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Group work in Australia: The question of agency

> In a group run on action lines, members find a strange voice, which they may begin to recognise as their own; they feel the gush of their life building up . . . Is *this* who I am? They tell stories about themselves in terms of their personal or work related problems.
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> *(Williams 1991, p. 1)*

In this chapter we lay the foundations of some of the themes discussed in later chapters. Most of the chapter consists of a story told by an able-bodied person who is working with a group of people who have some disabilities. This story contains some crucial ideas. First, the experience of this particular group of people with disabilities provides an insight into the value of exploring our place in groups and our use of them—which is related to the idea of *identity*. Second, it provides an opportunity to look at the role of *stories* in understanding our identity. Finally, we suggest that 'doing' group work, or working with groups, can involve everything from telling stories to planning for social change and each has a place in pursuing what we refer to as *agency*. Each of these themes is central to modern group work.

From 'disability' to agency: Telling stories and contemporary group work

Most of us live and work in large cities, which can often be cold, anonymous, professionalised environments. The city is a world busy with the ant-like activities of thousands of professional workers such as teachers, social workers, doctors and bureaucrats who help run the state and its hive of welfare, education and health care institutions. In such a world, many of us turn to friends and families for a little warmth. In one Australian city (Melbourne), a small group of people with a lot of experience of that world began to make their own history, much of it focused on telling stories about the problems they had experienced in being able to have friends.

Throughout 1994 and 1995, a small group of men and women (Arthur, Claire, David, Ian, Jenny, Melinda and Sue) met with a Melbourne-based academic and group worker, Lenny Jenner. They met in pubs, motels and houses. The group was not an ‘ordinary’ group, since most members had a range of physical disabilities—some of them quite serious. Some had very little control over their physical movements and many could not speak easily or clearly; some shook a lot or did not always have as much control over parts of their bodies as others; most used various machines with which to communicate; some spent a lot of time using pointers to type out sentences to communicate. All members of this group were used to being identified by other, often more powerful, people as ‘disabled’.

Lenny was involved in the group as an ‘able-bodied’ person. He was interested in finding out how the identities of people with disabilities could be affected by membership of a group which was exploring, revealing and redefining the experiences of disability, identity and friendship in a context shaped by the stories of ‘normalism’ (Fulcher 1989).

‘Normalism’

‘Normalism’ has to do with the fact that all of us have differences in a world where we all want to be ‘normal’. Remember that *all of us* have and do things that make us different. Some of us are ‘short’ (or ‘tall’) or have black hair (or red hair) or bits of our bodies are missing (like foreskins, legs or fingers), or we have different kinds of skin colour or shapes of eyes or noses. Some of us go to school for long periods of time and some of us leave early. The list of differences is endless and infinite. Difference is everywhere. But difference is not the same thing as inequality. Regrettably, some of ‘us’ use certain differences that can be seen on any street in any Australian city to infer that some of us are really ‘other’ people who are in some way very different, abnormal and unequal.

One way of converting ‘difference’ into ‘inequality’ is to name people in particular ways. This happens particularly when those names are put into stories about how the ‘other’ group of people is said to be more stupid, dependent, lazier, more drunk, less intelligent, more promiscuous and so on. The categories used to name certain people are usually the result of concepts that are imposed by other people.

In the case of the group of people discussed here, the very words used to name them (like ‘disabled people’) were not devised by those to whom the concept or category was applied. Furthermore, these names have a central place in stories that have been used to tell about the ‘other’ groups and those doing the telling have traditionally been in dominant, powerful positions of authority. Furthermore, it has been that authority, or the power of those doing the naming, that has given credibility and truth status to stories told about the people to whom these categories were applied. These are stories about ‘normalism’ (Corbett 1994).

Part of the experience of being marginalised and dominated also has to do with the way some of ‘us’ call ‘others’ (Abberley 1987). One way to dominate and exclude a person or group of people from institutions like work, school, health care or the law courts, or from relationships of mutual trust or esteem, is to insist that the differences that all of us manifest can be grouped and then used to indicate that some of us are not really properly human, or are not ‘moral’, or have no right to be respected.

Our identity is revealed in stories and understood via narrative. Using these stories, we want to reflect on how group experiences help shape identity. As discussed later in the book, groups are ideal places for telling our stories, whether we be someone with a special history or whether our story is about being a woman, or gay, or a Lebanese worker, or whatever.

