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Editorial

When does a group become a crowd and a crowd a group?

The question of how large is a large group (and, conversely, how small is a small one) exercises many groupwork theorists and practitioners. One rule of thumb is that we consider a group to be large once we find ourselves out of our comfort zone - so, for some people large might be six or seven, while your average politician will thrive on several hundred. Much groupwork focuses at the smaller end, but perhaps we should be learning from the larger end, too: at what point does a group become a crowd, and what is the relationship between group dynamics and crowd dynamics?

Recent research (Drury and Reicher, in press, 2009) throws interesting light on crowd behaviour that is of particular interest to groupworkers. The 'unruly mob' concept is challenged as almost entirely a myth, and research into how people behave in large gatherings (demonstrations, concerts, sports events, etc.) shows that crowds act in highly rational ways and are more likely to cooperate than panic in the face of a crisis. 'Rather than being prone to irrational behaviour and violence, crowds undergo an identity shift that drives them to act in the best interests of themselves and everyone around them' (Stephen Reicher, a researcher into group behaviour, quoted in *New Scientist,* 18/7/09, p.38). As groupworkers, we concern ourselves with how to transform six, ten or perhaps twelve people from a set of individuals into a 'mutual aid system', but what forces are in play when a crowd of several hundreds, even several thousands, is transformed into a single unit? Reicher's findings with crowds is absolutely mirrored in our understanding of smaller groups: 'The key ... is the recognition that you share something important with those around you, which forces you to identify with them in a meaningful way' (*New Scientist,* 18th July 2009, p.40). The crowd is no longer a crowd and can quite swiftly be transformed into a psychological or social unit.

We should note that this transformation from a large collection of individuals to a single entity does not require the services of a 'crowd facilitator'. This resonates with a theme I introduced in a previous

editorial in which I suggested a phenomenon that I called 'flash groups' (Groupwork, 17.3, pp.3-7). Triggered by a colleague's experience of a flash flood which prevented his train from continuing its journey and threw forty or so passengers together in a remote village, his story of their rapid coming together reminded me forcibly of the way that formed groups move from a set of individual 'I's to a common 'we'. Yet this flash group occurred with no preparation and no highly trained leader with knowledge and experience of groupwork theory and practice. My thesis suggested that, rather than bemoan a perceived demise in groupwork, we should recognise and name the phenomenon of groupwork that - spontaneously, and perhaps only momentarily - is ubiquitous. We should not lose these opportunities to claim these phenomena for groupwork and, thus, to bring in allies who would not necessarily have seen themselves as groupworkers.

Similarly, I think the researchers of crowds are providing valuable evidence about the human propensity to 'think and act group'. If we are to keep groupwork alive and well in our particular corners of the world (for example, in practice agencies and in professional training and education) we must be inclusive and build alliances with others who do not yet see themselves as groupworkers. Recognising groupwork moments, flash groups, crowd transformations and the like as part of the wider groupwork family could help policy makers and agency managers to see groupwork not as some arcane specialist method that a few highly trained people take off dusty shelves from time to time, but as something absolutely central to what it is to work effectively in organisations, live cooperatively in communities and participate actively as citizens.

Note: another example of a 'flash group' is recounted at the conclusion of this editorial.

In this issue

The journal's claim to cross professional and national boundaries continues to be demonstrated by the four articles in this issue. Writers from social work and clinical psychology, with professional and service user backgrounds write about groupwork with older people, people with mental health problems and children and young people in Australian, English and Welsh contexts. What continues to fascinate is both the

differences and the similarities arising from the collective experience of reading these articles.

Jane Maidment and Selma Macfarlane report on a qualitative research project conducted in Victoria, Australia, with nine older women. They consider craft groups as sites of friendship, empowerment, belonging and learning for older women and found that the women experienced the group setting as affirming and generative in a number of ways. The authors consider the social determinants of health. They find that 'while the creation of domestic craft artefacts was important in and of itself to the women we interviewed, the process of coming together in a group to craft was most significant in terms of fostering social connectedness, enduring friendships and a very real sense of belonging'.

