

## AN INFORMATION PAPER ON THE USE OF GROWTH GROUPS IN HONG KONG

*(Prepared by the Concern Group on the Use of Growth Groups, Division of Clinical Psychology, the Hong Kong Psychological Society.)*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 The Concern Group on the Use of Growth Groups

In the past couple of years, there has been an apparent surge in the public's interest on group activities which purports to help people to improve self-awareness, personal effectiveness, problem-solving and interpersonal relationships. These groups are run under various names. One example is "Life Dynamics" which has attracted a large number of participants. Feedback from members after participation was mixed. Although there are no formal complaints, members of the Division have time and again received enquiries about the efficacy of such groups, some of which by participants who suffered from various degrees of emotional disturbances because of their experiences in such groups. Similar enquiries have even been placed by the Consumer Council. As an integral group of mental health professionals, members of the Division feel the need to study and address the issue. The Concern Group on the Use of Growth Groups is therefore set up in September, 1993 with the view to study the use of growth groups in the local community and to write an information paper on the subject.

#### 1.2 Purpose and Contents of the Present Paper

The present paper surveys current literature on groups with the view to stimulate thinking about the present state of running groups, especially growth groups, in the local setting. It is hoped that group leaders or participants alike can benefit from the materials presented in either running or joining groups. In view of the scarcity of material directly addressing issues in the running of growth groups in the relevant literature, members of the Concern Group felt it necessary to borrow a great deal of concepts from literature on running therapeutic or other types of groups. Moreover, though the form and purpose of groups may vary, their characteristics and mechanisms are very similar. Hence, in the present paper there is no attempt to differentiate growth group from other types of groups. Even in section 2 where characteristics of growth groups are discussed, it is not difficult to see that many of the distinctions are arbitrary and some applies to other types of groups too. Growth groups, like others, could do both good and harm. Therefore, there is no reason to exempt leaders of growth groups from the stringent standards set on other leaders of other groups. For the same reason, participants of growth groups deserves the same vigorous protection as do their counterparts in other groups.

In Section 2, a general introduction to the use of growth groups is presented. This section covers the definition of growth groups; the reasons why people choose to join such groups; the potential advantages and harm from participation and important aspects of the group experience.

Section 3 focuses on the roles played by group leaders. The importance of personality variables, training and professional ethics for people who run growth group is discussed.

Section 4 is devoted to the discussion of what the public should know when they consider joining a growth group, how they should choose a suitable one and what rights they have as participants. As leader and participation behaviours are really two sides of a coin, there is considerable overlapping in the issues discussed in this and the last session. However, in Section 4, the focus of discussion is mainly from the vantage point of group participants, that is, how they may expect their leaders to behave and their rights as well as the rightful demands they may make on their leaders.

In Section 5, the last section, implications of the present paper, its use, and suggestions for further local research in the use of growth groups will be presented.

Perhaps it could not be emphasized more right from the start that the purpose of this paper is not to discourage the use of growth groups or to criticize their effectiveness, although reading through the stringent requirement for group leaders and participants, there may be a negative impression that the

use of growth groups are dangerous. In a way, they are but the same can be for any other helping methods, where there is but a fine line of difference between use and abuse. Members of the Concern Group are merely hoping to point out, for both leaders and participants of growth groups, the various pitfall they may find in their group experience with a view that growth groups should be used in a positive manner that brings out their best effect.

## **2. GROWTH GROUPS: A GENERAL REVIEW**

### **2.1 Definition: Group Work in General**

Although group work has emerged as a conscious professional activity, there is little consensus regarding its definition, purposes, methods, and techniques (Toseland and Rivas, 1986). The Association for Specialists in Group Work has defined group work as:

*"a broad professional practice that refers to the giving of help or the accomplishment of tasks in a group setting. It involves the application of group theory and process by a capable professional practitioner to assist an interdependent collection of people to reach their mutual goals, which may be personal, interpersonal, or task-oriented in nature"*

According to this definition, a great variety of groups falls within the realm of group work. Some examples are:

- \* Task/ Work Groups (e.g., action groups, committees)
- \* Guidance/ Psychoeducational Groups
- \* Treatment/ Remedial Groups
- \* Growth Groups

### **2.2 Characteristics of Growth Groups**

#### **2.2.1 Settings and formats**

Growth groups can be found in a variety of settings such as schools, social service agencies, religious organizations, and commercial companies. It can be under the camouflage of different names like personal growth workshops, human potential development groups, encounter groups ... etc. The format can also be varied in the range of training course, talks, unstructured and structured activities.

#### **2.2.2 Purpose**

Growth groups focus on facilitating members to increase self-awareness as well as to discover internal resources of strength so that they can live to their fullest extend. The group context is used as a vehicle to enable members to become aware of, to expand, and to change their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour regarding self and others. Interpersonal relationship usually used as a major force to facilitate changes.

#### **2.2.3 Participant**

A growth-oriented component in group work implies enhancement in sociopsychological health rather than treatment of illness. As a result, growth groups usually only include those "mentally healthy" people who seek for further improvement. Many members, in fact, are high functioning individuals who have more awareness on self-functioning.

