

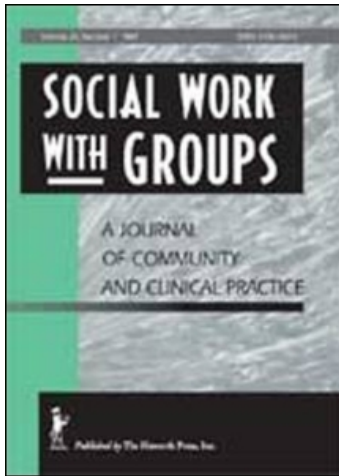
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Social Work With Groups

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t92306972>

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Online Publication Date: 18 February 1999

To cite this Article Nuttman-Shwartz, Orit and Shay, Sarit(1999)'Transition to Leadership: An Innovative Program to Prepare Helping Professionals to Lead Parents Groups',*Social Work With Groups*,21:1,117 — 128

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1300/J009v21n01_10

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J009v21n01_10

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Transition to Leadership: An Innovative Program to Prepare Helping Professionals to Lead Parents Groups

Orit Nuttman-Shwartz
Sarit Shay

ABSTRACT. The article describes a learning plan that facilitated the transition from functioning as a participant in a group to functioning as a group leader. This functional transition is part of the requirements of courses on group leadership. The transition and change of function are based on the need for "Transition Space," which enables separation from previous norms and a gradual development of new ways of behaving. The course combines theoretical studies with practical ones and was given as part of a program for training leadership for parents groups. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com]

INTRODUCTION

Group leadership training courses generally combine the teaching of theory and skills with actual experience in leading a group under professional supervision (Berger, 1996). The progress from theory to practice is inevitably accompanied by both practical and emotional difficulties in the trainees' passage from the role of learner to the role of leader (Hess, 1986; Kadushin, 1992; Winnicore, 1990). On the emotional level, the trainees must mature into and identify with their new role. On the practical level, they must usually

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This article was presented at the Joint World Congress of the International Federation of Social Work in Hong Kong in July 1996.

Social Work with Groups, Vol. 21(1/2) 1998
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complete a number of tasks prior to being able to lead a group. These generally include planning their group intervention and may also include, as they did in the case at hand, selecting a co-leader and marketing the group to a social service agency. The failure to complete any of these may either delay the start of the group or undermine the trainees' effectiveness as a group leader (Strozier, 1997).

This paper describes an innovative course aimed at facilitating the transition from the role of group participant to group leader. The immediate impetus for the course was to solve difficulties encountered in the group leader training program at the Shappel School of Social Work at Tel Aviv University. More broadly, though, the course addresses the fundamental practical and emotional difficulties of the transition.

THE ORIGINAL TRAINING PROGRAM

The course to be described was developed to fill out a post-graduate program to train leaders of parents groups that was given at Tel Aviv University's School of Social Work. The course was open to persons in the helping professions (social workers, school counselors, educational psychologists and occupational therapists). All the students had at least a B.A., which in Israel enables one to work in these professions, and three years of professional experience. Many had considerably more.

The original program consisted of five semesters. The first three semesters focused on theory and some skills teaching. In the fourth and fifth semesters the students were required to lead a parents group in a setting outside the university, but under the close supervision of a faculty member.

In the first eight years that the sequence was offered, we repeatedly encountered a number of problems in implementation. The students were supposed to begin leading the groups after completing the practical tasks of selecting a co-leader, marketing the idea of a parents' group to a welfare agency or service, and planning their group intervention tailored to the specific type of group they would lead, for example, for parents of adolescents, for parents of retarded children, and so on. These tasks were all to be completed in the month long break between the winter and spring terms. They usually were not. In many cases, the preparatory work ran into the first half of the semester, which was spent helping the students to organize the groups, and the groups extended beyond the end of the school year. The result was that the students received much less supervision than was intended, and, in some cases, the groups they led suffered.

It gradually became clear that the students found it difficult to perform these tasks on their own. Some of the difficulties were practical; others seemed to derive from the emotional complexity of the transition from learner to leader (Kacen and Soffer, 1990; Kurland and Salmon, 1993).

