1 What Is a Socially Just Approach to Group Work?

In our introductory chapter, we offer a definition of social justice, core practice principles, and a survey of themes and topics of the book that we believe are critical in laying the foundation for social justice practice in groups.

Most texts written about working with groups emphasize their ubiquity and the multiple purposes that groups serve. In today's complex and global society, groups become especially important in meeting the multiple challenges experienced by members facing a myriad of social conditions, environmental adaptations, and human needs. Core elements of work with groups include helping members become a system of mutual aid, utilizing group processes to assist in the helping process, and maintaining the importance of social functioning to autonomous individuals and as members of the group (Garvin, 1997; Middleman & Goldberg, 1974). A focus on optimizing social functioning directs our attention toward individuals and their embeddedness in contexts that include themselves, their social interactions, and the environments in which they function as contributors to understand needs, capacities, and opportunities for change.
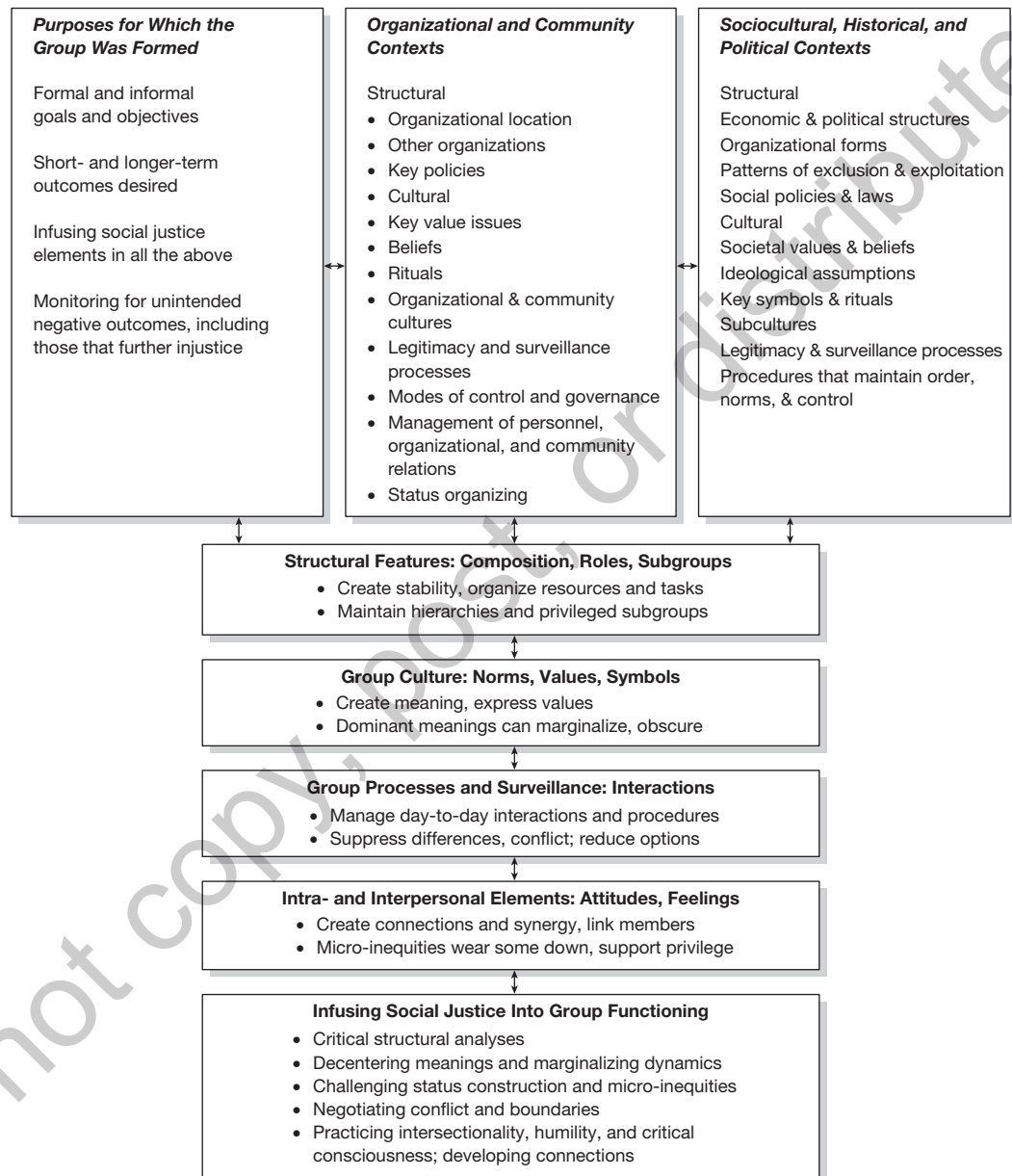
Group work from its earliest inception was about member empowerment and collective action for personal and social change. In the extensive history of social work in groups, we begin with the early settlement house movement. This initiated the evolution of community-based participation in response to an array of social problems relevant, for example, to immigrant segregation, oppressive child labor practices, unsafe work conditions, and poor access to health services. The history involved a continuous process of bringing people together, finding support in each other to fight against insurmountable odds, and gaining insights and skills from each other. Social justice group work aimed then and now to form networks of supportive relationships in which power and control are shared.

