

# Editorial

## **‘Flash groups’**

The summer of 2007 in England was a time of unusually heavy rainfall which produced much flooding, especially in my home city of Sheffield. Apart from the impact on people’s homes and businesses, and indeed some loss of life, there was general disruption to many people’s travel plans. This produced a camaraderie with people re-telling the tales of their struggles against adversity, including being trapped overnight in the workplace by swirling waters on the ground floor. A colleague related his experience of trying to get home from a meeting in another city. The train came to a halt in one of the smaller station stops with an announcement that the train was going no farther because of floods ahead and that everyone would have to disembark. A coach was promised.

The forty or so passengers stepped off the train into horizontal weather – heavy, driving rain and a gale blowing. They were in a small town in the midst of nowhere and on the wrong side of the Pennines, a chain of wild hills running down the middle of northern England. Huddling against the weather outside the station forecourt, the forty-odd individuals who had sat in silence on the train now began to talk about their situation. As time passed and there was still no sign of a coach, the discussion turned to what they might do in this situation. One woman had the phone number of the train company on her mobile, so it was agreed she would try contacting them for information. Some were charged with exploring the town for possible overnight accommodation, some with sussing out what looked to be the local community centre for overnight possibilities and others with discovering what taxis might be available.

I remarked to my colleague that it seemed like all the people who, before the flash flood, had been individual passengers had become a *group*. The flash flood had been met with a flash group! They had joined

together not just in discussion, but in action, allocating and agreeing tasks and roles to work to a goal. Different individuals wanted different outcomes (some were more OK with staying where they were, others much keener to find an immediate way out) but, in terms of scouting out all these possibilities and acting in a concerted way, these forty random people were creating themselves a group.

This story provides a challenge to us. This, and many other similar experiences, suggest that 'groupwork' is something that can happen at any time and any place. This does not conform to our professionalised view of groupwork, that it requires hours of careful preparation and years of training and experience for those who facilitate these groups. Is the suggestion, then, that any-one can do groupwork and that it requires no special skills? Well, yes and no.

Many years ago, in the face of escalating unemployment statistics, a British Prime Minister declared that the unemployed should do social work (It is not difficult to guess which prime minister this was!) It seems that all those years of undergraduate and postgraduate study counted for nought and that we were doing a job that really anyone could do. Although duly offended by this inference, I grudgingly understood what Margaret Thatcher meant. Just as untrained people can nurse their partners, teach their children and police their communities, there are lots of ways in which people can 'do social work'. Indeed, in my early years as a qualified social worker I recruited and supported a group of volunteers whose work could properly be described as social work.

Recognising that there are groupwork 'moments' – flash groups – perhaps challenges our traditional notions (for example, of stages of groups through time, etc.) but this should not be taken as a threat to the standing and skill of professional groupwork. There is no suggestion that those who took the lead outside the Pennine station would be able to facilitate groups for people with mental health problems, young offenders or older people with long-term pain. There will always be a need for groupworkers with specialist and developed skills.

However, there are strong and pressing reasons why we should recognise and celebrate flash groupwork and admit into our fold people who have never thought of themselves as *groupworkers*. My colleague on the train is not a groupworker, but he now saw the events of that night through a groupwork lens and identified with groupwork in a way that

he had not previously. 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. Not something mysterious that takes a few chosen colleagues away and leaves the rest with the regular work of the agency, but something that might be experienced, even momentarily, when they participate in a team or a meeting, or indeed are thrown together with a number of strangers.

Let us be explicit about any groupwork 'moments' we can identify, so that colleagues can also begin to see these interactions as a form of groupwork. 'That was a really skilled piece of groupwork you did in the meeting, you really helped bring people in.' They may be surprised to have it reframed as groupwork but, more and more, it will enable others to identify these moments and experiences as groupwork and encourage them to identify themselves with groupwork. That can only be a good thing.

We will be introducing more examples of 'Flash Groups' in future issues of the journal and we would like to encourage more examples from readers. We would also like to provoke responses and discussion amongst our readership. In this issue is a quick response from Oded Manor (see pp.79-80). Please feel free to join the discussion and send us your own contribution to this debate.

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In this issue we have articles from Australia, Scotland and two from South Africa. Two are concerned with fatherhood and groups, and two with groupwork and education, in one case the classroom setting and the other around placement groups. We also have a North American reflection on the 2007 European Groupwork Symposium, and two book reviews.

Melanie Osborne and Jane Maidment write about 'C'mon Guys!' a group programme to encourage fathers' participation in primary schools. As the authors note, 'The first hurdle for the program was to get the men through the school doors.' However, in common with much of the research about group engagement, the fathers were more inclined to respond to a personal invitation – in this case from their own child at the school. Groupwork with men is less well documented (and perhaps less common?) than groupwork with women, and with men in their

roles as fathers even less so; in these circumstances it is particularly good to present two articles on the theme of groupwork with fathers. In the second article, Christina (Reineth) Prinsloo explores the ways groups can strengthen the father-child bond by seeking to improve the fatherhood skills of incarcerated fathers. An impressive number of groupwork sessions (77,858 in one year) have been conducted by social workers and students in the Department of Correctional Services. As with all groups, it is also important to consider the contextual issues; in this case the backcloth of the social conditions that led to the crime, and the sense of justice or injustice that the family might feel about the removal of their father from the family. The reader might wonder whether in these circumstances 'no cultural or racial issues were encountered'; nevertheless, it is clear that the groups are having an impact and they have been taken on by other prisoners in self-help groups. The article also demonstrates the dilemmas for groupworkers negotiating the first wishes of the group members (in this case fathers wishing to see more of their children) and of the sponsoring agency (in this case, prisons with strict rules about what was possible and not possible).

We stay in South Africa for the third article in this issue, but move from prison setting to the classroom environment. Penny Singh writes about groupwork in multi-cultural class settings. She examines the use of a four-stage action research project to help students from diverse backgrounds, notably linguistic and ethnic differences, to work in learning groups more effectively. This article also illustrates the power of groupwork as a *research* method (the author analyses the use of focus groups in her research) as well as a practice method and a context for mutual understanding and learning.

For our final article we stay in the field of education, but in social work practical education rather than the classroom, and we move this time to Scotland. As with our first article, this is a collaboration between an academic and a practitioner, in this case Gary Clapton and Maura Daly, who recount details of a project designed to enhance integration of student learning for practice. In particular, they evaluate an innovative approach to the use of placement tutors, suggesting the possibility of more productive ways of using the time spent on placement liaison and visits. A practitioner and an academic co-facilitated groups for students on placement with a not-for-profit organisation working with children and families. The article has much to offer us in terms of the perennial

debate about linking theory and practice and the power of peer learning in professional education.

This issue also contains reflections on the 2007 European Groupwork Symposium held in York, England. What comes over especially clearly in Paul Johnson's account is the significance of *place* in terms of the feel of a symposium. This should come as no surprise to groupworkers, familiar as they are with the significance of venue and environment for the success of group encounters. Creating congruence between the topic of a symposium (groupwork) and the principles of groupwork is always a challenge.

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