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Annie Pullen-Sansfaçon

Université de Montréal, School of Social Work, Montréal, Québec, Canada
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Socratic Dialogue and Self-Directed Group Work: Strengthening Ethical Practice in Social Work

ANNIE PULLEN-SANSFAÇON
Université de Montréal, School of Social Work, Montréal, Québec, Canada

Socratic dialogue is a practical method of philosophical inquiry used to develop ethical and critical thinking among participants. On the other hand, self-directed group work is a practical intervention model based on social justice principles aimed at empowering service users and clients in social work and community work contexts. This conceptual article aims to reflect on a combination of the two models, arguing that group work interventions inspired by Socratic dialogue and self-directed group work may represent a way for social workers to develop a better ethical stance in their practice.

KEYWORDS  Socratic dialogue, self-directed group work, model, ethics, ethical issues, resistance, values, social justice

INTRODUCTION

Many agree that social work derives mainly from two ideologies: first, it is based on personal change of individuals, and second, it is based on the principles of social justice (Lynn, 1999). Social work values are, therefore, based on this paradigm and generally include principles such as respect for the person and self-determination, commitment to promoting social justice, and professional integrity (Banks, 2006). These values are said to be fundamental to professional social work and social work practice and are considered a distinctive characteristic of the profession (Banks, 2008). However, evidence...
A. Pullen-Sansfaçon shows that social workers have difficulty practicing according to their professional values consistently because organizational rules inherent in practice environments often conflict with these social work values (Chu, Tsui, & Yan, 2009; Preston-Shoot, 2010; Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2011a). For example, a social worker may believe that a particular intervention is best suited to a client’s needs and represents practice based on social justice and human dignity, but budget constraints or eligibility criteria may not support such an intervention. Thus, although the practice of social work should, in principle, adhere to the value base of the profession, various organizational contexts often lead the social worker to forsake these same values. Because ethical dilemmas are often value conflicts in action, it is not surprising that social work practice is fraught with ethical dilemmas.

This article aims at reflecting on how the principles and process of self-directed group work can contribute to developing an enhanced use of Socratic dialogue, an existing model for ethical thinking and ethical practice applicable to social work and social care practice contexts (see Philippart, 2003; Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2010). In this sense, it is argued that the combination of these models allows for the development of practical reasoning abilities among participants while giving them the collective strength to challenge unethical practice. The article begins by briefly exploring the Socratic method as a tool for reflective practice and practical reasoning in social work. We then briefly summarize the principles and process of self-directed group work (Mullender & Ward, 1991) before exploring how this model can contribute to strengthening the Socratic dialogue in practice. We also provide reflection on group recruitment, facilitation, norms, process, mutual aid, and collective power. The article concludes by highlighting the strengths of the combined model.

Socratic Dialogue

Socratic dialogue is a specific method known to promote ethical thinking and reasoning in practical and professional practice settings such as medicine, business, and social work (Boers, 2005; Morrell, 2004; Philippart, 2003; Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2010). Socratic dialogue was originally proposed by Nelson and Heckman in Germany during and shortly after the Second World War (Saran & Neisser, 2004). Socratic dialogue may take place over a series of meetings, as described by Saran and Neisser (2004) who applied the Socratic dialogue model to education. It is usually practiced in groups of 8 to 14 people (Saran & Neisser, 2004) although it can also be undertaken between only two people. Generally, Socratic dialogue is known to help participants to reflect, to think critically and independently, and to feel confident in their abilities to reason and to respond to particular issues or problems (Saran & Neisser, 2004). The Socratic dialogue method proposes a set of rules and procedures enabling participants to reach consensus on
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ideas, values, and principles (Philippart, 2003; Saran & Neisser, 2004). Many advantages have been noted regarding Socratic dialogue as a tool for practical reasoning. Indeed, it is known to enhance thinking skills related to work in an organizational context (Burnyeat, cited in Morrell, 2004), to help protect participants against complacency (Meacham, cited in Morrell, 2004), and to develop critical thinking skills among participants (Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2010). It has also been linked to the development of virtues and important character traits relevant to ethical life (Gronke, 2005; Kessels, 2005; Overholser, 1999; Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2010). This last point may contribute to better equipping social workers to practice according to social work values (Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2011a).

