
Strength in numbers: Findings from a national survey of groupwork and Irish social work practice

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***Abstract:** This article presents findings from a national survey of social workers in Ireland in which information was gathered on social work practice with groups. This article sets out the background to the survey, a review of relevant literature, the methodologies employed to conduct the national survey, and a selective set of findings from the research. The analysis reveals that groupwork is used across all practice fields in Ireland and is more widely used than previously recognised.*

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Introduction

This article is based on a paper delivered at the Joint World Social Work, Education and Development Conference (SWSD2018) held in Ireland in 2018, which presented findings from phase one of a national study of social workers' engagement in groupwork in Ireland. Groupwork is long established as an integral component of the theoretical and practice knowledge base of social work (Trevithick, 2005) and this study set out to ascertain how social workers in Ireland integrate groupwork practices into their work. Phase One of the study involved a national survey of social workers and was conducted in early 2018. Phase Two will collect qualitative data using focus group methodology. This article sets out the background to the survey, a review of relevant literature, the methodologies employed to conduct the national survey, and a selective set of findings from the research. The presented findings are discussed and some tentative conclusions drawn.

Background to the study

Groupwork has historically been an important component of the curriculum of social work education in the United States of America (U.S.A.) (Simon and Kilbane, 2014, p. 254). In the United Kingdom (U.K.), the teaching of groupwork skills as core to social work education has frequently been asserted (Lindsay and Orton, 2014; Trevithick, 2005). Just as in these other jurisdictions, instruction in groupwork methods has been an integral element of social work education in Ireland for many decades and remains a core element of all Irish professional level social work programmes. At the time of writing, social work in Ireland is regulated on a statutory basis by a Social Work Registration Board under the auspices of a multi-professional regulatory and registration body, titled the Health and Social Care Professionals Council (known as CORU). There are currently (August, 2020) 4756 social workers listed on the CORU Social Work Register (CORU, 2020). The guidelines for social work educators in Ireland issued by the Social Work Registration Board (SWRB) identify skills in working with groups, as among the required competencies for graduating social workers. The SWRB's published *Standards of Proficiency for Social*

Workers (CORU, 2019) states that the range of competences expected of social workers at the point of graduation should include an ability on the part of a graduating social worker to:

Critically understand the concepts and frameworks that underpin a range of individual counselling theory and skills; theory and practice of working with children and families; community work theory and practice and *group work theory and practice* (Coru, 2019, p. 11) (emphasis added).

Including groupwork in the *Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers* (CORU, 2019) underlines its importance in the curriculum for social work education and the need to ensure groupwork remains a core element in social work training. This is particularly important as social work practice has become more complex and other jurisdictions have experienced an apparent subjugation of groupwork in social work education (Sweifach, 2014; Goodman, Knight and Khudododov, 2014).

Reflecting on the lack of emphasis on groupwork skills in social work education, Kurland and Salmon (1992) lamented some time ago that groupwork skills are typically regarded as non-essential for social work practice, although they did not agree with that viewpoint. The reasons for the reduction in the status of groupwork in social work education and why groupwork methods have become less central to the architecture of the social work curriculum is not fully clear, but there are a number of possible explanations (LaRocque, 2017). Firstly, a lack of specialisation in groupwork across the social work academy may explain its downplaying (Goodman et al, 2014). Also, through our work we have encountered a perception among some social work academics that groupwork is used infrequently by social workers in their work in different sectors, and is, therefore, not an essential element of the social work skillset. Understanding this reduced status in groupwork practice is interesting given its long-held recognition as an effective modality for dealing with psychosocial problems, mutual assistance, and self-help or personal support needs (Whitaker, 2001), and its continued reported presence as a mode of social work intervention across the wide range of social work fields of practice (Doel, 2006; Garvin, Gutiérrez and Galinsky, 2017). Hyslop (2018) captures the competing perspectives currently at play in the field of social work where relational and emancipatory approaches seem at odds with processes oriented

towards privatisation, new managerialism, efficiency and risk aversion. Smith (2017) concurs that practice is not divorced from the ideological debates which surround it, debates which she suggests increasingly concern themes of agency, power, privilege, and oppression. Reisch (2013), writing in the US context, contrasts the continued expressed adherence to a social justice agenda with the realities of social work practice located within an increasingly neo-liberal landscape where solutions to individualised problems are favoured and elevated as the appropriate focus of social work intervention. In this context, Trevithick (2012, p. 237) asserts that the move away from groupwork is a product of the increasing conceptualisation of client's problems as individualised and personalised.

