

# Editorial

## A groupwork of things

It is seven years since I was Editor of *Groupwork* and it is a great pleasure to return as the guest Editor for this issue.

This return comes at the conclusion of a project in which I curated a collection of objects gathered to tell the story of social work – its past, present and possible futures. The *Exhibition of Social Work Told Through Objects* is a virtual exhibition where images of the objects are accompanied by accounts of why the object has been chosen – the information plaques, if you like – and the back story of the person proposing the object. There are more than 140 Objects in the collection at [socialworkin40objects.com](http://socialworkin40objects.com).

Using objects to illustrate abstract and complex ideas is not new. McGregor (2010) selected 100 objects to tell the history of the world since the beginnings of humanity; O'Toole (2013) proposed objects to trace the developing identity of a nation (Ireland); and Turkle (2007) asked a diverse group of individuals to nominate an object in order to understand how these objects evoke feelings and help us think. Using the material world to give expression to a more abstracted one is an interesting challenge. Objects can play an evocative, even provocative, role as the focus of story-telling to illuminate our understanding and catch our emotions.

Social work is of particular interest because it is such an abstract notion, yet one with applications that are concrete and practical. Moreover, these applications are diverse and contested, so social work has no single, definitive manifestation: a clinician practising individual psychotherapy, a neighbourhood activist galvanising a community to radical action; a bureau professional managing cases and gatekeeping resources. All of these, and more, are recognisable as social work.

What of groupwork? Could the measure of groupwork also be

revealed through an exhibition of objects? Some of the objects proposed for *Social Work in 40 Objects* were, indeed, focused on the groupwork element of social work. For example, *Cheese fondue* provided a metaphor:

Groupwork is central to social work and preparing and eating a cheese fondue is the quintessential group experience. Everyone helps to set the stage (cutting the bread, lighting the lamps, opening the wine) and everyone partakes of the final result. (Steinberg, 2017)

Similarly, Gardella (2017), chose *Coffee cup*:

In various coffee shops and diners, regular customers take their customary places, sometimes just nodding at one another, other times forming conversations ... these moments of familiarity offer the possibility of belonging, just like good social group work.

Domenech (2017) decided on a *Ball of wool* because

Like the web that spiders spin, a ball of wool represents the knitting of a support network in social groupwork. The group as a social support network is a very significant aspect of social work practice and it's important to know how to 'knit' these networks.

*Round table* was proposed by Folgheraiter (2017) because

The circle shape conveys parity which, in turn, evokes empowerment – the idea that people should have power to take decisions for their own lives and in their own best interests. This power is never an absolute ... Social workers should always think according to the democratic round table.

These everyday objects offer an insight into some aspects of groupwork – togetherness, process, belonging, support, empowerment, democracy and the like. These objects might be used as part of the group process itself. However, we soon realise that a wide collection of objects is required if a comprehensive story is to unfold. Though we can weave our own stories around these objects, it is also helpful to learn about the thoughts of the person proposing the object. This constitutes the 'information plaque' that we expect to see by aside objects in Exhibitions.

What purposes might such an exhibition of groupwork objects serve? The first could be to explain groupwork to a largely unknowing public.

Definitions and Standards (IASWG 2015) are generally written with the initiated in mind; it would take a dedicated member of the public to wade through them to interpret what groupwork actually *does*. The stories of groupwork that can emerge via the story behind an object can speak much more directly to an audience in ways which Turkle (2007) has described as evocative.

A second purpose might be to illustrate the kinds of things that are used in groupwork. We have already mentioned Folgheraiter's (2017) *Round table*, chosen in contrast to long, sharp-edged tables to facilitate a feeling of equality for those seated around it. Suzy Croft (2017) writes about the *Memory jars* that she uses in her direct practice with groups of children who have been bereaved, losing a close family member. With layers of differently coloured sand the children create a jar of memories, each coloured layer representing a facet of the person whom they are remembering. Biant Singh Suwali (2017) uses *Drums*, both as groupworker and musician, allowing him to keep creative practices amidst the harsh realities of unending austerity. A description of how the Drum is central to this tells a more vivid story of groupwork than any essay on empowerment and inclusiveness.

Objects from literature can also be revealing when it comes to understanding group process. In my teen years I was struck by the power of the *Conch* in Golding's (1954) novel *Lord of the Flies*, which tells the story of the descent into violence when a group of boys is marooned by an air crash on an island. The conch was used as a token by the boys to try to bring some respected authority into a group that was rapidly falling apart. In group meetings, only the boy holding the conch was allowed to speak, and it had to be passed to another boy to transfer the power to take the floor. I read about the conch long before I used similar objects in my own groupwork with young people.

As groupworkers, we might think about introducing artefacts into our work with groups, or asking group members to bring something themselves. Using the idea of objects loosely, this could include smells and sounds. Smells like lavender can be very evocative (I can still bring to mind the smell of the cleaning fluid that was used at my nursery school sixty years ago); so can songs and tunes. For people with learning disabilities and memory losses, these objects are a more tangible means to understanding and connection than words. Even the most articulate groups can benefit from the visceral directness of an object: a workshop

for groupworkers at the European Group Camp in Lithuania asked members to bring along their earliest doll or cuddly toy (Baar-Kooij *et al* 2016). In many cases this was their 'transitional object', the one that helped them to make the transition from 'me' to 'not-me' at an early age (Winnicott, 1953). The use of the dolls and the letters we wrote to them during the workshop were powerfully evocative because of the physical presence of these objects in the room.

