*Groupwork Vol. 16(3), 2006, pp.46-70. © Whiting & Birch Ltd, 2006*

# Groupwork researchers as 'temporary insiders'

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***Abstract**: This paper aims to build the evidence base for groupwork through an exploration of the potential for participant observation in groups. The value of the participant observation method is considered by presenting the available literature and by analysing its use with a particular group. The group used as a case example is one for parents and carers experiencing difficulties with the behaviour of their adolescent children, and it illustrates both the dilemmas and the opportunities of participant observation. This group's structure is described in detail to provide the backcloth against which the observation took place and to link the process of participant evaluation with the specific detail of the group programme.*

*The paper develops a variant of the notion of the participant observer, in this case as an active temporary insider in the group, in which the process of independent evaluation by a person external to the group inevitably becomes part of the group process itself. There is discussion of how best to use this characteristic of participant observation, concluding with some guidelines emerging from the research. The guidance is intended to aid temporary insiders to provide independent evaluation and to build the evidence base. The paper is a collaboration between a groupwork academic and a groupwork practitioner.*

***Keywords**:* groupwork; participant observation; parenting groups; group evaluation; group work evidence base; groupwork researchn

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## Introduction

An evaluation of groupwork services was commissioned by South Gloucestershire Youth and Children's Services Department, a public agency in the English South Midlands. Included in this overall evaluation were observations of groups by the external researchers. This paper is the story of one of these participant observations. The group in question is a Parenting Skills group for parents and carers wanting to understand and manage the difficult behaviour of their adolescent children. The principles and practices of the groupwork are, therefore, different to those one might use in direct work with adolescents themselves (Malekoff, 2004).

The group which provides the illustration for the analysis in this paper is one supported by an Adolescent Support Team staffed by social workers and adolescent support workers. The team works with young people between the ages of 11 and 17 and one of the main aims is to support young people at home and to prevent them from being accommodated by the local authority (section 20, The Children Act 1989). Although the majority of the work is with young people and their families on a 'one-to-one' basis, the team has established a strong and regular groupwork service. The Managing Difficult Behaviour group is one of the groups which the team has offered on a regular basis for the past six years (24 different groups to date). There is a working plan for each session and details are provided later, though this is used very flexibly and the groups are *not* curriculum-driven. Immediately following the session, the facilitators meet to de-brief and evaluate. The participant observer took part in the debriefing following the session that was observed. The agency provides fortnightly supervision of groupwork for the three facilitators together.

## The group

The purposes of the Managing Difficult Behaviour (MDB) groups are:

- to improve communication between parents/carers and adolescents
- to support and help group members to feel less isolated

- to develop a better understanding of adolescence and what 'positive parenting' can mean
- to consider rewards and sanctions and what works
- to know how to use the information and advice from the group

Referrals to the groups are made from a wide range of agencies such as youth offending and children's teams, health, education and police. Once a referral has been made, there is a one to one meeting with the prospective group member (or parenting couple) to consider whether groupwork is appropriate. The research suggests that this offer of groupwork on an individual basis is likely to encourage better attendance, by enabling mutual selection before the group first meets (Doel, 2006). The experience of the adolescent support team confirms this, with attendance and reliability increasing markedly since the pre-group interviews were instituted two years ago.

The Managing Difficult Behaviour (MDB) groups are typically composed of white women and men. Although over the 24 groups about 75% of members have been women, there has been a notable increase in men attending since the groupworkers started visiting group members in pre-group contacts, where they are able to discuss the importance of attendance by *both* parents or carers. There have been very few black members of the group and this reflects the local population. The age range of group members has been from 35 to 50 and typically late 30s. Three facilitators work with up to 15 parents and carers in each group. The group runs over 10 weekly evening sessions from 7.00 pm to 8.30 pm. However, members are encouraged to arrive at 6.30 pm to share refreshments and for 'chat time'. This gives members the chance to have non-threatening conversations and the session itself is rarely interrupted by late-comers. The refreshments are in a different room to the group meeting and this provides a natural break.

