

Young Adult Behavioral Patterns in Group Activities *

MYRON BEREZIN

Director of Support and Development, National Jewish Welfare Board, New York

AND

MORTIMER GOODMAN

Director of Adult Services and Special Projects, Jewish Community Centers, St. Louis, Missouri

The Problem

CONCERNED as we are today with young adults who do not develop self-autonomy and who suffer from apathy and helplessness, we face a major challenge to devise methods of referring them to appropriate social experiences.

Young men and women are more mobile than in former years. Corporations, as well as the armed forces, move young men around like chess pawns. The growth of career openings and increasing personal freedom for women further complicate the process of courtship and marriage, and young women yearn for social group opportunities. A Center worker comments:

Mary was sitting by herself, looking rather lonely. She started talking . . . about her difficulty in establishing relationships with fellows. She spoke about going to parties at some of the apartment developments specifically given for singles, about trying the agency young adult groups, about going with other girls to some of the bars—but quickly adding that she just can't get into this type of thing. She does not seem to be able to find a place for herself. She seemed to be asking again "What's wrong with me"?

It has been said that community centers staffed by social workers place too much stress on small group service at the expense of dances and mass programs where courtship can be better

pursued. Our agency, however, in stressing small group opportunities for young adults, has checked its records to find that twelve marriages have taken place among its young adult group members during the past three years. The staff contends that the more serious question is *who* gets married rather than how many become married; also, what coping skills, or deficiencies thereof, can be dealt with before they are carried over into matrimony. This problem is of concern to social workers because our society affords greater leisure time along with the abdication of local decision-making experiences. How much more depersonalization and diffusion will younger persons, many of whom possess marginal social skills, be able to tolerate?

Our agency, therefore, considered how it might handle intervention in its group program setting more thoughtfully. The staff realized it had limited referral information and limited intake procedures. How might assessments be made nevertheless? How might the referral of young people to existing agency groups be made more efficient? How might the social readiness of young adults for specific agency clubs and for other community groups be made measureable and predictive?

Group service agencies receive referrals of young adults from caseworkers, physicians, clinics and hospitals. The St. Louis Center is no exception. In addition to receiving referrals from such sources, many other young adults, who

* This paper was made possible by the collaboration of Beth Salmiker, Lester Harris and Ben Herman, Adult Department staff members.

are equally needful, also request service. Both sources provide a growing number of younger people who participate in social clubs and lounges, in addition to dramatic and choral groups, and who manifest a wide range of behaviors within the agency. Referred persons either have a handicap, lack essential personal skills or simply need and seek companionship. Once enrolled, they freely mingle with peers who may be more independent but who, in many cases, suffer from some handicap or from anomie or loneliness.

Confronted with a lack of clinical data even while introducing individuals to groups on an intuitive basis, the staff decided to reexamine the behavior of some individuals in existing groups and so perhaps enrich the process of intervention. The staff faced up to these considerations:

... To what degree do young adults respond to traditional social work intervention in agency clubs and lounges?

... In what ways do some members compensate for physical, emotional and mental handicaps in coping with the social demands of their group?

... Do young adults who join groups but who respond neither to peer stimulation nor to worker intervention, constitute a sub-culture? Are they a disadvantaged group? What skills do they possess that enable them to function in the outside world? In what common situations do their coping skills fail them? When is it time to dance? To go bowling? To get married?

In order to differentiate young adult clients more clearly and to base group placements on something more than chance, informal case notes and group records were reexamined and studied. The staff had considerable material on more than 30 single young adults since 1965, most of whom were currently known to two or more workers. In addition to studying and reclassifying behaviors described in existing records,

the staff also selected certain behaviors to rate on a five-point scale. The development of instruments and formal procedures to study young adult behavior in groups is precluded in this beginning effort. On the other hand, this experience may suggest that workers can reduce the element of haphazardness in group work.

Since the agency enables members to join different groups, a certain amount of "shopping around" occurs, as is typical of this age group. Shifting identifications with groups repeatedly occur and, fortunately, can be observed by the staff. Within this context, three typologies emerged:

- A. Members who behaved more realistically and who lessened their demand for ego support by the worker.
- B. Those who could accept staff direction and new assignments but who continue to re-enact a static group role.
- C. Individuals whose original lack of motivation seems to thwart any traditional kind of worker-intervention.

