

Book Review

Psychology in the real world: community-based groupwork

Guy Holmes (2010). Herefordshire: PCCS Books; 311 pp. ISBN 978 1 906254 13 1 (pbk), £19.99.

This book provides an interesting insight into groups, groupwork and community work particularly in the area of mental health. It describes various initiatives and groups falling under the umbrella term of *Psychology in the Real World* with which the author, Guy Holmes, has been involved over the past decade. Holmes is a clinical psychologist who has previously published widely in community psychology and mental health. This book draws on similar themes to his past publications, including his two previous co-authored books, 'This is Madness' (Newnes, Holmes, & Dunn, 1999) and 'This is Madness Too' (Newnes, Holmes, & Dunn, 2001). Holmes is critical of current psychiatric services and draws on themes including: the promotion of service user views and experience; tackling the social roots of mental illness; challenging the medical model; and challenging the power of pharmaceutical companies. In addition, this book aims to act as a guide to anyone, regardless of background or profession, who is interested in group or community work. It includes introduction to theory, practical information, useful tools, and examples of firsthand experience of being involved in and setting up community groups.

The introduction invites the reader to approach the book in the best way for them (either from start to finish or to dip in to sections of interest). There are 14 main sections covering areas including: the background philosophies and principles of *Psychology in the Real World* groups, community psychology, and countering the impacts of stigma; the beginnings, middles and ends of groupwork; and each of the *Psychology in the Real World* initiatives ('Understanding Ourselves and Others'; 'The Black Dog: Understanding Depression'; 'Thinking About Medication'; 'Toxic Mental Environments'; 'Walk and Talk'; and 'The Writing Group'). These sections include smaller 2-8 page (approx.) chapters which include information about specific research or theories, personal experiences from facilitators or group members, and explanations of useful tools and techniques to use when working with groups.

The book focuses on the *Psychology in the Real World* groups which have been set up informally and are open to all (for free). During the group sessions participants explore theories and research relating to causes of distress relevant to group aims (with the assistance of the facilitators), as well as sharing personal experiences. All of the groups and the whole ethos of the book are based around the concept of community action. The groups aim to encourage a wide mix of attendees including those with and without involvement in community mental health (p. 4) who work together to develop a greater understanding of their own experiences as well as those of others, and in some cases go one to use this knowledge to improve their communities (i.e. 'Walk and Talk' and 'The Writing Group' were the ideas of individuals

previously engaged in other groups). Holmes is keen to highlight that these are not 'skills for ill's' groups in which group leaders simply give information to group members, instead they are designed to teach participants 'how to think' rather than 'what to think' (p.4).

Rather than just describing the successes and pitfalls of these groups (which the book does succeed to do) Holmes aims to go further by explaining the techniques used within the groups to make them work and provides the reader with a useful toolkit to encourage the development of their own groups or to improve their current ability to facilitate the community groups that they are already a part of. To assist with this a link is also provided to the *Psychology in the Real World* website (www.shropsych.org/psychologyintherealworld.htm). The website provides a wealth of resources on each of the groups including: yearly reports; examples of reading provided to group members; course flyers; and links to relevant publications based on the work done with the groups. This is an excellent resource for readers interested in taking the advice provided in the book further in order to develop or improve their own community group working. Some of these materials are also provided within the book itself, separated from the narrative through the use of text boxes allowing them to stand out in their own right.

Like Holmes' previous books and the culture of the groups themselves, 'Psychology in the Real World: community-based groupwork', is written in a collaborative manner with chapters from a variety of sources including co-facilitators as well as members of the *Psychology in the Real World* Groups. This very personal glimpse of the experiences of group members and facilitators helps to cement the practical information provided in actual experience and provides insight into the lives of individuals whom, in some cases, have had long histories of involvement with psychiatric services.

There are many useful and enlightening firsthand experiences. Items of note include the touching and informative accounts of taking and coming off medication provided by Carole Stone, Carol Johnson and Mandy Barratt, all members of the 'Thinking about Medication' group. Not only do these highlight the ability of individuals to take control of and manage their own medication and the supportive roles community groups can take in this, but also highlight the negative reactions of staff in psychiatric services to those who wish to take control of their medication and the apparent readiness of GPs to prescribe drugs without considering other available options or providing support when users decide that they'd rather try to go it alone. These accounts should act as an important warning note to anyone working in psychiatric care and may serve to encourage people to question their beliefs about the necessity and importance of psychiatric medication. This fits with the ongoing themes of the book of challenging the medical model and the powers of the pharmaceutical companies in additions to the promotion of service user views and experience.

Unfortunately this mixture of perspectives also serves to make the book feel a little disjointed at times as the narrative jumps from Holmes to co-facilitator to group member after every few pages. However, as has been mentioned, the book is not necessarily designed to be read cover to cover and by being written in this way it does enable each section of the book to be, as the author hopes, “coherent in its own right”(p.7). Another element that makes the narrative feel a little disjointed is Holmes’ use of numbered lists and bullet points which appear in almost every chapter; perhaps the use of more tables in their place may have improved this?

The section on stigma is interesting and puts the efforts made by Guy to organize and facilitate these groups into context of our stigmatizing society which causes people to have a need for this kind of community support. This section comes in towards the end of the book and is partly linked with the evaluation of some of the groups in terms of their impact on the way the group members experience stigma. While it makes sense for evaluation to be towards the end of the book it would possibly have been useful to introduce the concept of stigma prior to discussing the different *Psychology in the Real World* groups so that the important theories of Wolfensberger and Goffman (‘Social role valorisation’ and the ‘the stigma cycle’) could be considered by the reader while learning about each of the groups.

Holmes’ background in clinical psychology has enabled him to draw upon a wide variety of psychological and social theories on groupworking which are skilfully woven into the text in a way that gives sufficient details for the reader to understand their relevance while refraining from bombarding the reader with detailed description which can be found elsewhere in most psychology textbooks. These snippets of information about past research and theories are not just described but applied to groupwork situations and will be interesting to readers with background knowledge and those with no experience of the studies alike. For those wanting to know more a comprehensive reference list is provided at the end of the book.

This book will be interesting to anyone looking to expand their knowledge of community-based groupwork. It contains tool and tips to help groups get started, and personal accounts of those involved in groupwork which highlight potential pitfalls and will reassure those involved in setting up community groups. The whole book is very personal and heart-warming and highlights the ability of groupwork to make a big difference to the lives of those involved.

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References

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