The consequences for social work graduates arising from this trend away from groupwork instruction are multiple, including difficulties they will encounter in migrating classroom-acquired groupwork skills into real-life contexts (Bitel, 2014; Goodman and Munoz, 2004), and gaps in knowledge regarding group processes, group development and group conflict (Cohen, 2014; Simon and Kilbane, 2014; Sweifach, 2015).

However, prior to initiating the survey with social workers reported in this paper, and in contrast to the notion that groupwork was a dying modality in social work, the authors had personally encountered many examples of social workers using groupwork approaches in their practice, a picture which appeared to contradict the sometimes expressed assumptions that groupwork was no longer core to social work practice and service delivery. This mirrors Toseland and McClive Reed's findings (2009) that social groupwork is thriving internationally. Furthermore, research with early career social workers in Ireland reported that new graduates were using groupwork skills and gaining experience in groupwork from an early stage in their employment as professional social workers (Guerin, Devitt and Redmond, 2010).

In this somewhat unclear and contradictory landscape, the authors set out to investigate the extent to which social workers, in the Irish context, typically employ groupwork approaches in their practice. Therefore, a primary focus of the study reported here centred on investigating the extent to which social workers located across the range of service sectors in Ireland use groupwork interventions in their work, either regularly or occasionally. A corollary to this focus concerned identification of the types of groups which social workers are involved in facilitating.

A search of the literature proved unhelpful in clarifying the use of groupwork in Irish social work practice as it revealed no clear picture of the extent and nature of groupwork in contemporary Irish social work. This reflects a similar lack of knowledge in relation to groupwork practice by social workers in the United Kingdom (UK) (Trevithick, 2005; Doel and Sawdon, 1999). Following a search of the literature for information on the practice of groupwork by social workers in Ireland, the current authors came to a similar conclusion drawn by Trevithick (2005) regarding the situation in the UK, where she identified the existence of an information gap regarding the use by social workers of groupwork methods in their practice. Reflecting on the UK context, Trevithick (2005, p. 101) pointed out that

one of the difficulties we face is that we in fact know very little about whether, when and where groupwork- in whatever form- is practised in the United Kingdom.

Apart from the examples of groupwork which we found in the literature on social work in Ireland (as set out in the next Literature Review section), coupled with our own observations that social workers appear to use groupwork approaches in many different contexts, it was clear that there was little that could be definitively asserted regarding the *extent* to which groupwork methods are utilised by social workers in the Irish context. The rationale for the study reported here arose, therefore, from a concern to address the gap in knowledge regarding the extent to which social workers in Ireland integrate groupwork methods into their work. To this end, social workers who took part in the survey were asked to indicate the frequency with which they use groupwork, as well as what forms of groupwork they engage in and with which service user groups. The methodology and selective findings are outlined in more detail later in this article.

Groupwork and social work: Past and present

Groupwork has been identified as a key approach in the practice of social work since the early decades of the 20th century. Schwartz (2006) reminds us that the impetus towards collective action and social reform

is a long established thread within social work's history and he traces in detail the road travelled towards the alignment of groupwork and casework as part of the overarching development of a unified social work identity. Just as the origins of groupwork can be traced to early examples of mutual aid, philanthropic and recreational activities (Alissi, 2009), so too can early examples of collective action be found in the Settlement Movement activities in locations such as Toynbee Hall in the UK and Hull House in Chicago (Schwartz, 2006). When the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) was established in 1955, it represented a merger of different practitioner groups which previously carried their own distinct identity, but which came together at that point in time to unify the profession of social work under one banner. The NASW incorporated five practice sections, one of which was groupwork, a move which recognised the position of groupwork as an important constituent of the social work profession (Andrews, 2001).

