Social Workers' Perspectives of Open Group Work Education in Social Work

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ABSTRACT

Anecdotal accounts suggest widespread use of open-entry groups in social work, yet research has not kept pace with this practice. Furthermore, the literature details a progressive decline in group work training within social work education. Workers may enter the field without specific training for groups with open membership and there is limited research and theory to guide practice and support learning. This article draws on findings from a qualitative research project that explored social workers' perceptions and experiences of open group work. The study aimed to gain an understanding of the skills, knowledge, and training social workers consider necessary for competent facilitation of open groups. Six social workers, recruited within Aotearoa New Zealand, participated in interviews which were analysed thematically. Participants reported gaps between their general group work training and practice realities, including minimal, if any, training for open group work. Support for workplace learning, such as mentoring, was similarly lacking. Participants reported steep learning curves and a sense of vulnerability and compromise around their open group work practice. The research underlines the need for both general and open group work training within social work education as well as mentoring and other group work practice support

INTRODUCTION

Positive outcomes, cost-effectiveness, and incidental alignment of these aspects with the neoliberal agenda, have contributed to the increased use of group work and international demand for skilled group workers (Bitel, 2014; Carey, 2016; Clements, 2008; Emond & Rasmussen, 2012; Glisson, Dulmus, & Sowers, 2012; Goodman, Knight, & Khudododov, 2014; Knight, 2017). To the extent that New Zealand social work has also been impacted by neoliberalism (Hyslop, 2016), the writers anticipate a similar rise in group work practice here. Nevertheless, the international literature details a mismatch between training and practice needs and the progressive decline in group work training within social work education (Andrews, 2015; Bitel, 2014; Carey, 2016; Clements, 2008; Glisson et al., 2012; Goodman & Munoz, 2004). This dilemma, potentially replicated in New Zealand, has significant implications for underrepresented areas of practice, such as *open* group work. Despite its complexity, open group work is curiously neglected in research and theory terms. The literature, most of which is referenced in this article, is dated and far from comprehensive. Given these issues, the writers sought to explore in-depth contemporary perspectives on open group work in Aotearoa. While the small sample and methodology employed precludes a transferable analysis, the findings offer important insights into some of the features of open group work practice in New Zealand.

BACKGROUND

Group work within social work is variously defined, but typically understood as a practice method shaped by, and exploiting, the mechanisms of group life (Toseland & Rivas, 2017). Social group work models have been classified as remedial, reciprocal or social goals oriented, reflecting the broad scope and heterogeneity of the practice (Papell & Rothman, 1966). Ironically, similar ideological forces have simultaneously prompted demand for some forms of group work (Bitel, 2014; Carey, 2016) and yet undermined social group work's traditional emphasis on social action (Andrews, 2015). McNicoll (2008) suggests this circumstance is the product of social work agencies responding to constraints imposed by government or charity funders. Many funders, "favor practice consistent with the dominant neo-liberal ideology . . . [which], emphasizes individuals instead of groups and communities" (McNicoll, 2008, p. 26). However, group work entails more than working with individuals en masse (Knight, 2017). There are different interventions and skills needed and different considerations in working with groups than in working with individuals and this dissimilarity makes group intervention a complex task (Toseland & Rivas, 2017; Trevithick, 2005).

In theory, social workers should be equally equipped to engage in individual casework, community and group work (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2012; International Federation of Social Workers, 2004; Social Work Registration Board, 2017). Nevertheless, research indicates group work is not granted equal accord with casework in the education of social workers (Gutman & Shennar-Golan, 2012; Kurland & Salmon, 2006; Macgowan & Vakharia, 2012). Support and skill development related to individual casework significantly outweighs consideration given to groups in both classroom and fieldwork experiences (Clements, 2008; Heft-LaPorte & Sweifach, 2011). Numerous commentators have noted the diminishing presence of the group work component and have called for renewed attention to this aspect

of social work education (Andrews, 2015; Bitel, 2014; Carey, 2016; Clements, 2008; Glisson et al., 2012; Goodman & Munoz, 2004).

