

Reflections on the Eleventh European Groupwork Symposium

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I would like to share some of the personal thoughts I have had, about the experience of being part of the symposium held in York this year. For those of you who attended, some of my comments may refer to activities and events which you have shared in, for others, who were not in York this year, I hope my description serves well enough to tempt you to join us in the future.

This was the second year we have held the conference at York and this was because we had such a positive experience last year that we decided to return. The campus of York St. John's College is very pretty in the summer and has space to sit outside in the beautiful grounds, as well as wonderful staff, who were friendly, approachable and helpful, which all helps to support the atmosphere and spirit of companionship which pervades this particular event. The food was glorious and plentiful, and the company friendly, open and receptive. It helps if the sun is shining, as it did for most of the time we were together, but we were not distracted by the occasional cloudburst that attempted to intrude on our activities.

The temptations of the wonderful architecture and history of the city of York were close at hand, with the Minster being only a two minute walk away, but we managed to stay focussed on the symposium by treating ourselves, as a group to joining the 'ghost walk'. This was a guided walk around some parts of the city and our guide, dressed in full Victorian garb, captivated his audience with wonderful stories, delivered in the best thespian tradition!

So, I think I can say that generally, the environment of the campus and York, the attention and flexibility of the people at York St. John's College

provided a very positive base for our work together. The feedback we have had and our own experiences have encouraged us to use York again for a third year (next year) because the venue has a good 'fit' with our needs. The basics of feeling 'looked after' were taken care of, an important aspect of any gathering which cannot be overemphasised and which has particular resonance, I think, for good groupwork practice. Beyond the logic and common sense of Maslow's much over-used 'hierarchy of needs', being in a 'good place' where our needs are taken care of so we don't even need to think about food, sleep or other physical needs, can be very liberating. It means that energies can then be directed to the matter in hand, which on this occasion, was a shared commitment and belief in the value of groups and groupwork.

However, creating a safe space for people to explore and to take risks, either by presenting their ideas to others, or sharing experiences that are personal and render us vulnerable, requires more than a good place to be. The Symposium, for me at least, is held at the end of the academic year, a time when I am probably at my lowest in terms of available energy and mood, accompanied by a sense of cynicism about the world. I often question whether it's a good thing to go. I feel generally tired, grumpy and want to be alone, away from others – so – I go to a groupwork conference! The paradox has always been that I take away from this experience far more than anticipated, in terms not just of new knowledge about groups and groupwork, but also feeling refreshed, renewed, restored, and back to a balance I have lost during the year. I have formed enduring friendships with people I have only 'just met' and I always come away feeling I know myself a little better because of the reflections I gain from others, directly or otherwise. I should say that I have attended probably six of the eleven Symposia that have been held since the first, back in 1991, and while each one has been a unique experience, this particular event has been a consistent pleasure for me. So, somehow, despite (or perhaps because of) changes in organisers and participants, the Symposium has managed to provide a positive experience over the years. One of the resoundingly successful characteristics of this particular conference over the years has been the capacity to build on past symposia and to provide some sort of continuity and flow, without excluding new people or making them feel as if they are peripheral. Just as a well functioning group is 'more than the sum of its parts' this particular event is more than a conference. It is a genuine

joining together of like-minded but diverse people and a celebration of the survival of groupwork.

It needs to be said, of course, that the commitment and dedication of David Whiting has been a constant since 1991 and the survival of the conference is largely due to his tenacity. In the face of changes in personnel on the journal editorial board, a waning organisational interest in matters relating to groups and dramatic cuts in budgets which prevent those interested in being able to fund their attendance, David has continued to support the Groupwork Symposia. Despite his claims of not being a groupworker, I think he ably demonstrates the required attributes of a good groupie: flexibility, imagination, obsessive and sometimes naïve belief in its worthiness and benefits. His abilities as a raconteur, his immense sociability, along with his capacity to join in enthusiastically with others, also contribute to the atmosphere that has been a traditional part of the Symposia since its inception. If he wasn't a groupie before, I think he should now consider himself an honorary member – the Shakespearian phrase 'My lord I think he doth protest too much' comes to mind here! (Or something along those lines – David himself will no doubt know exactly).

