What is group work?

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What is group work? While many practitioners may describe what they do as 'group work', they often have only a limited appreciation of what group work is and what it entails. In this piece we introduce groups and group work, define some key aspects, and suggest areas for exploration. In particular we focus on the process of working with groups.

Contents: introduction • what is a group? • working with • working with groups – a definition • three foci • exploring the theory and practice of group work • conclusion • further reading and references • how to cite this article

For some group work is just another way of talking about teamwork. In this context, working in groups is often presented as a good way of dividing work and increasing productivity. It can also be argued that it allows for the utilization of the different skills, knowledge and experiences that people have. As a result, in schools and colleges it is often approached as a skill to be learnt – the ability to work in group-based environments. Within schools and colleges, working in groups can also be adopted as a mean of carrying forward curriculum concerns and varying the classroom experience – a useful addition to the teacher or instructor's repertoire.

In this article our focus is different. We explore the process of *working with* groups both so that they may undertake particular tasks and become environments where people can share in a common life, form beneficial relationships and help each other. Entering groups or forming them, and then working with them so that members are able be around each other, take responsibility and work together on shared tasks, involves some very sophisticated abilities on the part of practitioners. These abilities are often not recognized for what they are – for when group work is done well it can seem natural. Skilled group workers, like skilled counsellors, have to be able to draw upon an extensive repertoire of understandings, experiences and skills and be able to think on their feet. They have to respond both quickly and sensitively to what is emerging in the exchanges and relationships in the groups they are working with.

Our starting point for this is a brief exploration of the nature of groups. We then turn to the process of working with. We also try to define group work – and discuss some of foci that workers need to attend to. We finish with an overview of the development of group work as a focus for theory-making and exploration.

What is a group?

In a separate article we discuss the nature of groups and their significance for human societies (see What is a group?). Here I just want to highlight five main points.

First, while there are some very different ways of defining groups – often depending upon which aspect of them that commentators and researchers want to focus upon – it is worthwhile looking to a definition that takes things back to basics. Here, as a starting point, we are using Donelson R. Forsyth's definition of a group as *'two or more individuals who are connected to one another by social relationships'* [emphasis in original] (2006: 2-3). This definition has the merit of bringing together three elements: the number of individuals involved, connection, and relationship.

Second, groups are a fundamental part of human experience. They allow people to develop more complex and larger-scale activities; are significant sites of socialization and education; and provide settings where relationships can form and grow, and where people can find help and support.

> Humans are small group beings. We always have been and we always will be. The ubiquitousness of groups and the inevitability of being in them makes groups one of the most important factors in our lives. As the effectiveness of our groups goes, so goes the quality of our lives. (Johnson and Johnson 2003: 579)

However, there is a downside to all this. The socialization they offer, for example, might be highly constraining and oppressive for some of their members. Given all of this it is easy to see why the intervention of skilled leaders and facilitators is sometimes necessary.

Third, the social relationships involved in groups entail interdependence. As Kurt Lewin wrote, 'it is not similarity or dissimilarity of individuals that constitutes a group, but interdependence of fate' (op. cit.: 165). In other words, groups come about in a psychological sense because people realize they are 'in the same boat' (Brown 1988:

28). However, even more significant than this for group process, Lewin argued, is some interdependence in the goals of group members. To get something done it is often necessary to cooperate with others.

Fourth, when considering the activities of <u>informal educators</u> and other workers and <u>animateurs</u> operating in local communities it is helpful to consider whether the groups they engage with are planned or emergent. Planned groups are specifically formed for some purpose – either by their members, or by some external individual, group or organization. Emergent groups come into being relatively spontaneously where people find themselves together in the same place, or where the same collection of people gradually come to know each other through conversation and interaction over a period of time. (Cartwright and Zander 1968). Much of the recent literature of group work is concerned with groups formed by the worker or agency. Relatively little has been written over the last decade or so about working with emergent groups or groups formed by their members. As a result some significant dimensions of experience have been left rather unexplored.

