# Editorial

In June 2008, the 30th Annual International Symposium on Social Work with Groups took place in Cologne, Germany. This annual symposium of the Association of Social Work with Groups (AASWG) also incorporated our own as 14th European Group Work Symposium which normally takes place each year in the beautiful ancient city of York. The theme of the Cologne symposium was '*Menschen*':

> Social group work is all about *MENSCHEN*. When groups gather together, grow and develop, each member changes as a *MENSCH*. Social group work is all about focusing on and strengthening human resources. This symposium is about encounter: encountering *MENSCHEN* in their different cultures, relationships and concepts of reality. This symposium invites you to experience our various (group work) cultures, to explore commonalities and differences, to learn and to grow.

The event was a resounding success and a triumph for the German Chapter of AASWG who, three years earlier, unanimously voted to hold the symposium in Cologne. This decision also marked an important milestone for AASWG because – despite the desire of this organisation to embrace international perspectives, all previous symposia over the past three decades have been held in North America.

The symposium had a uniquely German flavour in terms of its structure as well as its content – a flavour that was evident in the 'outstitutes' that were planned for the first day of the symposium where participants were invited to attend a guided tour of a range of agencies in Cologne. These mainly involved groupwork with young people, such as a project working with Roma children and a walk-in centre offering a range of activities for young people living in a disadvantaged area of Cologne.

A uniquely German flavour was also evident in the symposium plenary session with a fascinating presentation on 'The German Way of Group Work'. The developmental, relational and interactive model described draws on everyday experiences in ways that are goal oriented

and not problem based. In this model, deficit and defeatist statements are challenged and participants are invited to replace these with positive comments in the belief that positive self statement leads to positive action and outcomes. In this model of groupwork theory and practice, personal self statements are linked to social and political issues and the importance of people taking responsibility for events in their lives and in the wider national and political international arena.

A third distinctly German element of the symposium was evident in the sense of fun that was a central feature of the main events of the symposium. For example, in one main event of the symposium, members of the German Chapter presented a group cabaret – a hugely enjoyable and participative experience where we were invited to enjoy the importance of play as a central feature of groupwork. A similarly stimulating and innovative experience was evident in the interactive way that we were invited to evaluate what we had gained from the symposium.

In terms of the papers and presentations put forward, these focused on groupwork theory and practice taking place across quite a broad international perspective and included papers and workshops from the host country, Germany, and from Canada, England, Iran, Ireland, Japan, Scotland, South Africa, Switzerland, and several presentations from the United States. Predictably, these covered a range of different themes such as the importance of play within groupwork, managing conflict in groups, theoretical and practice accounts of the different stages of groupwork (beginning, middle and end stages), features of leadership, teaching and evaluating groupwork, and themes that focused on different client groups, such as work with fathers, children, people who have been abused and so forth. Of the presentations I attended, two common features were evident. Firstly, the passion – and concern and compassion for the plight of others – that groupwork practitioners and teachers bring to their work. Secondly, the fact that the struggle to keep groupwork alive – as an important and essential practice approach – is an international struggle. Many of the dilemmas found in the United Kingdom are also evident in Canada, Germany, Japan, the United States – indeed in most countries where practice options are tending to be controlled and confined within a more managerialist, programme or package-based approach to working with groups, or where personal and interpersonal development and choices are becoming increasingly

limited. Since the dilemmas experienced across international boundaries have similar features, this calls for even greater collaboration and co-operation across nations – and the Cologne Symposium marked an important opportunity to look again at how we can work together to ensure that groupwork continues to meet new challenges and to develop within this current climate.

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Turning now to the collection of papers in this edition, Paul Johnson continues the discussion about 'Flash Groups' from the previous issue of *Groupwork* (17.3) . This links to the points raised above and reminds us very firmly – and I think correctly – that 'we really do not have any firm conditions or hard and fast rules of exactly what we mean by groupwork'. For this reason, it is increasingly difficult to know the extent to which groupwork – as a practice approach or method – is being used in every day practice. On the one hand is the view that a great deal of work with groups is taking place but whether and how this relates to groupwork remains a contested issue. On the other hand, there is the view – described by Johnson as a more 'purest perspective' – that conducting a group does not necessarily mean that groupwork is being carried out.

This subject is important because if more work with groups is taking place, this begs the question why is this happening and how does this relate to what we consider to be groupwork? At this point, I think it is helpful to attempt to identify what we consider to be the main differences between work with groups and groupwork, which for me lies in the fact that the different groupwork approaches that I practise and teach have an identifiable theory base. Yet what is evident from my ongoing contact with groups set up in children's centres and Sure Start programmes – and also evident in other areas of social work practice that I encounter – is that work with groups is taking place on a considerable scale but that much of this work is theory-less. Also, most of these groups are being run by staff who have been given limited training – if any – in those theories that might help them to understand group dynamics and what we know about the behaviour of people in groups.

If this picture is replicated across the UK – and I suspect it is, since services are increasingly driven by government policy – then does it

really matter if the work taking place in groups is without a theory base if this work is meeting people's needs? I believe that this could make a difference for two main reasons. Firstly, because groups can easily run aground where a sound knowledge of human beings and an understanding of behaviour in groups is lacking or when differences within the group hinder progress. Here some knowledge of groupwork theory could – one hopes – help people to understand, and perhaps to work through, differences that leave the group fractured and unable to function. Secondly, a knowledge of groupwork theory should help workers – and participants – to gain more from experience of being in a group. For some groups, progress may be possible irrespective of its theory base because of the way they are structured but knowledge can give confidence in ways that aid understanding, decision making and action and lead to the transferability of skills and knowledge from one context to another.

