**GROUPWORK**

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Groupwork (North American spelling: group work) is one of the four pillars of social work: individual, family, group and community work. It has been central to social work since its origins in the nineteenth century. People came to the early Settlement houses collectively rather than individually and groupwork quickly developed as a natural way of working within the Settlements. Later, the adult education and recreation movements developed the use of activities not just as leisure but as part of the social process, with a therapeutic intent.

Groupwork became increasingly aligned with the emerging profession of social work, particularly in the United States and during the 1950s and 1960s theories of group development were elaborated, as well as groupwork models such as the social goals, reciprocal and remedial models (Papell and Rothman, 1966). The notion of *mutual aid* in groups emerged. In the UK the newly formed Social Services Departments brought the various social work services together in the early 1970s and there was a growth of groupwork, more especially with young people, offenders, family services and in mental health work. Indeed, in some Probation Departments groupwork was the main method of practice.

There are indications that groupwork has declined in recent times, certainly in mainstream social work education and practice - though other professions, such as occupational therapists, might be making up some of the gap. However, empirical evidence is scarce (Simon 2012).

*Group process*

Groups are a fundamental aspect of being human. We participate in many different kinds of group in our everyday lives – family, peer, social, leisure, political, religious, etc. We are also inclined, as humans, to form spontaneous groups that have been termed ‘flash groups’ (Doel, 2007) Some groups are planned and created specifically to work with particular problems and difficulties – perhaps self-led, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, or facilitated by a professional. These latter groups rely on the leader’s knowledge and skills with group process, that is, the communication patterns within a group of people. These patterns sometimes do not work; for instance, an individual dominates the group, the group starts to scapegoat one of the members, a subgroup separates from the group, or there is a taboo issue which the group cannot bring itself to face. In these circumstances, the groupworker’s knowledge of group process helps them to assist the group to overcome the obstacles and to model effective and empowering patterns of communication.

*Different kinds of group*

Adapted / existing 1 ***Group history*** Created / planned

Open 2 ***Joining and leaving***  Closed

Difference 3 ***Group mix***  Sameness

Self-help 4 ***Leadership*** Practitioner-led

Open-ended 5 ***Duration*** Time-limited

Long 6 ***Extent*** Short

Seldom 7 ***Interval*** Frequent

Large 8 ***Size*** Small

Outward-looking 9  ***Focus*** Inward-looking

Voluntary 10 ***Choice***  Compulsory

Loose 11 ***Structure***  Tight

Diffuse 12  ***Space***  Dense / intimate

*Group Contours, adapted from Doel and Sawdon,*

The Essential Groupworker, *1999: 73-4.*

There are many different kinds of group and there have been various ways of illustrating these difference in the groupwork literature. The *Group Contours* model above shows twelve different dimensions to arrive at a unique profile for any single group. Each group will have its own place on each of the twelve continua and this profile will, in turn, indicate the kinds of methods and models of groupwork that might be most appropriate. For instance, an outward-looking group like a local neighbourhood group that is fighting to keep its Post Office is likely to benefit from being relatively large, open and diffuse whilst an inward-looking group, such as a group for women who have experienced abuse as children, will work better if it is small, closed and intimate. These contours can be used to help to plan a new group and to consider the likely best profile to meet the group’s purposes.

*Tuning in*

The variety of techniques that can be used for successful groupwork is enormous. Here is a taster of one technique. It is called ‘tuning in’ and, rather like tuning into the correct frequency on an old-fashioned radio, it helps the group leader to get on the same wavelength as the group members and, therefore, to anticipate some of the feelings that they might be experiencing as they come to the group. Feelings need to be acknowledged – they can work strongly in favour or strongly against successful groupwork.

Groupworkers should give themselves a few minutes’ quiet time as close to the beginning of the group as possible and ask themselves what kind of feelings and thoughts do they you anticipate the group members have before the first session?

* Glad I have made it.
* Will I have a panic attack?
* Will I be heard or will I not speak at all?
* What will others think of me?
* Will any-one bother about what I have to say?
* What if I get upset and cry?
* Will others be like me?