#### **2.2.4 Format**

Growth groups are usually time-limited lasting from several weeks to several months with a frequency of at least one meeting per week. Activities vary a great deal. However, there are some core components common to most groups:

- a. Participants are often required to open up themselves and be honest in sharing of their personal experience. They are encouraged to avoid intellectualization and to talk about their feelings and perceptions with other members. In fact, it has always been emphasized that the success of growth groups depend heavily on the willingness of the participants to achieve the above.

b. The use of uncommon/ "risk-taking" behaviour in order to facilitate the discovery of a new dimension of self. Related to this, non-verbal modalities and exercises (e.g. fantasy, sensory-awaking exercise, mediation, touching etc.) are often used to accomplish the above goal.

c. An atmosphere of trust and mutual support is cultivated for eliciting and expressing emotions.

#### 2.2.5 Effect

Common responses after a successful growth group, as described by the participants, include a feeling of refreshment, more alive, more spontaneous, more aware of total experience, as well as increase intimacy (among members and/or transferred to other settings).

However, it should be emphasized that, because of the difficulty in defining growth groups, many so-called "growth groups" may not be dealing with personal growth issues as mentioned above and some supposedly "neutral" growth groups may have devastating effect on the participants if they are not conducted by qualified professionals.

#### 2.2.6 A Comparison between Growth Groups and Traditional Counselling/ Psychotherapeutic Groups

	<u>Growth Groups</u>	<u>Counselling/ Psychotherapeutic Groups *</u>
<b>Purpose</b>	To facilitate self-awareness & to develop potentials.	To change behaviour & to correct problems. Generally, to improve coping and problem-solving skills.
<b>Format</b>	Number of participants and setting may be varied according to needs. Duration limited and minimum frequency of contact is once per week.	Number of participants usually not exceeding 15. Usually conducted in institutional settings. Duration fixed and minimum frequency of contact is once per week.
<b>Leadership</b>	Leader as facilitator and role model. Professional qualification of leader varies.	Leader as expert to effect change. Leader must have formal professional training (preferably at least a master degree) in one of the following: clinical psychology, counselling psychology and social work.
<b>Member</b>	Participants are normal functioning individuals who seek to further improve themselves.	Participants varied from individuals with severe mental disorder to those encountering minor transient difficulties. Usually, participants have common problems.
<b>Communication</b>	Highly interactive. Members take responsibility to communicate. Self-disclosure moderate to high.	Professional leader takes the responsibility to facilitate communication. Self-disclosure moderate to high.
<b>Effect</b>	Improved sociopsychological well-being and more able to live to the fullest extent.	Behaviour changes leading to better adjustment to life.

- \* Although strictly speaking, counselling and psychotherapeutic groups are different, there is much in common between them to warrant their inclusion under the same category in this table.

The above table shows that the difference between growth groups and counselling or psychotherapeutic groups is perhaps no more than a matter of degree in the intensity of the group experiences. Growth groups, like other forms of group is not just "fun activities". They should be taken seriously and standards must be set for their running. These will be discussed in greater details in later sections.

### 2.3 The Local Scene

Information concerning groups or growth group in the local setting is very scarce. The following is based on a survey by the Breakthrough Magazine in 1993. Although it is not a comprehensive survey, it may serve to give some ideas about the status of growth groups in Hong Kong.

#### Targeted Participants

Most growth groups are opened to all people of 18 years or above. Only a few specify additional requirements like qualifications, (mental) health condition etc., of the participants.

#### Fees

Fees charged range from HK\$1,150 for a 4-day workshop to HK\$15,500 for a 13-day course. The fees charged depends on the nature of the organizations running the groups. Non-profit making organizations providing community services or are associated with training institutions usually charge less than commercially run groups.

#### Qualification of the Trainers

Few specify the qualifications of the trainers though many of them do adopt a theoretical model.

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Most workshops share the common characteristics of growth, viz.:

- \* emphasis on experiential learning rather than didactic teaching
- \* require participants to share their personal experience with others

#### Effects

Claimed effects range from simple increase in self-awareness to things like "create unlimited success" and "fully actualize your dreams and life vision".

However, nearly all groups surveyed have not mentioned the possible harmful effects of growth groups.

### 2.4 Why do People Join Groups?

Cohen & Smith (1976) see the "group movement" in America as a consequence of man's frustration with the series of changes that took place since the Industrial Revolution which has made man the slave of machines. The World Wars and the great Recession has further aggravated man's existential anxiety and "man's existence now became less purposeful and more fearful. The means by which he had intended to master nature had instead mastered him." Man needs to feel that he is in control of his environment again and that he can grow and fulfil his potential. (May et al. 1958 cited in Cohen & Smith) "Thus, there has developed a real need for the development of skills in communication -- especially communication within and between groups. This is seen as one of the main routes to alleviating loneliness and the feeling of being lost in an incomprehensible and overpowering mass of people with whom there is no apparent common bond." It is against such a background that the "group movement" developed and groups are widely accepted as a very powerful means through which man can learn about and change himself as well as his social environment.