Several international studies have surveyed students and concluded that their social work training did not adequately prepare them for group facilitation (Clements, 2008; Heft-LaPorte & Sweifach, 2011; Sweifach & Heft-LaPorte, 2009). Alarmingly, fewer than 33% of 1360 participants in one study possessed fundamental group work skills on completing their social work training (Sweifach & Heft-LaPorte, 2009). More specifically, some studies have identified gaps in students' knowledge of research and legal issues in relation to group work (Clements, 2008). Without training, group workers lack understanding of, and comfort with, the presence of group conflict (Garrett, 2005; Kurland & Salmon, 2006). Findings suggest group conflict is often viewed by untrained workers as interference, rather than as a necessary and functional group process (Garrett, 2005; Kurland & Salmon, 2006). Group workers who have limited understanding of conflict and other group dynamics are inclined to work with individuals in the group rather than working with the group as a whole (Bitel, 2014; Gitterman, 2004; Salmon & Kurland, 2006). Practitioners, without basic group work training, have also been identified as more controlling and less likely to reference developmental stage theory in their control-based decisions (Garrett, 2005).

The ongoing decline in group courses in social work has seen fieldwork instructors assuming greater responsibility for teaching students necessary group work skills (Clements, 2008). Studies have found students' motivation to practise and perceived group work learning are associated with the quality of the field instructor's group work knowledge and practice. Paradoxically, the fieldwork instructors' group work training and experience is often similarly limited (Clements, 2008; Goodman & Munoz, 2004; Heft-LaPorte & Sweifach, 2011; Sweifach & Heft-LaPorte, 2008). Heft-LaPorte and Sweifach (2011) observed that, "many field instructors (a) have a murky understanding of group work principles, skills, values, and techniques; and (b) are passing these misunderstandings on to students" (p. 241). Adding to this predicament, fieldwork instructors contend with a literature on group training in fieldwork education that appears contradictory and out of sync with actual practices (LaRocque, 2016). These issues may account for research findings that suggest opportunities for students to practise group work during fieldwork internships are increasingly limited or absent (Ward & Crosby, 2010). The lack of fieldwork opportunities has further ramifications, as supervised practical experience is considered essential to developing effective group work expertise (Goodman, Knight, & Khuododov, 2014; Heft-LaPorte & Sweifach, 2011; Knight, 2017; LaRocque, 2016).

As with other forms of group work, open groups require accomplished facilitators with suitable training (Brown, 2014; Turner, 2011). While closed groups do not accept new members once the group has started, open groups allow members to join at any point in the group's lifecycle. Galinsky and Schopler's (1987) research, relevant in the absence of more recent offerings, found open groups were therefore, a unique form of group work with different dynamics and increased leadership demands. Challenges aside, Turner highlights that, "with high demand for services and increasing emphasis placed on efficiency, open groups provide an attractive alternative to closed groups" (2011, p. 247). Open groups offer the significant advantage of preventing waitlists by providing clients with immediate access to support.

Nevertheless, despite a vast body of research and theory covering almost all aspects of group work and groups (Trevithick, 2005), open groups remain underrepresented in the literature. That open group work requires task-specific expertise (Trevithick, 2005) is, however, noted within the scant literature about open groups (e.g., Schopler & Galinsky, 1984). Writers also note that further conceptual clarification is needed to support social workers in their open group work practice (Galinsky & Schopler, 1987).

A nuanced conceptual awareness is required of group workers to respond skilfully to the distinct issues arising in open groups. The expectations of all group members need to be equalised to reduce the variance between old-timers and new arrivals (Schopler & Galinsky, 1990; Steinberg, 2014). Open groups can "be fraught with problems of cohesion and developmental challenges due to entries and exits" (Steinberg, 2014, p. 186). Group workers must therefore, be capable of recognising differences in group development in open groups, including the impact of group type, goals, and setting (Bailis, Lambert & Bernstein, 1978; Beeber, 1998; Hill & Gruner, 1973; Steinberg, 2014). While exits and entries are universal themes in open groups, different types of open groups as defined by extent and frequency of membership change, have distinctive developmental phases (Galinsky & Schopler, 1989; Schopler & Galinsky, 1990). On this basis, all types of open groups require mechanisms for managing the impact of change. Moreover, as Galinsky and Schopler (1989) have stipulated, "effective intervention requires an understanding of the unique developmental challenges characteristic of each group type" (pp. 107–108). Adding to these considerations, the impact of bringing members in at different stages of the group's development (Paradise, 1968) reinforces the comprehensive range of knowledge and skills required.

