For the past two years a study group consisting of five social workers met on a regular basis for the purpose of advancing their clinical theory of practice knowledge. Group composition, membership selection, format, and discussion topics were decided by the membership. There were no formal group leaders and members generally participated in discussions typically based on selected readings. Besides the initial goal, the group served as a bridge between the graduate school and professional functioning, provided for informal peer group association, and served as an arena for the exploration of current social work issues.

Background

It is clear that graduate social work education is merely an introductory step to any type of professional social work practice, and that continued practice demands continued learning.

Social workers are obviously not unique in their need for continuing education. In an age of rapid technological and social change, all health care professionals require periodic updating of their knowledge and skills, as well as remediation of useful traditional methodologies. While continuing education may have been considered as important but luxurious in the past, it is now becoming viewed as critical and indispensible. Armar (1970) states, “It used to be that an individual could go to school, take a job, learn from experience and do well until retirement. Nowadays, a scientist must constantly renew, extend, and reorganize his knowledge or in approximately eight years he will be beyond hope as a teacher or practitioner.”

The motivations to improve competence, of course, emanate both from within as well as outside of professional groups. The authority and status of the social work field grows as its individual members
become more skilled and capable. For the individual practitioner, continuing education can influence one's prospects of agency advancement, level of personal satisfaction, peer group approval, and future employment opportunities. Additionally, society in general, as vested in various governmental bodies, is increasingly demanding continued learning of all health care professionals for the maintenance of quality services (Millis, 1969; Yolles, 1969).

Given these factors, social welfare agencies devote much energy and expense to staff development, supervision, consultation, etc., which adds to the practitioner's development. Universities, training centers, and professional organizations also contribute to the opportunities available for continued learning. Unfortunately, only a few of these programs are reported in the literature and most are limited to in-service training within agencies (see Social Casework, 1972).

Reports of a noninstitutionally-sponsored study group continuing education model, as outlined in this paper, were not found in the social work literature. Perhaps study groups have or are now in operation but have not been formally reported. Besides the apparent uniqueness of the study group training medium, its stated advantages and benefits make this model worthy of examination.

Rationale and Description

The basic rationale for the development of the group was to help members supplement the theoretical and practice knowledge they gained through graduate social work training and post-Master's work experience. The group was initiated by the author who approached a social work peer with the concept and subsequently three other colleagues were contacted. After agreement about goals, format, and topics of discussion, the group was initiated. All members were selected on the basis of personal acquaintance as well as similar theoretical orientation which was a genetic-dynamic concept of personality.

Members included four males and one female. Four of the members were recent graduates of schools of social work with under one year of experience. One member had several years of experience. All were Caucasian under the age of 31. Each member was from a different agency which included a state hospital outpost, two child placement agencies, and a child psychiatry clinic. One member was employed by a large corporation dealing with the work training of low income employees.

Format

The group met twice a month on alternate weeks in the evening