole. And I'm using what I call an organismic model. And to be honest, Peter, that is very hard to say. I have.

[00:37:36] Well, I said I've had some conferences where I've been a bit embarrassed.

[00:37:38] That comes up the wrong way. But it suggests that as soon as you get a group together from day one first meeting. You have an entity that's more than the sum of its parts. That's crucial to understand that. That's what I mean by the second client. You can't see it, but you get to see it by observing how the group acts. For example, if a topic such as addiction or sexual abuse keeps getting avoided, a group designed to address those issues, you could assume the members have a shared but unstated. No one that says we won't talk about taboo subjects such as sex addiction and that married couples group I mentioned at the doorknob, one of the sessions, one of the couples drops a little bombshell about sexual dysfunction. And everyone agrees. We're going to have to talk

about it next week. We come in next week and they talk about everything at the beginning of the group, except that it's until I intervene and say to them, look what happened last week, be the recession.

[00:38:37] We said this was an important issue. And yet we're not talking about it. Maybe we should take some time to see what makes it hard to talk about this and what would make it easier. Those are standard questions I use in groups like this. And what's so interesting is they could talk about why it's hard to talk about.

[00:38:56] And also what would make it easier. And as they're doing it, they're talking about it. The very thing they thought they had a hard time talking about. Why do I ask that question? Because I see in front of me 10 people, five couples, and I see this group as a whole. And the second client is having trouble addressing this issue, which also happens to be a major issue in their relationships, where all of them content and process once again. So what's my job is to help them address what they could do in the group, to understand the difficulty. And then it's it's a short stretch. It's talking about what makes it hard to talk about these issues in their relationship. Am I still making sense?

[00:39:36] Well, absolutely. And really, what's going through my head is that really being a leader in this kind of mutual aid approach is you're being evocative, you're pulling from people ideas about their own lives and drawing on their strengths, which relieves a lot of the burden about having to be the expert or having to have the problem yourself big.

[00:39:59] It's called clarity role.

[00:40:01] You know, your job. You know, if you know your job, you know, then you're going to be able to do it more effectively. I often tell the story of dinner my mother gave me when I graduated with my MSW way back in 1961. My God, that was a long time ago.

[00:40:16] And she asked me in the middle of the dinner, she turns to me, says, OK, you're a social worker. Now, what do you do? I talk because I was trained in those days. I said, Well, Mom, I work with groups to enhance social functioning that facilitated individual growth and development, strengthen egos, and to make the world safe for democracy. At the end of which, she looks at me, says, hey, what do you do? I couldn't. That's a. I was unclear when I graduated.

[00:40:42] It was only later I found that it wasn't just social work. It was a lot of helping professions that use jargon instead of being clear. So from my point of view, if you care about mutual aid, if you know how people help each other. And if you care about your job, what you do, then this stuff becomes skills that you develop as you go along and you'll be on target more often than not. But if you're not clear about this, if you don't understand your role, you won't learn. I think every group I've led, every practice group I've read has taught me something about practice and about myself. You know, certainly when that when that woman said, you know, you don't work through your grief, Sonny, you learn to live with it. She was educating me in a very important way. You mentioned the scapegoat. That's the one that's the hardest for people. People get their kids group and somebody stop scapegoating.

[00:41:34] And all of a sudden, I did an article on this in Social Work Journal a long time ago. And I point out that this is another split that we often experience where workers feel pulled in to try to protect the scapegoat. Right. And as a result, they really are not understanding what's going on with the second client, which is the group. So you have to ask yourself, why does the group scapegoat this teenager? If you go back to the recent history of where scapegoating, scapegoating came from, it came from ancient Hebrew tradition, where once a year you took a goat, you killed it, you took the skin of it, which is called escape. Right.

[00:42:09] You put it on the back of another. You invest it first with all your sins. You put it back on another goat and you send it out through wilderness. And now you're free to send for the rest of the year. Catholics do it once a week. And their confession? That's where it came from.

[00:42:24] So if we understand that, then we stop and say what is going on with the group? Our second client and we don't identify with the kid and try to protect them. Instead, we start to explore what is the reason why these kids are scapegoating the group. And usually what you see is the kid who in some way semi volunteered for the job is a projection of some of the things about themselves that they don't really like. And so now the group is talking to you through scapegoating and expand the scapegoating is speaking to you from the group. And if the kid drops out and that kid's going to volunteered pop up, you know, so if you think about it that way, then it doesn't become that complicated then what you're tuning into or trying to understand and even exploring with the kids is what is it about this kid that gets them so angry? You know, comments like, you know, euro area, you're having trouble at school, but every one of you is in this group because you're also having trouble. Are you angry at him because you're seeing some of your own concerns in him? I'm doing and I'm doing it empathically too much of the literature. This is where I think I ought to just say it was a group work has been taught. We'll say, well, let's find an activity in the group that he can do well and we won't tell the group we're doing that. We'll slip it in. And his bad. That's the old paradigm completely missing that the scapegoating process is the way the group is talking to the leader monopolize, you know, the same thing. It's like the gatekeeper, the deviant member.

