

Editorial

At a recent Editorial Board of this journal, we found ourselves drawn – as we have on so many occasions – to a discussion on the difficulties we continue to encounter in our efforts to keep groupwork ‘alive’ in ways that keep this important method of intervention on the professional map. From this discussion, it was agreed that this editorial should review the contribution that groupwork can make in professional circles – how groupwork can help us to understand human beings and the complexities of human experience. In many ways, to revisit this subject again is timely because it links to some of the important themes covered in Mark Doel’s last editorial where, you may recall, Mark offered an illuminating review of the articles published in *Groupwork* during the period 2000-2006. This review highlighted the fact that as a profession, social workers continue to be the main authors writing for *Groupwork*. This is not surprising given the fact that it was social work academics that set up this journal, during a period when groupwork was considered to offer an important – and a potentially empowering - approach to work with people. My work as a lecturer in social work exemplified its importance - for example, for eleven years I convened and taught five separate groupwork courses each year – three for social workers, one for trainee counsellors and one for senior managers on an MSc management training programme. I came to lecture in this subject having worked for many years as a groupworker in a mental health project for women.

I want to remain with social work for a moment because the current picture is now very different from the one I have just described. For example, in a recent survey of the teaching units covered on university social work training programmes, only three universities out of 70 covered *Groupwork* or *Working with Groups* as a distinct and identifiable subject within their training programme. Clearly, this survey only provides a rough outline. Some websites contained more detailed information than others and, of course, it could be the case that *groupwork* theory and practice may be included as a feature of other modules or units, such as those described under the heading *Social Work Methods, Preparation for Practice*, etc. Nevertheless, this survey suggests

that groupwork does not feature highly – and certainly not by name – on most social work training programmes. This is particularly worrying given social work's particular contribution within multi-disciplinary and inter-agency work settings, which calls for the ability to identify the part that 'social' factors play within a given encounter or in relation to the problems presented. It means that a central feature of the social work task involves being able to analyse the impact of factors that are located outside the clinical setting or beyond the remit of one-to-one work.

The importance of the social sphere in social work practice is evident because social workers are required to '*work with individuals, families, carers, groups and communities*' and to be able to have a knowledge of '*theories of organisations, group behaviour and organisational change*' (TOPSS, 2002, p.20). It is not possible for social workers to fulfil these expectations unless they have developed a sound understanding of people in their social context – contexts that include how people identify themselves – and are identified by others – in terms of the family, network and community groups to which they belong. But even in relation to work with individuals, I would argue that it is not possible to understand other people without acquiring an understanding of the groups to which they belong – their family history and where they are currently located – and locate themselves - within this dynamic and family system.

The individualisation of problem and solutions

I would argue that one reason why a sound knowledge of groupwork theory and practice is not being promoted on professional training courses – both within and outside social work - is because the personal and social dilemmas that people face are increasingly being individualised. At its worst, this surface approach presents three major threats. First, it locates problems or difficulties solely in terms of the individual, as if other factors that are located outside the individual – over which he or she may have little influence - have no importance or relevance. Second, individualisation denies the opportunity for people to identify what they have in common – it obscures the possibility of seeing the general picture and the extent to which certain difficulties or problems are structural in nature. Third, the individualisation of

problems tends to lead to the individualisation of solutions – and in ways that are not always appropriate or helpful.

In relation to direct practice, the individualisation of problems and solutions can be seen in the shift toward one-to-one work and away from groupwork. For some practitioners, this change has resulted in the loss of groupwork skills through lack of practice. In most practice settings, managers and other senior staff are not ‘thinking group’, although the extent to which groupwork ‘seems, almost without notice, to have faded from view’ (Ward, 2002, p.149) is difficult to gauge. It certainly appears to be the case that in recent years most funders have not looked to groupwork as a cost effective and viable method of intervention. Instead, what we have seen is the introduction of a more *package* or *programme-based* approach, such those that fall under the heading *Anger Management, Managing Difficult Behaviour Groups*, or groups that are focused on *Parenting Skills*. Whilst these approaches can be helpful, they do not require a knowledge of groupwork theory and practice because understanding people – and their unique situation – is not a central feature of this behaviour change approach. ‘The central organizing principle of this orientation is that behaviour, emotions, and cognitions are learned and therefore can be changed by new learning’ (Malekoff, 2009, p.253). It means that the emphasis is not placed on *context* but instead placed on *content*, such as providing information and rehearsing and learning new ways to behave or to react, but with little – if any – emphasis placed on group dynamics and group processes. As such, an important learning opportunity and perspective easily becomes lost, which is the learning we gain through our relationship and interaction with others – and the part that we and others play in shaping behaviour.

