

Editorial

Groupwork and research

This is the second time an edition of *Groupwork* has been devoted to groups and research and our motivations, as editors, to facilitate this edition resonate strongly with the first special edition which was published in 1996 (Ward, 1996).

As then, a scan of the research methodology literature shows little attention to groupwork as providing relevant knowledge and important practice skills for researchers. A purpose of this special edition is to contribute to addressing that gap. This task has, in our view, become more important now that qualitative approaches to undertaking research arguably have gained increasing respectability as strong methodologies in their own right, beyond their utility for enriching and validating quantitative data or for highlighting areas worthy of more extensive investigation. This is not to gainsay their significance at the core of the development of feminist and other 'committed' methodologies.

It is our impression that whilst researchers undertaking participative, ethnographic, feminist and other anti-oppressive approaches have to address implicitly in their practice issues of group dynamics, groupwork skills and values, these are rarely articulated in reports, articles and outputs. Therefore, we have sought, again, through this edition to stimulate theoretical debate and the exposition of practice skill and experience so as to advance the knowledge and skill bases of both groupwork and research.

Furthermore, there is the imperative, which we feel, to advocate the need for a seam-less relationship between practice and research, no less for groupwork than in any other field. Without support of evidence derived from research, our value-based practice is vulnerable to being overwhelmed and subsumed by the concoction of service, managerial and political demands and fashions which are the everyday experience of practitioners and are reflected in these papers. If groupwork is to stay clearly focussed on its humanitarian values, a repertoire of knowledge

and skills grounded on robust and defensible evidence is required. Research-mindedness and, for those with the enthusiasm and bent, research skills are essential elements of the groupworkers' armoury.

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All the papers in this edition cast light on group-based research practice. They describe a variety of subject groups reflecting the breadth of contexts where groupwork is practised and, indeed, they reveal the potential for group-based research. The contributors are based in different locations around the world and their papers open a window into groupwork practice on a truly global level.

In the first article, Alice Home, based at the University of Ottawa, Canada, invites consideration of the many benefits attainable through the application of group-based research methods. In 'Enhancing the benefits of group involvement in research', she convincingly argues for greater understanding of group processes by researchers because such processes can deepen the production of research knowledge but also deliver other benefits, beyond the research itself, for the study participants. In particular, Home identifies the potential for mutual learning between participants, enhancing their sense of empowerment through contributing to the production of knowledge (research) and being heard in the research process itself. Home also highlights the range of roles that study participants can play in group-based methodologies, including where they become co-producers of knowledge or steer the focus of the study so that it addresses the most important issues as perceived by study participants themselves. Home's approach uses groupwork methods to position the research participants front and centre in the research process.

Yakti Lamba and George Palattiyil report on the benefits of groupwork in a study of migrant street children in Delhi, India which involved extensive use of groupwork skills and expertise as a way of engaging with participants and helping them to feel comfortable to discuss their lived experiences with the researcher. 'An innovative data collection method for engaging in groupwork with migrant children for research in Delhi' charts the research work carried out on the busy streets of Delhi where the researcher endeavoured to connect with a hard-to-reach and very vulnerable research population. The article illustrates how

groupwork, as a method of participant engagement, was pivotal in the strategy to collect life narratives from the young research participants. We learn how the group discussion was useful in creating a safe, flexible space within which the participant children could choose a level of disclosure that was comfortable for them. Lamba and Palattiyil also alert us to potential limitations of group research encounters, including the potential for over-disclosure by participants, conflictual group dynamics or a dynamic of conformity where participants avoid contradicting each other and thus limiting their disclosures.

Sarah Morton, Megan Curran and Mary Barry O’Gorman also incorporated a groupwork approach into their research on the benefits of working from a trauma informed perspective with women attending a domestic violence service, with particular reference to trauma related to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Their research design adopted a co-operative group inquiry approach which the authors found helpful in building a safe and supportive discussion context for the section of the research which involved data collection from service providers. Like Lamba and Palattiyil, Morton et al stress that the relationship built by the group facilitator/researcher with the study participants (practitioners) played a central role in successful data collection. From their paper, ‘Researching adverse childhood experiences in a domestic violence service: The role of co-operative inquiry groups in practice development and change’, it is clear that the experience of sharing knowledge within an inquiry group setting was beneficial for the study in rendering information on participants’ experiences accessible, as well as being of direct value in and of itself for them. The authors emphasise the importance of groupwork knowledge and skills for researchers who embark on using group-based methods in their work with research informants. For example, we learn in this article that the facilitator played an important role in guiding the group to safely reflect on their work concerning ACEs enquiry with service users and in safely sharing their personal learning within the group context.

We see a further example of the group context as an aide to data collection in the article by Andrew P. Allen, Mary Lee Tully, Desmond O’Neill and Richard A.P. Roche, where they illustrate how the group context for their research with older people in Ireland provided a useful strategy within which the autobiographical and reminiscence narratives of a sample of older people were collected. Indeed, recollections were not

only collected but the group method rendered some material collectable as some group members, particularly those with healthy memory, helped other group members with memory impairment to articulate and share their recollections. Their article, 'Reminiscence groupwork and autobiographical memory as part of meaningful activities', describes in detail the approach used by the research team. It also provides evidence of the benefits of group activities which take place in communal settings such as day centres for older people.

In 'Defining diversity in groupwork: A relational exploration' Melissa Popiel, Sarah LaRoque, David Nicholas, Christopher Kilmer, David Este and William Pelech report on a multi-method research study which explored groupworkers' understandings of diversity, how those views impact on their work with groups, and how the information yielded by this study can contribute to groupwork practice in general. The methods used in this study included focus group interviews with groupworkers as participants, which were conducted across two different locations and included in-person focus group interviews as well as online group interviews which were carried out using video conferencing technology. The study revealed diversity as a complex issue in groupwork practice and this article offers important insights on this issue.

Finally, in 'Self-directed groupwork and social action research with francophone parents of trans children and youth in rural Quebec' Annie Pullen Sansfaçon, Dominique Pineault, Jennifer Davis, Jennifer Dyer, Julie James, Kimberly Ens Manning, Julie Temple-Newhook and Sarah Pickett draw our awareness to the role that groupwork methods and skills can play in supporting other research methods and approaches. As the authors explain, the group activity reported in their article was part of a larger research study on the issue of parenting trans children and youth. The parenting group reported here operated as both a self-directed group intervention aimed at supporting the participant parents and also as part of the research project. Thus, the group served to provide a positive group setting for parents to explore their experiences of parenting trans children and youth in rural Quebec while at the same time providing a means for data collection on this parenting experience. This article illuminates the empowerment potential of groupwork, although it is clear that change and insight are not necessarily comfortable processes at all times. Furthermore, as the group process also served as part of the research study, knowledge gained from the analysis of this group

encounter can now be disseminated to a wider audience. During the preparation of this special issue, it was with great sadness that we learned of the death of Dominique Pineault, one of the authors of this chapter. We extend our sincere condolences to her family and colleagues.

Taken together, the articles in this edition add considerably to the nascent literature on groupwork and research. The rich detail and critical appraisal of groupwork for research articulated in depth across all of these papers highlight the importance of this type of reflection and critique, and hopefully this collection will prompt further exploration and theorisation of this important subject.

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