The current practice of social work with groups reflects an eclectic and flexible use of group modalities by social work practitioners. Typologies of groupwork models adopted within social work practice include empowerment, mutual aid, psychodynamic, task centred and cognitive behavioural (Gitterman and Salmon, 2009). Trevithick (2012) asserts that the underlying theory may be psychodynamic, behaviourism or humanism or a practice perspective of empowerment or mutual aid. Trevithick (2005) also argues for greater recognition of the importance of groupwork knowledge, skills and applications within non-groupwork aspects of social work practice. Bringing many strands of social work practice together, she identifies how groupwork theory and practice is relevant for all social workers not only regarding the facilitation of groups but also in work with individuals, families, teams, communities, networks and organisations.

Despite the long lineage of groupwork practice in social work, acknowledgment of its centrality in current social work practice appears to be overshadowed by the increasing emphasis on individualised interventions. . Andrews (2001) reports that the importance attached to groupwork instruction has been declining in the US social work academy. Commenting more recently from a UK perspective, and seeking to highlight the relevance of groupwork knowledge and skills for social work practice, Trevithick (2005, p. 80) has argued that

groupwork theory and skills must be included in the social work curriculum. She explains that

groupwork skills need to be taught on social work training programmes and that more opportunities need to be made available for practitioners to use these skills, particularly in the statutory sector.

The formation of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG) in 1979 in the US (later evolving into and renamed as the International Association of Social Work with Groups (IASWG)) was an effort to revitalise the position of groupwork as core to social work education and practice (Alissi, 2009). The AASWG first published a set of *Standards for Social Work Practice with Groups* in 1999 (Cohen and Olshever, 2013), which aimed to articulate the values, skills and knowledge base necessary for social work with groups (Malekoff, 2014). The *Standards* have been revised in the interim (Abels, 2013; Cohen and Olshever, 2013) with the latest iteration published by the IASWG in 2005 and re-edited in 2010 (AASWG, 2010; Cohen et al, 2013; IASWG, 2019). The Standards are intended to aid and guide both the teaching and the practice of social work with groups. The potential for incorporation of the *Standards* into social work education is provided by Macgowan (2013) with specific, local examples from across the globe provided by Shera et al, (2013) in Canada and an Irish example from Kirwan (2013). However, it is of note that despite these efforts to raise the profile of groupwork in social work education and practice, substantive groupwork modules are not always mandatory in all social work schools in the USA (Sweifach, 2014) and Canada (McNicoll and Lindsay, 2002). In recent decades in the UK, as noted earlier, the marginalisation of groupwork within social work teaching and practice has been raised as an issue of concern by Trevithick (2012). Although, the inclusion of groupwork knowledge in the Irish SWRB's *Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers* (CORU, 2019) means that groupwork cannot completely disappear from the Irish social work curriculum (Kirwan and Byrne, 2019), there is a similar danger that the instruction delivered on this topic will fade over time to an insufficient level, leaving new social work graduates feeling inadequately prepared to incorporate groupwork into their social work practice.

Groupwork and Irish social work practice

Exactly what that practice landscape looks like in Ireland at present is somewhat difficult to ascertain. There is a dearth of research on the extent, scope and nature of groupwork practice in Irish social work. An early publication from the 1990's, in the form of a special issue of the journal *Groupwork*, edited by Robbie Gilligan and John Pinkerton (1992), highlighted a range of groupwork practice on the island of Ireland, North and South. Contributions to that special edition of the journal included an exploration by Benson (1992) of personal identity and cultural context drawn from private psychotherapy practice; groupwork through the medium of art with bereaved children (Harmey and Price, 1992); reminiscence groups with older clients (Gibson 1992); a survey by Schonfeld and Morrissey (1992) of social workers and psychologists facilitating social skills groups with adults with learning difficulties; the creation of a support group for teenagers with cancer (Martin and O'Neill, 1992); and a therapeutic group for clients bereaved by suicide (O'Connor, 1992). The editors noted the richness of groupwork practice, 'despite its relatively fledgling status', (Gilligan and Pinkerton, 1992, p.3) and it appeared at that point in time that groupwork was gaining prominence in the Irish context.

