

VALUES IN SOCIAL GROUP WORK

A Comprehensive and Structured Study Note with Examples

Values of group work practice center on empowering individuals through mutual support, voluntary participation, and democratic decision-making to foster growth, change, and social justice. Core values include respect for human dignity, individualization, empowerment, voluntary participation, and solidarity. These practices emphasize equity, confidentiality, and utilizing the group as a primary tool for therapeutic change and socialization.

Key values of group work practice, largely within social work, include:

- **Empowerment and Self-Determination:** Group members are encouraged to set their own goals, make decisions, and actively participate in the planning and implementation of group activities.
- **Individualization and Respect:** Recognizing each member's unique strengths, weaknesses, and needs, rather than treating the group as a homogenous entity.
- **Solidarity and Mutual Aid:** Promoting a sense of community, where members help each other and share responsibility for the group's development.
- **Democratic Participation:** Ensuring equal rights to contribute to discussions and decision-making.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Emphasizing that members participate by choice, with a focus on self-help, rather than being forced to participate.
- **Diversity and Inclusion:** Respecting differences in culture, ethnicity, gender, and ability, with a commitment to equity.
- **Purposeful Relationship:** Building a professional, supportive relationship between the worker and the group to achieve specific, goal-oriented outcomes.
- **Confidentiality:** Creating a safe environment where members can freely express thoughts and feelings.
- **Social Justice:** Leveraging the group's power to combat social issues and foster a just society. [5]

These values are implemented through techniques that emphasize collaboration, conflict resolution, and the conscious use of self by the worker.

1. Introduction

Values are the beliefs and principles that guide what we think is right and important. In social work, values are not optional — they are the foundation upon which every action, decision, and relationship is built. Without values, social work would just be a set of techniques and skills. Values give social work its soul and moral direction.

In Social Group Work specifically, values are especially important because the worker is dealing with multiple people at once — each with different backgrounds, beliefs, and needs. The worker must ensure that every single member is treated with fairness, dignity, and respect, and that the group as a whole is guided by ethical principles.

Simply put: Values tell the social group worker HOW to behave, HOW to treat people, and WHAT to stand for — not just what tasks to perform.

2. What are Values in Social Work?

"Values are the beliefs and attitudes which provide direction to everyday living."

— Biestek, 1957

"Social work is a value-based profession. The values of social work are its most important distinguishing characteristics."

— NASW Code of Ethics, 2021

In social group work, values guide:

- How the worker treats each member of the group.
- How the worker handles conflict, mistakes, and sensitive situations.
- What kind of programme activities are chosen and why.
- How decisions are made — by the worker alone or together with the group.
- How the worker responds to diversity — of religion, caste, gender, ability, or opinion within the group.

3. Importance of Values in Social Group Work

Values in social group work are important for several reasons:

Protect members from harm: Values like confidentiality and non-judgment protect vulnerable group members from being exposed, embarrassed, or hurt within the group.

Build trust: When members see that the worker is honest, fair, and respectful, they feel safe enough to open up, take risks, and engage deeply in the group process.

Ensure ethical practice: Values prevent the worker from abusing their power or position over vulnerable group members.

Promote equality: Values like social justice and democratic participation ensure that all voices in the group are heard — not just the loudest or the most powerful.

Guide difficult decisions: When the worker faces a hard situation — a conflict, a disclosure of abuse, a member who wants to leave — values provide the moral compass.

4. Core Values in Social Group Work

The following are the most important values in social group work. Each value is explained with its meaning, importance, a real-life example, and how the worker should practise it.

Value 1: Human Dignity and Worth

Meaning: Every human being has value and deserves to be treated with respect — regardless of their caste, religion, gender, economic status, past mistakes, or any other factor.

This is the most fundamental value of all social work. In group work, the worker must ensure that no member is made to feel inferior, worthless, or less important than others. Every person — whether rich or poor, educated or not, Hindu or Muslim, able-bodied or disabled — has equal worth as a human being. This value also means recognising the strengths in every person, not just their problems.