The new program was designed to address both the emotional and the practical hurdles of the passage. It consisted of a “transitional” course inserted between the completion of the three theoretical semesters and the supervised group leadership. The course focused explicitly on the transition to the leader role. In line with Folkman and Lazarus’ (1985) findings attesting to the efficacy of a combination of emotional and instrumental coping, it provided the students both with a supportive environment in which they could bring up their questions and doubts and work through their feelings about their new role (Berger, 1989; Kacen, 1994; Kurland and Salmon, 1992b, 1993) and practical assistance in carrying out the preparatory tasks they had previously been left to do on their own.

THEORETICAL RATIONALE FOR A TRANSITIONAL COURSE

The idea of a transitional course is based largely on a combination of supervision theory and developmental theory. Supervision theory considers role transition an important, yet stressful, stage of professional development. As the theory sees it, the actual use of skills that have not been previously applied *in vivo* and the assumption of the new professional identity that has not yet been internalized can cause self doubt, confusion, uncertainty, and stress (Hoffman, 1990; Holman and Freed, 1987; Kacen and Soffer, 1990; Kadushin, 1992; Lazarus, 1984; Reynolds, 1965; Strozier, 1997).

Our students were confronted with the task of moving from the use of the learning skills and techniques with which they were familiar from their student role to the application of the new group leadership skills and techniques which they knew only in theory. Moreover, as leaders of their new group they had to cope with the disparity between the expectations of group members who regarded them as “omnipotent authorities” and their more modest self perceptions. Similar phenomena are reported in the literature (Berger, 1996; Dick, Lessler and Whiteside, 1980; Kurland and Salmon, 1992b, 1993).

In most programs for training group leaders, as in our original sequence, the transition from the role of participant to the role of leader is rapid and experienced as sudden. The students are not given the time to internalize the leadership skills they learn in class, to work through their doubts and uncertainties, or to make the internal changes they need to identify with their new role. In the original Tel Aviv program, as in other group leadership courses, the students had to plan and market their group intervention before they felt comfortable with their new identity. Kadushin (1992) notes the importance of bridging between the old role and the new and points out that such bridging takes time.

Supervision theory also holds that professional development entails not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also personal development. Many supervision theorists (Friedman and Kaslow, 1987; Kadushin, 1992)

draw parallels between the stages of personal development identified by Erikson (1950) and Levinson (1978) and the stages of professional development. On both the personal and professional planes, they point out the movement from stage to stage is punctuated by internal conflict.

One of the major conflicts in our students' stage of professional socialization is that of dependency versus autonomy (Friedman and Kaslow, 1987; Hess, 1986; Winnicott, 1990). The students in the course can be regarded as being in the separation-individuation stage of their professional development. Like children in Mahler's rapprochement stage (Mahl 1979), they can act independently but need to know that their supervisor is accessible and that they can go back to meet their dependency needs and to draw the knowledge and energy that they need to carry out their new tasks—namely to behave as fully formed leaders who project knowledge and authority.

Developmental theory generally accepts that in periods of transition the individual needs what Winnicott (1971) terms a "transitional" or "potential" space in which to work out the attendant conflicts.

The objective of the extra course was to provide the time and a professionally supervised place for the role transition. In terms of Kadushin's (1992) supervision theory, it was conceived as a bridge between the student role and skills and the leader roles and skills; in developmental terms, it was conceived as a Winnicottian "transitional space" (Winnicott, 1971), in which the students could try out the behaviors and begin to adapt to the demands of their upcoming stage in a more or less protected environment. The expectation was that in the "potential space" of the course, the students would internalize the demands of the new role, detach themselves from the position of dependency, and assume an autonomous adult position. In terms of group theory, the course served as a pre-group stage (Whitaker, 1985; Yalom, 1985), in which the students would be able, with the help of supervision, to separate from their student role and to progress together with their peers to the role of mature adult leader.

