

The potency of the small group members at local ‘Y’

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Abstract: *Over the past five years, I have been attending the local YMCA (Y) where I swim five mornings a week. Three years ago, I wrote a paper entitled the Ladies Water Aerobics Swim Group. This group had a profound impact upon me. Indeed, at the recent IASWG symposium in New York, I was approached by one participant who had read the paper which had been published in Groupwork and attended the presentation I gave at the symposium in North Carolina in 2015. Based on this and many other positive responses I had received regarding the first paper, I decided to write a second paper, which discussed the two groups I belonged to at the Y. Both these groups have had numerous social and therapeutic benefits for myself. Although, they are not ‘formal groups,’ the groupwork literature, talks about the unique qualities: forces of healing, social interdependence, ‘we-ness,’ affiliative bonds, importance in our lives, and bringing about individual and social change in our lives. These two groups have had numerous positive outcomes for me personally and other members of the groups.*

Keywords: *social interdependence; importance of groups; informal groups; social groups; forces of healing; therapeutic benefits of groups; ‘we-ness.’*

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Introduction

Three years ago, I wrote an article entitled the Ladies Water Aerobics Swim Group (Johnson, 2014). I must be honest and say I was very flattered by the number of compliments I received about the article. Especially nice was that the ladies for whom the paper was written about were very pleased. Several years ago, there appeared in *Groupwork* a series of articles entitled 'Flash Groups'. The intent of these brief papers was to talk about the groups and groupwork that we see all around us. Recently, the journal *Groupwork* announced a new series entitled 'Groupwork in Practice.' In addition, at the International Association of Social Workers with Groups Symposium in New York City this year, there was a film screening of Marty Birnbaum's documentary: *Central Park: The People's Place*. This movie explored the role Central Park played in people's lives and showed what a gathering force it was for numerous group activities and group interactions.

In the conclusion of the Ladies Water Aerobics Swim Group, I asserted that I had become a member of my own swimming group, and that perhaps I should write a paper on that group. Hence, based on how well received the Ladies Water Group was and the extremely positive impact Central Park had on so many individuals, I decided to write about my own-day- to- day experience with groups at the YMCA (Y) where I swim.

Background

Since writing the article on the Ladies Water Group, I have continued to attend the 'Y' where I swim between three and five mornings a week. As I stated in the paper, this group had a profound impact upon me. As stated by Conyne:

Groups are ubiquitous in our society and around the world, both in our daily living and, increasingly, as an intentional method to induce growth and development and/or the alleviation and resolution of life problems. (Conyne, 2014, p.5-6.).

As noted at the beginning of the paper, the concept of Flash

Groups began several years ago. In the paper that the former editor of *Groupwork* (Mark Doel, 2007) wrote, he argued that groupwork was everywhere. Robert Conyne in his book also emphasized that groups are vital to our day-to-day existence. There is this wonderful cartoon at the beginning of his book that depicts a graveyard with numerous gravestones therein and on the other side of the graveyard there is a single tombstone with the epitaph: 'Did not work well in groups.'

He then goes onto assert the following:

Groups by their very nature contain unique forces for healing and for production that cannot be found in other helping modes. These forces, or dynamics, are centered on therapeutic conditions (e.g. cohesion, the sense of 'we-ness' that can develop in a group and among members) through which members can progress. (Conyne, 2014, p. xx1v).

These two quotes, I believe, depict what has occurred for myself and all the other members of the groups at the 'Y.' There is a sense of 'we-ness.' We are all invested in one another's well-being. We help one another, we interact with one another, and we share with one another. I would also like to think that we have brought about positive changes in each of our lives and that by interacting with one another we have made a significant difference in our social environments.

Based on the aforementioned, I decided to hand out a brief questionnaire to the individuals who had become important to me at the 'Y.' I asked them why they attended, how long they had been attending, what they liked about the 'Y', what they currently do, and what did they use to do? The rationale for the last two questions was that many of the individuals I had met were retired.

I also asked them if they were ok about me writing an article about them. All asserted that they were very excited and supportive of the concept. I also gave several of them a copy of the article I had written on the Ladies Water Group. In addition, for the purposes of anonymity, the names of the individuals were changed. Lastly, when I was informed by the editor of *Groupwork* that the article had been accepted for publication, I again spoke to everyone and asked if they continued to be alright with me going ahead. Once again, I received enthusiastic support.

Today I am even more convinced that groupwork is happening all

the time, yet we are not cognizant of it. Unfortunately, we don't stop and recognize the numerous benefits that groups provide us and how they impact us on a daily basis. We don't appreciate the importance that groups play in our lives. If you think about the social implications of groups, they are tremendous.