Example: *In a group for people living with HIV/AIDS, some members feel deeply ashamed and expect to be judged. The social worker begins the first session by saying clearly: 'Every person in this room is valuable. No one will be judged here for their illness or their past. You deserve care and respect.' This simple statement, backed by consistent respectful behaviour throughout the programme, transforms how members see themselves and each other.*

Worker's Practice: Never use labels like 'addict,' 'criminal,' or 'patient' to describe members. Always use person-first language (e.g., 'person with a disability,' not 'disabled person'). Treat every member as a capable adult.

Value 2: Self-Determination

Meaning: Every person has the right to make their own choices and decisions about their life, as long as those choices do not seriously harm themselves or others.

In social group work, self-determination means that the worker does NOT impose decisions on the group or its members. The group must be allowed to choose its own activities, set its own norms, resolve its own conflicts, and determine its own direction — with the worker's guidance, not control. This value is closely linked to democratic group self-determination (Trecker, 1955), which states that the group must have the maximum amount of control over its own affairs. Self-determination respects that people are the experts on their own lives.

Example: *A social worker facilitating a group of elderly persons in an old-age home suggests the group explore gardening as a programme activity. But the group members say they would prefer to have a weekly music and singing session instead. Although the worker had carefully planned the gardening programme, she immediately respects the group's choice and reorganises the programme around music. Within two weeks, members are composing simple songs, and the group comes alive with joy.*

Worker's Practice: Always ask the group what THEY want — do not assume. Present options rather than instructions. Say 'What would you like to do?' rather than 'Today we will do this.' When members make choices you disagree with, respect them (within ethical limits).

Value 3: Acceptance

Meaning: The worker accepts every member as they are — with all their strengths, weaknesses, mistakes, and differences — without approving of harmful behaviour.

Acceptance does NOT mean the worker approves of everything a member does. If a member has committed violence or made harmful choices, the worker does not praise that. But the worker continues to see the PERSON behind the behaviour as someone worthy of care and help. This is sometimes called 'unconditional positive regard' (Carl Rogers). In a group, acceptance means creating a space where no one feels they have to pretend or hide who they are to belong. Members accept the worker because the worker first accepts them.

Example: *A juvenile rehabilitation group includes a boy named Rahul who has a record of violent behaviour. In the first few sessions, Rahul is aggressive and disruptive. Some staff want him removed from the group. The social worker, however, consistently treats Rahul with respect, listens to him without recoiling, and acknowledges his anger as understandable given his traumatic childhood. Over time, feeling accepted for the first time in his life, Rahul becomes one of the most engaged members of the group.*

Worker's Practice: Do not make faces, sigh, or show disgust when members share difficult things. Do not talk about members differently behind their backs. Show through words AND body language that you accept each person.

Value 4: Individualisation

Meaning: Every person is unique. Even though people are in a group, each member must be understood and helped as an individual — not treated as 'just one of the group.'

Individualisation means the worker recognises that members in the same group may have different needs, different levels of readiness, different cultural backgrounds, and different goals. Group work does not mean everyone is treated identically — it means everyone is treated appropriately according to their unique situation. The Principle of Continuous Individualisation (Trecker, 1955) states that the worker must continuously observe and respond to each member as a developing and changing individual.

Example: *In a self-help group of 12 women, all of whom have experienced domestic violence, two members are ready to discuss legal options while three others are still in shock and not ready for that conversation. The social worker allows the group discussion to continue but also checks in individually with the three quieter women after the session, meeting them where they are emotionally rather than pushing them to a place they are not ready for.*

Worker's Practice: Keep individual case notes for each member. Observe who is silent, who is struggling, who is ready to take the next step. Adjust your communication style for each member — some need gentle encouragement, others need a challenge.

Value 5: Confidentiality

Meaning: Information shared by members within the group — personal stories, family problems, feelings, disclosures — must be kept private and not shared outside the group without the member's permission.

Confidentiality is the foundation of trust in any group. If members fear that what they say will be gossiped about or reported to others, they will never open up. Without openness, a group cannot function therapeutically. However, confidentiality is not absolute — there are ethical and legal exceptions, such as when a member discloses that they or someone else is in immediate danger, in which case the worker must take appropriate protective action. The worker must explain these limits clearly to the group from the very first session.

