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## Group Work in Graduate Social Work Education: Where Are We Now?

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# 7

## Group work in graduate social work education: Where are we now?

Shirley R. Simon and Teresa Kilbane

**Abstract.** This paper presents the preliminary results of a national survey assessing the extent of group work offerings within masters level social work programs in the United States. The study replicates and expands upon a 1994 investigation by Birnbaum and Auerbach. Findings are compared with the earlier study to identify changes and trends in group work education.

**Key words.** group work, social work education; social work methods; generalist social work education; history of social work education in the United States

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### Introduction

Group work has a long-standing history as a core method within the profession of social work. However, for decades, social group work leaders have expressed serious concerns about group work's diminished place within social work education. Warnings about group work's demise as a distinct modality within social work date at least as far back as 1978, and have become increasingly dire in recent years (Drumm, 2006; Kurland et al., 2004; Middleman, 1990; Simon & Webster, 2009; Tropp, 1978).

The Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) 1969 decision to merge individual methodological approaches, primarily casework, group work and community organizing, into a single generalist perspective, is often cited as the beginning of the decline of group work within social work education (Goodman & Munoz, 2004; Salmon & Steinberg, 2007). When programs altered their curricula to accommodate this generalist orientation, the number of concentrations and specialized courses in group work declined significantly (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994; Goodman & Munoz, 2004; Middleman, 1990; Simon, Webster, & Horn, 2007). (For the purposes of this article, a program is defined as a CSWE accredited MSW degree granting institution. Within these programs, some institutions offer tracks or areas of practice such as clinical/direct practice, administration and/or policy. These tracks may be offered as concentrations or specializations, terms that are sometimes used interchangeably. Both concentrations and specializations typically require specific courses and/or a specific range of courses to be completed. A course is defined as a class or unit of study in the curriculum of the program taken for either one quarter or one semester depending on the institution.)

Unfortunately, this decrease in educational focus has led to a critical disconnect between social group work education and the practice arena, as a resurgent demand for group work services has arisen (Goodman & Munoz, 2004; Strozier, 1997). This demand is often financially motivated based upon the concept that one can treat/service six to ten clients in a group in the same time one can see one or two clients individually. Occurring largely as a result of reimbursement requirements by HMOs, insurance companies and other managed care companies, agencies – even traditionally psychodynamic, one-on-one treatment agencies – are now mandated to offer extensive group work services. Additionally, core areas of client services are increasingly reliant on the effective use of the group work modality. Service providers in the areas of addictions, domestic violence, grief and loss, trauma, the chronically and mentally ill, veterans services, youth and adolescence, immigrants and refugees, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender populations, and the elderly are but some of the fields that rely upon group work in order to best help their clients (Garvin, Gutierrez & Galinsky, 2004). However, according to the most recent study of group work offerings in schools of social work, many social workers have graduated without even one course in group work, and many supervisors lack the knowledge and expertise to effectively train students and new professionals (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994).

In 1994, Birnbaum & Auerbach published a landmark study on the state of group work education in masters level social work programs in the United States (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994). Birnbaum and Auerbach's work was cited in virtually all ensuing publications on U.S. group work education. However, many years had passed, and this critical study had not been replicated. Anecdotal accounts from group work leaders and educators suggested that the situation had only gotten worse, but valid, accurate data had not been collected. Thus, planning and decision-making by social work schools, accrediting bodies, and practitioners were being made without the benefit of current, validated information. Recognizing this void, and with the encouragement of Martin Birnbaum, the lead researcher in the 1994 study, *Group work in graduate social work education: The price of neglect*, (Birnbaum & Auerbach), the authors began work on the replication and expansion of the earlier study in 2008.

