

## Editorial

In the previous editorial, readers may recall that I described a comparative study looking at the groupwork offering on social work training programmes in the United Kingdom and Australia and concluded that in relation to the UK, most courses are failing to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills required to 'work with groups' in ways that are both creative and effective. This situation means that those individuals who could benefit from groupwork as a method of intervention are being denied this opportunity. At the same time, practitioners are also being denied access to learning which would enable them to consolidate and develop their groupwork skills.

This state of affairs is more profound than already described because it impacts on the principles that underpin continuous professional development (CDP) - sometimes referred to as Personal Development Planning (PDP). In the United Kingdom, practitioners are required to undertake CPD and employers required to provide appropriate learning/training opportunities to ensure that practitioners keep up-to-date with developments within their particular discipline in ways that enhance their knowledge and practice skills. However, the extent to which groupwork skills and competence are included as a feature of practitioners' practice development is unclear – but a feature that can be neglected. This danger is compounded by the fact that at this point in time, there are no accredited generalist training courses available in the UK for practitioners who wish to undertake further training and acquire a specific qualification in groupwork. For the most part, the training available in the UK tends to fall within the realm of psychotherapy, as opposed to generic groupwork skills where the focus is less 'expert' orientated and often involves bringing people together in order to share common experiences or to address areas of concern. There can be - and often is - a therapeutic or healing element to sharing experiences in this way, such as bereavement support groups, but for other groups this may not be its primary purpose. For example, I once ran an action group called 'Money Matters' for people on a housing estate who were experiencing considerable financial hardship. Our task – quite simply

– was to find ways to access money through welfare rights benefits checks, sponsored swims, jumble sales, etc.

In relation to group psychotherapy, many have their theoretical roots in psychoanalysis, such as those that fall under the heading ‘group analysis’ – an approach that brings together psychoanalysis, systems theory and sociology. The Institute of Group Analysis (IGA) and associated organizations offer training in this approach, which is based on the work of Foulkes who founded the IGA in 1971. However, for many practitioners, particularly those working in social work and social care, group psychotherapy or group analysis would not be a practice orientation of choice given its expensive and rigorous training requirements – nor one that employers are likely to support. Other courses may add a groupwork component as part to the training provided but again, this is likely to adhere to a particular theoretical model, such as the groupwork element that is a feature of some counselling courses or cognitive-behavioural (CBT) training courses but again, these do not offer a generalist approach to groupwork theory and practice that can be used in a range of different social, health, welfare and community settings.

A more recent and important change in this area has been the development of a number of therapeutically orientated degree programmes. For example, in the UK it is possible to undertake an MSc in Counselling, Group Psychotherapy, Group Analysis and Group Relations or to study for diplomas and certificates in some of these subjects. These developments have also led to a number of research initiatives being set up, which has further forwarded the academic standing of these areas of practice.

Sadly, there are no similar opportunities available in relation to groupwork – and this fact is an area of concern for members of the Editorial Board of this journal and for others who are keen to promote groupwork as method of intervention. At present, it is only possible for students to undertake groupwork modules within a Master’s programme but in the UK, these do not tend to be set at an advanced level. This is not the situation for social work programmes abroad. For example, the University of Melbourne (Australia) offers a module on Advance Practice with Groups as an elective subject on their Master of Social Work and Barry University School of Social Work (Florida, USA) also offers a similar course on Advanced Clinical Practice with Groups. The

term 'clinical' is rarely used in UK social work but, nevertheless, I know of no advanced groupwork courses that is currently being offered on social work training programmes, although this may be offered in other disciplines such as education. If any readers know of such a programme, we would be delighted to hear from you.

So far I have focused on the importance of accredited generic groupwork training courses for practitioners but it is also an important issue for employers who are committed to providing groupwork as part of the services provided. This is the case for South Gloucestershire Children's and Young People's Department, which for a number of years has given priority to offering a range of different groups for parents, children and young people. These groups address different areas of need, such as groups that focus on 'managing difficult behaviour', parenting skills, social skills training groups for young people, young carers' groups, women's and men's groups, and so forth. Most of these groups are set up in response to requests from parents and young people, as well as in response to suggestions from professionals, and as part of this initiative, for the past five years I have been involved in providing groupwork training, consultancy and practice support for staff involved in running groups. More recently, I have also been involved in running 'practice development sessions' that take place every 6-8 weeks. These focus on continuing professional development (CPD) and the importance of consolidating and enhancing practitioners' knowledge and skills in the area of groupwork and other areas involving the use of skilled interventions. Practitioners can bring any dilemma to discuss – and to role play – during these sessions, although most case examples tend to focus on the skills and interventions needed to work with complex problems and difficult situations, such as how to deal with abusive and defensive behaviour, how to work in a group with people with serious mental health difficulties or with family relationships that have become strained and estranged through years of adversity and misunderstanding.

