

# Social Change Through Group Work

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## Chapter objectives

By the end of this chapter students will be able to:

- Describe the fundamental role that groups play in our lives
- Identify the key foundations of strength-based group work
- Summarise the key functions that group provide for us in our lives
- Describe the life cycle of groups from the perspective of gender
- Explore their own experience of group

## Introduction

According to Lang (2010:1) "Belonging in small social groups is the means through which human beings experience personal growth, social development, and socialisation and sustain relevance to and influence on the society in which they live, throughout their lives."

In this chapter I will argue the importance of group work to the social work task of supporting those who for many reasons find themselves disenfranchised or grappling with the ability to participate fully in society. As groups are normative they provide structure to our daily lives along with identity and meaning. Group membership, like our gender, class, or ethnicity, is such an integral aspect of our lives that we often take for granted how much time we spend in groups or for that matter groups within groups.

For the purpose of this chapter I will keep my focus on social change groups by which I mean groups that are generally run with the express purpose of assisting people to make connection with those grappling with similar life experiences or groups tasked with behaviour change. Social change groups therefore cover a huge diversity of shapes and forms including: parenting, dealing with grief and loss, addiction, programs to reduce problematic behaviour such as stopping violence groups, groups for those who have been victimised, psychiatric survivors groups – the list is endless

Contemporary group work takes a strength based approaches to social change work (Metcalf, 1998). Many traditionally run groups that have emerged in human service settings have utilised psycho-educational approaches where group members are encouraged to reveal issues, express emotion as to what is occurring, search for insight and are often given the answers to how to resolve issues (McMaster & Dark, 2011). While clients find these groups supportive, they can emerge feeling disempowered and lacking concrete strategies that they can use in their own life. In essence they have spent too long focussing on what is wrong rather than focussing on what is right and building

from that position. They have become in the language of White and Epston (1990) problem saturated.

There are many forms of group work but a strengths based practice is anti-oppressive in its structure, purpose, the relationships between leader and group members, and in the practice. Social change group work is in essence about commonality of struggle often against various forms of oppression and therefore has the potential for reducing social exclusion, while at the same time creating the opportunity for greater social participation (Saleebey, 2002). Social participation meets our needs for affiliation, an important aspect of emotional wellbeing (Sigel: 2012)

### **Strength-based group work**

Strength based group's build upon the key idea that the role of the facilitator is to assist group members to construct new discourses and strategies while at the same time deliberately resisting the temptation to add to pathological discourses. The key facilitating style within a strengths-based approach to group work, is as a guide or co-researcher rather than as a leader in groups (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). That is not to say that the facilitator abdicates good leadership in working with the group to create a safe environment to explore what are often difficult and painful issues. The facilitator has the task to put in place processes that allow group members to build upon and extend competencies that they already have in place. The role of the facilitator also is to allow group members to learn from each other through exercises and activities that allow for the sharing of strategies that others have found to be effective.

In a strength oriented approach it is recognised that client problems do not occur constantly and that there are 'problem absent' times. These are labelled as exceptions and the role of the facilitator is to identify the specific interactions, thoughts, and behaviours that occur at these times and to utilise these in constructing a solution. In the words of de Shazer (1982, 1985) the challenge is to look at what has been working in order to identify and amplify these solution sequences. For clients this is profound in that they begin to view themselves as competent rather than incompetent, thereby building a greater sense of agency.

A number of key ideas form the basis of strength-based approaches to social change work. A starting point for the following ideas is based upon the work of O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis (1989: 34-50) who identify a number of strategies for strength based practice. I have also added a number of additional key ideas that fall out of my own group work practice.