In the local scene, the reason for the increased popularity of growth groups is probably the same as that which gives force to the group movement in the States, namely, the need to combat man's

existential crisis. In many ways, the development of the society of Hong Kong are reminiscent of the development in the States over the past few decades. With the raise in the standard of general education, rapid expansion of commercial influences, technical advances in general living and the industries, and finally the added pressure from political uncertainties in the recent years, people become increasingly alienated from one another. Communication between people becomes superficial. Honesty in expression of feelings is often ridiculed or even exploited. True friendship becomes a rarity and relationship become fragile. Many people, especially the socially affluent, hope to find solutions to the above problems in growth groups. They join groups in order to reexamine their meaning for existence, to learn more about themselves so that they could cope better with the problems in their lives. Most important of all, they hope to feel supported, accepted and hence, secure again.

## 2.5 What does the Growth Group Experience Offer?

Douglas (1991) suggest that people who choose to join a group "usually have in mind that joining a group will produce benefits for them, which, as far as they are aware, they cannot achieve in solation either at all or in satisfactory measure."

Cohen & smith (1976) write that "the group approach provides an opportunity for creating an authentic parallel to some of the life situations with which the individual has to deal. The group becomes a microcosm of 'life on the outside' and thus provides an effective training and testing ground within a realistic, controlled, and supervised environment. Also there is the possibility of people with similar problems learning from and helping one another."

Corey & Corey (1982) share similar views that the group experience facilitates participants to explore their style of relating to others and to learn more effective social skills. The group setting offers support for new behaviour and encourages experimentation. Besides, there is a re-creation of the everyday world through contacting a wide range of personalities, and the participants can receive feedback which is richer and more diverse than that available in a one-to-one setting. Moreover, certain factors that facilitate personal growth are more likely to exist in groups. For instance, in groups, members have the opportunity to learn about themselves through the experience of others, to experience emotional closeness and caring that encourages meaningful disclose of self, and to identify with the struggles of others members.

Some researchers, especially the analytically-oriented ones, go one step further to postulate that the group experience is reminiscent of early family experiences, thus trying to explain the powerful impact that a group can have on its individual members. According to these writers, at the subconscious level, people join groups also to ex-experience the kind of nurturing and supportive maternal relationship in their early childhood days.

Apart from dealing with the existential crisis, people may join a growth group in order to have company. Some join groups in order to deal with crises in their lives. They may be seeking temporary shelters from or solutions to their own personal problems. They hope to find that they are not alone in their predicaments. Some may even hope to find others who are worse off than they are. There are also those who are not satisfied with their relationships and seeking ways to improvement them. Some look for a whole transformation of their personality, after hearing the accounts by their friends of how they have been changed. As people are motivated by so many different reasons to join growth groups, it is important to ask the question: Can growth groups really cater for all of their needs? There are obviously some who may join a growth group for the wrong reasons. People suffering from some intense personal conflicts may find their needs better served by individual therapy or even family therapy.

Notwithstanding the advantages of the group experiences put forward by the proponents of the "group movement", things do go wrong in groups. "The negative experience of effects perpetuate the unresolved controversy between the advocates and antagonists of group work." (Fisher et al. 1991)

## 2.6 What can go wrong in a group?

Corey & Corey (1982) write that "A person may enter a group feeling relatively comfortable and leave feeling vulnerable and defenceless. Areas of personal conflict maybe exposed for the first time, causing much pain and leading to a new self-awareness that is difficult to cope with. A person's outside life may be drastically affected, for family members may have adverse reactions to changes. Participants may be left, at the conclusion of a group, in no better condition than when they began the group; they may even feel less equipped than ever to cope with the demands of daily life."

The group process is very complicated because what takes place in it is a product of an infinite amount of possibilities as very different personalities interact. Support could be turned to pressure, and sharing into competition. The kind of nurturing experiences which one seeks to depended on could be turned into nightmares. Wright (1989) notes that " The individual brings with him experiences, prohibition, permission and approval for certain ways of relating which were learned in his family of origin. This 'learned behaviour' will be recreated in all groups, even when it is inappropriate, unless it is successfully challenged and the individual is helped to develop other more appropriate ways of relating." From the many "casualties" of groups, we can see that the so-called "learned-behaviour" is not always successfully challenged nor is an individual always capable of developing more appropriate ways of relating.

The success or failure of the group experience hinges on both leader and participant variables. The group process itself is a powerful one and the importance of the role of the leader in steering the right course through a group is unequivocal. The leader's personality, knowledge, motive and integrity are all important factors which will affect his conduct as a leader. On the other hand, the participants' understanding of what the group is about, their expectations, misconceptions and personal problems ...etc. all have direct bearings on their responses to the group experience. Therefore, in order to make a group work, both leaders and participants should have a thorough understanding of what is going to happen in the group. There should be clear-cut guidelines for the behaviour of leaders and participants. Leaders should know their limits and participants should know their rights. The leader and participant variables will be discussed in detail in the following two sections.

## 3. GUIDELINES FOR GROUP LEADERS

Bion (1961) points out that group members tend to have strong dependency, especially in the initial stage of group development, on the leader. It is as if "the group has met to obtain security from one individual on whom they depend, and the group leader is **fully expected to provide whatever direction and protection** is necessary to keep members safe and keep matters moving." Corey & Corey (1982) point out that a by-product of the growth of the group movement is the "danger of inadequate leadership". "Some people attend a few weekend workshops as participants and then decide, with very little additional experiences to lead groups of their own. ... These kinds of leaders **can do extensive damage** and, in the process, cause participants to close themselves off from the possibility of seeking any type of therapy or counselling in the future." It is such kind of "group leaders" that poses the gravest concern to the local mental health professionals. Such leaders can foster dependency, instead of helping members to grow. They can exploit, knowingly or otherwise, the emotions of members in order to stay in control. Some may even do this for other selfish motives.