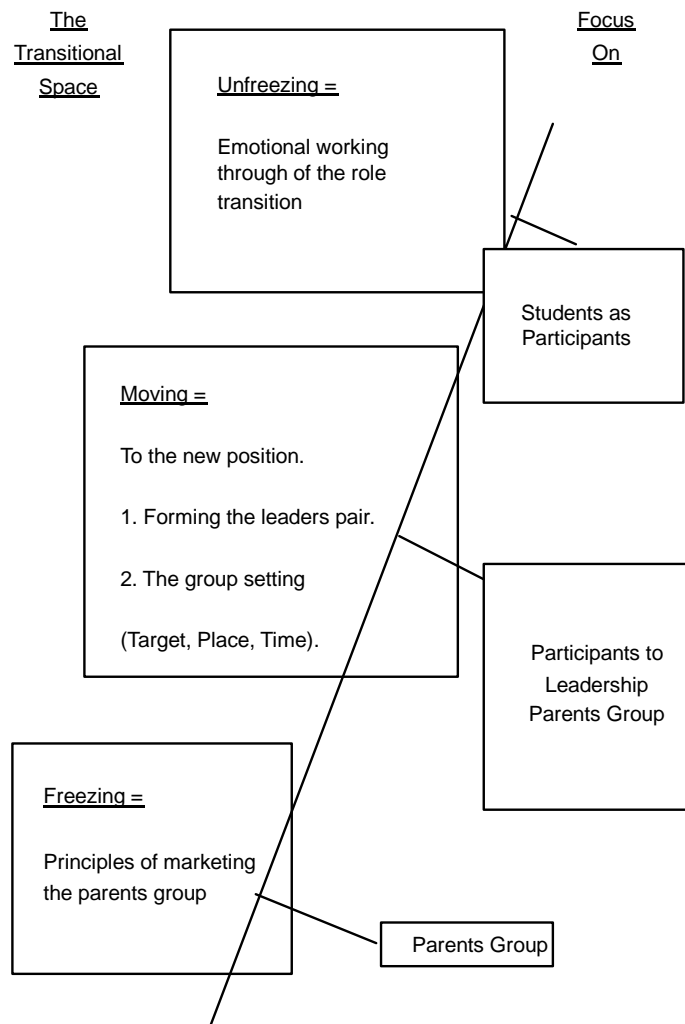
COURSE DESCRIPTION

The aim of the new course was to enable the students to lead a group when they were well prepared to do so and to benefit from the professional supervision available during the school year. The course was given in a small group, which had two main functions. One was to provide an appropriate setting for group supervision, in keeping with Kadushin's (1992) conviction that the transition to a new role is best made with the help of individual or peer group supervision. The other was to provide a protected framework in which the participants could try out the skills they had learned, work through their emotions and deal with the conflicts and difficulties inherent in their role transition with the help of their classmates (Berger, 1989; Kacen, 1994).

The course consisted of three consecutive parts (see Figure 1):

1. Emotional working through of the transition.
2. Socialization for the group leader role.
3. Marketing the group.

FIGURE 1



These stages were constructed to parallel the three stages of Lewin's (1947) theory of attitude change in groups: "unfreezing," "moving" and "freezing." According to Lewin, in order to form new attitudes and behaviors, individuals must first unfreeze their former positions. Only after such unfreezing can they "move" to a new position and, then, "freeze" their new attitude and way of behaving for an extended period of time. The role and style of the class instructor shifted in keeping with the demands of the different stages and the students' needs at each.

Emotional Working Through of the Role Transition

The emotional working through of the role transition—that is the "unfreezing"—was accomplished by helping the students to examine their feelings about the transition to their new role and to develop positive attitudes regarding their capacity to lead a group. For example, to legitimize the conflict that many students feel between the desire to remain in the protected place of the classroom and the desire to develop and move forward to a professional capacity (Schon, 1991), each student was asked for a statement describing his/her place on the continuum between leader and led. Repeated statements were: *'Leading for me is vague and frightening'*; *'I'm sorry I have to start leading'*; *'I'd rather stay a participant'*; and *'I can't wait to see my group.'* The discussion of the feelings and thoughts embodied in these statements raised to the surface the helplessness, anxiety and anger that many of the students felt about the need to take responsibility for leading a group and fostered the self awareness that is essential to the development of a new professional identity.

