

The Check-In and Other-Go Rounds in Group Work: Guidelines for Use

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Abstract. A group worker needs effective ways to get a group started and to involve its members. The check-in, an exercise to open group sessions, and other go-rounds which give each member a turn to speak, have become popular techniques. This article examines the value, purpose and problems of the check-in and other types of go-rounds and gives guidelines for use in a group.

It is possible to perform acts that are techniques without employing group work as well as to use these same techniques and be doing group work. The techniques are not unique to our field; they are shared by all of the helping professions. The method informs how and when these techniques are to be selected, in what combinations, and with what intents (Klein, 1972)

A go-round is an activity in which each group member is asked to respond, in turn, to a particular stimulus. This activity is known variously as a check-in, go around, agenda-go-around, round, and round robin. It is referred to as an activity, technique, procedure, and structured exercise. The group worker may direct the go-around with a specific set of instructions aimed, for example, at helping the members get to know one another, read their mood, or get started on their work. The agenda-go-round refers to this procedure specifically when it is used to set the schedule and topics of a meeting.

The check in is a go-round typically used as an opening ritual, in which members report how they are feeling and what they would like to talk about. A colleague likened this to “taking a pulse” of the group. The check-in may be used at the end of the group (a check-out, really) or at other times when specific feedback is desired.

This article stems from the author’s observation, as a group work teacher and consultant, that an increasing number of group leaders are routinely using the check-in to start their sessions. Why is this technique so popular? What are the implications? The follow is a critical assessment of the go-round technique, with particular focus on the check-in.

Origin and Purpose

The traditional “talking circle” is a very old way of bringing Native People of all ages together for the purpose of teaching, learning, and healing. To prepare, members purify themselves with smoke from the burning sage, cedar or lemon grass that is brought around the circle. The leader, usually an elder, says a prayer to the Great Spirit and then talks to the people, who listen respectfully. An eagle’s feather or a rock is passed and each member, as s/he holds the sacred object, may speak. In closing, the elder draws upon his/her wisdom. Likely using a story that speaks to the issues raised. Members rise in prayer, “All my relations” (N. Yellow Bird, 1981).

The go-round, as we know it in the group work field, appears to have its roots in work and educational settings. The check-in is frequently used by committees and task groups to set or modify the agenda. Also, committees go around to get input from each person and take votes. In school settings, students are checked-in by the taking of attendance, which also signals the start of class. A variety of go-rounds are used by teachers to involve students in lessons and test their knowledge.

In the 1960s, training or t-groups, which were educational in origin, introduced structured exercises, including the go-round. With the evolution of encounter groups and Gestalt therapy, these structured exercises were commonly used as acceleration devices. Certain tasks and procedures were thought to by-pass stereotypic or introductory social behavior of groups and get more quickly to individual disclosure, emotional expression, and body awareness. (Yasmin, 1985).

There is scant reference to the check-in or go-round in standard social work texts of group method (Shulman, 1992; Gitterman & Shulman, 1994; Garvin, 1981; Roberts & Northern, 1976; Bernstein, 1965; Klein, 1972; Sundel, Glasser, Sarri & Vinter, 1985; Schwartz & Zalba, 1971; Brown, 1991; Zastrow, 1989). Reid (1991) includes it in a chapter on a program activities. Yslom (1985) refers to the go-around in his section on structured exercises and gives a detailed description of the agenda-go-round in his book on inpatient group psychotherapy (1983). Sadock (1985) lists it as a therapeutic technique used in group psychotherapy.

Because each member must participate and no one is allowed to withdraw, the technique can be especially valuable for the schizoid member, who might not otherwise contribute, and for the passive member, who might be too intimidated to do so. It also helps control the monopolist, who might otherwise dominate a session. When the subject of the group is the members' feelings toward a particular member, it provides concentrated feedback and information about transferences (Sadock, 1985).

A group counseling text (Jacobs, Harvill & Manson, 1988) devotes a chapter to "Rounds and Dyads" and states that "there is no skill, technique, or exercise mentioned in this book that is more valuable than the use of rounds." These authors recommend liberal use of rounds in counseling groups as a way to: (1) get members focused, (2) deepens the intensity, (3) shift the focus to all members, (4) gather information and locate energy, (5) build comfort, trust, and cohesion, (6) process exercises, (7) draw out quiet members, and (8) summarize. The authors illustrate three different kinds of rounds: designated-word or number rounds (using scales or percentages), word or phrase rounds, and comment rounds (Jacobs, Harvill & Masson, 1988).