Last, considerable insights can be gained into the process and functioning of groups via the literature of group dynamics and of small groups. Of particular help are explorations of group structure (including the group size and the roles people play), group norms and culture, group goals, and the relative cohesiveness of groups (all discussed in <u>What is a group?</u>). That said, the skills needed for engaging in and with group life – and the attitudes, orientations and ideas associated with them – are learnt, predominantly, through experiencing group life. This provides a powerful rationale for educative interventions.

Working with

Educators and animateurs often have to 'be around' for a time in many settings before we are approached or accepted:

> It may seem obvious, but for others to meet us as helpers, we have to be available. People must know who we are and where we are to be found. They also need to know what we may be able to offer. They also must feel able to approach us (or be open to our initiating contact). (Smith and Smith 2008: 17)

Whether we are working with groups that we have formed, or are seeking to enter groups, to function as workers we need to be recognized as workers. In other words, the people in the situation need to give us space to engage with them around some experience, issue or task. Both workers and participants need to acknowledge that something called 'work' is going on.

The 'work' in 'group work' is a form of 'working with'. We are directing our energies in a particular way. This is based in an understanding that people are not machines or objects that can be worked on like motor cars (Jeffs and Smith 2005: 70). We are spending time in the company of others. They have allowed us into their lives – and there is a social, emotional and moral relationship between us. As such, 'working with' is a special form of 'being with'.

> To engage with another's thoughts and feelings, and to attend to our own, we have to be in a certain frame of mind. We have to be open to what is being said, to listen for meaning. To work with others is, in essence, to engage in a conversation with them. We should not seek to act on the other person but join with them in a search for understanding and possibility. (Smith and Smith 2008: 20)

Not surprisingly all this, when combined with the sorts of questions and issues that we have to engage with, the process of working with another can often be 'a confusing, complex and demanding experience, both mentally and emotionally' (Crosby 2001: 60).

In the conversations of informal and community educators the notion of 'working with' is often reserved for describing more formal encounters where there is an explicit effort to help people attend to feelings, reflect on experiences, think about things, and make plans (Smith 1994: 95). It can involve putting aside a special time and agreeing a place to talk things through. Often, though, it entails creating a moment for reflection and exploration then and there (Smith and Smith 2008:20).

As Kerry Young (2006) has argued, 'Working with' can also be seen as an exercise in moral philosophy. Often people seeking to answer in some way deep questions about themselves and the situations they face. At root these look to how people should live their lives: 'what is the right way to act in this situation or that; of what does happiness consist for me and for others; how should I to relate to others; what sort of society should I be working for?' (Smith and Smith 2008: 20). This inevitably entails us as workers to be asking the same questions of ourselves. There needs to be, as Gisela Konopka (1963) has argued, certain values running through the way we engage with others. In relation to social group work, she looked three 'humanistic' concerns. That:

- individuals are of inherent worth.
- people are mutually responsible for each other; and
- people have the fundamental right to to experience mental health brought about by social and political conditions that support their fulfilment. (see Glassman and Kates 1990: 14).

Working with groups – a definition for starters

What does it mean, then, to say that we work with groups, or that we are group workers? A problem that immediately faces us is that most commentators and writers come at this question from the tradition or arena of practice in which they are located. However, if we bring together the discussion so far we can say that at base working with groups involves engaging with, and seeking to enhance, interactions and relationships within a gathering of two or more other people.

Some will be focusing on issues and problems, and individual functioning. It is not surprising, for example, that Gisela Konopka (1963) writing from within social work would have this sort of focus – although she does look across different areas where these might arise:

> Social group work is a method of social work which helps individuals to enhance their social functioning through purposeful group experiences, and to cope more effectively with their personal, group or community problems.

