

International Korner

Center for International Social Work Studies

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Group Work

Group work is not exempted from the ever present global community social work moves within. The following is an example of how a group work situation helped give a group of Cambodian refugees back their lives. The information in this Korner was gathered from an article in the *Social Work* entitled Group Treatment of Traumatized Cambodian Women: A Culture-Specific Approach.

History of Cambodian Refugees

Within the past twenty years approximately 150,000 Cambodian refugees have found safety in the United States. In the mid and late 1970's Cambodia was under the rule of the Khmer Rouge. This regime aimed to establish a purely Marxist society by torturing and killing individuals who had "...*more than a rudimentary education or who in any way were identified as standing in the way of the new order.*" Refugees that arrived in the United States "...*were subjected to multiple traumatic experiences before their arrival in the United States.*" Many of these refugees witnessed the murder of family members, including children.

Creating the Group

The author of the article, Group Treatment of Traumatized Cambodian Women: A Culture-Specific Approach, had to consider the cultural implications of group work for Cambodian women. In the Cambodian culture, human services (like those in the United States) do not exist. Discussing one's troubles with "*outsiders*" is unheard of, instead Cambodians will seek the advice of family elders or religious leaders. The social workers leading the group considered this cultural difference and were sensitive to letting the group members decide when to share their feelings and when not to. The group's goals were to focus on skills training, enhancement of social supports, and interaction with the Cambodian community. These goals were established to "...*reconnect the women to their own cultural values, beliefs, and networks.*" The author sought to help group members to "*acculturate at their own pace*", thereby encouraging each member to decide when and what they will take from this new culture.

Examples of Group Discussions

Group discussions ranged from American beauty products to the death of a husband by the Khmer Rouge. The following are excerpts from the previously mentioned article:

EXCERPT #1

"...For two sessions the group discussed the use of American beauty products. The women wanted to practice using makeup. Whereas some women expressed discomfort,

saying that they were too old, others were eager to learn, shyly saying that they wanted to look better. We reassured them that no one had to participate if they did not want to. This gave the women 'a choice'; some just watched and talked while others worked. The women supported each other despite their level of participation, and in the end, all decided to try."

EXCERPT #2

"Traditional wedding ceremonies was the topic for one important self-expression session. One woman reminisced about how her husband asked her family if they could be married, although other, richer women wanted him. She told her story with much pride and happiness. However, she quickly became upset and distressed because the Khmer Rouge had killed her husband. Members asked whether she wanted to continue. She replied affirmatively, saying that it helped her to talk about how lonely she felt. The other group members were very supportive and began sharing their own experiences. Another member told of losing her whole family. As she began to cry, group members expressed their sadness about all that she had been through. Most had been through similar experiences and could easily empathize with her."

Cross Cultural Group Work

The excerpts illustrate the importance of recognizing and working *with* a culture in order to assist in a healing process. The Cambodian women in this article created and maintained a 'natural helping network' (with the help of the social workers) that addressed their feelings of anxiety, depression and trauma of being a refugee. The social workers assisted with the creation of this network by respecting and tapping into the values and beliefs of the women in the group.

Other Articles

1. What Makes for Successful Groupwork?: A Survey of Agencies in the UK
Journal: The British Journal of Social Work 31 (3) June 2001
Author: Doel, M. and Swadon, C.
2. 'Self-Help': Perceptions of Israeli Students in the Helping Profession
Journal: Social Work and Social Sciences Review 7 (3) 1997
Author: Ben-Ari, T.
3. Psychosocial Assistance to Refugee and Displaced Women in Croatia
Journal: Groupwork 9 (3) 1997
Author: Pecnik, N. and Miskulin, M.
4. Group Treatment of Traumatized Cambodian Women: A Culture-Specific Approach
Journal: Social Work 44 (5) September 1999
Author: Nicholason, B.L. and Kay, D.M.
(Article used for Korner)
5. Themes of Rejection and Abandonment in Group Work with Caribbean Adolescents
Journal: Social Work with Groups 17 (4) 1995
Author: Glasgow, G.F.

Resources:

Nicholason, B.L and Kay, D.M. (1999). Group Treatment of Traumatized Cambodian Women: A Culture-Specific Approach. *Social Work*, 44 (5),467-479.
eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/families/refugees/refugees.html *Cambodian Refugees in America* 2/18/02