Manuals and handbooks, specially for short-term counseling or psycho-educational groups, frequently recommend use of checking and go-rounds. For example in a manual for leaders who are working with adult survivors of incest, Roberts (1987) recommends an initial check-in, e.g. each member makes an "I feel..." statement and tells what she will need for comfort during the sessions.) In addition, ten-session curriculums which members are encouraged to approach

includes topics for each session, e.g. stories of the incest, accounts of how they survived, how they express their anger, etc., “round robin fashion.”

Check-ins and other go-rounds may have particular appeal to new group leaders, especially those more comfortable working with individuals. This technique may make the task of facing “all of them” appear more manageable, as it sets up participation one-by-one. It also gives a group leader something structured and concrete to do, when bewildered by commotion, or worse, by silence. In a chapter devoted to preparation of group leaders, Longerfan (1982) offers this very reassurance:

But what if the members don't talk to the leader and don't follow the leader's leads? The last resort is the “go around”. The leader says, “Now we will go around and everyone can give their name.” The leader expects everyone to contribute. Members give their name. Then what? The leader gives another subject for “go-around”. The entire meeting can be spent having go-arounds.

Beginning anxiety is understandable. Group work is not simple. There are multiple levels of meaning and interaction among the worker, individuals, the group as a whole, and the external system. Group work is not exact. Kolodny (1981) states that it is not a form of treatment where the techniques are part of a predetermined detailed master scheme (like chess), but rather in practice, particularly with children, group work is responsive and flexible, perhaps bridging several theories, having the quality of “shifting and searching” (like poker) (Garland & Kolodny, 1981). The worker must be an active listener, be relaxed enough to “be with” the group, trust and use the strengths of the members and the process, make thoughtful yet authentic contributions, and keep the group on focus. This seems a formidable task. In a climate that expects quick results, it is no wonder we have embraced the check in and other compacting techniques in their practice. What are the effects? And what are the underlying assumptions?

The assumptions and priorities

This article does not debate the use of some form of go-round in the first session of a group. This applies, also, to an open-ended group when a new member enters, (technically a first session). In the beginning, individuals need to get acquainted and discover how they are connected to each other and to the purpose of the group. It is important to hear from each person and a go-round gives such an opportunity.

Under challenge is the routinized use of the check-in, as well as the extent of the claims made for it. Although the check-in procedure is not likely to harm group members, it can give a paradoxical message and can be misused. Misuse generally occurs when the procedure ignores, interrupts, tries to speed up or circumvent the natural development of the group. Misuse also occurs when the procedure neglects the potent therapeutic force of member-to-member interaction, of mutual aid.

To prevent such misuse, it might be helpful to review some concepts about how a group begins and how the worker might aid in this development. Garland, Jones, and Kolodny (1965), in their

description of group stages, talk about the approach-avoidance that members work out in the beginning of the group and to some extent in each session. Moreno (1985) emphasizes the importance of a “warm-up” process in preparing the group for spontaneous action. Shulman (1992) highlights the task of the worker, as follows.

The beginnings of each group session should be seen as a tentative form of feeling out of the group, with the worker endeavoring to determine which member or members are attempting to capture the group’s attention for their own issues and how these issues may represent a theme of concern for the group. In a like manner, the group itself may be approaching a major theme of concern for that week, and the individual offerings may thus present specific examples of the concern of the group.

Whether the concern originates with the one or is an expression of the feelings of the many, the worker’s tasks in the early stages should be focused on answering the question, “What are we working on this session?” (Shulman, 1992) highlights the task of the worker, as follows.

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Social Work With Groups

An observant worker can pick up themes, nonverbal cues, energy, level, tone, and subgroupings with or without a check-in. Small talk in the beginning can often give big clues to the issues of concern. The following is an example from an open-ended psychodrama group in a residential substance abuse treatment program.

