

TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE



3rd Edition

Groupwork Practice in Social Work

Trevor Lindsay & Sue Orton

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Jonathan Parker and Greta Bradley

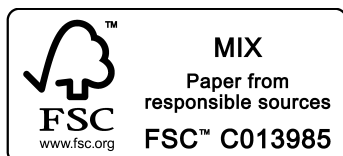
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About the authors

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Sue Orton is an experienced educator and learning facilitator, with over 30 years' experience working in all sectors. She has qualifications and experience in Humanistic Psychology and Psychodrama and is also a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Sue now divides her time between supervising educators, trainers and coaches and her other passion, weaving. See www.sueorton.co.uk.

Preface to third edition

In this edition you will find two new sections. In teaching the groupwork method we have sometimes found that students have problems in imagining actual situations with service users where they could see themselves facilitating a group; even when students are in an actual practice setting and meeting with a particular group of service users, they can still experience difficulty in seeing how the method might be applied in that situation with that group of people. In Chapter 1, therefore, we have added in some examples of groupwork opportunities that present themselves with specific service-user populations in different settings.

Groupwork has long been recognised as having benefits for learning and, as a student, you will often find yourself in group learning situations. Additionally, while there are some difficulties presented by students being assessed in groups, lecturers may find that these can be overcome and that the advantages in terms of integrating learning and assessment, students learning from each other and developing useful skills of cooperation, collaboration, negotiation etc. outweigh any disadvantages. Consequently, in the chapter on group process (Chapter 5) we have included a new section in which, in addition to providing an illustration, we draw out from the discussion of *process* some pointers that we hope will be helpful to you when you find yourself learning or being assessed in a group.

The book has also been updated in line with the Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Work.

Acknowledgements

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Finally, we would like to acknowledge and thank our partners, Irene Lindsay and Sarah Quantrill, for their tremendous support and help. We dedicate this book to them.

Introduction

This book is a practical 'hands-on' guide to planning, setting up, facilitating and evaluating small helping groups, together with the theory that underpins them. Although primarily written for social work students, the book is also relevant for new groupworkers in other roles and professions, for example in education, youth work and community organisations, as well as in team management.

Both the social work degree and post-qualifying award in social work require that students are competent in working with groups, and such skills are also valuable in interprofessional practice, in partnership working and within the social care workforce. The book contains common-sense guidance on setting up, facilitating and closing small helping groups, and interprofessional and other groups. The reader is introduced to relevant skills by making links between personal experience and life skills, including the development of emotional intelligence, listening, questioning interventions and personal boundaries, then introduced to planning and preparation, the stages and decisions in groupwork, and guided through what to do when things seem to be going wrong.

Research (Trevithick, 2005a) suggests that groupwork as a subject warrants a higher profile within the social work degree in the UK. Trevithick (2006) makes the point that, in four out of the five areas of social work practice – work with families, groups, communities and organisations – an understanding of groupwork theory is clearly relevant. However, in the remaining area – work with individuals – it is equally relevant, since we cannot hope to understand individuals unless we also understand the groups to which they belong. We hope that this book might help this situation by encouraging more people to try groupwork, and experience and disseminate its benefits.

Requirements for social work education

The Professional Capabilities Framework (The College of Social Work, 2012) requires social workers to be able to:

demonstrate a critical knowledge of the range of theories and models for social work intervention with individuals, families, groups and communities, and the methods derived from them; [to] select and use appropriate frameworks to assess, give meaning to, plan, implement and review effective interventions and evaluate the outcomes, in partnership with service users [and to] use a planned and structured approach, informed by social work methods, models and tools, to promote positive change and independence and to prevent harm.

Book structure

Chapter 1 introduces you to the concept of groups and the role these serve in human functioning. We discuss the characteristics of small helping groups and summarise the advantages, disadvantages and limitations of groupwork as a method of social work intervention and include some examples of social work populations for whom groupwork may be a helpful way of working.

Chapter 2 deals with planning your groupwork project: considering if a groupwork project is appropriate for meeting the identified yet unmet needs of service users and, if so, helping you make the case to colleagues in your organisation. We introduce the essential decisions in planning and structuring a group, taking into consideration issues of size, frequency, duration and composition, including age, class, ethnicity and gender.

Chapter 3 focuses on the tasks of facilitation: planning, intervening, monitoring and maintaining. We suggest that your facilitation style is grounded in your own values and principles and, more importantly, that your style will change and grow as you develop self-awareness. We offer models, theories and activities to assist your personal development, looking at intervention skills in some detail, including listening, questioning and six categories of intervention: supportive, catalytic, cathartic, confronting, informative and prescriptive. The chapter closes with a discussion of the pros and cons of co-facilitation, including factors that help a successful partnership.

Chapter 4 looks at the activities required when setting up the group, including the advantages of preliminary meetings with service users or potential group participants and what might be included in a groupwork contract.

Chapter 5 addresses group processes. Knowledge of how groups behave is important not only in making planning decisions, but also in making sense of what is going on. You will learn of some theoretical explanations of group processes and develop an understanding of how groups change and develop over time. We also argue that knowledge of process will be helpful to you as a student when you are learning as a member of a student group or being assessed through groupwork.