Parents and carers who attend the group often continue to meet up on their own to support each other after the ten sessions have finished. This is something that is encouraged early in the group by developing a contacts list ('Let's Keep In Touch') which group members can decide to sign up to, or decline. These continuation groups have proved successful in supporting group members to continue their problem solving without social work intervention. However, not every group decides to continue.

## What people want from the group

Group members invariably start the group in a state of crisis, usually attending the first session with a feeling that they are alone with their problem. One of the most powerful aspects of the group is the discovery that they are not. A typical situation is described below:

A referral is made by the parents with a request from them to have their young person accommodated by the local authority (taken out of the parents' care). The young person might even have been dropped off at social service offices and left. These situations will immediately activate support in the form of conflict resolution. The MDB group is offered as part of the support. When parents reach this stage they are often dealing with very extreme behaviours.

Group members are asked to respond to some questions in writing before they come to the group. A questionnaire called Before the Group Begins is designed to help members to think about groups in general as well as this one in particular. It can be a useful focus for the individual pre-group meetings with prospective members and it provides a benchmark to measure change and indicate what, if any, part the group has played in these changes. These are the responses of one couple, Mandy and Richard (names have been anonymised).

**Before the group begins ...**
We are looking forward to the group and we hope that it will be useful and enjoyable for you. Before the group begins, it is very helpful if you can answer some questions. We will return to these at the end of the group and it will help you and us to know whether the group has been a success for you. Thank you.

**Your name:** *Mandy and Richard S*

**How you would like to be called in the group?** *as above*

**Your age:** *42 and 49*

1. **Have you been a member of a group before** (if yes, please

say what kinds of group)? *Amateur dramatics, squash and badminton teams.*

2. **How did you get to know about this group?** *At a Family Support Meeting.*

3. **What do you want most of all from this group?** *Control and a normal family life.*

4. **Why do you think a group might be able to help?** *Other parents' ideas on how to manage [our son] George***.**

5. **What will you bring to the group** (for example, a good sense of humour)? *Ideas and fun.*

6. **Do you have any concerns or worries about the group?** If so, what are these? *No.*

7. **When the group finishes in 10 weeks, what realistic changes would you like to see in your situation by then?** Please be specific. *That we deal with George in a consistent way.*

8. **Would it be OK to contact you after the group has finished?** Say six months later to find out how things are going for you? If yes, please let us have a contact address or number (of course, you can change your mind at any stage): *Yes.*

Mandy and Richard were unusual in making links with other activities and social groups (Q1), but this is useful to help people see this group experience in the context of others that may not have been perceived as 'groups'. It is common for people to be unsure how the group might help them (Q4) and new members need to be reassured that this is fine. Although Mandy and Richard had no worries about the group, some people express fears that they will be nervous, that they might talk too much or not enough, that they will not see a benefit, or they raise practical issues such as child minding costs. At this stage, before the group has begun, the realistic changes (Q7) tend to focus on the behaviour of the adolescent.

Many potential group members hope for skills to help them cope with the situation at home. They are looking for new ideas and, though professional help is mentioned, many are already alert to the opportunity for learning from other group members. Answering these questions before the group begins is designed to prompt people to start *thinking group*.

## What happens in the group sessions

The Managing Difficult Behaviour group programmes have evolved over the six years through the experience of the groups themselves This is an outline of the current pattern.

## Sessional pattern

Before each session one of the three facilitators is available outside the building to greet members (and, for the first session, to show them where refreshments are). It is important to establish patterns in groups so that each session has a rhythm that is familiar. This establishes a reliable and safe environment and one in which the pattern can be deliberately changed in order to alter the rhythm (Doel, 2006). Of course, a pattern needs to be recognised as a pattern before it can be recognisably broken!