Example: *In a mental health support group, one member shares that she feels suicidal sometimes. She is terrified of being judged or hospitalised. The social worker acknowledges her courage in sharing, assures her that the information stays within the group and with the clinical team for her safety, and explains exactly what steps will be taken and why. The member feels heard rather than betrayed. The group rallies around her with support.*

Worker's Practice: Establish a group confidentiality agreement in the first session — get members to agree that 'what happens here, stays here.' Remind members of this agreement regularly. Handle sensitive disclosures privately and with great care.

Value 6: Democratic Participation and Group Self-Determination

Meaning: Every member of the group has an equal right to participate, to speak, to vote, and to influence the group's decisions — regardless of their status, education, or personality.

Social group work is rooted in democratic values. The group must not be run like a classroom where the worker lectures and members listen. It must function like a community — where everyone has a voice. This value is especially powerful because many group members come from backgrounds where they have never been given a choice or a voice — women who have been controlled at home, prisoners who have been told what to do, children who are never listened to. Experiencing democracy inside the group teaches them that they matter and that their voice counts.

Example: *In a group of tribal women in Odisha meeting for the first time, the social worker asks the group to collectively decide the day and time of future meetings, what language to use, and what topics to address first. Some women have never been asked their opinion before. The act of voting on the meeting day is itself a profound experience of dignity and agency.*

Worker's Practice: Use consensus and voting in the group. Actively draw out quiet members — 'We haven't heard from everyone yet. What do you think, Meera?' Do not let vocal members dominate. Rotate facilitation responsibilities among members.

Value 7: Social Justice

Meaning: Social workers must work toward a fair and just society — addressing discrimination, inequality, poverty, and oppression that harm individuals and communities.

Social justice goes beyond helping individuals in a group. It asks: WHY are these people suffering? Often the answer is rooted in unfair social systems — casteism, sexism, poverty, disability discrimination, or communal prejudice. A socially just group worker does not just help people cope with oppression — they help the group understand and challenge the systems that oppress them. In a group of Dalit students facing caste discrimination in school, the worker not only provides emotional support but also helps the group understand their constitutional rights and supports them in filing complaints with the school administration.

Example: A social worker facilitating a group of women who have been denied property rights after their husbands' deaths does not just console them. She helps the group understand the Hindu Succession Act (amended in 2005), connects them to a legal aid clinic, and supports them in collectively filing claims. Three women successfully receive their rightful property. The group transforms from a grief support group into a rights advocacy group.

Worker's Practice: Be aware of power and privilege. Advocate for members beyond the group room. Connect group experiences to larger social issues. Help the group move from personal struggle to collective action.

Value 8: Non-Judgmental Attitude

Meaning: The worker does not judge, label, blame, or morally evaluate the members — even when their behaviour or choices conflict with the worker's own beliefs.

A non-judgmental attitude is one of the most difficult values to practise, because all human beings carry unconscious biases. A worker might feel uncomfortable with a member who has a different religion, sexual orientation, or criminal past. But a professional worker does not allow personal discomfort to affect the quality of care they provide. Non-judgment does not mean having no values — it means not imposing your values on others. The worker must be aware of their own biases and continuously reflect on them.

Example: A social worker — who comes from a conservative background — is facilitating a group that includes a young woman who is in a live-in relationship outside of marriage. During a session on relationships, the social worker notices her own internal discomfort. She reflects on this privately, chooses not to comment on the member's relationship choices, and treats her with the same warmth as every other member. The member later says the group was the first space where she never felt judged.

Worker's Practice: Use reflective supervision to examine your own biases. Avoid expressions like 'you should have...' or 'that was wrong of you.' Focus on the person's feelings and goals, not your evaluation of their choices.

Value 9: Purposeful Worker–Group Relationship

Meaning: The relationship between the social worker and the group is not a friendship — it is a professional, purposeful relationship whose goal is the welfare and growth of the group members.

The worker genuinely cares about the group members — but this care is expressed within professional boundaries. The worker does not become a personal friend, does not share their own personal problems with the group, and does not maintain the relationship purely for their own emotional satisfaction. Every interaction the worker has with the group is guided by the purpose of helping members achieve their goals. This does not make the relationship cold — in fact, a purposeful relationship is one of the warmest and most meaningful kinds, because it is rooted in genuine care, consistency, and professional commitment.