Indeed, examples of groupwork in Irish social work practice have continued to have a visible, if somewhat limited presence, in the literature. Examples include reports on groups in specific settings, such as child and family services (Dempsey and Halton, 2017); in child and adolescent mental health services (Butler and Devenney, 2015); in criminal justice (Madden, 2011; Pugh, 1995); in schools for children with disabilities (Wilson et al, 2004); in primary care (Fleming et al, 2009; Ni Raghallaigh et al, 2013) and in bereavement support (Culhane, 2004; McGuinness, Finucane and Roberts, 2015; Walsh et al, 2008). Some literature addressed groupwork by social workers with specific target groups such as Holt, Kirwan and Ngo's (2015) evaluation of a concurrent mother and child groupwork program for victims of domestic violence, Jenkinson et al's (2016) and Jenkinson's (2016) reports of groupwork with fathers, Breen and Jenkinson's (2018) report of groupwork with mothers, and Peet's (2011) article on groupwork with men. Sharry (1999) published on groupwork with parents, Deasy (2011) published an article on groupwork with children

from disadvantaged communities, O'Driscoll (2011) has published on groupwork with children in a medical setting, and Loumpa (2012) reported on working with mental health service users through a peer support group approach.

However, while these publications showcase examples of groupwork in Irish social work, there has been no attempt to capture the extent and scope of this groupwork practice. This is mirrored in the UK where Doel and Sawdon previously stated that the 'best guess' is that 'groupwork's presence is patchy' (Doel and Sawdon, 1999, p. 18). They also argue that it is not enough to have data on the amount of groups in social work practice but an analysis of the type of groupwork is essential (ibid, p.19). Toseland and McClive Reed (2009), in their review of literature on international social groupwork, identified that most of the literature focused on descriptive accounts of groupwork practice. The International Association of Social Work with Groups 'recognises that social work practice with groups reflects a broad domain of professional practice' (IASWG, 2020). However, data on the extent, scope and nature of that practice in the Irish context is limited. This study aims to address this gap in knowledge and to illuminate the current nature and positioning of groupwork in social work in Ireland. It is also hoped that this study will encourage more critical analysis of the place of groupwork in social work practice, and the gaps in knowledge about how it is practised, that remain to be addressed.

Methodology

This study was undertaken by a team of researchers affiliated, at the time the survey was conducted, to two third level educational institutions in Ireland. Social work education programs are delivered in one of those institutions by two team members and the researcher from the other institution has an expert interest in groupwork and social work. A fourth team member was involved in the data collection and analysis and they were working at that time as a social worker in an agency external to the education institutions. All members of the research team are registered social workers in Ireland who are currently employed in the education sector. During their previous social work practice, they engaged in groupwork practice in a broad range of settings, with a diversity of client groups.

The study was supported by a small grant from the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty Benefaction Fund, Trinity College Dublin. This allowed the research team to recruit assistance with the administration of the survey instrument and the statistical analysis of the quantitative element of the survey data.

The aim of the research exercise was to illuminate the extent to which social workers in Ireland incorporate groupwork approaches into their social work practice. Ethical approval was granted by the two educational institutions for a mixed methods research design involving the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, over two separate yet interrelated phases. This paper reports on findings from Phase One, which involved the administration of a national survey to social workers utilising a standardised survey methodology (questionnaire) in the period from April to June 2018 and a simple statistical analysis of the collected data.

With the assistance of the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW), an email was posted to all members of the IASW inviting them to participate in a short, confidential online questionnaire. While it is acknowledged that the membership of the IASW does not include all social workers in Ireland, it nonetheless represents high numbers of social workers and access to this group for research purposes provided a means of inviting participation from social workers throughout the jurisdiction. In 2018, in the period when the questionnaire was administered, the IASW membership stood at 1199 social workers. The questionnaire comprised standardised questions and free-text questions. A time limit of one month was initially set for submission of responses, but this was extended because of the unexpected high rate of responses received in the initial period. Altogether, the survey was open to responses for approximately 8 weeks. In total, 157 responses from practising social workers were received, a figure which represented 13% of the total IASW social work membership. We did not request information on the demographics of the survey sample – for example, number of years since qualification of the IASW membership overall; the breakdown of social work specialisms in the overall membership cohort. Capturing this information would have allowed for a more robust and contextualised analysis of the survey respondents' data.