Therefore, Socratic dialogue, has enormous potential to address some of the challenges inherent in social work practice, including those triggered by organizational contexts perceived as rigid and sometimes incompatible with social work values. However, to practice ethically in organizational contexts perceived as unsupportive of social work values, simply understanding the ethical way forward is insufficient. For example, in many settings, the pressure to conform to organizational culture is considerable, as is the power relationship between employees and employers. As a result, such conditions may deter practitioners from carrying out their chosen action even when it is the most ethical one (Preston-Shoot, 2010; Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2011a). Therefore, though Socratic dialogue can be seen as an effective way to think about ethical dilemmas as they occur, the organizational context of practice may lead to ethical lapses if it does not provide adequate critical space for reflection or a certain level of professional autonomy. Consequently, there is a need for developing an approach that helps participants to develop ethical reasoning and provides them with tools for resisting power relationships and difficult organizational work contexts that are detrimental to ethical practice.

Self-Directed Group Work

Developed in the United Kingdom by Audrey Mullender and David Ward in the late 1980s, self-directed group work is a specific approach in social work now practiced in many parts of the world (Arches, 2011; Fleming & Keenan, 2000). The approach is characterized by a deep commitment to empowerment (Mullender & Ward, 1991; Ward, 2004, 2010) and is made possible through the integration of a set of principles and a process (Centre for Social Action, 2004).

Central to the approach is a deep concern for the understanding of “the relationship between oppression, power, and change” (Mullender & Ward, 1991, p. 13). The emphasis of self-directed group work is thus on social change and social justice, in contrast to other types of social work
practice that may focus merely on the adaptation of individuals in society or on personal change (Zastrow, 2009). Several researchers, professionals, and practitioners have described self-directed group work as an effective tool for helping oppressed people regain the power they have lost because of the inequalities in the societies they live in (Denney, 1998; Mullender & Ward, 1991; Preston-Shoot, 1992; Rimmer, 2005). The model was specifically designed to distance itself from the “deficit” and “blaming the victim” types of approaches (Mullender & Ward, 1991).

Fleming and Ward (1997, p. 5) defined self-directed group work as having two main characteristics, consisting of five principles and six stages, which are inseparable. Together, they help participants to discover the underlying causes of oppression and to act upon them (see Figure 1).

Self-directed group work is based on the principles that people have the right to be heard, to define the issues facing them, to set the agenda for action, and most important, to take action on their own behalf. The process, which is circular, involves five stages in which various questions are examined to understand the underlying causes of oppression. The five stages—What, Why, How, Action, and Reflection—are formulated in a group work process (Centre for Social Action, 2004; Mullender & Ward, 1991). The Why stage is particularly important and is often undervalued (Mullender & Ward, 1991). Indeed, a group that does not explore the Why question will not gain a sufficiently deep understanding of the sources of structural oppression and will risk falling into the trap of seeing the problem as a personal deficit. The Why question helps the group to not only find other sources of oppression, but also realize that the sources of oppression are more structural or social than personal. Thus, social action, through its five key questions and with the help of facilitator, aims at producing change in a process in which users are not simply consumers but are active agents for change (Centre for Social Action, 2004). Finally, it is the combination of the model’s practice principles and its process that facilitates the empowerment of service users (Mullender & Ward, 1991; Ward, 2010).

COMBINING SOCRATIC DIALOGUE AND SELF-DIRECTED GROUP WORK

Although self-directed group work was originally developed for use with service users, we propose here to use the model with workers wishing to engage in a process of ethical reflection in action within the context of their professional practice. The use of self-directed group work with social workers is quite relevant theoretically because the model is particularly suited to people experiencing oppression. Indeed, it has often been argued that though many social workers are in a position of power with regard to their clients, they also work within relationships of power with regard to their
**FIGURE 1** The process and principles of self-directed group work.

*Source.* Adapted from Centre for Social Action (2011). Adapted with permission.
organizational contexts and experience various forms of oppression and disempowerment when trying to practice according to their work values (Clifford & Burke, 2009). As a result, social workers are faced with a dual difficulty: on the one hand, they must manage ethical dilemmas; engage in critical, practical reasoning processes; and make the best ethical decisions for the service users, groups, or communities with whom they work; on the other hand, they must situate these decisions within the realities and constraints of practice. Preston-Shoot (1992) effectively summarized these issues in his discussion about the notion of empowerment in practice: social work based on ethical principles is often difficult when the practice setting is overly rigid and regulated because regulation itself can be oppressive and disempowering for practitioners. Therefore, though Socratic dialogue can help social workers find a more ethical way forward, it is not always easy to do so in practice. This problem was discussed in a recent article reporting that social workers in some areas of practice experience feelings of powerlessness, and that this may have serious consequences for ethical practice (Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2011a).

