

Reviews

A Guide to Evidence-Based Group Work

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This is a rather unusual book: it does not show you how to work with groups, it does not explain how to gather evidence and it does not even claim to be nice-an-easy. The author clarifies this in the last page, where he says that 'This book has described and provided resources for applying the process of Evidence Based Practice to group work' (p.201). This is a pool of ideas and links which may be used differently by each reader. Furthermore, the author even dares say that readers are expected to be graduates who have completed at least an introduction to groupwork and a basic course in research methods. Now – in the present climate, this seems to me quite a step to take. Personally, I found the approach very refreshing.

The materials are structured as three parts. Part I offers an introduction to the subject. Part II outlines the stages of applying evidence-based groupwork. Part III deals with the dissemination of this form of practice. Let us look at some details now.

Part I is the Introduction chapter. This chapter sets out the scene as a whole, and identifies major issues and concepts that will be discussed. The author's view of Evidence-Based Group Work (EBGW) is introduced in the opening sentence:

Evidence-based group work (EBGW) is defined as a process of the judicious and skilful application in group work of the best evidence, based on research merit, impact and applicability, using evaluation to ensure that desired results are achieved. (p.3)

Some readers may wish a shorter 'kick-off' was offered, but starting with a definition seems very helpful to me. You can instantly see that the author is going to deal not only with the outcomes but also with the *processes* of applying groupwork. This emphasis on processes distinguishes this book from others with a similar orientation. The chapter then maps out the book contents. These include a discussion of the assumptions underlying EBGW, its historical context, the basic concepts, the stages of applying EBGW, the merit of this type of practice and the use of case studies throughout the book.

Part II, the longest of the three, includes four chapters. Each chapter is actually about one of the stages of applying EBGW.

Chapter 2 is about formulating an answerable practice question. In reality this is a guide to choosing the groupwork approach for each group. The author recommends starting with questions that are relevant to group members' needs and these includes issues of differences (gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation etc.) among them. The questions have to be those which can be answered by applying this form of practice, and are practical enough to lead to a viable groupwork project. The integration of a research base with practice experience is very clear here.

Chapter 3 is concerned with searching for best available evidence. This is an extensive guide to searching groupwork literature. At the heart of this chapter is the author's 'Hierarchy of research merit'. At the top, which the author considers 'stronger', are 'syntheses'. These are 'systematic' studies – where there are explicit procedures for gathering evidence. At the bottom, which is considered 'weaker', is 'unobserved, speculative practice'. In simpler terms, the question is probably how easy it is to repeat the same practice so that the same outcomes arise; that is, to replicate practice. The easier it is to replicate the higher the merit.

Chapter 4 elaborates ways of undertaking a critical review of the evidence by evaluating its rigour, impact and applicability. This is a mammoth undertaking. Critical reviewing is discussed along three of its aspects. Rigour is the first. Rigour is seen as the 'efficacy for achieving desired outcomes' (p.79). Impact is the second aspect. Impact deals with the question whether the findings are consistent and 'powerful' - both statistically and clinically (p. 83). I must say that up to now, I have not encountered such a massive resource for critical evaluation of groupwork research. Applicability is the third aspect. This is the question 'whether the study provides sufficient information about the

group members, group approach, leadership, and group components to allow comparisons with the current (practice) situation.'(p. 117). Again, I think that any supervisor, trainer or teacher of groupwork would be delighted with such an extensive resource.

Chapter 5 focuses on applying the evidence and evaluating the achievement of desired outcomes. In a way, this is the crucial chapter, and the author does not shy away from addressing the most difficult issues. In particular: should each groupwork project fully copy (replicate) the other? Are we to modify each project to suit group members' and agency needs, or follow groupwork manuals to the letter? The author shows acute appreciation of the complexities involved and openly states that 'Currently, there are no research-derived standards for determining what a replication is'. (p.169). The possibility of identifying 'essential ingredients' of each groupwork intervention while enabling each practitioner to modify the rest, is discussed too. (p.169). Then - major issues that arise while applying research findings are explored and leading sources are introduced.