Chapter 6 leads on to how knowledge of process will be useful in planning a programme of activities for the group. You will read about the advantages of having a programme and learn about some of the issues to be taken into account in deciding on the shape of each session. We provide examples that you can adapt to suit your group.

Chapter 7 deals with issues of power and oppression. Recognising that your group will be representative of a society where power is not evenly shared and is used to oppress people, you will be introduced to the different aspects of anti-oppressive practice that need to be borne in mind at every stage of the facilitation role. You will consider how you might prepare yourself as an anti-oppressive facilitator, in terms of your awareness of yourself, and being able to recognise and deal with oppressive behaviour.

Chapter 8 discusses some of the challenges you may face in terms of unexpected and unhelpful responses from both those in the group and those outside it. We introduce you to some of the difficulties that can arise and you will be encouraged to adopt an analytical

approach to identifying the causes. Having read the chapter you will have some ideas about the responses you may make. You will be introduced to the idea of having a mentor.

Chapter 9 considers the tasks needed to gather evidence about your groupwork projects in order to demonstrate success to the different audiences and stakeholders, to enable you to learn and develop your practice and to disseminate your findings. We advocate developing a systematic approach to monitoring, recording and evaluating your groupwork before, during and after your project.

Learning features

As with the other books in this series, this book is interactive. You are encouraged to work through the book as an active participant, taking responsibility for your learning, in order to increase your knowledge, understanding and ability to apply this learning to practice. You will be expected to reflect creatively on how your learning needs can be met with respect to working with groups and how your professional learning can be developed for your future career.

Case studies throughout the book will help you to examine theories and models for social work practice. These are mostly fictionalised versions of real events we have encountered in practice. Activities that require you to reflect on experiences, situations and events will help you to review and summarise learning undertaken. In this way your knowledge will become deeply embedded as part of your development. When you come to practise learning in an agency, the work and reflection undertaken here will help you to improve and hone the skills and knowledge needed for your groupwork. Suggestions for further reading will be made at the end of each chapter.

Terminology

You will find in this book that we refer to facilitator, groupworker, worker and conductor. We use these terms interchangeably. A theme throughout the book is our insistence that, at its best, groupwork is an empowering, participative, integrating method of working with service users. As such, we eschew the use of the term 'leader', preferring to talk of conducting, facilitating and working with groups, rather than leading them. This is not to say that we deny the power and responsibility inherent in the role, that we do not recognise the centrality of the position that a facilitator occupies, or that we do not understand that most of the professional knowledge, skills and values needed to ensure the success of the group are located in that role. We do, however, wish to acknowledge that, at times, the leadership role can pass to other individuals in the group, that we wish to encourage the conditions in which this can happen successfully, and that all the members of the group, including the facilitators, are equal and that the group belongs to them all in equal measure.

Chapter 1

What is groupwork?

A C H I E V I N G A S O C I A L W O R K D E G R E E

This chapter will help you to develop the following capabilities from the Professional Capabilities Framework.

- **Professionalism**

Identify and behave as a professional social worker, committed to professional development.

- **Knowledge**

Apply knowledge of social sciences, law and social work practice theory.

- **Critical reflection and analysis**

Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision-making.

- **Intervention and skills**

Use judgement and authority to intervene with individuals, families and communities to promote independence, provide support and prevent harm, neglect and abuse.

It will also introduce you to the following academic standards as set out in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) social work subject benchmark statement.

5.1.1 Social work services, service users and carers

5.1.4 Social work theory

5.5.4 Intervention and evaluation

Introduction

So you want to work with groups? If you are reading this book as a student on a social work degree, you may be worried about your ability to meet course requirements for working with groups. Groupwork is at the core of social work, but what is it? Is it different from sitting round a table with your friends planning a party? Yes, probably, but in what ways? You *do* need to behave differently, but how and what does it mean for you? It is a lot more serious, since people's lives are involved. For one thing, you hold much more responsibility for planning and outcomes. Groupwork and group facilitation can also be a bit scary. Why might that be? Some reasons occur to us immediately. It will be rather more obvious to rather more people if we make a mess of it. Perhaps it feels risky too in terms of being challenged, put on the spot by the group members, with our ignorance or lack of skill exposed. So how do we go about learning to organise and facilitate groups

in a way that meets our responsibilities to the service users, our colleagues and our supervisors?

Our intention here is to help you to:

- begin to answer some of these questions;
- understand the contexts, challenges and situations you may meet;
- acknowledge the behaviour, skills and experience that you will need to bring to the front of your awareness;
- start planning, participating in and facilitating groupwork.

What is a group?

ACTIVITY 1.1

Spend a few minutes thinking about the groups of which you are currently a member. Write them down on a piece of paper.