The online questionnaire was constructed to gather information regarding the following:

1. Demographic characteristics of research participants
2. Current groupwork practice reported by the respondents
3. Groupwork education (past and future needs) as reported by the respondent .

Comprehensive attention was given to the ethical considerations involved in this research. With a stated and acknowledged responsibility towards the ‘researched’, whose dignity and well-being is absolutely integral to the integrity of the research, the research design adopted for this project reflected the fundamental core features of ethically sound research: ensuring voluntary informed consent; doing no harm; and the guaranteeing of confidentiality and anonymity. To that end, respondents to the questionnaire were not required to provide their name or the name of their agency. As such, no identifying data was requested or if inadvertently reported in answers by respondents, was not coded or referred to in the report of the research findings.

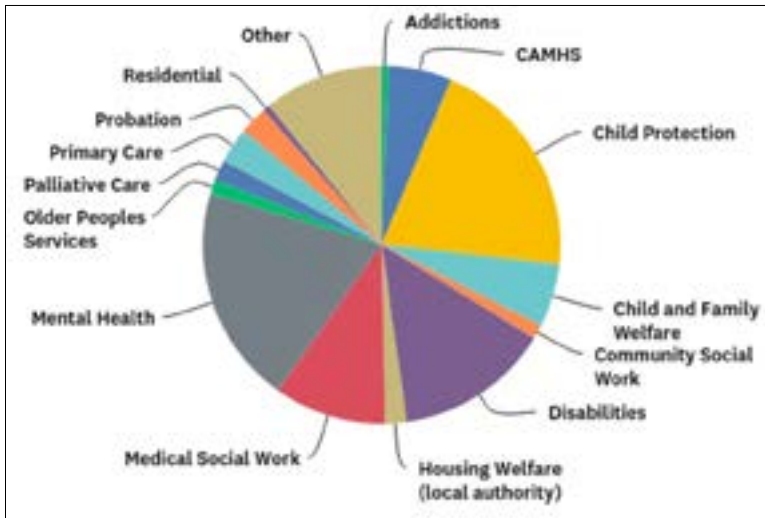
Discussion of findings

Groupwork and Fields of Irish Social Work Practice

The information provided by respondents regarding their current field of employment revealed that they were employed across a wide range of practice fields. In the responses, participants named fourteen different fields of social work practice as their current field of employment including: addiction, child and adolescent mental health services, child protection, child and family welfare, community social work, disabilities, housing welfare (local authorities), medical social work, mental health, older people’s services, palliative care, primary care, probation, residential (Figure 1). Based on the data provided, the three most represented fields of practice among respondents were child protection and welfare (20%; n=32), adult mental health (20%; n=31) and disabilities (14%; n=22). Medical social work (10%; n=16), child and family welfare social work (6%; n=9), and child and adolescent mental health services (6%; n=9) also had clusters of respondents. The fields of social work and addictions, community social work, housing welfare, older people’s services, palliative care, primary care, probation

and residential were identified by a small number of respondents as their current field of social work practice. A number of respondents also choose 'other', as their field of practice was not identified in the options provided. Further analysis showed that this response was chosen primarily by those working in fostering and adoption.

Figure 1
Survey Respondents by Field of Practice



Child protection and welfare was the field of practice with the highest number of respondents ($n = 32$). In many ways, this high representation from this one field was unsurprising because in Irish social work, child protection and welfare is the largest employment sector for social workers. Tusla (the Irish statutory Child and Family agency) employs the largest number of social workers, (almost half of all registered social workers in Ireland) 2,000 approximately in April 2019, compared to any other agency located in Ireland (Tusla, 2019), the majority of whom work in child protection and welfare services. Child protection and welfare social workers are primarily involved in individual and family work with children and parents, and the often highlighted perception of this work tends to be one of a crisis and emergency nature, with limited expectation of planned and structured interventions, essential to a groupwork approach. The

