

The Diversity of Practice Today - People, Places, Purposes

Presented by Andrew Malekoff©

This was one of the Keynote Presentations at the Hunter College SSW – 50th Anniversary celebration – October 24, 2008 – at 129 East 79th Street, New York, NY

Thank you for inviting me to participate this evening. Although I am not a Hunter graduate, for fifteen years Roselle Kurland and I were co-editors of the journal *Social Work with Groups*. During that time not only did we work together on the fifth floor of this building, but we became friends. Fortunately for me, I made many more Hunter friends along the way. Although I did not attend classes or teach here, I do feel a deep connection to this place that has so actively valued and promoted group work for decades. I thank you for always making me feel welcome and a part of your group work family.

In my first draft of this presentation I simply made lists; lists of diverse places, people and purposes that I gleaned from the Journal. Had I stayed on *that* road I would have started out something like this: “In recent years I have received manuscripts from across the world from Tapei County, Taiwan; to Auckland, New Zealand; to Missoula, Montana; written by authors wearing a variety of hats, such as the chief of respiratory medicine at Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario; the director of a residential wilderness treatment program in Costa Rica; and a journalist who is also a first year social work student (like Roselle once was).

The manuscripts I read are many and they address a wide array of purposes. Some recent ones are developing coping and social skills for pre-teens with cleft palates; building supportive connections for survivors of homicide loss in rural communities; and transforming faculty departmental business meetings into social justice groups in schools of social work.”

Although I was enjoying the compulsive process of compiling lists, after awhile I started to feel listless, so I decided to reel in my lists and instead to organize my remarks around just a few simple core concepts that approach the theme of *diversity practice today* from a slightly different angle.

I believe that it is most difficult to do the work that we do if we begin by taking a *position of certainty*, relying solely on scientifically sanctioned knowledge as the supreme truth. To *truly* capture diversity in its many inflections and shades, we must never forget to reach for other legitimate sources of knowledge as well, not the least of which is the reality expressed through the narrative voice of those that we work with; those that come from here and from there and that see the world through an assortment of sometimes oddly shaped and angled and differently shaped and colored lenses.

One teenager, feeling invisible, in a residential treatment facility said it best through her poetry:

What happened to my opinions and viewpoints?

Why do they assess me this way?

What happened to my freedom I must say?

Why do they label me this way?

Why do they label me –?

When I am only being me? (Chrissie Elms Bennet)

To truly reach for these other sources of knowledge, as one scholar suggested, *we* must “assume a stance of uncertainty,” (E. Pozatek) a commitment to developing relationships with people that transcends any model, any approach, any manual and any protocol that assigns practitioners as experts and the people that we work with as neophytes, or worse - dummies. Being true partners with group members does not compromise our authority and expertise. Rather it serves to enhance and humanize our relationships with group members.

In reporting on her work with HIV+ women’s support groups, Professor Starr Wood from SUNY Albany elegantly describes group work as “ever evolving creation, that may not always be linear or neat, but full of false starts, shifting conversations, and circular processes with frequent detours and topics not selected by [group] workers [but] rather emerging and flowing as they do in natural settings of interaction and conversation.”

In a similar spirit, I describe group work with kids as “a roller coaster ride... harrowing yet fun, with unexpected twists and turns, ascents and declines and vertigo-inducing surround-sound...and [at] other times...not so exciting-more like a crawling commute in rush hour traffic, enervating, meandering, puzzling, endless...”

Doing group work is the territory of multiple intelligences, where being interpersonally “people smart” is important as being intellectually “book smart; and where the ability to address profound human concerns, and especially during times of crisis, counts as much as scholastic smarts and the ability to implement protocols from evidence-based manuals and curricula.

Ours is the territory where group workers - with support and seasoning - learn to appreciate paradox and come to value intuitive *and* counter-intuitive ways of seeing and doing. And, in so doing, as we ride the roller coaster, eventually find our way to the transcendent and topsy-turvy realization that losing control is not where we want to get away from, but where we need get to; so that we may turn control over to group members to activate what they have to offer.

Recently, I was invited by a local chapter of the NAACP to participate in a community forum on child abuse in the aftermath of a great tragedy. The forum was held in an elementary school where six-year-old Jewell Ward was a student. Jewell and her younger brother and sister, Michael and Innocence, were drowned in a bathtub, reportedly by their mentally ill mother. Days after that tragedy my staff responded, offering group work services to a widely diverse school community of young and old and older; students, teacher, parents and grandparents; long time locals and new time immigrants; documented and undocumented.

