

Review

Empowerment in Action: Self-Directed Groupwork
Audrey Mullender, Dave Ward and Jennie Fleming
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 232pp
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This is a new edition of what I consider to be an inspirational classic in the groupwork literature (Mullender and Ward, 1991). It revisits and updates the original text on self-directed groupwork, taking the reader through the values and stages of this approach to working with groups. Some examples from the original text are revisited, including reflective commentary from participants about the lasting benefit of having engaged with this form of coming together and taking action; new examples are also described from across sectors, professions and cultures. This new edition is much more international in its reach and its review. Before and after the chapters that comprise the main ingredients and stages of the model are others devoted to a critical exploration of terms such as power, empowerment, participation and involvement, a review of the degree to which groupwork still exists, at least in state social work in the United Kingdom (UK), and application of the model to research, consultancy and training.

Among the strengths of the book are its clear writing and concise presentation of the model. Examples abound, which enable the reader to discern how the model might be applied in different settings. The book wears its values on its sleeve; it is clear that this is an aspirational, radical approach that seeks to achieve social change and social justice for people whose lives have been blighted by oppression, discrimination and disadvantage. It is both practical and radical, ambitious in its reach for change and feasible to deliver with commitment. It challenges readers to aspire to something more than individual change, although the authors are at pains to stress that individuals also may well benefit personally from their involvement. In so doing it rightly takes issue with dominant discourses about groupwork and is as refreshing now as was the original edition when first published.

Although the voices of past and present self-directed groupwork participants are included within the text, describing the evident long-term impact on how they frame issues, take action, and also gain personally from involvement, the book itself is written by those who have nurtured and developed the approach. Given the centrality of anti-oppressive values to the book and the groupwork model, this is a little disappointing. Chapters might have been given over to group members themselves to give voice to their lived experience of this approach to groupwork and what it has achieved.

Equally, especially in the earlier chapters, the book conveyed to this reader a slightly self-congratulatory tone. The reader is given insights into self-directed groups and organisations that have successfully taken issue with manifestations of structural disadvantage and oppression. Only occasionally is the reader given an insight into less successful attempts at initiating self-directed groupwork. Learning can be taken from both successful and less satisfactory outcomes. Perhaps too, a slightly more critical or reflective stance might have been taken as to the degree to which achieved social change is sustained over time.

That said, it is clear from the examples given that what starts out as social change on a local scale can become both national and international in aspiration and impact. Again, more detail of how group members and group facilitators have moved from engaging with local to wider platforms, and what they have learned in the process, would prove illustrative for others who aspire to achieve change beyond neighbourhood or community boundaries.

There are occasional proof-reading and index lapses but the bibliography and appendices offer additional examples with which readers can engage to learn more about the model and the outcomes of this approach to groupwork. Once again, some of the contents of the appendix that details groups and organisations using self-directed groupwork principles and approaches might have been written by facilitators and members themselves.

Groupwork may no longer have much of a profile in social work education or in the practice of state social work in the UK, but for those who use groupwork methods in their work, whether teaching or practice, this book is a refreshing reminder to reconsider long-held assumptions about working with groups and to recall the evidence of the impact and outcomes that groupwork can achieve. In a climate such

as that of the UK, England especially, where there are a few breaches in the wall of managerialism and bureaucracy, and a greater recognition of the value of relationship-based and research-informed approaches to practice, this book is a timely reminder that groupwork has an evidence base alongside currently more in vogue methods such as systemic family therapy, motivational interviewing, and cognitive behavioural interventions. The book also offers optimism that social change is possible and sustainable.

Reference

Mullender, A. and Ward, D. (1991) *Self-directed Groupwork: Users Take Action for Empowerment*. London: Whiting and Birch

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