## **Methodology**

The current study used Birnbaum and Auerbach's interview guide as its foundation. However, the methodology used by the current authors differs from that used in the previous study. While Birnbaum and Auerbach collected data through phone interviews, the authors developed an online survey adding questions of current interest. Birnbaum and Auerbach's study contained data from phone interviews ( $N = 80$ ) and course catalogs ( $N = 9$ ) with a response rate of 92%. Interviewees were group work faculty identified through the 1990 Membership Directory of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG). If there was no AASWG member at the school, additional steps were taken to identify a faculty member or administrator with knowledge about the group work curriculum. The current study used online methodology to reach the much larger universe of masters level social work programs ( $N = 200$  in 2008 vs.  $N = 97$  in 1991). The online survey was pilot tested by group work instructors from local universities. Once the survey was refined, it was submitted to the Institutional Review Board of the authors' University for approval. The researchers then consulted with the Information Technology department to create the online survey using Opinio, a

University-sanctioned software package. An email with a consent form and a link to the online survey was sent to the deans of all masters level social work programs in the U.S. directly from the dean of the researchers' home school. Emails were distributed to the 200 accredited MSW programs, and deans were requested to forward the email to the faculty or staff members most qualified to respond to questions about group work in their curriculum. Three additional emails were sent to increase the response rate. By June 2009, 59 usable surveys were collected, representing a 30% response rate. Although this response rate falls into an acceptable range (Sheehan, 2001), the researchers plan to continue to collect data through other avenues to increase the number of responses.

## **Description of current study respondents**

Programs in the current study sample are more likely to be found at public universities ( $N = 31, 56\%$ ) than at private universities ( $N = 24, 44\%$ ). The majority of programs are from non-religiously affiliated universities ( $N = 47, 85\%$ ). Two-thirds of the programs are in urban settings ( $N = 37, 67\%$ ) with the remainder divided between suburban ( $N = 10, 18\%$ ) and rural ( $N = 8, 15\%$ ) settings. For almost half of the programs, the primary focus of their curricula is advanced generalist ( $N = 26, 47\%$ ) while a third ( $N = 18, 33\%$ ) of the programs classify themselves as clinical or direct practice. Only one program identifies itself as having a policy/administrative track and ten programs (18%) have a single track or focus unique to their respective schools. Three quarters of the responding programs have an advanced standing option ( $N = 44, 75\%$ ). Half of the programs have their own bachelor's programs ( $N = 31, 52.5\%$ ), while only a third have Ph.D. programs ( $N = 20, 34\%$ ).

As an indicator of representativeness, the current sample was compared to the findings of the Council on Social Work Education's report, *2008 Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States*. The CSWE survey ( $N = 183, \text{response rate} = 96.3\%$ ) reported a higher percentage of public institutions (75% vs. 56% in the current study) and a higher percentage of programs offering bachelor degrees in social work (72% vs. 52.5% in the current study). National statistics on the primary locations of the schools were similar to those of the current

study (urban, 63%; suburban, 20%; rural, 17% vs. 67%, 18% and 15% in the current study) (Council on Social Work Education, 2008).

The number of enrolled students varies widely because some responding universities have multiple satellite programs. Full-time students range from 24 to 500 (M = 189, Md = 170); part-time students from 0 to 700 (M = 92, Md = 50). Likewise, the number of faculty members varies widely; full-time faculty range from 6 to 80 (M = 19, Md = 17) and part-time faculty from 0 to 90 (M = 21, Md = 12).

## **Results**

This paper presents the preliminary results of the current study as of June, 2009. One of the objectives of the study was to be able to compare current findings with those of the Birnbaum and Auerbach study. Thus, questions similar to those of the earlier study were incorporated in the online survey. Both studies included questions about program concentrations, required and elective courses, and field education in group work. The current study added questions on full-time and part-time MSW faculty expertise in group work, teaching experience, research endeavors, association membership, efforts to link students with professional associations, and use of online technology in group work education.

The Birnbaum and Auerbach study (1994) found a substantial decline in the number of schools offering group work as a concentration in their curriculum – ‘from 76% in 1963 to 7% in 1991’ (p.329). Nearly two decades later, the current study continues to observe a decline in schools offering a group work concentration – from six schools to four schools. Table 1 lists the schools with a group work concentration, the number of students in each concentration, and the percentage of the student body represented in each school’s group work concentration. In addition to a decline in the number of schools offering group work concentrations, the schools that continue to offer a concentration report a drop in the number of students enrolled in their group work concentrations.

