

# Review

*The Book of Games and Warm Ups for Group Leaders* [2nd edition]

L. Rutherford

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I've always enjoyed warm-ups and games and have used them extensively in my training, teaching and groupwork, so I was pleased to review this book. I hoped to chance on some good ideas for activities to use in my current work. Active warm-ups have somewhat fallen from fashion in training events, so I am hoping they might be experiencing a come-back.

It would be hard to disagree with a book based on a 'philosophy that laughter and play are basic human needs that feed the soul and unleash natural creativity' (cover blurb), but I was intrigued by the reference in the same sentence to 'Shamanic principles' and the author's move from psychotherapeutic models to shamanistic ones. This was either going to be an intriguing eye-opener or a bit too 'West Coast' (US, I mean, not Blackpool). How would shamanism go down with a group of hardened social workers in Ipswich?

Rutherford's is a very personal account. It is unreferenced, though there is a list of resources at the back, the largest section by far being devoted to music. The index is composed solely of the list of game titles (considerable) with a brief two-word description after each, for example, *Creative Excuses* Word Game; *Shoulders* Gentle Dance; *Soundbath* Closing Game. After the first two introductory chapters, each chapter clusters a number of games around certain themes, such as Helping People Meet, Improvisation, etc.

In his first chapter (*Why Play?*) Rutherford describes play as free-

form creativity ('if you know the outcome, it is no longer play', p. 29). He links playfulness to games, which are described as chaos within a framework, that require abiding by some rules. 'Through games and role playing we get to show something of ourselves' (p. 37) – and who we might become. Games and playfulness also reconnect us to the child in each of us. He sees this as compensation for all the 'left-brain' dominance of the logical world and notes that play is what is most missing in the target-driven, consumerist and managerialist context that dominates much experience of work. 'My thesis is that laughter and play are basic human needs' (p. 11), alongside being daring and risk-taking. Indeed, the author notes that fear of making mistakes blocks learning. He reminds his readers that laughter is part of a tradition of the jester telling truth to power, most classically in King Lear; there are cruel aspects to humour.

In this first chapter we are introduced to *The Medicine Wheel* and the four primary elements of existence which, I have to be frank, didn't do anything for me, but might for some readers.

The essence of the second chapter, *A guide to being a facilitator*, is 'go with the flow' - if the group is experiencing high energy, facilitators should choose games that tap into this and then move into introspective, gentler structures such as a trust game; if low energy, don't fight it, and reconstruct the programme accordingly. Rutherford gives the following advice to facilitators regarding the group participants: 'It doesn't matter if you happen not to like the personality of any of your participants, you can still be loving towards their essence' (p. 41). Chapter two also contains a canny list of props for facilitators to have at their disposal (p. 45).

The third chapter focuses on *Warm up games*. It is in this selection of warm-ups that the basic question of expectations (the facilitator's of the group and the group's of the facilitator) is first exposed, but not really discussed by the author. Rutherford speaks of the destructive power of cynicism (in reference to how a game can be very successful if entered into with an open mind but completely destroyed by cynicism). Unfortunately, many of the people that social workers work with in groups have lived lives that have engendered cynicism and fear, so it would have helped to have more discussion of how groupworkers can work with this cynicism – indeed, examples of games specifically to help a group confront its own cynicism.

The suggestions in this chapter, and the book in general, might be described as ‘touchy-feely’ and/or involve chanting. An example:

Start with a standing circle, holding hands ... get everyone singing a simple song or chant. For example, a Native American chant like this:

*Earth my body, water my blood,  
Air my breath and fire my spirit.*’ (p.48).

I can see this working well in some groups, whilst in others people are curling up with inhibition. I have my own personal ‘mother test’. My mother was not a cynical person, but she was deeply private and I can see her blushing with embarrassment at the thought of entering into most of the games that Rutherford describes. My ‘mother test’ is not designed to stop me from using these kinds of games but to remind me that there may well be a person, or many people, in the group for whom games like this are very, very difficult. Am I going to use them, then, and if so how am I going to ensure that I do not lose the Mrs Doels in the group? One concern I have about Leo Rutherford’s approach is that there is not much accounting for ‘my mother’, possibly because all those who have come to his groups are self-selected and know what to expect. There is only a little discussion of engaging shy people and dissolving resistance; for the many social workers working with people who are not self-selected, more discussion of how inhibited or cynical or reluctant people are drawn into games like these would be welcome.

It is probably not the aim or purpose of the book, but I found myself wanting more exploration of a game’s intent; e.g. *Opposite Emotions*, p. 58, where the group is asked to jump about with joy shouting ‘I’m depressed’, etc. Some brief exploration follows this game “From time to time we all express the opposite with our words or deeds, so when we do it in a game we also recognise something about ourselves and can laugh about it.” I think readers would appreciate more reflection from the experienced author to illustrate occasions when he has used the game and it has gone well (how and why) and when it fell a bit flat (how and why).

The Mingling ideas, (*Helping People to Meet*, chapter 4) were disappointing because there were not sufficient differences amongst them.

In *Verbal improvisation games* (chapter 5), Rutherford usefully notes

that ‘Many of us have been so criticised that we do not dare to speak before thinking, and so we kill our own creativity and spontaneity’ (p. 75). The activities in this cluster are designed to loosen up participants and encourage them to speak. In *Fortunately/Unfortunately* (p. 76-7) for example, a group member is invited to start, ‘Fortunately, so and so ...’ and a second member butts in with ‘But unfortunately ...’ and adds to the first person’s statement, then a third, ‘However, fortunately ...’ and, alternately, onwards. Speed, non-censoring of statements, lateral thinking and departure from linear logic are all encouraged.

