

# Groupwork and Well-Being

## 2010 European Groupwork Symposium

### A personal account

Once again, the European Groupwork symposium was held in the majestic city of York, I have to acknowledge that I love York; it is one of my favorite places in England to visit. The Minster, the Roman wall, the narrow cobbled streets, the River Ouse, everywhere you look, you are surrounded by history. Although time has moved on, York manages not just take you back a hundred years, but thousands of years; it's as if you are in the Tardis, traveling with Dr. Who.

The theme of this year's symposium was 'Groupwork and Well-Being.' However, I would propose that: History, Travel, Time, and Evidence were also central themes at the symposium.

The symposium got off to a stimulating start with Jerome Carson's: 'The Recovery Group: its role in enhancing well-being.' This group meets on a monthly basis and had presentations from three of its service users on topics they have expertise in. Margaret Muir a photographer, Elizabeth Wakely a retired history teacher, and Matt Ward an actor. What was so powerful and moving about their workshop, was that all three presenters took the audience directly into their worlds. There was no going through the 'normal' group stages of beginning, middle and ends. You were thrown right into the mix. Margaret's beautiful photography, Matt's booming voice, which immediately got your attention, and Elizabeth's wonderful historical analysis of Winston Churchill, was breathtaking. Indeed Elizabeth's presentation on Churchill provided me with some personal insights and explanations.

My maternal grandparents are from Cumbria, and I can still recall my grandmother's disdain for Churchill. She would often talk about how he had set the troops on the miners. But Elizabeth was finally providing me with some insight for this. How could a man who was admired and revered by millions, have done such a terrible thing to his own countrymen. Perhaps the bi-polar diagnosis did provide some explanations!

I have to acknowledge that I was glad I was not scheduled to follow the first workshop, because in my own mind I was thinking: 'Well how do you follow that!' But the next two papers: *Conducting Groupwork with people with dual Diagnosis*, by John Chilton and Margaret Parrish and *Enhancing the Well being of the Staff team*, by David Henchman, Sue Walton and Sally Curtis, were wonderful. Each presentation, grappled with and from my perspective successfully demonstrated the argument, of why it was necessary to have evidence and outcomes in your groupwork. However, what was especially interesting for me was that they were not just talking about 'conventional quantitative findings, but also qualitative outcomes.'

This illusive yet paramount issue of Evidence was a recurring theme throughout the symposium. In Ruth Cave's moving presentation of the 'Tuesday Group' and Nick Pollards wonderful insights about 'Having Somewhere to go on Monday's,' they both addressed not only the question of Evidence but also Time.

Regrettably, social work has reached a point where by we have to demonstrate immediately what we are doing, and how effective our work is. This can be attributed to a variety of reasons, however, the most prominent is funding. Yet, both Ruth and Nick conveyed the significance of time. That, the group needs to go at its own pace; there are ebbs and flows, highs and lows. Also, by time we were not talking about a group that meets for several weeks, but an open and ongoing group, whereby it was necessary to look at time from the perspective of months and years. With Ruth's group, there was also the poignant issue, that there were changes in the membership, due to the factor that some members of the group had passed away due to their illness. With Nick's group, the fact that they utilized low key activities, in particular horticulture, there was a great sense of pride and accomplishment. Yet by allowing the groups to move at their own pace, and not imposing time limitations, one could observe the positive changes in the participants. This was so wonderful displayed in the moving letter Ruth read from a group member, and also in the pictures of the gardening group that Nick showed.

Following Ruth and Nick, Chris Evan's gave a wonderful Keynote address, entitled 'Promoting and Researching Group Well-being.' What was so engaging regarding Chris's presentation was that he utilized the previous workshops and papers to illustrate the point that we

were all collecting evidence to support our work. Chris also added another variable to be considered in all of this and that one needed to be cognizant of the profound impact of social relationships and networks. He stressed that as groupworkers, we needed to be creative and ensure that our funders and benefactors could also observe the benefits that were occurring in our respective groups. In other words Chris got us to think out of the 'box.' That when we consider the impact of social relationships and networks that become established as a result of the groups, the groups which we run have profound impacts in our respective communities..