However, as Allan Brown (1992: 8) and others have pointed out, many group workers look beyond helping the individual with a problem. Group work can emphasize 'action and influence as well as reaction and adaption' (*op. cit.*). Thus, Allan Brown argues:

> … group work provides a context in which *individuals help each other*; it is a method of helping groups as well as helping individuals; and it can enable individuals and groups to *influence* and *change* personal, group, organizational and community problems. (Brown 1992: 8. Emphasis in the original)

This particular way of conceptualizing group work is helpful in that it looks to strengthen the group as what Lawrence Shulman (1979: 109; 1999) described as a 'mutual aid system'. The worker seeks to help people to help each other. Crucially, it is concerned with the ways in which both individuals and groups can build more fulfilling lives for themselves and for communities of which they are a part. It also looks to wider change.

Three foci

From this exploration I want to highlight three foci for group workers. They need to 'think group, attend to purpose, and stay in touch with themselves.

Thinking group

For the worker working with a group entails 'thinking group' (McDermott 2002: 80-91). 'Thinking group' means focusing on the group as a whole – 'considering everything that happens in terms of the group context (also the wider context in which it is embedded –social, political, organizational) because this is where meaning is manifest' (*op. cit.*:81-2). She continues:

> In advocating for the group worker to keep in mind that, while groups are comprised of individuals, at the same time their coming together may enable the expression of powerful forces reinforcing as sense of commonality and solidarity. These are the building blocks for the development of trust. Trust and its counterpart – reciprocity amongst members, may establish the bonds which serve to enable members to achieve their individual and common goals. The task of the worker is to nurture such developments. (*op. cit.*: 82)

For Fiona McDermott the capacity to 'think group' is the single most important contribution that group workers can bring to their practice. They need to avoid working with individuals in the setting of the group, but rather see individual growth and development as something that emerges out of group interaction and group life.

Attending to purpose

As well as attending to the group as a process of harnessing the collective strengths of group members, workers also need to look to purpose. Urania Glassman and Len Kates (1990: 105-18), for example, have argued that group workers should attempt to effect two complementary objectives. The first is the development of mutual aid systems; the second is to help the group to attend to, and achieve, their purpose (what they describe as the actualization of purpose). In other words, workers need to keep their eyes on the individual and collective goals that the group may or does want to work towards. They also need to intervene in the group where appropriate to help people to clarify and achieve these.

When considering purpose it is also important to bear in mind the nature of the group engaged with – and the context within which we are working with them. An influential model for thinking about this in social work came from Papell and Rothman (1966). They distinguished between three models:

- *remedial* – where the aim on the part of the work/agency is individual social adaption.
- *reciprocal* – where the aim is to strengthen mutual aid and to mediate between individuals and society.
- *social goals* – where the concern is to further social justice often through collective, social action.

Subsequently, there has been various variations and developments of this model e.g. Shulman (1999) – but this original model still remains helpful as a way of alerting us to thinking about purpose – especially from the perspective of the agency employing group workers.

Attending to ourselves

As Parker Palmer has argued in the context of education any attempt at reform or development will fail if we do not cherish and challenge the human heart that is the source of good practice (Palmer 1998: 3). For Palmer, good practice is rather more than technique, it flows from the identity and integrity of the worker' (Palmer 2000: 11). This means that they both know themselves, and that they are seeking to live life as well as they can. Good group workers are, thus, connected, able to be in touch with themselves, with those they work with and their 'subjects' – and act in ways that further flourishing and wholeness.

In a passage which provides one of the most succinct and direct rationales for a concern with attending to, and knowing, our selves Parker Palmer draws out the implications of his argument.

> Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together…. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life – and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject – not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth. (Parker Palmer 1998: 2)

If we do not know who we are then we cannot know those we work with, nor the areas we explore.

Exploring the theory and practice of group work

The emergence of the group as a focus for intervention and work within social work and informal education in Britain and north America was a slow process and initially largely wrapped up with the response of Christians, particularly evangelical Christians, to the social conditions they encountered in the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century. Examples from Britain include Hannah More and Robert Raikes and Sunday schooling; John Pound and Quentin Hogg and ragged schooling; George Williams and the YMCA; Arthur Sweatman and Maude Stanley in boys' and girls' club work. Their motives were often a complex mix of concern for others, the desire to bring people to Bible truths and values, and worries about the threat to order that the masses posed.

