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Exploring Nondeliberative Practice through Recreational, Art, and Music-Based Activities in Social Work with Groups

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ABSTRACT
This article reviews the history of recreational, arts, and music-based activities in social work with groups, providing a nondeliberative practice context. The article begins with an overview of nondeliberative practice, then presents various uses of recreational, art, and music-based activities during the Settlement House and Recreational Movements, in mid-20th-century group work practice and in present practice. The article concludes with a review of current projects in the Chicago land area and highlights their potential to decrease young person on young person violence.

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Lang (1979a, 1979b, 2016) emphasizes the importance of nondeliberative processes and creative use of activity in social work practice with groups. The successful and varied use of activity in social work practice with groups has been well documented in the literature (Andrews, 2001; Breton, 1990; Middleman, 1981). Additionally, the use of creative activities, such as recreational, art, and music-based activities, has a long and rich history in social work practice with groups. The use of these activities has also been well documented in the settlement house movement (Hull House Publishers, 1907), the recreation movement (Meyer, 1934; Pangburn, 1924), mid-20th-century group work (Konopka, 1963), and current group work practice (Malekoff, 2014). Yet there has been little examination of how the use of recreational, art, and music-based activities in social work practice with groups embodies Lang’s (2016) theory of nondeliberative practice.

This article reviews various modalities used, historically, in recreational, art, and music-based activities and then reflects on their inherent actional, analogic, and artful elements. The article concludes with a review of current community recreational, art, and music-based projects in the Chicago land area in an effort to highlight the nondeliberative potential for these programs to decrease rates of young person-on-young person violence in the city.
**Nondeliberative practice**

In her review of the therapeutic uses of groups in psychology, social work, and other helping professions from 1955 to 1978, Lang (1979a) notes, “In social work, one finds a distinctly different approach to the group” (p.112). She draws a distinction between group therapies used in psychology and other helping professions during this time and mainstream social group work. She describes the mainstream group process as developing in the natural and lived experiences of members, specifically in regards to communication patterns, what the group communicates about, and the various approaches the group may take to reach its goals (Lang, 1979b). Lang (1979b) stresses that this developmental and dynamic process is analogous to group development in society. Responding to Lang’s definition of the mainstream group and further grounding it in the natural and lived experiences of members (i.e., non-synthetic), Papell and Rothman (1980) note, “There is widely accepted agreement that the mainstream group is characterized by common goals, mutual aid, and non-synthetic experiences” (p. 7).

In her later teaching and scholarship, Lang (2016) built on the concept of mainstream groups and continued to promote natural, spontaneous, and nonsynthetic group processes in social group work practice. She defined these processes as “nondeliberative.” Lang (2016) describes nondeliberative practice as a “spontaneous, intuitive, inventive, holistic, creative” (p. 100) approach that takes place “in a lived, experienced reality of the participants rather than removed from it” (p. 102–103). Unlike deliberative forms of group work practice that primarily rely on talk-based and cognitively oriented forms of group therapy and problem solving, nondeliberative practice employs “artful, actional and analogic forms of solution-seeking” (p. 103) to engage group members in cognitive and conative methods of problem solving. Nondeliberative forms of practice may include the use of “play, art, analog, game, action, music, dance, dramatics, experience, simulation, role play, rehearsal, intuitive thinking and activity” (p. 100).

Lang (2016) contends that the purpose of the use of activity in nondeliberative problem solving is not to “do, rather than think; it is do, then think” (p. 109). In this light, the worker’s role is to identify activities that further the work of the group and facilitate the group process. In doing so, workers present members with opportunities to address a problem through activity (e.g., playing a game, choreographing a group dance, or writing a group poem) that may be seemingly unrelated to or beyond the scope of their presenting dilemma (e.g., learning new coping methods for stress). As members engage in the activity and identify creative solutions, they have an opportunity to reflect upon problem resolution in relation to the activity and how the experience may relate to other issues in their lives (e.g., members develop a comedic skit on reacting to stress and therefore may be...
able to come up with additional creative solutions for coping with stress outside of the group).