When I was at University, several friends would always come over to my house at around 1.00pm on Saturday afternoon when Middlesbrough were playing at home. The house I lived in was close to the football ground. I would make everyone lunch and then we would all go off to the game together. Following the game, everyone would return to my house and watch the football results come in on the television. It was a great way to spend an afternoon and we had such a wonderful time.

Recently, my wife's nephew and his wife were visiting us and we had all gone out to dinner. Over the course of the evening, we were talking about his mom and the long commute she had in from Staten Island to lower Manhattan each morning and the return trip in the evening. He then told us that:

The same people take the bus both into Manhattan in the morning, and in the evening for the return trip to Staten Island. They have been doing this for years. Now they all go out together once a month for dinner. Even the bus driver goes out with them!

When I heard, him say this, I just thought to myself, this is yet another example of the importance of groups and the prominent role they play in people's lives. This also reaffirmed the significance of my two groups at the 'Y.'

My two groups

My swimming group

Firstly, there is my swimming group. This is comprised of the following individuals. Valerie, who is a retired school teacher; Peter, my friend from Germany; Bruce our 'expert' swimmer; Carmen; and Hilda a Dutch woman. Most mornings Valerie and I share a lane. I will ask if she is going to help at the local elementary school that day. During her

career, she was a school teacher in several elementary schools. Although she has retired, it is very apparent that she still loves to work with the children in a school setting. She will often tell me about a project she is working on with them, or something that has happened in a math class, or perhaps a social studies project, or that the children are going on a field trip. Her great love and enthusiasm of teaching still comes through as we swim together.

It should also be noted that Valerie is a wonderful baker. Over the past few years, at Christmas and other holidays, I have found a box of butter cookies on the pool bench. The cookies are baked from scratch and individually decorated. The box is also decorated with ornate ribbons. As for the cookies, well let's just say they are wonderful and don't last too long in my home.

Another member of my swimming group is my German friend, Peter. Peter is a gentleman in his early 70's. Each morning, he greets me with a friendly 'Good morning, Paul.' If he is already swimming, he will raise his hands and wiggle his fingers at me as if he is waving. One of the most wonderful things about Peter is that he is always so positive and welcoming. I know over the years that he has had some health issues and on a couple of occasions has been hospitalized. There was time about a year ago when he wasn't seen at the pool for several days and finally Valerie tracked him down. He had been admitted into the hospital with an upper respiratory infection. Based on what happened to Peter, the swimming pool group set up an e-mail contact list, so if someone is missing, one of us will e-mail the individual and let the rest of the group know what's going on.

I also know that Peter often goes back to Germany to visit his sons and grandchildren. He told me several months ago about a trip he and his grandson took by train through Europe. He stated that he and his grandson were sitting at a station in France when he decided to smoke his pipe. Apparently, the station official pointed out to Peter that one could not smoke at the station. However, in typical calm and unruffled Peter manner, he continued to puff away on his pipe until their train arrived.

On a sadder note, I can remember when Peter informed me that his dog had passed away. My family has two dogs that we endeavor to take everywhere we go. Peter was the same way with his pup. I used to see the dog in the back of his car as I would pull into the parking

lot at the 'Y'. He would also take his dog out sailing with him. Peter states the following about the 'Y':

It is convenient, and I like the interaction with all the men and women

The third member of my swimming group is Bruce, a friendly and kind man. Out of all the swim group members, Bruce is the best swimmer; he can do the crawl, breaststroke, backstroke, and butterfly.

Next is Carmen, who has four adult children who live in different parts of the country--one in Portland, Oregon, another in New York, another in Boston, and one in Portland, Maine. I also know that Carmen has thirteen grandchildren that she absolutely adores. She will often talk about them. Over the last five years, it has been very exciting when the birth of a new grandchild occurs.

Finally, there is Hilda who is originally from Holland. Hilda met her husband, Joseph, when she was 17. They lived in Canada for several years and have four children and those children all live in different parts of the United States and Canada. About 18 months ago, Joseph passed away; and recently Hilda moved back to Canada to live in a retirement community and to be closer to one of her sons. When Joseph passed away, her children and grandchildren came to Maine and they went out on a fishing boat and scattered Joseph's ashes at sea. Apparently, Joseph loved to go sailing and fishing, so the family felt that this was the most appropriate place for Joseph to be remembered and to spend eternity. To demonstrate how beloved Hilda was, the 'Y' hosted a luncheon for her. Signs were put up inviting everyone who knew her to attend. A photo album was put together with pictures of members of the water aerobics class and there was a place where people could write notes to her. Unfortunately, I was teaching at the same time the luncheon was scheduled, but I was informed that one of her sons attended as did many other people and a good time was had by all.