‘Normalism’ has a history that still has to be fully told. Writers like Canguilhem (1993), Foucault (1979), Rose (1989) and Lewis (1987) have begun to pave the way in the telling of those stories. They have been particularly widespread in places like schools, hospitals, asylums and prisons since the early nineteenth century. And they have been told by groups of professionals—especially doctors, psychologists and teachers. The work of many professionals has been directed towards measuring the incidence of ‘normality’ in relation to factors such as intelligence, nutrition and physical fitness among the general population, thereby setting the standards against which those who were not ‘normal’, or not average, could be discovered, diagnosed and then cared for.

Many of these scientific and caring activities were tied to bigger, national stories about the government’s need to know about the health and wellbeing of the whole population. Such information was important because governments had been engaged in international struggles over ideology, empire and trade and therefore needed to be able to call on all of their resources should war or conflict erupt. States also needed to know about the condition of their human resources to establish what used to be called ‘national efficiency and hygiene’ (Rose 1989). Until the middle of the twentieth century, many people who were deemed not to be ‘normal’ physically or intellectually were measured, identified, diagnosed, managed, institutionalised, sterilised, placed in sheltered workshops or special schools, locked up, medicated or even sometimes murdered in campaigns of eugenics designed to improve the fitness and strength of the entire population. Much of this interest in the disabled was aroused by compassion. However, as Nietszche reminded us, compassion can sometimes take on a dangerous—even murderous—quality.

From this longstanding definition of disability, and the myriad of institutions, professions and organisations established to ‘help’ the ‘disabled’, emerged a movement by people with disabilities whose aim was to reclaim their identity. The group work process described here is one small expression of this, offering insights into the ways in which group processes can intersect with issues of identity (Jenner 1995). It becomes clear that this group process embodied a number of different purposes and goals. Lenny Jenner’s research was designed, amongst other things, to get him a Master’s degree; this ran alongside members’ desire to learn from the group experience with the objective of achieving a growing capacity for *agency*. The story that follows is told by Lenny Jenner and emphasises the central role played in our collective lives by story telling.

Background to the group work experience (as told by Lenny Jenner)

From the 1970s, workers in the Spastic Society, particularly those in areas of recreation, accommodation and volunteer services, used a number of different strategies to support the establishment and development of friendships in the lives of disabled people. Community-based recreation activities, organised by recreation workers, provided the backdrop for programs which emphasised building friendships between people with disabilities and ‘normal’ volunteers. The rationale for the Spastic Society’s endeavours was underpinned by ‘Social Role Valorisation’ (and before that the principles of ‘normalisation’) developed by Wolfensberger (1972, 1983).

In April 1993, staff of the Spastic Society of Victoria's recreation service ('Leisure Action') and housing resource service conducted a two-day seminar to explore the experience of friendship by people with disabilities. Staff had become concerned about the loneliness and isolation experienced by people identified as having disabilities and the difficulties encountered by staff in responding to this issue. As is often the case, this forum was dominated by staff concerns regarding their professional practice and the specific techniques used in establishing and maintaining friendships in disabled people's lives.

The disabled people invited to the seminar came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were using disability services like accommodation, recreation, day centres and employment services from disability organisations such as the Spastic Society of Victoria, while others had ceased using services from the disability sector. This group of people with disabilities had experienced organisations and workers who were either unresponsive or downright destructive when it came to action in the area of friendships in their lives.

The first seminar (in April 1993), while generating a number of ideas and strategies for debate by workers, had limited benefit for the people with disabilities who attended. It did, however, provide an important impetus for a small group of people (five disabled and two non-disabled) attending the seminar to meet again at Ross House in November 1993. This smaller meeting focused solely on those people with disabilities and provided an opportunity to talk about how they maintained and developed friendships. From this meeting, the participants began to understand some of the common experiences in their lives like the lack of priority given to questions of friendship, issues of loneliness and isolation by community and disability service providers and policy-makers. They also recognised the pressing need for research to gather ideas and information about friendship and disability. Even more importantly, they 'discovered' a shared commitment to continue to meet, share experiences and work together as a group to change the way services were structured and provided. And they made this commitment in the hope that, through working together, friendships would develop that had a positive bearing on people's ongoing experience of isolation and loneliness.

Subsequent meetings of the group were held in public places with the intention of combining discussion and debate about friendship and disability with an opportunity to relax, socialise and get to know one another. There were always issues of cost and accessibility in travelling to these places, as well as the quality of the space, given the difficulties many of the members had in talking clearly. In April 1994, the group met at a tavern which was easily accessed and provided a good opportunity to relax and socialise; however, communication was significantly hampered. Even though there were very few people in the pub at the time, the table and seating arrangements, and the background noise associated with work being done to prepare for the performance of a band later that day, made it difficult for people to communicate with one another.