Much of social justice work has tended to focus primarily on combating injustice. By inference, this perspective views justice as the absence of injustice. Without a vision of what social justice can be, however, work in groups may address some problems and improve some difficult conditions, but it is less likely to contribute to sustained progress toward socially just goals. In socially just practice, we build on theoretical concepts that draw upon the duality of recognizing various forms of social injustice and movement toward social justice in groups.

In our focus on socially just practice, we conceptualize small group as an embeddedness in social justice contexts for practice considerations (see Figure 1.1). We revised our conceptual framework from the one we presented in Roberta R. Greene and Nancy

FIGURE 1.1 | **Social Justice and Small Group Components and Theory**

Purposes for Which the Group Was Formed

Formal and informal goals and objectives

Short- and longer-term outcomes desired

Infusing social justice elements in all the above

Monitoring for unintended negative outcomes, including those that further injustice

Organizational and Community Contexts

Structural
- Organizational location
- Other organizations
- Key policies
- Cultural
- Key value issues
- Beliefs
- Rituals
- Organizational & community cultures
- Legitimacy and surveillance processes
- Modes of control and governance
- Management of personnel, organizational, and community relations
- Status organizing

Sociocultural, Historical, and Political Contexts

Structural
Economic & political structures
Organizational forms
Patterns of exclusion & exploitation
Social policies & laws
Cultural
Societal values & beliefs
Ideological assumptions
Key symbols & rituals
Subcultures
Legitimacy & surveillance processes
Procedures that maintain order, norms, & control

Structural Features: Composition, Roles, Subgroups
- Create stability, organize resources and tasks
- Maintain hierarchies and privileged subgroups

Group Culture: Norms, Values, Symbols
- Create meaning, express values
- Dominant meanings can marginalize, obscure

Group Processes and Surveillance: Interactions
- Manage day-to-day interactions and procedures
- Suppress differences, conflict; reduce options

Intra- and Interpersonal Elements: Attitudes, Feelings
- Create connections and synergy, link members
- Micro-inequities wear some down, support privilege

Infusing Social Justice Into Group Functioning
- Critical structural analyses
- Decentering meanings and marginalizing dynamics
- Challenging status construction and micro-inequities
- Negotiating conflict and boundaries
- Practicing intersectionality, humility, and critical consciousness; developing connections

Source: Revised conceptual framework from Reed, B., Ortega, R. M., and Garvin, C. (2010). Small group theory and social work: Promoting diversity and social justice or recreating inequities? In Roberta R. Greene and Nancy Kropf (eds.), *Human behavior theory: A diversity framework* (2nd ed.). Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publications. (Figure 9.1, p. 211)

Kropf (eds.), *Human Behavior Theory: A Diversity Framework* (2nd ed.). That book was devoted to social and behavioral science theories utilized by social workers. In our chapter in that book, we considered how this conceptual perspective can be used with diverse populations, particularly in ways that promote empowerment and social justice (Reed, Ortega, & Garvin, 2010). This framework was further described in subsequent literature (Reisch & Garvin, 2016).