1. Keeping the group non-pathological by redescribing problems to open up possibilities.
2. Building intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation.
3. Focus upon the exceptions to the problems discussed during group interactions. In other words group members may describe behaviours or thinking that is in direct opposition to the problem behaviour described.
4. Noticing a group member's competency in the group process, commenting on it intermittently and gather other group members' thoughts on your discovery. This is about noticing the small changes as well as affirming the direction of change.
5. Insight is one aspect of the change process. However, insight alone does not sufficiently provide group participants with the agency to act differently when they leave the session. Strength based approaches are clearly targeted at changes in behaviour and so the person should always be able to leave the group session with something to try out or do differently to alleviate problem behaviour.
6. Viewing group members as 'people with complaints about their lives', not as people with symptoms. Linked to this is the challenge to help group members view their problem as external to themselves.

7. Complex problems do not necessarily require complex solutions. This is a time to assist group members to think in simpler ways. Solution based practice often uses the following ideas, 'If it ain't broke don't fix it', 'Once you know what works, do more of it', and 'If it doesn't work, don't do it again; do something different'. This recognises that significant aspects of our behaviour are habitual, and that if we are to interrupt the patterning, then we quickly shift behaviour.
8. Adopt the client's worldview to lessen resistance and then work to discover less dangerous and interfering options with the person. This is a fine line and the skill of the facilitator is not to collude in disrespectful or dangerous behaviour towards others.
9. Focus only on what is changeable.
10. Go slowly and encourage members to ease into change. Help client's see each strategy as an experiment, not as a technique that guarantees success.
11. Strength based practice has as an important goal connectivity and social participation in the world.

In summary a strength based approach to social change groups requires that we are vigilant for the dominant narratives that we as facilitators and clients bring into the room. Our role is one of walking alongside clients to discover alternative explanations to problem behaviour so that they can construct unique realities based upon meeting social needs in pro-social ways.

### What we derive from groups

Wagner and Ingersoll (2013:22) identify that groups provide a range of potential outcome when they are facilitated well. They describe the following:

Therapeutic focus	Potential outcome
Acceptance	Members feel valued, understood, and cared for
Altruism	Members gain self-esteem and greater appreciation of helping others
Catharsis	Members learn to "let go" of negative emotions or perspectives that keep them stuck
Guidance	Members gain knowledge from group participation
Instillation of hope	Members develop optimism about change
Learning from interpersonal interaction	Members learn more about their impact on others, learned to give better feedback, and learn to interact more productive ways
Self-disclosure	Members learn to be more open and genuine
Self-understanding	Members gained greater knowledge of themselves and greater access to personal experiences
Universality	Members recognise they are not alone or uniquely damaged
Precarious learning	Members adopt more productive ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting from observing others' examples

One of life's challenges is to learn the limits of our behaviour, as well as the impact that our behaviour has on others. Group sessions in most social change groups generally have a strong emphasis upon skill rehearsal and applying learning in a very practised manner. This allows the best opportunity when group members go back into their existing or future relationships, to be able to deliver on the social and emotional responsibilities that are inherently part of relationship life. The idea of exploring and making sense of issues, without shaming, provides a number of 'aha!' moments for group members.

By nature and definition, group work requires a range of interactions between group members that differ significantly from individual work and individual interaction with an audience. Many group therapy models developed from individual psychotherapy and change usually took place as a result of the therapist/facilitator conducting individual therapy in the group setting. However, it is my view that this can translate into low energy groups that do not provide sufficient engagement for change.

Like any intervention, groups involve planning and preparation. This does not mean a reliance only on a session guide, but consideration of the needs of the group members and practical considerations of how the group session will be delivered. Effective group work is achieved through combining knowledge of group techniques and processes, with knowledge of the subject area, to construct a planned intervention. Understanding of group process and group content are critical to the delivery of effective group work.

One of the advantages of group work over individual work has always been the development of relationships and the ability to practice relating skills within a safe environment (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). The following section outlines a number of key functions that membership in groups provides.