This point of community well-being was further illustrated by Carole Stagg and Belinda Sosinowicz, in their workshop: 'The Journey: Exploration through creativity and their paper 'Guerilla, Extreme and Distance Travelled Groupwork.' In both of these presentations, Carole and Belinda, utilized art work. However, they didn't just talk about this modality as a theoretical concept; they had the participants at the symposium engage in the activity. Everyone in the room was split into groups and asked to utilize the art supplies on their table in order to answer several questions. However, we were then asked to move around the table and work on someone else's piece of art, or asked to move to another table, what became apparent was that some tables had more art supplies than others. This created a great deal of discussion, and indeed some people were upset that they did not have adequate materials.

However, what Carole and Belinda emphasized, was in many of the art groups that they run they have to improvise and the environments in which they meet are not conducive to undertake group work, in its 'purest sense.' For example they talked about working at a center, where workmen were repairing the room, and utilizing power tools. They mentioned that some of the mothers had to bring their children with them. They talked about going to particular neighborhoods and communities, that their groups frequently met on Saturday afternoons, and having to transport all of their supplies in order to run their groups. Both of them stated that they had to be very creative, resourceful and be willing to adapt to the settings they found themselves in. In other words what was so exciting about these groups was their unpredictability. The group leaders/facilitators needed to go to where their service users lived, they had to meet at times that were conducive to the participants. They pointed out that if they were unwilling to do this, then their groups

would not occur. Hence, this relates to the two themes of travel and time.

These recurring themes of: History, Travel, Time, and Evidence were further reinforced by Tony Coggins key note address of 'Making London Happy' and Sherry Clarks workshop, 'DIY Happiness'. Once again, Sherry got us to utilize art materials and for us to draw pictures of individuals who were of importance for us. Many of the participants at the symposium identified family members or loved ones, however, it was pointed out that many of the women group members who participated in Making London Happy, or DIY Happiness did not have such positive relationships with family members or loved ones.

What Tony and Sherry were emphasizing in their respective presentations was the impact their respective groups had on the women. They had made a conscious decision to move away from 'conventional, unexciting, piecemeal propositions,' to a more comprehensive concept of integrating physical health with mental and emotional well-being. What was so impressive about Tony and Sheri's work was that in many respects this was a radical departure from undertaking groups on a local level, this was groupwork which incorporated 20 communities across London. Not only were they offering the group members a new paradigm of looking at themselves, but also those who were providing funding were being asked to think very differently about this approach. In other words, this was group work on a national stage in the countries capital. This gave a whole new concept too Group well-being.

So what were the outcomes or lessons learned from the 16<sup>th</sup> European Groupwork Symposium? In each of the presentations, there was a Historical component, where we had been, where we had come from, where we were going. This led to Time. All of us could relate to this concept of time, it might be ten years ago, two years ago, last year, last month, last week, even yesterday, but we could all relate to the concept. This also meant that all of us had Travelled in some respect. Whether it was as a member of a group, and we saw our lives differently, or whether as a leader or co leader of a group and we could see how individuals and the group itself had changed and grown. Also, those funding or supporting the groups were seeing these approaches through a different paradigm. This also provided us with Evidence. Frequently, in groupwork we get frustrated with ourselves because we do not have

the evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness and impact of our work. Somehow the traditional or conventional instruments do not adequately reflect the work that is occurring in our groups. Yet, every presenter at the symposium clearly demonstrated the effectiveness and positive impact that their groups were having.

Which leads to Well-Being? I for one certainly left York feeling enhanced. When we bring people with like experiences together, we invite their innate wisdom, resiliency, insight, into the community. Empowering people to give voice through self expression, story, art, and spontaneous interaction, potentiates a higher level of collaboration and a deeper means of sharing truth and gaining insight. The role of the service provider is being open, flexible and creative in his/her ability to facilitate and deepen the immediate moment. Viewing the service user as an equal and more importantly as the primary catalyst for change, insight and ultimate transformation means grasping the opportunities that are omnipresent rather than assuming that such opportunities structures and beliefs exist outside of the present situation is incorrect and neither useful or relevant.

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