Conceptually, we consider a multi-systemic and structural–functional model that depicts the interrelated domains important for understanding small groups, including frames for understanding power not merely as a detriment to equity and inclusion, but also containing the contexts in which possibilities for social justice can come about (Reed et al., 2010). Our model considers the functions to be fulfilled by the group, as well as desired outcomes of the group's activities. Sociocultural, historical, economic, and political contexts are included, as well as community and organizational environments in which members and the group are embedded.

Our conceptual model draws attention to structural features of the group and how the group is organized; group culture (norms, values, symbols); group processes and procedures (how group members do things together); and intra- and interpersonal elements (including facilitator and member attitudes, values, and behaviors). Our framework also considers structural and functional aspects of the environment and their impact on the multiple components of small group. This includes group participant abilities to work together, influence each other, and the group's ability to affect environments that contribute to injustice. And finally, our model identifies a component depicting the ways group leadership works toward justice in small groups. It includes infusing social justice processes and disrupting the multiple forces acting as impediments to furthering the goals of social justice, reducing injustice, and guarding against unintentionally contributing to mechanisms that support and maintain unjust privilege and oppression (Reed et al., 2010).

Defining Social Justice

Pursuing the goals of social justice are complicated because even in defining social justice, conflicting perspectives emerge (Reisch & Garvin, 2016). A common social work definition of social justice describes it as

an ideal condition in which all members of society have the same basic rights, protections, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits. Implicit in this concept is the notion that historical inequalities should be acknowledged and remedied through specific measures. A key social work value, social justice entails advocacy to confront discrimination, oppression, and institutional inequities. (Barker, 2003, pp. 404–405)

Our definition of social justice recognizes that group members enter the group with different capabilities based on historical opportunities, multiple environmental influences, and meaning making that integrates one's intersectional identities with culturally adapting coping strategies, and decision making (Garvin & Ortega, 2016; Reed et al., 2010). A capabilities perspective requires us to build on and use our diversity

effectively in all group interactions and activities. Social justice group work from this perspective, for example, encourages members and the group as a whole to ask if the group's purpose addresses relevant issues of diversity for the particular members and the group's embedded contexts. Additional consideration includes the degree to which the group's goals relate to the unique experiences of oppression encountered by each member and as expressed by these members, themselves.

Reisch and Garvin (2016) further our definition of social justice by reminding us that social justice principles apply to the basic structure of society that determines the assignment of rights and duties in the context of citizenship and that regulates the distribution of social and economic advantage. A social justice perspective asserts that unequal distribution based on core contingencies such as race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status and that results in social or economic advantage and disadvantage attributed to these contingencies, requires redress so that all persons are treated equally (Reisch & Garvin, 2016). Reisch (2002) draws attention to Rawls' (2001) principles of justice, which posit that social values are to be distributed equally unless unequal distribution of all (or any) of these values is to everyone's advantage. In this sense, a social justice perspective asserts that any resources present in an organization's structure must be accessible to all and be to everyone's advantage. Hence, socially just practice includes the extent to which group procedures and practices identify and reduce or eliminate undesirable encounters of injustice within the group and between the group and its embedded environments. At the same time, we must consider group procedures and practices aimed at identifying and promoting socially just practices. We assert that the success of social work practice in groups is guided by practice principles drawn from social justice knowledge in pursuit of the dual goals of redressing impediments to, and promoting, socially just outcomes (Garvin & Ortega, 2016; Ortega, 2017; Reed et al., 2010).

