# The knowledge base of groupwork and its importance within social work

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**Abstract**: *This paper considers knowledge base of groupwork and its importance within social work. It describes how theoretical knowledge, factual knowledge and practice knowledge are conceptualized and applies this conceptual framework to group work. The paper then examines the National Occupational Standards in relation to groups and groupwork. It argues that for practitioners to meet these requirements, 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 paper also identifies the way that groupwork theory and practice can inform other areas of social work, including work with individuals, families, teams, communities, networks and organisations. This includes multiprofessional and interprofessional areas of practice, and the systems that underpin these structures. Where research – and teaching and training - is conducted in groups, this too calls for an understanding of groups. The reason for emphasizing the importance of groupwork's knowledge base, and its relevance to different areas of practice, is to maximise the opportunity for change, growth and development that groupwork can offer. The experiences described are drawn from the author's work as a groupwork lecturer, practitioner, trainer and consultant.*

**Key words**: *knowledge, theory, practice, competence, skills, interventions, National Occupational Standards (NOS)*

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This article looks at the knowledge base of groupwork and its importance within social work, focusing in particular on practitioner-led groups. It begins with a brief overview of the way that the knowledge is conceptualized, that is, the way that *theoretical knowledge* (theories and explanations), *factual knowledge* (facts and information) and *practice knowledge* (experience and practice) relate and interweave. In the first instance, this conceptual framework is applied to social work and then applied to the picture that is emerging for groupwork in the United Kingdom. A final section looks at the requirements laid down in the National Occupational Standards that relate to groups and groupwork (TOPSS, 2004). It argues that for practitioners to meet these requirements, it is essential for groupwork skills to be taught on social work training programmes and for more opportunities to be made available for practitioners to use these skills, particularly in the statutory sector where the opportunity to run groups tends to be limited and heavily influenced by agency policy (Doel, 2000, p.149). The paper also identifies the way that a knowledge of groupwork theory and practice can inform different areas of social work, including practitioners' work with families and communities, as well as with teams, communities, networks and organisations. This includes multiprofessional and interprofessional areas of practice, and the systems that underpin these structures. Where research is conducted in groups, this too calls for an understanding of groups - and the same relates to teaching and training undertaken in groups. The reason for emphasizing the importance of groupwork's knowledge base, and its relevance to these different areas of practice, is to maximise the opportunity for change, growth and development that groupwork can offer. The experiences described are drawn from the author's work as a groupwork lecturer, practitioner, trainer and consultant.

## Knowledge framework

The perspective that informs this paper is that for social work practice to be effective, it needs to be grounded in a sound knowledge base (Trevithick, 2005a, pp.2-4). The same requirement also applies to groupwork. However, what constitutes *knowledge* is described in a variety of ways in social work texts, including groupwork publications,

and the same could be said about documents that relate to social work education in the UK. This same confusion about what knowledge covers is also evident among practitioners - a situation that is not unique to social work but encountered in other professions, including medicine (Gabbay and le May, 2004). For example, the terms *knowledge* and *theory* are sometimes described as separate entities (GSCC, 2002) - or used interchangeably, thereby leading to confusion about how they relate, and the relevance of both to contemporary social work practice. In an attempt to avoid this confusion, these terms are defined in this paper as follows. The Oxford Dictionary defines knowledge as 'facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education; the theoretical and practical understanding of a subject' (Pearsall and Hanks, 2003, p.967). Using the same source, theory is defined as 'a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something' (Pearsall and Hanks, 2003. p.1829). From these definitions, a clear link can be seen between the desire to *understand* (knowledge) and the desire to *explain* (theory) what is happening and why. In this conceptualisation, *research* is not seen as a distinct form of knowledge in its own right but as an important and essential activity that informs these three areas of knowledge.

## The knowledge base of groupwork

The following section looks at the knowledge base of groupwork under the same three headings described above, that is:

- theoretical knowledge
- factual knowledge
- practice knowledge.

### Theoretical knowledge (theory)

There are many definitions of groupwork, which in the United States tends to be called 'social group work' (Barker, 2003, p.404; Northen and Kurland, 2001):

> Groupwork refers to a method of social work practice which is concerned
> with the recognition and use of processes which occur when three or more

people work together towards a common purpose. The term groupwork is also used to describe a context for practice, where social work practice is conducted in groups. (Doel, 2000. p.148)

The theoretical knowledge base for groupwork provides 'a set of explanatory ideas to assist in making sense of the many complex events which occur in .... groups' (Whitaker, 2000, p.43). One way to order this theoretical knowledge is to see it in terms of three overlapping areas:

- theories that draw on other disciplines in order to help understand people, situations and events. Central to this understanding is the role of ideology
- theories that underpin different groupwork approaches
- theories that analyse the task and purpose of groupwork

More detailed coverage of these three headings can be found elsewhere (Trevithick, 2005a, pp.28-37).