Contrary to the extensive scholarly attention to detailing group work skills and interventions, there are few descriptions of skills unique to open groups, or how generic skills apply in this situation. There is, however, some recognition that open groups require different skills and different emphases when using generic skills. Schopler and Galinsky (1984) found that "knowledge and skills related to group composition and group arrangements in a closed group are not sufficient to deal with the ever changing membership of an open group" (p. 6). Group workers must assume a more central role in carrying forth traditions and providing structure, particularly in groups that do not progress beyond the early stages of development (Schopler & Galinsky, 1984; Sulman, 1987). An adaptive leadership style is required to meet changing membership composition and conditions, and to transition between more and less active intervention according to group dynamics (Schopler & Galinsky, 1984; Turner, 2011). Group workers must manage many tensions resulting from mixed and unpredictable group composition. Skill in rapid individual and group assessment, and a variety of approaches to meet the needs of members present at any given session, are essential (Galinsky & Schopler, 1985; Keats & Sabharwal, 2008; Sulman, 1987; Turner, 2011).

Workers face the difficult task of achieving a balance between building on past sessions and ensuring each session can stand alone (Miller & Mason, 2012). A similar balance is required to maintain cohesion, consistency, and purpose, and yet foster a culture of acceptance of sometimes frequent membership change (Miller & Mason, 2012; Sulman, 1987). Workers must foster awareness of the group as an entity capable of helping members who attend a limited number of sessions. They must also work with established members

to keep the group moving forward (Miller & Mason, 2012). Considerable skill and flexibility are needed to advocate for the needs of, and develop a supportive environment for, the group while being responsive to agency policy (Schopler & Galinsky, 1984). Workers must be able to relate to, and quickly form bonds among, heterogeneous group members while also having a sophisticated understanding and comfort with exercising their authority (Turner, 2011). Alongside these tensions, group workers must stay attuned to capitalise on the fleeting unplanned opportunities arising in each session (Steinberg, 2014). While the literature about open groups is limited, it does highlight important differences in group dynamics and other facilitation demands, which support the need for greater clarity and understanding.

Given the paucity of information, particularly within the Australasian context, the research sought to better understand social workers' perceptions and experiences of open group work. One aspect of this exploration was participants' training for, and learning process in relation to, open group work.

METHODS

The study was conducted with the approval of the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited via the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW), which provided access to a large pool of nationally dispersed social work practitioners. An email was sent to all ANZASW members inviting participation with the only requirement being some experience of open group work within Aotearoa New Zealand. The recruitment process resulted in nine respondents, six of whom were willing and eligible to participate in the study. All six participants were female, with a range of social work, and general and open-entry group work experience. Four of the participants had undertaken social work training in New Zealand, one in Australia, and one in South Africa. The extent of the participants' general group work training varied, with those trained overseas receiving the most comprehensive training. The extent and duration of the participants' involvement in open group work also varied from one to 20 years. Four of the six participants described open groups as their first or predominant group facilitation experience. The remaining participants began open group work after considerable experience in other types of group work. Similarly, half of the participants had actively chosen to engage in open group work, while their counterparts had entered the practice by default.

A qualitative research framework was employed to facilitate understanding of the views and perceptions of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews; a method used for gaining in-depth and rich understanding of viewpoints and experiences (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). Open-ended questions provided a guideline for semi-structured interviews, which took place in 2016. Analysis of the data followed a six-stage thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Immersion in the dataset, as the first stage, began with transcription of the interviews followed by several readings of the dataset. Initial coding of the complete dataset was then conducted using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (NVivo v11), with reference to the interview questions. Once the initial coding was completed, the entire dataset was then recoded, searching for general patterns of meaning in relation to the research questions.