Through this artful and actional group activity, members engage in an analogic process that provides them with opportunities to replay “a problematic event in another medium” (Lang, 2016, p. 111), creatively rehearse solutions to their problems, and bring those solutions to their lives outside the group. Additionally, through this process members may access capabilities beyond the cognitive and/or verbal domain and employ creative competencies that might otherwise be ignored in more deliberative forms of group work practice. These creative competencies may be of great benefit to members as they navigate their lives outside of the group. The following section explores nondeliberative practice at Hull House through the use of recreational, art, and music-based activities.

**Nondeliberative practice and hull house**

As a pioneer of the settlement house movement, Jane Addams promoted the use of recreational activities at the Hull House settlement in Chicago (Addams, 1909a). To foster recreational engagement among residents and community members, Hull House published a recreation guide in 1896 that listed trips by method of travel, location, and pricing (Hooker, 1896). The guide stresses the importance of recreation, noting that “One should plan for his (and her) recreations as regularly and studiously as for his hearthstone or his (or her) chosen trade” (Hooker, 1896, p. 11). Many of the getaways were built around art and music-based activities, including art museum tours and band concerts.

Addams, along with Hull House cofounder Ellen Gates Starr, promoted the use of art and music-based activities at Hull House (Glowacki, 2004). Inspired by her aunt who worked as a religious art critic, educator, and lecturer (Nutter, 2001), Starr brought her passion for religious art to her work at Hull House, which was met with resounding support from the community. As Bosch (2001) notes, “The first successful endeavors at Hull-House were Starr’s reading parties and art exhibits,” which evolved from informal education and discussion groups “into formal educational programs and the establishment of the Butler Art Gallery, built in 1891” (p. 840). Through these initial art-based programs, Starr fostered a culture of art appreciation among area residents. Although Starr was interested in the potential of religious art to educate and uplift community members, including many recent immigrants who were struggling in a wholly new and often challenging environment, Addams saw the potential for art to bring people together and create community. Observing the large community interest and turnouts for Starr’s various art-based programs, Addams saw great potential for community engagement and worked together with...
Starr to develop more inclusive art and music-based programming at Hull House, programming that “expanded both the definition of what constituted art and an understanding of who was capable of creating it” (Glowacki, 2004, p. 6).

A review of Hull House yearbooks and annual reports from early to mid-20th century demonstrates Addams and Starr’s commitment to recreational, art, and music-based activities at Hull House. The 1907 Hull House yearbook (Hull House Publishers, 1907) describes a plethora of these activities, including educational and discussion-based clubs exploring topics related to the arts (e.g., Shakespeare), arts and crafts classes (e.g., pottery, metal work, enamel work, word carving, drawing, modeling, painting, and lithography), a fully functioning theatre with a full schedule of performances, and weekly musical performances. A report from 1909 (Addams, 1909b) and yearbooks from 1910 (Hull House Publishers, 1910) and 1921 (Hull House Publishers, 1921) demonstrate a similar dedication to recreational, art, and music-based activities. Throughout this time Hull House also hosted open house exhibitions for the community (Hull House Publishers, 1933, 1934). Studio and shop-based artists exhibited paintings, etchings, woodblocks, and weavings while actors performed theatrical pieces and musicians and dancers offered recitals. It is important to note that Woods and Kennedy’s (1922) study on settlement house activity in the United States and Simkhovitch’s (1938) description of daily life at Greenwich House settlement in New York City present similar support for the use of recreational, art, and music-based activities in settlement house work in other parts of the country and Europe during this time.

From the development of a recreation guide for area residents in the late-19th century to the establishment of art and music studios, workshops, galleries, performance spaces, and curricula well into the 20th century, Addams, Starr, and Hull House staff continually invested their time, energy, and resources in creating and facilitating spaces for area residents to participate in recreational, art, and music-based activities. The incorporation and implementation of these activities within the service structure of the settlement house allowed for unique forms of group participation and demonstrates an early application of the actional and artful tenets of Lang’s (2016) theory of nondeliberative practice with groups. In addition, it is likely that participation in one of the recreational, art, and music-based groups offered at Hull House provided members, again, many of whom were recent immigrants, with an analogic experience, whereby engagement and participation in a recreational, art, and/or music-based activity group may have provided members with the needed encouragement and experience to increase their civic and community engagement and participation.
Nondeliberative practice, the recreation movement, and group work

