

THE NINE DYNAMICS OF MUTUAL AID AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In This Chapter

Mutual Aid: What it is, and What it is Not
The Nine Dynamics

Key Concepts of This Chapter

All in the Same Boat/Universality
Dialectic Process
Discussing Taboos
Individual Problem Solving
Mutual Demand
Mutual Support
Obstacles to Mutual Aid
Rehearsal
Sharing Data
Strength in Numbers

Chapter Materials

Exercise 2.1: *Mutual Aid in Motion: Getting to Know the Dynamics*
Exercise 2.2: *Purposeful Action Equals Skill*

Appendix A: *Mutual Aid Dynamics and Their Related Skills*
Appendix B: *Generic Skills for Catalyzing Mutual Aid*

Mutual Aid: What it is, and What it is Not

Mutual aid is often misconstrued as either “sympatico” behavior (i.e., commiseration) or the exchange of advice. As the literature reveals, however, mutual aid is a much more elaborate process than either the expression of sympathy or the giving of advice. It has many facets and embraces many types of interaction, including those that might at first glance appear less than helpful.

Lawrence Shulman (2011) suggests that helping group members work through the obstacles to mutual aid is what helps to define the role of the worker. He identifies these obstacles as the complexity of the tasks involved in creating a mutual-aid system (hence the need to

harness members' strengths), the difficulty group members have in identifying their self-interest with that of others (hence the need to open avenues of communication and appreciation for the possibility of mutual aid through group building), and the difficulty with which people communicate honestly (hence the need to teach members how to engage in the purposeful use of self, an empathy-based helping process composed of self-reflection and self-reference). In addition to these obstacles, a number of further obstacles are brought about by the worker. The next chapter identifies them along with their impact and antidotes.

As articulated by Shulman (2011), understanding the dynamics of mutual aid can help us recognize when it is and is not taking place; can put us in a good position to formulate appropriate expectations of group members, of ourselves as workers in mutual-aid systems, and of the group as a whole; and can help us articulate what we do and why we do it to interested others, such as prospective members, their significant others, our colleagues, our students, and any practitioners who would like to enhance their skill at *group* work.

The Nine Dynamics

Sharing Data

Whether the data consist of specific tips on concrete questions (jobs, available housing, money management, and so on), values, or ideas about relationships, each member can contribute to the common pool of knowledge. The leader will also contribute data which, when combined with that of the others, provide a rich resource for the members.

(Shulman 2011, p. 344)

People bring all manner of information, knowledge, wisdom, and experience to the group, and one way of harnessing their strengths is by calling on that fund. How do we call on it? How do we set this data-sharing dynamic in motion? As with all other dynamics, we set it in motion during our very first contact with prospective group members by voicing our desire for this kind of norm. In describing and discussing our expectations, for example, we state very clearly that one of our expectations is that the group will be a place to exchange information. By letting prospective members know that sharing information of all types will be an integral component of the group, we begin to help them assess the goodness of fit between what they think would be helpful to them and what we envision. They can begin to imagine what at least some part of the process will look like. And they can also begin to think about and explore the strengths that they envision bringing to such a group. In other words, they begin to think of themselves as potential data resources. It might be said, then, that this dynamic reflects the networking aspect of mutual aid.

Once the group begins, we continue to develop this mutual-aid dynamic by turning all issues, from the not-enough-chairs dilemma to the more important issues, back to the group at every possible opportunity, even when the group calls on our supposedly superior knowledge (Middleman and Wood 1990b). We reach for information linkages by asking members to think about the ways in which one person's idea or experience relates to that of another. Because everyone who wishes to take part in this dynamic must have the opportunity to do so, we visually scan the group while we talk and listen for nonverbal reactions to what is being said or done at any given moment. Finally, when necessary, we help members hear what others have to say by amplifying overly soft or toning down overly loud messages. In

short, we consistently encourage members to look for ways in which they can exchange information, ideas, and wisdom gleaned from experience. Consider the case of Maria, who had agreed to join a new group for single mothers:

Just before the first meeting began, Maria came to me and said that although she wanted to be in this group, her babysitter had just backed out of her commitment. Maria had only come because her mother had agreed to watch the kids tonight, but Maria knew she could not count on her mother to be free every Tuesday night, and she knew of no one else who could watch her children. I asked Maria if she had time to stay this evening and talk to the group about her child-care problem. Maria said that because her kids were at her mother's tonight, she could stay this time. When we started I asked Maria to be the first to introduce herself, and I also asked her to tell the others about her child-care dilemma. It was great! Within a few minutes, she had two solid leads for child care and one other possibility to explore.

