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# Introduction

## What Is It All About?

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The self-directed groupwork model arose from practice, not theory: a reflexive process of information-gathering, analysis, understanding, action and reflection that is mirrored in its practical application. The model emerged as result of in-depth enquiry and critical reflection with individuals, with teams and in networks where we discovered groupwork was taking place. This formed the basis of *Self-directed Groupwork: Users Take Action for Empowerment* (1991), the original version of this book, and the process has been revisited and repeated in preparation for this new edition. Once more, we have asked people to describe what they are doing and to explain why, thus enabling us to build up a rich and deep description and analysis of their activity. Germane theory has been drawn upon to clarify and explain what, why and how, particularly why, practitioners have been doing what they were doing.

The term 'self-directed' emerged, in the first instance, as simply descriptive of the activity in groups we came across. This finding, that 'self-directed' portrayed what many practitioners were helping service users to be, led to our coining the term 'self-directed groupwork' as the name for a discrete, observable, explicable and recordable mode of groupwork practice. We found that we had moved from an informal, orally communicated practice tradition into a formally articulated one that became open and accessible to academic and practitioner scrutiny and critique.

### **Self-directed Groupwork**

Our initial objective for this new edition was to find out how relevant people think the model is now and how widespread is its use or at least where there are people who are working in ways that relate to it. We have had contact with people in the UK, Ireland, France, the USA,

Canada and New Zealand and lengthy conversations with many. In the event, as the many examples in this book will reveal, we found a wealth of self-directed groupwork happening. We came across groups based in, and arising directly from, awareness of the model as well as people who, when we described the process and principles, immediately responded with 'That is a model I recognize' or 'That is just what we do'. Distinctively, all these groups, which have helped to develop our understanding of contemporary self-directed groupwork, incorporate a primary focus on addressing a shared structural issue rather than meeting the individual needs of the participants, although of course the latter may still happen.

One thing that we realized was that, in England at least (it is no longer possible to generalize for the UK), the substantial involvement of social workers and probation officers in such groupwork has evaporated since we first wrote. The focus of state social work has narrowed to the oversight and management of individuals and families; probation now sits within the National Offender Management Service as a 'community corrections' agency. Twenty years ago groupwork was a core element of training but now very few social work courses in England teach it (although this is not the case in other parts of the world). In compensation, however, we identified much self-directed groupwork in the voluntary sector and amongst many groups with no 'professional' involvement at all. There are many self-run, service user-led and egalitarian groups, facilitated by group members. In these groups roles are often fluid, with groupworker functions being recognized, agreed and shared amongst members.

In the course of our conversations, we also found self-directed groups in a far wider range of settings than was the case at the time of the first edition, most notably in schools and in a variety of independent movements outside the predominating contexts of health and social care. Thus, we found groups developing community support for older and disabled people and self-advocacy groups of people with dementia in the UK, groups of mental health service users in France and Canada, a range of groups supported by professional workers for family support in the UK, New Zealand and Canada. We spoke with people from Asian Pride, a self-directed group for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Asians and Pacific Islanders in the USA, and with a university lecturer using self-directed groupwork as both method and subject in a service learning programme, with the students then taking forward self-directed groupwork with groups of young people in the community. There are young people in Baltimore, USA, who have worked hard over many years, facil-

itated by a high school teacher, to achieve their own community-based youth-run centre and, in the UK, young people used a self-directed groupwork approach to organize campaigns against ‘mosquito’ devices set up to keep them out of public spaces.

We located even more examples as a result of web-searching and reading books and articles: Rubyfruit Woman in Leicester, a group for all lesbian, bisexual and questioning women; Raging Grannies in Canada; groups of refugees and asylum seekers; the Extreme Group of young disabled people in Durham, working to improve access to leisure centres; and numerous patients and carers groups tackling health and social care issues. We discovered that some groups, such as Advocacy in Action, Turning Point and the Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People (now Disability Derbyshire), that had contributed to the first volume, are still active as groups while, as will be seen later in this book, members of the Ainsley Teenage Action Group have carried forward their achievements into their adult lives. Self-directed campaigning by disabled activists and mental health survivors, which were somewhat novel when described in 1991, are now well established on the political landscape.

