CHALLENGING FAMILIAR ASSUMPTIONS
Preparing For and Initiating a Self-Directed Group

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The self-directed groupwork approach aims to empower group members to set their own goals for external change. The membership of self-directed groups is open, voluntary and non-selected. In this paper, the preliminary stages of the approach are examined in detail and are contrasted with more conventional groupwork methods. A key feature of self-directed groupwork is that workers must begin by thrashing out an agreed and explicit value position from which their practice will flow. They then embark upon a process of 'open planning' in which, rather than making all the initial decisions for the group, they hand over as much responsibility as possible to the members. Neither the length of the group nor the frequency of meetings is pre-determined; members themselves decide on the timing and location of meetings. The conduct of the group is also negotiated by workers and members together. The message to be conveyed is that the group belongs to its members right from the start.

In an earlier paper (Mullender and Ward, 1985), we outlined a model which we called 'self-directed groupwork' and which has subsequently been incorporated into a number of groupwork typologies (Brown, 1986, p. 20; Preston-Shoot, 1987, p. 17). The essential features of self-directed groups include a dominant focus on empowering members to achieve external change, and open, voluntary and non-selected membership.

The self-directed groupwork model is part of a total approach which encompasses an underpinning system of values; it is not an abstract method of intervention which might have arisen in a vacuum. One definition of an 'approach' is that it is *'the total embodiment and expression of a philosophy which rests upon identifiable theory and assumptions'* (The Nottingham Andragogy Group, 1983, p. 37). What makes our model unusual is that its philosophy and assumptions are not only made explicit, but are firmly embedded in the groupwork practice itself (see Table 1). No model is, in fact, value free but many are presented as if they involved only a set of *'organised procedures ... or*

Table 1
First stage of the self-directed groupwork model

The groupworkers must begin by arriving at an agreed value position and selecting a methodology of practice accordingly. If this methodology is to be that of self-directed groupwork, their value position will look like this:

i. The worker team reaches the view that the people who use their existing services are not 'sick' or 'deviant', but that they are basically normal people facing difficult circumstances which stem largely from structural factors. Another way of expressing this is to say that people themselves are not the problem; they are caught in a wider web of problems, often including a lack of essential facilities, unemployment, adverse attitudes and prejudice against them.

ii. The workers accept empowerment as valid aim which can be pursued through addressing structural issues, in day-to-day practice, by means of groupwork.

iii. The workers consider that potential group members are not empty vessels; they have strengths, skills, understanding, the ability to do things for themselves, and something to offer one another.

iv. The workers believe that potential group members have rights, including the right to more control over their own lives.

v. In all their work, the workers determine to challenge oppressions — whether by reason of race, creed, gender, class, age, disability or sexual orientation. They recognise that this implies continual efforts to confront the prejudice and discrimination which permeate their own attitudes and practice.

Footnotes
1. The self-directed model can be adopted by one or more groupworkers or by a group acting on its own behalf. The latter possibility should be borne in mind at all points where, for ease of expression, we refer to the input or views of groupworkers.
2. For the remaining stages of the model, see Mullender and Ward, 1985, p. 165, commencing at step (e) and allowing for renumbering.

processes' (*ibid.*, p. 37), thus requiring the reader to elicit their value bases by implication or interpretation. In other cases, the published accounts of a particular model may lay claim to a philosophy whilst leaving scope for practitioners to use the model without being consciously aware of the values which its use implies. This would not be possible with self-directed groupwork because, central to the model, is an explicit commitment to a set of values *from which the practice itself must flow.*

This first stage of the model involves the groupworkers in thrashing out their agreed value position before they move on to the normal beginning stages of preparing to run the proposed group. It is, of course, easy enough for us to state that the groupworkers must reach a clear value position — far harder for them to achieve it. The process of establishing that they do, in fact, agree precisely on the values which underpin the self-directed approach, and that these values represent their starting point for intervention, will, almost inevitably, involve a series of meetings at which each person's views can be expressed and a collective stance reached. Only preliminary agreement of this kind about the sources from which ideology, understanding — and resultant action — will flow can assure the success of the group. If anyone feels at this stage that they are not able to agree with the others and decides to opt out of involvement, then we would regard this as a success rather than a failure since it demonstrates that the preliminary planning stage is being carefully and conscientiously carried out.

Important assistance in this phase of preparation for a group can be provided by a consultant to the worker team who is able to stand outside the workers' own deliberations (Ward, 1982, pp. 23–24). The person who plays this role needs to have had direct experience of self-directed groupwork practice, not only so as to have a greater awareness of what is being planned, but also because his or her interventions can set an appropriate tone for the group that is to follow. In so far as the consultant uses classic self-directed techniques like brainstorming, and provides a framework for discussions rather than pre-set content, he or she models the groupworker role in a self-directed group. Overall, by listening, questioning and testing impressions, the groupwork consultant can help focus on issues and draw conflict out into the open so that workers themselves can resolve it — just as they will assist the members to do in the group.