Given the amount of time that had passed since the group's previous meeting, the afternoon was spent going over the ideas discussed in November 1993. This provided an opportunity for new members of the group to contribute. It had the added benefit of clarifying and confirming people's motivation to be involved in what became known as the 'friendship project'. This was my [Lenny's] first meeting and the first time I had met a number of people in the group. I presented some ideas about how the research might proceed, all the time feeling somewhat overwhelmed by what might be in front of me. My journal captures my feelings:

> As I drove across town from my home in Ascot Vale to the Angel Tavern in Malvern on a Sunday afternoon in April 1994, I was acutely aware of the mixed feelings generated in me by the pending meeting. While excited by the prospect of joining the group to explore and research people's experience of friendship, I also had a number of overriding anxieties about 'getting involved' with disabled people.
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> The first of these apprehensions concerned communication. It was five years since I had worked directly with people who I then referred to as having a 'communication impairment'. I remembered (and sometimes would prefer to forget) how debilitating it could be when I could not understand what the other person was 'saying'. I recalled the intense frustration and difficulty of maintaining that fundamental sense of commitment and respect between people when communication proved impossible. I wondered if and when the issue would arise in this group and how I would respond.
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> The other question dominating my thinking concerned the personal commitment required in a project such as this. I wondered about where the research would lead and the expectations of group members in respect to friendship.

This meeting reinforced some of my reservations. For example, I found it extremely difficult to understand some of the people's conversation, which was partly due to the environment, but also to my inability to understand people.

During the meeting, I talked about my research interests and I asked to join the group. They said they were interested in advancing some research into disability and friendship but they had two key concerns, namely avoiding professional control of the research process and products and ensuring the relevance of the research to people with disabilities. This reaction was not surprising, given people's experience of completing countless questionnaires, surveys, individual program plans and program evaluations with little or no outcome to speak of. After some further discussion, the group recognised the benefits and welcomed my involvement.

In May 1994, the group met at the Carringbush Library in Richmond [Melbourne]. This was accessible and above all provided a quiet venue. Maree joined the group for the first time while Ingrid asked the group to consider including her partner, Robert. People indicated their support and most of the meeting time was spent listening to Ingrid and Robert describe their experience of meeting through an introduction service in a magazine. Their very personal and rich account of meeting and establishing a friendship highlighted their individual and collective strengths and their struggles. Their story also challenged the many stereotypes about disability and sexuality, and about introduction agencies, and encouraged a positive atmosphere of reflection in the group.

The group had recognised the importance of having a safe and accessible place to meet which was conducive to effective communication and provided a space to relax and socialise. The group agreed to meet at Claire's house later in May. We met one Saturday afternoon, beginning with some semi-formal discussion and finishing with an evening meal to which everyone contributed. The discussion picked up the threads of some earlier group conversations and focused on three things: the makeup of the group; how the group might go about the research; and the progress of planning a weekend away together. After listening to a number of different ideas about group composition, people concluded that ongoing changes would be disruptive, while a stable membership would assist in building trust and openness between members and a sense of group identity. We also considered the optimum size of the group and, given earlier comments and the practical issues associated with communication and translation, space and transport, identified that any more than twelve would begin to limit people's opportunity to contribute to and have a sense of being part of the group.

Questions about researching the area of friendship and disability were also discussed at this meeting. We were coming to see the value of grounding the research in people's experiences of friendship and disability, as well as the need to make time to get to know one another. It was also becoming clear that we would have to allow the research issues and ideas to emerge rather than prescribe what the issues were and how the research should progress. Finally, it was also clear that we would have to make the effort to document the research findings in a way that was accessible to people with disabilities.

Stories begin to be told

Up to the first weekend away in August 1994, the group continued to meet in one another's homes. On each occasion we set a semi-structured period for story-telling and discussion, followed by a social time for sharing a meal to which we all contributed. In many respects this decision to meet in people's homes and to have informal time to talk and share a meal together had a profound impact on people's connection and commitment to one another and to the research process. In 'sharing their homes', people disclosed a very personal part of themselves while others gained an insight into where and how another person in the group lived. Having the meetings in people's homes also provided security and safety.