The two coding frames (initial pass regarding interview questions and second pass regarding the research questions) were compared, combined where appropriate, and revised to create more intricate codes. In turn, these codes were collated to assist with developing candidate themes, subthemes and a visual map of relationships between them. The shaping of proposed themes entailed refining the candidate themes (e.g., determining if there were sufficient data to support individual themes). In the final stage of analysis, provisional themes were further refined, named, and checked for internal and external coherence (Patton, 2002). This process involved revisiting the coded data and the full dataset to ensure sufficient distinction between themes and that those data within themes coalesced meaningfully (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS

Analysis of the experiences described by study participants resulted in the identification of six key themes. *Navigating the ebb and flow*, or the participants' process and practices around the shifting membership in their open groups. *Dynamics in open groups* describes participants' observations regarding group member relations and bonding, safety and trust and cultural considerations. The tension or *balancing act* around allowing flexibility and yet creating structure for their groups constituted a further theme extracted from the data. *Worthwhile practice,* captures implicit and explicit ideas expressed by participants about the value and importance of open-entry groups based on their experiences. Mindful of space constraints and relevance, this article centres on the remaining two themes: the *learning curve* participants experienced concerning open groups, and the participants' perceptions about *competent facilitation of open groups.* Participants reported using open groups for various purposes, including psychoeducation, support, activity, socialisation and therapy in both inpatient and outpatient settings. Group populations encompassed adults and adolescents across areas such as addictions, mental health, parent support, and physical rehabilitation.

Learning curve

Evident throughout the data was the acknowledgement of a steep learning curve attached to open group work. The term "learning curve" described the rate of progress at which participants felt they gained experience or new skills needed for open group facilitation. For example, about her early open group work experience, participant one (P1) stated, "it was all learning, a huge learning curve". She described:

> Just going along by the seat of my pants . . . and sometimes thinking, "oh my gosh how am I doing to deal with this situation?" And just did, you had to, there was nothing else you could do really. (P1)

Irrespective of prior group work experience, accounts of protracted and intense learning on commencing open group work, were the most apparent and consistent narrative across the dataset. For most participants, learning intensity was sustained well into their practice. For instance, at the time of her interview, participant two (P2) was 12 months into facilitating her first open group after 20 years of other group work experience. She reported, "I am actually still quite challenged by the group I am co-facilitating. . . I think a big part of that is because it is open-entry and open-ended" (P2).

Participants varied in how well prepared they felt for commencing facilitation of open groups. While most had some group work education, few felt their training had equipped them with the baseline knowledge required for open group work. To this effect, P2 remarked, "I didn't feel prepared, and I continue to feel unprepared, I continue to feel anxious about it". Only participant three (P3) felt her group work training had contributed, albeit partially, to her perceived readiness for open group work:

> I think the theory and the practical exposure prepared [me] for the basics and the foundation. I think doing my Master's degree started to prepare me more therapeutically, while facilitation of workshops just added that last part of the thing, added component. So, I think it was building blocks that added to the open group. (P3)

Even while this participant reported comprehensive group work training, as with other participants, she received minimal training specific to open group work. She noted, "they [training institute] did not encourage them [open groups] so much . . ." (P3). For other participants, attention to open groups within their social work training ranged from merely noting their existence to no recognition or discussion whatsoever.

The lack of formal training for open group work appeared to bring other learning pathways into sharper focus for the study participants. A discourse around *learning on the job* was prevalent throughout the data, describing the primary means by which participants gained skill and knowledge about open groups. The assumption that learning on the job is a normal and expected aspect of social work practice was also both directly and indirectly portrayed by participants. Participant four (P4) offered this example: "It was learning on the job like so many other things I guess; it is part of I think, our [social work] roles". Being a less structured method of learning (Belcourt, Bohlander & Snell, 2011) the emphasis on learning by doing also impacted the participants' learning curve. Moreover, in most cases, guidance or mentoring to support on-the-job learning about open groups was absent. P1 stated, "there was no-one really to go and talk to and say, 'this is happening in the group. How do I deal with this?'" Without foundation knowledge to preface further learning and with inadequate workplace support to assist with development, most participants had less than optimal conditions for effective learning.