### **Development of socialising skills**

Yalom and Leszcz (2005) identified that when a group is both supportive and challenging, it is engaging. Very few people get honest and open feedback about their behaviour from others. It is more likely that we shy away from providing direct feedback around the impact of a person's behaviour on others. Feedback is often more indirect. One of the issues of group work is the ability to work in the 'here and now' and provide the opportunity for group members to become mindful of what is happening, to identify strategies to manage these situations, and then rehearse the strategy to get a positive result, by which I mean a safe result. The development of social skills in groups has major implications for life outside the group. These include:

- Being tuned to the non-verbal and meta-communication (what's the message being sent and received)
- Being verbally able to respond to others rather than keeping reactions internally focused.
- Learning and practising the skills of problem-solving and conflict resolution while maintaining the well-being and safety of others
- Communicating disagreement with others without resorting to abusive behaviour (being able to agree to disagree)
- Being able to take a different perspective on a situation
- Expressing accurate empathy towards others, as it is clearly known that empathy is the foundation of interpersonal intimacy.

### **Being able to explore and try out things differently**

Yalom & Leszcz (2005) identify that groups can provide the greatest possibility for people to re-experience past emotional states in more positive ways. One of the challenges for many group members is around understanding the formation of relationships, how they respond within relationships, and how this relates to issues of attachment and family of origin patterning (social modelling). Many group members accessing groups will have grown up in families which haven't been safe places which have impacted upon the development of secure attachment (Laing, 2010). They may have developed relationship patterns where they feel a lack of attachment, feel unloved and/or overwhelmed, or have high levels of mistrust. Several studies have indicated that attachment provides the basis for dependency needs as well as the ability to empathise (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Dutton & Nicholls, 2005). Secure attachment translates into being able to manage the complexities of the world with confidence.

Processes within group sessions that encourage caring for others (manaakitanga), support (awhi), and honesty (pono), can provide a social microcosm of what a functioning group can achieve. Rehearsing these experiences and exploring how these relate to life outside of the group provides the best opportunity for skills transfer.

### **Instillation of hope**

Social change groups are based upon the notion of hope and hopefulness that problematic behaviour can be banished and resolved. Research from Hubble, Duncan, & Miller (2004) reported that a number of factors contributing to generating positive change amongst counselling interventions. Forty per cent relates to extra-therapeutic factors (social supports, skills and motivation); 30 per cent to the working alliance between the worker and the client; 15 per cent to the therapist's attitude in conveying a sense of hope; while the remaining 15 per cent related to the model of intervention. Taking care of the working alliance and building strong interpersonal connections, encourages processes of 'facing-up-to' behaviour in a non-shaming way.

### **Interpersonal learning**

Interpersonal learning is a complex therapeutic factor and is crucial within group therapy. It is about important elements such as developing insight, as well as correcting emotional experience and behaviour. Interpersonal learning can be described as the mechanisms that mediate therapeutic change. Yalom & Leszcz, (2005) outlined three important factors to interpersonal learning:

1. The importance of interpersonal relationships;
2. The corrective emotional experience; and
3. Reality testing

#### **1. The importance of interpersonal relationships**

Yalom & Leszcz (2005) proposed that psychological and behavioural problems develop in part, because of disturbed interpersonal relationships. One task in the group then, is not only to assist the group members to learn skills that will help them reduce the probability of further problem behaviour, but also to assist them to develop gratifying, positive interpersonal relationships. This is akin to whakawhanaungatanga or sense of connection with others through belonging.

#### **2. The corrective emotional experience**

Alexander (1946, cited in Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) introduced the concept of the “corrective emotional experience” in successful intervention. Corrective emotional experiences occur in two steps. The first step is to become aware of the intense emotional reactions they are having in a particular situation. Rather than avoiding them, the group process will engage more therapeutically with these experiences. The second step is then to decide on how best to manage these situations without resorting to avoidant behaviour. The group therefore provides an opportunity, as well as an audience, to practice and develop new responses to old patterns of behaviour.

