

# Editorial

## Groupwork with people who have experienced political oppression

This special issue brings together a collection of articles and literature reviews, which together share the focus of groupwork with people who have experienced political oppression. Globally, the large numbers of people, who have been forced to move from their place of origin or place of residence due to various forms of political oppression and political conflict, is staggering and these numbers continue to rise. At the same time, there is a cumulative effect from the historic experiences of political oppression, which extends into living memory.

Complex and diverse relations arise in displaced communities around the world; people from different sides of a conflict or people from different eras of oppression in a country can find themselves as refugees in the same city, apparently similar but with very different needs. Through the combinations of abuses, terrifying experiences, losses, family and social disruption that typically accompany experiences of political oppression many aspects of life are affected, and health, education, and the ability to form relationships or feel safe or to trust anyone becomes compromised. For a person who has escaped political oppression one's actions or even one's visibility in a host country may have consequences for family who have been left behind. The administrations of host countries, border agencies and welfare systems can often add a further layer of oppression, with migration procedures often politicised through populist policies, with the fear of further disruptions or even deportation back to the circumstances from which one has escaped. The opportunities for one's children growing up in a host culture may be a mixed world of new vulnerabilities and susceptibilities. Old fears may be replaced with new fears and anxieties. Given the numbers of people worldwide who have experienced political oppression, it is likely that groupworkers, located in different organisations and services, will encounter and work

with people who have been negatively affected in one way or another by oppression and related factors which often go hand in hand with it including marginalisation, violence, hate crime and displacement. Awareness of the short and long-term consequences for people who have experienced political oppression is beginning to influence research and practice across a range of health, social and humanitarian services but there is still a need for service providers, including those involved in groupwork, to know more about the insidious and detrimental legacies which political oppression can produce.

The damaging effect political oppression can have on individuals has prompted an emerging literature on this topic. However, there is a need to grow the literature on the experience of political oppression and this is particularly necessary in relation to the practice of groupwork with oppression survivors which would benefit from additional knowledge and theorisation. Working with people who have experienced political oppression offers critical windows into the assumptions of safety and democracy which are inattentively neglected in professional practice. We may ask ourselves the extent to which, as workers and as professionals, we might contribute to political forms of oppression, how the personal slides into the political in the relationship between the job we do, the systems we work with, and the enactment and the limitations of interventions which form the context of groupwork. The collection of articles in this special issue aims to encourage deeper critical reflection on these issues and to contribute to this literature space.

The impetus for this special issue came from Nick Pollard's awareness of the lack of literature for groupworkers on working with people who have experienced political oppression. His reflections were initially prompted by encounters he had with people who had experienced political oppression whom he met through his participation in community writing groups. There he heard the stories of a very diverse range of people, amongst whom were holocaust survivors and refugees from Chile and African dictatorships. The writing these people shared with the group, their comments, recommendations for reading and conversations encouraged Nick to take a more critical look at the multiple forms of prejudice which exist in society.

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The first article in this issue is by Lorrie Greenhouse Gardella whose archival research reveals the use of groupwork with Holocaust survivors many decades ago, through which recovery from the trauma of their experiences was assisted. In *Repair the world: Groupwork in the Deggendorf Displaced Persons Center, 1945-1946*, Gardella draws out key aspects of this early use of social groupwork including its role in preserving the personal accounts of oppression and survival while at the same time assisting individuals to move forward with greater hope for their future. This article provides a richly detailed account of the group support offered to survivors in the Deggendorf Center and Gardella highlights how groupwork effectively contributed towards helping survivors in the post-Holocaust era and how current practice can be informed by examples from the past.

Stacy A. Gherardi, Maria A. Gurrola, Joshua Tafoya, and Bethany Garling-Spychala's article, *Setting the Table: Trauma-Informed Groupwork in Challenging Times*, examines the transformative and restorative potential of groupwork with people who have been targets of political oppression. The context of the groupwork they discuss in their article, namely groupwork with people of color or immigrant populations in the United States, reveals the multi-dimensional nature of political oppression and the many ways that people encounter stigma and discrimination in their lives. They highlight the need for groupworkers to incorporate into their practice knowledge on the impact of trauma and violence, two themes often concurrent with experiences of political oppression.

Nancy J. Murakami and Hang Yi Chen highlight the dearth of literature on groupwork with survivors of persecution and their article helps fill that gap by providing an account of the psychoeducational and skills-based group program run by the Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture. They argue that psychosocial support for persecution survivors is vitally important because of the complex needs of this population; furthermore, they demonstrate how groupwork can play a central part in psychosocial interventions. Their article illustrates

the potential for groupwork to benefit survivors by addressing their current wellbeing and affirming their strengths and survival skills. Their call for an expansion of evidence-based information on the use of groupwork with oppressed or survivor populations is worth repeating again here and this special issue is very attuned to the importance of widening the knowledge base on this issue.

Julie Byrne, Gloria Kirwan, and Edwina Flavin's article looks into the wider literature to capture key messages relevant to the facilitation of groups where one or more participants have experienced political oppression, including persecution, hate crime and forced displacement. Because the literature specifically focused on groupwork and political oppression is sparse, they incorporate information into their review from a wider range of publications on groupwork, cultural competence in human services, and service delivery to refugees and asylum seekers.

There are three book reviews in this special issue which will be of interest to groupworkers engaged in work with survivors of political oppression. Sarah Male and Julie Byrne review the work of E.J.R. David and Annie O. Derth on the concept of oppression in their book titled *The Psychology of Oppression*. This publication provides a detailed overview of the nature of oppression including details regarding how oppression is experienced and the deleterious consequences of oppression for individual wellbeing.

Hilda Loughran provides a review of a new text titled *Group trauma treatment in early recovery: Promoting safety and self-care* by Lewis Herman, J. Kallivayalil, D. & members of the Victims of Violence Program. This is a welcome and important text for groupworkers who work with people who have experienced political oppression, many of whom will be helped through group therapy which is informed by a trauma treatment perspective. Loughran discusses the contribution of this text to advancing practice competence among groupworkers on this issue.

The third book, review by Gloria Kirwan, looks at the 4th edition of *Group Work with Populations at Risk* edited by Geoffrey L. Greif and Carolyn Knight. Although this text is not overtly designed to inform groupworkers on how to work with people who have experienced political oppression, the review reveals that many chapters within this volume address issues of central importance for groupworkers who work with victims of oppression. These include chapters on groupwork with refugees and asylum seekers, working with victims of violence or

hate crime and the importance of being alert to the impact of trauma on individual wellbeing.

We know that survivors of political oppression are dispersed across the world, and that their needs are often long-term and complex. We also know that the size of the survivor population is growing and that increasingly health, social and humanitarian services are engaging with people who have been through deeply traumatic experiences of oppression. It is also clear, as Lorrie Greenhouse Gardella's article evidences, that there is a long history of people coping with the consequences of political oppression. Nonetheless, the knowledge base of groupwork with survivors of political oppression is surprisingly under-developed. Consequently, there were challenges in bringing this special issue to fruition partly due to the dearth of research on groupwork with people who have experienced political oppression and partly due to the limited literature base on which theorisation can be built. We are, therefore, very grateful to the authors who have shared their work in this special issue and we hope it will encourage an increasing focus on groupwork with people who have endured and survived extremely challenging experiences of oppression which so often go hand in hand with experiences of conflict, violence and/or displacement. We hope this special issue will spark increased interest among groupworkers regarding the needs of group members who are survivors of oppression, and that the articles and book reviews presented here will be a useful resource for those engaged in groupwork practice.

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