The next meeting was at Arthur's flat one wintry Saturday in June. Given people's concerns about the lack of time for informal discussion, we met through the afternoon and once again finished with an evening meal. Despite our intentions to separate some of the time for socialising, the day and evening centred on people sharing and comparing life stories and experiences. Discussion initially revolved around concerns regarding a 'stuff up', with information not being sent to some group members, the organisation of the next meeting in terms of time, date and location and the availability and provision of attendant care during the weekend away in August.

Some time was then spent talking about the front-page article that had appeared that day in the *Age*. It was titled 'Parents, police fear disabled are put at risk'. In reporting the views of the parents of a disabled adult, Caroline Milburn (25 June 1994, p. 17) wrote:

> In 1992 he moved out of home because his parents were too old to properly care for him. But Mr and Mrs Simm said they grew increasingly concerned that he was not getting any structured education or employment programs to occupy his days. Mr Simm said: ‘He just walked the streets aimlessly, up to 35 kilometres a day. I asked him once why he went on these long walks and he said, “Because one day I’ll find a friend”.’

An engaging and often intense group conversation ensued, which was linked to many of the ideas presented in the newspaper article. People literally traded stories, telling of their own experiences of day centres and accommodation services in the Spastic Society of Victoria. In many respects this meeting at Arthur’s began to link the individual experiences of group members and develop a group identity.

People spoke of how the organisational culture of many day centres and accommodation settings supported the lack of response by staff to the ideas and motivations of people with disabilities and reinforced apathy among staff and service users. Some stories stressed the inflexibility of those resources directed to support people’s involvement in the community—like the fact that people with disabilities can only reside in accommodation funded under Commonwealth or State Disability Services legislation if they are involved in full-time employment or education, or attending a day centre or other recognised day placement on a full-time basis. All the disabled members of the group related experiences of how friendships were undermined and some told stories of the destructive reaction by staff to intimate behaviour between friends. Everyone described the confusion and frustration associated with being identified in terms of a disabled body, which was constantly compared with ‘normal bodies’ and ridiculed.

One month later, the group gathered on a Monday evening around 6.00 pm at Sue’s temporary ‘home’ at the Royal Talbot hospital in Kew. She had been receiving medical treatment and living in one of the ‘independent living’ flats on the hospital grounds. Cassandra joined the group at this meeting. Other commitments had prevented her from attending prior meetings of the group. The group shared a meal and discussed details like the organisation and provision of attendant care, the transport to and from the venue and physical access in and around the centre, as well as the adequacy of bathroom, shower and toilet facilities.

The collective story begins to emerge

The August weekend was held in a convention centre owned by the Catholic Church and situated on the Yarra River in Lower Plenty. The group met around 8.00 p.m. on Friday evening and spent the night socialising and watching videos.

After breakfast on Saturday morning I guided the group through a meditation session which encouraged people to reflect on the nature and experience of friendships in their lives. The relaxation exercise provided an important stimulus for sharing stories and group discussion. The stories told were very powerful and deeply personal and generated a further sense of connection in the group. People relived a range of challenging, sometimes joyful but often destructive life experiences.

One important dilemma which was identified over the weekend away related to the dynamics of group discussion and, as a consequence, to the research process. The issue concerned the amount of time the group spent discussing and ‘building’ a collective story compared with ensuring adequate time and space for individuals to fully present particular aspects of their own lives. The dilemma was that people’s personal reflections were frequently curtailed by the enthusiasm of other group members’ contributions. The dynamics commonly began with one member of the group recalling a particular event in their lives which typically triggered a collage of tales and tragedies from other people which directly related to the initial topic or event. In this way, many of the details and the broader context of people’s experience were either missed or glossed over.

Over the course of the weekend, the group endeavoured to address this issue by being more sensitive to ‘hearing people out’ when they were talking. The group became more conscious of the need to ask for more detail, provide more time and clarify whether the person communicating had completed their comments. David took on the additional responsibility of reinforcing these strategies throughout the weekend. Despite these actions and the positive influence they had on group interaction, people remained sceptical about the adequacy of the opportunities provided in the larger group for individuals to fully discuss their experiences of friendship and disability. Towards the latter part of the weekend, people divided into groups of three to five and over the course of two, three or four meetings conducted over the following seven-week period, key aspects of people’s lives were researched and documented.