Another wonderful outcome of this group is that occasionally on a Friday morning, we will all go out for breakfast to the Freeport Café. It's just wonderful sitting around and talking together, finding out what one another is up to.

Men's locker room group

My second group is the 'Men's Locker Room Group.' In this group, there is Gareth, Brian, Fred, Harry, and Wayne. Gareth is a former chemist who retired 15 years ago. He was born in Alberta and got his B.Sc. there and then earned a Ph.D. in Chemistry at Purdue. He has been married for over 50 years and has three children and seven grandchildren. He is a friendly gentleman and will occasionally bring me in an article to read or will bring in some Irish poetry for my wife. We also talk about his trips to the UK, especially Cornwall and Wales, which are two of his favorite places. Gareth states the following about the 'Y':

My 'Y' is made more meaningful by the encouragement of seeing others there and by our daily or frequent interactions on the floor or in locker room banter. Not to put too extreme a spin on it, but it is nice to see people of all ages and abilities helping themselves and others to improve their bodies and perhaps even their minds.

Another member of the locker room group is Fred who worked at the Portland Press Herald for 15 years and then worked another 18 years in the health care field where he took care of stroke victims. Fred is always bringing me articles that he clips from the Portland Press Herald or Maine Sunday Telegram. These articles usually pertain to something going on at the University of Southern Maine or the University Maine System. He is a huge sports fan and will always talk about the Boston Red Sox, New England Patriots, Boston Celtics, or Boston Bruins.

Fred states:

I attend the 'Y' because I like to get up early and start my day off right by 8.00 a.m. Monday to Saturday to get in a good workout and try and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Thirdly, there is Brian. He is the comedian in the group. He is a large and jovial man who is always teasing me. He asserted that when Trump became President, the authorities were going to revoke my Green Card and that I would be deported. He also likes to tease me about my English accent and about the game of cricket. He will often say: 'At the end of the third day of play, India two and Pakistan one.' He also likes to tease me about football, informing me that I should give

up on English football and pay more attention to American football. However, there is a serious side to Brian. He has a son who is a Navy officer and is stationed in Portland, Oregon. Brian visited him recently and when he came back, Brian frequently talked about his son with great pride. He also had a daughter who began the program Safe Passage. Unfortunately, his daughter was killed about 10 years ago in a road accident in Guatemala while undertaking this work.

Another member of the locker room group is Harry and he is the serious athlete in the group. Harry works out conscientiously and follows a precise routine. Often when I arrive at the 'Y' at about 7:20 a.m. Harry is already working out. He runs on the treadmill and utilizes a great deal of other equipment.

Harry is also a huge soccer fan and follows English soccer. He and I will often talk about a game or the fact that West Ham is playing Arsenal next weekend. Not only is Harry up on the Premier League, but he also knows what's going on in the lower divisions. He will often say 'did you know that Scunthorpe are top of league one', or 'Plymouth Argyle are playing Accrington Stanley this weekend.'

Then there is Connor. He is a real estate entrepreneur and for the last several years he has been making numerous trips to Cuba. We refer him as our Cuban Ambassador. He is also a competitive and skilled yachtsman. He also likes to tease Fred. A few weeks ago, he put a sign on Fred's locker that stated that 'this locker belongs to Fred and no one should else should use it.' I don't know if anyone is familiar with the English TV show 'Fools and Horses', but Connor reminds me of the character Dell Boy!!

Finally, there is Wayne, who is from Australia. He and I will often talk about Cricket or Rugby Union. I always will ask him if he has checked the scores recently. Did England beat Australia in Rugby or Cricket? However, he is very quick to point out to me the numerous times that England has been thrashed by Australia.

We also talk about listening to cricket commentaries on the radio. He listened in Australia and I in England. (John Arlott, Brian Johnston, Henry Blofeld, Richie Benaud, Christopher Martin Jenkins, Trevor Bailey, and Fred Truman) were some of the individuals we both reminisced about. While these names date me, whenever we talk I can picture myself at home listening to the Test Match on the radio.

The other amusing aspect about this Group is that we all like to use

the same locker every day. Mine is right in the corner; Harry's is right next to mine; Fred's is at the other end; Gareth's and Wayne's are in the middle; and Brian's is around the other side or where Fred likes to be. It is like something out of 'Last of the Summer Wine'. We are such creatures of habit and woe betide if someone takes one of our lockers. Our whole mojo is off!!

So, what's the point?

The point I am trying to emphasize is just how important these groups have become to me. When I started swimming at the 'Y' in the fall of 2012, I had no idea of the impact that all these people were going to have on me. Now, I look forward to seeing everyone. If someone is missing or has been away, there is a genuine concern about their well-being and whereabouts. In other words, these groups are significant in my life. When I started swimming five years ago, I never envisioned that I would encounter these people or that we would become such good and close friends and have such a rapport with one another.