Part II includes the shorter chapter 6: Advancing evidence-based group work in research, clinical practice, and evaluation. Here the author introduces us to published accounts of developing this type of groupwork practice in various settings: clinical practice, organisational and higher education. His own experience of promoting and supporting groupwork practice becomes evident.

What is the merit of this book? Well – to begin with, the book provides a huge pool of knowledge and resources that can only help groupwork practice, education, training and research. Specific messages are important too: the volume of systematic groupwork research already available, the proven importance of processes variables such as feedback and the therapeutic alliance (p.62), the meaning of replicating practice, as discussed in Chapter 5 – all, and more, are ammunition in the struggle to set-up and maintain groupwork.

Have I got any reservations? Well, of course – no book is perfect. Perhaps the style of writing could have been made more flowing, and a few more references to studies published in Britain could have been offered. A crucial issue is this: chapter 3 focuses on the 'hierarchy of research merit' which is based on the ease of replicating outcomes. Yet, Chapter 5 points out to the lack of research-based standards for establishing how prescriptive (that is, replicated) should each

programme be. Perhaps the gap between the two could have been addressed. I certainly missed the discussion of another issue: how can a groupworker cope with unexpected spontaneous events during practice if she has to plan all the details in advance?

Yet, I thought the discussion of 'essential ingredients', mentioned already, was very promising. These ingredients are probably part of what groupworkers often call 'group dynamics': the processes, the structure and the moral values that emerge during the group. So - perhaps there is one message that shines between the lines: good groupwork practice will always be anchored in a through understanding of such phenomena.

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Psychological Groupwork With Acute Psychiatric Inpatients

Edited by: Jonathan Radcliffe, Katja Hajek,
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The authors have identified a gap in the literature and produced a relevant, dynamic and engaging text book that will help to support Government policy in increasing access to psychological therapies for acute inpatients. It will be a valuable resource for students of Psychology, Nursing, Occupational Therapy, Medicine and Social Work as well as qualified practitioners. In this regard, the book is uniquely placed to enhance the experience of acutely ill adults in mental health in patient services.

The historical context is extremely useful in that it helps to identify the deficits in psychological interventions while justifying the developments in practice over time. Within the text, a range of different styles and formats of therapeutic group work are addressed. The book also covers

staff support through the use of groups. Helpful guides, scenarios and vignettes are provided to enable the reader to apply theory to practice. The second part of the book discusses a number of contemporary models, drawing on national and international examples with direct reference to recent studies.

The authors manage to achieve the inherently difficult task of applying the principle of randomised control trials to psychosocial interventions as an evidence base. Other forms of evidence are also explored while presenting the efficacy of psychological group work and the authors adopt a critically analytical approach when looking at all of the evidence.

Practical elements of the book content are covered in a manner that enables the reader to approach group working with a degree of confidence. There is a clear hierarchy of challenges identified with regard to: degree of difficulty; professional experience; capability; clients' mental health status and group function. This will allow the reader to choose to commence at a suitable level and develop accordingly.

There is a clear demand for a book such as this to help the undergraduate, or newly qualified health professional, make the transition from learning about the theory of therapeutic group work to applying this in practice. The text will enable the practitioner to identify and further develop the necessary qualities to effectively plan and facilitate a wide range of groups.

There is a very brief reference to 'anti psychiatry' on page 6. It could be argued that this issue deserves more discussion in the text, given the context of the book, which champions alternative practices to the medical model. The brevity of the discussion on this topic leaves the reader wondering about its inclusion.

One other minor concern is that the index does not take the reader to any part of the book which addresses 'group dynamics'. This is an important aspect of group work which you would expect most students to seek out and, while this topic is covered in the text, the index does not provide the link.

Overall, the format and style of the book is excellent. The 'overview' is helpful to the reader and the sequencing of the chapters enables the reader to build on their knowledge systematically. There is a need for text books such as this one to help the undergraduate health professional make the transition from learning about the theory of therapeutic group work to applying this in practice. The text book will help students and

newly qualified health professionals to identify and further develop the necessary qualities to effectively plan and facilitate a wide range of groups. The book provides a strong sense of contemporary expertise in the field and the reader will feel that they can benefit from all of the experiences of the authors. If the intention was to encourage and inspire health professionals to adopt therapeutic groups into their practice, this would appear to have been achieved.

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