The lack of a goal in life—a sense of direction—would seem to partly characterize some individual B and C types. A deflated self-image, poor judgment, poorly developed communicative skills and impulsivity are other symptoms that tend to predominate among C type individuals, those whose behaviors are rigid and less permeable to professional intervention.

How Agency Groups Differ from Each Other

Three or four groups are available to single, young adult members each season, not including the typical "One Parent Family" group whose members have already been married. Groups vary in degree of homogeneity, formal organization and so forth. But group phenomena should be considered to some

degree if one seeks to more suitably match individual young adults with young adult groups in traditional agencies, and brief illustrations from group records are a convenient way to highlight group phenomena. The following excerpts, written by three different staff members will distinguish three actual groups.

Group A

The first point of business was a long discussion regarding membership in the JCCA. After much talking, it was decided that we would adhere to the JCCA policy of letting outsiders attend meetings, but after three times the staff person would approach the non-member and ask him to join the Center. It was agreed that we would advertise in the JCCA Journal stipulating qualification for membership in the "Pioneers." Persons must be college-trained, single (between the ages of 21-35). The committee thought it would be a good plan to look at agency membership cards. We would try to interest them in the "Pioneers." The next meeting will be held at Gwen's house. They would like to hear from someone on sensitivity training.

This group reflects a fair amount of "Structure" and "Intimacy." It is a rather sophisticated group, selective and homogenous.

Group B

There were 19 present. Seven came for the first time. New faces: Joe, a young man contemplating membership; Harry, late 20's or 30's and divorced; Arnold, looks and seems older, totally uncommunicative, sat and stared most of the evening; Ellie, brought in by Marlene—did a lot of giggling; Sara, came in twice, both times with a chip on her shoulder. Also, Florence, a big girl brought by Carla, who seems retarded, exceptionally slow speech, had difficulty assimilating ideas and responding. Bea returned after several weeks absence. Julie collected monies for the Carnival tickets. Frieda reported on responses from other cities on the inter-city weekend, for which a planning meeting will be held at her home this Sunday.

Group B is viewed as "permeable," allowing for the intrusion of new faces, but also producing group heterogeneity, as well as sub-group looseness or "stratification."

Group C

Kay announced that she and Alfred were engaged. Kay was strikingly subdued compared to last week. George, who appears every 5 weeks or so, announced that "they" have a rule that no one (meaning the advisor) can ask a certain married couple to leave the lounge and that "they" have decided that since Manny is back and used to be president, that he is now again president and Kay isn't! I explained that I had been rather lenient by letting this married couple say hello occasionally, but that there were groups more suitable for them, etc. Then I asked whether there weren't better ways to have a president and avoid the hurting of feelings. I suggested co-chairmen. "Yeah, that's what we meant," they said. Manny showed me a temporary membership card which looked legitimate. He asked me what "they" thought of his carnival idea and I told him it was excellent.

This group has very little structure and, in fact, plans its programs on a makeshift basis most of the time, its members acting impulsively, but also being immobile and unresponsive toward the worker. This group accepts anyone who enters the door of their lounge room. It would be correct to assume that the staff brings dysfunctioning applicants to this group, but refers a broad range of young adults to Group B, and only a careful selection of more sophisticated persons to Group A.

Each group is a unique entity. While none of them is regarded as a therapy group, all of them, nevertheless, have come to be viewed as part of a therapeutic milieu. In this kind of setting, both the groups and the individuals are in a constant state of flux. At the same time, there is a lack of information concerning the effects of group participation and the degree to which individuals were

benefiting from staff guidance and intervention.

Two years ago, the staff began to inquire into the attitudes and capacities for social responsibility among single adult members. It conducted a round of special interviews to probe attitudes to the agency, to the primary reference group and to the group worker. The staff found that certain young adults not only favored their worker above the agency and above their group, but apparently clung to him, as though everything else represented an extension of the threatening adult world. In addition, the staff noted that a growing number of dependent individuals seem to inject the group itself with an immunity against social work intervention.

Assessment of Individuals

The staff began to make global ratings on a number of individuals, based on their apparent ability to interact maturely with their peers, on their ability to assume group tasks and to participate in group decision-making processes. An "A" rating was given to those whose behavior suggested the most independence, a "B" rating to those who vacillate between independent behavior and dependence on the worker, and a "C" rating to those whose behavior seemed most static and unresponsive.