The participants' responses were also indicative of discomfort around their practice-based learning. For instance, participant five (P5) remarked, "I just did what I had to do", indicating her initial uncertainty about practising open group work with limited training and guidance. However, the conflict between the expectation of learning by doing and the injunction against practising without sufficient training (Brown, 2014; Reamer, 2013) appeared to create a similar quandary for other participants. In turn, this dilemma generated a sense of compromise and uncertainty for some participants regarding their open group work practice. "I think it is a sense of professionalism and integrity too. I want to do things right, and I want to do things that are going to be helpful" (P2). Although less explicitly expressed, the absence of practical guidance, and models or templates for open group work practice, also hampered the learning process for participants. "I think they [open groups] haven't been done before; closed groups have been done. So, there aren't skills or experience that we can draw on"

(P2). For some, the absence of direction (e.g., practical guidance and practice models) made it difficult to gage their competence in working with open groups.

Competent facilitation of open groups

Competence here describes the capable performance of the task of open group work resulting from possession of the necessary skills and abilities. Participants expressed the view that, for open group work, "you need more [skill] than in a closed group, there's definitely more demand on you" (P3). They felt some group work elements were more challenging in open group facilitation than in other group work, while some traditional approaches were inadequate. To exemplify, participants described preparation and planning as critical to competent facilitation of any group, but especially in open groups, where they believed planning and preparation assumed greater significance. Along with psychologically preparing themselves for the unexpected, participants found that, "always having something to fall back on" (P3), or planned contingencies to manage unpredictable group happenings, was vital. While self-preparation and contingency plans helped mitigate unpredictability and facilitator anxiety around it, planning was a fraught process that was not easy to effect:

> Especially when it [the group] doesn't run to a set format or content . . . It was quite a time commitment initially for a group that only ran for an hour. The thinking, the planning, the organising, took the best part of at least half a day, sometimes even longer. (P4)

> You never go thinking six people are turning up, you go with six people said they might come and three people might turn up. (P5)

Based on their experience, the study participants considered certain attributes to be crucial to skilful facilitation of open groups. They described the special relevance of having an attitudinal stance of acceptance and holding realistic expectations around mutable membership. These qualities helped facilitators manage frustration, uncertainty and sometimes self-doubt arising due to fluctuating numbers and variable attendance. Acceptance also helped facilitators normalise and model tolerance of constant group changes for group members. "Accepting that people come and go and that some people love it and some people are indifferent to it. So, all that is very much my learning, and you can't control it [change], you know?" (P6). Participants also stressed the significance of a capacity for self-reflection and the ability to learn from group members as key attributes for effective practice:

> I think it is really important to have a good reflective practice. . . I think if a social worker is really experienced in the field she [sic] will be able to do the open group with confidence, and if she is confident in her facilitation skills and has good experience in her area of work. (P3)

While experience and confidence in facilitation were viewed as necessary for skilful open group work, the skills employed by the research participants were somewhat contrary to conventional group interventions and skills. That is, only three of the several intervention clusters described in the group work literature were discussed; these were used differently across participants and deviated from the usual guidelines. For example, participants varied in their approaches to managing the common issue of the frequent admission of new

members into the group. Most participants started each group session as though it were the first session. However, some facilitators described minimal attention to introductions: "We would introduce people to each other if they weren't introducing themselves" (P4). Some also reported spending less time focusing on building connection between members than they might spend in a closed group, or than is proposed by the group work literature. Others reported the opposite, believing that open group work required greater attention to group members' emotional support needs. "You have to work much harder at establishing a connection between members of the group; I think you spend much more time with that as a facilitator" (P3).

Some participants reported frustration with trying to apply standard group practices into their open groups, as with for example, pre-group contact with group members. While pre-group contact with prospective group members may be a typical group work practice, participants' accounts suggested this was not the case with their open groups. The absence of pre-group contact meant facilitators sometimes had little knowledge of new group members and new members had little knowledge of the group. For some participants, letting go of this practice was uncomfortable but implementing it could be impractical and at odds with the intentions of open membership. "I know for me there's a bit of question mark about how actually. . . to meet with them [prospective group members] before they enter the group" (P2). Overall, most participants found it necessary to adjust interventions and accepted group practices to better fit the open group context:

> You noticed what was going on and you tried different things to work out how it was going to work or how you were going to manage it and then sometimes things didn't work and so then it was going away and contemplating well how am I going to do this differently? (P1)