### **3. Reality testing**

Intellectual insight alone is not enough to change behaviour. Most of us know what we need to do but don't act upon this knowledge. Effective group work addresses the emotional component and systematically allow members to reality test. Group members also need to become aware of any inappropriateness in their interactions.

## **Universality**

Universality is defined as the idea that we are not alone in the world, and that many issues we face are common across humanity. Many group members come to social change groups experiencing a sense of shame, inadequacy, disconnection and concern about their ability to manage the day-to-day challenges of being in relationships. Within the context of the group, group members find that they are not the only ones grappling with the skills of how to cope in the world (Lang, 2010). Universality also allows the group members to understand the influence of traditions (patriarchal, class, cultural, etc.) in shaping their behaviour towards others. This also invites the opportunity for group members to take a position of resistance against traditions that are not helpful and develop their own sense of agency. For example traditions of abuse and neglect within family/whanau groups are worthy of resistance. Within many social change groups exploring and understanding how dominant narratives inform and influence our behaviour is probably one of the most valuable aspects.

## **Altruism**

When group members are under threat, life can become narrow and constricted. Reaching out to others through altruistic means operates at multiple levels. Altruism within a group is about inviting group members to help each other through the provision of support, validation, insight, as well as providing meaningful feedback. Increasingly embedded in session design in many social change groups is the idea that senior members of the group will welcome and support (manaaki) new group members into the culture (kawa) of the group. Practising the skills of noticing and supporting others also contributes to the development of mindfulness that can lead to more empathic responses. Altruism has also been aligned with mental well-being (see Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006).

## **Imitative behaviour**

Human beings learn from imitation of others' behaviour. This is the basis of social learning theory and the group materials should reflect the importance of this aspect. In social change groups often a number of small group activities allow group members to view and feedback on others' behaviour, to practice themselves, and to build a repertoire that would work in their own situations. In addition, many group facilitators use media clips where group members can observe alternative strategies to deal with challenging situations, as well as other group members taking the risk to disclose their own experiences. One of the challenges in group work is to engage the group in enough depth of the work. When one group member is prepared to take the risk of disclosure, this invites other group members to match this. One of the skills of facilitation is to notice and draw out positive,

behavioural evidence within the group that allows other group members to also notice, and potentially imitate, the behaviour. This is also based upon the principle of positive reinforcement.

### **Group cohesiveness**

Cohesion in groups is critical to avoid drop out. Before group members can risk vulnerability, they need to have a certain degree of safety in place. Group cohesion, according to Yalom & Leszcz (2005), is about the overall quality of group members' interaction. In other words, it is based on the strength of the relationship established between the group members. Group cohesion is established through multiple channels, including connection of group members' experiences, building group norms to ensure safety, developing a group spirit, and acceptance of each other's past life experiences, transgressions or failings.

When a group has developed enough cohesion, then it provides a safe environment where conflict can be resolved in safe ways. When the group does not have cohesion then it often operates at a very shallow level without any real therapeutic depth; in other words, the work does not really take place.

### **Imparting information**

Many group members accessing social change groups lack certain foundational information about how to relate well within relationships. Groups do have an important role in imparting information when this is not available from within the group itself. Effective facilitators utilise strength based approaches through use of elicitation that starts from the premise that much of the knowledge around solutions will exist within the group itself. However, sometimes this information is absent, so it is then incumbent upon the facilitator/s to provide information that can enhance problem resolution. Within a motivational framework, before providing information, evoking what group members already know, minimises resistance. Seeking permission therefore to provide information becomes the second step within the process. This opens the possibility for information to be explored, rather than rejected outright. The third part of the process is to then have the group members consider how this information might support them in their endeavour of problem resolution.

### **Existential factors**

Groups, when they work well, also fulfil an existential need within us to understand ourselves, others, and the world around us. Increasing moments of wonder within relationships, will ultimately enhance well-being. When relationships have experienced distress, moments of quietness and thoughtfulness towards others are eroded. The existential question is, ultimately, 'What is the meaning of life?' and connecting of the things that are important.