Of course, this is not meant to undermine the efforts of all of those (particularly the current Co-Editors, Mark Doel and Pamela Trevithick) who have given their time and commitment to the journal *Groupwork* and the symposia over the years, and whose strength has contributed to groupwork's survival as a method of intervention, a way of working and being. My experience over the years has led me to think that the Symposia have reflected the developments and various coming of ages for groupwork and that while groupwork has had its ups and downs, it has remained a dynamic force. Groupwork has not just survived but has kept pace with the demands made upon it, to continue to provide a means and an arena, a context for facilitating change and growth. The symposium will no doubt continue to change and grow in response to these changing needs.

Several people have commented in recent years that part of the success of the Symposium has been its small size, in that an intimacy has been able to be developed through the interactions of smaller numbers of participants. While this has some resonance with group theories which recommend small group sizes for increased levels of sharing and the development of trust, I have to say that I have

experienced the same safe feeling when the numbers attending (in early years) were much larger. I have thus come to believe that the capacity for engagement at these events is largely down to a core group of people (those on the Steering Group) who have successfully shown the rest of us how to relate well and how to encourage others to engage. Paradoxically, this has been achieved through the promotion of individual choice, through valuing each other's contribution openly and through a spirit of celebration throughout: there is no peer pressure to 'perform', no competitiveness that is so often found at conferences. Just an experience of feeling that everyone, whether the contribution is formal or informal, has something to offer and everyone is there to learn. Again, there are parallels with good groupwork practice in that being there, being present, is as important as the formal proceedings, if not more so. Indeed, the formal structure of a group experience depends on a group's ability to 'be' together, and the 'being together' at York this year was a very valuable experience for me.

I realise that I probably sound like I am reminiscing about Woodstock or some such other 'hippie' event, rather than a groupwork conference but I am attempting to emphasise the difference between this particular event and the usual conference circuit. I think it has a great deal to do with the diversity of groupwork and its application and that groupwork is essentially a practice and an experience (as well as a body of knowledge) that we all share in. Coming to the Symposium is a group experience in itself and one which I am happy to join and have no fears that it will get too close, or in the immortal words of a colleague of mine, cliquish or 'touchy - feely'! Of course, there are lots of laughs, lots of socialising and eating and drinking together, but never a sense of coercion or of a dominant and intense group culture. If you are looking for an encounter group then this is not the place to come, although if you are open enough and reflective, there will be ample opportunity to grow!

The programme for the Eleventh Symposium included speakers and presenters from the United States, Europe and the UK and there has been some debate over the years about whether we should change the name of the conference to reflect the wider participation. I am of the 'if it ain't broke' school of thought on this one, but if you have other ideas I am sure that the Editorial Board would be pleased to hear them. I remember another discussion, some years ago when we

considered whether groupwork done outside social work settings should be encouraged or included and yet we celebrate the diversity of settings in which groups can be found and where the potential to facilitate change through the group is used sensitively. Groupwork has re-emerged as a method of intervention for families, for communities and for individuals (together) having survived a number of threats to its existence (particularly in the UK) such as the return to 'individual pathologising', and the focus on outcomes at the expense of process that has become dominant in social work and other practices. These issues were among the key themes which concerned people attending the symposium this year and one of the opportunities that an annual event of this kind offers is the chance to consider the contexts that we work in and how they impact on our practice as groupworkers, in a wide range of settings and organisations.

The formal programme was launched on the first day by a welcome from Mark Doel, who reminded us of groupwork's capacity to promote insight and to reveal both processes and outcomes through the group as a medium, in his plenary discussion. It was a warm day and we had begun the conference by joining together over lunch, so Mark's considered reflections signalled a move away from the unstructured into structured activity.

One of the benefits of having small numbers at the symposium was that we stayed together as a group and were able to attend all the workshops as a whole group. It can sometimes be frustrating to select workshops at a conference, knowing that in booking for one you are missing another and wondering whether you've made the right decision! At this year's symposium there were no difficult decisions to make and the group was able to stay together throughout. This raises issues about the size of conferences and while the attractions of being together and all experiencing the same thing might seem obvious a balance needs to be struck between this and the opportunities for choice and diversity that a larger gathering offers. In my view, this is the only conference of its kind (I am not forgetting the American Groupwork annual conference here) and it would be good if we could increase our numbers and engage a wider audience so that groupwork can be promoted more effectively and good practice shared more widely. I would like to think that in future years we can persuade many others who practice or have an interest in groupwork, in whatever

professional context, using a diverse range of theories and models to join us to promote and celebrate groupwork.

