

to external situational circumstances rather than to intrinsic characteristics of the child' (Carr, 2000: 33).

Portfolio P, 7.2

The child of Penny, another member of this group, was assessed as possibly showing early indications of some form of disorder, which meant they were of a different order than her peers and the usual parenting techniques would have less effect. Understanding these differences is important to successful groupwork.

'Connecting' knowledge is important to relate one area, such as social work practice, to another, groupwork. Orla, the groupworker with the Offending Awareness group (Box 1.O), is aware that groupwork programmes have been shown to reduce offending behaviour by between 10% and 20% (Dixon, 2000: 14). Researching sessions around victim awareness, she also understands that the young offenders may have been victims themselves, and that there are many potential advantages to the group context.

As Harrower (1993: 234) points out, 'groupwork with young offenders has particular advantages over traditional one-to-one casework. It allows those who are not adept at communicating, either verbally or non-verbally, to participate at their own level of expression and learn from observing others'.

Portfolio O, 2.1

There are, then, at least three kinds of relevant knowledge and literature:

- The general groupwork literature (of which this book is an example);
- Context-specific literature, for example, relating to work with children, mental health work, criminal justice, working with older people;
- Specialist group methods, such as cognitive behavioural groupwork.

Where the group is part of a specific programme, there might be a ready-made supporting literature, which brings all of these components together. This was the case for Claire and the Crimestop group (Box 1.C). However, preparing for groupwork 'from scratch' requires a willingness to search widely.

## ACTIVITY 2.2: SEARCHING

To prepare for the Westville Women's group for women with severe and enduring mental health problems, Wendy searched the following literature:

- General groupwork
- Feminist groupwork
- Groups for people experiencing mental illness
- Anti-oppressive social work
- Activity resources for women's mental well-being groups.

Take three of the groups outlined in Boxes 1.C to 1.W and consider what different areas of knowledge you would need to search in order to prepare for leadership



of the group. You should complete this activity with regard to any group you are preparing to lead.

## Groupwork and relevant disciplines

In this section I will look very briefly at examples of the way in which many different disciplines contribute to our understanding of groupwork.

### Philosophy

My focus is the existential aspect of groupwork, though there are many other branches of philosophy. Groups can bring not just a sense of belonging, but a deeper sense of *meaning*. Baggini (2004) explains that large and awkward existential questions such as 'what is the meaning of life?' can have either backward-reaching or forward-looking responses. This is a useful insight for groupwork. For example, some groups may bring meaning to its members by helping them consider, or re-consider, the past. The effects of past, perhaps traumatic, experiences and a greater understanding of them might help the group members to live more contentedly in the present. Although group members will rarely have lived these past experiences with each other, they may discover that there are similarities and that the consequences of these experiences are familiar. Moreover, the group gives the opportunity to share the process of re-discovery and assimilation.

Yet again, groups might seek meaning from forward-looking explanations. What future purpose or goals will help give meaning to the group members? These may be shared or related goals, or individuals in the group might share the process of determining their own different meanings together. The group might well become an instrument by which this forward-looking meaning can be achieved. Groupworkers may hold a tacit belief that the group's meaning must come *either* from a backward-looking *or* from a forward-looking orientation, whereas the group might best be served by combining both kinds of meaning. Indeed, not everything has to be a means to an end; the group might derive satisfaction just from *being*. This is neither backward nor forward, but present. A combination of all three is likely to provide the deepest and most fulfilling sense of meaning and value for the group. Chapters 4 and 5, in particular, consider ways to develop meaningfulness and identity.

### Politics

There are many levels at which politics and groupwork connect. Small groupwork might be viewed as a training for participation in a social democracy, with mutual aid models reflecting democratic ideals (Gitterman, 2004) and developing 'active citizenship' (Silverlock, 2000). Certainly, groupwork is a practical expression of the ideology of collective solutions, though there is a tension between the individualist, liberal values which inform much social work, and the collective principles which inform both social democracy and community work practice (Jordan, 2004). Groupworkers should reflect on whether they believe their practice to focus on managing social problems and



containing social needs; or, alternatively, on 'transformational perspectives, geared not only to meeting social needs, but also addressing the causes of oppression and discrimination' (Mayo 1997: 169). Beliefs are underpinned by ideological assumptions and it is interesting to speculate whether the group as a context is ideologically neutral. A group can, for example, be used for social control as easily as social support, and both at the same time. Group pressure can be oppressive as well as liberating, and a commitment to groupwork can spring from an ideology of radicalisation or social conformity.

Issues of power are likely to be more transparent in groupwork, and none more so than the politics of gender (Cohen and Mullender, 2003). At a theoretical level, the dominant postmodern paradigm suggests that notions of 'male' and 'female' are simplistic, and that the divisions and subgroups within these categories are considerable. However, experience tells us that gender remains a significant element in the dynamics of groups, reflected in the continuing popularity of single gender groups, often using gender to define the group's title, as in the Women's group. The co-workers in the Women's group (Box 1.W) decided to exclude men from membership because they felt it less risky for women to be with one another, and to build trust more easily. It also prevents women from adopting stereotypical roles of deference to men (Portfolio W, 2.1). As Claire noted in respect of the offenders in the all-male Crimestop group:

They tend not to ask a male colleague such questions as '*are you married?*'

Portfolio C, 2.1

Most important is to remain open to all experiences of gender and not to deny a person's own experience of their gender because it does not fit our theories or beliefs. In many ways, this is no less than *the* groupwork challenge: to find commonalities whilst not denying differences. This theme runs throughout the book and is highlighted in Chapter 6.