*Theories that draw on other disciplines*

This first area of theoretical knowledge looks at the way that groupwork, like other areas within social work – draws or 'borrows' from other disciplines in an attempt to explain and to understand human beings and group behaviour, and to 'read' different situations and events. In this task, psychology is particularly important - but so too is the social context or sociology of the individual and group:

Understanding individuals who comprise the group requires knowledge of psychosocial functioning and development through the life cycle, but it also requires knowledge of the impact of the group's structure and process on the members' behaviour. In turn, a group cannot be understood accurately without knowledge of the members in their social contexts. (Northen and Kurland, 2001, p.35)

In addition to sociology and psychology, different authors cite a range of theories, or 'schools' within these subject areas, that are used to understand groups and group behaviour. For Brown (1992, p.19), these subjects include social psychology, criminology, psychoanalytic

theory, learning theory, cognitive frameworks, systems theory and humanistic psychology. To this list, I would add the important influence that behaviourism has played and also theories that have been drawn from organisational theory and philosophy, such as those that are influenced by postmodernist perspectives in groupwork (McDermott, 2003, pp.53-55). A different account is provided by Douglas who looks at these 'borrowings' more in terms of the subjects they embrace:

> A primary and incomplete list of such borrowings would contain most of the following material: attitudes, authority, communication, composition, conformity, contract, constraints, cohesion, development, decision making, deviance, dyads, embedding, effects of social difference, feedback, individual properties, interaction, intervention, leadership, norms and standards, open/closed groups, observation, power, personal space, performance, prejudice, roles, size, status, subgroups, structure, task and values. (Douglas, 1993, p.4)

In their different ways, these theories all attempt to explain how and why people gather together in groups, the extent to which these choices are beneficial and are influenced by the 'context of social, cultural and political constraints' (Hooper, 2003, p.19). This last point relates to the role of ideology – which we now explore.

*Role of ideology: The individualisation of personal and social problems*

Ideological influences shape the context within which different disciplines are located, and the different ways that knowledge is sought and used. An ideological shift that has had a direct impact on groupwork in recent years has been the *individualization* of problems and solutions. This transforms 'public issues' into 'personal troubles' (Mills, 1959, p.130), and lays at the door of the individual the causes and solutions to personal and social problems, thereby tending to render the policies of governments, and the behaviour of organisations and institutions, beyond scrutiny and unaccountable. This can leave people divided from one another and isolated from those who share similar experiences (Fook, 2002, p.24). If neglected, these divisions – that are often caused by social inequalities - can lead to a breakdown in social cohesion in ways that fracture and destabilise social relationships and

social stability. This threat to social cohesion is a cause for concern in UK government circles, as demonstrated in the recent report on this subject from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM, 2004). I believe that groupwork has an important role to play in addressing social fragmentation and building social cohesion, but this work is only possible where practitioners have acquired sufficient training, skill and experience to work creatively with people in order to help overcome these divisions (McDermott, 2002, p.14).

*Theories that underpin different groupwork approaches*

A second area of theoretical knowledge covers the different approaches that have been developed within groupwork. This is a vast subject area (Brown, 1992, pp.207; Whitaker, 2000, pp.60-61) and it is only possible to cover some of the main groupwork approaches, which include:

- cognitive behaviourist approaches (Rose, 1998);
- feminist approaches (Butler and Wintram, 1991; Cohen and Mullender, 2003);
- psychoanalytic approaches (Kennard et al, 1993);
- humanist approaches (Glassman and Kates, 1990);
- empowerment/self-directed approaches (Mullender and Ward, 1991), including social groupwork (Northen and Kurland, 2001; Breton, 1991) and self-help groups (Ephraim, 1998);
- generalist or action based groups;
- other therapeutic groupwork approaches, such as gestalt group therapy (Hinksman, 1998), interpersonal group therapy (Ratigan and Aveline, 1998), and so forth.

Within these broad headings, different theoretical approaches have been developed. This is particularly true of theories and approaches that derive from psychoanalysis that underpin group analysis (Foulkes, 1975), group focal conflict theory (Whitaker, 2000), the Tavistock approach or 'Leicester model' (Miller, 1998) and theories that have been developed in the field of group relations (French and Vince, 1999). The work of Bion (1961) is particularly important, and also the work of other writers such as Agazarian (Agazarian and Peters, 1981), Dalal (1998) and Hooper (2003). At times, different approaches

may be combined. For example, for over ten years I was involved in setting up and running groups for women suffering from depression where our approach combined both feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives (Trevithick, 1995). Of course, it may be the case that no identifiable approach is being used, and that practitioners are largely using their accumulated knowledge and experience to run groups. This complicates the picture but in my experience, a knowledge of theory is likely to enhance effectiveness of this work.