### **Stages in Group Process**

The notion that groups have a life cycle was first described by Tuckman during the 1970s (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) and became commonly known as the Boston Model. 'Forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning' occupies the lexicon of group work and accurately described what generally occurs within a closed group structure. Depending upon the duration of any change group some of these stages may or may not be achieved. What has become increasingly clear however is that unless good group formation occurs, then the ability to work with difference amongst group members (storming) will impact upon the group developing its own culture or norms. This in turn will impact upon the depth of work that the group can achieve during this stage of performance.



Group conditions change over time as a result of the interplay between the need to attach and the need to separate. Observing and understanding the change in conditions is an important skill of group work practice. By examining the patterns of interaction and behaviour, it is possible to determine what needs prevail in the group at any given time and what, if any, intervention is required. Most writers describe a series of stages in the developmental life of the group. The model of group process favoured is that developed by Sarri and Galinsky (in Heap, 1977). They indicate that there are seven stages of the group process. However, they do recognise that not all groups reach all stages, depending upon the nature of the group and the length of the group process. Outlined below is an overview of these stages.

### **Stage of origin**

This refers to the pre-formation stage of the group and includes issues of resistance to working in a group, seeing the relevance of the purpose of the group, and the setting of the group. The functions of the facilitator include: assisting members to develop group readiness, establish the profile of the group in the minds of the potential members, and to deal with planning, building co-working relationships, and so forth.

### **Formative stage**

In this stage, group members are often energetic in a more diffuse manner. Members seek similarities in background, personal values and attitudes in expectations of the group. Tentative relationships begin to emerge, giving rise to the structure of the group, but this is in the context of a high level of anxiety in group members as they test out issues of safety, trust and boundaries.

The functions of the facilitator include: assisting members to settle into the group by developing clear ground-rules, culture/kawa (protocols)/norms for the group, energising the group into activity to reduce levels of anxiety, and assisting members to begin to build relationships with each other.

### **First working stage**

This is really the first working stage in the group where interpersonal ties increase, which is visible in greater cohesiveness of the group. Also, sub-groups may start to emerge as a result in the move to commonality, and there is an increase in clarity around the purpose of the group at this stage.

The functions of the facilitator include: assisting members to begin to work on the task of the group, engender a sense of success in completing smaller tasks, to ensure that cliques are managed appropriately, and that the ground-rules are being adhered to.

### **Stage of revision**

At this stage, the group will start to develop behaviours that are generally called 'storming'. Conflict begins to emerge in the group as differences in values become more evident. This is also often concurrent with challenges to the facilitator's leadership; in other words the honeymoon is over.

The functions of the facilitator include: the need for the culture of the group to be reworked and modified, further clarification of the purpose and commitment to the group's aims, assist group members to normalise conflict and find processes to resolve conflicts. Further tasks include: assisting group members to reflect upon progress in meeting the group task, and establishing goals for the next stage of the group, and to re-establish a commitment to the group's purpose and aims.

### **Second working stage**

This stage cannot work well unless the issues at the revision stage are resolved.

This is a more focussed stage of working in the group in that group roles become clearer and more defined, resulting in a high level of cohesion, identification and stability of the group structure. Group members take on greater responsibility for monitoring and challenging anti-group behaviour.

The functions of the facilitator include: increase the pace and focus of the group, assist group members to realise their renewed goals, and work towards goal completion.



### **Stage of maturation**

This refers to the mature stage in the life of the group, with clarity in the roles and responsibilities of the group. Group members own the group and see it as their group and are protective of purpose as well as members. A team feeling has emerged. Group members begin a process of differentiation at this point (a move to more individual issues). The functions of the facilitator include: allowing group members to be more responsible for the life of the group, working with the individual issues that members bring to the group, dealing with group members who move into termination too early, and keeping the group moving so that it does not stall.

