

Focus on practice

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Focus on practice

This issue of *Groupwork* focuses on groupwork in action, with three examples of different significant areas of groupwork practice alongside a research paper exploring the consequences of a retreat from groupwork in US social work training, as well as a review of a new edition of a fundamental text on social work (*Social Work: The basics*).

In *Internship Supervisors' Perspectives of Group Work Within Social Work Practice*, Shirley Simon, Kristina Lind, and Teresa Kilbane note the decline in the recognition of the significance of groupwork and the resulting effect on practice. Groupwork may be declining because it is less visible in social work and other professional groups. As these authors find, and as can also be inferred from Lauren Lo Re's detailed *Group Therapy Proposal for Parkinson's Patients*, the actual need for groupwork practice has not diminished.

Everyday groupwork

Developing and implementing a programme of group work requires preparation and planning. A problem in knowing what may be involved in the skills for organising activities and actions is that the numerous actions involved in supporting groupwork are often unrecorded.

The experience of what Tarun Bannerjee, Sagarika Bannerjee, and Mark Doel describe in *Street groupwork in Kolkata*, as "everyday groupwork" is intuitive and fluid, often stemming from "flash groupwork", where people find themselves organising around a particular purpose in the moment.

Paul Johnson and Lydia Savage also report in this issue: the mutual and reciprocal processes which arise from these everyday connections, and form around practical issues (*AFUM and groupwork*). These structures which are necessary to manage the practical activities themselves become forums and spaces where critical discussions develop. These opportunities enable dialogues that could not be appropriately pursued in other parts of the network.

Organizing things

Many groupwork processes are tacit, particularly in the union work that Johnson and Savage describe (Tait, 2016): the skills of organising the space;

following up people who have missed a few meetings; supporting people who are uncertain about joining or hesitant about their contributions. Sustaining meetings and small organisations through the periods when membership is thin, or when members are preoccupied with other activities and life responsibilities, might, for example, be amongst the unseen tasks of groupwork that people get on with but do not have the time to record. The mundane details of stocking up tea and biscuits, tacking notices on the community information board, attending the management committee for the community space to negotiate group access on Wednesday afternoons, or recording petty cash are all significant contributions that someone must remember to do – and were usefully set out in classic activist handbooks such as Ward's (1984) *Organizing things*. Such publications were necessary for people to steer their way through groupwork processes under the stress of managing a campaign, the nuts and bolts of which could be overlooked. As Bannerjee et al say, many of these unappreciated or overlooked facets of *everyday* groupwork have to be rediscovered or retrieved from someone's experience of running other groups.

The consequences of underestimation

Simon, Lind and Kilbane show that the consequences of underestimating the full breadth of groupwork are that the skills are not taught or experienced in the training of professionals who might be expected to use these apparently mundane skills in everyday groupwork. Johnson and Savage therefore offer an illustration of how these important skills are fundamental to active citizenship, democratic participation and the protection of rights, an aspect of groupwork that potentially touches anyone who needs to be represented in a community or as a worker asserting their rights.

Roles like the keeping of minutes or petty cash tins, the organisation of keys to access the building, ensuring the new members are welcomed and introduced to people before the meeting starts are essential to the reciprocity of responsibilities that members share. These actions give the sense of ownership or the modelling of experiences that enables people to feel that they too are part of this collective (Bannerjee et al 2025). Such informal processes can be as important as the more dedicated content of the group activity – even part of the process of empowerment, because they can confer belonging, or provide a space for spin off activities to be negotiated between members (Harding et al 2018, Pollard, 2010). These important spaces within a group can easily be overlooked. Perhaps they occur before the main business of the group, in

refreshment breaks or gatherings that may take place afterwards. They may also be spaces in which the power of the group itself can be recognised, such as representing a gathering of local people who can be consulted in local planning decision processes (Grant et al, 2017).

Social practice theory (Shove et al. 2012) can offer a way to trace how the human actions and skills involved in groupwork are afforded by structures (facilities, union organisation) and resources (tea, spaces) which enable groups to achieve meaningful practice – learning to manage living with Parkinsons and resume an interest in photography [Lo Re]. Social practice theory has frequently been used to underpin ways of understanding practice in professions such as social work and occupational therapy in relation to disasters and complex situations (e.g. Maglajlic, 2019; Creek et al, 2022), as well as unravelling complex human practices, whilst appreciating their individual components and elements. Groupwork practice takes place in spaces which are currently under pressure: structures are being altered as higher education, health and social welfare systems are dismantled and resources restricted to save costs, and skills devalued as tasks are made more reductively generic or “vague” (Daly et al 2024, p958).

The practice of groupwork is one of the important spaces and resources for the affirmation of professional identities (Simon, Lind and Kilbane in this issue) and vital to meeting needs that people have for discovery, growth and confirming their capacity, but its core place in practices, training, and as a professional tool has to be asserted and sustained. The everyday components of groupwork are embedded in practice and potentially taken for granted, but their essentiality should not be overlooked.

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