Social Justice Practice Principles

Central to our social work mission as group work practitioners is building on individual experiences in ways that support personal growth while allowing members to benefit from the experiences of others. In doing so, group workers are mindful of how bringing people together has both benefits and challenges. Garvin and Ortega (2016) state,

> In groups, we seek to pursue social justice goals by asking the following guiding questions: "Do the group's purpose and goals accommodate issues of diversity and social justice that are relevant to its members both inside and outside the group?" "Does the group experience take into account the individual member differences, including their various positionalities and standpoints?" "Do the group's dynamics that emerge within the group shape or influence group participation in social just ways?" "Does the group's leadership respect each member's unique background, perspective and contributions?" "Does the group's processes contain built-in responses that identify and address power dynamics and potentially counterproductive actions, appropriately manage conflict, and prevent undesirable outcomes?" Finally, "In what ways do core group work processes support ethically-based socially just group work practice(s)?" (p. 166)

In this book, we elaborate on these questions with examples and practice application of important concepts.

With the above questions in mind, we present the following core practice principles that frame our approach(s) and that are core to the development of this book:

1. The group's goals and purpose must be inclusive of social justice goals of the participants and host context in which they develop and perform.

2. Member relevance including unique intersectional social identities, needs, and experiences of each of its members both within and outside the group are recognized, appreciated, and valued.

3. The group's norms must support socially just participation.

4. Conflict regarding social differences should be resolved in the group.

5. The group worker facilitates and supports each member's contribution.

6. Group processes must consider whether issues are conceptualized and understood within a social justice framework through how language is being used, and the ways people are interacting and supporting each other; also, power, authority, and conflict resolution in a group must consider each member's intersectional social identities and their impact on participation.

7. Practice dimensions, as a whole, must consistently demonstrate and adhere to socially just knowledge and skills.

Throughout this book, we elaborate on these core social justice principles and note that inclusion of social justice must focus on both "product" (purposes) and interactions within groups. In social justice group work practice, we are mindful of the fact that the very elements that can make living and working in groups a positive force within society may instead create conditions that disempower members, lead to inequities, and promote injustice. Throughout this book, we carefully consider how a group is comprised, organizes itself, and conducts its work within the group and with its environments, how issues are being conceptualized and understood, how language is being used, the ways people interact and support each other, and the growth of individual members.

Purpose and Goals

We consider the implications for social justice of the explicit purposes for which the group was formed, its goals and desired outcomes. A group's purpose refers to the specific reasons for establishing the group as determined by the host organization, modified and then accepted by the members (Garvin, 1997). The following is an example of the development of a group purpose:

The high school social worker received teacher referrals of several female students identified as performing poorly in their classes for various reasons. Each one of these student was on the verge of either dropping out or being

suspended. All of them were described by their homeroom teacher as involved in behaviors that maintained their social distance from other students and in some cases the prospective member threatened other students. For example, an American Indian student who was referred refused to socialize with "white privileged oppressors" and talked openly about hating "white rich spoiled brats." A second, limited English-speaking student maintained poor attendance, seemed inattentive while in class, and did not complete class assignments; she was likely going to fail all her assigned classes. A third student strongly identified with the LGBTQ student organization; however, she expressed extreme views about her identity, so she became ostracized by her own group. There were eight students who raised concerns for their respective teachers in various ways. The social worker invited these students into the group setting and proposed the purpose, "To develop a social support and mutual aid group and identify ways for them to engage in student life." She recognized that when the group formed, each member would bring with them their own sense of purpose and anticipated a challenge in members finding common ground.

