Book Review


It is appropriate that I disclose to the reader of this critique that I reviewed this book in manuscript form for the publisher and made suggestions for its revision. I also provided a favorable comment that was quoted on the back cover. In addition, the author and I, together with others, have participated together on panels on evidence-based group work at several professional conferences and he acknowledges my contribution to his thinking. Thus, I have been familiar with Macgowan’s ideas and have publicly supported them. Nevertheless, I intend to share my views of the strengths and limitations of this book.

This book offers a full presentation of how to do evidence-based group work (EBGW) and is the only one of its kind for social work with groups. The author begins with a discussion of what EBGW is and what assumptions underlie the approach such as the incorporation of critical thinking, the idea of EBGW as a process, the relationship to scientific methods, and the belief that outcomes of group work are measurable. One essential of EBGW, according to Macgowan, is its reliance on best evidence defined as that “derived from observation, experience, or experimentation” (p. 8). His concept of observation is broad and includes “personal experience, results from one’s own practice evaluation, expert opinion, case studies, randomized clinical trials, and meta-analyses” (p. 8).

The next chapters of the book present, in considerable detail, the steps in doing EBGW. Each of the steps is presented through the use of detailed tables and figures as well as examples that carry through each chapter. A flow chart at the beginning of the chapter helps the readers keep track of how the information in that chapter fits with the entire process of EBGW. The second chapter, therefore, teaches how to formulate a practice question in answerable form. Such questions can relate to the selection of a change theory, an intervention used to benefit individual members, a modification in a group structural condition (defined primarily as size, timing, setting, or composition) or process, or a way in which group leadership is enacted. This range of categories is an important contribution of the book as it recognizes that questions can either relate to outcomes or group conditions and,
in the opinion of this reviewer, the latter are too seldom the subject of research. Macgowan presents an excellent discussion of how to formulate a question and indicates, for example, that a question should incorporate the group situation to which the evidence will be applied, the problem or challenge in the situation; the intervention technique or strategy that the evidence supports; and the outcome sought as a result of the intervention.

The next chapter explains how and where to search for evidence. Macgowan divides evidence into research or authority based. This dichotomy recognizes that research with reference to the practice question may not exist or may be very limited or poor in quality and the practitioner will, consequently, be required to accept evidence drawn from the knowledge of authorities.

With respect to research based evidence, Macgowan places syntheses of well-designed studies as the strongest and lists many of these that are available. The reader should be pleased to learn that there are many such syntheses available that should be of interest to social workers such as group work related to alcohol and other drug treatment, most mental health areas, HIV, obesity, parenting concerns, caregivers needs, and rehabilitation of offenders, to name a few. A disappointing fact is that these reviews are not likely to appear in social work journals but are more often found in the International Journal of Group Psychotherapy or the journals pertinent to the condition in question. I have consulted many of these reviews, however, and the authors are likely to include studies by social workers of groups in social work settings but these are not the preponderance of the articles located. Macgowan also describes many other sources of information that may not be known to the practitioner first embarking on this type of quest.

The subsequent, and longest chapter, is devoted to how to engage in a critical review of the evidence. Filling almost half of the book, the chapter presents in considerable detail how to review quantitative studies (with randomized and nonrandomized samples), single case designs, qualitative research (including case studies), opinion of authorities, literature reviews (systematic and nonsystematic), multiple studies, and the instruments and measures used in such studies.

The author recognizes that the critical review requires that the practitioner is knowledgeable about many aspects of research methodology and data analysis and he presents a good discussion of this issue (p. 84). He believes that this background should be developed in one’s social work education; but, where this has not been the case, he recommends that the practitioner make use of one of several resources such as knowledgeable colleagues or research specialists in the agency. Macgowan’s standards for the critical review are appropriately high and will certainly challenge readers with limited education in research methodology. Macgowan, however, presents these standards in a series of tables accompanied with a discussion of each portion of the table.
In logical progression, the next chapter describes how to make practice decisions based on the evidence. In addition Macgowan states that an EBGW approach requires the practitioners, once they have implemented an intervention, to document what they have done and to evaluate whether in the given instance, the desired results have been obtained. His final chapter discusses dissemination issues as well as how to build EBGW into ongoing and continuing education.

This book is a very important addition to the professional literature of group work and should be part of every group work curriculum. EBGW cannot stand alone, however, in a curriculum that pays little attention to evidence based practice as this content, especially that related to a critical review of research, is complex. It cannot be attained in a less than first rate research curriculum. Otherwise, much of what Macgowan has to say would be over the heads of many students. This poses a challenge to social work curriculum planners to carefully construct a curriculum that has the necessary components to support evidence based practice. The group work curriculum, in particular, has to be more extensive and evidence oriented than is frequently the case.

I would like to see us collect data on what is being taught about evidence-based practice, especially in group work curricula, and how the students feel about and are using this content. We should follow this with an examination of what is happening in agencies in terms of this kind of practice and what they are doing to support it. Without this support, I fear that whatever knowledge students have about EBGW when they graduate will be forgotten.

We should also seek to resolve some of the ideological debates about EBGW. Some group workers oppose aspects of this approach because of its emphasis on outcomes even though writers such as Macgowan urge us to look for evidence on processes also. It is also a problem when some models of group work have less research on both processes and outcomes available than others. This is a problem to practitioners who seek evidence when they wish to apply these models.

An additional problem is an error made by practitioners of those models for which there is an abundance of research. This occurs when they make the assumption that their application of the model will achieve the same results as that reported. Macgowan makes the sound observation that evidence based practice is not finished until the specific application is evaluated.

The profession’s code of ethics requires that practice should be informed by research. This book makes a major contribution to how this should happen in group work.

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