For me personally, I have gained so much from my groups at the 'Y'. These individuals have become important members of my life. I look forward to seeing them each morning. I feel I have become meaningful in their lives as well. In addition, I enjoy their company and they have enriched not only my time at the 'Y', but impacted other aspects of my life. For example, bringing home Valerie's cookies and/or going out to breakfast with members of the swimmers group.

As for my Locker Room Group, Gareth brought his wife and some friends to an exhibit at the Library at USM in the fall. I just happened to be walking through the main concourse of the building and bumped into them. He introduced me to everyone, I told them what I did at USM and they stated they were very impressed with the exhibit. In addition, Gareth recently celebrated his 80th birthday and several of us from the 'Y' attended his party. It was a wonderful evening.

Finally, Harry has now become a colleague at USM. He assumed the position of the Major Gifts Officer. Prior to this position he worked for the Maine Cancer Foundation. MCF has major ties to my wife's company since one of the partners had lost a leg to cancer several years ago and the other partner's family has been severely impacted by cancer.

If one returns to the groupwork literature, the following authors affirm the points I have been making:

- Group work is a goal directed activity with two primary uses: (1) to bring about change to individual members (as an intervention group) or (2) to bring about change to the social conditions or environment outside of the group (as in task group). (Pelech, Basso, Lee, and Gandarilla, 2016, p.3).
- Social interdependence to humans is like water to fish. Just as fish are immersed in water their entire lives, we, too, are immersed in social interdependence. And because we are immersed in it, social interdependence can escape our notice. Because we cannot imagine its absence, we often do not consider its presence and, therefore, regularly underestimate the role that social interdependence plays in human life. (Johnson & Johnson, 2017, p.88).
- The small group, in and of itself, is recognized as a powerful social unit, of such importance in human lives that none of us can survive long or well without such fundamental social belongings. (Lang, 2010, p.56).
- Concerned with the needs of individuals to belong, to establish affiliative bonds with others, and to develop the capacities for empathy and identification. (Papell and Rotherman, 1980, p.10)

In addition (Yalom 1995) identifies several therapeutic factors of Groups. (as cited in Conyne, 2014, p.124).

Altruism- Group members offer help to one another

Catharsis - Group member expresses affect strongly

Development of socializing

Techniques- Group members gain skills through interaction

Group cohesiveness- Group members feel connected to one another

Installation of hope- Groups members gain inspiration from group

Universality- Group members learn that he or she is not alone

I would assert, that all the members of the two groups that I have written about, have benefited in the therapeutic ways identified by Yalom. There is a great deal of support, concern, interest, connection, appreciation and even inspiration from one another. Again, Norma

Lang in her writing really understood and grasped this concept, when she talked about the small group in life:

The small group has been identified as a beneficial social form by a number of social and behavioral sciences. Its potency is documented in the literature of psychology, social psychology, anthropology, and organizational behavior theory, as well as being acknowledged in social work, education, and other helping professions. (Lang, 2010, p.55).

According to Blisten:

The small group is seen as the fundamental unit linking the individual and society, the building block of society, and the locus both for maintaining stability and for producing change in both the individual and society. (as cited in Lang, 2010, p.56).

My groups and the groupwork literature seem to confirm that there are many benefits to participating in groups: That indeed they are an extremely influential and have numerous benefits that are not always understood or recognized.

In other words, all our lives connect at various points. My groups at the 'Y' have demonstrated to me the importance of these relationships and interactions. As Conyne (2014) states, life would be dull without groups!

Conclusion

I hope that my account of my two groups at the 'Y' has resonated with you and your own experiences of being a member of a group. When I watched Marty's movie on Central Park, what came across to me was just how much everyone benefited from doing things in groups. They came to the park as individuals with their bikes, their fishing rods, binoculars, baseball gloves, and bats. They came to see or go to a part of the Park, the Carousel, the Lake, the Gardens, the Alice in Wonderland statute, but it became far more meaningful when they interacted with one another. This is exactly what occurs for me and I believe other members of my groups at the 'Y'.

We talk to one another, we laugh together, we tease one another, we take care of

one another, we swim together, we exercise together, and we go out for breakfast together, we celebrate birthdays with one another. Through this 'little group' we have, I believe, made a significant impact in one another's lives.

I trust you have enjoyed reading this short piece about my personal group experiences and trust you will embrace not only working with groups but also being a member of a group. I for one would love to hear about your groupwork experiences. Groupwork is everywhere!!

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