

# Editorial

## Groupwork and user involvement: A critical pairing

We are in the midst of an almost unheralded revolution in society, social relations, public policy and politics. People who have long been regarded as some of the most disempowered, vulnerable and socially excluded in society, have begun to organise effectively in groups, both globally and locally. New movements have developed of people previously only identified in terms of what were seen as their personal troubles: disabled people, older people, people with learning difficulties, mental health service users and people with long term and life-limiting conditions. What has summed up this radical development is a determination on the part of these groups to speak and act for themselves. The main route that they have adopted to achieve such empowerment has been organising collectively. At the heart of this welfare service user movements are a myriad of groups and organisations, operating at local, regional, national, continental and sometimes international levels.

*Groupwork* has been at the heart of their development and innovation. This Journal has on occasion signalled this development through particular contributions it has included. However we believe that this special edition represents a step change to advance discussion and action on service users, user involvement, service user organisations, movements and groups.

Great strides have been made by disabled people and other service users globally in recent years, challenging the barriers, discrimination and exclusions that they face. However, globalisation and a shift to neoliberal politics internationally have challenged many of the gains they have achieved, with cuts in public spending, state welfare and public services on which they are particularly likely to be reliant. At

the same time we have been seeing the emergence of new approaches to involvement and campaigning. These developments make this a particularly helpful and important time to be focusing on groupwork in relation to service users.

Given the reality of the lives of many service users, groups can play an important part, both as forums for planning collective action for change and also to offer support from people with similar experiences. The papers in this special edition are explorations of both these important aspects of groupwork. The accounts are written from the groupworkers' and group members' perspectives and understanding – groupwork process, groupwork tasks and theory are evident in all the papers – though they may not be referenced as such. As Staddon writes in her paper in this edition

It must be remembered that none of us had any theoretical knowledge of groupwork. We had only our mixture of good and bad experiences to guide us.

Two papers in this edition are written by group members themselves – describing self run groups – Pat's Petition and Turning the Tide, two are written by professionals who lead the groups and draw on information specially collected from group members about their experience in the groups – Gather the Women and Community Outreach Program in Addictions. The final paper has been written in partnership between people with Asperger's syndrome and a doctoral student who worked with them in a group over a period of time. All have been peer reviewed by other service users from the national user organisation, Shaping our Lives ([www.shapingourlives.org.uk](http://www.shapingourlives.org.uk)) and also one of the editors of this special edition.

Despite their wide range of perspectives and experience the papers highlight some common themes – the importance of recognising the shared experience of group members and that this experience makes them experts in their lives. Whilst people may face individual problems, they are common concerns and by gathering together around these common concerns people can gain strength and empowerment personally and also through campaigning for wider change. Groupwork has an emphasis on commonalities within problems and collective commitment, and the ability of groups to become more than a collection

of individuals gives groups much of their power (Dole and Kelly, 2014, p. 55). Groups can address issues and achieve tangible practical gains that individuals on their own cannot contemplate (Munford and Walsh-Tapiata, 2001).

Several of the papers highlight the issue of trust and the importance of building trust between different partners if involvement is to be effective and sustainable. This reflects a much broader issue that has emerged over efforts to develop collaborative approaches to practice and research. However, it isn't rocket science! Rather it is a matter of being as honest and transparent as possible in developing working relationships, identifying ground rules that help encourage positive and inclusive partnerships (see those developed by Shaping Our Lives) and having a real commitment to equal partnership.

This leads to another issue: developing ways of working that are truly accessible and both recognise and value diversity. People have different ways of working, and people who have intellectual, physical and sensory impairments, who have had limited educational opportunities or who identify as neuro-diverse, may prefer or need to work in different ways. From long experience trying to work in accessible and inclusive ways, the lesson we have learned, and the papers highlight, is that if we try and do this, working tends to be a more positive experience for *all of us*. It is likely to mean that we do things in different ways – and this will have implications for writing, research and journals like this, but *the result is almost invariably more positive and more helpful for everyone*.