This was followed by a very welcome opportunity to move around and interact with each other in the workshop led by Sonia Spelters and Suse Kunz from Germany. They shared with us some of the group activities that they use in their practice together and this was followed by a lively discussion about how these specific exercises might be applied imaginatively and safely to other contexts. I was particularly interested to see how what took place during these 'fun' activities could be used to understand the dynamics in a group and to facilitate positive engagement in the group process. I was also reminded that groupworkers often dislike 'being done to', in other words, at the mention of being asked to interact, playfully or otherwise, we moan, resist and then we jump in with both feet! We needed to have no fears that this presentation would make us look silly or 'force us' to participate, because it was delivered well and choice was encouraged and supported, including the choice to sit it out. This is such an important point to remember in our own practice, that participation and engagement are not always to be demonstrated by volunteering and each participant must be free to choose the level and extent of joining in. I have read in the literature so often of group members who are deemed to be 'not participating' because although they are present they choose not to be centre stage – again we come to realise that 'being' in groups is often a more complex concept than one would initially have thought.

The question of choice and participation and the role of the group leader arose again in David Abbott's excellent presentation, which looked at a particular application of role play in groupwork. David has used and developed 'Scenario Role Play' in his work with various groups and has examined the theoretical background, as well as his practice experience very thoroughly.

Nick Ashwell concluded the formal part of our first day with his paper on organisational cultures in interprofessional working, based on research he has carried out on how these impact on working together across cultural and organisational boundaries. Nick was able to share with us how differences in custom and practice across agencies supposedly working together can inhibit good practice and how a knowledge of group dynamics might be used to improve this. For me, this highlighted the potential tension between sameness and

difference inherent in most groups and the need for skilled handling of these issues in terms of group processes and enabling participants to feel safe and valued because of their uniqueness, not in spite of it.

The first day was a huge source of inspiration and a stimulus to reflection for me and although we were not able to enjoy our glass 'on the grass' we did partake of light refreshments indoors before exploring York's culinary potential! Again, because we were a comparatively small group we were able to land on our chosen target for eating without the need for the group to split up.

The second day of the symposium provided a wide range of stimulating topics which began with Pamela Trevithick enthusing all of us about the need to share and celebrate good practice and ideas through publishing, particularly in *Groupwork*. Pamela has the unique ability to make writing for journals sound incredibly attractive and 'do-able', while at the same time emphasising the need for writers to be critical in their thinking and use of theoretical perspectives. Her positive encouragement should result in more high quality articles being submitted to the journal, I feel sure. I would also like to point out (as a member of the journal's editorial Board) how helpful and supportive the journal can be in helping would-be writers to perfect their skills and in offering valuable and helpful advice on drafts that are submitted. Other journals I have worked with do not respond so positively but I feel strongly that writing should be encouraged, especially that done by practitioners, who have so much to contribute to our understanding of groupwork from this perspective.

I digress again!

Perhaps it is because I am reluctant to move on to the next part of the day which was understandably disrupted by the news of the bombings in London. Several people attending the conference had relatives and friends who were in or around London at that time and who needed to make contact to make sure they were OK. News was difficult to get hold of initially, since all communications (by phone at least) had been cut off, but the staff at York St. John's helpfully provided access to a television so we could hear the news as it emerged and also kept abreast of travel and transport news. Jerome Carson handled the news sensitively and gave us permission to break out of the group and for individuals to do what they needed to do. Ironically, his presentation on self – esteem had only just begun when

news began to filter through, but his skilful handling of what was an extremely unusual and potentially traumatic situation spoke volumes about helping people 'feel better about themselves'. It was a shock for all of us, one which jolted us out of our safe 'group space' back into the outside world and connecting us with our families and friends 'outside'. We each experienced this shock in our own way so I can only report my own concerns here, which will have differed from others. My immediate reaction was to scan quickly through where all the members of my own networks (family, friends) might be and whether they might have been in London that morning and thus be at risk. Fortunately for me, this was not so, as I later confirmed when I was able to ring home. I felt a very strong urge not just to phone home, but to *be there* with my husband, my daughters, the cats, the guinea pig, the garden, the 'home'. Despite knowing at an intellectual level that I was safe and my family were safe (and I acknowledge that for others at the conference this was not so easy to establish), I felt guilty about being away from home at such a time and also needed to be there. It seemed to me that the group I was in had just got a whole lot bigger and included the families and friends of others at the conference, those in London affected by the bombings and those in the wider world not directly affected perhaps, but still, shocked and surprised and shifted from their positions by the news, emotionally, at least. It was, for me, a relief when we decided to re-group after lunch and try to continue with the programme. And while we were all conscious of having been taken out of our small world, it is an indication of how safe the group felt, that we were all able to come back and get on with the task set before us, so to speak.