We too have information and knowledge to share with the group and contribute to its data-sharing process, but we do not force our own contributions onto center stage, even if we like our own ideas best. If our ideas predominate, we imply that, when all is said and done, it is still what we have to offer that is most valuable and set a norm of individual work in a group context (worker to member) rather than group work (member to member) and mutual aid. Once members experience the value of this dynamic of mutual aid—both in terms of being helpful to and being helped by others in the group—they will begin to take ownership of this process by initiating it for themselves.

To some extent, the group's freedom to become a data-sharing system is affected by the nature of the work setting, generally, and organizational policy, more specifically (Kurland 1978). In a closed system in which self-determination is restricted, for example (such as prisons or institutions in which "clients" or service recipients have little power over what happens to them), a group may have the freedom to problem solve and explore ideas but less freedom to try out different ways of acting outside the group (see the *rehearsal* dynamic below). It is imperative, therefore, that we understand the implications of the setting in which we carry out our work—its history with regard to working with groups (tradition with regard to using groups, for example); current attitudes toward groups (value of versus threatened by formally organized groups); and general philosophy regarding the use of groups as a helping medium (ways in which groups are used). Only when we understand systemic or organizational restraints can we help a group understand its data-sharing potential and define its acceptable range of data-sharing possibilities (see Chapter 4).

The Dialectic Process

An important debate of ideas can take place as each member shares views on the question under discussion. Group members can risk their tentative ideas and use the group as a sounding board—a place for their views to be challenged and possibly changed.

(Shulman 2011, p. 345)

If group members are expected to debate and, even further, if they are expected to take some risks by debating real feelings, real ideas, and real attitudes, then the group must be

perceived as a place where people can express themselves freely and safely and challenge others freely and safely. Not only is it helpful to share data, it is also important to examine its implications.

How do we set this dynamic into motion? We set the stage for it when we voice our expectation to prospective group members that not only will the exploration and debate of different perspectives (regardless of how far-fetched they may seem) be a norm of the group we have in mind but also that examining and exploring differences that emerge in the group will actually be encouraged.

The idea of a forum for debating ideas often appeals to prospective group members, but most of us are not very skilled at this process. At one extreme, so-called polite social debate tends to be carried out at a superficial level, guided by good manners and such restraint that true positions and feelings are often left unrevealed. As a process whose goal would seem to be to keep all feathers unruffled, this kind of debate—if it could even be called that—might be labeled as “all form, no substance.” At the other extreme are debates in which feelings and positions are expressed with such bad manners and lack of restraint that, while viewpoints are made quite clear, the total lack of interest in hearing other opinions is equally clear. Although we would also be hard pressed to refer to this exchange as debate, if we had to label it for the sake of comparison to polite tea talk, we would refer to it as “all substance, no form.” Finally, somewhere in the middle of these two extremes, and much like the conversations at some dinner tables, talk often comes from all corners at once, focused more on “a good time was had by all” than on any real exchange of ideas or understanding of others or of synthesis. None of these “approaches” to debating serves mutual aid.

Thus, while the idea of debate may be appealing, the demand for authentic and respectful expression is not always easily met. Some people, afraid of being judged harshly, may be reluctant to reveal their true feelings. Others, afraid of finding themselves alone in their positions, may also be reluctant to reveal their real attitudes. And still others, oblivious to the sensitivities of their listeners, may find it difficult to express what they think or feel without alienating those around them. Nevertheless, to the extent that it helps people try to deal with difference and understand where others are coming from, debate is one of the most valuable aspects of mutual aid.