The same features that make one groupwork approach distinct from another also inform the practical ways that groups are set up, organised and run, including the selection process, the role of the group leader and how what happens in the group is conceptualised in terms of the group's dynamics, development and processes. For example, a group that is run from a psychoanalytic perspective will place important emphasis on unconscious factors, whereas a group run from a behaviourist perspective is likely to give little or no weight to unconscious elements. On the other hand, some common attributes that are often looked for in groupwork include: the ability to communicate; degree of disturbance; motivation to work or to engage in group activities; the ability to relate to others, and so forth (Benson, 2001, pp.24-25).

Some groupwork approaches are eclectic and draw on a range of theories. An example would be the work of Yalom, whose group psychotherapy is influenced by psychoanalytic theory and generally described under the heading interpersonal group psychotherapy (Whitaker, 2000, p.61) but whose work is referred to in a number of generalist and other specialist groupwork texts. In many instances, the use of groupwork within social work will often address a broader range of social and personal problems than those designed for group psychotherapy. For groupwork, these can include the desire to:

- achieve personal change (i.e. changes in attitude or behaviour)
- achieve social, environmental or political change
- foster relationships/gain support
- pool resources
- facilitate learning

These uses can lead to a different range of groups being set up, such as action based groups (e.g. tenants associations or pensioners groups)

or groups designed to meet the needs of specific groups of people, such as young carer's groups, or to address a particular problem, such as eating disorder groups.

*Theories that analyse the task and purpose of groupwork*

The following headings describe the theoretical and practice themes that are included in the handouts I provide for students and practitioners. It is not possible to look in detail at these headings, although some themes are covered later in this paper.

- knowledge base of groupwork (covered above)
- different kinds of groups, groupings and groupwork approaches (covered above)
- the advantage and limitations of groupwork over individual performance and one-to-one interventions
- practical, structural and boundary issues to consider when setting up groups in relation to venue, duration, membership, size of the group, choice of workers, time, format, activities
- selection
- icebreakers, group games and activities
- leadership styles and approaches
- general, specific, advanced and specialist skills and interventions (covered later)
- what happens in groups: group dynamics, process and development (covered below)
- roles taken up in groups and the part played by defences
- dealing with difficult situations and behaviour
- understanding the family as a group
- understanding teams as a group
- understanding day and residential institutions, and therapeutic communities from a groupwork perspective
- understanding organisations from a groupwork perspective
- evaluating practitioner effectiveness
- evaluating the effectiveness of groupwork as a method of intervention
- role of research in relation to groupwork

As already stated, different groupwork approaches will approach

these themes in ways that are both similar and dissimilar. The following section provides an example of how we might use theory to help us to analyse the task and purpose of groupwork, taking as its theme the different ways that group dynamics, process and development have been conceptualised. According to Douglas, *group dynamics* provides 'a static analysis of a group' (1976, p.12). It describes what is happening in the group, that is, 'the properties of groups and interactive events which occur within groups' (Whitaker, 2000, p.34), which for Shulman, is seen more systemically - as a 'dynamic system' in which the movements of each part (member) are partially affected by the movements of the other parts (other members)' (1999, p.475). Other writers also analyse the group in terms of phases or stages of *group development*. Whitaker writes in terms of a three-phrase model: a formative, established and termination phase of group development (2000, p.122). In Northen and Kurland's conceptualisation, the notion of a *stage* is preferred to that of *phase* of group development:

Stage I:    inclusion-orientation;
Stage II:   uncertainty-exploration;
Stage III:  mutuality-goal achievement and
Stage IV:   separation-termination
(Northen and Kurland, 2001, pp.47-48)

Perhaps the best known theory from a stage perspective is Tuckman's (1965) five stages of group life, namely, forming, storming, norming, performing and ending (mourning) (Brown, 1992, pp.100-111). Another conceptualisation emphasises the importance of *group process,* defined as 'changes over time in the internal structure, organisation, and culture' of the whole group, part of the group and/or individual member (Benson, 2001, p.74). This describes the quality of group experience and what happens underneath the surface of the group. A different way to describe this process is in terms of the 'moods and atmospheres' of a group (Whitaker, 2000, p.34), or as the unconscious communication and the different ways that defences are deployed (Bion, 1961, pp.146-147). Bion's work is not concerned with stages or phrases but focuses instead on the different ways that anxiety is played out to sabotage the purpose and direction of the group. This is conceptualised in terms of dependency, pairing and

fight/flight reactions (Bion, 1961, p.158). Perhaps with the exception of Bion, there is considerable overlap in the accounts of a group's development, processes and dynamic. The reason for attempting to analyse the group's interaction and progress in this way is to maximise the opportunity for change, growth and development that groupwork can offer.