An actual group example can be used to illustrate what happens when a worker team leaves conflict unexpressed and hence fails to reach an agreed value position in advance of establishing a group. In this example, which relates to the Rowland Dale group, a group for parents

who had physically abused their children, two out of three group-workers strongly believed that structural inequalities lay at the root of the members' abuse of their children, whilst the third was of the opinion that more money or better housing would not help because the families concerned would simply get themselves into a mess all over again. These fundamentally opposing views were not discussed or resolved before the group commenced and no consultant was involved. The third, isolated, worker left the group after only a few meetings. No lasting harm was done, but the differences of viewpoint had for a time hampered the group's ability to discuss matters from members' own perspectives (which concurred with the view that social structural factors were central in the problems they faced, and also drew attention to the fact that child abuse 'procedures' had involved a secretive and heavy handed use of authority) because meetings had continually degenerated into discussions between the workers. It would certainly have been prefer-able if the third worker had departed before the group started, rather than after.

Realising that this emphasis on agreeing values in advance is an unconventional starting point for running a group, we want to go on and consider in what other ways the planning and preparation stages of self-directed groups differ from more traditional groupwork models.

Open planning

Once the groupworkers have reached a common position in relation to their values, there are a number of other matters which remain to be considered before a group is actually instituted. We regard these as amounting to establishing a climate or an environment in which self-directed groupwork can take place. In most forms of traditional group-work, this initial planning stage consists of making a series of decisions about the goals of the group, its membership, leadership, and the circumstances in which it will be run, each of which decisions closes off other options by choosing one amongst them. Self-directed group-workers, in contrast, need to start off by opening up horizons as far as possible so that the group members will be enabled to take as many decisions as possible for themselves. We call this a process of 'open' as opposed to 'closed' planning. The skill is in knowing what *not* to plan in advance because it is better left to be discussed with the potential group members.

All writers on groupwork give considerable attention to planning, on the assumption that it *will* be appropriate to decide a whole range of things in advance. Douglas (1976, pp. 41–42), for example, offers a

check-list for starting a group designed to give the worker *a reasonable certainty about what he* [sic] *intends to do* since that will make it easier to convince a sceptical client of the value of the group. He makes no mention of the alternative means of winning a potential member over to the idea of a group: by involving them fully in its planning and making it truly 'their' group. This would be the approach favoured by self-directed groupworkers and it would include giving the individual concerned the choice whether to attend the group or not.

Although less is decided in advance, preparation is no less important in self-directed groupwork than in any other model. Indeed, we would echo Brown's view (1986, p. 27) that:

> The preparation stages may lack the demands, enjoyment and involvement of actual group meetings and activities, but they require just as much creative energy, clear thinking and skill in communication. Some groups are stillborn or die later because social workers underestimate the time and care which good preparation requires.

It would now be appropriate to look in greater detail at each facet of groupwork planning, to examine the effect of keeping this process as 'open' as possible.

Unfettered goal setting

The key feature which the worker team must not pre-empt in its own preparations is goal setting. Indeed, it is a central characteristic of self-directed groupwork that group members set their own goals (and any group able to do so can use the approach). In fact, of course, the groupworkers do start out with an overarching purpose in mind for the group, based on their initial forging of agreement about their under-pinning values. This broad purpose, however, should be set at no greater level of specificity than the general concept of empowering members to confront and move on from their shared experience. The latter may be of an entirely personal nature at first, for example a common experience of having a child with learning difficulties, but it is crucial to the model that the option to progress to broader social consid-erations is not shut down by the groupworkers. In the example just given, for instance, it would commonly be the case that, if not self-directed, a group would be run on therapeutic lines intended to help members to 'come to terms' with their experiences. Whilst discussion of feelings and the opportunity for mutual support remain very important

in any group of this kind, it is equally likely that common themes of anger about under resourcing of obstetric and neo-natal care, or unsatisfactory service provision, may emerge over time if discussion is allowed to flow without being checked by workers' assumptions about what is appropriate or what the group is 'for' (see fuller example in Mullender and Ward, 1985, p. 157.) Equally, a self-directed group for people who have suffered bereavement might progress into issues concerning industrial diseases, or inequalities in health care, or changes in widows' benefits, and might decide to campaign around issues such as these.

It is by no means contradictory for the groupworkers to be clear about their overall purposes and explicit about group process, and yet to leave group members free to determine the detailed goals for the group. Indeed, helping them to do so is an essential part of empowerment. Only the group members have had the life experiences which legitimate their establishment of these kinds of priorities. In order to establish and pursue their priorities, however — at least initially — many groups will require skilled facilitation.