As people entered the room for my psychodrama group, I noticed that two members brought pillows from their beds to use as cushions and one member was handing out life savers. I thought to myself that it might be tough to get a drama going today. I took a deep breath and asked what was going on. Actually, the members with pillows both had hemorrhoids and said they came prepared, knowing it was a two hour group! It was clear from the discussion, however, that other members were “tender” also. They were anxious and apprehensive about the group; the staff has been preoccupied with a seriously ill resident and had not been attentive to them. I listened to their concerns and then talked a bit about psychodrama. I encouraged them to participate as much as they could. I asked them to think about something they wanted to accomplish in the next few days and to identify any obstacles. I asked them to choose

another person in the group and talked together about this. After 20 minutes, the whole group gathered and a member volunteered to rehearse his situation in a short vignette.

The underlying assumption of a check in is that individuals can directly articulate their concerns and that the worker can readily find a connecting theme. This may not be the case, as the following example illustrates:

In a group for students with learning and emotional problems at an alternative high school, the adolescents responded to the routine check in with routine answers: "Fine", "Fine," "Fine" and so on, around the room.

The check in did signify the opening of the group; it also signified the extent to which members were *willing* to open. The group leaders still had to decide what to do next. They had a number of options: They just had to wait. They might express relief that the students were "fine", and just wait. They might express pleasure that things were "fine" and encourage members to talk further about what's going well. They might feel frustrated at the group's collusion and press a likely member to talk. They might feel a sense of failure. They might simply log the check in as a barometer of the resistance and watch how the responses change over time. They might comment on or reach for the anxiety / resistance in the group. They might reach for feelings around the fact that the group is mandatory. They might reach for feelings around the fact that the group is mandatory. They might feel angry and retaliate by threatening to take away free period if students don't talk. They might pick up on strains of conversation before the check in (which likely reflected themes of anxiety / resistance).

Even in cases where the members can directly articulate their concerns, the worker and the group must still struggle with the issue of authority and control: who desires which topic / person gets priority? Whose comments carry more weight? Who reins in the verbose or the narcissistic member? The worker must still answer questions about his/her role: does s/he direct the check-in? Respond to members' comments? Sit back? Participate in check-ins? Pass? Pass sometimes? The group will use any kind of activity to play out its current developmental issues. It is up to the worker to make use of the explicit and implicit themes that emerge from a check-in to help the group do its work.

A task in beginning groups is to create a culture of mutual aid (Glitterman, 1989; Yalom, 1985). The worker models and nurtures such norms as mutual support, collective action, appreciation of differences, autonomy, self disclosure, freedom of interaction, honesty and spontaneity of expression. The go-round format may be at variance with these norms.

Because each person is expected to take a turn, individuals are forced to speak, even when they may prefer to remain silent. Often, however, members are so anxiously preparing in advance what they are going to say that they do not listen to what others are saying. In fact, the round robin contradicts the ideal of speaking freely and spontaneously, listening to others as sensitively as possible, and working in a warm flexible climate suited to the members' needs. (Benjamin, 1978).

Social work with groups

The check-in may convey the message that real work gets done individually. This is especially true when entire sessions are structured to give members time one-by-one. This happens by default in groups that use a lengthy check-in to determine the agenda but leave little time for agenda filling (Forberg & Slide, 1987). In some groups, workers and members collude in using the check-in to identify which individual will have the “hot seat” (Perls, 1973) for that particular session. Such a format gives the illusion of deep work, especially for the person who has the floor, and it offers relief for those in the “audience” who want to avoid painful exposure. This format does not encourage the kind of norms that make the best use of the group and its resources, however.

The check-in may reinforce another encumbering norm: the person who presents his/her need most urgently or dramatically or powerfully is given the floor by the group. Members who are quiet, lack confidence. Or tend to minimalist their feelings defer to the member who appear to be “in more pain” or “more deserving”. The worker has to be careful that a method designed to give greater equality and be less competitive is not a structure that, paradoxically, buttresses those who can already attain voice and power.

Workers need to assure that members have equal access to the floor, not necessarily equal time. A recent student of time-limited psychotherapy tmfeoups showed no significant correlation between patient activity level and outcome. People who were “main actors” were more likely to feel that they even fired from the group, but concrete changes, such as reduced symptomatology, improved self esteem, better social functioning, and so on appeared unrelated in any simple way to how much one said (Soldz et al, 1990).

In any case, a check-in can be time-consuming. If a group has eight members and each speaks briefly (one-two minutes), a check-in takes eight to 16 minutes. Another check-in at the end consumes a total of 16 to 32 minutes; another at mid-point (Corey, 1990), 24 to 48 minutes. The obvious question is whether this saves times or is the best use of the group and its time.