The group agreed that a set of questions be designed to stimulate people's reflection in these sub-groups. Claire, David, Helen and Lenny (all 'abled' group members) volunteered and ten days later met at Claire's home to develop some draft questions. These were then sent to all members of the group to consider and change as they desired. This decision to meet and talk in smaller groups in people's homes as part of the research had two important spinoffs. In the first instance, it provided a more personal environment for people to share their experiences and explore a number of significant issues not previously raised in the larger group. It also kindled more frequent contact between group members and the beginning of friendships between people.

The August weekend meeting will be remembered for a long time. Sue, Maree, Ingrid and Jenny told some horrific tales of experiences in the Spastic Society and Yooralla Special School and during visits to hospital. The dominance of doctors and therapists, the use of medication to control what staff regarded as inappropriate behaviour, the values underlying the Miss Victoria Quest and the appalling work conditions in sheltered workshops were all discussed in significant detail. Robert, Claire and I were bewildered and confused by many of their experiences that, in my reading, could almost be defined as torture. In recalling these events, Sue, Maree, Ingrid and Jenny did not dwell on their pain or the destructive impact on their lives. There was an overt sense of exhilaration in having lived through these events. As the stories were told, they seemed to gain confidence and strength in exposing the perpetrators and making connections through their experiences.

The second weekend was conducted in October and once again we met late on Friday evening. Arthur was not able to make it and Ingrid became ill a few days before the weekend, although she and Robert arrived on the Sunday and joined our discussion. A significant portion of the weekend was spent reflecting on personal experiences and consolidating the ideas and views of the group in respect to disability and friendship. Following the second weekend, a meeting was organised at Jenny's flat. The date did not suit Arthur and Melinda, while Maree was running late due to delays in getting a taxi across town.

Lots of small-group conversation happened over the dinner period. The group managed dinner successfully, with support being provided—although there was very little, if any, reference to it. It was interesting how this aspect of the group dynamics surrounding personal care had become more relaxed. After dinner, the conversation turned to talking about experiences of hospitals. This was triggered through Sue mentioning a recent conversation with her mother during her recent period of hospitalisation. Sue told how, whenever she saw the tower of St Nicholas hospital, she used to start screaming. Jenny recalled similar experiences, which in her case were triggered by seeing the overhead tramlines. She automatically associated overhead tramlines with going to the Royal Children's Hospital in Parkville. She described the process as torture and can vividly remember crying and crying as a result of the physiotherapy. Jenny recalls that she used to say to the physios as she was crying, 'You're hurting', to which the physios responded, 'It's supposed to hurt'.

Jenny commented that, in hearing the stories of other people in the group, she realised how unsupportive her own parents were. She described how her mother had constantly apologised for her. Jenny explained how she used to try to participate as much as she could with the other kids in the neighbourhood, but that when this happened her mother used to say to her, 'Don't keep them, they're only being nice to you, they don't really want to play'. Her mother's comments continually underlined the association between being disabled and being a nuisance. Jenny said that, as a result of this, her first instinct had always been to sit out of the way of others so that she wasn't a 'nuisance'. Jenny remarked that, even today, she finds it difficult to engage with others, particularly in public spaces. After hearing this, Maree scoffed at Jenny's remark. Maree had been quite amazed by Jenny's confidence—in fact, Jenny had contributed to lifting Maree's confidence.

Jenny said that, for her, 'independence was about finding your way around things'. She talked about always being on the lookout for alternative ways of getting things done. She explained how this often meant getting other people to do things for her—not in a negative sense, but in a way that people didn't mind.

Sue then raised the question of sexual abuse by asking, 'Has anyone ever thought about sexual abuse and what ideas do people have about how to respond to it?' There was a marked silence in the group for a considerable period. No one spoke. This was a significant silence given the constant banter that typified the group. I finally said, 'Well there's your answer, Sue. This is typically how people do respond—they don't talk about it and if people raise it there is silence.' Once again there was silence. David then talked about some people with disabilities accepting abuse, as the relationship with the person abusing them was often their only significant relationship. Jenny commented that she hadn't thought about these issues until she moved out and it was only then that she had to think about it. Maree commented that you didn't think about it until you were out living in the community. Little else was said; however, there was a sense that Sue's question and the topic overall remained unresolved.

The most recent meeting took place in mid-February. The agenda was to centre on the focus and future of the group. We met at my place just after lunch and once again Ingrid and Robert were unable to attend due to poor health. Arthur had another meeting and could not attend. We spent the first few hours just catching up and each person talked about what they had been doing over the New Year and January period. There were lots of interesting stories and people were very interested in what had occurred since we last met.

