events do not occur. This leads to a feeling of security and enables me to enjoy the group; for example, a 'learn to ski' group, where each session had a list of new skills that the participant would learn through the course of a lesson.

Portfolio S, 1.1

Understanding the group leadership

The group leadership is another system in the group; sometimes, when there are three or more co-workers this constitutes a group in itself. The personal qualities of the group leadership and the way in which you relate to one another and to the other systems in the group, is crucial to the way the group will be experienced. In particular, there needs to be a mutual understanding of the significance of *social location*, in terms of gender, race, sexuality, age, class, etc. in the co-leadership group, and also how this is likely to relate to the social location of group members. For the four white women who co-led the Memory Joggers group (Box 1.J), the main differences of significance were ones of professional status, as Jenny explains:

As a 'group' of four it felt powerful when working and planning together. In a sense it gave strength to the [larger] group. However, a power difference was apparent within the four facilitators. I often felt that Jill and I were expected to take the lead or that, on occasions, we did anyway. Joy, in particular, felt that if Jill or I made a suggestion then it should stand simply because 'you're qualified and know more than us'.

Portfolio J, 2.P&O

The group leadership needs to develop what is sometimes referred to as emotional literacy (Goleman, 1996). The problem in discussing feelings about status in the Memory Joggers' co-leadership were mirrored in an avoidance of focusing on feelings in the group itself.

Where I think we lack experience as co-workers in ending sessions is failure to discuss 'feeling'. Activities are discussed, members are focused on what has been achieved and we highlight successes. Members say that they have enjoyed themselves and look forward to coming, and I believe these remarks to be genuine ... However, in summing up we have never mentioned anxiety levels rising as members feel challenged, or had lengthy discussion about how they feel as regards memory loss. Perhaps it's our fear of being rejected by members, and dealing explicitly with memory deficit is challenging.

Portfolio J, 2.1

Co-working is considered in more detail in Chapter 6.

Understanding the group members[1]

There are three levels at which an understanding of the group members is important. The first belongs to a more general level, of group members as 'young offenders' or 'women with severe mental health problems':

The idea for this particular group arose in discussion between the co-workers who identified a number of common themes among several female clients with long-term severe mental health problems, namely:

- poor understanding of the nature of their mental illness
- lack of awareness of viable alternatives to coping with their problems
- low self-confidence and self-esteem resulting from their experiences of mental illness.

We were also aware that none of the women had experienced this type of groupwork before, and that many experienced social isolation, which we hoped to partially address through the group process.

Portfolio W, 2.1

The second level is an understanding of this group in particular. How does this group respond and how can it get the best out of itself? Orla demonstrates this in respect of the Offending Awareness group (Box 1.O).

As the term *role play* had caused concern in a previous session, the technique was 'marketed' under the heading of placing themselves 'in some-one else's Adidas'.

Portfolio O, 4.2

The third is at the level of the individual member, and an awareness of the particular strengths, potential and challenges of each person. Degrees of understanding will usually increase with contact, and groups are more likely to show individuals off in a variety of different lights, as Helen observes in respect of Hayley, a member of the Women of Hope group (Box 1.H):

Hayley was having a lot of support outside the group ... weekly therapy, local drop-in service, GP and psychiatric input. Despite this Hayley was always negative. Much of her conversation was around nobody cared ... Yet she had another side to her character, which manifested itself in the group – caring, good sense of humour, thoughtful and considerate.

Portfolio H, 5.1

Outer systems

Practitioners sometimes make the mistake of neglecting the outer systems, explored below, thinking them to be remote and exerting less pull. In fact, these outer systems can be by far the most powerful in the group, even determining whether the group will exist or not.

Understanding your team and agency

Jenny, a social worker in a Community Mental Health team, was disappointed and distressed to discover how the Memory Joggers group was perceived by some of the other professionals in the team.

To my dismay I have realised that not all colleagues are as supportive as I had once believed and that groupwork is seen *as a soft option*. This is incredible, as I find the project absolutely draining at times!

Portfolio J, 2.1

The success of groupwork in the longer term depends on team and agency supp even though they might never have contact with an individual group (see Chapter Team colleagues can sometimes actively oppose new developments (Rushton and Marty 1990). Despite the rhetoric of user-led services, there is more likely to be support fo group when it is presented as meeting the needs of the team or agency. This is acceptab as long as this is consistent with the needs of the group members. For example, addition to helping young people leaving care, Samantha also identified that 'there i need for the Leaving Care team to become better acquainted with young people oth than those on their individual caseloads. The group will provide a good opportun for this' (Portfolio S, 2.1). Whole-team involvement in the planning also meant th colleagues felt confident about inviting their 'own' young people.

BOX   2.3   GROUP   CONTEXT

Westville Women's group

Wendy is a white social worker in Westville Community Mental Health team. Her co- worker, **Win**, is a social work assistant. (See Box 1.W.)

Wendy writes:

The team is multi-disciplinary and consists of three Community Psychiatric Nurses, two Social Workers, an Occupational Therapist, a Social Work Assistant, two Community Support Workers and a secretary. We work with people who suffer from severe and enduring mental health problems, typically schizophrenia, manic depression or long-term depression or anxiety problems.

Each team member holds a caseload of service users, which involves working with individuals, carers and families. Because most of the people whom the team works with have fairly complex needs, usually two or more team members are involved in working with each person and we try to make sure that all users are known to each team member. The team already runs a number of groups including a weekly social support group, a weekly activity based group, and a twice weekly gardening group. I am involved in helping to run all of these groups on a rota basis.

The co-leader for the proposed Women's group is Win, who is the social work assistant in the team. Win also holds her own caseload and is involved in the running of all of the above groups.

Portfolio W, 1.1

It is important that the whole team owns the work and puts the effort in, particularly practical support such as providing transport.

Portfolio S, 2.1

ACTIVITY 2.3: MAKING CONTACT WITH OUTER SYSTEMS

- Given the context for the proposed Women's group (Box 2.3), what team needs do you think the group might satisfy? (You may need to speculate by supplying your own additional information.) Make a list in a left-hand column.
- What potential objections can you foresee Wendy's team might raise? Make a list in a central column.
- What responses could you give to counter the potential objections you have identified? Make a list in a right-hand column.

Understanding significant others

Group members spend much more time outside the group than in it, even when the context is group care. The value and meaning of the group's time together should be set against the impact of families, communities, other professionals and the legal system on the group members. From the point of view of the group these may seem to be outer systems, but for many of the group members they are distinctly central. This is explored in greater detail in Chapter 8.

KEY POINTS

- Groupwork is underpinned by different kinds of knowledge derived from research, practitioners and group members themselves.
- Groupwork is also underpinned by knowledge from key disciplines such as philosophy, politics, social and organisational psychology.
- No single model of groupwork is able to take account of the great variety of groupwork methods and contexts.
- Each group has a unique 'fingerprint' composed of a different balance of the same basic seven elements.
- Systems theories help to understand how to work with groups and promote groupwork effectively.

FURTHER READING

AASWG (1999), *Standards for Social Work Practice with Groups*, Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups: www.aaswg.org