The situation may be worsened when, for instance in Hong Kong, people who run groups can be anybody. They do not necessarily have the qualifications or training to lead groups. There is as yet no law governing who can lead groups and what they can or cannot do in their groups. Moreover, some group leaders may not even be members of learned societies, which mean that their actions and behaviour may not be bound by professional ethics. Although one may argue that there are very good group leaders who are without professional qualification or membership, these are perhaps more likely the exceptions rather than the rules. In the absence of other better criteria to measure the fitness of a leader, a good basic training, and the obligation to be bound by codes of professional conducts set by learned societies are perhaps the only guarantee of good leader behaviour.

In Hong Kong, most counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists are members of professional societies. They are bound by these societies' code of professional conducts. However, for many of these societies,

there may be no separate guidelines in their existing codes to cover specifically the conducts of group leaders. As the increase in the popularity of growth groups locally has only a short history, there is naturally not, as yet, a separate code for growth group leaders. At present, the following guidelines, based on the **Ethical Guidelines for Group Counsellor** by the Association for Specialist in Group Work (ASGW, 1989), can be used for reference. It should be emphasized that the guidelines quoted are not exclusively for group leaders but they apply to counsellors/ psychologists in general too. It is hoped that with accumulation of experiences, a separate guideline for local group leaders can be developed.

### 3.1 Professional Competence and Training

*ASGW guideline: Group leaders shall not attempt any techniques unless thoroughly trained in its use or under supervision by an expert familiar with the intervention.*

Professional group workers should know their limitations and recognize that they cannot lead all kinds of groups or work with all kinds of clients. Nevertheless, all professional counsellors should possess basic knowledge and skills in group work. In its Professional Standards for Training of Group Counsellors, the ASGW (1989) sets out knowledge competencies, skill competencies, and suggested supervised clinical group experience for leaders. (For details please refer to appendix A.)

Critique of the above standards centres mainly on their lack of applicability in daily work due to the lack of a vehicle for enforcement. Besides, most training programmes in group counselling fall short of the standards. (Zimpfer, Waltman, Williamson, and Huhn, 1985) The case is valid for the local scene. It is rather unrealistic to expect only fully qualified group leader to conduct groups as there are so few of them. In the meantime, the prospective group leaders should exercise self-discipline to keep on critical review of their works. Co-leadership, consultation with peers and experienced leaders, and on-the-job training may be required. In the long-run, specific training for leading groups should be incorporated in the training of mental health professionals, particularly for those who intend to do group work. Basic training in clinical psychology, counselling, and social work should be considered as pre-requisites for people who desire to further their studies in running groups.

### 3.2 Group Recruitment and Membership

*ASGW guideline: The group leader shall conduct a pre-group interview with each prospective member for purposes of screening, orientation, and, in so far as possible, shall select group members whose needs and goals are compatible with the established goals of the group; who will not impede the group process; and whose well-being will not be jeopardized by the group experience.*

However, group leaders are faced with the difficult task of determining whether this person should be included in this type of group and at this time. This is particularly true for group leaders conducting short-term intensive group, such as weekend workshops and marathon groups.

Yalom (1985), when writing about the choice of clients for treatment groups, states that it is easier to identify the people who should be excluded than those who should be included in a group. Citing clinical studies, he lists the brain-damaged, paranoid, hypochondriacs, drug or alcohol addicts, acute psychotics, and sociopaths as poor candidates for a heterogeneous outpatient intensive therapy group. These rules apply to screening members for growth groups too. Yalom also points out that the participants' level of motivation to participate is the most important variable in affecting the outcome of groups. Groups are also particularly useful for people who have problems in the interpersonal domain, such as inability to make or maintain intimate contacts, fears of being assertive, and dependency issues.

Other authors (Corey & Corey, 1988) suggests the alternative that the initial session is used for screening and informed consent. Members can be encouraged to come to the first session or two and consider the suitability by actually experiencing the group. A private meeting to explore these concerns can be arranged after a few sessions if a prospective participant has any reservations. The participants, however, should be well informed and prepared for the anxiety and frustration commonly found in the beginning few sessions in groups. Moreover, a prospective participant who is undergoing psychotherapy and counselling should be encouraged to consult his or her therapist or

counsellor before becoming involved in a group. With the consent of the client, the release of relevant information to the group leader for screening is facilitative.

### 3.3 The Preparation of Group Participants

*ASGW guidelines:*

- (1) *Group leader shall fully inform group members, in advance and preferably in writing, of the goals in the group, qualifications of the leader, and procedures to be employed.*
- (2) *Group leaders shall explain, as realistically as possible, exactly what services can and cannot be provided within the particular group structure offered.*

Yalom (1985) is an advocate of systematic preparation for people in groups therapy. The following areas should be addressed to:

#### 3.3.1 Voluntary and Involuntary Participation

*ASGW guideline: Group leaders shall inform members that participation is voluntary and that they may exit from the group at any time.*

Corey & Corey (1988) highlight that when group participation is mandatory, leaders should take special care in discussing with the participants their rights, expectations and the legal consequences of noncompliance to join the group. The members should be given the opportunity to ventilate their feelings about involuntary participation.