Because debating is such a difficult process, when the group begins we focus our efforts on helping it balance authentic expression with respecting the sensitivities of its members. We do this by attending to two tasks at once: we help group members express themselves whenever they indicate the desire to do so, and we help the group adopt a structure for the safe examination and exploration of its differences. In a new group, for example, we restate or reframe overly aggressive or understated communication or ask that group members help one another find new words to express sentiments, and we ourselves model a sensitive and open manner of presenting our views and listening to those of others. Later, when the group’s sense of community is stronger and better able to withstand dissent and make use of its differences, we take a back seat and encourage members to provide the structure and norms that they think are necessary for examining, exploring, understanding, and making use of their differences.

It is often when we are helping group members debate and stick with issues rather than give in to the temptation to move away from painful, thought-provoking, or otherwise disconcerting discussion that our skill of “being there” for all members at all times (Middleman 1987) takes on its greatest meaning, for it is precisely during these moments that we need to balance empathy for everyone in the group with demand from everyone as well. Consider again the case of Maria’s group of single mothers:

At our fourth meeting, some differences emerged as the women started to talk about the pros and cons of working outside the home. Tina said her mother had worked and talked about some of the ways she felt her mother had been an excellent role model. Jeannette said she felt her mother, who had also worked, had never been around when she needed her and said if she were still married, she'd stay home with her kids. Tina said she thought the issue had to do with quality time, not quantity time—at which Jeannette raised an eyebrow, and Gloria sighed and said she wondered if what they thought even mattered, since they all had to work whether they wanted to or not anyway . . . so . . . what was the point of even talking about it?

After a few moments of silence, I said that I thought there seemed to be many different experiences among the women, but that each of those experiences, even though they were different, seemed to be placing some real burdens on them in terms of their own present situations. They agreed and started to talk again, but while they had first focused on their feelings as daughters, they now started to talk about their feelings as mothers.

The group's discussion eventually revealed that those who had expressed the opinion that mothers should be able to work outside the home actually had mixed feelings about not being ready with cookies and milk for their children at the end of the school day. And those who had expressed the opinion that mothers should stay home felt bad about having to work whether they wanted to or not. In this case, then, being there for all group members by not placing judgments on any viewpoint or position helped them continue to explore their differences (histories, experiences, and cultural norms and expectations). It gave them opportunities to hear about other ways of being, doing, and thinking, and it helped them discover some common denominators (such as feeling guilty for not being able to "do it all" and mourning their loss of choice) that transcended their differences.

Discussing a Taboo Area

[T]he group recreates in this micro-society the general community "culture," consisting of norms, taboos, and rules that the group members have experienced outside the group. Thus, direct talk about such subjects as authority, dependency (on people and/or drugs), death and dying, and sex is experienced as taboo. . . . As the [group members] experience positive work, they are given permission to enter the formerly taboo area.

(Shulman 2011, p. 346)

As demanding as it might be to engage in straight talk, it is even more so when we approach those areas we define as taboo. When people greet us, for example, it is taboo to tell them how we really feel. What should I do when my physician first asks how I am? Should I respond politely first and go from there? Or should I skip the polite altogether and immediately plunge into why I have come to her office? Even in situations we know to be more than merely social, in other words, we often still feel pressured to behave in certain socially prescribed ways.

Many topics, such as income, sexuality, prejudice, or attitudes toward authority, to name but a few, are taboo topics in our culture, and we do not expect to discuss them under any but the most necessary circumstances (such as with our accountant or physician, for example)

or the most lighthearted circumstances (such as in joke telling, for example). On the other hand, taboo issues are what often bring people to a group in the first place, and it is more often than not, therefore, precisely into this territory that many groups need to venture.

How can we help the group make this journey? Two tasks are called for. The first is to model the process: we are honest with prospective group members about our own perceptions of their needs and concerns and discuss with them the ways in which we think their needs could be met through the group we have in mind. Modeling is particularly important to the new group, because it helps members know that when we said we wanted the talk in this group to be real, we meant it. At the same time, it is a task that we continue throughout the life of the group by being responsive when real talk takes place, by encouraging the expression and exploration of members' needs and concerns, and even by raising taboo issues for discussion if we think it would be useful and no one else is doing so.

