

## CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCE

### OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you should:

- Feel introduced to the purpose, scope and limits of this book
- Know about the Groupwork Project and how it has informed this book
- Understand the nature of the portfolios used in this book
- Feel introduced to the groups which illustrate the book
- Be interested in the possibilities (and the limitations) of theorising from practice.

## INTRODUCING THE BOOK

This book is about groupwork. It explores the similarities and differences between groups. Through that exploration the book seeks to develop an understanding of the nature of the 'groupwork' which unites these diverse experiences. As we shall see, the book makes regular and consistent reference to nine actual groups in order to learn more about the practice of groupwork. Through the lens of the groupworkers, we will learn more about the strengths and limitations of groups and about the many factors which contribute to a successful group.

Of equal importance to the groupworker's perspectives are those which derive from group members themselves and from formal research knowledge about groups and groupwork (Manor, 2000b). These perspectives will be incorporated into the text, though



our principle viewpoint will be that of the groupworker, for reasons which will soon become clear.

I will be developing a model of groupwork which is 'generalist'. By this, I mean that it is not specific to any one kind of group in any one particular setting. It transfers readily to a broad variety of locations for groups and groupwork. The evidence for this claim comes from the experience of developing and refining the model of groupwork over many years with groups and groupworkers whose circumstances varied enormously. The contention that there are essential qualities common to all groupwork is based, therefore, on systematic experience and testing. Details of the Groupwork Project are contained in Box 1.1.

### BOX 1.1 THE GROUPWORK PROJECT

The Groupwork Project was an action research project with the aim of developing and sustaining a groupwork service in a social work agency in northern England. The project was open to all staff in the agency, social workers and social care staff, and occasionally other professionals, in all sections and settings. It included a training and consultation programme over a period of half a year and this was integrated into a programme of continuing professional development. All participants were invited to submit portfolios of their groupwork practice for assessment. As noted, the quotations in this book are taken directly from a sample of nine of these portfolios. It is not the purpose of this book to present or evaluate the project as a whole, since this has been documented elsewhere (see below). Suffice it to say that, though the project had much success in generating groups and developing groupwork competence, when attempting to infiltrate the mainstream it encountered the kinds of difficulty which have been well documented by Smale (1996).

#### Further reading about the Groupwork Project:

Doel and Sawdon (1995, 1999a, 1999b); Doel *et al.* (2002).

#### The groups

68 groups were planned  
54 groups ran successfully (79% of those planned)

#### Of the 54 groups which ran successfully:

37 groups were in community settings	(69%)
9 groups were in day-care settings	(17%)
7 groups were in residential settings	(13%)
1 group was in a school setting	(2%)

20 (37%) groups were in the children and families sector of which:  
1 (+2)\* groups with children below 12 yrs  
10 (+1)\* groups with young people 13-18 yrs



**Box 1.1 continued**

- 9 groups with carers of children and young people
- 0 (+2)\* groups with children with learning disabilities.
- 14 (26%) groups were in the mental health sector; they included well-being, and not necessarily for people with diagnosed mental disorders.
- 9 (17%) groups were in staff development.
- 8 (15%) groups were in the adult services sector of which:
  - 7(+4)\* groups with older people
  - 1(+1)\* groups with adults with disabilities.
- 3 (6%) groups were with offenders:
  - 1 group with adult offenders
  - 2 (+1)\* groups with young offenders.

\* Figures in brackets indicated a related interest: for example, a group for parents and carers of young offenders is counted in the 'carers' tally and registered in brackets in the 'young offenders' category.

Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number

**Co-working**

- 47 groups had co-workers (87% of the 54 successful groups)
- 7 groups were sole-led (13%)
- Of the 14 planned groups which did not happen:
  - 5 groups were planned as sole-led (36% of groups not progressing beyond planning)

**The groupwork learners**

122 learners took part in the Groupwork Project

- 58 social work trained (48% of the total)
- 59 social care staff (48% of the total)
- 5 others (4% of the total)
- 91 were involved in successful groups (75% of all learners)

**The groupwork portfolios**

- 48 portfolios were submitted (39% of learners)
  - 28 from social work trained staff (58% of portfolios)
  - 20 from social care workers (42% of portfolios)
  - 41 passed on first submission (85% of portfolios)
  - 5 passed on re-submission (10% of portfolios)
  - 2 were unsuccessful (4% of portfolios)

31 different groups (57% of all groups which ran successfully) were represented in the 48 portfolios (many co-workers submitted their own portfolio around the same group)

All figures are correct as of 2005.



A generalist model of groupwork must, of course, take account of context. Indeed, the significance of the context in which groups and groupwork take place will be a strong and recurring theme in the book. Ironically, the significance of the specific context is, itself, a general and common characteristic to all groups and groupwork practice, and sits comfortably within a generalist model.

## Documenting practice

This book is based on the learning derived not just from the nine illustrative groups, but from all the 54 groups in the Groupwork Project (Box 1.1) and, indeed, those 14 groups which were unsuccessful in moving from the planning stage. This learning has been amplified by the fact that 48 of the 122 participants in the project documented their groupwork learning and practice in a systematic and standardised format. To do this they used a portfolio: a collection of materials to demonstrate the learning and practice ability of its author (Doel and Shardlow, 1995). Portfolios have great potential to develop practice by availing the wider practice community of detailed information.