Non-selected membership

'Open planning' involves moving away from the selection of members on the basis of referrals sought in response to predefined criteria. Many groupworkers seek referrals almost by default, as if this were the only possible way of conducting the initial stages of a group. In self-directed groups, on the other hand, the only criteria for inviting people along to an initial group meeting are that they must freely choose to attend and that they are either a natural group or, alternatively, that they have enough in common to offer the potential for developing a group identity; there is no selection stage of any kind. 'Having enough in common' may include being all women, or all black. It would normally also include some additional shared experiences of oppression, as with the members of a self-directed group of Asian students at a further education college who all felt they had been treated unfairly by the college authorities. They successfully campaigned for their meetings to be included in the normal weekly timetable and, with the help of two Asian groupworkers, went on to negotiate on a range of matters concerning the way they felt their particular needs had previously been ignored within the college.

Although the members of self-directed groups may have heard about the group initially through their social workers or health visitors, or through any other professionals who have a significant involvement

in their lives, they cannot be 'referred' as such; the group is merely suggested to them for their own consideration as a potentially useful or interesting idea. Although it is not associated with any process of selection, many self-directed groupworkers, except when working with a natural group, do nevertheless employ the same procedure of meeting potential members individually before the group starts as will be familiar from more traditional methods of groupwork (Manor, 1988).

Perhaps we might see Stock Whitaker's idea of a *two-way process* (Stock Whitaker, 1975, p. 431) as becoming more one way in self-directed groupwork; the groupworker will not be making a decision during this meeting whether or not to invite the individual to the group because enough will already be known about them to make this an automatic process. The potential member, however, will still need all the information the worker is able to give about the group. As Stock Whitaker continues (and allowing for 'therapist/group leader/client' terminology and gender specific language which the present authors would not find acceptable):

> The therapist tells the client that a group is being organized; the client naturally wants to know what sort of group and what will happen in it ... the therapist explains as best he can; the client reacts with enthusiasm (rare) or certain reservations; the reservations are explored and client and group leader together decide whether or not the client will give the group a try. . . . The client's intuition is often very reliable. I do not of course mean that the client's first 'I think I'd rather not' should be accepted as it stands. That should be the starting point for a mutual exploration, not the end of the conversation.

What the workers will be explaining to potential members of a self-directed group is that it will be *their* group at which they will meet others — or be with others they already know — who are facing similar problems to their own, and that the workers will only be there to help them discuss what form the problems take, which of them are experienced as the most severe, why these problems exist and what, as a group, they might choose to do about it.

Almost by definition, the people who are most likely to make excellent use of self-directed groups are also, and rightly, very cagey of professionals who come offering them new kinds of help; they have usually had many negative experiences of authority and of well meaning intervention in the past. They may also see themselves as struggling on alone against the world and may find it hard to see what relevance a group could have or — since they will generally have had many person-

ally devaluing experiences in the past — what anyone could think they might offer to it. Most of all, they are likely to be feeling pretty hopeless about the prospect of any remedy for their present troubles, and may take some convincing that this proposed group has any more chance of success than all the other failed solutions in the past, or that it is anything other than a new way of the powers that be pointing the finger at them as authors of their own misfortunes (Ryan, 1971). All these matters can be explored in pre-group meetings with potential members. All that is required from them is agreement to give the group a try and willingness to continue these discussions in the group itself; they do not have to be convinced in advance that it will succeed.

Open membership

In addition to being non-selected, the membership of self-directed groups is truly open; there is no requirement that any member should stay throughout the group's life, so that anyone may opt in or out at any intermediate stage, and, of course, this means that the overall group membership fluctuates over time.

Whilst apparently alert to factors such as the increased range of 'learning opportunities' in open membership groups (Preston-Shoot, 1987, p. 31), writers on groupwork invariably exhibit a bias in favour of closed groups: '*A closed group does seem to promote cohesion and trust and may provide security for members who initially are apprehensive or lacking in confidence*' (*ibid.*, p. 31). There is an apparent fear, shared by many theorists, of working with open groups:

> Some groups seem to operate with a revolving door, with members constantly dropping out and being replaced. In such a group continuity is lost, and the members are likely to be preoccupied much of the time with mourning lost members, working out fantasies about what the survivors did to drive the members away, or dealing with new people coming in (Stock Whitaker, 1975, p. 435).

We would not suggest that those remaining in the group either can or should completely ignore the coming and going of other members, but nor would we accept an interpretation that sees this as always problematic. Since those attending a self-directed group know from the start that membership is entirely open and that people only come of their own volition, it may be nothing out of the ordinary for a particular individual to stop attending when they lose interest or move on to deal

with other, more pressing things in their life. As the group has often not been brought together by the worker, members and ex-members may continue to bump into each other outside of group sessions and, even where they did meet initially through the group, they may forge friendships or informal neighbourhood contacts which take on a life of their own. Similarly, members may bring friends along to group meetings and be flexible enough to welcome new members as useful additions to the group's combined strength and efficacy.