The current online survey asked the question: How many courses are offered in your curriculum whose primary focus is group work? Respondents were instructed to answer regardless of whether the course was part of their concentration in group work. Nine responding schools

Table 1  
Social work schools with a group work concentration

School	Birnbaum & Auerbach Study		Current Study	
	Number of students	% of All Students	Number of Students	% of All Students
Hunter College	90	18	40	20
University of Connecticut	80	30	60	18
Yeshiva University	36	15	18	5
Boston University	30	12	15	5
Washington University	30	20		
Rutgers University	25	10		

Table 2  
Required courses, elective courses and field education by program

	Birnbaum & Auerbach ( <i>N</i> = 89)		Current Study ( <i>N</i> = 59)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
	Offer Required Courses	45	50	27
Offer Elective Courses	41	46	22	37
One course	27		18	
Two courses	13		1	
Three or more	1		3	
School policy:				
Group experience part of field work	25	34	30	52

(15%) do not offer any such courses in their master's programs, while in the earlier Birnbaum and Auerbach (1994) study only 3 percent of the responding programs did not offer group work courses. With a range of 0 to 6 courses, social work schools offer an average of 1.48 courses (*Md* = 1.0, *N* = 50) that focus primarily on group work. Each program was allowed to enter up to a maximum of four group work courses in the survey. These 50 schools offer a total of 74 group work courses. Only six of these 74 courses do not contain the word 'group' in their course titles, which seems to support the premise that these courses contain group work content.

Both studies investigated whether the group work courses offered in schools of social work are required and/or elective courses. In the Birnbaum and Auerbach study (1994), half (50%) of the programs offered required courses (see Table 2). In their study, the six schools

(7%) with a concentration in group work required 2 or more group work courses; 12 schools (13%) required one group work course for non-group work concentrations; 10 schools (11%) offered a group work course as a required option within clinical sequences for non-group work concentrations; and 17 schools (19%) required group work courses for all students. In the current study, the percentage of schools requiring group work courses is slightly less, 46% ( $N = 27$ ). The majority ( $N = 14$ ) require a single group work course; eleven programs require two courses and two programs require three or more courses. In the current study, the number of elective courses has decreased: from 46% ( $N = 41$ ) of the programs in the Birnbaum and Auerbach study to 37% ( $N = 22$ ) in the current study. Programs in the earlier study also tended to offer a broader range of elective courses whereas programs in the current study almost exclusively offer only a single elective course (see Table 2). Given the overall decrease in the percentage of programs offering group work courses, it is logical that there would be a decline in the percentage of programs offering required and elective courses. Finally, both studies investigated whether schools had a policy requiring a group work experience in a student's field work placement. Current programs ( $N = 30$ , 52%) more often formally require group work in the student's field work experience than programs in the past study ( $N = 25$ , 34%). It should be noted that only schools offering required or elective group work courses were included in this question in the earlier study; programs not offering group work courses were asked not to respond.

The current study also looked at additional factors: whether schools have group work expertise on their faculty, whether their faculty is affiliated with group work professional associations and actively linking and promoting such affiliations among their students, and whether online technology is being used as a method to deliver group work content in the curriculum. Nearly three-quarters (72.0%,  $N = 42$ ) of the programs state that there are full-time faculty members who specialize in group work at their school (see Table 3). Nearly one-half (45.0%,  $N = 26$ ) of the programs have part-time faculty members who specialize in group work. Three-quarters (76.0%,  $N = 32$ ) of the full-time faculty specializing in group work also teach in this area on a regular basis. A much lower percentage of full-time faculty, 31.0% ( $N = 18$ ), conduct research in group work. AASWG is a leading professional organization for social group work educators and practitioners. Twenty-two programs (38.0%) responded that full-time faculty are members of AASWG; another eight programs (14.0%) stated that full-time faculty

Table 3

Number of programs by faculty interest in group work, teaching, research and professional memberships

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	<i>n</i>	%	Total
Full-time faculty members who specialize in group work	42	72	58
Full-time faculty who specialize in group work and teach on regular basis	32	76	42
Full-time faculty who conduct research	18	31	58
Full-time faculty members who belong to AASWG	22	38	58
Full-time faculty members who belong to other professional groups	8	14	58
Part-time faculty who specialize in group work	26	45	58
Link students to professional associations	17	30	57

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members belong to other groupwork associations. Nearly a third (30.0%,  $N=17$ ) of the programs report supporting a curricular and/or extracurricular effort to link students with professional group work organizations.

The use of technology in teaching has made great strides since the Birnbaum and Auerbach (1994) study. Social work courses are now taught in the traditional face-to-face manner, as hybrid courses that combine face-to-face and online classes, and in a purely online format where there is no formal face-to-face classroom contact between the faculty member and students. Only nine of the 74 required and elective group work courses are taught as a hybrid course; no totally online courses are offered.

