

Editorial

The place of groupwork in the new social work degree

Some readers may remember that some time ago, I wrote an article for this journal on 'The knowledge base of groupwork and its importance within social work'. In this paper, I looked at the requirements laid down in the National Occupational Standards (NOS) in relation to the new UK social work degree, particularly Unit 8 that calls for students and practitioners to be able to 'work with groups to promote individual growth, development and independence' (GSCC 2002). I suggested that what this requirement covers is unclear and for this reason, is likely to be open to interpretation within social work training programmes and also open to being neglected in terms of the groupwork services provided to service users and carers.

In an attempt to understand how social work training programmes have interpreted this requirement, I have been involved with Fiona McDermott (University of Melbourne) in a cooperative study based on a mailed out self-completion survey sent to Australian and UK social work programmes. The aim of this study - which is ongoing - involves comparing groupwork teaching across these two countries, particularly the extent to which this subject is taught and what this teaching covers in terms of its content, teaching format, the groupwork theories covered and the duration of the teaching. Fiona and I plan to publish our findings in full early next year but in the meantime, I thought it might be interesting to flag up some of the issues that have emerged in relation to the UK surveys received, some of which are mirrored in Australian responses but to a lesser extent because groupwork has been part of the accreditation requirements of the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) for a number of years.

To date, 23 replies have been received from UK social work courses – roughly 25% of the total number of courses – remembering that some courses run both undergraduate and graduate programmes alongside

one another. Clearly, any findings at this stage need to be seen as tentative but the picture that is emerging suggests that groupwork - or work with groups - is rarely taught as a stand-alone subject but instead tends to be included under a number of different subject headings relating to social work skills and interventions. Indeed, to date only two programmes have indicated that they teach groupwork as a stand-alone subject which is a sign that programmes are interpreting the NOS requirements in a number of different ways. Given this picture, it probably comes as no surprise that where there is some coverage of groups or how to work with groups, the theories cited to underpin this work tend to be generalist and to lack coherence in terms of their relationship to groupwork theory and practice - a lack of coherence that is also evident in the texts cited. Perhaps predictably, a more consistent approach is evident in the perspectives that inform interventions that include groupwork, where an anti-discriminatory/anti-oppressive practice (AOP) is by far the most influential cited in the replies received. Like Australia, the majority of courses used a range of teaching approaches including lectures, experiential formats, workshops, and so forth and tend to use traditional measures to indicate the effectiveness of the teaching offered, such as student evaluations and essay/assignments.

Two points are worthy of note from the UK replies received so far. Firstly, several respondents indicated that they would like to see more groupwork taught within their programmes. However, many felt that this was not possible given staff pressures, the timescale and the requirements laid down in relation to the new social work degree. The following comments summarise these concerns:

I feel that groupwork ... should occupy a greater place within social work education. Surely a complete social work undergraduate module could be dedicated to groupwork but there are so many components to include (re GSCC and other social work regulations) that it is not always possible.

Statutory social work has largely forgotten about groupwork and denies or underestimates the place of group dynamics even in the most obvious applications such as teamwork and group care. The only kind of formal groupwork surviving in some agencies is the more 'programmatic' approach used in some Youth Offending and other project-based schemes. Meanwhile some excellent work is still being done in some mental health and childcare agencies, especially in the voluntary sector.

A second point that I want to raise relates to the way that groupwork theory and practice is conceptualized on some training programmes. Of particular concern is the fact that merely teaching students in groups is seen by some academics to indicate that groupwork theory and practice is being covered:

... we don't teach groupwork but we use groupwork as the main method of learning, throughout our degree ... Our students occasionally comment on the fact that we don't teach how to do groupwork but they are doing it throughout the degree and we think their skills are quite advanced as a result.

Where group dynamics and processes, and other areas of groupwork theory and practice, form part of this teaching then it is clear that the knowledge base that is needed to work effectively with groups is being covered. However, where this is not the case, then I would argue that groupwork as a distinct approach or the theories that underpin 'work with groups' is not being covered - and that this situation is far from ideal. What influences lead to groupwork being neglected- and not other subjects? We would welcome your views on this important subject.

Themes in this issue

Fortunately, the importance of groupwork is kept alive by the efforts, commitment and creativity of groupworkers around the world - as the articles in this edition aptly reveal. Once again, we have an international collection of papers covering important themes that are relevant to readers in other countries and contexts. We begin this collection in England, with a paper by Gillian Ruch that describes the introduction of sculptps into a programme for post-qualification child care practitioners and the tensions and pressures experienced by social work practitioners that can lead to a resistance to learning and to exploring new approaches. A theme that is particularly interesting is the way that 'stuckness' and 'resistance' that families sometimes take up can also be present in the reactions of practitioners when presented with a new idea or approach. On the other hand, the paper explores how working with resistance and introducing something new can 'release creative energies' and enable us

to see events - including our own reactions - from a different and more open perspective.

A second paper by Bruce St. Thomas and Paul Johnson is located in the United States and has relevance for all practitioners working with people where 'hope and possibility can become unimaginable'. It describes a twelve week peer support program designed to apply resiliency theories to adult life situations in order to enable people 'to rediscover the roots of their own resiliency'. A striking feature of this paper is the poignant way that that participants' stories are described and how these experiences are acknowledged and transformed into new possibilities and opportunities:

Joining people who have suffered unimaginable personal injury means being able and willing to invite the realm of possibility. The deeper strength of humanity is not to comprehend and measure the nature and degree of human vulnerability and suffering, but instead to acknowledge such pain in a way that joins mankind in the struggle for healing and recovery.

Like Gillian Ruch's paper, this article describes the importance of our relationship to one another and the way that this human connection can help heal the traumas and 'personal injury' experienced.

In a scholarly paper, Ginette Berteau and Louise Villeneuve focus on supervision and look at the resurgence of interest in the utilisation of group supervision in Quebec, both in terms of the training available for social work students and the supervision of workers in practice. In particular, the article explores two important processes that are central in group supervision, namely the stages of group development and the integration of the learning process. Drawing on Anderson's (1984, 1997) five stages of group development (*trust, autonomy closeness, interdependence and separation stage*) and Villeneuve's (1991) five phases of the learning process (*availability and motivation, exposition, moving forward, symbolisation and expressive action*) the paper provides some important theoretical insights to illuminate how these stages and phrases come together in group supervision.

We remain in North America for a fourth and final paper by Kay Levin on working with involuntary clients. The paper reminds us that much of our practice knowledge and experience as groupworkers is based on work with voluntary clients, yet referrals for involuntary clients are

growing. What is impressive about this paper, and the research study that informs this work, is the way it looks at a range of individual and group theories to help construct a conceptual framework to guide both theory and practice. Once again, a central feature of this article is the importance of the relationships and 'engagement' that we work to build with others and, in relation to involuntary clients, the importance of recognizing and accepting anger as a central feature when attempting to create a group culture and to enable people to move their lives forward.

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Reference

Trevithick, P. (2005) The knowledge base of groupwork and its importance within social work, *Groupwork*, 15, 2, 80-107