**Factual knowledge**

Having looked at the way that theoretical knowledge informs the knowledge base of groupwork, we now turn to look at a second area of knowledge, namely factual knowledge. Again, it is important to stress that the three types of knowledge that are conceptualised in this paper overlap and interweave, sometimes making any distinction difficult and somewhat arbitrary. Common terms used to describe factual knowledge include information, data, statistics, facts, figures, records, research findings or evidence, proof, and so forth - that is, facts that are verifiable in some way, but they are also capable of being refuted when confronted with new or different data (Schön, 1991, p.146). Factual knowledge is, therefore, often used to confirm, refute or to adapt the theories that have been developed, or to describe theories in ways that are accessible, provable and applicable outside the domain of theory. Most factual information is gained through research.

In terms of the factual knowledge that groupworkers need, this can include general and specific information that illuminates the practitioner's understanding of the individual or group in question; the problems presented; the social and cultural context within which this individual lives and the work is located; agency policy, procedures and priorities; government policy and priorities; the law/legal requirements that underpin the work, and so forth. The importance of factual information can best be seen in the way that legislation and government policy, such as the requirements relating to social work training and practice (GSCC, 2002; QAA, 2002; TOPSS, 2004), regulate practice, including the groupwork that is undertaken within this umbrella. These important themes are covered in the National Occupational Standards under the heading 'The legal, social, economic and ecological context of social work practice' (TOPSS, 2002, pp.20). These requirements are often in the form of agency policy and practice

guidelines, particularly the 'legal mandate' that empowers, guides and controls social work in relation to its organisation, function and procedures (Roberts and Preston-Shoot, 2000, p.183).

A knowledge of law is the best example of the importance of factual knowledge. This covers legislation such as the Mental Health Act 1983, the Children Act 1989, the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990, the Criminal Justice Act 1991 and Crime and Disorder Act 1998 (Brammer, 2003, p.1), and so forth. In addition, an understanding of the way that *regulations, codes, guidance, duty* and *powers* impact on social work (Trevithick, 2005a, p.17) is important, and also the rights that are embodied in the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Leaflets providing information on these rights should be available for all service users, including people attending groups.

Another area where factual knowledge is important is in the field of welfare rights and the benefits that people are entitled to draw. There is considerable argument as to whether it is the role of practitioners to undertake welfare rights checks, if requested (Bateman. 2000, p.371). This task is important because the issue of poverty, and its impact, is of central concern within social work (Stewart, 2000, pp.263-264). For example, I once ran an action-based group called 'Money Matters' that was set up to provide a place for people to talk about the impact of poverty on their lives and the feeling of shame and self-blame that are often the companions of poverty. Its focus also included checking about benefit entitlement and exploring other ways to access money, such as applications to charities, odd jobs that would not interfere with benefit entitlement, and so forth.

In some contexts, our credibility as social workers and groupworkers can depend on our being well informed and having the confidence to state what we know. Knowing where to find information may not be helpful when faced with the immediate need for information. Like many practitioners, I have often been in situations where I needed to have relevant knowledge at my fingertips, particularly when other professionals were able to present facts and figures to support their position. I have felt this gap in relation to the law but perhaps most acutely when dealing with the medical profession, especially psychiatrists. Our input may not always be invited or welcome but a sound factual knowledge base is as relevant to groupwork as it is for

other areas of social work practice. The following example, based on my work with women suffering from depression, illustrates the kind of factual knowledge that can be needed to work effectively.

*Group profile*

Of eight women who attended the group, all were on benefits, were in debt, lived in poor housing, had suffered from depression for a number of years and were taking medication. Their age ranged from 22 to 56 years and all but one had had partners at some point in their lives but most of the older women were now living alone with limited contact with their adult children. Four had been the victims of domestic violence, and two had injunctions against their former partners. Some had had some helpful contact with professionals but others had not: most saw little hope of any kind of recovery. Almost all had not worked for a number of years, and two of the women were disabled.

*Sources of factual information*

The kind of factual information that we needed to consider involved benefit checks, including disabled and housing allowances; familiarising ourselves with the local authority housing policy for people with mental health problems or experiencing domestic violence; resources available within the NHS for depression, and the criteria and referral system for this kind of support; details of the medication being taken, and their possible side-effects; relevant government policy initiatives in relation to employment and women's mental health; resources available to help people in debt, such as debt counselling or applications to charities; support that may be available in the voluntary sector, and so forth.

