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Box 2.1 continued

Educational

Teaching group members to learn new skills, attitudes and behaviours, often through cognitive activities. The groupworker introduces a variety of different learning styles into the group and monitors changes in individuals' abilities.

Social Action

Empowering group members to effect change in their environment, often with a campaigning element. The group is less likely to have a formal leader, and may be a self-help group, with professional assistance to access resources.

Social Control

Containing group members, perhaps by providing an alternative to harsher forms of social control. The groupworker helps mediate between the group and the authorities, aiming to reform individuals' behaviours and beliefs.

Social Support

Supporting group members to help maintain or improve their social functioning. The groupworker finds practical ways of bringing people together who may be isolated and to help them to develop mutual aid, perhaps becoming self-help.

Task

Enabling group members to achieve certain goals by developing and completing appropriate tasks. The groupworker helps the group to focus on its end-goal, suggests role allocations in the group and keeps the group alert to time limits.

Therapeutic

Helping group members to come to terms with past or current difficulties, often focusing on psychological issues such as trauma. The groupworker takes care of the group, assisting members to support each other to express their emotions.

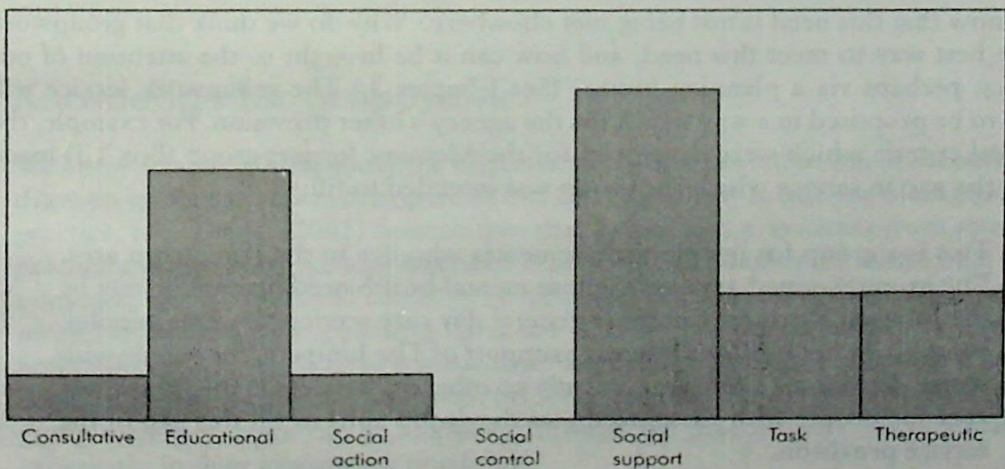
We must also take account of the immense range of settings in which groupwork occurs. Even within one agency, groupwork can have an impressive presence, across community, residential and day settings, and with people from various social groups and in very different circumstances (see Box 1.1). In some circumstances, such as group care and group living, the group is its own community.

ACTIVITY 2.1: FINGERPRINTING

- In the introductory chapter we presented an outline for each of the groups used to illustrate this book. Consider the outlines for the Crimestop group (C), the Family Support group (F) and the Memory Joggers group (J), and for each of these three groups construct a likely *fingerprint*, in the manner of the Westville Women's group (W) in Box 2.2.
- If you are currently involved in a group, draw its fingerprint and consider the likely implications for the content and style of the group. You will find it useful to return to this as you read through this book.

BOX 2.2 GROUP FINGERPRINT

Westville Women's group



Using a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means the element has no bearing at all, to 10 which means it is very heavily present in the group, it is possible to develop a rough and ready 'fingerprint' for each group. The example above is the fingerprint for the Westville Women's group.

If we take the example fingerprint in Box 2.2, we see that the dominant elements are identified as educational and social support, whilst social control is absent and the consultative and social action elements are considered insignificant. What implications does this particular fingerprint have for the kind of groupwork which would best suit this group? To be honest, we have very little empirical evidence to guide the groupworker's plans. That is the bad news. The good news is that, whilst there can indeed be no one model of groupwork, there are universal groupwork principles and practices which promote

good practice whatever the group's fingerprint, and that although the particular dilemmas which groupworkers face are experienced as very particular to the specific group, there are commonalities which enable you to transfer learning from one group experience to another, even when there are very different purposes.

Garvin *et al.* (2004: 5) state unequivocally that 'group work with an open-ended group is not the same as group work with a closed group. Group work on the computer is not the same as group work face-to-face'. They use this to argue for the need for theoretical specificity, though later recognise that there is an art to the application of practice guidelines. However, groupwork with one closed group can be very different from groupwork with another closed group, so we have to be careful that this logic does not reduce us to such levels of specificity that we can no longer understand 'groupwork'. Rather than looking for elusively precise practice principles, perhaps we need to understand better what makes groupwork *groupwork*. Essentially, that is the central purpose of this book.

Understanding the need (or not) for groupwork

Often it is our own experience which suggests the need for groupwork. This is a good basis to start, but we need to check this out; is our experience shared by others and do we know that this need is not being met elsewhere? Why do we think that groupwork is the best way to meet this need, and how can it be brought to the attention of our agency, perhaps via a planning group? (See Chapter 3.) The groupwork service will need to be proposed in a way which fits the agency's other provision. For example, the referral criteria which were developed for the Memory Joggers group (Box 1.J) made clear the gap in service which the group was intended to fill:

This is a group for people with dementia who live in the Jamestown area. The group is aimed at people whose mental health needs cannot be met by the Johnson Resource Centre [a general day care service for older people], but who do not need the intensive support of The Junipers [for people with severe dementia]. There are currently no other day services in the Jamestown area for people with these needs, so the group aims to fill this gap in the service provision.