In case of programme requirement for trainees in helping professionals to join a group, the students should be alerted the relevance of their training with the group experience. In this regard, Forester-Miller and Duncan (1990) offer the following guidelines: (1) the personal-growth experience should not be related to the screening of students or entering or continuing in the programme; (2) no aspects of the student's personal life, value system, or group behaviour may be considered in evaluating the student's academic performance in the group experience; (3) students should be evaluated only on their level of group skills; and (4) students are not allowed to lead a personal growth group of their peers without the presence of a professional staff member who supervises the group experience.

#### 3.3.2 The Freedom to Leave a Group

Members have the right to leave the group, but leaders need to stress the importance of a careful commitment and the procedures for leaving a group. The participants should understand the importance of informing both the group leader and the members before making a final decision. Leaders can discuss the possible risks involved in leaving the group prematurely and the negative impacts on the remaining members. Leaders can also encourage members to take time to consider whether to stay in the group as well as to think honestly about the factors that have led to the decision to leave.

#### 3.3.3 Psychological Risks

*ASGW guideline: Group leaders shall stress the personal risks involved in any group, especially regarding potential life-changes, and help group members explore their readiness to face these risks.*

Participants can be informed the group process may precipitate a crisis; areas of personal conflict may be exposed for the first time; family members may have adverse reactions to changes; and the chance of their feeling less equipped than ever to cope.

In conjunction with exploring potential risks, leaders can explore preoccupation and misconceptions they may have brought with them to the groups. The early exploration can help members to determine how realistic they are and try to put some of them to rest.

The leaders need to stress that group members have the right to decide for themselves what to explore and how far to go. Participants must learn the difference between appropriate and



facilitative self-disclosure and disclosure that leaves nothing private. Leaders should be alerted to the risks of invasion of privacy, scape-goating and confrontation and they should take measures to prevent such negative effects.

It is also the responsibility of leaders to warn members against making major decision too soon after an intensive group experience. What the individual may see as the result of newfound spontaneity or decisiveness may be due merely to a burst of energy generated by the group. However, it is not the leader's role to stand in the way of members' decisions after thorough consideration.

### 3.3.4 Confidentiality

*ASGW guideline: Group leaders shall protect members by defining clearly what confidentiality means, why it is important, and the difficulties involved in enforcement.*

Leaders should emphasize at various stages of the group's evolution this importance of maintaining confidentiality. Confidentiality can be broken by carelessness as well as gossip. Corey & Corey (1992) expect that members will want to talk about their group experiences with significant people in their lives. Members can be encouraged not to discuss identities or specific situation. Talking about what they learned in group is more safe than how they acquired insights or how they actually interacted in a group.

When working with minors or with clients who are unable to give voluntary and informed consent, it is essential that the professional exert special care to protect these persons' best interests (APA, 1989). For the mandatory group, members should be informed of any reporting procedures required. In case of working with children, their parents can be given some feedback concerning the child, but care must be taken not to reveal specific things that the child mentioned. One way to provide feedback to parents is through a session involving one or both parents, the child, and the group leader.

Leaders should point out the limits on confidentiality at the outset. Corey & Corey (1987) state that confidentiality may be broken in those unusual circumstances as: (1) clients are likely to do serious harm to themselves or to others; (2) clients are gravely disabled; (3) child abuse of any kind is suspected; and (4) clients give specific written permission.

Leaders shall provide prospective members with specific information about any specialized or experimental activities in which they may be expected. Members shall be informed about any observation of the group through one-way mirrors, or any audio or video taping of sessions and how tapes will be used. When the group materials are used in writing or in lectures, prior consent or adequate disguise of all identifying information is required. (APA, 1989)

## 3.4 **Providing Group Service to Members**

### 3.4.1 Use of Group Techniques

In addition to the ASGW guideline listed in 3.1, Corey, Corey & Callanan (1988) provide guidelines in practice to avoid abusing techniques. These are:

- There should be a therapeutic purpose and grounding in some theoretical framework.
- The client's self-exploration and self-understanding should be fostered.
- At their best, techniques are invented in each unique client situation, and they assist the client in experimenting with some form of new behaviour.
- Techniques are not used to cover up the group leader's incompetence; rather, they are used to enhance the group process.
- Techniques are introduced in a timely and sensitive manner, and they are abandoned if they are not working.
- The tone of a leader is consistently invitational, in that members are given the freedom to participate or not participate in a given experiment.
- It is important that leaders use techniques they have some knowledge about and that they

be aware of the potential impact of these techniques.

Leaders should be equipped to cope with powerful feelings, particularly aggression. Members have the right to be protected from either verbal or physical assaults. Caution should also be made on using nonaggressive physical techniques, such as touching. It is important that members are given choices to participate in touching exercises and avoid stimulating affection. As a general rule, leaders employing such techniques, especially those that are likely to arouse strong emotions, with members should ensure that a trusting relationship has been established. (Corey, Corey, Callanan, & Russell, 1992).

*ASGW guideline: Group leaders shall ensure to the extent that it is reasonably possible that each member has the opportunity to utilize group resources and interact with the group by minimizing barriers such as rambling and monopolizing time.*

Leaders need not to take full responsibility for these intervention, for the group too has a share, but it is the leaders' task to structure the group so as to spare the group energy to productive work, particularly in the initial stage. Leaders also protect members from coercion of disclosure, scapegoating by ganging up members, and inappropriate confrontation.