planning and structured approach essential to effective groupwork (Doel, 2006; Lindsay and Orton, 2014) may present many challenges in the context of the imminent demands of child protection social work. However, within the field of child protection and welfare, there can be a diversity of practice within both a social work team and within different area/regions where groupwork is sometimes regarded as an important mode of intervention with children and young persons, as well as with their parents and carers. The findings in this research provide evidence of the researchers' anecdotal sense that there is significant groupwork engagement by social workers in child protection and welfare social work in Ireland. A total of 11% (N=17) of respondents selected to define their field of practice as 'Other'. Upon further analysis based on details provided by this group of respondents to later questions in the survey questionnaire, it was possible to deduce that many of those who selected this category were working in the fields of adoption and fostering. It is to be expected that groupwork would be a frequent modality for this social work specialism, for example, in working with prospective and current adoptive and foster parents.

Mental health, as a field of practice, was identified in this research as their field of practice by the same percentage of respondents as child protection and welfare (20%). This rate of response from social workers in adult mental health is interesting as there are significantly fewer social workers employed in adult mental health services than in child protection and welfare in Ireland. However, descriptions of mental health social work frequently include a focus on groupwork modalities, reflecting Hyde's (2013, p.44) assertion that the 'mutual aid model of groupwork epitomizes principles of the recovery model in mental health.' In an Irish context, the interest in groupwork among social workers located in adult mental health services possibly reflects Wilson and Kirwan's (2007) observation that the lack of a legal or statutory role for mental health social workers based in the Republic of Ireland allows them to engage in a range of therapeutic and creative interventions, among which groupwork might feature. Nolan (2004), Mannion (2004) and Kirwan and Kirby (2002) have confirmed the use of groupwork as a mode of intervention often used by social workers based in Irish adult mental health services and old age psychiatry services. In addition, Loumpa (2012) provides an

exploration of groupwork and mental health social work in an Irish setting, focusing on how groupwork can be helpful in maximising the potential of peer support in a recovery-oriented service framework.

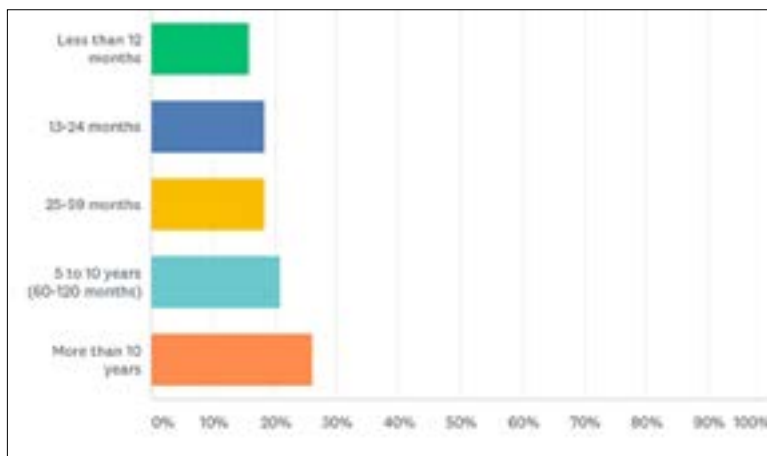
Disability as a field of practice represented the service location for 14% (n=22) of respondents to the survey. The Social Work in Disability Special Interest Group of the Irish Association of Social Workers highlights groupwork as among the core therapeutic skills used by social workers in this field (Social Workers in Disability Special Interest Group, 2010), stating that social workers involved in this specialism provide, 'training and group work to the people they support, their families, and staff. Training varies according to service and can include areas such as safeguarding, parenting, sibling workshops, and bereavement support' (ibid, 2010). This suggests that groupwork modalities, especially psychoeducational approaches, are incorporated into their practice by social workers working in the specialism of disabilities in Ireland. Morrissey and Schonfeld's (1992) survey of practice in the early 1990's showed that groupwork with adults with a learning disability was a recognised method used in social skills teaching for many disability services; their earlier work in this area (Morrissey and Schonfeld, 1991) explored practice with two specific groups of adults with a learning disability. Reporting on practice in Northern Ireland some time later, Wilson et al. (2004) documented groupwork as a strategy for inclusion and social skills training in a school for children with disabilities.

