

## Editorial: Groupwork and Social Action

It is with great pleasure that I introduce this edition of *Groupwork* which is devoted to the specific topic of Social Action. Social Action, as a distinctive approach to groupwork, has been evolving for some 25 years and this collection reflects contemporary thinking and practice among its practitioners.

As described by Jo Aubrey in her paper, Social Action is a model that relies, first and foremost, upon group process. It commences by asking group members what their problems or concerns are, continues by encouraging them to consider the root causes of these issues and the social and economic mechanisms that reinforce them and concludes with the group taking action grounded on these understandings, reflecting upon that action and, perhaps, beginning the whole process again. As Aubrey highlights, through this process Social Action aspires to be an effective and empowering vehicle for change, based on anti-oppressive values and capable of exploring and addressing the entrenched dynamics of power.

Social Action first emerged in the late 1970s in the field of work with youth offenders. It was first conceptualised in detail as *Self-Directed Groupwork* (Mullender and Ward, 1991), which Payne (1997, p.280) describes as offering 'a clear view of empowerment theory focussed on groupwork settings and processes'. As these papers amply reflect, the approach has evolved much since those beginnings and has come to be recognised as applicable in a wide range of human service settings and to have wide international currency.

Over these years there has been a regular flow of articles in *Groupwork* through which the development of the Social Action groupwork genre can be traced. Following the early research and

theory building, based on the pioneering fieldwork of Audrey Mullender, Dave Ward and colleagues at Nottingham University, the focus for the development of Social Action has been at the research and practice development unit, the Centre for Social Action (CSA), at De Montfort University, Leicester (UK). ([www.dmu.ac.uk/dmucsa](http://www.dmu.ac.uk/dmucsa)) In this environment, frequently a cauldron of argument and debate, Social Action practice, as shown in the articles that follow, has evolved, moving far beyond its original focus on community-based groupwork with service users, where a groupwork approach grounded in community issues rather than 'private troubles' was, at the time, a major innovation in social services based groupwork.

Social Action practice has now extended into the realms of a variety of disciplines, for example health and education (see Fleming and Ward, 2004 and Fyfe's and Bamber's papers in this collection) and into different and challenging cultural and geographical settings, for example, described in the articles that follow, literacy work in an American school and social services development in the post communist societies of the former Soviet Union. Much of this development has cascaded through a multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary group of Associates, each of whom has brought a distinct perspective which has enriched the practice and the continuing process of development of Social Action theory.

Social Action continues to provide a focal, dare I say, rallying point for progressive practitioners seeking an approach to practice which is soundly grounded in theory and research, transparent in its values and practical and feasible as a way of working. Social Action puts the service user, patient, pupil/student or community member at the forefront of defining the goals and strategies of professional practice. As all of the contributions show, it sees the aspirations gained and the skills learned by those who are disenfranchised as critical in opening up the ground for innovation and sustainable social change.

In sum, Social Action can give contemporary meaning to groupwork's historical commitment to playing a leading part in practices, campaigns and movements aiming towards the achievement of fairer and more equitable social arrangements. As these papers convincingly show, change and progress towards such a goal, as tangible and recognisable outcomes of professional intervention, can be achieved where there is a disciplined process of trustful and

respectful interaction through which groupworkers and members are able to work confidently in tandem.

## References

- Fleming, J. and Ward, D. (2004) 'Methodology and practical application of the Social Action Research Model' in F. Rapport (Ed.) *New Qualitative Methodologies in Health and Social Care Research*, London: Routledge
- Mullender, A. and Ward, D. (1991) *Self-directed Groupwork: Users Take Action for Empowerment*, London: Whiting and Birch
- Payne, M. (1997) *Modern Social Work Theory* (second edition), London: Macmillan

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Guest Editor