In the final stage, members should be provided an opportunity to clarify the meaning of their experience, to consolidate the gains they have made, and to make decisions about the new behaviours they want to carry away from the group and apply to their everyday lives. Leaders should not assume the transfer of learning from the group to daily life to occur automatically. Members also need to prepare to deal with those they are intimate with. Corey, Corey and Callanan(1988) suggest to caution participants to give people on the outside a chance to get used to their changes. Role-playing to give member an opportunity to practice responding to others in different ways can be carried out. When strong but previously hidden feelings are aroused, it is important that members are helped to gain insight or even to resolve the issues that are behind these feelings. In some occasions, members can be prepared a sense of loss and depression after a group ends.

#### 3.4.2 Personal Involvement

Several guidelines (AACD, 1988; ASGW 1989; APA, 1989) state the importance to abstain from inappropriate personal relationships with clients. Leaders shall not misuse their professional role and power to advance personal or social contacts and sexual intimacies. Although what constitutes "inappropriate personal relationships" is not always clear, trying to determine it does demand honesty in examining one's own motivations and needs. A key question that leaders need to ask of themselves is whether the social relationship is interfering with the therapeutic relationship.

#### 3.4.3 Leader's Values and Needs

Leaders shall refrain from imposing their own agendas, needs, and values on group members. Corey and Corey (1992) agree the importance of leaders to be aware that extremely needy and dependent members may feel pressure to please the leader at all costs and hence assume the leader's value automatically. However, little is gained by refusing to express the value if asked. Expressed values are less likely to interfere with the progress of a group than values that are concealed.

Leaders shall also make every reasonable effort to treat each member individually and equally. Leaders need not like each member to the same degree, give each member equal time, and be equally interested in each. Leader should only avoid clinging to initial impressions of a member and they should keep themselves open to changing their reactions.

*ASGW guideline: Group leaders shall help promote independence of members from the group in the most efficient period of time.*

Leaders should avoid promoting dependence of members for the need to be needed; the need to depend on their work as a confirmation of their worth; and the need to make money.

### **3.5 Evaluation & Follow-up**

Leaders can develop some method of evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the group. Members may have a tendency to discount what they actually did in a group, and they may not be aware of the subtle changes they continue to make after the group ends. It is the leaders' responsibility to teach them how to recognize the ongoing changes they are making that are partially the result of what they learned in the group, and also evaluate the nature and degree of their changes.

*ASGW guideline: Group leaders shall provide between session consultation to group members and follow-up after termination of the group, as needed or requested.*

## **4. GUIDELINES FOR GROUP PARTICIPANTS**

Group experiences are new to many people in Hong Kong. Many prospective members of growth groups simply do not know what to expect from their groups. Yet, in order that they can really benefit from their group experiences, it is important for them to ask the right questions before hand and to know how they can conduct themselves in groups. The ideas listed in this section are meant to help participants to get more prepared for their group experience.

### **4.1 Psychological Preparations Prior to Group Participation**

Participation in growth groups is an individual undertaking to achieve personal goals. Before attending groups, participants need to clarify their needs and expectations. Group participants might be more concerned with self-actualization motives (as conceptualized in Maslow's hierarchy of needs) than basic drives. The more specific and clear the personal expectations, the more likely will personal gain from group experience occur. Personal needs and expectations must be carefully evaluated against the objectives of growth groups. The success of group experience hinges on the concurrence of group objectives and participant expectations. The need for growth groups must be carefully weighed against alternative forms of group or individual counselling experiences. As Corey and Corey (1982) aptly advises potential participants, "Do not join a group because someone you know thinks you should. Decide for yourself whether you want to be a member of a particular kind of group." Participants might discuss personal needs, suitability for growth groups with helping professionals or previous participants.

As pointed out earlier, it is quite common for participants to get "emotionally high" during the group process. They may need to realize that after the group disperses, they may not have the same kind of support in daily life as they did experience during the group. Significant others may not understand or provide adequate support in response to their new found changes. Some participants may even meet with resistance and antagonism when they deviate from old and familiar ways. As far as possible, participants may discuss anticipated setbacks and personal gains with their significant others before group participation.

Corey & Corey (1982) note the danger that "in opening themselves up to themselves and others during a group, people will become very vulnerable. Individual's insecurities need to be explored in some depth, and conflicts need to be worked through." These experiences sound threatening to most people but are at times indispensable in enhancing personal growth and understanding. Potential participants are encouraged to be psychologically prepared for possible challenge to personal value system and the ensuing "emotional crisis" which often spring up during the group process. Rogers (1957) points out that the self undergoes disorganization if too much denied material becomes conscious too abruptly.

### **4.2 Selection of Groups**

Potential participants often ask how they can make an informed decision about joining a particular group. While there are no guarantees that the group one picks will be the right one, it is important that participants follow some guidelines in the process of group selection.

