

Debate

Flash groups: A quick response

Space does not allow me to respond to more than two major points in Mark Doel's Editorial in this issue. Before doing that, let me clarify that I too want to see groupwork supported far more strongly than at present and wonder what would generate such support. I too advocate differentiating among various types of groupwork, as I think that not all types of groupwork need the same range of skills. Yet, some points are not entirely clear to me in this flash group discussion. I presume the unclarity is mainly the result of the author writing a very short piece and assuming some shared understanding with readers. So – let us try to flesh out some details:

The author says that

The more we can connect groupwork to everyday lives and work experiences the more people we will be able to bring in support of groups and groupwork.

Two issues are involved. The first is that the terms 'groups' and 'groupwork' appear to mean the same thing. Do they? Definitions of each may help here. Once definitions are offered, I expect we shall see that *each term means something that is somewhat different*. Then another question may arise: should we ALWAYS support people who 'join together' to 'allocate and agree tasks and roles to work to a goal'? Do we intend to promote all joint activities – whether or not these also involve colluding with conformity, scapegoating, exclusiveness, monopolising and so on? I know the author knows that many natural groups are prone to engendering such disabling processes. Quite often natural groups are naturally inclined to repress. Indeed, the discipline of groupwork was developed to undo such repression, and people like Bertcher (1994) have long ago articulated the implications for participating in groups.

The second claim is that connecting groupwork more closely to everyday lives will increase support for it. Is that so? Let's look at

this issue again: we may compare our fate as groupworkers with the fortunes of our professional siblings – family therapists. The theory and techniques of family therapy are rather abstract and complex. *Yet, family therapy seems to be far more strongly supported than groupwork.* Actually, I remember an example. We were front line social workers in Inner London of the 1970s when we applied family therapy ideas to our practice. Yes, we were supported. Yet, I do not remember that support came from acting like enabling families or being instantly understood. I doubt that we were. Our managers later explained that they had been influenced mainly by the *outcomes* we were able to show, by the *demonstration sessions* during which we clarified how those outcomes were achieved and by the fact that we were ‘not rigid’ – that we modified the work to *accommodate to statutory requirements*.

Still, this debate may lead us to take stock of our various groupwork competences. We could begin by identifying major skills we expect of any person we accept as a helper for a particular groupwork project (I certainly began as such a helper). The skills of such helpful people may count as level 1 of practice competence. We may then try to articulate the skills required for level 2, level 3, level 4 and level 5 of continuing professional development. This possibility has intrigued me for quite a while, but it too needs far more shared and extensive analysis.

I can already see a task force in the making. Any takers?

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Reference

Bertcher, H.J. (1994) *Group Participation: Techniques for leaders and members.* (2nd ed.) London: Sage