Therefore, social workers may benefit from participating in activities that not only promote ethical reflection but also help them develop empowerment and collective resistance. Indeed, systematically extending the Socratic dialogue activities beyond one meeting and integrating it into the process of self-directed group work would allow for continuity within the group and enable participants to develop their feeling of empowerment and capacity for collective action. Furthermore, the combined model also exposes practitioners to a method linked to the development of practical, critical, and ethical reasoning ability, which self-directed group work process alone does not necessarily offer. Finally, because of the recognized applicability of self-directed group work to social work settings, the combined approach proposed in this article is very well suited to the context of social work professional practice. The next part of this article will examine some key aspects of the combined approach.

Group Recruitment

Socratic dialogue can be incorporated into a series of regular group meetings that benefit from the strengths of self-directed group work while offering a space for ethical reflection. The interest in discussing ethical practice then becomes justification for the meetings. Indeed, basing the group on prospective participants, in this case, practitioners who request support with regard to ethical practice, would be appropriate for initiating self-directed group work (Mullender & Ward, 1991). As in the case of traditional self-directed group work, the group work model proposed here would not draw on pregrouip interviews but, instead, would be open ended and open to new membership. Such openness is important because it would allow for the
addition of new themes and ideas. Likewise, Socratic dialogue is more effective when a diversity of stakeholders is involved because it nurtures a more varied discussion on the topic (Boers, 2005; Kessels, 2005). In this light, the only criterion of participation is the will to share one’s experience of social work practice and to explore the many ethical issues that may emerge within the meetings. Group composition and recruitment should therefore be open, and membership voluntary. Voluntary membership is perceived by Mullender and Ward (1991) as an essential component of successful self-directed group work in that participants are free to choose the type of intervention they need (Centre for Social Action, 2004). Similar to the Socratic dialogue activities offered in some parts of Europe, the model proposed here would therefore be publicized and open to all so that “all potential members are simply invited along on the basis of a shared problem” (Mullender & Ward, 1991, p. 60), in this case, challenges related to ethical practice. However, we believe that such groups should also avoid mixing social workers and managers together and that diversity of participants is achieved among social workers themselves (i.e., cultural background, range of experience, etc.). In that sense, managers who also experience ethical issues could be encouraged to develop their own group to deal with the issues posed specifically within management positions and thus avoid unnecessary unequal power relationships between the members.

Group Facilitation

The facilitation of the combined model presented here should be undertaken by a social worker who is directly involved in social work intervention. In their discussion of self-directed group work, Mullender and Ward (1991) suggest that cofacilitation should be adopted because it allows, among other things, to achieve a better sharing of power between the facilitator and the group. Although a cofacilitation team could initially establish the group, it may also be relevant for group members to cofacilitate the meetings. This method has been used with social work students engaged in Socratic dialogue as a pedagogical tool (see Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2010, 2011b), in which the students themselves facilitated the discussions on an alternate basis. To this end, a model based on cofacilitation may increase participants’ sense of ownership and professional empowerment. “Facilitation functions are not the special province of workers. Group maintenance, for example, is shared as far as possible with groups members, and increasingly so over time” (Mullender & Ward, 1991, p. 41). Nevertheless, facilitators must be strongly committed to the value base of self-directed group work. Most social work practitioners are well suited to facilitating self-directed group because the latter’s value base shares many similarities with that of social work as defined internationally (International Federation of Social Workers, 2000). It is important to note, however, that like the group composition discussed above, it
is inadvisable for cofacilitators to hold management positions within the
organization so that power relationships between the facilitator and partic-
ipants are minimized. Indeed, power relationships between social workers
and the organizational context of work, which includes managers, has been
identified as being detrimental to ethical practice in many cases (Pullen-
Sansfaçon, 2007). If managers feel they face challenges with regard to ethical
management, they too may seek support by forming such groups among
themselves. Therefore, in the proposed model, we suggest that, as the group
evolves, the facilitation should be undertaken and shared among participant
social workers. It may also be appropriate for one or two participants to
take responsibility for ensuring the stability of the group, that is, coordi-
nating meetings, managing resources where required, and ensuring regular
participation among members.