There are several sources where relevant general information can be located. For example, the government regularly produces statistics, such as *Social Trends* (2005), which lists information under a number of headings that includes health. Other information can be gained from local authority websites and the websites of voluntary agencies that focus on specific issues, such as housing (e.g. Shelter), domestic violence (e.g. Women's Aid) and mental health (e.g. MIND or SANE).

In relation to information on the causes and treatments for depression, these can differ significantly depending on the perspective adopted. A valuable source of information can be found on the NHS Direct website, which coves a range of themes on depression, such as symptoms; diagnosis; treatment; medicines and their side effects; etc. Although this website is written in an accessible language, its perspective is located in the medical model. As a result, there is limited coverage of the social causes of depression (Brown and Harris, 1987) or alternative forms of treatment. The website of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) also has valuable information on a range of subjects, such as depression, including research on the effectiveness of different interventions with particular patient groups. In relation to these websites, practitioners need to think critically about the ideological and theoretical perspectives that underpin the type and quality of factual information that is made available. For example, in 2002-03 there were 26 million NHS antidepressant prescriptions written, costing over £380 million in total (NICE). Almost all of the research into these – and other - drugs is funded by the pharmaceutical industry. Information on the benefits and side effects of drugs, including antidepressants, can be found on the British National Formulary website.

The social work equivalent of NICE, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), also has an informative website where a range of relevant publications can be accessed, such as knowledge reviews, position papers, practice guides, reports and resource guides. In terms of other publications, an important source of knowledge in relation to depression and social work can be found in the work of Michael Sheppard (1994, 2001, 2002). In relation to groupwork, depression is covered in some texts (Yalom, 1995), and articles (Trevithick, 1995) but not extensively given the significant number of people affected. It is estimated that 'about 15 per cent of people will have a bout of depression at some point in their lives and it is the fourth most common cause of disability worldwide' (NHS Direct). Instead, this subject may be covered under mental health (Doel and Sawdon, 1999, pp.62-3) or in texts focusing on depression (Rowe, 1994).

I have described in some detail the way that factual information is an integral aspect of the knowledge base of groupwork, emphasising the importance of a factual and research-based approach to practice

effectiveness (Pollio, 2002). However, some points of caution need to be added because the realities of contemporary social work practice mean that it is rarely possible for practitioners to be able to find the time and resources to engage in this kind of information gathering. Many practitioners – including groupworkers – do not have access to online computers nor always the skills needed to find their way around the world of websites. One way to address this difficulty would be to borrow an idea being put forward in medicine. This involves identifying *opinion leaders*, that is, practitioners who have extensive knowledge and experience in a particular field of practice – including groupwork – who can be called upon to guide practitioners in relation to these subject areas (Gabbay and le May, 2004). Finally, it is important to stress that all information found in this general landscape needs to be related to individual circumstances and to people's unique experiences. Every relationship and every experience is unique and made up of intangible factors that are difficult to identify (Cheetham et al., 1992, p.12). Therefore, general and specific areas of knowledge must each inform the other and neither should be neglected, with particular emphasis being given to the way that people perceive events and the meaning they give to their experiences.

**Practice knowledge**

The third area of knowledge covered in this paper is practice knowledge, which describes how theoretical and factual knowledge can be used in different practice situations, that is, knowledge in action. It argues that social work practice, including groupwork, is essentially intellectual - as well as practical - in character and that the knowledge we acquire has no real meaning or value unless this knowledge can be applied in practice. This section looks at practice knowledge in terms of three themes: competence, skills and interventions.

*Competence*

In this paper, competence describes the knowledge, understanding, skills and values that underpin practice effectiveness. However, practice effectiveness is conceptualised in terms of three elements: firstly, the knowledge, understanding, skills and

values perspective that practitioners bring; secondly, the attributes that service users/carers bring; and finally, the extent to which this body of knowledge is supported in the wider social and environmental context. This highlights the interrelationships between individual and structural factors. It brings into the equation the fact that whilst practitioners bear the greatest responsibility for ensuring that they use their knowledge, understanding, skills effectively – and in ways that are pitched to meet the capacity of others involved in the interaction – their effectiveness may be hindered by elements outside their immediate control, particularly the policies that direct the resources available (Harris, 2003, p.36).

