

Guest Editorial

Populism: A challenge for groupwork?

Populism is a word of the moment. It is cited and linked with Trump's ascendancy to the presidency in the USA, Brexit in the UK, Marine Le Pen's challenge in France, Duterte's brutal regime in the Philippines, to name a few. It is said to reflect a resurgence of the will of an erstwhile excluded section of the citizenry, newly inspired, energised and empowered to ensure that their self-defined needs and interests are taken into account and actually met by national leaders and governments. This description resonates uncannily with the democratic values espoused by groupwork (Abels and Garvin, 2010) and, especially those of self-directed and social action groupwork (Mullender, Ward, Fleming, 2013). Is there an issue; if so, what do we need to consider; what might we do? I am looking to provoke response and debate.

Up to now, I would argue, a fundamental concern for groupworkers has been to counter the individualization of problems and solutions by means of which 'public issues' have been translated into 'personal troubles' (Wright Mills, 1970). This has involved laying at the door of the individual the causes and solutions to personal and social problems, thereby tending to render the policies of governments, and the behaviour of organisations and institutions, beyond scrutiny and unaccountable. This process can leave people divided from one another and isolated from those who share similar experiences (Fook, 2002 cited in Trevithick 2005: 84).

Encasing these processes, we have seen increasingly the development of educational and occupational cultures which are more and more top-down and prescriptive, preoccupied with following rules, performance indicators and output measures (Pullen Sansfacon and Ward 2014). The effect of these is a narrowing of

vision, a driving out of initiative and creativity, the generation of conformism and reluctance to question received ideas (Faulkner 1995). Sennett (2007) describes how, in the modern economy, only a certain kind of human being can prosper in unstable, fragmentary social conditions. They must manage short term relationships; develop new skills rapidly, as demands of the work setting shift, and let go of the past. In other words, Sennett states, a personality is needed that discounts the experiences that it has already had, resembling, in many respects, the persona of the consumer, ever avid for new things. Like Sennett, groupworkers would say that most people are not like this: they need a sustaining life narrative, they take pride in being good at something specific and they value the experiences that they have lived through.

How then do we interpret the broadcast evidence (and, in my case, personal experience) of populist rallies, their displays of group energy and cohesiveness, of consciousness of the issues confronting the participants, not least in their underscoring the responsibility of governments, said to be in league with out-of-reach multinational commercial interests, for job losses and the social and economic poverty of specific communities as they effect participants individually and collectively? To dismiss them with references to the Nazi Nuremberg assemblies is not good enough; many of the understandings and aspirations revealed are ones which, in their own work, groupworkers would have welcomed.

In an article written before the prominence of the populist events noted above, Cas Mudde (2015) highlights the electoral success of left-wing populist parties such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. Until then he notes that populism was almost exclusively linked to the radical right, leading to a conflation of populism and xenophobia.

Up until a couple of years ago the consensus among European elites on the left and right was that populism was inherently bad. It was dismissed as a “pathology of democracy” or, as the American historian Richard Hofstadter wrote in the 1960s, “the paranoid style of politics”. The rise of left-wing populist movements and parties has seen a shift in the public debate that populism actually constitutes the essence of democratic politics ...

The main good is that populism brings to the fore issues that large parts of the population care about, but that the political elites want to avoid discussing; think about immigration for the populist right or austerity for the populist left. Leaders from different parties can come together to keep issues that divide their respective electorates off the agenda – such as European integration and immigration.

The main bad is that populism denies the existence of divisions of interests and opinions and rejects the legitimacy of opponents. As the populists are the *vox populi*, that is, the voice of all the people, anyone with a different view speaks for ‘special interests’, even labelled as the ‘corrupt’ elite. This uncompromising stand leads to a polarised culture, in which non-populists are turned into anti-populists.

Indeed, Mudde observes that populism tends to get ‘ugly’ when it gets into power. History, he says, has shown that populists regularly have tried to circumvent or undermine the power of countervailing forces, including independent judges and the political opposition, including the introduction of new constitutions that significantly undermine the checks and balances of liberal democracy. Opposition is frustrated by a combination of legal and extra-legal pressures. In the end, he argues, populism is an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic forces within liberalism. Rightly, it criticises the exclusion of important issues from the political agenda by the elites and calls for their repoliticisation. However, populism’s inflexible views and uncompromising stand leads to a polarised society, denies legitimacy to opponents’ opinions and weakens the rights of minorities.

With these understandings of populism in mind, there is surely a distinctive role for groupwork within its time-honoured purposes (Abels and Garvin, 2010). Nevertheless, perhaps there is a need for a serious rethink and regroup if we are to navigate an ethical yet practical path through “the good, the bad and the ugly” of 21st century populist realpolitik.

In this issue

So, how does this connect with the articles in the current issue? Although only recently have we published a special issue on

Groupwork and Education (25(2)), the majority of the papers in this issue also have an educational focus. It is in the educational setting that we have the opportunity to alert upcoming professional groupworkers to the issues and challenges discussed above. It is inspiring to see these educationalists so keen to innovate and, in turn, to interrogate the quality and effectiveness of their practice. I am confident that the students involved with them will gain much for their journeys towards becoming competent, critical and reflective practitioners.

Gee and Towers write about the use of role play as a means of encouraging groupwork practice within the lecture theatre. They argue that such practice provides a beneficial form of pedagogy as it encourages better learner reflection and engagement by providing opportunities for students, via a form of cyclical and iterative communication, to share lived experiences and connect with theory learnt. The approach also provides opportunity for students to engage in and thus understand group dynamics and groupwork practices and to be better placed to evaluate their own learning. In contrast, Kelly and Wodda offer an exposition which actually links a companion essay with audio and video-based engagement (accessed from a linked website). The reader/listener/observer is invited to participate in the learning experience and, in combination, to reflect on this, assisted by the companion essay which critically describes the authors' experiences with a classroom-based learning group undertaking a graduate-level 'performance ethnography' seminar.

I found both papers to be fascinating and engaging both to read and, in the case of Kelly and Wodda, to listen, watch and engage. Gee and Towers ground their pedagogy in Self-directed Groupwork, presenting their 'teaching' approach as 'facilitation' (Fleming and Ward 2013) whereas, for Kelly and Wodda, groupwork skills and methods are mostly implicit but, nevertheless, obviously connected on a number of interlinked levels: process, content and 'leadership'. Norma Lang's work (see article references) provides a key element of their theoretical underpinning. The ideas expressed and the approach advocated is very challenging and, as such, to be welcomed.

The 'Groupwork in Practice' section also includes a paper on education, Hamm and Alison report on a study conducted to measure perceptions of graduate students in an experiential

therapeutic support group. The findings indicated that students benefited by experiencing personal growth and gaining knowledge of group dynamics and facilitation. Group members also provided recommendations concerning the size of the group and approaches to facilitation.

The third main article, by Robinson, discusses a participatory research involving adults with Asperger's syndrome as co-researchers. The research is significant in that adults with Asperger's syndrome were integrally involved throughout every stage of the research. Robinson highlights the centrality of groupwork methods and skills in the process of participatory research. The findings point to a new way of thinking about Asperger's syndrome and suggest alternative ways of thinking about disability generally, in particular, challenging traditional notions of support.

What brings all these papers together is the way they demonstrate groupwork's inherent capacity to support the challenging of received ideas and to innovate new and progressive forms of practice – exactly the qualities required to engage with “the good, the bad and the ugly” features of populism.

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