Some time later we got around to talking about the future and a number of directions emerged. The clearest message was that people were keen to have their stories documented. There was a powerful awareness of the significance of this process, particularly in terms of people clarifying who they were and the events, people and places that were vital in their lives. The group talked about seeking some funds to publish the stories. A second direction, which was a little more hazy, related to how people utilised their collective energies and ideas to change the way disability 'services' were constructed and delivered. Ideas were tossed around, but no concrete ideas were agreed on. Finally, people wanted to continue to meet to maintain the individual and group support that had grown and become an important part of their lives.

This story goes on. The group continues to meet, a number of autobiographies have been written and the group members are now discussing how the stories might be published in 1996–97.

Comments

This has been a story about the value of stories as a small group of people with 'disabilities' (re)capture their identity through an exemplary process of social group work.

Implicit in the stories told by these people with disabilities is the idea that groups can provide us with a sense of who we are. They can also become powerful tools for beginning to deconstruct oppressive and exploitative power relations. In telling stories in groups, we affirm our capacity to act and to assert our identity as persons and as collective actors.

In the 1990s, people are ‘rediscovering’ how the stories we tell about ourselves and others are fundamental to building knowledge, understanding culture, engaging in social action and affirming our identity.

Some key issues and themes

Stories

This chapter has focused on a story about storytelling. Lenny’s story began with the experiences of a group of people with disabilities to illustrate the kind of group work we would like to see done. Throughout the book we look at stories, especially in the way they appear in mainstream group work as ‘structured experiences’, which people use to reflect on and learn from—as Lenny’s group did.

Stories are important for many reasons. They matter because they are one of the ways in which we make sense of what happens to us and of who we are. Stories are usually told as narratives: they have a beginning, a middle and usually an end, in that order. Some of them are funny, some are sad and most have a point to make. They make up what we call ‘history’. A lot of what is called ‘social theory’, or political philosophy, or science, also relies on stories. These can be narratives about history as a story of how things keep getting better and better (history as progress) or about how history is about things getting worse, or stories of how societies are full of class struggle or feminist stories about women’s inequality.

Some writers go so far as to suggest that even our concept of self and our sense of being a person is nothing more than a special kind of long story which each of us writes. The stories we tell about ourselves are important for constructing, understanding, affirming and changing our identities.

Many people with serious disabilities have experienced more fully than others what it means to be dominated and marginalised. These marginalising and dominating experiences can be understood as the construction of an *identity* as dependent people. This in turn has meant the denial of *agency*.

Identity

The stories we tell have a lot to do with establishing our identity—

usually captured in names like ‘wife’, ‘doctor’, ‘white’, ‘woman’, ‘male’, ‘homosexual’, ‘poor’, ‘Jewish’ or ‘prostitute’, which carry a sense of social existence. Some of the names we use refer to our physical appearance—like ‘big’, or ‘fat’, or ‘thin’, or ‘black’, or ‘redhead’. Sometimes they refer to bits of our history: ‘I am divorced’, or ‘I was a boat person’, or ‘I was raped at sixteen’. Some of these names or markers refer to being part of a group: ‘I am Catholic’, or ‘I am an Iraqi’, or ‘I am gay’.

Identity has an inner and an outer quality. It has to do with the way we relate to and understand ourselves and with the way other people understand us and relate to us. The inner sense of identity and the outer sense of our identity are not always the same.

Our identity is made up of all of these kinds of markers that we and others use to say who we are in particular places and at particular times. Together, all of these markers can be said to help make up ‘who we are’ (Morris 1992).

Sometimes people say they are something or someone called an ‘individual’—a concept we don’t accept. It implies—and has long been used to imply—that we are all Robinson Crusoes living all alone and all by ourselves. This seems to miss some important elements of our identity—in particular, the social nature of our identity. This is so because all of those markers we just referred to imply the existence of, and the need for, other markers to make sense of the markers we have used; these other markers are also part of relationships we enter into. For instance, to be a ‘doctor’ or a ‘teacher’ we need other people—‘patients’ or ‘students’. To be a ‘man’, we need other people called ‘women’ and ‘children’. To be a ‘wife’, we need a ‘husband’ and to be a ‘daughter’, we need a ‘parent’. To be ‘fat’, we need ‘thin’ people. To be ‘human’, we need ‘animals’ and ‘vegetables’. And so on. All of the markers and names we use to name ourselves and others imply the existence of a social world of other people who are either the same or different.