One of the problems of this stage of the program is that while becoming aware of their strong feelings, some of the students regressed and seemed to forget a good deal of the knowledge and skills they had learned. Such "regression" is normative during transitions (Friedman and Kaslow, 1986; Horner, 1988; Knowles, 1980). But in working through their doubts and ambivalence, the students discovered their inner strengths and the knowledge and skills they had "forgotten" and were enabled to shift their focus from themselves and their anxieties to the group they were to lead.

In this stage of the course, the instructor functioned largely as a supportive group leader who encouraged emotional working through. The focus was on the students' shifting feelings and needs as they grew into their new role. The teacher-supervisor served as something of a Winnicottian holding and containing mother, providing understanding, encouragement and emotional support.

Socialization to the Role of the Group Leader

The second stage of the course, analogous to Lewin's (1947) "moving" stage, was dedicated to forming leaders' pairs and drawing up the interven-

tion plans. Our training utilizes the co-leadership model. Although there are some reservations about this model, we chose it because of its reputed effectiveness, its ability to provide the novice leader with security and support, and its analogy to the two parent family, which we felt could serve the parents in the perspective groups (Ben Yakar, 1994; Holifrom, 1969; Rosenbaum, 1971; Strozier, 1997).

Most training programs do not allocate time specifically to the formation and cohesion of the leader pair or to the development of strategies for professional communication and working together (Kacen, 1994). The frequent result among novice leaders is confusion, tension, and conflict, which reduces their ability to lead and sometimes also harms their group.

In the new course, Dicks et al.'s (1980) model of paired group leadership was adopted to help the students make the transition from study companions to professional colleagues. The students were first asked to consider the qualities that they personally needed or wanted in a partner, and these qualities were discussed in the group before the students were sent off to make their selections in private. The purpose of the discussion was to make each student aware of what he or she was looking for in a partner and hence more ready to accept and communicate with the partner they chose. Then, once they were teamed up, each member of the couple gave expression to his/her anxieties and conflicts and the pair worked out their disagreements with one another. Then together they decided what type of parents group they preferred and worked out between themselves the principles on which they wanted to run the group, how they would deal with the difficulties they anticipated, what they expected of one another and so forth. In Dicks et al.'s terms, they explored and adjusted their "personal fit" to each other and to the type of group they planned, gave expression to their performance anxieties and worked out, as much as possible, their interpersonal conflicts.

For the present purpose one of the major tasks of this stage was for each pair to draw up a detailed intervention plan for their group. This included such matters as the theoretical foundations for the group, the major issues they expected to cover and in what order, and the exercises the participants would be asked to do. For this purpose the principles of planning interventions learned at the BA level were reviewed and the students were instructed to read up on the literature in their chosen problem and on similar groups. The students were also helped to plan the intervention techniques and subjects of discussion suited to each stage of the group process. The reasons for the detailed planning were to decide on basic matters at the pre-group stage so as to avoid later uncertainty and conflict, to cement the leader pair and make it more effective, and to enable the students to market a clearly defined product in the third stage of the course.

In this part of the course, the instructor functioned more as a group super-

visor, who provided theoretical and practical information, on the one hand, and concrete assistance with the tasks that the students had to complete on the other.

Marketing the Group

The third and last part of the course focused on marketing the parents groups. By this stage the students were more self confident, more identified with the leader role, and had formulated objectives and planned their interventions. In Lewin's (1947) terms, the students had moved to the third phase, the "freezing" stage of attitude change, characterized by the ability to apply what one has learned. In this part of the program, the students applied to marketing both the plan they had drawn up for their groups and their newly developed sense of professional identity.

Before the introduction of the transitional course, marketing had been very difficult work for most of the students. In fact, it was the most salient obstacle to their starting to lead a group on time. It was not only that marketing presents external obstacles, but the anxiety that many of the students felt in their role transition prevented them from applying to marketing the basic skills, such as needs assessment and intervention planning, that they all had.