The second task is to explicitly discuss in the group how it may be different from others to which members currently belong or to which they have belonged in the past. In this group, we state, we will deal with real and sometimes sensitive issues. And although members may find themselves in a state of mutuality regarding some issues, it is also likely that at other times they will find themselves in a state of conflict. Regardless of which particular dynamic is in play at any given moment, and although the sensitivities of all group members will be treated with respect, we add, it will be a norm of this group to address all issues useful to the helping process and to helping it achieve its purpose.

Since taboo issues are kept secret, we rarely have occasion to measure our own thinking and attitudes against those of others. Through the mutual-aid process, however, people are given exactly such an opportunity. And while the expression of commonalities can be comforting, differences can be useful. Commonalities can let people know that they are not alone—that others share similar concerns or have similar problems, but the expression of differences gives people an opportunity to examine their own beliefs or attitudes and often provides a corrective experience. In either case—whether members have occasion to experience commonality or difference—it is usually refreshing to participate in a group in which speaking about the normally unspeakable is acceptable.

All in the Same Boat Phenomenon—Developing a Universal Perspective

We do not mind our not arriving anywhere nearly so much as our not having any company on the way.

(Frank Moore Colby, *The Margin of Hesitation*, 1921)

Discovering that feelings are shared by other members of the group can often help release a group member from their power. Guilt over “evil” thoughts and feelings can be lessened and self-destructive cycles broken when one discovers they are normal and shared by others . . . This can be one of the most powerful forces for change resulting from the mutual aid process . . . Many group members, particularly those belonging to oppressed and vulnerable populations, may internalize the negative definitions assigned to them by the larger society. In a group where common experiences of oppression are shared, it becomes easier for group members to recognize that a source of their problems in living may be external to themselves.

(Shulman 2011, pp. 347–348)

People often believe that being in a boat with others who share similar issues, needs, or problems will prevent anyone in that boat from arriving anywhere. But group members must share a boat in some important respects if they are to bond together in common cause. Consequently, an early task of mutual-aid practice is to help people imagine how the group we have in mind will mobilize rather than immobilize its members. How do we do that? We use examples of mutual aid in action to help them understand our vision of mutual aid both as process and as mission. And we share our vision of the group as a strength-centered joint venture, using the group purpose we have in mind as the reference point for helping them understand what participating in such a group will mean for each of them. Although it is true that members' needs, issues, and goals are in the same boat, let us not forget that their strengths are now in the same boat as well. Hence, while we use introductions to help group members see how they are connected to a common purpose, for example, we also use that time to help them identify their individual strengths and skills. In fact, it is often during this process that group members begin to understand how being in the same boat can lead to another mutual-aid dynamic: strength in numbers.

Our own attitude toward groups generally, toward their therapeutic potential more specifically, and toward people's capacity for mutual aid even more specifically, is most revealed by the way we articulate this particular dynamic. People can usually imagine receiving comfort and support from being with others of a similar ilk yet often have difficulty understanding how change or action can also come about in such a case, particularly if they are accustomed to thinking about groups as places to share deficits or problems. To help people overcome this hurdle, therefore, we need at the very least to believe in mutual aid. Beyond that, we also need knowledge. We need to know about small-group theories, specifically those theories that have evolved with mutual aid in mind (such as theories about planning, composition, group development, and interaction). We need to know about small-group dynamics, particularly those that affect and effect mutual aid (such as which communication patterns or group-management or decision-making norms are most conducive to mutual aid). We also need to know about the mutual-aid process itself (that is, the nature of each dynamic) so that we will know when mutual aid is or is not taking place. If we too are not sure how people in the same boat can help one another or, like some, tend to conceptualize groups as efficient backdrops for working with individuals; or if we do not know how to translate the ideal of strength-centered practice into action, then we will be hard pressed indeed to offer examples to others that reflect this dynamic.

Mutual Support

For a member struggling with a specific concern, the acceptance and caring of the group can be a source of support during a difficult time . . . At crucial moments in a group, one can sense a general tone or atmosphere, displayed through words, expressions, or physical posture, that conveys the caring of the "group" for the individual. One can almost sense it "in the air."

(Shulman 2011, p. 349)

One of the most appealing dynamics of the mutual-aid system is its capacity to provide support, caring, and empathy for its members, norms that evolve from the emotional commitment people make in themselves, in one another, and in the group as a whole. Even when ideas, feelings, and perspectives differ, which they inevitably do, there is great comfort

in being surrounded by people who we believe accept and understand us or, if they do not fully understand us, are at least willing to hear where we are coming from. This dynamic is frequently cited as a group's primary value.