The improv. theme continues in chapter 6, *Theatre games and improvisations*. It reminded me of the TV programme, *It’s Your Line*. The ideas are interesting and imaginative – quite demanding for some groups. Yet again, I would have liked more discussion of each, including examples of the pitfalls and pleasures in using these games; fewer activities with more analysis and reflection.

The discussion about high and low status in chapter 7, *Power and status games*, limits itself largely to the personal and inter-personal. The cultural and social context is missing (race, class, gender, age, etc. in groups and their possible relevance to these games) and I’m aware that this rather two dimensional approach is limiting the book’s appeal for me, though others might not expect or want more analysis. There is little guidance about how the use of games and group activities might achieve the author’s aspiration to get beyond status issues; indeed, Rutherford’s belief is that *all* interactions are either high or low status. It feels unsatisfactory.

I love dance and there were some interesting ideas in chapter 8, *Dance games*. The reflections of someone who had experienced one of the dance games (p. 131) were illuminating, and it would have been good to include more of these throughout the book.

The title of chapter 9, *The blamer, the placater, the computer, and the distracter* borrows categorisations developed by Virginia Satir. I’ve never been a fan of categorisations – the personifications of behaviour, so that ‘scapegoating behaviour’ becomes ‘the scapegoat’. Instead of searching for complex dynamics and groups, this personification encourages group leaders to put effort into identifying an individual to pin a label on. It feels disrespectful to label someone ‘blamer’, etc. rather than to describe blaming behaviour within the group. Notice, too, how these kinds of labels are invariably pathological rather than desirable. This

list in chapter 9 – blamer, placater, computer, distracter – does nothing to change my view.

‘Closing is as important as starting’ (p. 151), yet only two pages of *Closing a Session* (chapter 10) are devoted to closing; the rest of the brief chapter comprises suggestions for programming. This is disappointing, as there is a dearth of good cool-downs and summarising games and tips and ideas would have been especially welcome.

*In summary*, there are some interesting ideas for group activities in this book. Indeed, I tried out a couple with success during a day of workshops with groupworkers in Suffolk, including *Italian breathing* (p. 47) – a warm-up that I used as an effective cool-down at the end of the day. Overall, the book would benefit from more reflection on the experience of using these activities and from some more contextual reflection. As I write this review, I chance on a review of David Graeber’s *The Utopia of Rules*, in which he suggests that instead of being rule-following drones of capitalism, we are essentially playful (*Guardian Review*, 21/3/15, p. 13) – themes that resonate with Rutherford’s book but which could usefully be explored to give it that third dimension.

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It is not easy to review a book such as this. Essentially it is a reference work although it is structured to provide elements of continuity by offering thematic threads across sections. As a reference work, one must ask whether it is sufficiently comprehensive to offer the prospective enquirer confidence that ad hoc queries will be answered? For those looking for guidance in the skills and processes of groupwork practice, is the narrative sufficiently detailed to help in the myriad complexities

and vagaries of the groupwork endeavour? The co-authors acknowledge the challenge and, at the outset, provide the reader with guidance for using the book.

As a reference work, the book is organised around a selection of key topics set out alphabetically. While each entry stands on its own, within each there are cross-references to other related entries as signposted at the beginning of each entry. A scan of the contents pages setting out the seventy five topics covered shows a selection of topics which any experienced groupworker would recognise as pertinent to their work. Fortunately, there is a comprehensive index which expands upon the alphabetical list and rectifies my initial concern that some key topics may have been missed. For instance, empowerment, while surprisingly not categorised as a topic in its own right, is identified in the index and is addressed under the key topic 'Power'. Inevitably, in an A-Z or any similar reference work, the selection of topics will reflect the co-authors' preferences and leanings. In this work, however, the topics are sufficiently broad as to provide a compendium that people from all corners of the discipline can open with some confidence that their interests and needs will be covered.

In terms of depth, undoubtedly the more value-based and contested areas of groupwork are recognised and touched upon. For example, the section on Social Action addresses the nature of leadership and the balance between process and outcome. However, development of the critical and reflective understanding which is necessary to work responsively and effectively in groupwork's wide range of constituencies will require the reader to study, learn and debate well beyond the pages of this book. To their credit, through cross-referencing and signposting, the authors make a serious attempt to facilitate this learning process. Following trails from topic to topic was not just interesting and instructive but, by introducing a lateral element, prompted lines of thinking that took me into new territory 'outside of the box' of my initial assumptions.

This book provided me with several interesting and fulfilling hours of 'dipping into' information and ideas that constitute the accumulated theory and practice of groupwork. I am not sure that I agree with the cover blurb that it is "an ideal starting point for people new to groupwork", although, as a reference work, the book has much merit as a supplement and support to their studies and practice learning.

(Unfortunately, I did find some referencing errors.) However, I do feel that the more experienced and, probably, time-starved practitioners will enjoy using this book to dip into the ideas and themes that make up their discipline. I am sure that they will find it to be an engaging and convenient “gateway” into materials and thinking that will enhance their continuing development as groupwork practitioners.

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