Portfolio J, 2.1

Teams where there is a culture of sharing work experiences and reflecting on them can develop an awareness of service users with common needs. Wendy and her co-worker, Win, specifically wanted to include women with long-term severe mental illness because they were generally excluded from groupwork activities (Box 1.W).

The initial idea for the group came out of recognition that a number of women on the team's caseloads had several similarities in terms of unmet needs. For example:

- 1 they had talked about how their illness had affected their confidence and self-esteem;
- 2 they had talked about loneliness and problems they had keeping a conversation alive;

- 3 they appeared to have poor understanding of their mental illness and little knowledge of alternative ways of helping outside traditional medication.

Portfolio W, 2.1

An organisation might understand groupwork to be an efficient way of managing the amount of work, as Fran notes below. This is fine as long as groupwork *is* the best way to meet the service users' needs, and the agency also accounts for the time needed to prepare and debrief from groups as well as the direct contact time in the group.

There was a large amount of family support work cases within the Firwood team and it was felt that a parenting support group could reduce the workload of individual social workers quite significantly.

Portfolio F, 2.1

Despite your desire to do groupwork, the local research might conclude that groupwork is not possible or appropriate. Often this is because there are insufficient numbers of people who are compatible, but it may be that needs are better met on an individual basis. If a group would be justified but there are not the resources, this information needs logging so that the potential group can have a call on resources if and when they do become available.

Knowledge for groupwork

We know relatively little about the different types of knowledge which social workers draw on in their practice (Sheppard *et al.*, 2001) and this is true for their groupwork practice, too. Lewis' (2002) formulation that *knowledge = evidence from research + practice wisdom + service user and carer experiences and wishes* is a useful one; for our purposes, 'service users and carers' = group members. This book's starting point is the second factor in Lewis' equation, 'practice wisdom'; however, we saw in Chapter 1 how collecting this wisdom in standardised ways and reflecting on it systematically can begin to transform the wisdom into 'evidence from research'. We also saw how the group members' voice can be amplified through the practitioners' documentation of experience in their groupwork portfolios.

The practitioners in the Groupwork Project (Box 1.1) had the advantage of making immediate use of the knowledge from the training workshops. It is likely that application of knowledge was assisted by its nearness in time and space – 'proximate' knowledge. These groupworkers were also generating new knowledge through their practice and bringing this back into the project via consultations and workshops, which in turn assisted them in making this knowledge more explicit. As Eraut (2005: 2) notes, 'the role of tacit knowledge in routinized professional practice is greatly underestimated, if not denied'. Groupwork can be a way of breaking out of this kind of routine, and over half (48) of the 91 learners who had the opportunity to practise groupwork recorded their practice systematically in a common portfolio format, where they also collected reflections on their learning. The knowledge from all of these experiences underpins this book.

An especially attractive feature of groupwork is its capacity to position group members' knowledge at the heart of professional practice. This knowledge, derived from the

direct experience of service users and carers as group members, is too often neglected and subjugated (Croft and Beresford, 2002). It is much more difficult to neglect in groups, even in those which are heavily led and tightly scripted. The mathematics of a group (usually many more group members than groupworkers) and the central mission of groupwork, means that service user experience is inevitably a deep and essential resource, the very reason for bringing people together in the first place.

What constitutes knowledge has long been recognised as highly contested (Trevithick, 2005) and the knowledge of marginalised groups in society, such as service users, and black and ethnic minority groups, is often not heard, not counted and not valued. Groupwork is one way in which the current rhetoric about listening to service users and carers can become a reality. Groupwork practice has a rich tradition of listening to and acting on the voice of people whose knowledge has been considered peripheral, and of helping people to motivate and mobilise. There is still a long journey to find ways to disseminate this experiential knowledge, though the growing user-led research movement is showing the way. In addition to the different and unequal power bases of these sources of knowledge, they use such different languages and respect such different criteria that it is hard to overemphasise the challenge of bringing these together. This book is intended to be one small contribution.

Increasingly, there are attempts to codify and gather knowledge in social care in 'knowledge reviews' which are underpinned by the notion of the *quality* of knowledge and developing a better understanding of how knowledge works in social care (Pawson *et al.* 2003; Shaw *et al.*, 2004). For instance, an anecdote may be very illuminating, but we should be cautious about drawing any general conclusions from it. The beliefs and experiences of particular group members constitute very real truths for them, but might be at distinct odds from the truths for other group members. We also need to beware the creation of such tight criteria for knowledge that it is pushed far out of the reach of anybody without an enormous research budget to conduct randomised control trials (RCT). Indeed, there has been no large-scale RCT undertaken in the UK in social work overall, never mind groupwork specifically. Disentangling all the variables is extraordinarily complex. For example, though cognitive behaviour treatment (CBT) has 'significantly positive results against comparisons with either no intervention or with other commonly employed methods' (Sheldon, 2000: 70), how much is due to the CBT and how much is due to the groupwork in which CBT is frequently conducted? (Rose, 2004).

Topic-related knowledge

In addition to knowledge of groupwork, the worker needs knowledge and theoretical understanding around the content of the group. For example, if the group's purpose is to help people who misuse drugs and alcohol, groupworkers should have an understanding of substance misuse. Jenny might review Rishty's (2000) strengths perspective in reminiscence groupwork with depressed older adults to prepare for the Memory Joggers group. Paul, co-leading the Parents Plus group (Box 1.P) relates one of the member's success stories to his understanding of how the changes might be explained:

Pat's story is in line with evidence about how [these changes] work: parents 'develop a belief system in which the child's difficult behaviour is attributed