Norms: Agreeing on Work Principles
As outlined above, self-directed group work has a clear value base apparent
through six principles that must be fully integrated into practice: (1) avoid-
ance of negative labels, (2) rights of group members, (3) intervention based
on an analysis of power, (4) attainment of collective power by coming
together in groups, (5) opposition of oppression through practice, and
(6) facilitation instead of leadership (Mullender & Ward, 2009). Central to the
approach is recognizing “the nature of personal and structural power rela-
tions (Lorde, 1982, p. 183) to mobilize the capacity of a group work process
to achieve change and transformation at both levels” (Mullender & Ward,
2009, p. 94). Mullender and Ward (1991) explain that the self-directed group
work facilitator needs to integrate these practice principles for the approach
to be effective. This is also true for the juxtaposed model presented here.
Agreeing on these principles for practice is therefore central to successfully
combining Socratic dialogue with self-directed group work. Once the group
has identified common aims and objectives, it should draw up a contract
early on that clearly states its terms of operation. The contract should include
information on the value base of the group and other relevant information
the group wishes to develop with regard to these terms. At a minimum, the
group contract should include references to self-directed group work prin-
ciples as well as some reference to the basic rules of Socratic dialogue, which
are to aim at reaching consensus, gaining a full understanding of other par-
ticipants’ positions and experiences, and dealing with concrete experiences.
The adherence to these principles is particularly important because group
facilitation will be conducted by the participants themselves.

On the contract should also appear information about confidentiality in
the group. Indeed, because confidentiality in a group is sometimes difficult
to guarantee, and because information about agencies and service users may
be discussed within the group, notions of confidentiality should be discussed
thoroughly with the participants from the onset, through the development of the group contract, and throughout the duration of the group, if needed. Once the group is formed, the process of self-directed group work can proceed through the five stages described above, examining the various questions related to the underlying causes of oppression.

Asking the Questions: What, Why, and How

We propose using Socratic dialogue as the main basis for discussions during the first stage of self-directed group work to answer the “what” question. Socratic dialogue generally follows a simple procedure. First, the facilitator provides the group with a well-formulated yet often complex question before the group activity begins (e.g., Are there limits to antioppressive social work?). In our case, since the Socratic method is combined with the self-directed group work model, it is important for the participants to formulate the question as a group, based on their own relevant experiences, rather than by the facilitator alone. Once the question is defined and agreed upon by the group, the next step is to gather examples from the participants’ experience of social work practice (e.g., one social worker may talk about one situation she had with a service user trying to access services, whereas another might talk about a service user being discriminated against). Next, one example from one participant is chosen by the group and usually serves as the basis for discussion and analysis during the dialogue. Participants are free to ask questions. During the process, important statements and provisional answers by the participants are written down so that everyone has an overview of the discourse.

When all the participants are satisfied with the responses to their questions, they can begin to decide consensually on answers to the original questions. Participants are encouraged to use counterexamples from their own practice to find inconsistencies in the discourse before finally deciding on a response. It is through the process of identifying the various questions from meeting to meeting using Socratic dialogue and attempting to respond in a way that ensures “everyone comes to agree with the final decision” (Zastrow, 2009, p. 179), that the group can effectively determine the issues and difficulties (the “what” questions) related to ethical and professional practice as they experience it. The use of Socratic dialogue, from week to week, therefore helps participants to understand the many ethical difficulties experienced at work and the commonalities behind their experiences. More broadly, it helps them define a common goal for the group (Mullender & Ward, 1991).

When a sufficient number of Socratic dialogue meetings have been held, as specified by the participants themselves according to their own needs, the facilitator may now introduce the “why” question. During this stage, it is possible for the group to move back and forth between Socratic dialogue
activities, that is, the “what” question, and the “why” question. In other words, it would be acceptable for the group to conduct further Socratic dialogue before answering the “why” question. However, as mentioned above, it is extremely important for the group to have adequate space to ask the “why” question so that the group may move beyond personal ethical dilemmas and understand that their commonalities are political. As Mullender and Ward (1991) pointed out,

> it is only the full and detailed consideration of why problems have actually come about—which may take weeks, months or even years—which will prevent people from selling themselves or other oppressed people short when it comes to taking appropriate action. (pp. 84–85)

This stage is therefore crucial because it helps participants to delve deeper into the problem and understand its root causes, instead of jumping the gun and confronting the problem on a personal level. Once the participants have identified the common causes of concern (what) and are satisfied that they have explored the reasons underlying the difficulties they are experiencing in their practice (why), they may want to start thinking about ways they can challenge the identified difficulties. They will then turn to the “how” by “setting priorities, strategies, tactics, and tasks” (Mullender & Ward, 1991, p. 101) and then, by taking action.

