

Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal

If Groups Are So Easy, Why Train So Much?

Personal Development experiential groups are an integral part of the experience of counselling training. They are clearly important in promoting integration between counselling students and their learning on the course. They are also often the main form of self exploration for counsellors who will begin to help others in this enterprise. Run well, personal development groups provide the peer support necessary in a training which involves interacting with others in role play and doing client work.

Experiential groups on counselling courses may lead counsellors to want to deepen their interest in groups, or they may put them off groups altogether. All too often, the nature and the role of the PD group, and other experiential groups on counselling courses, are not clearly defined. (1) PD groups are often seen as uncomfortable or to be avoided, if possible. (2)

Groups are fundamental to emotional life and mostly taken for granted. Although we humans spend most of our lives in groups, including families and work places, groups are seldom thought about or analysed as groups. Instead, they are often looked upon as collections of specific individuals.

However, it is clear that humans are biologically group-based animals. Groups are a recognised part of human evolution from matriarchal clans to tribes to families. In the matriarchal clans, the brothers follow the rules of the mothers, developing male bonds and enabling collective hunting. Concomitantly, religion evolved from the clan totem, the identity of the specific clan, to the totem pole of the tribe, and later to the many gods of the Greeks and Romans. Christian, Jewish and Muslim monotheistic religions with written texts are relatively modern social creations, along with the family and patriarchy. When families fail in modern societies, they are substituted by gangs and other peer-group structures: these become the mothers and the brothers of the clan, complete with totemic symbols of identification.

Modern human groups are rooted in this long history, a fact which tends to be forgotten in the contemporary emphasis on the individual. Enlightened, social self-interest has been converted into individual self-interest, with predictably destructive outcomes, such as extreme poverty, global warming, war, nuclear proliferation, etc.

There are many different group theories. Foulkesian, group analytic theory is unique in that it puts forward the view that individuals grow out of groups, in the here and now as well as historically. The more interpersonal group theories, based on Yalom, see groups as growing from aggregates of individuals. Group analysis emphasises the unconscious, biological connections between people that are capable of healing basic faults in very early childhood, as well as providing a space for people to define themselves socially with others. Other theories are necessarily confined to the social level and miss, I believe, the opportunity that groups offer to develop a sense of wholeness in intimate connections with others.

Although Personal Development groups on courses, staff groups, work groups, etc., may not pay attention to the historical and unconscious elements in group life, these elements are still active. I believe this is what makes these groups feel so difficult and why they often run into trouble. These same elements also make groups creative, fertile and healing.

The success or failure of a group, whatever its aim or structure, often depends on its leadership; how it is facilitated. Group analysis revolves around the role of the conductor who makes the group safe for the intimate exploration and openness involved in authentic communication. The conductor creates the group and holds its boundaries. The conductor practises abstinence from the group process and encourages the group members to find words for difficult thoughts and feelings, even when these might be "anti-group", anger, hurt or disappointment. The conductor holds the authority of the group but progressively cedes this to the group members.

It is not easy to conduct a group well. For one thing, it is strongly counter-cultural to think about a group as a whole, rather than as a collection of individuals. And, yet, it is this very thinking about the group as a whole that makes the various, individual, contributions understandable both to the conductor, and to the members. For another, groups are very powerful and it is difficult to maintain a stance on the edge of the group, without being pulled into the group process. And, yet, it is this skill of being able to be both outside

and inside that allows the group conductor to hold the fundamental thoughts and feelings of the group and to create the space for the members to be able to both think and feel.

Finally, the conductor needs to understand his or her own feelings and motivations in order to make sense of counter-transference feelings from the group and to hold the role well enough for people to be able to explore their feelings about authority or parents, who have sometimes been neglectful, or even abusive. Conductors who can open themselves up in an understandable way can also make the best use of supervision support.

Many people run groups and expect them to work well without any training or even without any specific thought about what might be involved. Teachers, for example, are expected to be able to work in classrooms without ever identifying that classrooms are also groups of students.

It is clear that counsellors who run groups need some sort of specialised training and supervision. They need their own group experience. All too often badly run groups, like badly run families, leave people with traumatic experiences, or re-traumatised. Too many participants of Personal Development groups feel that this has happened to them. Unhelpful PD group experiences discourage counsellors from making further use of these powerful teaching and therapeutic tools. Good group experiences are crucial to how human lives are led and need to be valued as such. This needs the experience of a good enough group as well as thought and training in running groups.