Next the staff devised a list of behaviors to be rated on the basis of interviews but mostly on participant observation of individuals in the groups. Several items were gradually eliminated because they were either too narrow or too broad and less helpful to the staff in its effort to arrive at a better understanding of specific behaviors.

As a result, 23 items were retained and ratings on 21 individuals known to as many as five workers were completed. Each worker had worked with one or

more of the agency groups. Fourteen young adults were rated by three to five workers, and 7 were rated by two workers.

Many of the items were rated very closely. Items that were rated identically may be somewhat suggestive. The following identical ratings were the strongest ones:

- rating to those whose behavior seemed
1. HumorLack of humor
(5 identical)
 2. Lucid thinkerFuzzy thinker
(5 identical)
 3. CooperativeUncooperative
(5 identical)
 4. AssertiveFearful
(5 identical)
 5. Inspires othersDoes not inspire others
(7 identical)

Three case examples will serve to illustrate some practical applications of the global rating and of the rating of specific behaviors.

I. *Elaine*, global rating: "C"

Has been active in two young adult groups for two seasons. Most characteristic of Elaine was her almost compulsive chatter-like way of talking, punctuated with nervous laughter and giggling. She commented a lot on relevant and irrelevant matters and impaired the group's ability to carry on its business. Although she took on the role of group catalyst, embroidering assigned group tasks in a spirited manner, she rarely performed the smallest part of the commitment.

The worker observed that Elaine had a poor self-image and was getting psychiatric help. Even though she was viewed as well-groomed, articulate and cooperative, as a person who enlivened her primary group, she contributed nothing to it.

Four staff members rated her identically as "Poor" on the item "Sound Judgment," even though she had confided her problems to only one of these

raters. The staff obtained an almost uniform, poor rating on Elaine on the "Lucid thinker . . . fuzzy thinker" item, an impression that may be related to limited judgmental ability. On the other hand, she was rated low on patience, carefulness and follow-through, and these may bear on the problem of a limited sense of direction. Is it Elaine's lack of purpose or direction that keeps her from being a constructive person in her group, or is hers more a problem of innate judgment, or might it be a combination of the two?

II. Larry, global rating: "C"

In the two years that Larry was involved in planning group events there was a glaring contradiction. Although he was a college graduate and held a good position in a large company, he dressed and spoke in such a modest, humble manner, that I always wondered where he got the ego-strength to complete four years of training, and to hold down a responsible position. In helping to plan programs, Larry would rarely interact with the group. When a major issue would arise involving Larry, he would turn to the worker to ask his opinion. He seemed powerless to act or to think for himself. This dynamic seemed to permeate his whole personality, impairing his ability to cope with situations. Once at a picnic, he anxiously approached the worker to say that there wouldn't be enough ice to go around. When the worker asked: "What will we do?", Larry looked somber and said nothing. When the worker suggested that he leave the area and buy some ice, he smiled and asked if the worker would solicit someone to run this errand. The smallest obstacle seemed to derail him.

How can the social behavior of this young adult be evaluated more effectively? How can the staff pierce his hard shell and assist him to cope more successfully in social interaction? Almost entirely, the raters marked him low on the items "Fast worker (or) slow worker," "Humorous (or) Humorless" and "Enthusiastic (or) Lacks enthusiasm." On

the other hand, Larry was rated average on grooming, thinking and on the ability to admit errors, and he was high in cooperativeness and carefulness. Unlike Elaine, these ratings indicate a person with a good sense of direction, but one who might benefit from more exposure to situations that demand self-assertion.

III. Sam, global rating: "Low B"

Sam has been around the agency for over five years. His family has sent children through college but Sam has completed only two years. Due to a physiological defect, his personality is such that he does not hold jobs on a regular basis, nor is he very predictable. He has mood swings, which seem to typify his scholastic and job behavior. Sam has suggested good programs to his group and he shows pretty good judgment in theory. However, when confronted with a down-to-earth question such as "Should we eat now or later?," he becomes flustered and he seeks the worker's opinion. He constantly seeks the worker's approval: "Do you think I should have said (this) or (that) in the group meeting?" He can appear to be very cooperative, but underlying this is an unwillingness to commit himself to the responsibility of actually doing necessary things to help the group fulfill its tasks.