All of the ways we use to describe ‘self’ and the ways in which we name our identity rely on the existence of others who are not the same as us. What we are *not* helps to define who we *are*. Other people with whom we have entered into a relationship also help to define who we are. And this leads to one very basic insight: our identity markers are all relational and not ‘individual’. As people, we are defined by the relations we have with others (Yeatman 1992).

Sometimes, as with ‘wife’ and ‘husband’, or with ‘father’ and ‘son’ or ‘daughter’, these relationships are real and very close. Sometimes the relationship, like that between ‘fat’ and ‘thin’, is more conceptual and logical because ‘fat’ is the opposite of ‘thin’. Sometimes, as in the relationship between ‘working-class’ and ‘middle-class’, the link is more abstract and structural; in other situations, such as the relationship between a ‘worker’ and her ‘boss’, it may be quite real.

The point remains that all of the identity markers do not point to or make up a ‘Robinson Crusoe’ individual; rather, they point to a thick texture of social relationships and to the very wide range of specific relationships that we continuously enter into throughout our lives. For this reason, we refer throughout this book to ‘people’ and ‘persons’, but not to ‘individuals’.

This diverse range of relationships—and the parts of identity that they confer on us—can create a lot of tension and frustration. Identity is rarely a settled matter—to be a person who is a ‘worker’, a ‘wife’, a ‘mother’, ‘lesbian’ and a ‘Catholic’, for example, is to enter into a variety of relationships and a range of expectations that can be very difficult, tension-ridden and even contradictory. Thus our ‘identity’ may be unsettling and is often experienced as difficult. Furthermore, other people may want to define our identity in ways that are unpleasant, discriminatory or oppressive. This can be very subtle—for example, when a parent says of a young person in their hearing, ‘Oh, she’s such a typical teenager!’ Or it may have quite sinister overtones—for instance, ‘All blacks are stupid, promiscuous and drunken.’ Such comments may well be experienced as a problem for our *agency*.

Agency

Agency is the idea that people are able to achieve what they want to achieve. What we have said about identity suggests that agency is not an individual quality. Agency involves the relationships we are involved in—it relies on them or is obstructed by them. The child–parent relationship, for example, is currently one in which adults can do to their children what they may not do lawfully to any other person. They may beat them or scream at them and defame them. These behaviours seriously infringe children’s agency. The power of ‘employers’ to hire and to fire ‘workers’ also constrains workers’ agency.

> When people have agency, it means they can make sense of, as well as initiate, influence and cope with, events in line with their own values, goals and expectations.

Groups have much to do with helping people to develop a capacity for agency. So let us explore the idea of agency in a preliminary way, and examine how groups can support agency.

Over recent decades, people have talked about how groups and group work can *empower* people, or help them to be better *citizens*. We think that these ways of talking about the goals of group work can be better described as *working to achieve agency*.

We might be able to achieve agency for ourselves by ruling our family with an iron fist, or by being a brutal boss in the office, but no one else in that setting will experience agency. Agency is a social achievement that involves the people we interact with at various levels of intimacy or distance.

Groups can support agency, but they can also impede agency. When groups are working well, they can help people affirm their identity and begin to achieve the capacity for agency. Fundamental to the notion of social agency is the idea that people are embedded in social relationships and that they actively strive for purposeful self-determination. This involves attempting to make sense of relationships, as well as initiating, influencing and coping with events in line with certain values, goals and expectations (Fryer 1995, p. 39). Agency can be achieved in specific social relations, just as it can also be undermined, restricted and frustrated by those relations. We should make no assumptions about the normal tendencies of any institutions or relationships like those found in Australia’s factories, schools, offices or even in our ‘family’ to promote agency.

There are many different circumstances that can destroy or impede our agency. Being poor and unemployed in the 1990s is frequently experienced as destructive of our agency. As Oakley put it in 1936, the specific relationships and experiences involved in being poor or unemployed restrict, baffle and discourage people with an overwhelming ‘yet indeterminate feeling of being thwarted’ (Oakley 1936, p. 396). Fryer suggested that being unemployed and/or poor has two effects. First, it makes planning and forward thinking difficult because there is fundamental uncertainty and insecurity in these states. Second, having little or no money also results in corrosive stress and anxiety about all the effects of lack of adequate income—effects like debt, power disconnection and worries about food and clothing. Relative deprivation, says Fryer, is real. It does not take place in regard to some social scientist's construction of a scale of normal consumption, but is referenced against very real self-selected reference groups of friends and neighbours. Within families, relative poverty translates into tortuous budgeting strategies, painful prioritising of differing family members' needs, conflict-prone domestic division of financial responsibility and coping behaviours (McGhee & Fryer 1989). There is nothing new about these insights. Being unemployed or poor has always been associated with anxiety and worry about not having enough money to meet normal consumption and material needs.