Example: A social worker running a group for children in an orphanage genuinely loves the children and they love her. But when one child asks her to stay after hours and have dinner with them regularly, she gently explains that she cannot do that — not because she does not care, but because her role is to help them within the group and in line with the agency's guidelines. She helps the child explore what they are really feeling — loneliness — and addresses that need appropriately within the group.

Worker's Practice: Be warm but maintain professional boundaries. Do not accept gifts, socialise outside the agency, or share personal problems with group members. Be consistent — show up every week, prepared and fully present.

Value 10: Empowerment

Meaning: The goal of social group work is to help people discover and use their own strengths — so they become less dependent on the worker and more capable of managing their own lives.

Empowerment means the worker does NOT do things FOR the group — the worker helps the group do things FOR ITSELF. If the worker solves every problem, makes every decision, and leads every

discussion, the members remain dependent. True group work builds the capacity of members to lead themselves. Empowerment also means helping members see that their problems are not due to personal weakness — but often due to social and systemic barriers that can be challenged and changed. The empowered group becomes its own force for change.

Example: A social worker has been facilitating a community women's group for six months. By the end of the programme, the women are conducting their own meetings, managing their own savings fund, resolving their own disputes, and even training a new group in a neighbouring village — all without the worker's presence. The worker's success is measured not by how much she did for the group, but by how little the group needs her.

Worker's Practice: Build leadership within the group — rotate facilitation roles. Ask 'What do YOU think should be done?' before offering suggestions. Celebrate the group's achievements as THEIR achievement, not yours. Prepare the group for your eventual departure from the very beginning.

5. Quick Summary: Values at a Glance

Value	Core Idea	In One Word
Human Dignity	Every person deserves respect regardless of background	Respect
Self-Determination	People have the right to make their own choices	Autonomy
Acceptance	The worker accepts the person without judging them	Non-Judgment
Individualisation	Every person is unique and must be treated differently	Uniqueness
Confidentiality	Information shared in the group stays within the group	Trust
Democratic Participation	Every member has an equal voice and vote in the group	Equality
Social Justice	Workers fight against unfair systems that hurt people	Fairness
Non-Judgmental Attitude	Worker does not label or blame members	Openness
Purposeful Relationship	The worker-group relationship is professional and goal-driven	Purpose
Empowerment	Help members discover their own strengths and power	Strength

6. How Values are Interconnected

It is important to understand that these values do not work in isolation — they are deeply connected to each other. Look at how they link:

Dignity + Acceptance = Creates a safe, respectful group environment where no one fears being shamed.

Self-Determination + Democratic Participation = Ensures the group has genuine ownership of its own process and decisions.

Confidentiality + Non-Judgment = Together these build the deep trust without which no therapeutic group can function.

Social Justice + Empowerment = Together these move the group from personal healing to collective action and systemic change.

Individualisation + Purposeful Relationship = Ensures the worker sees every person fully and serves each one with professional care.

Example: In a group for transgender persons facing employment discrimination, ALL ten values are at work simultaneously: The worker treats each member with dignity. Accepts them completely. Does not judge their gender identity. Listens to each person's unique situation (individualisation). Keeps all disclosures

confidential. Involves everyone equally in group decisions. Works to challenge the discriminatory employers (social justice). Builds the group's confidence and skills to advocate for themselves (empowerment). And maintains a purposeful, caring professional relationship throughout.

7. Conclusion

Values are not a chapter in a textbook that a social worker reads and then sets aside. They are a living, breathing part of every single interaction the worker has with the group — in the words they choose, the way they sit, the way they listen, the activities they plan, and the way they respond to conflict, pain, and joy.

A social group worker who knows all the techniques but lacks values will do more harm than good. A worker who holds strong values — who truly believes in the dignity of every person, the right of every person to determine their own life, and the power of every person to change — will transform lives, even with very simple methods.

As the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) rightly states: 'The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values that are the foundation of social work's unique purpose and perspective.' In social group work, these values are not just professional obligations. They are a way of being — a commitment to seeing every human being as worthy, capable, and deserving of respect and justice.

— End of Notes —