Participants also reported unique group dynamics occurring due to the unpredictable movement of members through their open groups. They recognised the understanding and mastery of these dynamics as critical to competent facilitation. For instance, most felt bonding was possible despite the turnover of members but observed differences in how bonding occurred. Overall, participants felt it took longer for members to bond in open groups than they anticipated based on their experience of other groups: "With a closed group, people bond and they can bond over the first two or three sessions. If new members are coming into an open group all the time, then the bonding does not happen so quickly" (P1). However, as with applying conventional interventions, participants were how unsure how to effectively manage these different group processes:

> Part of the group is managing dynamics or the group process, and that is a big undertaking. If you have constantly got new people entering all the time . . .
> it is so complex that you can't even solve it all. (P2)

> You could have a really good cohesive group and then one person comes in and throws the whole group out and then people start leaving and so it's just how do you work that? (P1)

DISCUSSION

The research intentionally employed a small sample to achieve rich representation of experience, thus inferences drawn from the research findings should be read as indicative rather than conclusive. The findings do, however, raise many issues that warrant further consideration and dialogue. For instance, learning on the job, as was the case for most of the participants, is considered a credible means of social skills training and ongoing learning for professionals (Eraut, 2002). However, Carey (2016) has argued the real power of group work education lies in a combination of classroom and field practice. This combination allows practitioners to accumulate, through training, foundation knowledge to integrate into practice and preface further learning. While most participants reported some group work education, few felt their training equipped them with the baseline knowledge required for open group work. Furthermore, participants suggested scaffolding in their workplaces (such as task-specific supervision and mentoring), was absent or insufficient for an effective learning process.

To an extent, these results resonate with some of the international group work issues. That is, there appears to be a gap between training *received* and *required* by budding group work practitioners (Bitel, 2014; Carey, 2016). Positive outcomes-research as well as the perceived cost effectiveness of groups has increased group work's appeal to overseas administrators and thus demand for group workers (Bitel, 2014; Carey, 2016; Emond & Rasmussen, 2012; Knight, 2017). However, it seems many social workers are not adequately prepared for group work practice. Participants in this study also reported a minimal correlation between their training and their readiness for group work. In concert with previous research (Clements, 2008; Sweifach & Heft-LaPorte, 2009), this pattern suggests group work course content may be insufficient or unsuitable to social workers' needs. Indeed, participant responses indicate varying attention to group work across their different social work qualifying programmes. This inconsistency, if widespread, is itself an issue for social work education and possibly indicative of the pressure of increasing regulatory requirements on curriculum content. The emphasis on accountability and forms of standardisation (e.g., assessment tools) appears to have undermined the need for specialised skills in social work (Spolander et al., 2014). It is possible group work training and especially the more finely detailed aspects, such as open group work learning, are examples of this phenomenon.

Consistent with the literature, social workers in this study experienced the facilitation of open groups as more demanding, and as presenting different challenges, than closed groups (Schopler & Galinsky, 1984). Similarly, participants suggested the skills for closed groups were inconsistent with, and fell short of, those needed for open groups (Schopler & Galinsky, 1984). Given these differences, it is conceivable that generalised group work training may exacerbate difficulties for social workers embarking on open group work. Preconceived ideas and expectations arising from general group work education, may be unrealistic and out of sync with *open* group work. For instance, according to traditional group work knowledge (Trevithick, 2005), some participants maintained that pre-group contact with potential group members is fundamental to "good group process". However, consistent with Steinberg's (2014) assertions, findings in this study indicated pre-group contact with prospective group members seldom occurred with open groups.

Group work concepts may be broadly applicable, but perhaps group work competencies are not immediately transferable to open group work. In ideal circumstances, supervision or mentoring assists practitioners with transferring academic learning and theoretical concepts into practice and practice competencies into new contexts (Eraut, 2002). However, as previously noted, social workers in this study reported limited mentoring support for their open group work. One possible explanation for this is that, much like earlier research about group work in general (Clements, 2008; Heft-LaPorte & Sweifach, 2011; Sweifach & Heft-LaPorte, 2008), supervisors and advanced practitioners themselves lack training and experience in open group work. Similarly, without theoretical concepts for open groups, social workers indicated difficulty determining learning objectives and competent practice. This oversight means social workers must rely on more subjective and less rigorous markers for developing and measuring competence.

