

## Chapter 5

# Evaluation

With the growing emphasis placed on empirically based practice in social work, evaluating group work for its effectiveness is essential. Both the group process (what happens during group) and its outcomes (the effects of group participation on members' well-being) should be evaluated to give the group leader, the agency, and the group members a clear understanding of how the group is progressing.

A primary aspect of group evaluation involves asking group members directly about the effects of the group. When conducting an evaluation with group members, the leader should ask broad questions about the strengths of the group, the weaknesses of the group, and ideas for improving the group (Zastrow, 1997) as well as seek feedback about any particular activities or techniques used. This form of evaluation can be done verbally during check-in rounds throughout the course of the group process. Group members, however, may feel pressure to please the group leader by giving desirable answers (Rubin & Babbie, 2008), especially at the beginning of the group process, when the group is still forming and members may be more guarded and less comfortable giving honest feedback. Such check-ins are more likely to elicit useful information midway through the group and in environments where open and genuine dialogue has been established between members and the group leader.

Group leaders may consider seeking feedback about group members' perceptions of the group through anonymous questionnaires to reduce the bias associated with assessment in front of the rest of the group. These types of written evaluations are commonly used in agencies at the conclusion of services. While they provide some indication of group members' level of satisfaction with the group, they do not measure its effectiveness.

To best evaluate the group's effectiveness, group leaders should utilize pre-group and post-group assessments that target the specific thoughts, feelings, and behaviors the group aims to change. To ask such targeted questions, the leader and the group members must have a clear understanding of the purpose of the group and the outcomes desired. A clear purpose directly informs the questions the leader asks at the beginning and end of the group to measure change. For example, a treatment group oriented toward alleviating postpartum depression might use a standardized measure of depressive symptoms at the start of the group to assess members' functioning prior to treatment and then repeat the same measure at the end of the group to see if individuals, and the

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group as a whole, improved over the course of the group. Depending on the length of the measure and the time it takes to administer it, leaders might also decide to conduct evaluations midway through the group to get a sense of group members' progress and identify ways to improve the second half of the group.

If leaders are designing their own assessment measures instead of using standardized assessment tools, having a clear idea of the purpose and goals of the group is especially important. For example, the leader of a postpartum depression group might want to design questions asking how many days in a given week a group member feels sad, hopeless, or fatigued. The leader might want to inquire about members' feelings toward their children and their perceptions of their ability to parent. Group leaders should carefully construct the questions they ask to avoid confusing or leading questions (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Asking questions before and after group treatment will give the leader and group members a sense of the progress made toward their goals and help identify issues that still need to be addressed.

Group leaders may also choose to evaluate the group through observation. Group leaders often write progress notes after each group session that document the goal or topic of the individual session, the activities or interventions used, group members' reactions and discussions, and a brief analysis of the session. The leader might make note of techniques that appeared to work well in the group, as well as techniques or activities that fell flat. Observing, writing, and reading progress notes provides the group leader with valuable information and allows him or her to reflect on the progress of the group. The group leader can observe whether the group members seem to be progressing through stages, becoming more comfortable with one another, and making progress toward their common goal. Observations and notes about the process of the group can also help identify particular group members in need of more attention, such as those who are struggling or are especially quiet during group. Understanding these dynamics is difficult while one is conducting the group; thus putting them in writing and reflecting on them between sessions is an important form of evaluation (Northen & Kurland, 2001).

Group leaders should evaluate themselves over the course of the group. They may ask themselves questions related to different stages of the group process, including how well they met group members' needs during the initial stages of group and their effective use of relationship (ability to provide support to members), choice of interventions (use of skills and different approaches), structure of the group (empowerment of members, establishing norms), and ability to create productive and respectful interactions among group members (Northen & Kurland, 2001). Other forms of evaluation include asking colleagues to observe a group session or videotaping a session that can then be reviewed by a colleague or supervisor, who can provide feedback (Zastrow, 1997).