Except when people work in pairs or small groups, the group always sits in a circle, with the three facilitators distributed fairly evenly through the group. Sessions start with an Opening Circle, in which everyone has the opportunity to have a voice and offload how their week has been, scoring from one (very bad) to ten (extremely good). These scores are noted in order to monitor change and the group facilitators join in with this activity. Group members are introduced to a practice task in each group session, which they complete between one session and another. These are crucial for transferring learning from inside the group out to the home and community and to start to change feelings and behaviours. Finally, every session ends with a Closing Circle, in which the theme is always connected to adolescence, but in the context of the parents' own experiences of adolescence. For example, 'when you were a teenager what was your favourite music?' This has the dual

purpose of taking group members back out into the world and also of putting them in touch with their own adolescence. As the group gains in confidence, members take turn to decide the adolescence topic for the Closing Circle and to lead it.

### Session 1

The first session helps people get to know one another, covers housekeeping issues, considers the aims and objectives of the group and explores hopes and fears for the group. A Group Agreement is negotiated which incorporates all this and is available for the rest of the group as a guide and memo.

### Session 2

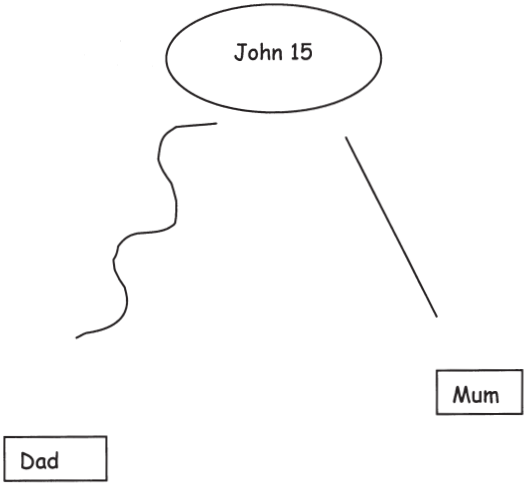
The second session focuses on 'family mapping'. The group moves into three smaller groups each led by one of the facilitators and with the aim of exploring family dynamics via strengths (positives) and problems (issues). There are usually recurring and common issues within the group as a whole, which helps the leaders to anticipate likely themes and members to bond, by reinforcing the feeling that they are not alone with their problems.

Each person draws their family map (see figure 1 overleaf), with lines between family members representing the kind of relationship that they feel they have. They are asked to represent how problematic the relationship is by how zig-zag the line and the length of the line represents how close or distant they feel about their child. Other significant people can be added to the map. All the completed Family Mapping sheets are displayed up on the wall, which makes the similarities very graphic. This activity also gives the adolescents a kind of presence in the group.

### Session 3

Adolescent development is the focus of this session. There is input about adolescent biology and psychology, such as brain development, risk taking and identity. The social aspects of adolescence ('what is it like for adolescents today?') are also introduced. The practice task for

Figure 1: Family mapping




| Issues | Positives |
|---|---|
| Drugs | Can be very loving |
| School problems | Is very clean |
| Coming in late | Plays football |
| Hanging around with the wrong people | |

this session is a work sheet, the Stop-Think Circle in which the person completing the sheet records what they believe to be normal adolescent behaviour (in an outer circle) and what they identify as unacceptable behaviour (in an inner circle), with a suggestion that the questions 'Is it safe? Is it fair?' are used as guide.

Both group members *and* their adolescents are asked to complete the Stop-Think Circle. Doing this exercise helps the parents to let go of some of the normal adolescent behaviours that they do not need to challenge and to think about saving their energies for the unacceptable behaviours. It is also the beginnings of new house rules. The process of the exercise means that the parents must communicate with their young people in order to have them complete it.

**Session 4**

This session takes the group members back to their own adolescence, to remember their own difficulties at that stage of life with behaviour and feelings. The practice task is to take five of the unacceptable behaviours identified in the Stop-Think circle and rate them in order of the behaviours they would like to change, thus helping the parents to decide on their priorities. Parents complete this practice task at home with their adolescents.