## **Discussion**

The number of schools offering a group work concentration had drastically declined when Birnbaum and Auerbach (1994) did their study nearly two decades ago. The percentage of schools offering a group work concentration declined 'from 76% in 1963 to 7% in 1991' (p.329). This trend continues in the current study. The six schools with group work concentrations in the Birnbaum and Auerbach study have now declined to four. In addition, during this time period, the percentage of programs that do *not* offer courses with primary content in group work has increased from 3 to 15 percent. Thus, the current study also demonstrates a decline in the percentage of required and elective courses. When the final results incorporating additional respondents are available, it will be important to note whether these trends remain the same.

A positive change for group work education since the earlier study is the increase in the percentage of schools requiring students to have group work experience as part of their field work placement. This could be a critical change, since it is through field work that students have the opportunity to actually practice their group work skills. However, only half of the responding schools state that they typically enforce this requirement.

While online education was not a consideration when Birnbaum and Auerbach conducted their study, it is now an increasingly important offering within higher education. During the 2006-07 academic year, there were an estimated 12.2 million enrollments in college-level credit granting distance education courses with 77% of enrollments in online courses, 12% in hybrid/blended online courses, and 10% in other types of distance education courses (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Given this rapid growth, it is important to consider group work education's response to this trend. With only nine out of a total of 74 group work courses in the current survey taught in a hybrid online format, and none at all taught in a purely online format, one must raise the question of whether group work education is sufficiently embracing this newer modality of education. While there are legitimate questions about the effectiveness of non face-to-face group work education, it seems an important avenue for further exploration (Simon & Stauber, 2009).

The current survey requested respondents' comments regarding the

trends and changes in group work education since the Birnbaum and Auerbach study (1994). The comments indicate that some schools have actually introduced group work courses or group work content within the last few years. Other schools have reduced the number of courses due to limited resources. Many schools indicate that they chose to place more emphasis on the infusion of group work content into integrated courses rather than offering separate group-focused courses. Since the current study's instruction was to list only courses whose primary focus was group work, the study's ability to capture group work content in infused courses was limited. Another influential factor in the offering of group work courses and content is the importance of having a faculty member committed to group work. Some respondents stated that the retirement of a dedicated group work faculty member led to a decline in the emphasis on group work within the school. The absence of a strong voice for group work content and the aging of a large cadre of group work's spokespersons have been cited as significant concerns for the survival of group work as a strong modality within social work (Simon, Webster & Horn, 2007).

## **Limitations**

The preliminary findings presented here are tentative and require more in-depth analysis. At this time the current study has a somewhat low response rate and plans are underway to increase the number of completed surveys. The authors are preparing to file an amendment with their university's Institutional Review Board to allow them to directly contact non-responding schools to ascertain the name and contact information of the faculty member or administrator with group work expertise. These identified contacts will then be sent an email introducing the study with a link to the survey. Next, for schools who still do not respond, basic data will be collected from the school's website description of their master's programs.

The authors also understand that while the online survey format may be convenient, its length and detail may have inhibited some respondents from finishing the survey. Many surveys were opened using the online link but not completed. Conversely, schools with committed group work faculty or group work offerings might be

more likely to complete the survey and, therefore, skew the results. Finally, the current survey does not give a complete picture of group work offerings since the content of infused courses was not addressed. Such courses contain group work content, but the relative extent and depth of its focus as compared to other areas of course content is not addressed in this survey.

## **Conclusion**

The preliminary results of this study indicate a loss of two programs offering a concentration in group work since the 1994 study, bringing the total number of schools currently offering a group work concentration to four. In addition, the percentage of required and elective group work courses continues to decline. On the other hand, the current study does demonstrate a change toward more schools including a group work requirement in the student's field work experience. It remains to be seen whether these trends will continue when the final results are tabulated. Having a clearer picture of the educational landscape with regard to group work offerings in master's level social work programs is an essential first step in making appropriate curricular and extracurricular decisions. The authors hope that the final results of this study will provide useful knowledge for making these critical decisions and will stimulate increased professional dialogue and collaborative action among group work educators, AASWG members, and schools of social work regarding the future of group work education.

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