

## Editorial

### **Groupwork crossing borders**

The 12th European Groupwork Symposium met in York in July 2006. The theme of the symposium was 'Groupwork Without Borders', a fitting theme for a time when political and national borders were, as usual, causing such grief and mayhem around the world. The workshops, seminars and plenaries covered a wonderful range of topics. These titles will illustrate my point:

*Crossing boundaries of culture; Crossing internal boundaries - groupwork and nation building in South Africa; Crossing the boundaries between practice and learning - reminiscence groupwork; Crossing personal boundaries in student groups; Crossing the boundaries of 'inner' and 'outer' groups; Crossing boundaries at the margins of society - groupwork with offenders and substance abuse; Crossing boundaries of individual and group supervision; Crossing faith boundaries through groupwork - the need for Islamic sensitive groupwork practice; Crossing 'virtual' boundaries - the power of storytelling in groups; Crossing the boundary of researcher/groupworker - when researching becomes part of the group process; Crossing boundaries from practice into print; Crossing experiential boundaries in groups - sculpting and reflective techniques; Crossing boundaries from crisis to aftermath - post-crisis groupwork.*

What strikes you when you read through this list? For me, it is the diversity of groupwork and its immense 'reach' in terms of helping us to cross all of these different kinds of boundary. The membership of the symposium itself was a reflection of this, in terms of the national, professional and 'role' boundaries (practitioners, students, researchers, academics, managers), and the range of groups represented, both in terms of service user focus and in methods and approaches used. And yet, it does not feel 'hotchpotch'. Supporting all of these differences, there is a common value base and a common curiosity about how groups work and how they can work for the best, that brings us together. In particular, the keynote speakers, Nick Pollard (an Occupational Therapist) and Karen

Callaghan (a Movement Psychotherapist with Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture) emphasized the *political* as well as the personal in groupwork theory and practice. It is the power of groupwork beyond individual liberation that attracts so many of us to it; and its place at the heart of human society. How could anybody *not* be curious about groups?!

Symposia are opportunities to hear about others' work and experiences; groupworkers being groupworkers, this is invariably a participatory event, even those sessions styled 'paper' presentations. Re-creating elements of the group experience in the seminar touches our instincts as groupworkers and develops the kind of trust-to-take-risks we expect from groups. The experience of a symposium can also encourage presenters to take their work further; a warm and excited reception with peers at a symposium can be a springboard to writing for publication. Practices not previously conceptualised as groupwork (for example, organisational and team development; group supervision of students) are shaped and reshaped by the friendly scrutiny of others, not just in the formal presentations but in the all-important 'spaces' in between. This is another reason why the European symposium has eschewed the growing practice of plenary talks at meal times - how much better to talk to the people at your table over breakfast, lunch or dinner - and decent breaks for people to take time to reflect and to meet and converse together.

The transition from lived experience to printed page is perhaps the most curious 'boundary' of all. For example, in one of the workshops, the presenter invited us to re-enact the group sculpting method she used with her students on a social work education course. This was highly engaging and very illuminating and even those participants who had some familiarity with the use of sculpting took fresh ideas and new enthusiasm from the session. But how to present this kind of experiential material in the two-dimensional format of a published article? A good place to start is to search for other, similar examples. In this case, for instance, Lordan's (1996) article in the pages of an earlier issue of this journal. Reading related articles helps the author not just to locate their current work in the body of evidence and experience already available, but also to consider what, as a *reader*, they find helpful and what they would wish to avoid.

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Fortunately, four good examples of crossing the boundary from experience to print await you in this issue of Groupwork.

Jonathan Parker introduces his article on 'Reminiscence groups with people with dementia: a valuable site for practice learning' with a thorough and useful review of the relevant literature and an exploration of the terminology in this field. A particularly interesting aspect of Parker's study is the interplay of groupwork, reminiscence work, student learning and staff training. As well as its central focus on working with older people with memory loss, the article also illustrates the potential for the development of a groupwork service to act as a catalyst for wider change - and also its limitations, especially the sustainability of groupwork when it is 'project' based.

From Parker's English context we move to the French Canadian landscape of Jocelyn Lindsay and his colleagues. In 'Therapeutic factors in the first stage of men's domestic violence groups: men talk about universality and how it becomes operational in the group', we consider the therapeutic factors in men's groups. The study analysed 72 responses from interviews following the third session of the groups. One of the findings that most impressed me was the strong reference to universality (83%):

*You think you're all alone. You think that you're the only one, the only one to act like this, since you never heard anyone else talk about it. When you do hear it, you're really taken aback. I think it wakes you up.*

Groupworkers will not be surprised by this quotation, but painstaking analyses of interview content is essential to build the evidence base. Sometimes this will confirm our experience (as above) and sometimes it will challenge it. Lindsay and colleagues interest us in the potential to be more strategic in groups about developing therapeutic factors such as universality.

Gwenelle O'Neal's article, 'Using multi-cultural resources in groups', considers the use of bibliotherapy, (books, poems and other written materials) to introduce people to different cultural perspectives and to help them reflect in small groups on their responses to these differences. In the context of the United States, O'Neal uses a multi-cultural reference point; we can use O'Neal's own technique to consider how the 'meta-analysis' of culture and difference is also framed by time and place. For

example, a group of students could read two texts, one that illustrated the multi-cultural perspective and the other, an anti-oppressive paradigm. These could be used to help the group consider the effect of the presence or absence of the power dynamic on their understanding of ethnic and other cultural differences. O'Neal's article in itself reminds us of the way differences in time and place subtly influence the 'spectacles' through which we view the world.

And finally to Scotland, where Tim Kelly and colleagues introduce us to 'The use of online groups to involve older people in influencing nursing care guidance.' This article crosses boundaries that are still relatively new, and perhaps challenging, to groupworkers - the boundaries between virtual and present. Kelly et al's findings demonstrate that a very real sense of group can be generated by people who are not in the same room at the same time, and that new technology has boundless potential to involve those who are too often excluded from group experiences. Older, isolated people formed on-line communities to have an impact on policy and practice. The study is also a good example of groupwork's role in bringing people from different professions together as facilitators (in this case, a social worker and a gerontological nurse, with some input from IT professionals, too). Like much groupwork, it challenges our stereotypes - in this case, not just about the location of groupwork, but also about the capacity and desire of older people to learn and use the new technology.

All but one of the papers appearing in this issue were presented at groupwork symposia, giving those authors an opportunity to have their work and experiences scrutinised by colleagues, and to have a dialogue with them. I hope you enjoy the results and, of course, that you will feel encouraged to join the 13th European Groupwork Symposium in York in September 2007.

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### Reference

- Lordan, N. (1996) The use of sculpts in social groupwork education.  
*Groupwork*, 9.1, 62-79