#### 4.2.1 Leader Characteristics

Lieberman et al. (1973) summarize four basic dimensions of leader behaviours: "Stimulation, Caring, Meaning-Attribution, and Executive Function". They maintain that Caring and Meaning-Attribution are "associated with beneficial effects, whereas excessive Stimulation or inordinate attention to Executive Function (are) associated with negative outcomes". Leader qualification, leadership style and personality also have important bearings on the success of group running. Corey and Corey (1982) suggests that participants may check with others who know the group leader before they make decision. While some reports may be biased (either positively or negatively), feedback from people who have participated in a group conducted by that particular leader can be valuable.

Corey and Corey (1982) suggest that potential participants may consider interviewing the group leader before joining a group. The pregroup interview serves a number of purposes. First, it provides the leader with information to determine the client's readiness for group experience (Yalom, 1985). During this interview, the leader can explore an individual's expectations, clarify the goals and objectives of the group, discuss procedural issues, impart information about group process, and answer questions (Corey & Corey, 1987; Yalom, 1985). Yalom (1985) specifically stated that he uses the pregroup interview as a time to identify and correct a prospective members' misconceptions regarding group counselling.

Second, during the pregroup interview, the client may decide whether the leader inspires his or her trust and whether the group purpose and structure suits his or her needs. Caple and Cox (1989) maintain that "efforts to provide initial structure for groups ... is related to the development of attraction to the group." The client may need to know:

- What is the purpose and structure of the group?
- What are the responsibilities of the leader and of the members?
- What does the leader see as the risks of participation, and what safeguards does he or she take to minimize the risks?
- What is the method of deciding when a member should quit the group or when the group should be terminated?
- What kinds of results does the leader see in his/ her groups?
- What kinds of techniques are used?
- Is there an opportunity for individual sessions or other follow-up procedures as necessary?
- What is the leader's professional background and training? What are the qualifications as a group practitioner?
- What theoretical model does the leader use?

#### 4.2.2 Group Size and Participant Characteristics

Facilitator-participant ratio affects group effectiveness and the sharing opportunities of participants. Corey and Corey (1982) advise that groups of more than 16 or fewer than 5 members are best avoided. If a group is very small, there are not enough interaction possibilities. If a group is very large, group cohesion is hard to establish, and even a highly qualified leader may have trouble monitoring the interaction. For a group as large as 16, there should be at least two leaders.

Participant characteristics also influence group processes. The process of screening participants reduces the chance of including unsuitable clients. Depending on the group purpose, the degree of heterogeneity of participant background might facilitate or hinder group processes. In general, high homogeneity facilitates mutual sharing of issues of common concern. A heterogenous group is conducive to sharing of a wider scope of life experiences amongst members.

#### 4.2.3 Time considerations

Depending on group objectives, the duration of growth groups may stretch from one evening up to 5 days. The majority of growth groups lasts 2 to 3 days. Some marathon groups have

residential facilities. Generally speaking, the longer the group duration, the greater the impact. For some marathon encounter groups, sessions are held in continuous evenings after office hours. Participation might experience great physical and psychological strain. Mental exhaustion and stress may ensue. Under such circumstances, independent thinking is undermined and participants may become easily susceptible to suggestion or influence.

#### 4.2.4 Promotional Materials

Corey and Corey (1982) advise that participants need to "be cautious about responding to advertisements or to brochures and pamphlets circulated in the mail." Unjustified claims or vague objectives (e.g. "The workshop reunites you with your innocence and your enthusiasm for life.") need to be cautioned against. It is important to examine promotional materials in light of the considerations discussed in this section. Moreover, often former participants of certain growth groups would "sell" their experiences to their friends, urging them to join. Some of these former participants are motivated by a sense of mission, in ways analogous to missionaries trying to make converts. Some are subtly pressurized by organizers of the groups to "invite" others to share their wonderful experiences. They may feel that they have benefited so much that it would be wrong not to persuade their friends or beloved ones to join. In this connection, the saying, "one's meat is another's poison", should be a good reminder for those who are being persuaded or coerced into sharing another's experience. It is essential that each potential participant should make his own informed choice.

#### 4.2.5 Fees and Venue

Locally, growth groups charge a wide range of fees varying from several hundred to several thousand dollars. The fee charged depends on the organizer and the venue. As a general rule, groups run by non-profit making agencies cost less than commercially-run organizations. There is no evidence to suggest that the amount of fee charged or the luxury of the venue is proportional to the amount of personal gain from group experience.

### 4.3 **Consumer Rights**

As group participants are consumers of a service, their rights as consumers must be respected. They have full rights to ensure that for all the money, time and effort spent in attending groups, they are getting benefits for all its worth.

#### 4.3.1 Right to Information

Interested participants have rights of access to information which aids their selection. In particular, they should have initial understanding of questions as listed in 4.2.1.

#### 4.3.2 Right to Maintain Personal Boundaries

The majority of growth groups adopt experiential approach. The here-and-now is the focus. Self-disclosure and confrontation are common ingredients. Participants may experience pressure toward self disclosure. Confrontation may induce personal distress. Participants need to be reassured that they are entitled to keep their own personal boundaries and to take their time to get integrated into the group process. When they have doubts that self-disclosure is absolutely necessary, they have full rights to safeguard their right to privacy. It is alright for them to feel threatened, uneasy and not trusting when they are not ready. They may also take the liberty of voicing such feeling during group sharing.