At other times, self-directed groups do hit patches where established members become reluctant to accept new faces and develop into something of a 'clique'. These may well be times when the workers have to help them examine and reflect on the process that is going on in the group and whether it is helping or hindering the group in the pursuit of its goals. They may need to encourage existing members to recall how they felt before they joined the group; to think how many more people 'out there', who are facing the same kinds of oppression and inequality as themselves, could potentially benefit from group membership to raise their confidence and awareness. These others may also have a major contribution to make to the group's ideas and activities so that their loss, if they are not recruited to the group, would also be the group's loss.

As far as any threat to continuity is concerned, it is possible to preserve a feeling of continuity in a self-directed group, in the pursuit of goals which the group itself has set, by means of a kind of 'group memory' that is also owned by the whole group. This can take the form of written records of group meetings, photographs, press cuttings, sometimes even a video film or televised item about the group, and anything else which the group finds it appropriate to keep. Sometimes such materials are stored and only occasionally referred back to, to boost group morale or keep the members to the goals and tasks they have set themselves. Other groups may routinely use records of the direction they have set and their achievements to date in the same way that some professionals use written contracts with their clients. Flip-charts, for example, on which issues and plans of action have been brainstormed and analysed, can usefully be retained and regularly displayed at future meetings to form the basis of subsequent work. The Nottingham 'Who Cares' group, with which one of the authors was involved as a co-worker, operated in a similar way by gathering together all its memorabilia into a box which came to every meeting and took on a certain significance as the embodiment of where the group had been and what it had done.

Group size

The notion that the ideal number for a small group ranges from three, and preferably from six, to 12 members is a further example of received wisdom which is not applicable in self-directed groupwork. The entire literature of groupwork is essentially one of work with *small* groups. Douglas (1976) and Heap (1977), both give serious and balanced consideration to the question of group size but come down firmly on the side of the small group, whilst Stock Whitaker (1975, p. 434) asserts:

> A group of 12 or 15 or more is too large for many purposes. If one's intention is to plan, or to hold open discussions (even when the topic is well structured), groups of this size almost always devolve into a small core of active participants and a fringe of onlookers.

She does go on to add that large groups may be desirable in certain residential or hospital ward settings, simply so that everyone can be included. Whilst self-directed groupwork has been successfully practised under similar circumstances, we would have no qualms about extending our view of the acceptability of such large groups to a wide range of other contexts.

In self-directed groups, since not even an upper limit is set, it is not uncommon to find attendances in excess of 20, and 40 is not unheard of. The Asian students' group and the Nottingham 'Who Cares' group which were mentioned earlier, certainly both exceeded 20 members at times. With the exception of Kreeger (1975), the theoretical literature on groups of this dimension tends to have an orientation which is out of harmony with our own (see, for example, Jones, 1968, on therapeutic communities; Bozarth, 1981, on Rogerian residential workshops, which reached 50 to 150 people). Interestingly, Bozarth (*ibid.*, p. 118) comments that '*The role of the facilitators in the large group is no different than in small group therapy or encounter groups using the well-known client-centred model*', showing that he, at least, is not over-awed by the prospect of working with such large numbers.

As a consequence of the membership fluctuating over time in self-directed groups, clearly the size does also. The workers need the necessary skills to work with three members at one meeting and over 20 at another, as happened, for example, in the Nottingham 'Who Cares' group. Large attendances called for the use of techniques to raise issues, such as brainstorming, exercises to prioritise those issues and to set tasks arising from them, and games designed to help the group to look at its own process. (Examples of all these may be found in ACW, 1981; Hope and Timmel, 1984; Jelfs, 1982.) At other times, when only a few

members are present, it is important not to retreat into the feeling that they represent a more 'authentic' small group and to treat them, therefore, as if they *are* the whole group by letting them take fresh decisions that contravene all the work which has been done in the group up to that point. One way of holding on to what the large group has set as its priorities is to display its work to date (in the form of flip-charts, for example) at every meeting and to keep that in the forefront as representing the direction in which the group is aiming to move, however many of its members are actually able to attend at any given time.

Self-directed groupworkers may, then, require greater flexibility but, given this, they do not find that large numbers of group members need remain on the side lines or that the issue of trust within the group cannot be satisfactorily handled, despite Preston-Shoot's fear (1987, p. 32) that, in large groups, both intimacy and freedom of expression are threatened.