Playground reformers of the late 19th century, including child psychologists and settlement house workers, such as Addams, “believed that supervised play could improve the mental, moral, and physical well-being of children” (Sniderman Bachrach, 2005, n.p.). In response to their call for safe spaces for children to play, several municipalities, including Boston and Chicago, opened children’s playgrounds in the late 19th century (Reid, 1981). These playgrounds were often simple dirt lots where children could engage in safe play, off the busy and dangerous urban streets. As the American Labor Movement championed workers’ rights during the late-19th and early-20th centuries, successfully securing the 8-hour workday and the 5-day workweek, many American families gained additional time for rest and relaxation. As a result, many playground reformers extended their calls regarding the benefits of play and recreation for children to the adult population, culminating in the development of a nationwide recreation movement.

The recreation movement ushered in a new era of municipally sponsored recreational activities for children and adults, including the proliferation of public parks, playgrounds, and fieldhouses (Sniderman Bachrach, 2005). These facilities were often operated by trained recreation workers and offered a variety of facilitated, group-based recreational activities to area residents, including arts and crafts clubs, community theatre and dance troupes, community jazz bands and orchestras, and individual (e.g., hiking or swimming) and team (e.g., baseball or football) sports. Opportunities for recreation continued to develop throughout the 20th century, and social group work partially developed out of this momentum.

As Andrews (2001) notes, “Group work emerged out of several organizations including both those which focused on self-help as well as those that focused on recreation and informal education: settlement houses, neighborhood centers, Ys, Jewish centers, camps, scouts, and labor union organizing” (p. 47). Reflecting on the development of social group work in her interview with Andrews, group work practitioner and scholar Gisela Konopka (1963) notes, “Group work was not just about talking, but also painting and playing.... It wasn’t just a method to be taught, but a philosophy that opened doors” (p. 50). In this quote, Konopka presents a compelling case for the inherently artful, actional, and conative elements of social work with groups. In doing so she makes explicit the strong historical connection among the use of recreational, art, and music-based activities in the settlement house movement, the use of play and recreation in the recreation movement, the use of activity in social group work, and nondeliberative practice.

Although some mid-century group workers were willing to facilitate nondeliberative forms of practice, including recreational, art, and music-based activities, a growing majority were less willing to accept a model that
promoted activity and instead chose to rely on more cognitively oriented forms of group work, such as group therapy. Lang (1979a, 1979b) makes a clear distinction between cognitively focused forms of group therapy of the mid-20th century and the cognitively and conatively balanced models of social group work. She notes that social group work eschews the primarily cognitive forms of interaction found in group therapies and instead favors and prioritizes the use of activity to encourage the natural and normal social development of the group. Lang (2016) contends that by allowing the group and its process to develop naturally through the use of activity, groups develop an approach to problem solving that employs “intuitive, actional processes” that are “nondeliberative in nature” and have “mechanisms other than cognitive for problem solving” (p. 101). Although some social group workers of this era lament the loss of activity and the potential for nondeliberative practice in social group work (Konopka, 1963), the following section demonstrates that recreational, art, and music-based activities continue to be used in social group work.

**Nondeliberative practice In current social group work**

Several practitioner/researchers use recreational and art-based activities to help groups of people experiencing homelessness create narratives of survival, strength, and resilience. In one study, Racine and Sevigny (2001) explore the use of a board game in a homeless women’s shelter. Study findings suggest that the recreational activity provided women with opportunities to develop narratives that highlight their strengths and opportunities to share their stories of survival and resilience with other participants. In another study, Washington and Moxley (2008) describe the process of eight women (who were formerly and currently homeless) as they developed narratives of their experiences of homelessness. The authors describe the construction of the women’s narratives into large collages that were put on exhibition in the lobby of an urban office building in a midwestern city. The women served as docents at the exhibit, leading visitors through their experiences and stories. Although the authors focus on the project development, their findings clearly demonstrate that the collage process and the docent role provided the participants with opportunities to reconstruct their narrative, including how some of the women survived and exited homelessness. Sakamoto et al. (2008) use recreational and art-based activities, including photovoice, painting, and sound, in eight different community-based research projects with groups of people experiencing homelessness in a large Canadian city. Study findings suggest that these activities were particularly useful in helping participants articulate their stories and experiences of homelessness and did so in artful and actional ways.
These studies demonstrate an important element of nondeliberative practice: the “use of an actional medium to stimulate or unlock other modes of communication” (Lang, 2016, p. 113). Through the use of recreational and art-based activities the practitioners/researchers provide participants with important opportunities to (re)tell their experiences of homelessness through cognitive and conative means, countering narratives that are often likely projected onto them (e.g., poverty and destitution) and that fail to capture their experiences of survival and resilience. By providing a balance of cognitive (e.g., verbal/narrative) and conative means (e.g., recreational/board games, art-based/collages and painting, and experiential/serving as a docent), the participants are able to access capabilities and creative competencies that might have been underutilized in solely cognitively oriented forms of group work practice, thereby highlighting their entire lived experience of homelessness, including how they have strived and survived.