Differential Use

The go-round can be a valuable technique in the group worker’s repertoire. Like other structured procedures, it’s use should be differential, with consideration of population, purpose, focus and timing. The following are examples and guidelines for constructive use of the check-in and other go-rounds in social work with groups:

1. *In the first meeting of a group, as discussed previously.*

.... In the first session of a group for couples who were experiencing marital problems, the worker suggested that they go around the room so that members could share their names, how long they had been married, and whether they had any children. Later, the worker suggested

some “problem swapping” about their difficulties and the changes they would to see in their relationships. (Shulman, 1992).

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2. *As an opening or closing ritual for on-going groups* (despite the questions raised(. If a check in is used, it should serve as a quick scan. Responses should be succinct. Instructions should be simple, specific, and related to the group purpose. For example, “Please tell the group, if you cannot, one thing you want to talk about today (...one thing you like about yourself and don’t want to change, one thing you don’t like and want to change;...a word or two that describes your teenager...on a scale of 1-10c with 10 being the most, tell how much you want to do this activity, ...name a situation in which you would feel vulnerable to relapse,” etc.) Malekoff (1992) used a “famous last words” go-round as a closing ritual in one of this adolescent boys’ group to help them consolidate and leave.

Yalom (1985) advises workers to avoid go-rounds that end up in a cul de sac, such as asking members to tell how they feel (then what?) or asking questions that have complicated answers based in the past. As far as possible, workers should avoid putting people on the spot. Members should be able to exercise control over their participation, knowing at the outset that they have the option to “pass”. During the check-in , the worker may need to help members clarify input that is confusing and condense input that is rambling. However difficult, s/he must accept the role of limit setter. Even with the check-in, it may be necessary to make a space for someone who is reticent and to seek more meaningful participation from the monopolist. Always, the worker must help the group assess the way it is working together.

3. *In an inpatient psychiatric setting, where individuals are in severe distress (agitated, depressed, anxious or withdrawn).* A structured protocol for group sessions may help group members make simple and safe encounters with each other. Movement, sentence completion; or other specific tasks may be used. Such exercises demonstrate that participation by each person is expected and valued; the form alleviates some of the social demand that may be overwhelming to these individuals. The go-round is also useful for the worker:

...In the rapid change of the inpatient group, the therapist is often confronted with individuals about whom he or she has little information. A structured “go round” allows the therapist to scan the group quickly, to make contact with each person in the room, and to obtain a bird's eye view of the work possible for the group that day. (Yalom, 1983).

4. *With particular populations to develop specific coping skills.*

...The check-in has been used in both women's and men's groups to respond to particular styles and to develop gender-related skills. Women's groups often use the check-in as a way to assure inclusion, as well as a way to help members put forth their needs, since women tend to defer to others. Men's groups often use a go-round to assure each man a space and to encourage members' contributions without the level of competition typical of men's interactions (Sternbach, 1990).

In a group for chemically dependent people in early recovery, workers may use a quick check-in to help members get involved and be accountable (rather than to "skate" through the whole meeting, which may be a more familiar device).

6. To help group members get down to work in creative and interesting ways.

...Movement, music, art, poetry, and drama assignments may be used.

The worker rolled out a length of mural paper and provided markers. She asked group members (one at a time) to quickly draw a symbol of something that was on their mind that they had feelings about. Each member came up, made a sketch and said a little about it; other members watched closely and responded spontaneously; they built on the ideas and drawings of each other. The worker asked the group to look for connections, out of which came several themes for discussion. (Duffy, 1990).

6. To get feedback

...Spontaneous use of the go-round in the work phase of the group allows quick feedback-reaching for what members are feeling or thinking and have not said, reaching for perceptions from others when a member expresses doubts. The purpose of the go-round, in these cases, is to clarify the dynamic process, what is happening here and now.

7. To take a quick poll on issues

...Go-rounds can provide a structure for decision-making, particularly when group members have never experienced an orderly, collaborative process. In his work with impulsive adolescent boys who operate from out-of-control, Gitterman (1989) used such a structure to help them offer ideas, listen, and decide among the alternatives.

Like any technique or trend, the check in and other go around techniques need scrutiny. Techniques can never be a substitute for group work skills. As illustrated, go-rounds can be used in a gimmicky, restrictive, habitual way or they can be used with authenticity to build relationships and help the group do its work.