**Session 5**

The focus moves to parenting styles. Three styles are discussed - authoritarian, liberal (laissez-faire) and democratic and the group members consider what their own style of parenting is and how they were parented themselves. The aim is to foster a more democratic approach and an understanding of why this might be more successful. The practice task is to analyse a situation during the week, consider the style of their reaction and how they could have responded more democratically.

**Session 6**

The theme of the sixth session is communication. In pairs, one person is asked to talk on a subject whilst the other continually interrupts. Then, the pair are asked to play it with one person talking and the other showing no interest at all, for instance looking out of the window and avoiding eye contact. Lastly, the concept of active listening is explained and discussed and the group members practise eye contact and no interruptions. This is a very powerful exercise and it invariably makes a strong impression. The practice task for this session is to choose an appropriate time during the coming week (and what could be 'appropriate' is rehearsed in the group) and actively listen to the young person.

**Session 7**

The theme is negotiation and the notion of 'best time' to challenge a situation. Examples are explored, such as the futility of challenging a young person who has just come home late and is under the influence of

drugs or alcohol. How might group members create a win-win outcome? The practice task is to revisit the five behaviour changes identified in session 4 and to negotiate sanctions and rewards with the adolescent. This reinforces the communication issues which were introduced in the previous session.

### Session 8

This session continues the theme of negotiation by considering how boundaries are set, inviting parents to present difficult situations and how the group might respond to them. The significance of timing is reinforced (for example, that adolescents may talk more freely when sat by your side on a car journey or when playing a game). The practice task is to continue to negotiate the rewards and sanctions.

### Session 9

This penultimate session explores self-esteem, assertiveness and looking after yourself. The group thinks about what they enjoy, what they feel good about and how they can take time out to recharge their batteries. The importance of having energy to cope with the difficulties is established, and therefore the need to know how to look after energy levels. The practice task is to identify activities that will help group members to look after themselves. They also focus on something that their adolescent is good at and on developing it with lots of praise.

### Session 10

The final session is largely an evaluation of the group and its impact. Various resources (reading matter, contacts and organisations) are made available, as well as a certificate of attendance. The group leaders encourage the members to continue contact with each other for support.

## The evaluation

South Gloucestershire Youth and Children's Services Department commissioned an evaluation of its groupwork service. This included a stock take of groups past and present, as well as planning for the future. In particular, survey work by the researchers was conducted to highlight the groupwork service's strengths and pinpoint the concerns. The main strengths were seen as the opportunities for co-working and professional development (and the sharing that this entails), and the value of groups for the members. The flexibility of the group content and structure, group planning arrangements and the opportunities for multi-disciplinary work also figured prominently. In terms of action needed, two priority areas emerged. One was the question of publicity for groups (and the appropriateness of referrals) and the other was the need for more consistent and systematic evaluation of the groups. In particular, long-term outcomes of groupwork interventions were not known and there was no specific follow-up with group members after the groups finished. The groupworkers wanted to learn more about what difference, if any, the groups were making. A forthcoming paper will present this research in more detail.

Of course, service evaluation is unquestionably important for reasons such as accountability, efficiency, planning, development of appropriate programmes and improvement of existing programmes (Alston and Bowles, 2003). What is less conclusive is what methods are the most effective and reliable for which aspects of the evaluation (Grinnell, 1993). If the *delivery* of the service uses groupwork, it seems congruent to incorporate group methods in the *evaluation* of the service (Wheelan, 2005). Yet in the agency in question there was a reliance on individual evaluations (of the 'how was it for you' variety) which probably reflects the broader picture. So, finding out how the groups are working and what difference this is making was typically being focused on the individuals in the group, not on the group as a whole.

### Participant observation

Participant observation has an established history as a humanistic research method in the qualitative tradition (Jorgensen, 1989).