Ideas expressed by participants in this study about facilitator competence also endorse the need for more comprehensive practice-specific knowledge and training. As with the literature regarding practitioner expertise in open group facilitation, participants in this study indicated different group interventions and skill sets are required (Galinsky & Schopler, 1989; Turner, 2011). Social workers may employ the full range of established interventions (e.g., Northen & Kurland, 2001; Toseland & Rivas, 2017; Whitaker, 2000) in other groups. However, participants in this study gave little evidence of wholesale application of these skills in their open groups. It is possible that certain interventions (e.g., clarification skills) are reified as standard group work knowledge and therefore were not considered noteworthy by participants. Another plausible explanation is that, due to variations and limits to their group work training, social workers do not conceptualise group interventions consistently. That is, they may not hold the same knowledge and critical understanding of the skillsets described as necessary for group work and may not apply these in the same ways.

Alternatively, as suggested by Galinsky and Schopler (1989), open groups may require emphasis on certain facets of interventions. For instance, structuring skills are typically used to create an optimal environment for the group's work (Northen & Kurland, 2001) and include aspects such as preparation for sessions and defining group limits. For open groups, these skills would emphasise repeated rituals that help define the group's purpose and reinforce norms and goals (Galinsky & Schopler, 1989), and routines for dealing with changing membership (Miller & Mason, 2012; Sulman, 1987). Interventions employed by the research participants partially aligned with the nuanced interventions suggested for open groups. They used both repeated and varied methods, across and within groups, for introducing new entrants into the group. Again, the inconsistency in the participants' practice could conceivably be attributed to a lack of formal guidance and instruction around open group work intervention.

As with intervention categories, the group work literature is replete with descriptions and explanation of various group dynamics (e.g., Forsyth, 2010; Toseland & Rivas, 2017), the assumption being that this is essential knowledge for group workers (Trevithick, 2005). Most of the social workers involved in the study recognised attention to systems of behaviour within the group as necessary to successful group functioning. Nevertheless, this was an area of open group work they found quite perplexing. Again, this information

leads to some plausible inferences. Group processes or dynamics present some of the most complex aspects of group work (Forsyth, 2010), factoring in an irregular element, such as membership turnover introduces another level of complexity altogether. Even assuming all the participants had an equal theoretical grounding in group dynamics, this did not necessarily equip them to manage dynamics in *open* groups. Open group work training needs to consider these issues in addition to those discussed earlier.

Some of the participants indicated negligible training for group work. This situation possibly accounts for reports that their training had minimal bearing on their perceived readiness for practice. Given the small sample, generalisations are tentative, but these findings do coincide with overseas accounts of the same issue. An investigation of the current status of group work, within the New Zealand social work curriculum, would help to establish its adequacy for contemporary social work practice. Where it is not already occurring, qualifying social work programmes must find a way to establish group work training as a priority within the overall curriculum. In addition, training specific to open-entry group work requires greater consideration in foundation social work education. Social workers need to exit their studies equipped with realistic expectations regarding open group work and resourced with templates for addressing potential hurdles.

A further recommendation is the recognition of open-entry group work as an advanced, specialist area of social work practice, requiring unique competency standards. The establishment of a competency framework for open group work would assist with providing direction for future programming in education and service provision. Opportunities also exist for creating specialisations in group work at more advanced levels, allowing for more balanced coverage of both open and closed group work and greater attention to skill development. Similarly, there is a need for practice guidelines to provide practitioners with some direction for their open group work and to aid in developing and determining practice competence.

CONCLUSION

Research to date has not considered social workers' training for open groups or the nature of their learning process in relation to this practice. Despite the small scale of the study, it offers some new insights about social workers' experiences in this regard. The education of social workers for group work practice is recognised by the study participants and the literature, as insufficient for social workers' practice needs. Moreover, training for closed group work may not adequately address the specialised knowledge required for open groups and may even create unrealistic expectations for social workers. Similarly, without objective measures of competency and greater support for their development, social workers face an unnecessarily arduous and diffuse learning process. As an effective intervention and an efficient means of service delivery, group work will likely continue to grow in popularity, cementing its importance to social work practice. In the process of ensuring social workers are adequately prepared for the work they will do, comprehensive training and fieldwork experience in open group work, addressing the issues identified in this study, need to be a priority within social work qualifying programmes.

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