

Reviews

*Stories Celebrating Group Work:
It's not always easy to sit on your mouth*
Roselle Kurland and Andrew Malekoff (Eds)
Binghamton, NY, The Haworth Social Work Practice Press,
2002, 202pp
ISBN 0 7890 1747 4 (pbk)

If the familiar saying 'You can always tell a book by its cover' holds true then I certainly would not choose this book. But in this case I do not believe it does. Whilst the cover of the book suggests some sort of lightweight journalese approach to groupwork, its content tells a different story. I found this edited volume of papers published to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the American-based *Journal of Social Work with Groups* stimulating and enjoyable. In my experience this is a rare feat to achieve in an academic book.

The task set for the contributors, whose papers were originally published in a special edition of the journal, was to offer short, personal and reminiscent accounts of their groupwork experiences. The book offers the reader an insightful and accessible mixture of personal, yet theoretically informed, reminiscences from a range of practitioners involved in diverse groupwork contexts - adult and child/adolescent mental health work, youth work and community work – and in groups with diverse objectives. Despite this diversity of experience all the practitioners' (authors) hold in common a firm belief in the transformative potential of groupwork and this comes through in their rich accounts.

I would heartily recommend this book to all educators responsible for teaching groupwork on professional programmes. It is *not* an orthodox 'how to do groupwork' textbook but that is its strength. Perhaps the overriding message I take from this book is simple

yet complex - that groupwork is about people, those who attend groups and those who facilitate them, and the dynamics between them. Although the groups were diverse (as indicated above) and each facilitator's experiences were unique, it was possible to identify recurrent themes underpinning 'good' groupwork practice:

- the importance of recognising the personal roots of interest in groupwork and the impact of the 'self' (personal and professional) on groupwork practice and *vice versa*;
- the centrality and inter-related nature of personal/individual and collective/political perspectives in groups;
- the importance of identifying and working with the strengths of individuals;
- the need to attend to the process and content of the group.

Reading these diverse accounts it was possible to be informed about the fundamental theoretical principles of groupwork through the medium of practice. And isn't that how theory should be learnt and understood?

One recommendation – perhaps the book could have been enhanced if these principles had been drawn together by the editors in a more theoretically explicit way in a concluding chapter. On the other hand, in so doing it might detract focus from the personal nature of the book and the implicit but evident integration of theory with practice – which goes to show how, even in the context of reviewing this volume, the individual and collective, theory and practice dilemmas, challenges and tensions embedded in groupwork just won't lie down.

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*Therapeutic Groupwork For People with Cognitive Losses:
Working with people with dementia*
Mike Bender
Oxford, Speechmark, 2004, xiii+274pp
ISBN 0 86388 406 7 (pbk)

When I first received the book I imagined that I would be reading a manual filled with activities that could be used in groups for older people with cognitive losses. I was pleasantly surprised to find that it was not a 'cookbook' approach to activities. I was also afraid that the author's use of the word 'therapeutic' in the title would reflect a medical model of 'therapeutic.' Instead the author's definition involves improving well-being, increasing resources, and enriching quality of life. This definition fits nicely within the values of groupwork.

The author's aim is to present a research-based, theoretical framework for running effective groups for people with dementia. He begins with a central question: 'Why Groupwork?' for people with cognitive losses, and briefly gives an overview of therapeutic groupwork. After a brief but useful description of dementia and cognitive losses, the author takes a thoughtful look at planning groups, beginning the group, mobilising therapeutic factors, dealing with difficult group dynamics, and ending the group. Chapter 2, *Understanding the reality of groups*, was particularly clear on distinguishing between an activity and a group, and introduces the concept of the group as a whole. Several chapters address the importance of preparing the organisation for groupwork services and these sections are very good. The handout *Checklist for preparing to run a group* should be required reading for all new groupworkers. The discussion and handouts for evaluating groups are also exceptional.

There is much to like about this book, however I have several reservations. The first reservation centres on the lack of enough dementia specific content. His discussions of groupwork, in large part, are good. However, more application of the ideas to groups for people with dementia is needed. Secondly, people new to groupwork can be overwhelmed with its complexity, but oversimplification runs the risk of dogmatic and rule governed behaviour. For example, he asserts that groups always need two leaders because one person cannot cope with task and socio-emotional content at the same time,

but a good group leader is able to manage both task and affective content. The discussion of confidentiality presents a black and white conceptualisation of confidentiality. Defining confidentiality as 'what clients say in the group stays there,' (p.89) is problematic and an oversimplification. There are times when sharing what occurs within a group is necessary to the care of the person with dementia and confidentiality is rarely absolute. New groupworkers need to understand how to sensitively handle such situations and to honestly prepare group members for the limits of confidentiality. Finally, the approach is too leader focused and controlling at times. For example, several chapters deal with difficult moments and group dynamics, but the approach is not democratic and overlooks the power of the group to cope with problems that occur within the group.

This book is not for seasoned groupwork professionals or even university based education. The content can be oversimplified and lacking in depth. However, it would be very useful as a training manual for people who are skilled care workers, but not academically trained. There are, however, chapters and handouts that would be useful in higher level training and education, provided more depth and critical appraisal supplement the content. The author suggests further readings at the end of each chapter that could serve such a purpose.

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