> Observational techniques ... can provide new insights by drawing attention to actions and behaviour normally taken for granted by those involved in programme activities and therefore not commented upon in interviews. (Clarke with Dawson, 1999, p.81)

As a method of research it lends itself naturally to groups, though we would argue that its value is considerably enhanced if the participant observer is skilled enough both to participate in groupwork and to observe group process at the same time. Indeed, we might think of adept group members as participant observers, since they actively participate in the group whilst also observing the process.

Ethical considerations are prominent in participant observation, especially concerning whether consent is informed, openly given and can be withdrawn during the process. Especial care must be taken when the participant observation is in a group, in case group pressures have led some reluctant members to acquiesce. Although there may be some rare circumstances which justify the deception of covert participant observation, such as Whyte's (1955) street gangs, in this current study the very fact that the participant was known to be a researcher was important to the process. Although Alston and Bowles (2003) caution that 'subjects will be less likely to disclose sensitive and critical information and they may be inclined to change their behaviour to conform to what is seen as socially desirable', this rests on a largely untested common-sense thesis. As we will see in the following illustration, it is possible that an outsider-becomes-temporary-insider might prompt levels of reflection and disclosure that the group had not previously achieved.

> *Group think* can operate so that individual members feel afraid to voice their true opinions and diversity is lost. Much depends on the skill of the group facilitator' (Alston and Bowles, 2003, p.120)

Some techniques, such as the nominal group, allow ideas to be generated and evaluated by individuals within a group and, by a process of prioritisation, help the group to achieve a consensus. This avoids some of these potential problems of group pressure (Delbecq & Van de Ven, 1971; Potter et al, 2004). All three facilitators of the Managing Difficult Behaviour group reported that the group was operating

consensually whilst accommodating divergent views and they felt it was robust enough for a whole group method to be used. They saw much potential for reviewing the group from a fresh perspective via the participant observer.

There is a judgement to be made about how much participation there should be. For example, the observer could have participated merely for the 45 minutes of the evaluation slot. If taking part in the whole session, does the observer engage in group rounds? As a groupworker, it is important to negotiate the degree of participation that will be most appropriate for the group; as a researcher, it is a question of which arrangements will yield the most meaningful data (Patton, 1990). Our hypothesis is that these propositions are directly linked and that arrangements that benefit the group process are likely to benefit the research data, too.

Documentary sources of evidence concerning the group's effectiveness came from the groupworkers' own logs, made immediately after each session of the group and the individuals' written evaluations before the group began, mid-way through the group and at the end. These are all primary sources of evidence for the evaluation (Burgess, 1984).

### *The role of the participant observer*

Gold (1969) describes four kinds of role in observation: complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant and complete observer. None of these quite fits the bill for our purposes, which led us to develop the notion of 'temporary insider' as a better description of the role in this research, building on McDermott's (2005) notion of insider and outsider perspectives when researching groupwork. This 'dip-in' temporary insider role is, therefore, a different variant of participant observation, which classically involves a longer period. When the temporary insider has a good knowledge of groupwork this can change the role of participant observer into a co-facilitator, but the very temporary nature of this transformation can enable the insider to remain independent. For example, some fifteen minutes into the evaluation one person had been silent, except in response to the first round, and the evaluator made exactly the kind of judgement a groupworker does about whether to ask her to volunteer a view.

The evaluator was also familiar with the task of assisting the members to reflect on themselves *as a group*. The nature of the questions

emphasized the group and not just the individual, and they were addressed to the group as a whole as we will see later. A decision has to be made about whether the groupworkers should absent themselves; in this case, the evaluation did not focus directly on the groupworkers and the group was working effectively, so it was decided that they should stay. Having groupworkers present as non-participant observers to the group's evaluation ('temporary outsiders'!) has the benefit of their hearing the evaluation directly and it is experienced as a more adult and trusting process than having them leave the room.