### **Stage of closure**

The literature refers to this as the stage of termination but I prefer the idea of closure or transition. This occurs when the goals of the group have been attained and there is no reason for the on-going existence of the group, or when the group has been established for a defined number of sessions and these are now completed. The functions of the facilitator include: assisting members to finish relationships with other group members in a meaningful manner. In closed groups members can practice terminating relationships in healthy pro-social ways and assist members plan for post-group change work and maintaining changes made.

Since the development of this model, there is another phase that is increasingly being identified as critical for the maintenance of changes in behaviour and that could be called Phase of Maintenance. Prochaska (1999) argues that there is often a need in the post action (working stages) of change for group members to access ongoing support from counsellors, sponsors, self-help groups and family/whanau, if they are to be succeed in maintaining a position of change. By locating themselves in an accountability framework, that is, they are considering the impact of their behaviour on others, and then group members are able to continue to resist the tendency to isolate themselves and return to previous patterns of behaviour (Cagney & McMaster, 2013).

### **Group work with women is different**

In contrast to traditional theories, that stress increasing independence and autonomy as the hallmarks of growth and adult mental health, relational viewpoints highlight the importance of relational development in framing a woman's sense of self in the world. Gilligan (1982) proposed that "connection and attachment" are basic human needs, and these are particularly strong in women. They are central to the development of a sense of self, and they influence the ways that women approach conflict and confrontation (Covington, 1998). Relational approaches also highlight the difference in the way women define power, weaving it together with attention to attachment, relationships and caring for others. This approach is in contrast to the traditional model that is driven more by control, dominance, and status concerns (Schiller, 1995).

One of the main differences observed between all-male groups and all-female groups is in the way they deal with conflict. Women tend to challenge and confront only after a sense of connectedness, personal identity within the connection, and a sense of safety, have been established (Schiller, 1995).

The relational approach takes a five-stage model structured along the lines of the "Boston Model" (Garland, Jones & Kolodny, 1978 cited in Schiller, 1995). It includes the first and fifth stages of the Boston Model that it proposes are universal, but it is suggested that the middle three stages for women's development are different. The developmental group stages for women include:

1. Pre-affiliation
2. Establishing a relational base
3. Mutuality and interpersonal empathy
4. Challenge and change, and
5. Separation

Each stage has its own dynamic themes, its own issues and struggles, and its own implications for facilitator interventions.

### **1. Pre-affiliation**

As with the Boston Model, at the pre-affiliation stage, group members generally act in a tentative or uncertain manner, seek information, and proceed cautiously (perhaps “casing” the program). Group members are likely to be untrusting, so facilitators must repeatedly encourage disclosure. Key functions/characteristics of this stage include:

- Development of trust and establishing a particular operating style
- Foundation for future work
- Explicit ground rules established
- Essential conflict around balancing self-needs for independence and dependence
- Concern about acceptance, members preoccupied with how others will see them and how they will fit into the group
- Members search for commonalities, minimise differences, e.g., self-disclosure about information of self rather than feelings and how they feel about others
- Advice/information given to gain acceptance of others rather than as an act of altruism
- Conflict avoided or quickly smoothed over
- People try to see if they fit, and who has influence, other than the leader.

### **2. Establishing a relational base**

In contrast to the Boston Model, women’s groups do not seem to move into a power and control stage after their initial pre-affiliation. Instead, because of the importance of connecting to other women in their healing process, they spend their time and energy in the second group stage establishing a common ground and a sense of connection with each other and with the facilitators. This stage is characterised by:

- Discovering similarities and positive experiences
- Seeking approval (sometimes anxiously) and connection from group members and facilitators
- Establishing a sense of safety in the group

As women are often disempowered in their lives, safety must be established as a prerequisite to greater intimacy or self-disclosure. Evolving roles and status within the group during later stages seem to emerge more from the content and quality of each woman’s interactions with the other members, and from their perceptions of themselves and the others as possessing empathy, understanding and support.