Although Brown (1986, pp. 40–41) and Preston-Shoot (1987, pp. 32–33) reflect the tendency in more recent literature to think about size less rigidly, and in relation primarily to the broad purpose of the group, they still remain wedded to upper limits on numbers: in the region of 12, or six to eight, respectively. Brown (1986, p. 40) passes the sensible observation that, at the upper end of his own recommended range of group size: '*Problem-solving takes longer, but may produce better solutions*'. Similarly: '*For problem-solving, activity and "open" groups, larger groups provide more resources and can work well*'. Nevertheless, he still does not appear to feel comfortable with the notion of the larger grouping, in that he states that the observed '*tendency to sub-grouping*', rather than being minimised by the worker, '*can be used constructively by sub-dividing the group for various tasks and activities*' (*ibid.*, p. 41). It is as if practitioners and theoreticians are anxious to return to the more familiar territory of the small group as quickly as possible. A further axiomatic principle appears to be that large groups lead to loss of control: '*Larger groups usually require more management and structure*'. Although we would agree that the size of the worker team may usefully increase with the size of the group itself, this is not to ensure that the groupworkers keep a grip on the group but, rather, to facilitate their ability to pick up the wealth of ideas and energies which will flow from the members. An additional role which can usefully be played by one of the groupworkers, for example, over and above the more standard ones, is that of 'spotter'. This involves the worker concerned in sitting amongst group members and listening out for those who clearly have ideas to contribute but who are perhaps more inclined to whisper these to a neighbour than to share them with the whole group. The

'spotter' can encourage them to have the confidence to address their views to the group.

Like community groups, self-directed groups may go through periods of feeling that numbers have shrunk too far and decide to publicise the group to attract more members. This may be done through word of mouth when, for example in young people's groups, members will bring their friends along to the next meeting. Alternatively, a group may consider putting posters up in its usual meeting place, or may even advertise in the press, as the Rowland Dale group considered doing when it needed more members to help it run independently of worker support.

Open ended length

Just as the number attending a self-directed group is not fixed in advance, so the workers need to learn not to pre-set the duration of time during which the group will meet. It is not easy to move away from the kind of 'gut level' feeling in many professional settings which has come to associate small groups with a duration of six, eight or 12 weeks. It is not untypically acknowledged that therapeutic groups may last for several years but, in general, timespans are calculated according to the length of commitment workers feel they can make, rather than the exigencies of the group itself. This is compounded by the unfortunate tendency to regard any form of 'self-help' activity as able to become member-led after a very short period of time (Wilson, 1987) so that, again, workers' own involvement in the group may last only a matter of weeks. In self-directed groupwork, group members themselves decide for how long they find the group to be serving a useful purpose, which frequently extends over a period of years until long term goals for external change are achieved — for example, the successful campaign by a young people's group for a youth club on their estate, or by a local women's group for a women's centre (in both cases with the group firmly in control of the management committee).

Groupworkers may hand the responsibility for facilitating the group in its work over to colleagues after a time (subject to the group's agreement), or eventually over to members themselves, but workers should not expect to be associated with the group for less than a good few months — and years would be better. Such a long term commitment makes a team of at least three workers especially desirable, so that sickness and leave can be covered. These workers need not all be from the same agency — for example, the facilitators with the Rowland Dale group were a social worker and a health visitor — but their necessarily long term commitment does have resource implications. The proven

effectiveness of the approach in a wide range of settings would probably need to be its own justification.

Frequency of meetings

Once again, the frequency of meetings constitutes a feature which is not fixed in advance of self-directed groupwork. There is a tendency, in adult-led long term groups, to assume that meetings will take place once a month whilst short term groups may well meet weekly. In self-directed groups there is a far greater element of the members determining what feels right for them and what will best enable them to meet the group goals they have set.

In the Nottingham 'Who Cares' group, for example, the group-workers — who were new to the self-directed approach — had made the assumption in advance, following the model of most adult meetings, that the group would meet monthly. After the group had actually started, the members — all teenagers in the care of the local authority — stated that they would prefer to meet weekly. It seems likely that they were more accustomed to weekly groups, on the model of Scouts or Guides for example. They also found it easier and more realistic to plan their lives a week rather than a month ahead. The reasons for this included the routines established within the children's homes where most of them lived, their schools' weekly schedules of homework and of out-of-school commitments such as team sports, their own sense of time which revolved around a somewhat shorter timescale than that of adults, and their vague awareness that control over their use of time, and even over where they might be a few months hence, was not in their own hands — which made it important to achieve as much as possible as quickly as possible. The lack of fit between the group leaders' expec-tations of monthly meetings and the members' wish for weekly meetings led to a compromise that the group would meet fortnightly. This suited no-one particularly well, did not harmonise with anyone's other commitments so that it became difficult to remember the meeting dates, and caused problems in fitting meetings around holidays and half-terms. The workers learned from this that they should not have pre-determined or made assumptions about the frequency of meetings, but should have left this for negotiation with the group members. They could then have negotiated their own commitment to the group on whatever basis resulted; if necessary, for example, by recruiting additional assistance in running the group so that a sufficient number of groupworkers could be present on each occasion without making unrealistic demands on anyone.