#### 4.3.3 Right to Seek Follow-up Service

When problems arise during the group process (scapegoating, breach of confidentiality, emotional breakdown of members), participants are entitled to alert the group leader to their personal discomfort. Participants may, under the guidance of the group leader, seek professional assistance.

## 5. **RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE CONCERN GROUP**

### 5.1 **Training**

As mentioned earlier, the background of group leaders conducting groups in Hong Kong are varied.

Whilst some have extensive experience in conducting groups, some have little training in counselling or psychology. Opportunities for formal training for group leaders depends on the initiative of those interested. Often more substantial training for group leadership depends on overseas trainers who conduct local workshops. Courses for group training are almost absent at post-graduate level. In view of the shortfall in well-trained group leaders, the need for formal training should not be understated. Components of training programmes should involve academic (group counselling and group dynamics), observation, experiential and supervision components. (Horne, 1989; Merta and Sisson, 1991).

Before Hong Kong has sufficient trained professionals to conduct groups, all the mental health professionals who are involved in group activities should exercise strict self-discipline and recognize their own limitations. It is hoped that the guidelines listed in Section 3 should be used as reference by local group leaders throughout the territory. If this were the case, then it may be possible to compare procedures and set up standards which are supported by all who are involved in local group work. In the long run, locally developed guidelines should serve to restrict running of different groups by professionals of different training.

## **5.2 Research Directions**

Robinson and Ward (1990) survey on research activities among a randomly selected sample of ASGW (Association for Specialists in Group Work) members. 16 % are involved in research activities. It is observed that "non-practitioners (counsellor educators, consultants, administrators) are more likely than practitioners or students to conduct research" and that "insufficient time, funds, and employer support were most frequently reported as reasons for not conducting research". Similar statements might well describe the local situation. As growth groups proliferate, organized research effort (e.g. outcome of growth groups) would raise the overall quality of such groups. Interested and concerned parties should seriously consider researching on the trend/ development of growth groups in Hong Kong, the characteristics of such groups and their participants. Long term or longitudinal studies to follow up on growth group participants to study the effect of group experience on them will answer the most important question of all --- whether growth groups do serve the purposes they claim.

## **5.3 The Need for Public Education**

The history of growth groups in the local scene is relatively short. The recent years see the commercialization of similar groups. Such groups organized by profit-making organizations have been attended by thousands, many of whom middle-class executives or professionals. Participants' reasons for enrolment is as varied as their feedback. Some attend because of positive peer feedback or because such is in vogue or for other reasons. Many lack relevant knowledge of how growth groups help in personal development or of their rights as participants. The need for public education is pressing. Education effort, e.g. through the mass media or the Consumer Council, is urgent to prevent unnecessary damage as far as possible. In this connection, excerpts from Section 4 could be translated into Chinese and publicized so that participants are aware of their rights, and the pros and cons of joining the group that they choose. Moreover, participants who feel that they may have suffered from the group experiences should be encouraged to share their experience and to seek professional assistance when necessary. In addition, heads of agency or organizations should acquaint themselves with the potential advantages as well as harm which could be caused by growth groups and hence their careful scrutiny before sanctioning the provision of such groups by their organizations.

## **5.4 The Role of Professional Societies**

As it will take quite some time before public education has its effect and people begin to learn about their rights and problems when joining groups, professional societies such as the Division may consider to take up the responsibility of monitoring the situation. The Division may find it necessary to answer enquiries and to give advice on certain group programmes because members of the Division are in the position to help. Lastly, members of learned societies who have more experience in the running of groups locally should be encouraged to share them with their colleagues and to help in the work of public education.

**Appendix A****Knowledge, Skills and Supervised Experience Required by Leaders in Professional Standards for Training of Group Counsellors (ASGW, 1983)****Knowledge**

- the major theories of group counselling, including their differences and common concepts
- the basic principles of group dynamics and the key ingredients of group process
- one's own strengths and weaknesses, values, and other personal characteristics that have an impact on one's ability to function as a group leader
- ethical and professional issues special to group work
- updated information on research in group work
- the facilitative and debilitating roles and behaviours that group members may assume
- the advantages and disadvantages of group work and the situations in which it is appropriate or inappropriate as a form of therapeutic intervention
- the characteristics of group interaction and counsellor roles involved in the stages of a group's development

**Skills:**

- being able to screen and assess the readiness of clients to participate in a group
- having a clear definition of group counselling and being able to explain its purpose and procedures to group members
- diagnosing self-defeating behaviours in group members and being able to intervene in constructive ways with members who display such behaviours
- modelling appropriate behaviour for group members
- interpreting nonverbal behaviour in an accurate and appropriate manner
- using skills in a timely and effective fashion
- intervening at critical times in the group process
- being able to make use of major techniques, strategies, and procedures of group counselling
- promoting therapeutic factors that lead to change both in a group and within an individual
- being able to use adjunct group procedures, such as homework
- being able to work effectively with a co-leader
- knowing how to effectively bring a group session to a close and how to terminate a group
- using follow-up procedures to maintain and support group members
- using assessment procedures to evaluate the outcomes of a group

**Supervised Experience:**

- critiquing of group tapes
- observing group counselling sessions
- participating as a member in a group
- co-leading groups with supervision
- practicum experience - leading a group alone with critical self-analysis of performance as well as a supervisor's feedback
- internship - practice as a group leader with on-the-job supervision

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