Observers, even passive ones, are likely to have some kind of impact on what they are observing. Often this is considered to be a problem (as in the so-called Hawthorne effect, which suggests that people might have a propensity to behave in ways they perceive the researcher to want them to behave), but it can also be a benefit. For example, an unintended consequence of this example of a temporary insider at work was the way that this role actively promoted the development of a *whole group* identity. On a number of occasions, people remarked that 'we haven't really thought about it this way before', but that 'now we think about it', etc. Although the groupworkers themselves could have led a sequence for the group to reflect on itself as a group, in some ways perhaps it is easier for an outsider with a temporary 'visa' to release this.

## How the evaluation was established

The groupworkers explained the possible benefits to be derived from evaluating the group and the agency's desire to have its groupwork services evaluated. During the second session they gained group members' informed consents to the attendance of a researcher towards the end of the next session, the third of ten. This verbal consent was given by all group members and it was agreed that the researcher would be present for the whole session (including the pre-group refreshments), with the formal evaluation confined to a given 30-45 minute period towards the end of the session.

## How the evaluation was conducted

Having agreed that the evaluator would participate in the whole group, there were decisions about levels of participation. In fact, the observer

took an active part in the same elements as the facilitators (in some rounds for example, but not all). The evaluator did not introduce or facilitate any of the segments of the group, apart from the designated one. It is important to note that the evaluation was not a observation of the group from which then to make inferences, the pitfalls of which have been demonstrated by Winstein (1982). Nor was it a systematic, quantitative approach, clocking the pattern, direction and frequency of exchanges between group participants in the style of interaction analysis. In fact the evaluation consisted of a structured conversation with the group, using these questions:

1 How did you get to know about the group?
2 What do you hope the group will do for you?
3 How do you think a group can help (in other words, what is different about the group compared to working with someone individually?)
4 What are you most enjoying about this group?
5 Are there things you'd like to change about the group, or other things you'd like to do?
6 When the group finishes, how will you know that the group has been a success?
7 Would it be OK for me to meet you individually or as couples six months after the group finishes to see what your memories of the group are then, and whether the group is still having an impact on you?

Each of these questions was asked into the circle of the full group of twelve people (seven women and five men) without being directed towards any particular person. Without discussion, the group chose to use the first question as a round, each person responding in turn. After this, questions were treated as open discussions, generating such discussion that prompts were not needed, merely the occasional request for clarification or elaboration. Permission was asked to use a laptop to make immediate notes, a technique familiar to the participant observer. Sometimes it was difficult to type and process and listen at the same time, but the group responded well to requests to 'just go back and check what you were saying'. The observer knew everyone's name by this stage, which aided the process, though no differentiation between

who was saying what was made in the notes. Very soon after the session the observer went over the typed notes to correct and tidy them.

These are the notes from the group's reflections.

**Now the group has begun ...**

1. **How did you get to know about the group?**
   All members came to the group via some form of contact with social services. For two members attending the group was part of a 'list of things that had to be done'. The police and education welfare service were involved in two other situations.

2 **What do you hope the group will do for you?**
   *I'd like a magic wand, but I know there isn't one!; cope with the outbursts; deal with the behaviour as a couple; I need to know how to help him [*son*]; I want to deal with the situation more calmly; talking will help manage my son's behaviour in a consistent way; I want to get a better understanding; I want better communication and mutual respect; I want to feel more confident as a parent; I want to know what is wrong; I want to learn how to get them [*the adolescents*] to communicate with me.*

3 **How do you think a group can help (what is different about the group compared to working with someone individually?)**
   *You're not on your own - you don't feel stupid; you meet with people who are experiencing things that are very similar; I'm glad that I came - I found out that others have difficulties and in some ways worse off than my situation; the group puts it in perspective; I learn from other people; not feeling alone with your problem; issues are similar and it makes you feel better; able to laugh about it; good to be away from it - the nervous twitch comes back at 8:20pm! [*ten minutes before the end of the group*]; it's difficult for others [who are not group members] to understand what you're living through; you get acceptance here; family and friends judge you as a bad parent, but here [*in the group*] they don't; I don't feel judged here; [*coming to

the group*] shows I'm committed; you learn that people have different tolerance levels; people here are dealing with it - at least we care enough to be here; it's a sign of caring [*being in the group*].*