Timing of meetings

Similar principles relate to the timing of meetings. Brown (1986, p. 41) rightly regards discussing meeting times with members as desirable within many approaches to groupwork; we would not claim this as specific to self-directed groupwork, but it is of particular importance there. A groupworker team who made advance plans for a women's group, for example, might assume that it would be easier for women with family commitments to attend an evening group because they could then share child care with their partners; in fact, were they to consult the women themselves, they might find that they were single parents who could only manage a daytime group with a crèche for the youngest children. Only by discussing the matter with the potential members concerned would this necessity emerge. Of course, the same would be true for any kind of group but with the additional factor that a self-directed group needs to bear its own goals in mind when deciding what would be most suitable. It may, for example, be needing to reach the widest possible potential membership, or one specific group of people for whom timing is of crucial importance — as was the case with the young people in care who joined the Nottingham 'Who Cares' group because they needed to seek permission to be allowed out in the evening.

Location of meetings

In seeking to involve members in determining the most appropriate location for group meetings, one factor to bear in mind may be the places where they would tend to congregate naturally. With young people, for example, the most natural setting in which to find them initially could be a street corner or a public open space of some kind. This does not mean that all subsequent meetings have to be held out of doors, but it is a reminder that most groupwork takes place under quite artificial conditions and that much effort is typically expended on bringing individuals together into groups instead of working with the untapped potential of natural groups. It is important for self-directed groupwork to tap into the natural dynamics of group interaction as far as possible because this is what the workers are there to facilitate; they are often not attempting to create a new group identity from scratch but to enhance what already exists, in embryo at least.

A wonderful example of a detached youth worker who was very skilled in self-directed groupwork techniques doing precisely this occurred when he came across a natural group of young people 'hanging around' on a housing estate. Wanting to encourage them to voice their

own experiences of living on the estate, but knowing that the process of engaging them in joining together into an officially recognised group and moving to an indoor location would lose the young people's natural spontaneity, the groupworker proceeded to pull a piece of chalk out of his jacket pocket and to hold a 'brainstorming' session with them there and then, by writing on the paving stones. This led to the group negotiating for somewhere to meet and setting goals around issues which members decided to tackle. Natural group dynamics may also be harnessed in a residential or day care setting where members already know each other and where the group can meet in its normal, everyday context. The use of self-directed groupwork in penal settings should remind us, however, that a group's everyday setting is not necessarily one in which it feels perfectly at ease: there still remains the need to engage the group in the work and to go through all the stages of 'open planning'.

Where individual members are being brought together for the express purpose of starting a self-directed group and there is, therefore, a completely open choice of venue, the initial one or two meetings should normally be held on 'neutral' territory away from the professionals' normal workplaces, such as a community centre, and the preferred location of future meetings should be discussed with those members who come along at this initial stage. Once again, we are emphasising that no aspect of planning should unnecessarily be taken out of group members' hands. It is not normally appropriate for workers to provide transport to a self-directed group unless for some special reason, for example, if members have disabilities and some require help. In residential, day care and penal settings, members are already together in one place. Outside of this, group meetings will normally take place in the members' own neighbourhood, within easy reach of their homes so transportation should not be needed. Also, it is sometimes questionable as to how far attendance remains truly voluntary when transport arrives without fail every week; it is easier to attend by default than to contemplate the choice of whether to go or not.

Reaching agreement on the conduct of the group

Self-directed groupwork is grounded in the notion of a working agreement between workers and members. As has been outlined, many of the elements of the group's functioning — such as where and when the group will meet — are negotiated between the parties. The group members also decide for themselves whether they want to attend, and they are responsible, as a group, for setting the group's goals.

There remain a number of other matters, however, on which it is necessary to reach agreement in the very earliest stage of the group's life (Brown, 1986, pp. 45–46): these include any rules for the conduct of the group; the related issue of confidentiality — both between workers and members, and between the group and the outside world; the relationship between membership of the group and any individual help which members may be receiving from one or more of the agencies involved, including any with a statutory component; and what members and workers can properly expect from one another — in particular, what role the workers will play.

GROUP RULES

Rules for the conduct of self-directed groups are established by the group members themselves. In the Nottingham 'Who Cares' group (for young people in the care of the local authority), for example, after one or two rather boisterous and noisy meetings the young people decided on the rule that only one person should speak at once and that the others should listen. It would, of course, have been perfectly possible for the workers to predict that such a rule would be needed and to have delivered it to members as an expectation at the first meeting. This, however, would have flown in the face of the whole philosophy and practice of self-directed groups and would have been entirely counter-productive. It would have established a 'them and us' feeling between workers and members and would have placed the former firmly in a leadership role, with the members left to choose between subservience and rebellion. Furthermore, if the groupworkers had later gone on to suggest to members 'This is your group and it is up to you to decide how you want to use it and what you want to achieve', the members would have had no reason to believe that this was actually how the workers intended to operate.