If you feel inspired to nominate an object, to contribute to the story of either groupwork or social work (or both) please visit the exhibition website and take it from there: [socialworkin4objects.com](http://socialworkin4objects.com).

\*\*\*

In this issue we have five fascinating and very different articles. The first by Anne Byrne, Marguerita McGovern and Ciara Bradley considers new technologies and creative practices in teaching groupwork. The authors explore a variety of teaching methods and activities, including visual biographies, mask-making and podcasting, to consider how creative teaching can integrate the students' knowledge of groupwork in different spheres – experiential, practical and theoretical. The authors aim to inspire readers to adopt a wider range of creative methods in the teaching of groupwork.

David Henningsen, Mary Lynn Henningsen and Gregory Russell revisit groupthink theory and challenge its predictions and the notion that all the illusions of groupthink are caused by groupthink. Groupthink is a pressure to conform, an illusion of consensus, and the presence of biased perceptions of those outside the group. The authors test their two-process model using decision-making groups (each consisting of three students) to consider levels of internalisation and compliance amongst different group members – those whose thinking was in the majority and those in the minority. Their findings raise questions about long-held assumptions about groupthink.

Groupwork with women trauma survivors of the Rwandan genocide is the focus of an article by George Jacinto, Reshawna Chapple, Hadidja Nyiransekuye and Olga Molina. Many of the women had been children during the genocide itself and suffer from considerable post-traumatic stress. The authors introduce readers to a group-building exercise that takes place over seven weeks. This programme includes a *rites of passage*

consonant with the women's own framework of spirituality. Rwandan cultural practices from times before the war are incorporated into the exercises.

In addition to their involvement in the Rwandan groupwork article, Olga Molina and Reshawna Chapple are authors of *A Safe Home Away From Home*, which is a qualitative study exploring the group experiences of Latino and Latina adolescents who have experienced domestic violence (specifically, violence between adults with parental relationships to the adolescents). The authors use a grounded theory approach, from which five themes arose. The group experiences had very positive outcomes for the young people taking part, suggesting that mutual aid groups are a way forward in working with this population.

This issue's *Groupwork in Practice* article returns us to the topic of our opening article – classroom-based teaching approaches for groupwork. Tee Tyler presents a fascinating model (the *Interpersonal Classroom Model*) that places interpersonal communication skills at the centre of class-time. He considers how students can prepare for groupwork practice with diverse client groups by first learning to communicate across lines of social identity already present in the classroom. The author's account uses three examples of dialogue – race, religion, sexual orientation – to illustrate the model and concludes with an initial evaluation by those who experienced it.

I am sure you will enjoy the articles and book reviews in this issue,

Mark Doel  
Guest Editor  
Sheffield, UK

## References

- Baar-Kooij, H., Bartuseviciene, L., Burneikaite, S., Doel, M., Godvadas, P., Liobikiene, N. T., Schmitz-Remberg, T. E., Tully, G. and Vysniauskyte-Rimkiene, J. (2016) Reflections on the European Groupcamp in Birstonas, Lithuania. *Groupwork*, 26, 2, 36-54
- Croft, S. (2017) Memory jar. in M. Doel (Ed.) *Social Work in 42 Objects (And More)*. Lichfield, UK: Kirwin Maclean Publishing.

- Domenech, Y. (2017) Ball of wool. in M. Doel (Ed.) *Social Work in 42 Objects (And More)*. Lichfield, UK: Kirwin Maclean Publishing.
- Folgheraiter, F. (2017) Round table. in M. Doel (Ed.) *Social Work in 42 Objects (And More)*., Lichfield, UK: Kirwin Maclean Publishing.
- Gardella, L. G. (2017) Coffee cup. in M. Doel (ed) *Social Work in 42 Objects (And More)*. Lichfield, UK: Kirwin Maclean Publishing.
- Golding, W. (1954) *Lord of the Flies*. London: Faber and Faber.
- IASWG (2015) *Standards for Social Work Practice with Groups*. (2nd ed.) Alexandria, VA: IASWG (available at [www.iaswg.org](http://www.iaswg.org))
- MacGregor, N. (2010) *A History of The World in 100 Objects*. London: Allen Lane/ British Museum/BBC.
- O'Toole, F. (2013) *A History of Ireland in 100 Objects*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy.
- Steinberg, D. M. (2017) Cheese fondue. in M. Doel (Ed.) *Social Work in 42 Objects (And More)*. Lichfield, UK: Kirwin Maclean Publishing.
- Suwali, B. S. (2017) Drum. in M. Doel (Ed.) *Social Work in 42 Objects (And More)*. Lichfield, UK: Kirwin Maclean Publishing.
- Turkle, S. (2007) *Evocative Objects: Things we think with*. Cambridge, MA: MIT
- Winnicott, D (1953) Transitional objects and transitional phenomena: A study of the first not-me possession. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 34, 89-97.