The groupwork portfolios provide particularly rich detail for the lives of 31 of the 54 groups in the project. Each portfolio was structured in the same way. Data were collected in a standardised format and systematically presented by the groupworkers, who were asked first to describe, then to analyse, and finally to reflect on 18 different aspects of the group and their own groupwork practice, thus providing over 50 sets of information. In addition, appendices in each portfolio provided direct materials from the group itself, as well as a video-tape of the group in session, when the appropriate permissions could be obtained.<sup>1</sup>

Although the idea of 'portfolio' goes beyond the conventional notion of a case or group record or even a groupwork 'assignment' (Wayne and Cohen, 2001), it is interesting to locate the groupwork portfolio in the broad history of social work documentation. For example, the understanding that documents can be used to construct and develop a common knowledge base for practice was demonstrated almost a century ago by Mary Richmond (1917). This involved social work practice rather than groupwork practice, but the premise that representations of practice (whether in case files or portfolios) can inform practice development has a long tradition. Shortly after Richmond's text, Ada Eliot Sheffield (1920) authored an entire book on case records, *Social Case History*. Most interesting of all for groupworkers is Grace Coyle's (1937) *Studies in Group Behaviour*, a book based on case studies of five groups. These groups had engaging names such as 'The Gay Girls', 'The Merry-Makers' and 'The Concordia Club – a study of hilarity and conflict'. Therefore, the process of using practitioners' documented work to inform and shape future professional practice has a long history (Gilbert, 2004).

The advantage of the groupwork portfolio is that it is written not as a case record but as a descriptive, analytical and reflective account of the practitioner's learning and practice development, with case material as illustration. For the purposes of exploring how groupwork is practised and how groupworkers conceptualise their practice, the portfolio is a better instrument than an agency case record. Any potential distortions arising from a portfolio author's desire to present their shiniest practice, were countered by a strong message from the Groupwork Project that some of the 'best' evidence comes from those times when the groupworker feels most challenged ('calm seas ne'er produce an able seaman'). In fact, the portfolios were, by and large, refreshingly can-



did, reflecting the honesty experienced in the workshops and consultations. (For more details about the training programme which supported the project, see Doel and Sawdon, 1999b.)

This book has grown out of the detailed reading and analysis of portfolios of groupwork practice and learning, so that the architecture of the book reflects the themes which arose from the practitioners' own groupwork. This has been a rewarding experience, which I hope will have a positive effect on the authenticity and relevance of what is presented.

## Theorising from practice

The development of portfolios in recent years has made it possible to draw on practitioners' own words in a systematic way. Although writing about experiences helps them to 'become clearer and more objective for later study' (Lähteenmäki, 2005), this is only the case if the manner of the writing is accessible and systematic. If the learning is to become more than personal, broader than anecdotal, it needs to be sufficiently standardised to bear comparison and contrast with others recording their experiences, too. As Sheldon and MacDonald (forthcoming) note, 'Informed practitioners are potential contributors to the knowledge base, if they so organize their evaluations of their work that they are reliable enough to be fed back into the research and development process'.

The portfolio can provide an authentic window on how groupwork is experienced and practised, and the portfolio template is constructed in such a way as to peel away the groupworkers' thinking, so that we learn not just about what happens in the group, but how the groupworkers conceptualise this experience and how they learn from it. We have an insight into how individual groupworkers are conceptualising their own practice as 'insider-researchers' (McDermott, 2005) and this, in itself, is of immense value. However, can we go further and consider these conceptualisations as 'a collective experience'? In other words, are there ways in which we can use each individual portfolio as a brick which, together, construct a greater understanding? This book is something of an experiment, but hypothesises that the answer is probably 'yes'. If one portfolio provides evidence of the way in which an individual groupworker is theorising their practice, it seems reasonable to suggest that, taken together, we should be able to learn even more about how groupwork practice is theorised. Given the broad range of groups in the sample, we should also be able to learn more about the nature of the core elements of groupwork.

There are some cautions. First, the sample remains relatively small, even though it is large in comparison with what else is available. Certainly, there is a wide variety of groups, but they are all housed within one social work agency, a statutory social services department in northern England (with the exception of the Crimestop probation service group). They are all created groups, that is the groupworkers were responsible for their formation. None are user-led or self-help in nature. None are primarily social action groups (Ward, 2004; *Groupwork* journal, 2004). Second, all the 'bricks' have been fired in the same kiln; in other words, since all the groupworkers were trained through the one project, is it possible that we are merely looking at our own reflection? What we put in to the training is merely reflected back through the portfolios. There are, then, advantages and disadvantages to being an insider. This contrasts, say, with



the groups with which Phillips (2001) illustrates her text, where she has the advantages and the disadvantages of being an outsider.