As the example illustrates, a group's achievement of its purpose is often influenced by forces from the larger environment. As the worker in our example realized, members enter the group expecting that the group will relate to "the real world" in which each member lives. As such, members will bring to the group experience their own assumptions and beliefs about their life situations such as their social life (e.g., within their family, among peers, and other contexts in which social interactions take place). Their personal definitions of human well-being, values about the human condition, individual rights and responsibilities, assumptions about conflict, and the common good will ideally emerge and become expressed early on. And approaches toward social justice must respect member experiences, from their perspective, and align with their purpose (Reed et al., 2010).

Key social and cultural symbols, rituals, and moral ideals (e.g., about personal or social responsibility) influence what group members value. From the beginning, then, the group worker should be attentive to each group members' visions of social justice and how these evolve as a group vision, as the group develops.

Member Relevance and Social Identities

From a social justice perspective, members enter the group while enacting multiple roles in many social locations.[1] The thoughts, feelings, and actions workers also develop reflect their positionalities, that is their standpoints or positions in which they view and experience their reality. Becoming aware of and building on positionalities and standpoints is especially important at the level in which *communication and interactions* take place. The patterns that emerge are illustrative of how dimensions of power, privilege, oppression, and differences associated with positionalities influence the perceptions, decisions, and actions of members and ourselves.

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[1.] Referred to as *positionalities* or locations in the social world (Finn & Jacobson, 2003).

Patterns of positive and negative emotions that members verbally and nonverbally direct at other members influence relationships, including subgroups, and the overall climate of the group. This makes it a challenge for the ability of workers to see (and experience) the world from the perspective of the members, while recognizing their own strengths and limitations (Hill Collins, 1990; Ortega & Faller, 2011). How a member views himself or herself serves as a reminder that matters of social status, power, privilege, and authority (undergirding standpoints and positionalities) are highly individualized and manifested in each member's identities or self-references. A major practice challenge from a social justice perspective is knowing how to validate each member's view of himself or herself (i.e., making the member's perspectives relevant), while at the same time working to achieve the group's relevance for each member. That particular challenge presents itself in the above example and is clearly an important focus in the example that follows.

> James entered the group with a chip on his shoulder. He scoffed at another member, stepped on the foot of another as he walked past him to sit in his chair, then leaned back in the chair as if to exaggerate his preference to not be a part of the group. His behaviors, both verbal and physical, gave every indication he wanted nothing to do with anyone in the group. The group was recommended by the detention center staff for the purpose of engaging Black male youth in dialogue about the negative effects of violence on young Black males' lives. James' life was wrought with abuse, and exposure to sex, violence, and drugs. For him, there was no escape while living at home and in a dangerous neighborhood. In-home detention and an ankle tether proved to be ineffective and impractical since there was no way to physically restrain him. James trusted no one except his maternal grandmother who tried to protect him from the negative influences in his life. She consistently expressed her love for James yet knew that if James was out in the street and left unsupervised, he would likely end up seriously hurt or dead. James maintained his religious faith out of love and respect for his grandmother who was deeply spiritual. She was the bedrock for the family and maintained traditional cultural practices and celebrations during holidays. During those times, James enjoyed being with family, although he resented family members who looked as though they had their lives together since it made him feel abandoned and alone.

As James' example illustrates, cultural, social, and personal experiences weigh heavily in early group adaptations. Members may enact unique patterns in their group involvement based on perceived, real, or even anticipated experiences with the larger society, and it may take considerable effort to sort out individual factors from those reflecting these external forces. Personal change for James and members in the other example, then, will most likely occur with an appreciation of the interplay between social and structural experiences juxtaposed onto intrapersonal experiences.

The examples emphasize how self-definitions are cumulative and emerge in overt (but also subtle) ways and must be recognized, respected, and challenged when they immobilize a member rendering him or her incapable of a social justice vision. On this last point, group members who have experienced marginality and historical trauma may enter into group situations in which they view themselves from a stationary minority perspective and are distrustful or skeptical of change.