COMMENT

How many did you get? Did you include family groups? You, your partner and children? Your parents and brothers and sisters? Your extended family? Social groups? Friends you meet up with at college? at gigs? after work? What about work groups, team meetings, trade union groups, task groups, committees? recreational groups? sports, music, reading, dieting? educational groups, buzz groups, seminar groups, presentation groups, study groups? It is clear that much of what we do, we do in groups.

We must first start by trying to establish some idea of what actually is a group. This is perhaps an equally difficult concept.

Some questions to ask

- How small or large can a group be and yet still be considered a group?
- We would agree that two people are not a group, but are three?
- What about 12, or 28?
- How long do people in a group have to have known each other to be a group?
- How regularly do they have to meet?
- Do they always meet in the same place?
- Do they have to meet at all or is it enough just to believe that you are a member of a group, even if it never meets, communicating perhaps over the internet, and being aware of the other people as a group?

- Who is it who is to say that a group exists? Is the group defined by people outside it who can say 'Look, there is a group', or does the group have to be aware of its existence as a group?

Perhaps it is impossible to arrive at a definition of a group since groups do not exist necessarily as separate definable entities. Phillips (2006) argues that trying to define the term is of little use to anyone. Manor (2000) makes the interesting point that every group has some unique features, yet all groups have characteristics that are the same. Perhaps we can make a stab at some of the qualities that any group has, that allow us to recognise it as a group, either as observers or participants. Many writers have attempted this. Preston-Shoot (2007) suggests that a necessary condition is that there is a collection of people who spend time together and that they both recognise themselves as a group and are seen by other people as a group. Levine and Moreland (2006) suggest that it may be misguided to make hard-and-fast distinctions between *groups* and *nongroups*, preferring to think in terms of *groupiness*, or *social interaction*, as a dimension along which sets of people can vary (p2). *Groupiness*, they explain, is greater in sets of people who interact more frequently and intensively, and have an idea of a group history and future. Coulshed and Orme (2006) argue that a perception of group membership extends beyond the time that the people spend together. Being a member of a group involves loyalty and commitment, which arise out of the interaction that takes place. They suggest that indeed members of internet 'chat rooms' may well consider themselves to be members of a group and that it is not therefore necessary that the group physically meets. Brown (1992) adds to the concept the ideas that there is interdependence between the members and that some common purpose exists, however ill-defined. Groups can be either formal or informal. A group may be a collection of young people who hang around a bus stop or it could be a committee set up by a government body.

Social, family and informal groups

Our starting place is your experience of groups and for you to reflect on your behaviour and 'roles' in those groups – first in the social, family and informal gatherings, of which you will have direct experience already, and then in 'working' groups – and to see what makes them different. We will then consider how these reflections might link you to social work groupwork.

There are groups that you are joined to because of your life circumstances. Think how you are in those groups, how you behave, and how safe or unsafe you feel when contributing or getting your voice heard. Think of the behaviour or 'roles' that are played in the group and how they affect your own behaviour. Reflect on these matters when you next join such a group. There is no right or wrong here, but there is value in building awareness of your and other people's behaviour and intentions when in these groups. Why? Because it is likely that you might transfer some of the behaviours, reactions or your unspoken 'rules' from these groups into 'groupwork' groups, especially when you start to facilitate them.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Can you think of an occasion when you behaved in a work group in a way that you have behaved in your family group? We are thinking, perhaps, of 'family rules' from the past that we still trip over in other situations in which we have to remind ourselves that we can behave differently now.

Now look at groups that you have chosen to join around an interest, life preference or social gathering. How are you in these groups? Are your behaviour, sense of safety and level of contribution different from those you experience in family or work groups? If so, how and why do you think that is?

Writing or drawing will help you build the picture.

COMMENT

Again, there is no right or wrong here, and the reason for building your awareness is the same. You are painting a picture of you in groups.

Working groups

The term *group* covers a wide range of gatherings and forms, from long-term training, seminars and workshops, to formal and informal meetings and gatherings, and personal and therapeutic development groups. The *work* bit may suggest a purpose. The interesting question is what the 'work' is and who does it. What are the factors that enable the work to happen in a clear, supportive and honest way? What role does the leader or facilitator of a group have? Who sets the rules for what should happen when? One of the keys is the relationship between the intention or purpose of the group and the behaviour that results.

Again, you may be familiar with groups that have been formed for a specific issue or purpose. Maybe you have attended or participated in a school council, a residents' meeting, or a society annual general meeting; think of examples of groups you have seen, joined or participated in with a set agenda or reason for gathering.

- Who decides when and where they meet?
- How do they organise themselves and know what to do?
- Is there an agenda or order of business?
- How do they decide who speaks when and what happens if these 'rules' are broken?

There will be a link between the behaviour(s) of participants and the agenda or purpose of the gathering. Can you think of examples of this link? If you can, what are they? Perhaps discuss this with your friends and colleagues.

You might also find watching television reality shows or parliament or your local council meeting helpful for developing very different insights into groups 'working'. As in the previous section, note your feelings and responses to watching different groups. Watch how people behave and consider the intention behind their behaviour. Could they have chosen to behave in a different way? What do you notice? What processes, feelings or emotions are