**4 What are you most enjoying about this group?**
Responses were similar to Question 3, plus:
*Everybody's company; I feel sorry for people's situations; time away from it [*the situation at home*]; talking to others; the only time I laugh in the whole week!; a relaxed atmosphere; informative; the group gives me hope; it leads to increased communication; this group is therapy.*

**5 Are there things you'd like to change about the group, or other things you'd like to do?**
*It's a bit short - I'd like more time [*most of the group agree with this*]; two hours would be great; it flies by too quick; two sessions a week; perhaps have the first session one and a half hours - I wouldn't have come if I thought it'd be two hours, but then lengthen it as we get used to each other!*

**6 When the group finishes, how will you know that the group has been a success?**
*We're still keeping in touch as a group; carry on supporting each other; I will have a strategy for how to confidently deal with my son; the group will have given me new ideas; we'll be more of a friend to him [*son*] by the end of the group; I'll know if I've taken something out of it [*but couldn't be specific yet*]; to have been able to lower my expectations [*of the adolescent's behaviour*]; have a growing awareness of how to make it [*the relationship and the behaviour*] better; have more self-esteem as a parent; have a better idea of whether I am doing it right, as a parent.*

**7 Would it be OK for me to meet you individually about six months after the group finishes to see what your memories of the group are then, and whether the group is still having an impact on you?**
Everyone agreed to this. The researcher will contact people

in the autumn, via the groupworkers. Group members can, of course, change their minds in the meantime.

## Findings from the evaluation

To what extent had the group become 'a group'? Perhaps we first need to define the characteristics of a group. Although taken from proceedings in 1959 and written in the gendered language of the time, these characteristics are as apt now as they were then and a useful reminder of the timelessness of groups:

(a) close emotional ties among the members
(b) each individual feels that he [*sic*] belongs to the group
(c) each individual feels that he is accepted by the others
(d) the group creates its own structure through which responsibilities are assigned to the various members by common agreement among them
(e) the members of the group have a feeling of loyalty towards the group so that they serve and defend it.

(from: *European Seminar on The General Principles of Social Group Work*, (1959, p.8)

There is evidence in the responses to 'Now the Group Has Begun ...' to support all five elements above. Element (d) was evidenced in the way the group managed itself throughout the session and the sharing of responsibility for the Closing Circle described earlier. The significant aspect of the evaluation was the focus on *the group*. This is in contrast to many evaluations which tend to focus on the *individual* gains. The questions prompted group-oriented responses, peppered with reflections on how the group had affected individuals.

## Follow through

The notes from the session were returned to the groupworkers who checked them out with the group members to see if they felt they were accurate. No changes were requested. A follow through visit was

made six months later. This particular group did not continue meeting beyond the ten weeks, despite the strong sense of 'groupness', so a call was sent out to all the group members by the workers. Just two people (a couple) came to the follow-up meeting and one person sent her apologies. We discuss this disappointing turn-out later. The couple's responses to the evaluator's post-group interview is recorded below as *Since the group ended ...*

**Since the group ended ...**
*Remembering the group.*

**Name of the Group:** Managing Difficult Behaviour

**Date**: 6 months since the group ended

**Your names**: Richard and Mandy

**How you were called in the group**: *Same*

**1 Thinking back, what were the main reasons you came to the group?**
Both*: To find ways to handle George [our son] when he was in a temper. Learning tips to handle difficult behaviour. Seeing how other people were coping in the same kind of situation - what were their experiences and suggestions were. Looking for different opinions and views.*

**2 Thinking back, what did you hope the group could do for you?**
Both: *We were hoping to learn different techniques.*
Richard*: Being honest I didn't think the group could do anything. I thought, well I'm going to show willing, but it's George who's got the problem, not me. But I went because I wanted to show George that I was prepare to work at it.*
Mandy*: I knew we needed help. I thought the group could help.*