We assert that relevant practice requires us to assist members to examine how they have internalized their experiences of oppression and how to learn skills to empower themselves (e.g., through individual expression, consciousness raising, and social advocacy). These aspects encompass important values for socially just practice. Values we promote in this book include solidarity, tolerance, inclusion, transformative trust, cultural humility, empowerment, and shared leadership. We dedicate a chapter focusing on these values as core to our social justice approach. We also consider their implications for ethical group work practice.

As facilitators, a worker must recognize his or her own self-definitions as products of multicultural experiences including cultural, political, religious, socioeconomic, and historical experiences. Social justice work in groups must be attentive to how these experiences become a part of the narrative of the group's perspective as well as reflective in the silence of members. A social justice perspective challenges us to engage in *critical consciousness or critical self-awareness* defined as a continuous examination of our own world view (and epistemic privilege) to recognize our own sociocultural and personal relevance. A critical consciousness perspective requires us to go beyond a celebration of diversity and difference. Rather, through a social justice lens, we must consider the processes and multiple experiences that result in such differences and that distinguish our uniqueness (Hill Collins 1990; Reed, Newman, Suarez, & Lewis, 1997).

Norms and Socially Just Participation

Considerable knowledge now exists about different ways of knowing and learning, and about how people respond to social contexts depending on their backgrounds and cultural styles (Finn & Jacobson, 2003; Goodman, 2003). Opportunities to share relevant histories and experiences can help members learn to understand each other's behaviors and to support each other. A social justice perspective in our work with groups helps us recognize areas of privilege, marginalization and oppression that if not attended to, can block our ability to work with others.

Group members can learn about various types of micro-inequities and create ways to assess within the group whether and how these occur. Social justice work in the group will help members develop ways to identify and seek to stop micro-inequalities. Through self-awareness, all group participants can reflect on unique differences from each other. Remaining conscious of our experiences of privilege and oppression allows us to better relate to our positionality on various status dimensions. (e.g., race, gender, and social status).

Hardy (2016) raises a concern about the "untold story" in which he reflects on experiences of the oppressed who either tell their story of oppression that results in little to no change (i.e., the unheard story), or else remain voiceless because no remedial action follows the many times the story has been told (i.e., the untold story). A social justice perspective requires an ability to support communication and interactions that strengthen silent voices but also works to enhance member abilities and capacities to listen to and hear each other's untold stories. A social justice perspective challenges the facilitator to demonstrate an awareness and appreciation of the social contexts influencing member perspectives. While clearly not suggesting the worker can fully appreciate these experiences, especially from a member's past, it does not preclude a facilitator from visualizing the contexts in which work in groups is being practiced;

therefore, consideration must also be given to the potential for change goals to include targets outside of the group, especially in response to shared structural and environmental injustices that align with shared group identities.

Conflict

Conflict is important in the practice in group work and is considered a natural consequence of member interactions. Garvin (1997) reminds us that conflict relevant to group process includes (1) power struggles among members; (2) power struggles between members and the group leader; and (3) efforts by members or leader to control aspects of member behaviors deviant from group norms. And while none of these aspects are considered good or bad, group responses will ideally be consistent with the group's purpose and goals.

Power struggles may occur, for example, between members committed to the group's purpose and members who are not. Conflict may also be provoked by members who are finding it difficult to find their place (e.g., role) in the group. If addressed successfully, conflict can promote positive group development and movement toward its desired purpose. If managed poorly, conflict can cause more harm than good (Forsythe, 2006).

From a social justice perspective, attention to conflict is furthermore important to group development and maintenance, when negotiating and building upon differences among members, and when the group members are seen as crossing group boundaries (Garvin & Ortega, 2016; Ortega, 2017; Reed et al., 2010). We offer a more extensive discussion of the important role of conflict and managing conflict in this book.