[00:43:55] You know, the one who acts out the group. What do you say to yourself? Oh, if only this guy wasn't in my group. Well. I'm not saying that the group members had a meeting before your first meeting and said, look, we're going to need a deviant member and anyone to handle that role. And this guy says, oh, yeah, I've been that way at school and my family, I could take the job on, but it's practically that way.

[00:44:15] And so when you have a member acting out, you've got to ask yourself, what's the connection between that member and the group as a whole, like that young lady who was dancing on tables, if you don't see it that way. You know, you will see the deviant members, your problem. And I read books on counseling group work, which I think are oversimplistic. They say, oh, here's a way you can handle them, monopolize or deviant member you work round in. You do this. They have all kinds of techniques with a lack of any understanding that the deviant member has a role in the group, a job, and that you need to understand what their job is and why the group needs them. And once you address the issues, he doesn't have to do that work anymore. Once they once the group, we can see this group as a whole. This thing, this organism, then the work really involves confronting them, building up support, helping them move into protected areas. The classic mistake for the monopolize is to try to work around him or her, you know, ignore them, except not realizing they're stepping back. And this doesn't happen in this session. It sometimes requires a pattern, stepping back and saying, what are the points? This guy goes off all the time and nine times out of ten, this guy is going off intellectually because he's having the most trouble, the most difficulty facing the feelings that are crucial for the group. If that's true, then he's sending you a signal and you have to explore that. You see what I mean by a paradigm shift?

[00:45:40] Well, yeah. And I mean, the steam of the false dichotomy is just cutting through all of the individual versus the group.

[00:45:46] Yeah. Is upper structure versus freedom content versus processed in the setting. The stuff we talked about research, you know, art versus science. That's a false dichotomy. I think each of us have to work to be to use science, but to free our artistry, not to take it away from us, you

know, to find. That's why I had the problem with the prescriptive stuff, because I think prescriptive stuff often takes away our artistry. You and I had different view. We came from different backgrounds. The science tells us we need to be empathic and we need to confront our clients.

[00:46:21] But you'll do it your way and I'll do it my way. I hope that makes sense, you know? And so, in effect, the individual versus the group. These are all forced economies. As soon as you feel stuck. I think one or two questions. The group leader should ask. Am I clear about my role or am I stuck on a false dichotomy?

[00:46:39] Many of the MSW students who I encounter and actually experienced social workers that I know in the field, you know, often talk and an approach who work with, you know, a fair degree of hesitation, even almost. They're intimidated about leading a group. And given, you know, at least social works, rich tradition and group work, why do you think so many of us feel that way?

[00:47:08] I think you're talking about the tradition. Go way back. We did come from a stream, Jane Adams stream, you know, settlement, house movement, social change, addressing problems in society in the Mary Richman's stream. Individual clients hurt friendly visitors and all of that. And the two streams came together. And then later on, the third leg of the stool community organization was added. And finally we get to where we are now, what we call generalist practice, which I I'm in agreement.

[00:47:35] By the way, although I think each part of the generalist practice needs further elaboration and work, it's not enough just to have one group jobs practice. And I think you've gotten it. So we have a rich tradition. The early group work, in my view, was in another paradigm. The way I was trained was manipulative, came very skillfully. If you came up with the right kinds of games, right kinds of activities to achieve your purposes as a group leader. So you were in control of the group. And I got example after example with my books from my own process recording from my first year field placement where I was operating under that paradigm and it didn't work very well. So what I'm saying is, even though we have a rich tradition in group work, that tradition for a long period of time was not a very good group work, in my view. And mutual aid wasn't central. My own mentor had never had him as a teacher. Bill Schwartz, way back in 51, I think his first major article, he introduced the idea of mutual aid and he introduced the idea of shifting the paradigm. My work is built on his work. So I'd like to acknowledge it, that he really laid the groundwork. So why do people have difficulty? Well, often they've had bad experiences in groups or other areas of their life. They don't understand. The powerful, helpful fact is that we've been discussing for the last hour. They don't get good group work experiences in the field. And if they get them the supervision and the models often enough, very helpful. They're not clear about their role. That is crucial. What I was talking about, my mother's story and the rest, they feel they, as you pointed it out. They feel they have responsibility for the success of the group. So they're afraid to take it on and they don't realize how good the training if they've had good training in work with indigenous families. How much about group leadership? They already know. So if they can get ongoing supervision and help when they are good examples, I see it all the time, especially in counseling and social work. If they don't have groups in the agency, they put them in as a generalist program. So now the faculty members are going to run a process group in class to teach them about a week groups. I've already commented on those kind of groups. Now, can you do a simulation in class? Yeah, I think that's a good idea where students have a chance to simulate meeting a particular group with a purpose that is similar to the kinds of things they might have in the field. I don't think good is having a field work experience, but it comes closer and I think a skillful faculty put together opportunities for people to do that. So I think a lot of it has to do with the training. And I think we're getting a lot better at a lot of the stuff that we're doing now. Generally understands mutual aid, but I see it all the time. I'm doing an article right now, a chapter actually for a group counseling book, and it's gonna be a chapter on mutual aid, which did not exist in that book. It's one of those books that comes out,