Other practitioner/researchers use art-based activities with children. Kozlowska and Hanney (2001) explored the use of art-based activities for a group of children between ages 4 and 8 experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of violence and parental separation. Study findings suggest that the activities were useful in helping the children discuss their parents’ separation and in decreasing the harmful effects of the youths’ anxiety. This study demonstrates several important elements of nondeliberative practice, including “providing avenues for expression other than verbal” (Lang, 2016, p. 113) and “problem-solving in a miniature, manageable, analogic equivalent” (Lang, 2016, p. 114). Lang (2016) notes that sole reliance on cognitive forms of intervention often fails to provide young people with the tools needed for full expression. By incorporating creative, art-based activities the practitioner/researchers provide the children with important avenues for expressing their anxieties and fears and opportunities to work through them in a smaller, supportive, and manageable setting. In doing so, they may be able to navigate and manage their fears and anxieties regarding their parents’ separation outside of group as well.

In support of a turn toward artful and actional forms of practice, recent research in neural sequential development suggests that solely cognitive interventions fail to fully address the treatment of young people who have experienced trauma. Perry and Szalavitz (2007) contend that artful, actional, and nonverbal interventions, such as dance, movement, and music, are often most effective in treating young people who have experienced some form of trauma as these interventions engage the young person at a developmentally appropriate level (i.e., the level at which the trauma occurred). If a young person is abused and/or neglected as an infant or toddler, cognitive and talk-based therapies will fail to engage the part of the brain affected by the trauma (i.e., the part(s) of the brain that were developed at the time of trauma). Artful, actional, and nonverbal interventions, such as dance, movement, and
music, allow clinicians and young people to work from the appropriate level of neurological development (e.g., movement and motor skills, self-regulation) and heal in a developmentally appropriate way.

Other practitioner/researchers use recreational and music-based activities with various groups. In one study, Rykov (2008) explores a music therapy support group for individuals living with cancer. Sessions provided members with opportunities to listen to, write, and perform music as well as opportunities to reflect on the group process using art-based methods (i.e., creating images in response to therapy sessions). Findings suggest that participants’ experienced a sense of connection and empowerment from participating in the music making process. In a reflective essay, Tervo (2001) uses several case studies from his music therapy practice with adolescents in mental health settings to develop an argument that exposure to music, including listening, writing, and performing, helps young people connect to therapeutic processes while in treatment. Through the case studies, he describes the youths’ affinity for and intense engagement with the music therapy groups and makes a compelling argument for the broader use of the nondeliberative (e.g., actional, verbal, and nonverbal) properties of music therapy groups. In a pair of related studies, Kelly (2013, 2015) explores the utilization of a music studio in a transitional living program for young people experiencing homelessness. Findings demonstrate that the young people are able to work together in the studio space and engage in collaborative music appreciation, composition, education, performance and production. Participants describe their experiences in the studio as opportunities for connection, development, engagement, expression, and growth.

These studies demonstrate the nondeliberative practice element “fostering effectance through activity” (Lang, 2016, p. 112). As Lang (2016) notes, “Successful performance [of an activity] gives visibility to competences which the participant may not have known he or she possessed” and that because these competences “emerge through doing… they are part of the outcome along with the concrete product of one’s actions” (p. 112). Through the use of recreational and music-based activities, participants access their creativity and apply that creativity, however great or small, to the group activity and ultimately the group process. Throughout the process, members engage in verbal and nonverbal communication and work toward a collective goal (e.g., the writing, production, and/or performance of a song). In doing so, they engage competences they may have been unaware of (e.g., confidence in their ability to collaborate and conflict management) and gain important intra and interpersonal skills that they may transfer in their lives outside of the group as a result of their participation.