It is not surprising that groups are difficult both for conductors and for participants. The biologically-based pull of the group can be terrifying and overwhelming. In the biology, the group matters more than the individual member.

However, the rewards are great. A well-trained group conductor will be aware of the difficulties and will help the group members to find themselves with others. The abstinence in the group will be rewarded by finding articulate expression of difficult thoughts and feelings in words. The fear of meeting oneself in others becomes a pleasure in a sense of belonging and intimacy. Relationships and individual therapy work prosper.

One group trainee has expressed this thought: "I have extended my thinking about clients as individuals and started to see them as members of groups, i.e., family, society, etc., although I may not meet the other group members. This has given me a new perspective on individual work." (3)

Well-run groups build the internal authority and strength needed to be able to deal with others, including counselling clients. Good experiences in Personal Development groups leave open the possibility of joining a therapy group or of further training in groups.

Another group trainee described this feeling: "I feel much more free and less absent-minded. I'm better able to focus on what I want to do. I used to have difficulty prioritizing and throwing things away. But now I find it less necessary to cling on to things." (4)

There are no sound reasons for ignoring the importance of training in groups. Training is available. The Institute of Group Analysis currently runs 13 introductory group courses around the country. Each of these courses gives a taste of the power of this thinking and experiential learning, both for knowledge and for healing. There are also five regional trainings in London Glasgow, Bath, Manchester and Turvey (Bedford). These are full trainings which give UKCP registration as well as the opportunity to complete an MSc. London, Turvey, Manchester and Glasgow also award membership to the Institute of Group Analysis.

The full qualifying training courses outside of London are all based on a block weekend model. The Manchester Course takes place over 10 block weekends a year for four years. It includes an intensive therapy group, theoretical seminars and supervision. It is run by the Institute of Group Analysis in conjunction with Group Analysis North.

This is the second year that the Manchester Qualifying Course has integrated with the Manchester Group Introductory and Intermediate Courses. All courses share a large group at the beginning of the weekend and the Introductory students meet and mingle with the Qualifying students, getting a flavour of what it might be like to train further. The Intermediate Course is offered for those who want more than the introductory year, but who do not wish to commit for the full four-year training. This course takes two years

and gives a Certificate of Advanced Learning in Group work from Group Analysis North. The emphasis is on the practical application of analytic principles to groups other than therapy groups, such as personal development groups, etc. GAN will be putting on a day "Introduction to Groupwork" Workshop on the 28th of April 2007 for those who might want to find out more about groups and training in groups.

Although working in groups is not easy, these courses attract a significant number of students, all of whom make major commitments of time, energy and money to this crucial enterprise. Once course members begin to think and feel the power of groups which are run in benign ways, the thirst for this knowledge and support becomes an important part of their lives and work.

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Enquiries about the Manchester Courses in Group Psychotherapy can be directed to: Bethan Marreiros, Group Analysis North, 78 Manchester Road, Swinton, Manchester M 27 5 FG. 0161-728-1633 or email Administrator@groupanalysishnorth.co.uk. There is a GAN website at: www.gannet.org.uk.

Enquiries about other IGA courses can be directed to: Sue Stevenson, The Institute of Group Analysis, London, NW3 5BY. Email: Sue@igalondon.org.uk. Telephone: 020-7431-2693. Website: www.igalondon.org.uk.

Notes

1. Hill, Andrew: "Let's Stay and Hate: The Role of Community Meetings on Counsellor Training Courses", Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, Vol 2, No 4, 2002, Taylor and Francis, pp. 215-221. See also, Lennie, Clare: "Methodological choice in doctoral counselling psychology research: locating the researcher within the research", Counselling Psychology Quarterly, in press.
2. The attraction and difficulty of the PD group are both often recognised in the self presentation of the course. This is the description of the group from the Post-graduate Diploma in Psychodynamic Counselling Course of the University of Leicester: "Personal Development Groups are an integral part of the Course, in which individual weaknesses and vulnerabilities are often revealed and worked with. Students give and receive support from others, which is essential to a safe learning environment."
3. See Bacha, Claire S.: "Evaluating Experience: The Manchester Course in Group Psychotherapy", Group Analysis, Vol 38, No 4, 2005, Sage Publications, p. 515.
4. Bacha, op.cit, p. 510.