*Skills*

A central feature of competence is the notion of *skill*, which is seen to have five common characteristics: it is an action with a specific *goal*, that can be *learnt*, that involves *actions performed in sequence*, that can be organised in ways that involve *economy of effort* and that can be *evaluated* in terms of its effectiveness. Although these characteristics have been described separately, they interweave and overlap:

> Within any skilled performance these characteristics are closely bound together, and in order to gain an adequate view of the nature of skill all must be considered. (Welford, 1958, p.18)

For example, the skill of driving a car involves a pre-set series of actions that need to be carried out in sequence or in chronological order, that is, we generally put the gear stick into neutral, switch on the ignition, press the accelerator, press the clutch, etc. In time, these tasks can be performed without conscious thought, although at the outset they require considerable mental concentration. Learning is best acquired where time is set aside to prepare for the performance of a particular skill - and where guidance is provided beforehand and feedback available afterward (Legge, 1970, p.235). In addition to guidance and feedback from others, the capacity for critical thinking, self-reflection and self-criticism are important (Gambrill, 1997, pp.125-1266; Trevithick, 2005a, pp.43-48).

*Interventions*

If we define skills in terms of what we learn, then interventions describe how we put that learning into practice, that is, the actions we perform to influence events. Indeed, we do not know how well a skill has been learned until we attempt to put that skill into practice – in the form of an intervention. However, we can intervene in ways that are skilful yet fail to be effective due to the influence of other factors - perhaps due to our own or others' limitations, or limitations located in the wider environment. For this reason, it is important to differentiate between being skilful and being effective. In relation to groupwork theory and practice, considerable focus has been placed on analysing the use of interventions – sometimes called intervention theory and practice or *intervention research* (Rothman, 2003, p.1521). This is in part due to the fact that in groupwork the way that skills and interventions are used is a more complex undertaking than, say, one-to-one work. In groupwork 'there are multiple relationships and interactions to be understood' (Northen and Kurland, 2001, p.24) because several group members witness – and can be influenced – by an intervention. Also, practitioners' knowledge and skills are exposed, and open to being questioned and judged by everyone present, which adds another important dimension.

*Generalist and specialist skills*

Most skills and interventions are *generalist* in character, such as communication skills, and are therefore transferable, that is, they can be applied in different practice contexts and situations. Other skills are *specialist* and indicate 'superior knowledge and skill about a client group, problem area, methods or settings' (Parsloe, 2000, p.145). They imply that additional training has been undertaken, or that considerable expertise has been acquired. For example, this training may cover the skills associated with cognitive behaviourist groupwork approaches (Rose, 1998), such as cognitive restructuring. Or specialist skills can describe the use of specific skills in relation to a particular service user group, such as the use of Makaton with people with learning difficulties (Pierson and Thomas, 2002, p.263) or those required to work with people who are experiencing bereavement (Worden, 2000). The following examples give a flavour of the different ways that groupwork skills

and interventions are conceptualised. For example, Northen and Kurland identify nine 'clusters of skills' that include: 'structuring, support, exploration, information-education, advice-giving, confrontation, clarification, forms of feedback and interpretation' (2001, p.81). Brown goes for economy and describes *general skills* under four headings: group-creation skills, group-maintenance skills, task-achievement skills and culture-development skills (1992, pp.89-93), whereas Doel and Sawdon list 14 *interactional techniques*. These include: starting, attending, responding to feelings, giving information, seeking information, negotiating, renegotiating and reinforcing the group agreement, gatekeeping, focusing, modelling, rewarding, confronting/challenging, mediating, summarising and ending (1999, pp.166-177). In an interesting chapter, 'Intervening in groups', Whitaker describes 25 possible interventions (2000, pp.233-236), and the list becomes longer in Bander and Roman's writing, who place 52 skills under four headings: communication skills, affective skills, cohesion-building and contractual skills, and problem solving skills (1999, pp.11-13). In my teaching and training, I have identified eighty generalist skills that are commonly used in social work – most of which are also relevant to groupwork (Trevithick, 2005b).

In broad terms, interventions can be categorized as *directive*, (e.g. providing advice) and *non-directive* (e.g. enabling individuals to arrive at their own decisions). In groupwork, the extent to which directive and non-directive interventions are used is likely to depend on the practice approach adopted. For example, behaviourist approaches tend to be far more directive than, say, psychoanalytic approaches but both are important in certain situations. For example, I once ran a group for young boys at risk of being excluded from school and family breakdown, where there were times when it was essential to be more directive in order to steer the group away from situations that were likely to become damaging or dangerous. We never found out which boy rolled the supermarket trolley into the river when we were away on a camping trip but we did learn to be more vigilant and to lay down clearer boundaries. On the other hand, directive approaches of this kind would have been inappropriate – and produced defensive reactions - in relation to a group that I recently ran for women on drugs who were involved in street prostitution.