**Art and music-based projects in chicago**

Several community programs in the Chicago area offer young people important opportunities to engage in recreational, art, and music-based activities.
The Chicago Public Art Group provides avenues for art and actional expression through the production of murals, mosaics, and sculptures with young people. They provide art education through collaboration, community development through the visual arts, and provide mentorship and leadership training in the arts (Pounds, 2012). The Put Down Your Guns project in the Englewood neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side is a collaborative, grant-funded program that explores opportunities for empowerment for adolescent males between ages 13 and 16 through the utilization of expressive visual arts. The 3-year project ended in 2011 with several showings of the young people’s work. A youth services organization located in Chicago’s River North neighborhood, Marwen, provides, “high-quality visual arts instruction, college planning, and career development to young people (grades 6–12) free of charge,” (Yenawine, 2004, p. 5). In descriptively evaluating Marwen, Yenawine (2004) notes several successful components, including reciprocal respect between artist-in-residence, instructors/mentors and students, a value for teaching, individualized and growth-enhancing instruction, as well as teamwork and shared responsibility.

The You Media program of the Chicago Public Library system offers young people access to various media production equipment, programs, and workshops, including digital photography, graphic design, digital video and music production, and spoken word and lyric development (You Media, 2012). The Chicago West Community Music Center (2012) seeks to “enrich and enhance” the “economic, intellectual, and social condition” of the neighborhoods on Chicago’s Westside “through education and training in music” (p. 1). Finally, the Stockyard Institute (2012), an artistic pedagogical collaborative based in Chicago’s Back of the Yards neighborhood, seeks to offer area youth opportunities to engage in creative civic and social engagement through the arts.

These programs and the recreational, art, and music-based activities they offer are important given the epidemic of young person on young person violence in Chicago. Two recent documentaries have explored the violence and its impact on youth in the city. Chiraq (Vice, 2013), a video documentary, explores young people’s access to firearms, the high levels of gun violence, and notably compares the affected neighborhoods to a failed state within a democracy. The directors poignantly note that the death toll in Chicago between 2003 and 2011 \((N = 4,265)\) is just below the number of American deaths in Operation Iraqi Freedom \((N = 4,422)\) and has surpassed the number of American deaths in Afghanistan \((N = 2,116)\).

In a recent audio documentary on William H. Harper High School, located on Chicago’s South Side, Chicago Public Radio’s This American Life also explored the high level of young person on young person violence impacting the community (Glass, 2013a, 2013b). During interviews, some young people described their participation in extracurricular activities, which
most likely include recreational, art, and music-based activities, as a method of physically staying off the streets—in other words, safe and out of trouble. Additionally, these activities may provide young people with important opportunities to rehearse and/or work through solutions to problems they are experiencing in their lives. By working toward solutions through participation in recreational, art, and music-based activities, young people may replay “a problematic event in another medium” (Lang, 2016, p. 111), such as coping with community violence and the related stress. In doing so, they may gain important intra and interpersonal skills and then apply those skills outside the group (i.e., in their neighborhoods and on the streets). From this perspective it is possible to see the potential for recreational, art, and music-based activities and nondeliberative practice to decrease the young person on young person violence in the city.

**Conclusion**

Recreational, art, and music-based activities provide practitioners with unique opportunities to engage in nondeliberative forms of social work with groups. As this review demonstrates, these activities are inherently actional, analogic, and artful. They allow practitioners to engage members in cognitive and conative processes that promote the use of activity to stimulate alternative and creative forms of verbal and nonverbal communication, expression, and problem solving, and have the potential to impact members’ lives outside the group. Given these findings, the longstanding utilization and effectiveness of these activities, and the move to establish community recreational, art, and music-based programs for urban youth who are at risk for exposure to violence and trauma, such as those programs in Chicago, it seems particularly important at this time in the history of social work with groups to prioritize these recreational, art, and music-based activities in our practice. In doing so, we will engage members in a vital model of practice and ground our practice in Lang’s important and innovative work.

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