CONFIDENTIALITY OUTSIDE THE GROUP

The same 'Who Cares' group also had to tackle the issue of confidentiality between the group and the outside world. The residential staff who were caring for most of the young people felt somewhat threatened by the existence of the group and would sometimes 'pump' them for information as to what went on there. The group considered this situation and reached the opinion that they had a right to discuss matters which concerned them in privacy but that, at the same time, there was no point in fostering suspicion of the group's activities unnecessarily. As a result, the members decided to hold occasional 'open evenings' for their field and residential social workers at which the

group's progress and plans could be reported on, in a way which the whole group had had a chance to plan, and support would be enlisted for the group's continued existence since it could be seen to be an important factor in its members' lives. In between these open meetings, members could feel free to keep the content of group sessions confidential without feeling that they were betraying individual social workers or carers. Such freedom was absolutely essential if they were to have the necessary space to share their adverse experiences of the care system and to reach decisions on how to tackle these. The groupworkers regarded themselves as bound by exactly the same expectations.

CONFIDENTIALITY IN THE GROUP

A different aspect of confidentiality, that between workers and members, was faced by the Ainsley Teenage Action group, a group for young people on a council estate who had been harassed by the police and who had nowhere to congregate without getting into further trouble. The worker team with this group was meeting regularly with a consultant to help them keep in view their overall philosophy of empowerment of the young people in the group, and to develop the kinds of skills and techniques which would make this a reality. When the existence of these consultancy sessions first came up in conversation between the workers and the young people, the latter were angry that there were discussions going on about *their* group from which they felt excluded, in just the same way as the residential workers had felt shut out from the 'Who Cares' group. In this case, however, the fact that it was the members of the group themselves who were experiencing this feeling of exclusion raised a very real dilemma for the worker team. Workers and members together discussed the situation, with the groupworkers strongly holding the opinion that they had a right to their own professional development and, indeed, that they could not offer an adequate service to the group without it. On the other hand, they did not want to create any 'no go' areas in their work, nor to leave the members feeling that they were being talked about behind their backs. On reflection, it became clear that the workers did have a right to, and a need for, time and space for their own reflection but that this should not be kept confidential from group members. Indeed, as the group developed its own levels of skill and awareness, the members became increasingly able to offer valuable feedback to the workers about how helpful they were experienced as being and how they might have responded differently at particular points in the group sessions. It was agreed, therefore, that any members who wished to do so would be free to attend the consultancy sessions, provided that the focus of these

remained on the performance of the workers and they did not develop into mini-group sessions outside of the meetings proper. In addition, the records of the consultancy sessions would be open to the group members to read, just as the records of self-directed group sessions themselves are normally open to members — and, indeed, are quite often written by them.

GROUP MEMBERSHIP AND INDIVIDUAL WORK

Part of the process of negotiating a working agreement with the members of a self-directed group consists of clarifying which matters it is proper to bring to the group and which should be dealt with outside of it. Brown and Caddick (1986, p. 101) have questioned how the self-directed approach '*incorporates the agency's goals in relation to individual behaviour*', with particular reference to social control functions, and also '*whether there is a place within it for individual members to work at their own ... personal matters, perhaps of health, role-change or relationship*'. Unequivocally, we would answer that a groupworker using the self-directed model would not put any of these matters on the agenda *in the group*. Individual members themselves are, of course, always free to mention in a group meeting that they have had a bad week, or any other current preoccupation, but this would be because it arose in the course of conversation and not in the expectation that the group would 'down tools' to focus on the matter, as might happen in a group which had a therapeutic purpose. When an individual problem arises spontaneously, it may well be discussed but is often a prelude for either workers or other members to refocus on the goals or tasks in hand. For example, in a group held in a penal setting, a number of people wanted to know about parole or visiting arrangements; answers to specific factual questions on these matters, as well as strong expressions of discontent by particular individuals, led into broader discussions of how to 'play the system' for an early release and of the unfairness of the 'system' overall. What is not appropriate at such a time is for the workers to move into an individualised perspective which would be at odds with the overall goals of the group.

This is not to say, however, that individual needs are ignored. On occasion, the same or a different worker does retain a continuing one-to-one casework relationship, sometimes on a statutory basis (discussed in more detail below), with a group member outside of the group. Where this is the case, the worker is able to make it clear to all group members that he or she (or the rest of the team) remains available to offer individual support at times of difficulty. The probation officer who worked with the Ainsley Teenage Action group left open the offer of

individual contact for occasions like this, although he did not impose it as a regular requirement alongside group membership. Some members did indeed ask to see him individually when they felt they needed to do so. As a group develops over time, however, members increasingly offer each other this support both inside and outside the group and, where they feel something to be beyond their scope, will often help the person concerned to seek appropriate sources of help outside the group.