More pragmatically the papers also point to struggles with funding and resources, and how limited they can be – particularly for service user led groups and groups of disabled people. Sadly, this reflects a much wider picture. User controlled and survivor research repeatedly report facing major barriers in accessing funding from both statutory and independent sources. Access to publication can also be a problem. Hopefully this special edition, by bringing together a range of different high quality contributions in this field will serve as another incentive to challenge such barriers.

In this edition

*Pat's Petition* describes the working of a UK based self-run campaigning group – seeking to gain a target number of signatures on an e-petition seeking a review of benefit changes for disabled people. It challenges as to 'what is a group': there are core members, groups of

supporters, a wider group of interested people and then all who signed the petition. Groups can be seen to be fluid.

The paper discusses the clear and commonly shared goal of the group, and the impact of not reaching that commonly shared goal. Membership and the loss of members, as well as the integration of new ones are all discussed - "Think of the group like a shoal of fish or a flock of birds, sometimes just one or two and at others one large group all gathering to head in the same direction." Relationships between group members, and how important it is to work together in a respectful way are considered.

*Turning the Tide* is a paper describing another self run group for women in the south-west of England who had used alcohol services. Whilst the group was self-run, there was facilitation and leadership provided by founding group members. Once again the significance of relationships between the women and importance of support both to enable women to come to their first meeting, and also support between meetings are stressed. In this paper the role of professionals is considered as is the importance of shared experience and how membership of such groups can be empowering for members. Staddon finishes with advice to other service users considering carrying out similar groupwork.

*Gather the Women*, written by a professional drawing strongly on material created by group members especially for the paper, describes another women's group, for women with limited financial resources. Based in Pennsylvania, USA the group had leadership from professionals. Alongside the groupwork, there is also individual support (for example advocacy, resources) and members have personal goals for personal growth and economic advancement. The authors' study shows that the group had a significant impact on members increasing their trust in other women, self-confidence, self-esteem and their overall empowerment and offered much needed social support for women living in poverty.

The fourth paper is the evaluation of a Community Outreach Program in Addictions based in Toronto Canada, 'An evaluation of an innovative group based psychosocial approach to groupwork for older adults who have problem substance use and mental health issues - the participants speak'. This is a fixed term programme of groupwork with older adults who have problem substance use and mental health issues. The study found, in common with the other groups, that the atmosphere in the group is vital to whether members feel comfortable being part of them

and is linked to how trust develops, which in turn affects the willingness of members to share experiences and talk honestly in the sessions. The importance of meeting with others facing similar issues to themselves is stressed by group members – “We are all in the same boat together” as was humour. Members valued the educational and holistic approach of the groupworkers. The majority of group members felt their health and quality of life had improved from being part of the group,

The final paper in this edition, People with Asperger’s syndrome lead the way in how to work in a group, focuses on groupwork with adults with Asperger’s syndrome. Group members identify a number of factors that make the group experience successful in their opinion: these include the group’s clear shared values and the fact they felt they were regarded as experts. For the group members the fact that groupwork is an unusual approach for people with Aspergers, was important – they had a shared motivation to experience how it would work. This paper describes the role members took in the group and how they moved away from more traditional roles, such as ‘leader’, but each developed a role that fitted with their skills and with which they felt comfortable. The paper clearly shows that groupwork can be highly successful for people with Asperger’s syndrome when undertaken with respect and recognition of the abilities of the group members.

We will leave the final word with Drumm (quoted in Martin et al in this issue) who says:

Groups validate every person’s voice and honour each participant’s view by exemplifying faith and belief in each individual’s capability of constructive contributions’ (p. 5).

Finally we would like to express our gratitude to the service user reviewers for this edition - Colin Cameron, Patricia Chambers, Sid Jeewa, Kay Malko, Anne Nutt and Graham Price.

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## References

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