But if more groups are being set up and run with minimal training in groupwork, where does this leave us – as a journal and community committed to the task of promoting groupwork? It is not possible to begin to answer this complex question in this editorial but Johnson's commentary raises important issues that are worthy of much greater discussion and debate.

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Of the other papers included in this issue, three are accounts from the United Kingdom and one from Greece. Interestingly, two papers focus in the area of palliative care but from very different perspectives. The first paper has a focus on children. This moving paper describes how research based on collaborative inquiry can be used and adapted in ways that meet the needs of children who have a terminally ill parent. Collaborative inquiry was chosen by Gillian Chowns, a palliative care social worker, because it provided an action research paradigm that could engage with the children in an activity that illuminated their experiences. The group included nine children, aged from seven to fifteen, and four adult facilitators. Of the adults, three were qualified social workers with experience in the area of palliative care and the fourth adult had important technical skills, and also the ability to engage young people in a participatory video-making project of this kind.

However, it is the experiences of the children that are the central feature of this paper, seven of whom had a mother with a life-threatening illness and two a sick father. What unfolds is the way that collaborative inquiry was used to enable the children and adults – all with different levels of expertise – to work together in a group to produce a video to record the children's experience of what it was like, and now how it felt, to live on a day-to-day basis with life-threatening parental illness. This paper is impressive on several fronts, but mainly because it is rare to hear the voice of children experiencing parental loss – their poignant words and also their decision-making capacities. This paper highlights yet again how essential it is to find new and creative ways to work with children in groups.

A second paper, 'It is possible for people diagnosed with schizophrenia to recover', by Carol Valinejad and Jan Smith, also lies in the area of health provision but in relation to serious mental illness. It describes and evaluates the benefits and effectiveness of a recovery group run for eight weeks within the National Health Service (NHS) for people diagnosed as suffering from a range of mental illnesses, such as severe depression, schizophrenia and chronic compulsive behaviour. Four qualitative measures were used to assess the benefits of the group that included measures of hopelessness, quality of life, psychological well-being and participants' perceptions of themselves in the past, present and future. Although only four participants completed the programme, the benefits of this group – and the research undertaken – should not be underrated, because for those individuals the findings suggest that some improvements were achieved in the areas of quality of life and psychological well-being and, importantly, that some of these achievements were maintained and further progress evident in a follow up undertaken of these participants one year later. What is striking about this paper is that it highlights the vital work that can be undertaken with people who experience severe mental health problems, and the importance of practitioners exploring new and innovative ways of working with complex problems. This includes the role that groupwork can play in breaking down isolation and social exclusion. It also highlights the extent to which negative perceptions among mental health professionals about the possibility of recovery can act as a barrier to recovery if patients hear and internalise these negative beliefs.

The third paper in this edition, by Malcolm Payne, Nigel Hartley and

Rosanna Heal entitled 'Social objectives of palliative day care groups', returns to the subject of palliative care, but centres on an evaluation of views of patients, staff and volunteers about the social objectives of different kinds of groups offered in the day centre of a London hospice, namely St Christopher's Hospice. Of the 20 – 25 places available at the centre each day, every patient has the opportunity to be involved in three group activities: unstructured social time on arrival in the morning, the creative arts or other activity groups and sharing lunch together. The study provides an analysis of views of patients, staff and volunteers about these different activities and reveals that whilst there were shared objectives among those involved in the study, some interesting variations are indicated in how the different groups are perceived. For example, some important variations are indicated – and differences among patients – in the value placed on patients sharing their experiences of their illness. The study suggests that formal activity groups were more important to staff and volunteers, whilst patients gave equal importance to less formal social groups. Two key issues that stand out in this paper relate to the value in canvassing and studying the views of the different individuals involved in providing and receiving services – and the extent to which perceptions can differ – and, secondly, the extent to which patients and their families are aware of, and embrace, the ethos of openness and sharing about illness which underpins the provision of palliative care in the UK.

A final paper is a study from Greece and located in higher education, focusing in particular on university students aged 18 to 20. This study, 'Psychological maturing and coping strategies: A study based on group process' by Maria Theodoratou-Bekou, investigates students' psychological maturity and coping strategies and the extent to which an experiential group enhanced students' capacities in these areas. The paper begins by drawing on a range of influential writers in relation to adolescent emotional development, such as the work of Erikson (1956), Winnicott (1965), and Bowen (1978), as well as publications from Greece that focus on ways to address the adversities that young people present (Malikiosi-Loisou, 1993; Leventidou, 1997; Kalantzi *et al.*, 1997).

Thirty-two students volunteered to take part in this study which ran over the course of an academic year and involved attending a *self-awareness seminar* for two hours and week over

a nineteen week period. As part of the study, students were asked to complete two questionnaires administered before and after the group began which were designed to measure psychological maturity (Johnson, 1990) and coping strategies (Esparbès *et al.*, 1993), plus a form that evaluated the seminar each week. In addition to these measures, there was a content analysis of all the group sessions. Studies of this kind, involving college and university students, tend to be common in the United States but much less so in Europe, yet important information can be gleaned, as Maria's work indicates, from studying and researching changes that occur where specific interventions have been used – as in the case of this self-awareness seminar group.

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