We would not deny that very many group members feel that their personal problems have eased, or that they have become more able or more motivated to tackle them, as a result of their membership of a self-directed group. These benefits we have elsewhere referred to as 'secondary advantages' of membership of self-directed groups (Mullender and Ward, 1985, p. 156). Also, it is true to say that workers and individual members get to know each other better because of the group, and may discuss the group's progress, and how membership of it is helping this particular member, as part of any individual work outside of the group; this process would not, however, work the other way round and does not mean that the groupwork is subservient to, or less important than, individual work.

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

The viability of self-directed practice where statutory orders are in force may be seen as open to question (Brown, 1986, p. 20). In our view, however, membership of a self-directed group is not precluded for those on such orders, or those who are subject to statutory monitoring or investigation, provided that there is no actual or implied requirement that they will join the group. This is of crucial importance in self-directed groupwork since voluntary membership has already been shown to be a basic feature of the approach (see above p. 10).

A helpful consideration here is the differentiation made by Bottoms and McWilliams (1979, p. 177) between constraint and coercion. Coercion, they argue, is unacceptable, whereas constraints exist in all situations in which people interact. They merely provide a framework within which real choice remains possible. This notion of choice can be developed further by considering the idea of primary and secondary contracts (Bryant *et al.*, 1978; Raynor, 1985; see also Mullender, 1979). The primary contract, the court order, provides a framework of constraints — officially termed 'conditions' — such as the requirement in a probation or supervision order to report regularly. Beyond this framework, the person who is subject to the order remains free to choose whether to enter into one or more secondary contracts,

which may include receiving individual help through casework or joining a group. In the Ainsley Teenage Action group, for example, the probation officer who set up the group gave members the option of fulfilling the reporting requirement of their orders by attending the group. He made it absolutely clear that, should they withdraw from the group, their primary contract — the statutory order — would not be broken, provided that they worked out an alternative arrangement for contact. Since subsequent withdrawal from a secondary contract would not prejudice the conditions of the court order (which remains in force), the existence of the order itself does not prevent potential group members from exercising a real choice.

MUTUAL EXPECTATIONS

In sum, it is essential that a potential group member's preliminary expectations on first joining a self-directed group are explored and clarified, as would be the case with any method. The role that the workers can be expected to play, for example, requires careful elucidation. It needs to be clear from the start that they will not be telling members what to do but will be placing full responsibility on them to decide. This firm placing of responsibility back with group members may have to continue, intermittently, throughout a group's life. For example, one women's action group has been in existence for several years and now employs its own worker, but she still finds that the group occasionally attempts to pass decision making to her; she then needs to remind members of how much they have achieved already and to stress that new tasks and responsibilities are not beyond their capabilities.

Conclusion

Many of the features of planning and preparing to run a self-directed group involve the groupworkers in unlearning previous assumptions about the classic features of groupwork. The first stage of the group-workers' activities, as outlined in this paper, has covered all the preparations and planning for the group as well as getting the members together on the basis of a preliminary working agreement as to how the group will run. In short, the process we have described has been that of the groupworkers moving out of a leadership role into that of facilitators. The group members, too, may need time to become accustomed to the workers playing this less familiar role and may need gently reminding at various points during the life of the group that they cannot look to the workers to have all the answers. Since members are keenest to seek the safety of depending on the workers and conforming to their

wishes at the very beginning of a group (Brown, 1986, p. 74), it is particularly important that workers in self-directed groups should convey the message that these groups are member-centred right from the start — that is, from the point when initial preparations for the group begin to be made. As they 'get the message' that the workers are not going to give them an easy way out by telling them what to do, members begin to look more to each other to make decisions. The workers, meanwhile, attempt always to help the group members determine where they want the group to go, rather than imposing their own goals or direction onto the members.

This brings us back full circle to the question of values. We consider that there are problematic issues surrounding both 'leadership' and 'control' in groups. We would always wish to ask to what ends such control is directed, and over which areas of members' experience it is exercised. It is not sufficient to treat control, or the power on which it depends, as value-free or value-neutral as, for example, does Douglas (1976, pp. 71–73) when he discusses both the degree and the sources of the groupworker's power as questions primarily of what makes the worker most effective. Power-ful leadership roles are presented by Douglas as alternatives to be adopted or discarded by the professionally skilled worker in order to achieve his or her own ends for the group. We would personally be unhappy with any analysis of power which was not *value-laden* (Lukes, 1974, p. 57), or which omitted to note that the significance of control *to the recipient* is related as much to the ends to which it is exercised as the means by which this happens. Leadership, by definition, cannot be simply a technical exercise in management; it must always involve explicit or implicit intentions and purposes which, if left to default, will reinforce rather than question dominant social values. The self-directed approach is deeply grounded in value-based considerations of who determines what those intentions and purposes shall be; its underpinning rationale is one of handing back the power over decision-making to service users.

'Empowerment', a term which can be used to encapsulate these values, has become fashionable in recent months. In this paper we have attempted to show that its achievement through the medium of a self-directed group demands a high level of awareness and skill, so that careful planning of the group remains consonant with the groupwork-ers' overall values.

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