*Tuning In, from Doel, M. (2006),* Using Groupwork, *page 62.*

If the groupworker has met each member beforehand (perhaps making an individual offer of the groupwork service) this makes it easier for the groupworker to respond to these questions and, more importantly, to know which questions to ask. As groupworkers get to know their particular group, they will know which questions to ask to help them to tune in. They should also ask themselves how *they* *themselves* are feeling, as their feelings are important and influence their leadership of the group.

*Group and team identity*

Groups, like teams, work best when they have a sense of their own identity. This can occur with the passage of time, but professionally-led groups rely on the leader to work with the group process in order to accelerate the development of identity. Here are some ways in which group members can achieve the feelings of belonging and togetherness that are associated with group identity.

*8 ways to develop group and team identity*

**Choose a name**

Often the name of the group has been a ‘given’, but choosing a name for the group *as a group* is an excellent way for the group to consider what it stands for. Often a team does not have a name, but perhaps this is a good opportunity for team members to decide on their name.

**Sentence completion**

Have the group focus on itself as a group by answering sentences which begin:

‘in this group I feel ….’; ‘this group helps us to …’; ‘if this group were a colour it would be … ‘ ‘I would like other people to see this group as …’ The same can be done with ‘team’.

**Scarce resource game**

The group or team is in competition with three other groups or teams for a much desired prize (tailor this to the particular group). The group must build a case as to why it deserves the prize more than any other group. You can leave these other groups as unknowns, or supply details for them.

**Group tangle**

The group holds hands in a circle. Then, by stepping over and ducking under the arms of people opposite, and not letting go of any hands, the group knots itself until it cannot move any more. Then the group must untangle itself without letting go of any hands.

**Re-decorating**

The group’s meeting room is up for redecoration and the group must choose a colour scheme and new furnishings. Great if the group can actually do this, but even a hypothetical re-decoration plan can be very effective to build group identity.

**Coat of arms**

The group or team must decide on its coat of arms. Once the group has discussed and agreed what this should look like, it sets to with coloured paper, paints and the like to make one. The group then reflects on why and how this coat of arms was chosen.

**Docudrama**

The group is being featured in a Channel 4 docudrama, *‘What makes a group?’* The groupworkers interview the group for an in-depth, inside look at what makes group work. Similarly, *‘What makes a team?’*

**The group symbolized by an animal**

‘If this group were an animal, what kind of an animal would it be?’ Every-one has to make a case for their own ‘animal’, and then the group negotiates which of these to choose as its emblem. Similarly, ‘if this team were an animal … ‘

*Group Identity, adapted from Doel, M. (2006),* Using Groupwork, *pages 86-7.*

All of these group identity activities can be used with teams, too. If a team is viewed as a group, and the team leader as needing groupwork skills, the team is likely to function much more successfully.

*References*

Doel, M. (2007), ‘Flash groups’, *Groupwork, 17*.3, 3-7, London: Whiting and Birch.

Doel, M. and Sawdon, C. (1999), *The Essential Groupworker: teaching and learning creative groupwork,* London: Jessica Kingsley.

Papell, C and Rothman, B. (1966) 'Social Groupwork models: possession and heritage', *Journal for Education for Social Work* 2.2: 66-77.

Simon, S. and Kilbane, T. (2012), 'Group work in graduate social work education: where are we now?' in *AASWG Chicago Proceedings,* pp 95-106, London:Whiting and Birch.

*Further reading*

For a comprehensive approach to groupwork – from planning a group right through to ending and evaluating it – and for accounts of actual groups in social work and social care written by the groupworkers themselves, see:

**Doel, M. (2006), *Using Groupwork,* London: Routledge/Community Care.**

For an up-to-date A-Z entry to the world of groups and groupwork, with an outstanding bibliography to help you follow through with more specialist reading, see:

**Doel, M. and Kelly, T. (2014), *A-Z of Groups and Groupwork,* Basingstoke: Palgrave.**