Evaluating the group process, whether through verbal check-ins, satisfaction surveys, pre-group/post-group assessments, or self-reflection, can create anxiety for group leaders. Group leaders may fear negative feedback or assessments that indicate the group intervention is not working. These are valid and common fears. Yet group leaders must work past these anxieties, because identifying interventions that are not effective and working to improve these interventions is the ethical responsibility of all service providers. Providing services based on the hope or a hunch that they are working is not best serving group members' needs. To improve one's practice and service to others, social workers must seek evaluation of their group work and use that evaluation to actively improve their work. Negative feedback or assessment results, however, should not be taken personally or as indications of failure or incompetence. While the leader should take responsibility for addressing poor evaluations, this could take many different forms, including changing the format of the group, reassessing who is included in the group, or changing the length of the group, the approach, or interactions among members.

Group leaders, especially new leaders, may be surprised at the positive feedback they receive from group members during evaluation. Group leaders should be aware of what they are doing well and should continue to do, in addition to identifying areas for improvement. Furthermore, conducting evaluations during group may be helpful in drawing the group's attention back to the overall purpose and helping individual members' reflect on their level of motivation, progress, and efforts toward change.

### **Exercises**

#### **Observing Accurately**

##### **Objective**

To practice observation

##### **In-Class Exercise**

While being able to accurately observe is an important skill in all group work practice, it is essential to the evaluation process. In groups of five or six students, a leader will practice observing certain behaviors. Group members are to simulate a treatment group for persons suffering from low self-esteem. The worker should make note of the number of times group members engage in the following behaviors: sighing, interrupting, exhibiting signs of discomfort, and exhibiting disinterest. Group members should also keep track of how many times they exhibit each behavior, for the sake of comparison. After five minutes, the leader and group members should compare tallies. Each person in the group should take a turn in the role of the leader so that everyone can practice their observation skills.

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1. In what ways was this exercise difficult?  
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2. What were the barriers to accurate observation?  
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3. What can you do to improve your ability to observe accurately?  
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**Case Example: Assessing the Context of Evaluation****Objective**

To learn to assess the feasibility and likelihood of successful agency evaluations

**Case Example**

You are one of fifteen social workers who conduct groups in your foster care agency. Your director, Carlos, asked you to evaluate the effectiveness of the group component of the program. There are several types of groups that your agency provides. The most popular are support groups for foster parents. In these groups, workers help foster parents learn to cope with challenges. Your agency provides services to the Latino and the Southeast Asian communities. The majority of the foster parents in your program are white. About half of the caseworkers do not have formal education in social work but are members of Latino and Southeast Asian communities. The other half are white social workers with BSW and MSW degrees.

Carlos informed you that you will be given a release of 10 percent of your time to conduct the evaluation. He said that you will have a total budget of \$500. Carlos made it clear that he chose you for the job since your enthusiasm, openness to growth, and education will be helpful in conducting an evaluation. As you have only been with the agency for a year, he let you in on some of the history of evaluations at the agency. Five years ago, researchers from a local university were contracted to provide an evaluation of the program. Many of the workers were resistant to the evaluation process. The researchers implemented many changes in the documentation process specifically for the evaluation. Workers felt unduly burdened by the changes. Each week, group leaders were required to complete an assessment of all their clients' progress toward their five most important goals. The researchers became frustrated with the workers' noncompliance. When they finished the evaluation, they provided a report that most of the workers found offensive. Some of the workers said that the researchers did not pay attention to cultural issues, citing their heavy-handed criticisms of the late start of some of the groups. Carlos wants you to figure out a way of conducting an evaluation that does not upset the staff. He is under

pressure from upper administration to prove the impact of services. He does say, however, that you will have his total support in completing the project. He asks you to think about the project and come back to him in a couple of days to discuss your involvement.

### **Writing and Reflection**

Use these questions as a guide to help you decide what you would want to discuss with Carlos about taking on the project.