### A Word About Mutual Aid

Although the self-directed group work model is not specifically focused on helping members develop systems of mutual aid, we believe that it has great potential in this regard when applied over a period of time. Steinberg (2004) argued that group activities based on open discussions are most favorable to the development of mutual aid. Socratic dialogue is a process that offers many opportunities for exchange between participants, and it can, therefore, lead to the development of mutual aid. Indeed, as participants discuss their experiences around a question, it creates an environment conducive to support. This type of group work also allows members to confront the misconceptions and prejudices that sometimes emerge from the discussions (Steinberg, 2004). It is through the sharing of a mutual experience, on a continuous basis, that Socratic dialogue is enhanced, helping members to develop the feeling that they are “in the same boat.” Indeed, through the group process, participants are able to share their practice experiences, their concerns, and their uncertainties and are thus exposed to opportunities for developing mutual help. We now discuss another important aspect of mutual help explored by Mullender and Ward: strength in numbers.
Collective Power

One of the most important and undeniable features of combining Socratic dialogue with an ongoing self-directed group work process is the potential for empowerment and collective action while enabling ethical reasoning. Indeed, the weakness of Socratic dialogue practiced on its own is twofold: on the one hand, there is the danger of failing to link the personal with the political, and on the other hand, there is the problem of ethical practice that does not fit easily within an organizational context. However, combining Socratic dialogue with the collective and empowering aspects of self-directed group work may not only promote political awareness and practical reasoning among social workers with regard to ethical issues but also may help social workers develop their capacity and strength to mobilize in oppressive contexts often detrimental to ethical practice. As Fenwick (2003) explained: “collective action is key; when cultural resistance through collective action is combined with critical analysis on power relationships and structural oppression, people can explore unexpected, unimagined possibilities for work, life and development” (p. 622). It is in this sense that the potential for developing critical analysis and practical reasoning offered by Socratic dialogue, combined with the strength of self-directed group work, provides a model that enables social workers in a difficult work context to practice according to their professional values. Indeed, according to Mullaly (2010), it is possible to establish that the most important element in carrying out acts of resistance is the progress and hard work of a caucus or group of colleagues who share similar values. In a similar vein, Mullender and Ward (1991) noted that networking is the obvious answer [to the isolation of workers in difficult work contexts]. It assists in developing the skills, not only to carry out self-directed work, but also to handle organizational constraints. In this way the working environment can be manipulated to ease the group’s way without losing the integrity of the work, (pp. 147–148)

The model presented here therefore offers a powerful platform for connecting social workers, promoting empowerment and collective mobilization, and enabling social workers to recognize and engage with the complex ethical and political conflicts embedded in social work practice.

CONCLUSION

In light of these considerations, we believe that combining Socratic dialogue with self-directed group work adds value to the two “stand-alone” models, that is, Socratic dialogue and self-directed group work. Indeed, this
combined model offers practitioners ways of developing their ethical consciousness in social work while increasing their capacity for collective action. As Philippart (2003) explained, Socratic dialogue helps participants improve their level of awareness about the misconceptions, assumptions, norms, and values that all play an important role in understanding and articulating personal and collective issues. Combining it with the known strengths of self-directed group work can contribute positively to the process of practical reasoning by fostering a powerful mechanism for change while allowing those with a shared experience to develop a sense of solidarity and the satisfaction of helping others (Reid, 2002).

As mentioned in the Introduction, social workers are often confronted with ethical problems that may be interpreted as personal but are in fact more related to “macro-” contexts such as the organization or even the society in which the intervention takes place. To develop a more ethical practice, practitioners who experience ethical dilemmas in practice must ensure that they use practical reasoning abilities to think the dilemmas through, act in line with the values of social work, and find the strength to carry through with their decisions in practice. As Rhodes (1986) stated, “workers must begin to break down the radical separation between their personal integrity and their professional lives, by accepting responsibility for the ethical and political dimensions of their work” (p. 154). By combining Socratic dialogue with self-directed group work, not only are social workers able to develop the practical reasoning essential to ethical practice, but also the collective nature of the activity strengthens their resistance to power because of the possibility for social action and collective mobilization. In this sense, we believe that the model presented in this article offers added value to social work practitioners who face an increasingly difficult work environment.

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