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# Group Work with Adolescents: Principles and Practice

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*Group Work with Adolescents:  
Principles and Practice* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition)  
Andrew Malekoff  
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As a social work educator and researcher invested in the promotion of groupwork for emerging adults, I was pleased to learn that *Group Work with Adolescents: Principles and Practice* would be receiving a timely revision. In this third edition of the text, Mr. Malekoff challenges readers to look beyond prescriptive models of groupwork practice with young people and instead embrace the possibilities of working with this dynamic and exciting population. At the heart of the text, he promotes a method of leaning into the unknown with young people and sitting with them in the uncertainty that often permeates their lives. While this approach may appear to be at odds with current trends toward evidence-based practice, it is in fact aligned quite deeply with the roots of groupwork and evidenced in such practices as meeting members where they are (e.g., questioning, lost, conflicted) and being present with them in that space (e.g., sitting with members in their uncertainty).

The book is organized in four clearly articulated and interrelated parts. The first places adolescent group members in context by focusing on their development, including a discussion of the risks and opportunities they face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It also outlines essentials for workers facilitating groups with adolescent members. From the outset it is clear that Malekoff is invested in releasing the worker from the responsibility of knowing, preferring instead a balanced approach that seeks to:

Integrate what we think we know (based on theories we subscribe to and experiences we've had) with what we cannot know until we come to know it (based on individual and circumstantial uniqueness, the ever-changing experience and context of one's life). (p. 31)

Throughout this first part of the text he encourages workers to embrace ambiguity, paradox, and contradiction and argues that "staying in the mess" (p. 21), is an essential aspect of groupwork with adolescents. To be clear, Malekoff is not arguing against the use of evidence and

practitioner knowledge to inform facilitation. Rather, he is arguing for a move away from the strict application of evidence-based practice that is often critiqued for its lack of attention to context, towards a model of evidence-guided practice, in an effort to integrate context and make space for science and art within groupwork.

The second part of the text focuses on guidelines for establishing and implementing groups. Building on the seminal work of Saleebey (2009) and colleagues, it begins with a chapter outlining seven principles of strengths-based groupwork with adolescents, including welcoming the whole young person to the group process, the inclusion of verbal and nonverbal activities, and the decentralization of authority. While little has changed or been updated in this chapter, it is important to consider how radical an approach Malekoff is championing here, particularly in light of current trends towards deficit and problem-oriented approaches to working with young people, in which practitioners must demonstrate competence or mastery in order to effectively and efficiently help, if not fix, the troubled or broken parts of the young person. In that light, this chapter, and the entire book for that matter, is that much more important and refreshing as it promotes a holistic approach to working with young people.

Throughout the rest of this part of the book, Malekoff guides the reader through group planning, beginnings, problem solving, the use of activities, and group endings. Lest he lose the reader, he grounds this important theoretical content in vivid case examples from his and his colleagues' work. In doing so, he brings group theory and practice alive for the reader. Noteworthy examples of this style include his attention to issues of cultural diversity in forming alliances with members' guardians in the initial stages of group development in chapter six, and the inclusion of content on grief and loss groups in school settings in chapter seven, which is particularly relevant given the alarming levels of violence and loss young people experience today.

Other examples of this style include his attention to demonstrating the benefits of music-based activities, including improvisation in chapter seven and song writing in chapter eight, as a means to engage young people in the group process, a practice with growing theoretical (Delgado, 2000) and empirical support (Kelly, 2014). Throughout these and other examples, Malekoff embeds content on mindfulness practices and advocates for a social justice orientation in facilitating groups with

young people. The text could be strengthened by greater articulation of, and attention to, the social justice issues young people face and the role group workers might play in helping them address these issues. Perhaps what is most impressive about this part of the book is the way the author successfully threads the strengths perspective throughout the group process, even into group endings, a time when members' ambivalence toward termination is often framed from a deficits perspective.

The third part of the text explores issues that young people face today and the role that groupwork can play in helping them navigate these issues. Each chapter reviews a complex dimension of an adolescent's environment, including racial and ethnic diversity, violence, traumatic events, sexuality, and alcohol and other drug use. The chapters then outline practice principles for working with young people through challenges related to these complex dimensions of their environment. As in part two of the text, Malekoff then grounds the principles in candid illustrations from his and his colleagues' work that place the principles in a groupwork context. Of particular note in this section are the practice principles and related illustrations for addressing racial and ethnic diversity as a "normative adolescent issue" (p. 242), in chapter 11, working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in chapter 14, and the framing of "group work as a counterforce to alcohol and other drug use" (p. 336), in chapter 15. These are important issues facing young people today and the book positions groupwork as an effective way to help young people navigate issues related to race, ethnicity, sexuality, and drug use, while providing readers with principles to guide their practice.

In the fourth and final part of the book, Malekoff considers the unique challenges of working with adolescents in groups, including helping young people work through issues of identity and difference, the inherent loneliness of adolescence, the interdependent and competing needs for independence and belonging, and the very real sense of social isolation that results from this tumultuous developmental stage. Ultimately, he positions groupwork as an optimal environment to assist young people in working through these developmental issues as it allows them space and time to interact with each other and reflect on their experiences. In the final chapter, he positions the group as space for learning and reflection for the worker as well, reminding novice and seasoned practitioners alike that self-perceived facilitation failures and

mistakes are inevitable. It is what the worker learns from their mistakes that matters.

*Group Work with Adolescents: Principles and Practice* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) is well written, organized, and highly accessible. Students and educators will appreciate the balance of theory and case illustrations. Group practitioners will appreciate Mr. Malekoff's reflective narrative that is informed by close to forty years of groupwork practice with young people. The casual reader will also enjoy the book as the author clearly brings his heart and mind to his writing in order to create thoughtful and engaging scholarship.

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## References

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