Sue Kenny summarised the contemporary elements of the notion of agency, which provides a useful checklist. These can be used to assess institutional capabilities in both the market sector and in the public sector to assist people to assert their agency. Among her criteria for agency are the following;

- People have access to open and democratic structures.
- People have a real choice about their lifestyle.
- People have access to reliable information.
- People can work collectively with those who matter in their lives to prioritise and make decisions.
- People believe in the right to control their own destinies.
- People have the right both to participate and not participate in community decision-making.
- People have self-esteem and are listened to and treated with dignity, respect and mutuality.
- People work and live in a non-authoritarian environment. (Kenny 1995, pp. 121–22)

All these capabilities assume a set of social relationships in a wide range of social institutions which can facilitate experiences of agency.

Setting up the circumstances in which agency can develop requires that the agency be oriented to a range of logics which has little to do with competition, exclusion and stigmatisation, and which has much more to do with social action involving cooperation, participation and community. Small groups of people with disabilities are struggling in the 1990s to claim and reclaim their agency from those professions and institutions who have, in the name of 'good intentions', stripped it away. This book has been written in the belief that, through the appropriate use of groups, group facilitators can help group members achieve their own agency and recover the sense of identity upon which agency depends.

Conclusion

In selecting stories told by 'disabled' people to start the book, we are making the point that *where* we do group work is important, and with *whom* we do group work matters also. Yet too many group work texts operate on the basis that we are all the same and that we all share certain universal and essential 'human' characteristics. Furthermore, most group work texts assume that group work techniques are universal, and are applicable to anyone, anywhere. We believe it may be more useful to accept that, while we may share *some* human characteristics, our differences also need to be acknowledged and valued.

'The disabled'—people who have observable major or minor physical tremors, spasticity, loss of limbs or intellectual 'problems'—have been named in many different ways that turn some of their differences into major problems and into a powerful identity marker. Those people who *have* a disability *become* that disability (Fulcher 1989). Think of how most 'able bodied' people speak of 'the blind', 'the deaf' or 'spastics'. Why is it that people who have a cold or cancer are not called 'colds people' or 'cancerous people', while people who have a disability are turned into 'the disabled'? The 'disabled' have been defined by dominant and benevolent professional and governmental concerns as inferior, weaker and more dependent people. In some cases, they have been victims of genocide—though not here in Australia. They have faced institutionalisation, ghettoes, the development of an Australian version of *apartheid,* economic deprivation, social discrimination and eugenically inspired campaigns of sterilisation and paternalism. On the other side of the fence, since the 1970s, Australians have seen campaigns by 'disabled' collectives to claim back their identities and reshape their relations with dominant groups.

In both cases—and this is our major point—the experience and expressive capacities of being human and having agency have often been realised in group settings. As part of the attempt to redefine themselves, many 'disabled' people have renewed their collective and personal identities through group processes, which we report on here through a moving account of a year-long group process authored by researcher Lenny Jenner and members of the group.

The rest of this book explores some of the ways in which effective groups can help people to reconstruct their identities and promote their agency. We stress that group work that uses stories, that gets people to tell stories, and that gets people to reflect on their stories is going to be very powerful group work. As one Australian group worker (Williams 1991, p. 1) puts it:

> In a group run on action lines, members find a strange voice, which they may begin to recognise as their own; they feel the gush of their life building up . . . Is this who I am? They tell stories about themselves in terms of their personal or work related problems.

Group work does not have a monopoly on stories and storytelling. But as the poet Seamus Heaney (1980, p. 17) points out:

> Finding a voice means that you can get your own feeling into your own words and that your words have the feel of you about them.

Review questions

1 What is agency?
2 What is identity?
3 What are the collective stories modern Australians tell about themselves in terms of ‘who we are’ and ‘where we come from’?
4 Can you think of other groups of people whose identity has, in a sense, been constructed for them by more powerful people?
5 What are the criteria for saying when a story told by someone is true?
6 Using Kenny’s list of criteria for agency, how would you rate your household and your workplace, or some other place in which you spend a lot of time, as a place which enhances your agency?