Sam was rated low by four of the staff in regard to judgment. He was rated poorly in Consistency, being scored as Impatient rather than Patient, and Not Following Through as opposed to Following Through. He was rated low on Articulativeness and on Coherent Speech. Assertive to a degree, Sam will probably never "make it" in the usual sense of achievement. This rating procedure tended to confirm his mental limitations and his inconsistent behavior in group life, and it provided other clues wherein he may be helped.

These examples suggest one way to understand the young adult's social needs. This procedure of making global ratings based on team observation, backed up by rating some specific behaviors, has been valuable to this staff in suggesting

Summary

how and where to look further in order to assist these clients to interact more successfully. Other procedures by other workers to study the coping skills of young adults are being suggested. Some provocative questions are implied in this report. Why, for example, was tentative reliability obtained in rating an apparently subjective item such as Inspires Others . . . Fails to Inspire Others? What is the underlying meaning of this behavior? Why should the field not develop ways to study non-verbal communication factors such as grooming, judgment and humor within practice settings? How might practitioners delve deeper into a methodology of rating and assessing interactive behavior around problem-solving, decision-making and conflict-resolution?

Some young adults display limited qualifications in socializing while others show ample skill, and both types are merged together in a wide variety of agency groups, as well as in groups outside of agencies. What do less skilled young adults gain when they socialize with the more skilled? Do the latter help the former, or do they only suffer their presence, and if so, for how long a period of time? Does social work intervention help the less competent, or, on the other hand, does it merely perpetuate the development of shared-dependent behavior, of a sub-cultural group that leans in the direction of marginality? If this does happen to be the case in some agencies then what special skills might be teased out, tested and supported, that bear on independent functioning in an already fragmented society? Other methods of assessment that can be carried on by non-research workers should be developed. The stimulation of curiosity and the continuous inspection of behavior can only increase social work knowledge.

Single young men and women are understood to have special problems in today's society. Small group experience is assumed to be helpful in working out young adult problems.

The St. Louis Jewish Community Center provides a variety of groups but it lacks a system for the efficient referral of such clients to one group or another as well as a system for evaluating the outcome of group experience. The staff developed useful team ratings of selected behaviors that could be observed by regular workers. It encourages other social workers and other agencies to do likewise.

With an eye to research that might stem from practice, the following questions are raised:

- (1) To what extent can group practice settings reduce the element of chance in referring young adults to one program or another?
- (2) Can observation-in-practice be directed toward the development of a predictive instrument that is needed by service agency staff workers?
- (3) What methods, in addition to the limited ratings suggested here, ought to be developed?
- (4) Are there some skills related to communication that are of special importance to successful social behavior?
- (5) Might it be possible to identify certain skills that are integral to the independent functioning of young adults who have obvious handicaps and other special needs?
- (6) Can the research of young adult problem-solving and decision-making in regular agency groups be made feasible?

Social work must draw upon its own resources in order to comply with the urgency of community mental health planning. The 1960's witnessed the popularization of drug use and of the pill, of the crumbling of accepted ethical standards and of youthful attacks on the legality of war and poverty. No segment of our urban population will be more

affected by these powerful social forces during the next decade than the single young adult sector. Many of them have challenged our institutions. We are witnessing the displacement of youthful frustration in campus demonstrations and in other places. A renewed sense of mutuality, of involvement between the old and the young, is needed. The social work profession, working in the existing framework of its own institutions, especially in group-serving agencies, is capable of developing a rich variety of methods and procedures to cultivate the latent resources of young

adults. This report is one step in that direction.

References

McMahon, Frank B. Jr., "Psychological Testing—A Smokescreen Against Logic," *Psychology Today*, (January 1969), pp. 54-59.

Ross, Murray G., and Hendry, Charles E., *New Understandings of Leadership*, Association Press, New York, 1957.

Scheidlinger, Saul, "Therapeutic Group Approaches in Community Mental Health," *Social Work*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (April 1968).

Solomon, Barbara, "Social Group Work in the Adult Outpatient Clinic", *Social Work*, Vol. 13, No. 4. (October, 1968).