However, mutual support is not always extended to its fullest potential. All too often, group members support one another in good times when the support is easy, such as when everyone agrees, but then tend to fall short in hard times, such as when differences emerge and what is needed is empathy rather than sympathy. All too often, instead of exchanging mutual support in such moments, people become harsh and critical, chiding those who disagree or take a different position (Konopka 1990). It is, however, precisely in such times of strife that a supportive atmosphere is most needed.

Thus, while we discuss with prospective members the group's potential for providing support, we also explain that in the group we have in mind, mutual support includes empathy as well as sympathy. We ask that prospective group members make an emotional commitment beyond the one they might normally make to their own growth or well-being in a therapeutic process. We ask them to commit to the support, growth, and well-being of the other members as well as their own. And we ask members of the formed group to extend their emotional commitment to the well-being of the group as a whole.

Although it is up to the group members to make such a commitment, it is up to the worker to create an appropriate opportunity for commitment by initiating the norms of acceptance and empathy. Early on, therefore, we use every occasion to help members come to know one another, care about one another, and care about what happens in and to the group as a whole. We model and demonstrate our acceptance, support, and compassion through our purposeful choice of caring words, expressions, and gestures. Our constant and consistent message is that in this group, people will really feel for one another—not only when times are good but also when times are difficult; and in this group, if we disagree, it does not mean that we do not care for one another; it just means that we disagree.

Mutual Demand

Another group expectation can be that the members will work on their concerns. At moments when clients feel overwhelmed and hopeless, this expectation may help them take a next step. The group cares enough about them not to let them give up.

(Shulman 2011, p. 350)

Similar to its counterpart of mutual support, mutual demand also tends to be misunderstood. In some cases, the demand that group members work on issues of concern takes the shape of the "hot-seat" syndrome, during which one member is badgered by the worker and co-member "assistant therapists" (see Chapter 3). In other cases, under either the guise of sensitivity or the need for equal time, problem solving is carried out in so cursory a manner and at such a superficial level that no meaningful exploration of problems, possibilities, or implications can take place (see Chapter 7). Whichever the case, such processes reflect a misconception of mutual aid.

Often requiring deep self-reflection and reorganization of thought, the tasks of meeting personal and interpersonal needs, working out issues of concern, and resolving problems can be slow, painful, and difficult. But if the group is going to be a forum for work, however that has been defined by its purpose, then the expectation that it will be a place where people

really do grapple with issues rather than merely scan them needs to be clear. Further, if it is going to be a forum for group work rather than individual work in the presence of others, then the expectation that members will work on issues cooperatively rather than individually and/or adversarially also needs to be clear.

Setting mutual demand in motion occurs when we first discuss with prospective members what they hope and expect to receive from being in the group. In that dialogue we examine the relationship between their hopes, needs, and desires and the purpose of the group we have in mind. And while we acknowledge that work may sometimes take the form of shaking old ways of thinking and doing, we also reassure them that work will always take place in a supportive and empathic atmosphere. Even when—or perhaps especially when—we find ourselves in disagreement with arguments, positions, or points of view, we will be there for all group members at all times. That is, we will make sure there is an opportunity to voice and explain all feelings and positions in the group. In essence, then, we ask that prospective group members pledge themselves to the serious examination of issues that bring them together and, in turn, we pledge to provide a safe structure for that process (Gitterman 1989; Schwartz and Zalba 1971).

The worker is usually the first to make a demand for work from the group, to set the tone of work—to let members know that working, however defined by the group’s purpose, will be an integral part of membership. In fact, group purpose plays a central role in this dynamic, for if a clear collective purpose does not exist, the group will have no reference point for its work and, as a result, the question of what it is that members have in common to work toward will always plague them.