Third, the portfolios are instruments not just of learning and practice, but also of assessment (Doel *et al.*, 2002). Knowing that a judgement will be made on the basis of the portfolio, how tempered is the evidence presented by the portfolio authors? These, and no doubt other, factors all need to be taken into consideration before any larger claims can be made about the collective evidence to be derived from these portfolios of groupwork practice.

Of course, the portfolios are not the sole evidence. The wider experience of the project included workshops and consultations which provided a rounded picture, and we have a wealth of groupwork experience through the formal literature, though the evidence base is yet in its infancy (Preston-Shoot, 2004). We shall consider this in more detail in Chapter 9.

Unusually, then, this book takes its primary references from groupworkers' portfolios rather than traditional academic referencing.<sup>2</sup> The quotations in this book are taken direct from portfolios and only occasionally modified to clarify meaning. The number which follows each reference (e.g. Portfolio P, 5.2) is the relevant section in the portfolio, and 'P&O' is an abbreviation for 'Power and Oppression', a regular unit through the portfolio.

As well as the advantages and the innovations of this approach, there are also some difficulties. Practitioners' portfolios are somewhere between the private and the public domains, so I have respected the confidentiality of their authors and the reader is unable to visit the source. With quotations from published works you can follow up the sources directly, and judge for yourself how representative the quotations are. Until we have a systematic way of making practice experience available, perhaps in an electronic library available to all (with safeguards for the confidentiality of service users and carers), this kind of access is not possible. Nevertheless, I trust that the disadvantages are outweighed by the advantages, and I have attempted a faithful representation of the themes emerging from the groups as demonstrated in the portfolios. I hope that the unmediated voice of practitioners will become increasingly common as a principle reference.

Discovering how practitioners theorise is central to the development of practice, groupwork or otherwise. Chapters 2 and 9 will consider in more detail the basis for our current understanding of groups and groupwork, and how the evidence base might grow.

## The nine groups

Nine groups illustrate the book. All were supported by the Groupwork Project training programme, and all but one were located in the same social services department ('Crimestop' was in a Probation Service). The groups could be referred to as case studies, but I prefer the notion of *storytelling*. The stories of these groups, their individual members and the groupworkers, are a powerful narrative which helps us to 'empathize with the experiences of others' (Fairbairn, 2002: 24). It is, after all, this ability to empathise with the narrative of these stories that helps us to make sense of our own experience and learning, and to make the translation into our own groupwork practice.

The groups have been chosen to reflect the variety of the project, but they are not intended in any way to be carefully representative. In some respects the choice of groups is immaterial, given the central premise of the book that groupwork has generic ele-



ments and that strong connecting themes link groupwork in contrasting situations. However, I recognise that, as the reader, you are likely to relate more to some of the group's contexts than others. Even so, a strong message from many of the participants in the project was the benefit derived from the opportunity to learn about groups in unfamiliar settings, alongside people in circumstances very different to those they usually encountered. Learning can accelerate when you cannot call on a stock response. This is useful advice for your progress through this book; when approaching the activities in each chapter, it can be useful to choose to work on examples in territory which is new to you.

Even where there seem to be stark differences between groups, such as the degree of choice which group members have regarding membership, we will see that these differences lie along the same continuum, rather than at unconnected, opposite poles. Learning about the notion of compulsion from studying a group where members are present because of a court order can tell us much about the nature of so-called 'choice' in groups where members are self-selected.

An outline of each of the nine groups is sketched in the boxes at the end of this chapter (Boxes 1.C to 1.W). You will be able to refer back to these profiles as you read the book. All names have been anonymised and a unique identifying letter is used for each group. For example, the Crimestop group is Group C, the names of the groupworker, co-workers and members all begin with C, and the portfolio reference is Portfolio C. I hope this will enable you to differentiate quickly between different groups as they appear in the text. The few quotations from portfolios not in this sample are referenced as Portfolio X and all boxes are numbered by taking the number of the chapter as the first number, so Box 3.2 is the second Box in Chapter 3.

## The groupworkers and the group members

We see the groups through the eyes of the nine groupworkers. From their perspective we have a reasonably clear view of the group members, whose stories provide the fabric of the group. Groupworkers and group members are two of the 'drivers' identified by Preston-Shoot (2004: 23) when considering the search for evidence of groupwork's effectiveness. Like the groups themselves, the practitioners are not chosen to be strictly representative of the 122 learners who took part in the Groupwork Project, though they do reflect the range of participants. There are six social workers with varying years of post-qualifying experience, two social care workers without a social work qualification, and one probation officer. Eight of the nine are women, eight are white and one is dual heritage. They were located in various settings – adult services, community mental health, children's services (family support; child and adolescence mental health), family centre, leaving care project, youth offending and probation. All nine groupworkers had co-workers and there are occasional quotations from the portfolios of two of these co-workers.

I have described the access which portfolios give to the perspectives of groupworkers. It is possible to learn much about the group members, too. Group members' evaluations were included, and groupworkers were regularly asked to reflect on their participation and progress, both in terms of individual members and the group as a whole. Video recordings of some sessions provided a direct window into the group. However, with more resources it would have been desirable to discover members' views directly,