Group Leadership

From a social justice perspective, leadership encompasses individuals acting in ways that increase the effectiveness of a small group, while working toward social justice (Reed et al., 2010). Although many groups have a designated leader or leadership team, either appointed by some external authority, or emerging from the group, in socially just practice, every group member can exert leadership by contributing to the evolution and accomplishments of a group (Garvin & Ortega, 2016; Reed et al., 2010). Leadership must consider how safe members feel, as safety, trust, and support are undermined when unjust practices are imposed, and their restoration are imperative prior to gaining confidence that positive change is possible.

Group Development and Process

As previously discussed, group process includes member communications, expressions of affect, conflict and how conflict is resolved (or not), and the patterns among these as the group begins and continues over time to pursue its purpose and goals. This latter is referred to as "group development," which will be explored further in this book. Special attention is focused on how issues are conceptualized and understood within a social justice framework and through how language is being used, the ways people interact and support each other, and how power, authority, and conflict resolution in a group take into account each member's intersectional social identities and the impact of them

on participation. In this book, we offer a specific focus on implications of socially just practice in task groups.

Practice Dimensions

We discuss group work practice dimensions that are strongly influenced by the work of Mullender, Ward, and Fleming (2013) with their focus on the members' responsibility for their group. In addition, we view all practice as encompassing the following dimensions: Exploring, Engaging, Planning, Implementing, Monitoring/Evaluation, and Celebrating/Termination. We do not view these phases as stages or sequential and consider each phase reflective of particular tasks that the group engages in as determined by the natural course of the group.

Our development and application of our definition of social justice is evident throughout this book and especially in Section II. We elaborate on socially just group processes, content, and assessment. Processes consider all of the activities in the development of the group, including the interactions of the group members with each other and with the various contexts in which the group is embedded; these include the agency and the other institutions in the surrounding environment. In this section, we also consider the worker's interventions, the group's activities, and other events whether intentional or unintentional. We include also all aspects of the group's dynamics including patterns of communication, belongingness, and social structures, including the distribution of power and the group's culture. We also elaborate on the social justice implications for terminating and ending groups.

Two important features of this book are important. (1) We include a focus on environmental change. Throughout the book, we emphasize the important impact the environment has in promoting social injustices. (2) We furthermore discuss group work practices that engage with the environment to promote social justice change.

Our discussion includes implications for both assessment and evaluation. At the conclusion of the book, we bring in extensive work by one of the authors (CG) that reflects on various approaches to evaluate social justice work in groups that take into account member gains, improvement in group conditions, and changes in the environment sought by members and the group.

SUMMARY

Much of social justice work should recognize intentional and unintentional acts of privilege, marginalization, and oppression that must be confronted. And while we consider what happens within groups to be a microcosm of society, we are challenged to impede actions and processes that replicate the kinds of social injustices that have brought the members to experience the issues they bring to the group.

As we have discussed in previous work (Garvin & Ortega, 2016; Ortega, 2017; Reed et al., 2010), discussions of the struggle for social justice should show a deep commitment to an ongoing engagement with and understanding of the dynamics and forms of privilege and oppression. In this book, we introduce the reader to concepts for developing skills that require working with people with diverse experiences, social locations, and perspectives. Such skills are essential, especially toward building socially just relationships, procedures, decision making, and environments.

In social justice work, barriers to justice exist in mechanisms of privilege and oppression, which must be understood and challenged, as goals in themselves and as recurring processes in all social environments and systems. Social justice in groups considers how these barriers become expressed in both the structures found in the group, as well as in the interactions among members, between the group and local contexts such as the agency, and with the larger society.

In the chapters that follow, we elaborate further on a wide range of challenges for socially just practice in groups and offer skills that we hope will challenge the readers to incorporate in their practice and that demonstrate their commitment to social justice in social work practice with groups.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How might you respond to the following assertion: "If everyone in the group is treated the same, then it's socially just!"?

2. Is social justice possible in groups that include poor and wealthy members?

3. What two to three core practice principles will you consistently adhere to when incorporating social justice into your group work practice?

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