WORKER AUTHENTICITY IN GROUP WORK

Kenneth E. Reid

ABSTRACT: The article focuses on the issue of worker authenticity in working with groups. It is suggested that authenticity is an important ingredient in the helping relationship and that the social worker needs to encounter the members as a human being who is willing to reveal himself rather than as a professional, playing a role. While the importance of the worker being genuine is highlighted, attention is also given to those situations when it may be inappropriate for the worker to disclose personal thoughts and feelings. The author suggests specific guidelines based on timing, appropriateness, and motivation.

Two questions that have perplexed those working with individuals within a helping relationship—whether individually or in groups—are what makes a worker effective and what goes on within the helping relationship which helps some people function more effectively and others to give up in frustration or not change at all. Psychoanalytic, client-centered, and various eclectic theorists alike have emphasized: (1) the importance of the counselor’s ability to sensitively and accurately understand the client in such a manner as to communicate this deep understanding; (2) the importance of nonpossessive warmth and acceptance of the client. These two elements cut across the more parochial theories of effective helping processes and appear to be a common element in a wide variety of interpersonal approaches.

In recent years, a third factor has come to be recognized as important, namely, authenticity on the worker’s part; more specifically, the ability of the worker to express himself naturally and openly, and
to selectively reveal his own feelings and thoughts rather than acting strictly in terms of his role as a social worker (Truax & Carkhuff, 1967). While worker authenticity is certainly not new to social work, it has received relatively little attention in the professional literature. It is the purpose of this paper to explore the use of genuineness and authenticity, specifically as it relates to social workers working with groups. It is the premise of this paper that: (1) authenticity on the worker's part is a significant ingredient in the helping relationship, and (2) it is not something to be left to chance or used capriciously but something to be consciously employed by the worker in the client's behalf.

**Humanization of the Professional**

Social work literature has generally counseled against the worker emotionally responding to the client. Similar to other helping professions based on the medical model, emphasis has been on the accentuation of the technical aspects of the situation with the relationship being limited to the task at hand. If personal information is sought or given, it is information relevant to the performance of the technical task. The young social worker entering the field is warned against socializing with the client; instead, the client is kept to an appointment schedule, symbolizing the formality of the relationship and the measured restrictions of the contact.

Closely tied to keeping the relationship within bounds are a non-judgmental attitude and objectivity. The worker is to be objective and in full control of his emotional involvement with the client. For the professional "helper," according to Wilensky and LeBeaux (1968), this often poses a real dilemma. If he becomes emotionally involved himself he loses objectivity, his ability to see facts in clear perspective, and his power to help; but at the same time a sufficiently close relationship must be established to convince the client of the worker's understanding of his problem and of his willingness to help. There must be involvement and noninvolvement at the same time. Together they comprise in Mannheim's words a "strange combination of intimacy and objectivity, nearness and distance, attraction and repulsion, friendship and estrangement" (1940, p. 217).

In recent years the medical model in general and the study-diagnosis-treatment approach in particular have come under attack for failure to view the client as an individual with special needs, weaknesses, strengths, and concerns. It is argued that man is more than an organism comparable to rats, pigeons, and monkeys; more than a communication system; and more than a computer. It is also felt that one does not have to know the causative factors of a problem before a cure or resolution can be found. Following this same theme Carol