Alongside this a considerable amount of mutual aid activity developed during the nineteenth century especially around chapels, meeting houses, working men's clubs and in the field of adult education (see, for example, Smith 1988 on the making of popular youth work; Horton Smith 2000; Rose 2002). There was also a growing appreciation of group process and sophistication in approach within adult education. However, it was with developments in psychology and sociology (with the emergence of 'small group theory' and studies of group dynamics, for example) that the scene for a more thorough building of theory about working with groups – particularly in north America. Alongside this, the influence of progressive education as a philosophy – particularly through the work of John Dewey and William Kilpatrick – began to be felt by many practitioners (see Reid 1981a).

In the USA, courses on group work started to appear in the early 1920s – and the first sustained treatments of group work began to appear. In particular, the work of Grace Coyle (1930; 1937) drawing upon her experience of settlement work, the YWCA and adult education was influential – but many others around the field such as Eduard Lindeman (1924), Margaretta Williamson (1929) and Mary Parker Follett (1918; 1924) were exploring different aspects of working with groups. There began to be a discourse around the work that transcended professional and sector boundaries.

> First, it was discovered that workers in a variety of agencies had a great deal in common and that the major compoenent of that common experience lay in their experience with groups. Out of this recognition came the widespread use of the term social group work and the development of interest groups focusing on work with groups in a number of cities. The second discovery was that what was common to all the groups was that, in addition to the activities in which the group engaged, groups involved a network of relationships between the members and the worker, between the group as a whole and the agency and neighborhood in which the members lived. This combination of relationships was called the group process. This second realization produced a search for deeper insights into these relationships, an attempt to describe them and to understand their dynamics. (Reid 1981a:123)

Group work began to be seen as a dimension of social work in north America (perhaps best symbolized by it being accepted as a section at the 1935 National Conference of Social Work). It's potential as a therapeutic process was also starting to be recognized (Boyd 1935). As might be expected there was considerable debate around what group work was – and where it belonged (see, for example, Lieberman 1938). Although group work methodology was developed within recreation and informal education agencies it was increasingly being used in social work-oriented agencies within other institutions such as children's institutions, hospitals, and churches (Reid 1981b: 145-6). Influential commentators such as Gertrude Wilson (1941) argued that group work was a core method of social work and not a field, movement, or agency. At the same time theorizing about group work was benefiting from significant advances in the understanding of group dynamics (most especially through the work of Kurt Lewin) and small work groups (Elton Mayo's research at the Hawthorne Plant of the Western Electric Company being the best known).

By the start of World War II, group work in north America 'was beginning to change its emphasis from social action and preparation of group members for social responsibility to problems of individual adjustment' (Reid 1981b: 154). This gathered pace during the 1940s and was reflected in the publication of key practice texts – notably Grace L. Coyle's (1948) *Group Work with American Youth: A Guide to the Practice of Leadership*, and Gertrude Wilson and Gladys Ryland's (1949) *Social group work practice; the creative use of the social process*. There were those, such as Alan Klein (1953) who continued to explore the connection between group work and democracy – but much of the running was now being made by those working within social work and therapy. Gisela Konopka's explorations of therapeutic group work with children (1949), group work in institutions (1954) and of social group work as a helping process (1963) were amongst the most important here. Some more generic texts around social group work such Phillips (1957) also appeared.

In Britain, there was some awareness of these developments – but there was very little explicit exploration of group work theory and practice until the early 1950s. A number of the key figures involved in stimulating debate and exploration came from youth work – notably Peter Kuenstler at the University of Bristol. Kuenstler encouraged Grace Coyle to come to Britain to spend time with workers – and edited the first major text on social group work in Britain (Kuenstler 1955). Josephine Klein was another pivotal researcher and writer. Her books *The Study of Groups* (1956) and *Working with*

Groups (1961) were major additions to the literature – and brought groups and group work firmly into the discourse of social work. This was helped by the attention given by the Younghusband Report (Ministry of Health 1959) to social group work.