Too many students simply did not succeed in persuading a social work agency to sponsor a group, while some of those who did succeed failed to attract clients. They were hesitant, unsure of themselves, and presented themselves as groping students rather than as professional group leaders. None had formal marketing skills. On the whole, they were not very attractive salespersons and did not evoke confidence. Since social scientists explain that the persuasiveness of a message is closely related to the confidence and attractiveness that the source of the message evokes (Gergen and Gergen, 1981), it is not surprising that the agency directors they approached often turned them away.

The first order of business in this part of the course was to overcome the profession's negative perception of marketing (Digiuliou, 1984; Fine and Fine, 1986). The values and code of ethics of the helping professions in general and of social work in particular make it appear that there is a contradiction between the principles of the profession and the principles of marketing. Marketing is perceived as manipulative and marketers as persons who will do anything to sell at any price. The stereotypic perception is that marketing shows a lack of professionalism.

On the other hand, several scholars have pointed out that the opposition to professionals engaging in marketing is rooted in a patronizing attitude towards the client (Ben Tzvi, 1982; Espy, 1993). They argue that the patronizing view that clients are incapable of choosing and making an appropriate

decision about the type and quality of the services they receive prevents professionals from dealing with the entire matter of marketing their services.

Our course incorporated the view that the marketing of social services is a legitimate and necessary part of the intervention process. It was presented as a reaching out process which could serve as a professional tool and means for meeting real and sometimes pressing needs. In the classroom, the students discussed the potential conflict between their need to market a group in order to meet the course requirements and their professional obligation to meet the needs of the target population. Needless to say, identifying and meeting the needs of the population were presented as the guiding motives.

The actual marketing skills were taught and practiced in three consecutive stages. First, attention was paid to augmenting the students' skills in community mapping and service assessment (Kaminski, Kleinman, and Sadan, 1990; Laufer, 1992). Among the issues discussed in class were how to identify the community agency most likely to attract their target population, how to introduce a new program into an agency, and how to integrate an outside person into an agency's regular workforce. Then, each student was sent to interview the directors of services where they might offer their intervention program so as to identify the needs of the agency and to find out whether a parents group was at all relevant and, if so, what kind of group. The idea was for them to make the heads of the agencies aware of any existing but unmet need in their area.

Following this, the students learned to plan the "sales meeting," which has been found to have a strong impact on the success of marketing in general and the marketing of welfare services in particular (Espy, 1993). Using closed circuit video and role playing, they practiced their presentation and answered potential questions. Their presentations were then analyzed with the help of the course instructor. Lastly, the students' real sales meetings were analyzed in class, based on their videotape reconstructions of the meetings. The factors that promoted and detracted from a successful sale were identified and suggestions were made for improvement.

In this part of the course, where the focus was on teaching new skills and the instruction had to be more directive, the instructor acted as a "coach" (Middleman and Rhodes, 1985; Schon, 1991). The teaching was relatively structured, cognitive and task oriented, with direct and immediate feedback for the performance of all the marketing skills. At the same time, the students were encouraged to act independently and autonomously.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

By the end of the "transitional" program, the students had succeeded in bridging between the knowledge and skills they had acquired in the previous

semesters and the demands of the leader role. They created an intervention plan and most of them successfully marketed and led their groups at the time designated in the training program. Most of them reported feelings of efficacy and a strengthened professional role identity.

The new course has been taught to three recent classes in the School of Social Work. In contrast to what had happened before this course was introduced, the period for the supervised fieldwork was devoted entirely to leading and supervising the groups in the various service agencies and time was not wasted in finding and forming the groups to lead. The learning in the fieldwork was more effective than in the past both because of the relative preparedness of the group leaders and because of the proper utilization of the fieldwork period.

Although the program was not followed up by systematic research, discussion with the students and other staff members and analysis of our experiences as teacher-supervisors of the course suggest that the allotment of a full semester to the transition to the leader role helped the students cope with the difficulties stemming from the changes that were required of them.

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