In terms of the survey reported here, the respondents were drawn from a wide range of practice fields, representing the breadth of social work practice in Ireland. This substantiates the authors' anecdotal experience that groupwork engagement by social workers in Ireland is active as a mode of intervention, in various different social work contexts.

The relevance of social work experience for engagement in groupwork practice

Figure 2

Length of time in current role



The data from this research indicates that social workers who responded to this survey included high numbers of practitioners who were qualified for more than five years and were in their current role for more than five years. The breakdown of the data reveals that 65% of respondents were more than two years in their current role, with 47% of respondents in their current role for more than 5 years (Figure 2). This can be broken down further to reveal that the largest single group of respondents, representing 26% (N=41) of the total sample, were more than 10 years in their current social work role and a further 21% (n=33) were employed in their current role for 5-10 years. In the mid-range, 18% (n=29) were in their current position for more than 2 years but less than 5 years. The smallest group of respondents (16%; n=25) was less than 12 months in their current role. A further 18% (n=29) had more than one year but less than two years' experience in their current social work position. The sample, therefore, included practitioners from across the spectrum of experience in terms of number of years of experience in their current position.

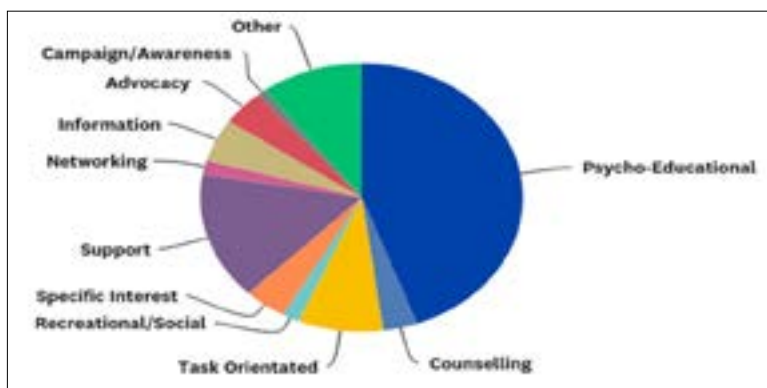
It is not clear how representative this sample is of the total population of social workers in Ireland. The questionnaire was distributed to all

members of the Irish Association of Social Workers and was not specifically targeted at any cohort within that membership population. Phase Two of this study will provide the opportunity to explore any tentative link between length of time qualified and use of groupwork approaches. We already know that groupwork is often another demanding responsibility in addition to a demanding workload and it requires 'a high degree of commitment and enthusiasm' (Preston-Shoot, 1987, p. 1). Social workers established in their role in an agency are possibly better equipped to initiate, prepare and maintain groupwork practice, when they have established their position on their social work team and within the wider interdisciplinary team. Groupwork practice often frequently requires engagement by colleagues, as co-facilitators (Lindsay and Orton, 2014) and/or as sources of referral to the chosen group intervention and social workers with longer lengths of time in practice will have had more opportunities to develop this type of engagement. The development of peer and interdisciplinary relationships require specific skills and a sense of confidence in one's professional role (Supiano and Berry, 2013) as well as taking time to build the relevant relationships in a work context. A newly qualified social worker is usually focused on situating themselves within the established social work role in an agency (Byrne and Kirwan, 2018) and will have less time or confidence to initiate what may be understood by them as advanced practice modalities such as groupwork. However, the data in this study suggests that social workers new to their current employment were adopting groupwork approaches as well as those who were in post for longer periods. It is not clear from the data if those new to their current posts were also newly qualified. The data has prompted questions regarding the relationship between the use of groupwork and length of time since qualification. Phase Two will provide the opportunity to explore this relationship in more depth.

Types of groupwork approach

Figure 3

Types of Groupwork



The group types used by respondents in this study included psycho-educational, support, task orientated, information, specific interest, advocacy, counselling, recreational/social, networking, campaign/awareness and other (non-specified) (Figure 3). The largest number of respondents (44%; $n=52$) identified psycho-educational as the type of group which they had facilitated. A support group was identified by 15% ($n=18$) of respondents. There was a relatively high response (10%; $n=12$) to the other (non-specified) category. Further analysis indicated that this option was chosen by social workers who indicated that they were engaged in group types which were specialised and role specific.