*If, when and how to intervene*

Intervention theory and practice is a particularly important area of exploration within groupwork – and an area where groupwork has a great deal to contribute to the knowledge base of social work. Interventions may be undertaken for a range of different reasons, such as:

- to maintain the group's structure, boundary (ground rules) or purpose.
- to open up new possibilities or avenues of explorations.
- to guide the direction of the group away from – or towards – certain themes.
- to interpret the assumptions, attitudes or behaviour of the group or its unconscious communication.
- to initiate a particular course of action (e.g. to remind members that the group is about to end).
- to model a way of dealing with a particular dilemma or situation (e.g. how to respond when a group member begins to cry or threatens to walk out, etc).

The need to intervene is often justified when interactions or the communication pattern within the group is becoming fragmented, cliquish or stilted in some way. However, before taking action it is important to think through whether our intervention is justified, appropriate and potentially helpful to the group's process and dynamic at that point in time. This can involve asking the following questions:

- What is the state that I am observing?
- What processes are contributing to it?
- Do I judge it to be constructive, destructive or neutral?
- Would it be advantageous to change this state?
- Is it possible to change it?
- What intervention(s) might influence the constituent processes and state?
- Is the necessary intervention within my repertoire?
- Is the time ripe for an intervention?

(Kennard et al., 1993, p.6)

Once having decided that an intervention is appropriate, we need to remember that 'interventions differ in their (a) form; (b) target; (c) choice of language; and (d) the tone of voice and body postures which accompany spoken words' (Whitaker, 2000, p.233). Of particular importance is whether the intervention should be directed towards an individual member; the group as a whole; parts of the group, such as all members who are parents, all step-fathers, or toward the other group leader/leaders (Brown, 1992, pp.88-89). Some of the most effective interventions are communicated to the whole group, perhaps asking 'what does the group think'? This question enables us to see the group's capacity to analyse what is happening, particularly its ability to address differences, difficulties or conflicts that have not yet surfaced (Northen and Kurland, 201, pp.365-366). Whatever the target and purpose of our interventions, verbal and nonverbal forms of communication need to be used thoughtfully. This involves being able to adopt a language that is accessible, and to pick up on cues. The way we communicate in terms of our verbal skills is sometimes called *paralinguistics* (Kadushin and Kadushin, 1997, pp.287–320) or paralanguage (Thompson, 2003, pp.95-97), which describes the speed, tone, volume, pitch and intonation, intensity, pauses, silences, and fluency of our communication. It is these subtleties that convey the meaning that underpins our communication – that is, 'it's not what you say but the way that you say it'.

It is the ability to intervene in ways that positively influence the course of events that lies at the heart of effective social work practice, and the effectiveness of groupwork interventions. However, it is important to stress that for interventions to be effective they need to be positioned in ways that ensure that the focus of our intervention – whether an individual or group – takes part as an active agent in the change process, and not as the passive recipient of our intervention. For this reason, whenever possible it is important to explain what we are attempting to achieve and for what reason. Bringing individuals 'on board' in this way lies at the heart of task-centred, strength based and solution focused groupwork approaches – all of which place the service user, carer or others at the centre of the problem-solving process and work to be undertaken.

## National Occupational Standards (NOS) and the importance of groupwork theory and practice

Over the past few years, the tendency to individualise problems and their solutions, and the growing emphasis given to one-to-one work, has resulted in groupwork being neglected as a viable method of intervention. This situation has been compounded by the lack of groupwork training offered to students on some social work courses. As a result, the groupwork skills that students once learned, and that practitioners once had at their fingertips, are increasingly becoming lost through lack of practice. In most practice settings, practitioners and managers are not 'thinking group' (McDermott, 2002, pp.81-82). Yet groupwork's knowledge base is not only relevant for running groups but provides a conceptual framework from which to understand the dynamics, developments and processes involved in other aspects of practice. For example, if we look at the five major areas of practice within social work, namely, work with individuals, work with families, work with groups, work with communities and work with organisations, an understanding of groupwork theory and practice is directly relevant to all areas with perhaps one exception - work with individuals. And in relation to work with individuals, it is relevant because it is not possible to understand a person without an understanding of the groups to which that individual belongs – his or her family, neighbourhood or community, networks, links with a range of different organisations, and the teams within those organisations.

The expectations placed on social workers in the National Occupational Standards cover the five major areas of practice mentioned above but in addition, work with carers is included. These expectations involve being able to 'understand, critically analyse, evaluate, and apply' knowledge in relation to a range of themes, including 'theories of organisations, group behaviour and organisational change' (TOPSS, 2004, p.20), and the ability to:

(Unit 7)   Support the development of networks to meet assessed needs and planned outcomes

(Unit 8)   Work with groups to promote individual growth, development and independence

(Unit 17) Work within multidisciplinary and multi-organisational teams, networks and systems

(TOPSS, 2004)

Whether describing networks, groups, organisations, teams or systems these subject areas cover the different ways that people organise themselves – or are organised – into groups. In order to ensure that people receive the maximum benefit from the groups to which they belong, all practitioners need to have a sound knowledge of groupwork theory and practice in ways that lead to the ability to apply this knowledge - and to intervene - when appropriate.