> Group work as form of social work is directed towards giving people a constructive experience of membership in a group, so that they may develop further as individuals and be better able to contribute to the life of the community.

There was also important work happening within community development – with studies of community groups (Spencer 1964) and small social groups (Phillips 1965). George Goetschius' (1969) long term exploration of work with community and estate groups was also important. Further significant work followed – notably Joan Matthews (1966) explorations of working with youth groups, Leslie Button's (1974) examination of developmental group work, and Bernard Davies' (1975) path-breaking interactionalist perspective with regard to the use of groups in social work practice.

At the same time there had been an explosion in exploration and publishing in the United States. Aside from the obvious problem of scale, there are issues around categorizing material, quality (many texts are are repeats of a basic how-to-do-it formula), and purpose. To make life easier I have adapted a framework used by Kenneth E. Reid in his helpful study of the use of groups in social work (1981) and added in a more therapeutically strand. I am not very comfortable with the categories – but they do provide a way of mapping material:

Case-focused group work. This approach can be described as 'preventative and rehabilitative', 'remedial' or 'organizational' – and is focused on the individual. The group provides a means by which an individual's problems can be assessed and addressed. It is most clearly connected with social work and casework and case management. The emphasis is upon 'ameliorating or preventing the adverse conditions that negatively influence individuals and result in deviant behaviour' (Reid 1981: 191). Classic examples of this literature come from Gisela Konopka (1949, 1954, 1963) and Paul Glasser et al. (1974).

Interaction-focused group work. Here the group is understood as 'a system of mutual aid wherein the worker and the members are engaged on the common enterprise of carrying out the group's goals' (Reid 1981: 191). Within this category fall humanistic approaches such as those of Glassman and Kates (1990), the social group work of Grace Coyle and the work of William Schwartz as his associates such as Lawrence Shulman (1979, 1999).

Group therapy, T-groups and encounter groups. There was a continuing growth in discussions that looked to the group as a key element in the therapeutic process – and that drew heavily upon central traditions of practice within psychotherapy e.g. psychoanalytic, Gestalt, cognitive-behavioural etc. Allied to this was material around family therapy (through which I have hardly bared to tread). 'Classic' work appeared from Wilfred Bion (1961) and some standard works from writers such as Irvin D. Yalom (1970). Another tradition of practice that could be said to fall in this strand is that of Training groups (T-groups). Here following on from Lewin's interest in using small

groups as training laboratories for teaching people interpersonal skills, Bradford's work at the National Training Laboratory at Bethel, Maine; and the later development of sensitivity-training or encounter groups (e.g. Lieberman 1973, Rogers 1970) are examples of the use of groups for interpersonal learning.

Social goals group work. Here the focus is on dealing with 'those problems that are related to the social order and the social value orientation in small groups' (Reid 1981: 202). This long established set of traditions of practice is closely linked to community organization/community work. See, for example Mullender and Ward (1991) and Twelvetrees (1982, 1991, 2001, 2008).

In recent years there has been a significant development in the discussion of therapeutic traditions of group work, and some limited attention to group work within mainstream schooling. Unfortunately, much of the work within the social work arena has resulted in rather pedestrian 'how-to-do-it' texts – but there have been some good introductory texts examples over the last decade or so (e.g. Benson 2000; Brown 1993; Doel 1999). Similarly, the quality of texts offered teachers and educators has been variable but one of the better examples is Jaques and Salmon (2006). Sadly, working with emergent groups, and with community groups has not had the attention it merits.

Conclusion

In this piece we have seen something of the development of thinking about group work – and explored some significant dimensions of practice. In many respects it raises as many questions as it answers. For those concerned with informal education, social pedagogy and social action there is a considerable need to explore ways of working with groups that:

- is educationally informed.
- has a vision of the people as social beings.
- is committed to democracy and social justice.
- looks to the groups that arise as part of everyday living.

While there are fascinating examples of practice in this area, there is a huge gap in the literature.

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