### *Social and organisational psychology*

One of the best known contributions to our knowledge of groupwork from social psychology is the concept of group pressure, made popular by a number of high-profile experiments (Asch, 1952). However, in this brief section I will highlight an element which is core to successful groupwork, difficult to establish in individual work, and often not considered explicitly: play and playfulness. The significance of play for children is well rehearsed, even though it is sometimes lacking in their lives (Simmond, 2005). Children generally have more opportunities for play in their everyday world, but the group may open up new kinds of play in which they can explore different aspects of their 'self'.

For adults, groups can provide permission for play, in all its many meanings. It may be a chance to play in the sense of have fun; the group might be the only place where some members are able to experience their 'child'. In addition, the group can be a place to play other roles, either formally in some kind of rehearsal of a situation to practise for the world outside, or implicitly by trying on new kinds of role – for instance, of one who helps rather than one who has been used to being helped. Playfulness is a significant part of being human and even in groups with painful and intense purposes, we should



always find reasons for some playfulness. Chapter 5, in particular, considers ways in which groups can find their playfulness.

Cultures and structures in organisations have a direct impact on the delivery of services and they can be friendly or hostile towards groupwork as a mode of delivery. There are 'micro-climates', too, which influence the likelihood of groupwork taking root in this team or unit and not in that. A very useful concept from organisational psychology is that of the 'champion'. Chapter 9 considers the organisational context in greater detail and the significance of champions for groupwork.

## Understanding ethical groupwork

Central to social work practice with groups is the concept of mutual aid. The group worker recognizes that the group, with its multiple helping relationships, is the primary source of change. The group worker's role is one primarily of helping members work together to achieve the goals that they have established for themselves.

(Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups [AASWG], 1999)

This statement introduces a set of 'Standards for Social Work Practice with Groups'. Behind the factual nature of the statements are ethical considerations about what groupwork *ought* to look like. Rightly or wrongly, these Standards would bring into question the legitimacy of groups where social control is a significant element, where membership is obligatory or even where content is prescribed by a manual. What we are reminded of is the moral purposes of groupwork and that groups are, themselves, moral agents. Groupwork is as much about helping a group to articulate a set of values as it is about learning new behaviours, sharing painful stories or achieving mutual goals.

The sharp end of ethical practice is, without doubt, groupwork by compulsion. The obligatory nature of the sessions of the Offending Awareness group (Box 1.0) raised particular ethical and practical issues for groupworker, Orla. As an alternative to custody, the group would probably be seen as a more positive option, though the compulsory nature of the group meant that non-attendance carried serious consequences, i.e. a decision to breach and removal of the young person to custody. Nevertheless, we can see that obligation can turn into fulfilment, and that there are often many constraints on 'free choice' (see Chapter 4 for more discussion on this topic).

Despite initial protestations about attending, most of the young people began to view groupwork sessions as a welcome change from the individual work that had previously constituted much of their programme.

Portfolio O, 3.2

Indeed, 'there are issues that are unique to ethical practice with groups' (Garvin *et al.* 2004: 2), not least the question of privacy and confidentiality, but also the obligation to reach out to populations who are often at the margins and who may be side-lined by the mainstream services. Ethical considerations are especially transparent for groupworkers because of the semi-public nature of a group. Power can be magnified in



groups and this puts a particular onus on groupworkers to use their own power ethically to empower the group. Finally, the onus to evaluate the experience of the group is especially strong and complex for groupworkers, given the range of dynamics and systems involved. In Chapter 7 we will consider how value and values can be weighed with and by groups.

## UNDERSTANDING GROUPS

Knowledge is one thing, understanding is another. We can know that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , but not understand why. We may not *know* what  $4 + 4 =$ , but if we understand why  $2 + 2 = 4$ , we can begin to discover what  $4 + 4 =$ . Understanding, not knowledge alone, is the key to effective professional practice, groupwork or otherwise.

One way to understand a group is to conceive it in terms of a number of different systems, all of which have an impact on the way it functions. Systems theories vary in the way they seek to explain how these systems interact and in this section we will use a notion of inner and outer systems; the best practice arises from a holistic understanding of all these systems (Doel *et al.*, 2002).

### Inner systems

#### *Understanding yourself*

A significant element in the group system is yourself. This 'self' is a third addition to Schwartz's (1961) classic idea of the two clients – the individual members and the group as a whole. There are several reasons why it is important to have self-knowledge. First, is the significance of personal beliefs. These play an important part in the way in which knowledge is used or ignored. The beliefs which people hold about themselves and about the possibility of change, whether in a group context or some other, will have a significant bearing on their success. Second, is the motivation needed to prepare for a group and sustaining your groupwork; understanding what nourishes your motivation will help to maintain it. Third, it is important to be aware of your likely strengths in the group and what you might find difficult, or what might lie outside your 'comfort zone'.

I find it difficult to handle indifferent feedback – preferring it to be positive or negative. I think this is because it makes it hard to know where I stand as a groupworker, as I am keen to adapt the group as feedback is received.

Portfolio W, 5.1

Finally, a self-audit about what you like about groups will be illuminating. It will prompt you to take a step back to consider that your own preferences may not necessarily be shared by your co-workers or group members.

As a group member, positive experiences of groups have been those where there is a clear outline of what will happen, so that significantly unexpected