regulate and updates, group and group counseling. And I'm doing the literature review right now. And I put the word mutual aid in there in the search. I find it in social work. I don't necessarily find it in counseling. Very interesting, isn't it? So there is a paradigm shift. So I think that's one of the reasons why people feel intimidated and they need support. You know, I do I do a workshop on group work, 100 people in the room somewhere in California, you name it. And we do a one or two day workshop. And I'm doing these simulated educational group in the sense that I tell them from the start that this is mutual a group as the educational purpose of a teacher. I'm not a social worker, but I should be practicing when I'm preaching. And at the end of the day, with two days, inevitably they'll say, oh, God, why didn't they have this? When I first started working with groups, they weren't prepared right now. So you ask one more question and I'll get at it. You said. You're out, right? A good group work is born. Or can they be made? Well, I think you can ask the same question about social workers or any helping professional. In my view, I think there's a level of artistry in group works, a world all different.

[00:51:37] But I don't accept the false dichotomy between science and art. I've already said that I think we each bring unique qualities to our work. But I think any social worker, if he or she is clear about the role in the group and if they understand it's not their group, but it belongs to the members. Yes. Any social worker could develop the understanding and skills to be an effective group leader. But each of us in our own way. I use the example often about the issue of confrontation. And I used to do some training in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Have you ever. Have you ever heard the expression Minnesota nice?

[00:52:13] No. People in Minnesota have this expression about how nice everyone is to each other. Although in the current politics, I'm not sure about that. The joke I use is if there's a four way stop sign in downtown Minneapolis, it ties up traffic for hours. Nobody will go first. All right, let's do it.

[00:52:31] No exaggeration. But what I try to say is, if you grew up in Minneapolis and Minnesota and you grew up in what people called Minnesota, nice culture as compared to me growing up in Brooklyn, which I would call Brooklyn Strong Culture, we are each going to bring a group where something different. But what we will use is the science to tell us, for example, when we confront my confrontational groups going to sound different from someone from Minneapolis, from making sense. So we bring something to the process and that something has to be shaped and it ought to be shaped by science that frees that, but rather it takes it away from us. So, yes, I think group workers do not have to be born. But how you were born, how you were raised, the culture you bring, Hispanic worker and African-American worker, you name it.

[00:53:22] We all bring a certain thing to that process for sure. But we can shape it if we care about role and purpose and if we shift our paradigm.

[00:53:31] Larry, thank you so much. Very predictably interesting. I think the things that you talked about, I know that for at least students who are going to be listening, I have a feeling many of them are going to find these ideas very liberating and will actually probably build a little bit more excitement about wanting to, you know, do group work and, you know, approach it with a lot less anxiety, I think.

[00:53:57] I appreciate it. I want to thank you for the outline you gave. You're really free to talk about stuff I want to talk about. But can I point out one other thing? There'll be faculty members listening to this as well. Such as you you just listened to it. You are modeling all the time in your classroom. An educational group. What you think about group work that your students are earning more from the way you handle your class than anything they read in my books or they listen to on this podcast. And that's one of the reasons why leaving school social work set up this wonderful series of seven sessions I did with PhD students and the full time and part time faculty members.

And it really looked at in many ways, teaching issues that parallel the issue students face in their groups.

[00:54:40] You know, that's I'm sorry to interrupt you. That's still available. Oh, yes. It is widely used. Yes. And counselors on social education

[00:54:47] Is about to put out a manual of my about hundred pages online free for people on teaching, using samples. But with what you would find if you looked at it, you're going to link to those tapes.

[00:55:01] What you would find is that in every class, every class, more is caught than taught. And that's a real teaching group. Work takes place and the way we teach group work.

[00:55:11] So I think I'll end on that note. I think that's a good place to end. Thanks again. Thanks a lot, Peter.

[00:55:17] You've been listening to Dr. Lawrence Schulman discuss mutual aid and group work practice on the third anniversary episode of Living Proof.

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