

Editorial

I was recently at a meeting of an older people's advisory group for a research project exploring older people's well-being, and we were discussing why people do or do not join groups and in what ways being a group member can enhance well-being. Evidently the people who were part of the discussions were those who do join groups, and so they could readily identify what could be gained from group membership. The main focus of the discussion was on what groups could offer older people locally, both in terms of social contact and support, and also as a way of being part of discussions about what services and support should be offered.

They recognised the wide range of ways groupwork could contribute to people's well-being. They spoke much of the importance of social contact, and how the building of trusting relationships had to be a priority; and that shared interest or passion was crucial – for keeping people interested and active. They identified how belonging to a group can help older people regain – or maintain - confidence and feelings of self worth and solidarity and also reduce isolation – as well as providing a chance to gain new skills and knowledge. They recognised the opportunity for co-operative and shared learning, allowing for the different skills, knowledge and experience that people have that can offer individuals a voice and opportunity. They clearly articulated that being part of a group could also mean you were part of a critical mass leading to change. However, they also recognised that it was possible to feel lonely and isolated in a group and said care was needed from all group members to avoid this. Workers need to be able to draw on a range of skills to ensure all members feel valued, able to contribute as they wish and support members to feel responsible for and to one another, in line with the humanistic values of groupwork (Glassman in Gitterman and Salmon, 2009, p.39).

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Interestingly, all these aspects of groupwork that were articulated by the group members in conversation are included in some way by the authors of the papers in this edition of *Groupwork*. All four papers are studies of groupwork within research or evaluation methodologies, and demonstrate the usefulness of social groupwork in very different contexts. The authors use their experience of developing, undertaking and evaluating this approach in order to contribute to the wider discourse on the contribution of groupwork.

Nick Pollard and Sarah Cook discuss the role of groupwork in mental health support in the UK. They used realistic evaluation (Tilly, 2000) to find out about the ways in which the groupwork process delivered benefits for members. The groups discussed were run by two voluntary organisations for people with severe and enduring mental health needs. One focused on horticultural activities and had an allotment. The other offered a range of groups including writing, knitting, walking, singing and reading. Both projects offer members support, care and counselling and opportunities for creative expression and recreation, or other leisure time occupations including education and training for work. The groups have been developed so as to allow a low key, mutually negotiated level of engagement, focussing on support and enabling participation. The evaluation found that the members felt the informal groups built confidence and self worth. They allowed for the natural development of social relationships and foster mutual regard and facilitate the exploration of cultural diversity. The evaluation highlighted the importance of continuity in building a strong community within the group, with members showing commitment and concern for each other, as well as the fact these were local groups.

Hazel Bryce writes of her experience of facilitating a Photovoice project within a government funded outreach mental health team based in the UK. She explores her roles of being a facilitator, researcher, participant and mental health professional during the project. She explains the Photovoice approach as one that shares peoples' expertise and intimate knowledge of their own communities, through the use of photographs and the creation of written captions. The Photovoice project focused on being part of social activity groups facilitated by the mental health support team. The paper reflects on the authors' multiple roles within the projects and Bryce suggests the Photovoice project is really

a form of co-curation. The article suggests that the issues the project raised, as is so often the case, are relevant to working with groups generally and will provide insights into how such groupwork projects can become increasingly participatory as members gain knowledge and experience of working in a more collaborative manner.

Sally Paul and Kirsty Freeland write about group support for children experiencing bereavement in Scotland. The group developed in response to a lack of support identified by families and professionals. They state that groupwork has become an increasingly common area of service provision for children at this undoubtedly challenging and confusing time. The evaluation found that children reported valuing the social aspects of the group and meeting others with the experience of bereavement; and that through the group they learnt how to manage their own feelings, as well as talk about them. The service also provided support for parents recognising that to maximise the benefits for children, others in their lives might also need support. The authors discuss the challenges to both the groupwork and the evaluation of such interventions and report that a number of changes have been undertaken in the service due to the evaluation – such as in the assessment criteria and processes, more family work, emphasis placed on wider education around the bereavement needs of children, and developing further evaluation tools.

Penny Singh and Ivan Niranjana's paper has a different focus and describes the use of groupwork in a tertiary educational setting in South Africa. Their study explored the effectiveness of groupwork as an educational intervention in Occupational Health and Safety. Groups of students designed and played board games to aid their understanding of the Occupational Health and Safety Act and Regulations. Singh and Niranjana's study found that not only was the board game groupwork activity an effective teaching method and that students achieved significant learning through the designing, playing, and being assessed on the games; but also the groupwork improved relations and interactions, and effective teamwork. Valuable lessons in communication, collaboration and conflict resolution were also learned. The authors particularly note that the groupwork process enabled the diverse group of students to work with each other over a period of time and as Pollard and Cook also suggest, they consider that such groupwork aids cultural understanding. The students said that

groupwork had a substantial impact on their ability to work together, see things from others' perspectives, to compromise and led to deeper insights regarding gender roles, race relations and power issues.

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References

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- Tilley, N. (2000) *Realistic Evaluation: An overview*. Presented at the founding conference of the Danish Evaluation Society, September. [Accessed 12 September 2011 at http://evidencebasemanagement.org/research_practice/articles/nick_tilley.pdf]