1. What are the most significant barriers to the successful completion of this project?  
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2. How will you discuss the project with your coworkers?  
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3. How might clients be involved in the process?  
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4. What skills can you use to help the other workers become invested in the evaluation project?  
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5. How can you deal with the resistance in a way that will help the evaluation process?  
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6. What are some methods for making the evaluation process as unobtrusive as possible?  
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7. How might this project affect clients?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Are the resources provided (time and money) sufficient for completing the project? If not, how might you obtain additional resources?  
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9. After reviewing your answers to the preceding questions, develop a plan of action.  
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### **Assessment of Group Dynamics**

#### **Objective**

To develop your ability to assess group dynamics

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Group leaders frequently do not spend enough time assessing group dynamics. Like assessing other aspects of groups, assessing group dynamics is not a one-time event. A good group leader constantly pays attention to the key areas of group development.

A group of five to eight students will participate in a one-session group on a topic relevant to the members of the class. It should be a topic that is intense enough for some personal investment yet does not delve into the realm of therapy (for example, students' plans for the future once they graduate is a good topic). The instructor of the course or a student shall lead the group discussion. The rest of the class will form a circle around the group for the purpose of observation.

Each student should pay attention to the four dimensions of group dynamics: communication and interaction patterns; cohesion; social control mechanisms, including norms, roles, and status; and group culture. Once the group discussion is completed, discuss as a class what each person observed.

**Writing and Reflection**

1. What were your general impressions of this group?  
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2. What did the leader do well?  
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3. What would you have done differently if you had been the leader?  
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4. What group dynamics seemed to be helpful to the group process?  
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5. What group dynamics seemed to detract from the group process?  
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6. Describe the various roles of the different group members.  
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7. Based upon your initial assessment, what would you do with this group if it met for subsequent sessions?  
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**Scanning****Objective**

To develop your ability to pay attention to the individual members and the group simultaneously

Scanning is a group skill that is as important as it is difficult to master. When one scans, one simultaneously pays attention to the group member who is speaking as well as the rest of the group members. Scanning is a vital skill. If group leaders focus only on an individual and not the group as a whole, they will soon find that they are the center of attention, and all communication will soon go through themselves. Failure to scan often leads to low levels of group member participation.

### **In-Class Exercise**

Break into groups of five. There should be an additional person for each group. This person will serve as an observer/consultant. Members will take turns being the group leader. For five to ten minutes, the group leader will practice scanning while group members conduct a discussion. The goal of the exercise is for the leader to find a way of paying attention to the group member who is talking, as well as each member of the group. The consultant will gently remind the leader to scan if he or she begins to pay too much attention to individual members.

### **Writing and Reflection**

1. What was it like to scan the group?

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2. In what way was it difficult?

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3. Discuss ways you can improve your ability to scan.

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### **Self-Anchored Do-It-Yourself Rating Scales**

#### **Objective**

To develop a useful assessment tool for helping individuals in groups assess and monitor their own behavior

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Self-anchored rating scales are useful assessment tools. These rating scales help group members monitor behaviors they are attempting to change. In order to help group members learn to develop their own scales, it is useful to practice developing them for yourself.

Self-anchored scales are appropriate when there is no standardized instrument that can be used to measure a client's condition. These do-it-yourself scales are quick and easy to use. They can be used in individual work with clients or can be used in a group setting with one client at a time or with all group members

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in a round-robin format. Clients are asked to rate themselves on a particular dimension (e.g., level of anger, physical pain, hopefulness, self-esteem) on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not hopeful at all and 10 being the most hopeful the client could ever be. You can also use a smaller range of numbers, such as 1 to 5 or 0 to 5, but it is important to be consistent, as clients will likely remember from one week to the next what their previous ratings were. Whenever possible, ask clients to rate themselves on a dimension of a strength, rather than a weakness. For example, don't ask them to rate how hopeless they feel; ask them to rate how hopeful they feel.

**In-Class Exercise**

Work with a partner to develop self-anchored rating scales for each other around behaviors or feelings that you struggle with (e.g., procrastination, depression, anxiety, stress, burnout).

**Writing and Reflection**

1. How might such scales be useful in your own life?

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2. Understanding the nature of your own resistance can help you be more empathic to the resistance of clients. What would prevent you from utilizing these scales?
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