Furthermore, as will be illustrated in the final chapter, self-directed groupwork has crossed ‘disciplinary’ boundaries to be employed in education and training, in research and evaluation, in project and service development and in management and organizational practice on local, national and international levels. Selected examples from the rich and diverse array of groups that we uncovered are included in more detail as brief case studies at the end of the book.

Thus, we found that self-directed groupwork is widespread but, echoing findings at the time of the first edition, only rarely articulated as a dedicated approach or, with notable exceptions, named as such. Why might this be the case? To some extent, it is perhaps because the approach has been learnt through using it rather than through reading about it, so terminology becomes less important. There is also a tendency for those who facilitate in self-directed ways to identify themselves with identity politics and with social and political movements for radical and progressive structural change, rather than with particular ways of working. The method of working matures out of that identification and out of a clear value-base that we will discuss in detail in later chapters but its practitioners may not engage in a discourse of social intervention. Finally, the more radical practitioners often talk more about what they are not than what they are: not subscribing or working to prevailing, ‘common-sense’, neo-liberal understandings of social problems or responses to them; not implementing what is conventionally taught and

promoted as social intervention because it is seen to replicate, in various guises, oppressive and devaluing top-down, expert-led models.

Compounded by these factors, self-directed groupwork poses a challenge to teach, assess and manage within conventional training or organizational structures. The reflexive nature of the process does not fit conventional, linear formats of assessment, planning or evaluation. Unlike other forms of groupwork the goals, methods and expected outcomes cannot be planned for, even speculatively, in advance. Furthermore, the methods and skills are to a significant extent represented in what the groupworker refrains from doing. The role is to allow the space for members' experience and understanding to emerge and to flower, by encouraging and nurturing, and to offer frameworks and structures for members' autonomous decision-making and action.

Self-directed groupworkers do draw upon orthodox group 'leadership' and other skills but these have to be adapted to a self-directed, member-led context. For example, groupworkers must be trustful of, and confident in, members' innate knowledge and abilities and able to contain their anxiety and consequent urge to intervene when faced with silence or 'messiness' – not taking control or prematurely structuring activity – in other words, they need to be able to trust the process and, in so doing, to live up to their statement of values.

## **The Structure of the Book**

In this book, the structure represents and follows the stages of the self-directed groupwork process. Although framed within the same structure as the original 1991 edition, the text has been somewhat rewritten in the light of practice developments, new research, theoretical advances, political and economic changes and major world events. The first chapter introduces groupwork as the preferred and natural platform for the self-directed methodology, with Chapter 2 going on to outline the theoretical and policy context for user-led work. Chapter 3 establishes that a distinctive and critical phase for establishing competent practice of self-directed groupwork takes place largely before the group commences when the groupworkers take stock of themselves to establish a shared value position. On this foundation they can go on to prepare the ground for a group to meet (Chapter 4) and then replicate the exercise of taking stock in facilitating the group to prepare to take action (Chapter 5). During this process, the group will be becoming self-directed and the groupworkers supply non-directive support (Chapter 6). As the goals and

action are those of group members, the groupworkers look to their agreed statement of values to reflect on and evaluate their own practice, with the group members by now very much in the driving seat (Chapter 7). The final chapter looks outwards, beyond the practice of groupwork, to other applications of the model in research, training, consultancy, and the like.

The text abounds with examples from practice. The majority are present-day but a few have been retained from the first edition where we feel they illustrate issues effectively and are not out of step with current policy and practice. Similarly, with references, original ones have been retained only if they still make valuable contribution to discussion and debate. Some we would consider to be ‘classics’ in the discourse of empowerment.

The biggest advance, however, is that self-directed groupwork is no longer a methodology simply grounded in the work of social workers, probation officers and youth workers in governmental and voluntary organizations. In 1991, we argued its potential to have much wider application. Since then, our own activities, backed up by the information gathered and support offered in preparing this new book, have shown the extent of the approach, its relevance and potential to make a difference in people’s lives in many settings and in a global environment. Self-directed groupwork has come of age in these intervening years. It is now truly interdisciplinary, inter-professional and transnational; it encompasses governmental, independent and many kinds of egalitarian, citizen-led initiatives, projects and organizations. It straddles and frequently joins up the problems that citizens confront in health, social care, social security, education, criminal justice, planning, leisure and many other areas of their lives, and it offers an effective way to take action to challenge and change. We are none of us trapped – there is always a way forward.

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