When the group first meets it needs help to talk the talk of mutual aid—to “dig deeper” in order to identify and stretch its thinking-through skills. Hence, in the new group the worker’s primary role is to demonstrate what work looks like. For example, we model the action dimension of this dynamic by being thoughtful before we speak, and by taking a few moments to collect our thoughts and words to demonstrate our own efforts in the contributions that we ourselves wish to make to the group’s process. At times, we share our own thinking with the group to initiate or confirm the norm of using the group to help think things through. And we model the reaction dimension of this dynamic by being visibly attentive and reflective when we listen to others. We scan the group as we talk and listen to make sure that we pick up all contributions to the work process. We ask for clarification or elaboration whenever we find ourselves in doubt or making assumptions. We ask questions such as: “What do you mean, exactly?” “Can you give an example?” “Why do you say that?” “Do you really mean that?” “Do you know why you feel that way?” “Can you be more specific about what you mean?” “Can you be clearer?” “Can you say more about what you mean?”

By being thoughtful and by taking risks ourselves, we inherently make a direct demand for work from the group as well. When we speak, we demand that members listen to what we are saying and that they think about what we are saying. We demand that, like us, they think about what they are saying—that they do not just “mouth off” or simply talk to hear themselves talk but that, just as we take care about what we say and how we say it, they take similar care. And by scanning the group visually while we talk and listen, we in effect demand that all reactions, verbal and nonverbal alike, be expressed.

Once we set mutual demand in motion—that is, once we initiate the norm of work—group members follow suit and make the same demands of one another. The following moment in an after-school group of teenagers is a good example of this dynamic in action:

One teen became so provocative we had to stop what we were doing. I asked the group to sit on the floor and said: “Okay, now, what are we going to do? How are we going to do a show with all this going on?”

Some of the members started to talk about what Ben needed to stop doing, then he talked about what the others needed to stop doing. In fact they talked for a long time without much input from me, and after a while, they all agreed on what they had to do to work together better.

The discussion went something like this: “You have to stop . . .” “Well, you have to stop . . .” “Well, okay, but if I stop . . . then you have to stop . . .” “Okay, but then you can’t . . .” “Okay, but then you better not . . .” “Well, okay, but then you have to . . .” “Okay?” “Okay!” “Okay?” “Okay!”

Individual Problem Solving

The general learning of the group members can be enhanced through the specific problem-solving work done with each member. The group leader can help by pointing out the underlying common themes.

(Shulman 2011, p. 351)

As people bring their hopes, needs, desires, and concerns to the group, they engage in a collective problem-solving process. Through examination, exploration, and elaboration of the issues at hand, they look to their own personal experiences (self-reflection) in the attempt to deepen their insight, and build empathy. Ultimately, to be helpful to others as well as to themselves, they share their personal stories with the group (self-reference).

There is a tendency in groups to partialize the problem-solving process so that the issues of one group member remain for all practical purposes unconnected to those of the others. In such a case, we might think to ourselves, for example, “Well, it seems to me that Tom needs to work on issue X, Dick needs to work on issue Y, and Harry needs to work on issue Z.” This partialization, or individualization of issues, often occurs when the group purpose—that is, the common cause that binds members’ issues together—is unclear or when no common cause has been identified. It also tends to happen when the worker does not help members discover the ways in which their work is connected. It is absolutely essential to mutual aid, therefore, that we both understand and be able to describe the purposeful-use-of-self process, explain its role in individual problem solving from a mutual-aid point of view, and help the group adopt such a norm (see Chapter 7).

We first set in motion individual problem solving with mutual aid in mind long before the group encounters any serious problems to tackle. For example, we discuss with prospective members the concept of group purpose and our understanding of the relationship between group purpose and individual goals. We also begin to set the stage for this dynamic by describing what the process looks like. We talk about the fact that it is purposeful use of personal experience rather than advice that will be the key problem-solving vehicle in the group we have in mind, and we discuss both the concepts and processes of self-reflection and self-reference, describing how they help so-called individual problem solving take on whole-group meaning. Then, when the group meets, we ask it to continue this discussion. In fact, the dialogue about group purpose never really ends, as we use every occasion to help members identify what they have in common and how the group purpose as it has been articulated both embraces and reflects their own personal needs and goals.

Finally, in addition to asking that the entire group become involved in any and all problem-solving processes, we also model how to participate in this unique approach to this dynamic through our own (professional) purposeful use of self and by seeking explanation, clarification, and elaboration of all so-called individual issues until the ways in which they can provide meaningful whole-group food for thought is clear to everyone.

