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TARGETED ACTIVITIES IN GROUP CONTEXTS
The Analysis of Activities to Meet Consumer Need

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This article acknowledges the lack of analytical frameworks to aid the practitioner in selecting and organising activities to meet the needs of individuals and groups in residential, day care, and a wide range of social groupwork settings. The contribution of the relevant literature is reviewed. The results of the author's use of a framework to analyse activities in a day centre for people recovering from mental illness are described.

The effectiveness of group care resources depends largely on staff teams and users having agreed objectives for their client groups. Lack of clarity about the *means* of achieving those objectives leads to staff feeling confused about their role and a corresponding minimalist approach to users' personal potential. Day centres for adults with learning difficulties are described by Gathercole (1987) as functioning mainly to *contain* members. Units across the provision spectrum from family centres for the under 5s to residential accommodation for the elderly are criticised for centring staff activity on physical care. (Berry, 1975; Miller and Gwynne, 1972).

One element in achieving objectives for users in day, residential and group settings is the analysis of social groupwork in terms of:

i. how far the objectives are likely to contribute to the needs of the whole group;
ii. how far they are likely to meet the needs of the individual participants.

Activity here is defined as all elements of consumer experience which can be planned to meet need, and includes 'programmes' of activity such as handicrafts, play therapy (Curry, 1971), outdoor pursuits and discussion. Also included are activities less frequently viewed as part of the planned positive experience, for example, bedtimes, meal times and food preparation, which, nevertheless, have a

strong body of supportive literature (Trieschman, 1969; Van der Ven 1985; Wills, 1971) rooted in the planned environmental milieu therapy tradition.

Although some writers, whose work is founded in milieu therapy, traditionally provide workers with some strategies of operationalising these planned experiences, there are few guidelines for the detailed analysis of activities which relate user need to specific activities. Managers of group care units and social groupwork programmes have to make judgements about which activities are likely to achieve particular ends. Davies (1975) in his discussion of how groups' activities are selected says:

> Decisions about what a social work group should do and evaluations of what it has done, see, repeatedly to rely on untested and often highly subjective assumptions.

He suggests that rather than carefully matching the needs of the individual with the specific activity, workers are more likely to select some form of discussion, outdoor pursuits or community service, all three of which, he states, have been widely and largely uncritically accepted for use in group situations. Davies admits that groups do engage in activities other than these three, but he suggests that the basis of choice bears no relation to the aims for the group or to individual needs.

Davies' criticism of workers may be too harsh but there has been little guidance from research studies or the literature, for practitioners intending to select specific activities to achieve particular objectives.

The emergence of some analytical frameworks

In the 1950s, Gump and Sutton-Smith (1955) began to examine the relationship between particular types of behaviour and particular activities in children. Their observations and research suggested that the precise impact of an activity on the participants is partly determined by who takes part, but also by the demands and limitations which the essential structure of that activity imposes on them. These authors hypothesise that:

> ... activities have a reality and a behaviour influencing power in their own right. An activity area entered will exclude some potential behaviours, necessitate other behaviours and finally encourage or discourage still other behaviours.

The essential structure of the activity will elicit particular 'respondent behaviours'.

This can be illustrated by described the effects on 'Freddy' of two different but similar games:

> At first Freddy refused to play the game; later he was persuaded to play. In the 'it' role he was at first reluctant and uncertain: then he experienced moderate success. With each capture of a tail his stance was more confident, his chasing more vigorous; finally as his tension melted away he began to laugh ... The game ingredient which contributed to Freddy's pleasurable experience was that of a Central Person role which had considerable game-giver power, 'it' was free of game retaliation. This 'it' role required only a moderate amount of physical competence, an amount which Freddy possessed.
>
> In the second game, a cat attempts to catch a mouse. A circled group joins hands and attempts to block the cat and protect the mouse. Freddy becomes the cat and is initially excited and assertive. But he has no success ... Freddy blusters that he will use a 'special trick' but the trick doesn't work. Freddy scowls ... after several more hopeless attempts, Freddy in a sullen temper, quits the game (Gump and Sutton-Smith, 1955, p. 263).

A research study by Gump and Sutton-Smith (1955) tested the hypothesis that '*the amount and kind of social interaction is significantly affected by the variation of activity-settings*'. The subjects were 23 boys aged 9½–11½ years, at a summer camp, referred because of some adjustment difficulties. The report findings concern swim and craft activities. Types of social interaction were divided into six categories; sharing, helping, asserting, blocking, demanding and attacking. The amount of overall interaction was noted as well as the persons involved in types of interaction.