There are two other areas where groupwork theory is important. The first relates to teaching and learning, and the fact that most teaching and training takes place in groups. The extent to which the dynamic of the group enables or inhibits this learning opportunity is in part due to group dynamics, processes and development – all of which require an understanding of groups (Doel and Sawdon, 1999, p.33). A second area relates to situations where groups are used in research studies. For example, in relation to focus groups the group dynamic and processes that may have influenced the outcome of the group's deliberations run the risk of being ignored if researchers do not know how to 'read' that dynamic (Ward, 2002, p.154). In most types of groups, *groupthink* can be a feature of the group's process – a feature that I have seen played out in the groups that I have taught. This phrase was coined by Janis (1972) to describe the way that a group's judgements can deteriorate due to 'in-group pressure'. It can mean that 'the need for agreement takes priority over the motivation to try to obtain accurate knowledge to make appropriate decisions' (Reber and Reber, 2001, p.309), thereby limiting the scope of the subject being explored.

## The need for groupwork research

The extent to which groupwork 'seems, almost without notice, to have faded from view' (Ward, 2002, p.149) is difficult to gauge. It certainly appears to be the case that in recent years most social services departments have not looked to groupwork as a cost effective and

viable method of intervention although there are always exceptions, such as South Gloucestershire Social Services Children's Department where groupwork with parents and children is an important aspect of the services provided. Also, in my experience the shift away from groupwork appears to be less pronounced in the voluntary sector. However, it appears to be the case that in the statutory sector, the focus has shifted from groupwork as a practice approach towards working with groups, or *work-in-groups* (Ward, 2002, p.152). This can be seen in relation to programmes designed for parents, and for children and young people presenting 'difficult' or 'challenging' behaviour, such as those drawing on the work of Webster-Stratton (1992). However, the shift is particularly noticeable with regard to groups run for people with addictions and in the criminal justice system, including probation and youth offending, where a growing number of programmes or 'packages' have emerged, such as those described by McGuire (1995) in *What Works: Reducing Offending*. These developments are in keeping with a managerialist approach to service delivery, where the 'focus is on concrete and measurable outcomes, in a drive towards greater economy, efficiency and effectiveness' (Ward, 2002, p.151). These packages and programme may comprise of high-quality training materials but a major criticism - with some exceptions (Day, 2005) – is that they function without taking into account group dynamics and processes as a force for personal change, growth and development. As a result, they run the risk of being superficial in their efforts to change attitudes and behaviour. As the chairperson of a group campaigning for the reform of the criminal justice system, my contact with groups run for young offenders and groups run in prisons, supports the view that group programmes and packages are less effective and helpful when their primary purpose is to meet targets and when they fail to embrace the needs of individual group members.

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. Equally, we do not know the extent to which groupwork theory and practice is being taught on social work programmes, and if taught, what this covers and the extent to which this knowledge is relevant and able to be used in contemporary social work practice. Similar gaps in our knowledge exist in relation to the effectiveness of groupwork when compared

to work with individuals (Brown, 1992, p.4) and, with regard to all practice approaches, which of these are the most appropriate, helpful and effective when working with certain groups of people or specific types of problems. An approach that is considered to work well with one cross section of the population may not be applicable – or 'import' easily - when working with other groups, particularly differences in gender, social class, race, ethnicity, age, and so forth. One reason for this gap relates to the difficulties inherent in attempting to develop research designs for groupwork practice (McDermott, 2005). These are areas where our knowledge is limited and more research needed (Doel and Sawdon, 1999, p.247; Preston-Shoot, 2004).

This paper has looked at the knowledge base of groupwork in terms of three important areas: *theoretical knowledge, factual knowledge* and *practice knowledge*, and how these relate and interweave. It has also looked at the requirements laid down in the National Occupational Standards and argued that for practitioners to meet these requirements, it is essential for groupwork theory and practice to be taught on social work training programmes and for groupwork to be seen as a valuable and viable method of intervention within social work. In addition, a knowledge of groupwork theory and practice can inform other aspects of social work practice, and provide practitioners with a framework from which to 'understand, critically analyse, evaluate, and apply' (TOPSS, 2004) this knowledge to their involvement with families, communities, networks, teams and organisations, including multiprofessional and interprofessional areas of practice, and the systems that underpin these structures in order to maximise the opportunity for change, growth and development that groupwork can offer.

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