Recent developments that have taken place in adult and children's services mean that it is even more important to link continuing professional development to accredited groupwork courses, so that the opportunity to demonstrate progress in relation to professional competence in groupwork is not lost but extended. Whilst setting up accredited groupwork courses is a formidable task, it needs to be

considered urgently if we are to keep abreast of other developments in practice and if we are to advance the opportunities for groupwork in the United Kingdom and abroad.

## **Themes in this issue**

There are some fascinating articles in this edition which begins with a paper by Guy Holmes and Lucy Gahan, *Psychology in the real world: understanding yourself and others*. This describes a course that has run five times a year for the past 4 years at an Arts and Education Centre in the West Midlands, with Guy as the facilitator, looking in particular at key themes that have emerged from an evaluation of the last three courses that have been attended. What is interesting about the focus of this work is the fact that it attempts to provide a 'psychological ramp' that is designed to bridge the gap that exists between courses that fall within the category of adult education and those that might be described as therapy or psychotherapeutic groupwork. Whilst the courses are described primarily for people with mental health problems, particularly people who might be isolated or experience stigma because of their emotional difficulties, those who attend are regarded as students, not patients. As such, they are invited to take part in an educational programme, rather than as recipients of a mental health service. Thus, the venue and the groupwork approach adopted, reflect this emphasis. What is striking about this paper is the creative way that groupwork theory and practice is used to offer 'a radical alternative to psycho-educational and 'skills for ills' programs', by providing an opportunity to enhance people's understanding of themselves and of others and the difficulties they experience.

The second paper in this edition is from the United States and looks at the importance of Parents Anonymous (PA) groups as an approach for addressing the problem of child abuse and neglect, and as a resource for parents struggling to rear their children safely. Ray Liles and Lugena Wahlquist's article looks at the lessons that have been learned by the two authors, one of whom has been involved in facilitating a PA group for twenty-five years. Several important themes are explored, such as the role that 'professional facilitators' can play within a group structure that is based primarily on the principle of mutual support

and self-help and how the concept of 'leadership' is taken up within the PA model described. In some writing on this subject, the notion of or 'professional' and 'peer' leadership is seen to be mutually exclusive but this paper, the all aspects of leadership are considered important - such as the environment of safety and trust provided by 'professional facilitators' and the leadership that group member undertake outside the group. Another important theme looks at the way that different PA facilitators interpreted and adapted the manual that was drawn up by a regional PA office. Some 'major similarities and some major differences in applications' of this 'official model' were identified, which highlights a tension that is often found when attempting to apply manual approach across different groups, situations, settings and group dynamics.

A third paper, *Groupwork researchers as 'temporary insiders'*, describes a collaborative venture involving an academic, Mark Doel, and a groupwork practitioner, Kim Orchard. In this article, the difficulties encountered by parents is revisited - but this time the emphasis shifts from an analysis of several groups to an account of the important learning that can be gained through an analysis and evaluation of a single group. The paper begins with an account of the Managing Difficult Behaviour groups run by social workers and adolescent support workers in an Adolescent Support Team in South Gloucestershire. It then focuses on the dilemmas and opportunities that participant observation can play in providing an independent evaluation of the group and processes. This complex role captures both an 'insider' and 'outsider' perspective where, in addition to the more traditional methods used to document and evaluate the effectiveness, both roles can provide an important perspective to help groups to evaluate themselves. In this task, the authors emphasise the importance of participant observation being located within a clear knowledge and evidence base, and of a sound ethical framework to ensure that 'consent is informed, openly given and can be withdrawn during the process'. Another valuable feature of this paper is that it highlights the advantages that can be gained from academics and practitioners working together in ways that enable practitioners' knowledge, skills and experience to be accessed by a wider audience - particularly other groupwork practitioners.

In a final paper in this edition, we remain with the ethical considerations that underpin groupwork. In *What works' in groupwork? Towards an ethical framework for measuring effectiveness*, Carol Lewis

analyses some of the difficulties that exist for groupworkers within a climate where the emphasis is on a more top-down, objective and scientific approach to evidence - an emphasis that does not always sit easily with evaluations of effectiveness that emphasise 'both processes and outcomes, effectiveness and experiences'. Of particular concern is the issue of power and control within groups, and within groupwork, and the extent to which current groupwork practices, and evidence-based perspectives, have become 'divorced from values and principles which emphasise respect for the individual and the context within which the group takes place'. The paper suggests that one reason for this change is the fact that more and more groups are being run by professionals - and others - who 'have little opportunity for training, reflection or supervision of their practice' and limited input on the way that power differential, both within groups and within wider society, impact on social relationships. Without this understanding of oppression and the unequal allocation of wealth and resources, personal and social problems can easily become individualised and separated off from 'issues of equity and social justice'. The paper concludes on a positive note and suggests that one way to address these concerns would be to open up the debate on what constitutes ethical and acceptable groupwork practice, and to re-examine the societal context within which our work - and the relationships we form - are created and maintained.

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