Tim Kelly talked about his work using computers as a communication medium to engage with older people in a project he had worked with and researched. I was reassured by Tim's interest and commitment to older people and their rights and this lessened my initial reaction to the words 'Information Technology'. I have to confess to feeling that computers and IT seem anti-humanist and are an anathema to my values about face to face working with people, but Tim's presentation was more about integration than conflict and he was able to persuade this committed sceptic of the value of IT and the web for enhancing good practice. Not an easy task, particularly given the level of disengagement we had experienced.

This essentially humanistic element also pervaded the discussion encouraged by Kay Goler-Levin's work, with individuals who are forced to attend groups (involuntary clients). Kay struck me as a person who was tough and no nonsense but who manages to convey to her clients an acceptance and a valuing they may not have experienced before. Her examples of working in extremely difficult circumstances with people who know every trick in the book in terms of avoiding engagement, were powerful and real. Her ability to keep going and yet remain sensitive to what lies beneath, being open and always there, never rejecting and emphasising choice not victim status, was humbling to hear about and led me to look at how I might improve how I convey acceptance in my own interactions with clients, colleagues and others.

On the final morning of the Symposium, our colleagues from South Gloucester Children's Services, Phil Lewis, Kim Orchard and Vickie Osborne, shared with us their experiences of working with some very vulnerable groups of people. Despite the team's protests that they were 'not academics' they conveyed very clearly how groupwork can help those who seem almost unreachable by other methods. They were also able to communicate the sense of value and importance each group member had and how their own professional ethics guided their decisions. This for me was a description of groupwork on the cutting edge, carried out in immensely difficult and tense circumstances, but with thought, planning and care. It was clear from their presentation that they work closely together and 'look after' each other, as groupworkers, which as we know, is an essential part of good practice when we are working with people. It is particularly crucial for groupwork, because of the increased risk and intensity for transference and counter transference. Carrying feelings for the group or on behalf of individuals in groups is something we all encounter and sensitive co-working can help us make sense of our experiences and sort out who 'owns' the powerful emotions we might take away from a group. The team also emphasised the importance of good supervision and regular planning meetings with a groupwork consultant to help the team to work well together. All of this was delivered with such modesty and humility that it was hard for the listeners to persuade the team of the high worth and skill of their work and the importance that such top quality work is shared with others through publication.

Phil did make a declaration at the end of the morning's session that he would write, that he now felt ready to write and I am holding him to his word here!

Hearing about real experiences of groups and groupwork from practitioners, as we had throughout the symposium, is probably the most enjoyable and informative aspect and one which I have learned most from, over the years. Groupworkers often have, in my experience, a great capacity for storytelling, for combining accounts with humour and communicating sometimes harrowing accounts of events in successful ways that enable us to each take from the story what is relevant for us. The final morning was such a good example of communication skills, coupled with trust in the group and an enthusiasm about groupwork that it provided a very pertinent closing to what had been a challenging, but very enjoyable three days. We shared lunch and then went our separate ways, knowing that we will each be in touch with others who had attended in the coming months and that we had formed new relationships that would continue beyond the time of the conference.

I hope I have managed to successfully 'tell a story' here, that will encourage you in your own groupwork practice, tempt you to write for the journal or possibly join us in York next July. You will be more than welcome to join us, if the weather permits, for a 'glass on the grass'. More than this, I hope that my version of the story will encourage a dialogue that will take place through the journal, about how we experience groups, as leaders, as members and sometimes as observers. Think about your own expertise and knowledge and decide to share it with others who will receive what you have to tell and transform it by applying it to their own practice, or by challenging their ideas about what groupwork is, or is not. Go on you know you have something to say don't all groupworkers have something to say?

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