As the forum came to a close, the principal of the school approached me. She introduced herself and thanked me for our rapid response in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. The principal – her name is Mrs. Dingwall - said to me as she held on to my hand, “I didn’t know what to do. My teachers didn’t know what to do. Our parents didn’t know what to do. We were all - all of us - in shock. Our children were frightened and confused; and our staff too. Many of the children, some as young as five, said that they didn’t know ‘that mommies could kill their babies.’”

Mrs. Dingwall told me - still holding my hand and sending what I felt like an electrical current up my arm - she told me that there were many children that were afraid

to go home and that they were especially afraid to go to bed or to take a bath. What she said to me brought to my mind what a young trauma survivor years ago wrote on a concrete wall. He painted a single line of graffiti on that wall that read: “I don’t like being a child, its 24-hour-a-day guard duty.”

Mrs. Dingwall told me what I already knew, but what I was pleased to hear nonetheless. She told me that our social workers provided support, education and guidance to small groups of children and adults to help to calm the situation and offer hope; hope in the face of incomprehensible loss and overwhelming grief.

Parents and grandparents and other caring adults – some speaking English and others Spanish, French or Creole - were gently encouraged by our bi-lingual and bi-cultural staff to address their own feelings so that they might be free to help one another and then help the children allay their fears, so that they might gradually be restored to a level normal functioning, and might one day be free from the plight of the young graffiti artist, might one day be free simply to take a bath in peace.

What is important to know from this story, is *not simply* that we reached out and responded, as many here this evening have done before and will do again; but that we were able to take action with such a diverse group, in large part, because of our *knowledge of and commitment to* group work.

- We did not wait – we planned, rallied and responded rapidly
- We did not impose – we joined,
- We did not presume - we partnered,
- We did not leap from afar– we looked, listened and learned up close,
- We did not pressure – we invited trust gently, and

- We did not come and go - we stayed for the long haul

In each place that we work today, all of us - and the settings and their institutional cultures are as diverse as the people, and we are often guests in host systems - as in the case of this elementary school – In each place we go, in each setting, by listening carefully *and* embracing our uncertainty without shame, we are better able to tune in to how things are framed, who does the framing, and what the framing means. To truly grasp diversity we need also to fully embrace the idea that *context counts*.

We need, as Indian essayist Arundhati Roy so eloquently states, “to see the gap between what we know and what we are told, between what is concealed and what is revealed, and between the ‘real world’ and the virtual world;” or, as the late great Ruth Middleman (who once upon a time spent her sabbatical in this place) aptly put it, “to cultivate an area of one’s mind that is reserved for the unknown.”

In closing, I suggest that to best address diversity in practice today that you never factor out who you are, who the person sitting before you is, and what the situational surround says about the moment in time. Always remember and never forget that *context counts*. Learn from the models and learn from the manuals; and also please learn from yourself, and learn from the inside-out as well as the outside-in so that you can be free to innovate, improvise, and be co-creators with those that you work.

I end my remarks with a poem that I wrote a few years ago that speaks to that part of our group members and that part of ourselves that struggles daily to be heard and to do what can be done to become a force for change. I call the poem *Making Waves*.

making waves

what's it like to
 have no voice
 have no say
 have no choice;

what's it like to
 make no waves;

to have
 optical-delusions
 and
 spiritual-
contusions;

 psychic-psorosis
 and
 civic-sclerosis;
to
 make no waves;

to be told
 what's so

to think
 so what;

to hang
 on the
 edge
 of a
 terminal
 rut;

skyscraper up
no ground floor
two-way mirror
no back door

elevator out
stairway down

level below
lost and found;

where's my voice
where's my say
where's my choice
where's my wave;

want to make waves
tackle real need
take on the
kingdom of
corporate greed;

sheet rock craters
 fists in flight
aimless days
 dreamless nights
decade plus three on
 terra non firma
extra layer of
 rawhide derma;

give me liberty
or
take my breath;

want to make waves

have something to say
 something to say

want to make waves

want to shake things up
want to wake things up
want to wake you up
want to shake you up:

 you primal
dreamers
 you silent
screamers
 you screaming
dreamers;

hear my voice
 my say
 my choice;

want to make waves
want to move the earth
want to make waves
not rants and raves
want to make waves
not psychic caves
want to make waves
not nine to five graves
want to make waves
not corporate slaves;

want to make waves
want to make waves
want to jump in
 want to make
some waves
want to make waves
 want to make
waves
want to get wet
 want to make
some waves

want to make waves.

by Andy Malekoff©
2004