RESULTS

	SWIM	CRAFT
Average number of overall interactions	38.8	26.4
% interaction between boys and staff	26%	46%

The predominant staff/boy interactions in swim were 'sharing' followed by 'conflict' 34 per cent (made up of a combination of 'demand, 'block' and 'attack'). 'Conflict' was 17 per cent in craft staff/boy interactions.

These results indicate that in swim the staff members were involved in few helping interactions but were called on to settle conflicts. In craft, the staff role was mainly helping. Peer interactions also differed between activities. Swim seems to encourage high peer interaction, high assertion and attack. Craft seems to encourage low peer interaction with minimal peer conflict interaction. This research investigates the characteristics of these two activities in terms of likely respondent behaviours, it does not attempt to investigate particular effects on participants with known individual needs.

Vinter (1974) revised and extended Gump and Sutton-Smith's conception in his attempt to formulate a framework for the analysis of all activities used in social groupwork. Like Gump, he states that all activities comprise an 'activity setting' which is likely to evoke certain 'respondent behaviours' in the participants. Vinters' main contribution to activity analysis is his '*6 dimensions of activity-setting framework*', which is a schema for analysing the 'activity setting' of all activities in order to *predict* the likely 'respondent behaviour' of participants. The six dimensions are: *prescriptiveness*, the degree of prescribed structure for an activity, *e.g.* a game of snooker would have high prescriptiveness; *controls*, level of staff control in the activity, *e.g.* technique instruction, provision of tools, materials; *competence* level needed to take part, *e.g.* a low level for free play, a high level for portrait painting; the amount of *interaction* verbal or non-verbal, ranging from high level, *e.g.* football game, a shared group task, to low level, a lone activity with little need of staff response; the amount of *rewards* to participants and how widely they are distributed in the group, *e.g.* personal achievement, group identity, public achievement; and the amount of physical *movement* required. The schema does not in general attempt to analyse respondent behaviour, although Vinter does predict likely behaviours under each dimension for craft and swim activities. The framework does not relate respondent behaviour to individual needs, or to group or individual goals. It is the practitioner who must use Vinter's framework to analyse the likely reward for participants and to relate this to individual group goals.

Whittaker (1974) has attempted to extend Vinter's framework by relating the six dimensions to eight types of children. It was initiated for use in a residential children's setting so that the activity examples are mainly of the 'games' variety.

Davies (1975) used Vinter's six dimensions to analyse likely '*respondent behaviours in a social group work setting*'. Davies contrasts the types of discussion group for women, one formal and the other informal. He applies Vinter's framework to all activities which occur in

the meetings including: arriving and departing, provision of refreshments, and the amount of physical contact permitted. Davies' interpretation of Vinter's framework highlights the importance of analysing all aspects of group interaction, since all elements affect participant perception and therefore the groups' effectiveness.

Gump, Vinter and Whittaker all use activities with children as examples, swim and craft being predominant. Vinter claims that *all* activities can be analysed using his framework to predict likely respondent behaviour.

A wider application of the framework

In order to test the above claim, the author used Vinter's framework to analyse a wider range of activities in a day centre for adults recovering from mental illness. In this centre new members meet with staff to discuss their goals and to choose activities which meet these needs. This discussion forms an initial contract which is reviewed in four weeks.

The five activities selected were: badminton, arts and crafts, the Tuesday group, a repairs workshop, washing up and clearing away. Each activity was observed on four separate occasions by the author and the manager, each making separate readings. Vinter's framework was used and a high, medium or low measure for each dimension was recorded. Judgement decisions between the author and the manager on the measures were in agreement.

A brief summary of the results are shown in Table 1.

The *Tuesday group* is a weekly discussion group in which members' personal problems and coping strategies are discussed as well as aspects of running the day centre. In the first half of the session, the whole group meets. In the second half, members are in small groups with a staff member to each group. Figure 1 suggests this type of discussion structure provides controlled, highly prescriptive activity which encourages high interaction between all participants in the second half, with low interaction in the first half, and that being mainly staff/member.

Badminton seems also be a controlled, prescriptive activity, but medium competence levels were well tolerated in this setting and interaction (verbal and non-verbal) for all participants was medium to high.

Arts and crafts was more complex to analyse than the other activities, since high, medium or low scores for interaction for staff/participant and participant/participant varied according to the tasks, in this mixed task group.

Washing up and clearing away. Prescriptive and controlled activity seems to require medium competence and to encourage interaction as long as the tasks within the activity were shared. The latter was also partly dependent on the physical design of the kitchen. A socially valued role in the day centre, it provides rewards for all participants.