Using groupwork theory can enhance our understanding of how different individuals and groups of people relate, interact and interconnect – whether in families, communities, networks, teams, agencies or organisations. It can illuminate the internal dynamics taking place within a group and also how the group – and individuals within the group - relate and occupy positions when they encounter individuals and organisations located in the wider social and cultural context. It offers a conceptual framework from which to analyse the ‘default’ positions, and the roles or stances that different people take up; the defences and resistances to change that are in operation; how

individuals react in conflict situations (fight/flight reactions); what people become for one another and the part played by fantasy within this construct and, importantly, how power relations are played out. Other theories can help to illuminate what is happening and why but because the focus in groupwork is placed on people's interaction and relationship with others, including how they see themselves and how they relate to the systems within which they orbit, it becomes possible to use this conceptual framework in a range of different contexts and to address different areas of difficulty. This makes groupwork's theory base highly transferable. For example, it can illuminate our understanding of why some teams and organisations work better than others – and identify those factors which facilitate or fracture the possibility of people working together in ways that are imaginative and creative. It is this analysis that informs and shapes the interventions used to bring about change.

However, one of the difficulties we face is that we know very little about the effectiveness of groupwork when compared to work with individuals. Also, our knowledge is limited in terms of which of the different groupwork approaches might be the most helpful and effective when working with certain groups of people or specific types of problems. An approach that is seen to work well with one cross section of the population may not be appropriate when working with other groups. These are areas where more analysis and research is needed.

In this issue

Nick Pollard's article, *Occupational narratives, community publishing and worker writing groups: sustaining stories from the margins*, provides a fascinating account of the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP) - a network which grew to embrace the work of 80 writers' and publishing groups worldwide. The paper highlights the diverse ways that this loose network of people communicated with one another – and the important context this organisation provided in terms of enabling people to share their experiences and to develop their cultural potential using different creative forms. In particular, the network provided an opportunity for people from more marginalised sectors of society to give voice to their experiences. This scholarly paper

explores the cultural politics that underpins the work of FWWCP and its successor TheFED and the way that coming together in groups ensured the organisation's survival.

Caroline Kamau's article, *Ingroup attraction, coordination and individualism as predictors of student task group performance* asks the question 'what factors do we know predict group performance?'. A range of issues are explored – such as the part played by motivation, coordination, leadership, the role of *groupthink*, the extent to which group members have a 'collective orientation' and what part individualism plays as a predictor of group performance. In particular, the paper then looks at whether 'individualist' groups performed better than the collectivist groups. This research, which involved 52 undergraduate psychology students located in 14 groups, suggests that individualism had a positive impact on group performance but a cautionary note is added because this finding 'may only hold true for groups in individualistic societies'. This raises important questions and in ways that enhance our understanding of the complex dynamics involved in groupwork.

The article by Stephan Geyer, *Strengths-based groupwork with alcohol dependent older persons: solution to an age-old problem?*, begins with a highly informative and illuminating account of the social welfare picture in South Africa. It describes the outcome of a strengths-based groupwork approach involving 80 alcohol dependent older people, where the respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire before the programme and three months after completion. The paper highlights the vulnerability of this group of people and the extent to which social factors can deepen older people's dependency on alcohol. The tentative findings of this study suggest the approach adopted succeeded in enhancing respondents' 'repertoire of strengths' but the author notes that further research is needed to establish the extent to which 'improved psychological functioning' can lead to a reduction in older people's dependency on alcohol.

Jane Westergaard's article *Providing support to young people through groupwork: delivering personalised learning and development in the group context*, looks at the work of youth support workers in the UK – and the different roles that these workers take up. This is an important paper covering a neglected subject. It describes the development of Personal Learning and Development (PDL) groups within the UK and

the particular features of a model described by the acronym FFAST– a PLD framework where groups are conceptualised in terms of: Focus, Aim, Activities, Structure and Techniques. The paper explores the tendency of youth workers to focus on the use of one-to-one skills in their work and suggests that the addition of groupwork approaches could add important benefits – particularly in relation to ‘encouraging groups of young people to work together’.

An affectionate goodbye ...

As Mark Doel noted in his final *Groupwork* editorial, we have worked together as Co-Editors of the journal for over six years. This has been an enormously enjoyable and enriching experience – not least because of the warmth and generosity of spirit with which Mark approached our work together and the task of co-editing this journal. Fortunately, much to our delight he will remain on the Editorial Board of *Groupwork*.

Pamela Trevithick
Co-Editor of *Groupwork*
September 2010

References

- Malekoff, A. (2008) Adolescents. in A. Gitterman and R. Salmon (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of Social Work with Groups*. London: Routledge (pp. 252-254)
- TOPSS (2002) *The National Occupational Standards for Social Work*. April 2004 edition. [Online at <http://www.topss.org.uk>]
- Ward, D. (2002) Groupwork. in R. Adams, L. Dominelli and M. Payne, (Eds) *Social Work: Themes, Issues and Critical Debates*. (2nd ed.) Basingstoke: Macmillan (pp. 149-158)