Rehearsal

[T]he group becomes a safe place to risk new ways of communicating and to practice actions the group member feels may be hard to do.

(Shulman 2011, p. 352)

New ways of looking at old pictures—of communicating, of interacting, even of thinking—are often identified as a result of the mutual-aid process; and one way a group can help people to think things through is as a sounding board for action as well as talk. In fact, helping people examine the implications of the way they act and react is one of the things a group does particularly well. In addition to helping the group identify alternatives through its problem-solving process, therefore, a major task of mutual-aid practice is to help members use the group to rehearse, either in fact or in imagination, those alternatives and their implications.

We set the tone for rehearsal by helping the group develop an atmosphere conducive to risk taking—an atmosphere in which taking chances and making mistakes is actually desirable. How do we do that? We ourselves take some risks. We praise group members for the risks they take. We acknowledge our own mistakes. When others make mistakes that are either visible or touch the group in some way, we acknowledge them as well and help the group put the issues into perspective. We ask group members to work collaboratively rather than competitively. We ask them to show support for one another's risk taking. Whenever occasions for trying out new ways of being, doing, or thinking present themselves, we encourage members to take advantage of those opportunities, often using activity appropriate to the group's developmental stage, such as role playing, to help it happen (Garland *et al.* 1965; Middleman 1982). Finally, by helping the group develop and maintain a sense of community and common ground at all times, we help it provide a safe and supportive climate for rehearsal and risk taking. In short, we help members understand that in the group we have in mind, trying and failing will be assigned a higher value than not taking risks at all.

Strength in Numbers

High tides raise all ships.
(John F. Kennedy)

An individual's fears and ambivalence can be overcome by participating in a group effort as his or her own courage is strengthened by the courage of others.

(Shulman 2011, p. 354)

Undoubtedly, we gain strength, courage, and new resolve from feeling connected to other people who we believe share similar needs, hopes, and goals. Although talk can be very

supportive, this dynamic, as with rehearsal, is often played out in action as well. Strikes, demonstrations, class-action suits, and tenants' associations, for example, all reflect this dynamic on a large scale. It can provide powerful mutual aid on a smaller scale as well, however, through vehicles such as community boards, organizational committees, consumer-rights or advocacy groups, or neighborhood-watch groups. Furthermore, even if groups are not social-action groups per se, there are still many possibilities for their members to experience this dynamic. When a member of a cancer-recovery group goes to her physician's office to obtain new test results accompanied by one or more of her co-members, for example, this dynamic is being acted out. Not only is the individual strengthened by the presence and support of a co-member, the whole group is strengthened by this process—strengthened by the need to reach for and use whatever skills it has to help a member face a special challenge. When the group uses its collective power to take action on behalf of one of its members (such as helping someone negotiate a complicated system) or even on behalf of the entire group (such as the collective presentation of demands regarding organizational policy) this dynamic is also in action. In each case, members are strengthened by the fact that they are both bonded and banded, that they are not alone. In each case, the power of the group itself is strengthened by the contribution of each of its members to whatever process is being undertaken.

We first set this dynamic in motion when we help prospective members understand what we mean by strength-centered practice. We offer examples of how individual strengths can shape and cultivate the power of the group. And we offer examples of how group power can strengthen each member. Once the group comes together, we encourage the development of its strength-in-numbers potential by helping it experience its we-ness at every possible opportunity. We also help members think about some of the ways in which their particular skills might strengthen the group. We help the group take advantage of those strengths. We help it identify how it has been strengthened. We help members think about some of the ways in which their membership might strengthen them. We help them take advantage of the group's power whenever such a need presents itself. We help them articulate the ways in which they feel they have been strengthened by being in the group. Finally, we praise the strength-in-numbers phenomenon every time we think we see it in action—that is, every time we see group members, as the French say, *se tenir les coudes*, or “hold one another up by the elbows.”