The repairs workshop mends an item each week. Usually the member of staff and one to three members are involved in the repair, the rest of the group congregate around this activity and discuss the repair and/or general topics. Scores on the dimensions therefore vary. 'Whole group' describes those not actually involved in the repair. The activity seems to be rewarding for all in the group. It is less controlled and prescriptive for the non-repairers and therefore may well be attractive to members who find it difficult to join in more formal sessions.

Figure 1 shows which of the six dimensions were found to be the most useful in each of these activities in the particular setting. *Interaction* and *reward* were noted for all five activities, whilst competence and prescriptiveness were noted in four activities.

The usefulness of Vinter's framework in this setting

This application of Vinter's framework highlights its usefulness in differentiating between respondents' behaviours where participants are engaged on different *tasks* within an apparently similar activity, *e.g.* arts and crafts, oil painting and puppet making. It highlights differences in working in pairs/small groups on shared activity; working in pairs on same activity; working in a group on *own* activity.

There is a tendency for dimensions to be a blanket description. They may need more behaviour specific definitions. It seems likely that particular settings will need to be more specific for some dimensions than others in relation to unit objectives and individual and small group goals. In the day centre for the recovering mentally ill, interaction was the most useful dimension. However, when applied as a differentiator between activities and elements of activities it was found not to distinguish between negative and positive interactions. Gump (1955) defines six types of social interaction, which Vinter (1974) has not incorporated into his framework.

Van der Ven's (1985) concept of appropriate *time* dimension in activity programmes focuses on the importance of giving participants sufficient time to complete a task satisfactorily to ensure participant reward. Van der Ven also focuses on understimulation and overstimulation or setting the activity at an appropriate participant level. Each of these elements could be incorporated into Vinter's *competence*

Vinter's 6 dimensions	TUESDAY GROUP	BADMINTON	ARTS & CRAFTS	WASHING UP + CLEARING AWAY	REPAIRS WORKSHOP	
Prescriptiveness	High	High	Varies depending on task. Puppets — High Wool picture — Low	High	*Repairs* High	*Whole Group* Low
Controls	High (internalised)	High (self-imposed)	Med/High	High	Med	Low
Movement	Low	High	High hands	High hands + arms	High hands + arms	Med. in and out of the room
Competence	Low/Med	Med	Low/Med	Med	High	Low
Interactiveness	*1st Half* Low Mainly client/staff *2nd Half* High client/staff & client/client	Med/High	Δ	Med/High shared tasks Low solitary tasks	High Staff/Repairer	Med Partic/partic. Med Staff/Partic.

Rewards *	*Physical* activity Team membership Demonstration of reasonable skill level	*Expressive* Choice of task Demonstration of competence Staff attention	*Competence in* task Social usefulness Group identity	*Competence* Staff Attention	*Social* interaction Group identity Staff attention

△ **Interactiveness in arts & crafts**

Solitary tasks:

Oil painting Wool picture	Low participant/participant	Mending wooden puzzle Puppet making	Medium participant/staff

Same tasks (shared materials)

Basket making Puppet making	High participant/participant	Med/High participant/staff

* **Rewards Tuesday discussion group:** Personal skill in contributing. Confidence re self-expression in a large group. Demonstrates the interest of others in personal problems. Identity with group and the Centre.

and *reward* dimension to provide further classification and refinement.

This application of Vinter's structured approach to activity selection is not intended to suggest that all practitioners have selected activity without conceptual frameworks or consideration of group or individual goals. Churchill (1959) says '*in planning of every activity the effect of group interaction on each member must be considered*'. In planning a group activity for young boys in a child guidance setting, she chose model airplane construction, since it requires little necessary skill, allows those with skill to demonstrate it and demands no tool sharing. These elements relate to goals for two particular boys that day. Thus the selection not only relates to individual goals, but to several principles which Vinter's framework highlights. Troester and Darby (1976) provide a theoretical basis on several dimensions for the use of food in group settings.

The application of Vinter's framework to participants in a day centre for adults recovering from mental illness suggests it may well have wide ranging applicability on residential, day care and other social groupwork contexts.

It would seem, however, that the framework needs refining to differentiate a wider range of respondent behaviour. It may well also need the adoption of some specific dimensions to provide analysis in some settings.

In its present form, however, it provides a framework which can be applied to give overall guidelines in the choice of activities and their likely indicators of participant response, in order to achieve users' goals more reliably.

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