An unusual aspect of the two groups that Maidment and Macfarlane studied is their longevity - one began 17 years before their study and the other over 30 years before. The groups are a place where the women can share and normalise their concerns and they are good examples of the way in which groups and groupwork are an integral part of our lives as human beings, without always assuming the need for specialised training in groupwork or leadership. An interesting observation is that peers can often see one another more holistically than family. There is also insight into the complex combination of altruism and benefit that groups engender, the links between group membership and active citizenship, and the reframing of the 'fiscal burden of an ageing population' to the quiet contributions made by naturally occurring groups and community networks.

In a highly personal account, Sarah Morgan and Jerome Carson describe the contemporary importance of the recovery approach in mental health services and the key role that groupwork can have in the development of this approach. Together, as a service user and a clinical psychologist, the two authors provide a fascinating window on recovery. The first part of the article details the work of three key people on this stage, from the US, Australia and New Zealand and emphasises the significance of service users' own stories. In the second part, Sarah recounts her first experience of the Recovery Group, in which members relate their own stories and the role of the group facilitator's role is more that of a *mis en scène*. Again, this article explores the wonder that can arise from the coming together of people in a very informal setting, far removed from 'classic groupwork' and, with a resonance of Maidment

and Macfarlane's article, it happens to be a craft - appliqué - that has helped the recovery in question. The final part of the article discusses the previous narration and the Recovery Group as 'an unusual form of groupwork'; in many ways it is unusual, but it sits more with many people's social and group experience and can help those who do not know much about 'groupwork' to understand what we mean by it.

Like Carson, Morag Marshall and Guy Holmes, are clinical psychologists. They work in the English West Midlands and their article analyses the benefits of 'mindfulness groups' for people who access mental health services in terms of learning mindfulness skills, becoming more mindful in daily life and improvements in their well-being. Mindfulness, defined as 'keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality' has links with eastern spirituality and resonances with western concepts of reflectiveness. The authors describe the selection process for the group and their respective roles as co-leaders. The group consists of a programme of ten sessions and the authors describe each of these sessions so that the reader gets a good sense of the detail of the activities and processes in the group. Whilst mindful of the dangers of groups being evaluated by their co-facilitators, it is nevertheless the case that the workers are often in the best position in which to do this; in this case, the authors (who are also the group facilitators) used a tested instrument to measure the impact of the group in a number of dimensions. The authors note that there are advantages in a mixed group composed of people with a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences, who come together because they have a shared interest rather than a shared problem and that such groups can be less stigmatising.

Paul Rees rightly notes that 'many educational establishments have for some years routinely employed groupwork pedagogy yet there has been limited research on how students actually perceive groupwork'. In his article, Rees considers student perspectives on groupwork and presents the findings of a school improvement initiative. A continuing theme in this issue is the link between groupwork and active citizenship, that the ability to cooperate with others within a group is a fundamental prerequisite of effective citizenship. A total of 248 students were included in a sample of school age students who responded to a questionnaire designed to find out about the responses to groupwork in the school.

Groupwork 'purists' might question whether students were

responding to their experiences of 'work in groups' rather than 'groupwork', but this study underlines the broader theme in this editorial that group processes are a central part of our daily experiences, whether in school and work or in social and leisure settings. The themes that arise in 'classic groupwork' - interdependence (mutual aid), competition, group composition and selection, group achievement - all are central to the students' experience of working in groups. Readers will find much of interest in the details of the findings, such as the fact that being shy does not seem to preclude enjoying groupwork. The next step from this research would be to find out what *kinds* of groupwork are most successful or enjoyable with school students.

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Reference

Drury, J., and Reicher, S. (In press) Collective psychological empowerment as a model of social change: Researching crowds and power. *Journal of Social Issues*. Special issue on the social and psychological dynamics of collective action.