### **3. Mutuality and interpersonal empathy**

The third stage, of mutuality and interpersonal empathy, is when women’s groups move past the establishment and recognitions of their similarities and the connections that arise from them. It is characterised by:

- Safety
- Trust
- Self-disclosure
- Empathic connection
- Recognition and respect for the differences between women in the group.

This is in contrast to the Boston Model, which proposes 'intimacy' and 'differentiation' as two separate stages.

The facilitator's role in all of these stages is crucial. If their basic philosophy stresses mutuality among group members and between members and facilitators, and the idea that members help each other, then the group dynamics will be more likely to reflect a belief in the power of growth through connection.

#### **4. Challenge and Change**

For growth to occur, one must confront and challenge old or outdated ideas about oneself, one's ways of relating to the world and/or one's interpersonal relationships. In groups, sometimes this growth happens through one's own emerging awareness, though often it occurs as someone else challenges or confronts a thought or perception. In this stage, if the women have sufficiently experienced connection, empathic attuning, and respect for differences, they are then free to:

- Challenge themselves
- Challenge each other
- Challenge the facilitators.

Some studies (e.g., Tannen, 1990, cited in Schiller, 1995) have concluded that men see power as coming from an individual acting in opposition to others, and that life is seen as a contest, whereas for women, community is the source of power, and for women the danger is being cut-off from the community. Miller (1991, cited in Schiller, 1995) described women's experiences with using their power in the world (i.e., experiences with challenging or confronting others or expressing contradictory/ unpopular viewpoints). She noted that women have 'troublesome equations' with power. They tend to equate power with selfishness, destructiveness and/or abandonment. That is, if a woman uses her power, she might trigger attack and abandonment, which threatens a central part of her identity based on connectedness.

Given women's general disempowerment, and their 'troublesome equation' with power, this is an important stage where the women can experiment with their own growth and power. The challenge of this stage of growth is to maintain and enhance connections that have been developed. At the same time, women can allow themselves to question authority, challenge themselves and each other, and also risk direct expressions of anger, disappointment, dissatisfaction and disagreement without fear of losing valuable connections.

#### **5. Separation**

As noted above, this stage of separation is the same as the final stage in the Boston Model. It involves dealing with the imminent loss of the group, anxiety, regression and denial, review, evaluation and then finally, separating. It is characterised by:

- Closure of group
- Leaving each other
- Moving on
- Conflict between wanting to give up the group and not wanting to (fear)
- Time to consolidate and generalise gains
- Plan for transition from group to community
- Variety of feelings associated with separation (anger, sadness, fear of abandonment, excitement re the future)

Some groups try to resist termination by introducing the idea of extending the process or by planning post-group, social gatherings.

It is also my contention that many cultural specific interventions mirror that of the relational group work theory. Connection and safety are important for those who have had colonising experiences and may be disenfranchised from power within the dominant society. Certainly for Māori (indigenous inhabitants of New Zealand) the notion of who are you and your intentions, form the basis of engagement. In many ways the work cannot take place until safety has been established. At that point it is possible to create steps of conversation that can lead to social change.

### **Concluding thoughts**

In this chapter I have explored the importance of groups to our lives as well as how social change groups are an important aspect of social work intervention with clients who are often disenfranchised or struggling with the ability to resolve issues that they face. I have argued that being a member of a group is one of the fundamental experiences that we have as humans. I have also covered the developmental stages that groups go through and contrast of how these models might apply to different populations.

Group work continues to be an under-utilised resource within the human services profession but in my mind has the potential for significant change. If we consider that everyone who attends a group impacts on at least twenty-five other people, then this can start to seriously make a difference in our communities. The challenge for students and practitioners in the human services is not only to give greater consideration to group work as a method, but also to utilise strength based approaches that are empowering rather than problem saturated.

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