Key Points of This Chapter

1. Understanding the nature of each mutual-aid dynamic helps us articulate our vision of mutual aid to others.
2. Understanding the implications for practice of each dynamic helps us formulate appropriate expectations of ourselves, of group members, and of the group as a whole.
3. We set the dynamics of mutual aid in motion long before the group begins when we discuss our ideas and tentative plans with prospective members.
4. The data-sharing dynamic of mutual aid reflects a group's informational networking potential. When members share “data” they help one another by sharing whatever information, knowledge, and wisdom they have accumulated.
5. The dialectic dynamic helps group members debate their ideas and examine and explore their differences and provides opportunities to hear about new ways of thinking, being, and doing.

6. Many issues and concerns that bring people to social work groups are considered taboo. The opportunity to discuss taboos, therefore, as well as opportunities to gain knowledge about issues not normally talked about and to debunk common myths is an important dynamic of mutual aid.
7. People often feel as if they are alone in their concerns—that no one else feels as they do. When people spend time with others who they believe are in the same boat, they feel relieved and comforted by that company.
8. The dynamic of mutual support has two dimensions. The first is sympathy (e.g., “I’ve been there, and I know how you feel.”). The second is empathy (e.g., “I haven’t been there, but I think I can imagine how you feel.”).
9. It is through mutual demand that group members carry out the group’s work, however defined. This dynamic can be difficult for members to develop, because in many groups the right to demand work belongs only to the practitioner.
10. Individual problem solving with mutual aid in mind consists of a process called purposeful use of self, composed of self-reflection (thinking about personal experience) and self-reference (talking about personal experience). It is this mutual-aid dynamic that most helps a group stay away from casework in a group (Kurland and Salmon 1992).
11. The dynamic of rehearsal gives group members opportunities to practice, through talk or through action, new ways of thinking, being, and doing, either in imagination or in fact.
12. A group’s strength-in-numbers potential is one of the most powerful dynamics of mutual aid and can be expressed in many ways, ranging from the use of group force to advocate on behalf of one of its members to the use of its collective muscle to promote social action.

Chapter Exercises

2.1: Mutual Aid in Motion—Getting to Know the Dynamics

Purpose

To familiarize participants with each mutual-aid dynamic’s range of expression.

Learning Value

Opportunity to translate theoretical understanding into a concrete vision of mutual aid in a broad array of settings and in response to widely varying needs and goals.

Duration

About 90 to 120 minutes

What’s Required

Appendix A: *Mutual-Aid Dynamics and Their Related Skills*

Instructor Directions

1. Briefly review with all participants Appendix A (or alternatively, assign as preparatory homework).

2. Small groups form with 3–6 members each.
3. Each group chooses three dynamics on which to focus.
4. For each dynamic selected, the group develops at least one example of it “in action” using hypothetical scenarios or scenarios from practice/personal experience.
5. Groups share and compare results.

Outcome

At the end of this exercise participants are better able to anticipate the variability in application of each dynamic.

2.2: Purposeful Action Equals Skill

Purpose

To help participants recognize the purposeful use of certain actions as skill.

Learning Value

Opportunities to identify strategies for catalyzing mutual aid and to conceptualize those strategies as practice skill.

Duration

About 90 to 120 minutes

What’s Required

Appendix A: *Mutual-Aid Dynamics and Their Related Skills*

Appendix B: *Generic Skills for Catalyzing Mutual Aid*

Instructor Directions

1. Briefly review Appendix A (or alternately assign as preparatory homework).
2. Small groups form with 3–6 members each.
3. Each group focuses on three dynamics noted in Appendix A.
4. Each group identifies a setting and a population the setting serves.
5. For each assigned dynamic the group considers:
 - A. How might it be catalyzed in a group from the population selected?
 - B. What words and/or actions would they use to set it in motion?
 - C. Which label from Appendix B best reflects the intent of each action they identify?
6. Groups share and compare results.

Outcome

At the end of this exercise participants are more skilled at recognizing purposeful actions as skills of mutual-aid practice.

Recommended Further Reading

- Gitterman, A. and Shulman, L., eds. (1994). *Mutual-Aid Groups and the Life Cycle*. Itasca, IL: Peacock.
- Middleman, R. (1982). *The Non-Verbal Method in Working with Groups*. Hebron, CT: Practitioners Press.
- Shulman, L. (2011). *The Skills of Helping Individuals, Families, Groups, and Communities* (7th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.