The range and diversity of group types identified in this research reflects an eclectic and flexible use of group modalities in social work practice. The preponderance of social workers engaged in psycho-educational groups was expected as this form of intervention is increasingly common because of its evidence base and presumed ease of implementation (Gitterman and Knight, 2016). Supportive groupwork as evidenced in these findings is another common type of group facilitated by social workers in Ireland. Support groups are the centre of a continuum of supportive group interventions from self-help groups to treatment groups (Schopler and Galinsky, 2014); support groups are one of the core typologies of groupwork (Toseland and Rivas, 2017) and this may explain the reported use of support

groups by social workers in their work with service users. Psychosocial and support as the group types which most respondents in this study identified mirrors the role and nature of engagement by social workers in both individual and family work in a diversity of sectors.

Conclusion

The dearth of both quantitative and qualitative empirical Irish data concerning the extent and nature of groupwork in contemporary social work practice in Ireland rendered this phenomenon relatively untouched and demanding of in-depth inquiry. Responding to this data vacuum, the authors of this paper considered that capturing this data quantitatively was essential, not only as a means of providing an objective measurement of the extent of this specific modality of practice, but equally importantly as a foundation and context within which future qualitative data could be better understood.

Therefore, a primary focus of the study reported here centred on investigating both the extent to which social workers located across the range of service sectors in Ireland use groupwork interventions in their work, either regularly or occasionally, whilst also capturing information on the nature of that practice. To this end, social workers were invited to participate in the survey, asking them to indicate if they ever used groupwork, and the forms of groupwork they engaged in and with which service user groups.

Contrary to Trevithick's (2012) earlier assertion of a suspected practice move away from groupwork in the UK, due in part to the increasing conceptualisation of clients' problems as individualised and personalised, the study described here reports on a vibrant social work engagement in groupwork practice, across many domains of practice in the Irish context. Echoing Gilligan and Pinkerton's (1992) description of Irish social work practice with groups as rich and gaining prominence, this study conducted over a quarter of a century later demonstrates that groupwork practice is currently thriving in the Irish context.

Of particular interest is the finding regarding the breadth and depth of groupwork practice by social workers working in the fields of firstly, child protection and welfare and secondly, mental health services. Regarding the former domain, this finding dismisses the perception

that child protection and welfare work is largely crisis driven and individually focused, with minimal room for the more structured and planned interventions that are the hallmark of groupwork practice. The finding of considerable engagement in the domain of mental health is perhaps less of a surprise, particularly if we consider Hyde's (2013, p.44) assertion that practice in this area has maintained a predominantly 'self-help focus'.

This study attracted a high rate of responses from social workers in their current posts for more than five years. While caution must be exercised in interpretation of this pattern in the profile of respondents, it is acceptable to suggest that this warrants future research attention to establish if it is the case that more experienced social workers are more likely or not to engage in groupwork practice and if so, why this might be the case.

The findings of this survey offer interesting empirical data on the breadth of groupwork practice in Irish social work, the nature of that groupwork and the practice experience of these social workers in their current roles. Other findings in this survey include data on the theoretical approach utilised in these groups, the typology of the chosen client groups, the structure of the groups, co-facilitation with social workers and other professionals, and the education of the respondents and their further training needs. The next stage of this study will be focused on exploring and analysing these further findings. This research engenders many areas of further interest and possible enquiry: what are the rationales for why social workers in Ireland may choose a groupwork approach as opposed to another type of intervention; what are the aims and goals of this group practice; what specific issues may support and impede the choosing and possible implementation of a groupwork approach; which evaluation methods are used and what the outcomes of these evaluations might suggest for further development of groupwork in Irish social work practice.

While this study has found that groupwork is very much alive and actively part of social work practice, less clear and not captured as part of this study is an understanding of how groupwork practice can be sustained and maintained going forward as an integral piece in the social worker's toolbox of approaches and interventions for adults, children and families. Ascertaining the role that both social work education providers and social work employers could critically

play towards sustaining and developing groupwork practice is clearly important and worthy of further exploration.

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