**3 What benefits did you get from the group at the time?**

Richard: *Not feeling alone with the problems. We learned quite a few parenting skills and new ways of handling the situation. Learning to negotiate was really important, though I also found it very infuriating because it takes two to negotiate (*i.e. George wouldn't*). I also learned that anger begets anger, but I learned to manage it. One of my past bosses said 'if the client's ranting and raving on the phone, say nothing and eventually they'll run out of steam'. George gets fed up if you don't bite. I negotiate at a low level without aggression.*

Mandy*: To see Richard calmer helped me. Being able to manage situations at home in a calmer fashion. It helped me that other parents were going through similar things, sometimes worse things. The homework was good and it was never a problem getting George [*our son*] to do it. I enjoyed the group meetings - I felt I could open up and express anxieties. We all learned from each other. When you spoke out about your problems you could see other people being helped by hearing about them. I could see others picking up on the 'money drawer' [*a technique that Richard and Mandy used with George*].*

**4 Have these benefits lasted? If so, how have they been maintained?**

Both: *Yes - for us. For the overall situation no, in fact George is worse. But it may lead to the overall situation changing at some time. We soon realised that they were* parenting *sessions - for the parents, not for the kids. They were about habit forming - getting into different ways of doing things.*

Since the group Richard and Mandy no longer disagree with one another. *We're working together more now. He gets the same from both of us. If we do have a difference we sort it out away from George.*

**5 If the benefits didn't last what might have helped keep them going?**

Both: *We're going to carry on with the plan we've got. George will learn.*

**6 With hindsight, what other things, if any, could the group**

**have done that would have improved it?**
Both: *If it could have gone a bit longer. We would have liked even more open discussion and longer sessions. Not necessarily every time, but maybe another hour on this particular night, a half-hour on that night, if it was going well. We understand the groupworkers have a life, too, but sometimes it just felt too short.*
Richard: *I was never looking at my watch, in fact I'd look at my watch and think, have we only got fifteen minutes left.*
Both: *Follow-up sessions every two months would be good; after two months, then four, then six. Get feedback from other group members. It'd be better if it was a follow-up just for us [*the members of that particular group*] but we could understand if, because of people's time, we had to meet up with other groups, too. We'd want a worker there, to structure it.*

**7 If the group was starting again would you recommend it?**
Both: *Yes.*
*Although it'd be good to have longer sessions and to go on for longer than just ten weeks, we can see how people might be put off if they thought they were committing to a longer period.*

**8 On a scale of 1 - 10 (1= not at all; 10 = completely) how successful was the group for you?**
Mandy: *7/10*
Richard: *8/10*
Both felt it was an excellent group and Richard thought he probably scored even higher than Mandy because he had lower expectations of the group than Mandy.

**9 In what ways did the groupworkers help you?**
Both: *They were brilliant - calm, relaxed and relaxing. There was really good input - useful information. They were very flexible, no dictating. They would assess the mood of the group and go with that. They had an agenda, but they could be flexible with it. And then they'd always bring us back on track. They sympathised with us, they understood. Their professionalism*

*was superb. They'd listen and come out with constructive ideas. They weren't condescending and everything sounded fresh, not like they'd done it lots of times before. You felt you had some form of support. Yes, it was their professionalism. The only thing we'd want different was to be able to have extended some of the sessions and meet up regularly after the group finished.*

## Reflections on the follow up

What is most striking about this follow up is the fact that only three of the twelve members of the group responded to the request for contact. It is impossible to know what this might indicate and there are many possible explanations, from the group being so successful that participants did not want to be reminded of previous less happy times, to the group having so little medium-term impact that the group members felt embarrassed or angry about the prospect of turning out again. Like silence in a group, absence from the recall is difficult to interpret. The fact that the group members did not continue to meet after the ten week sessions undoubtedly reduced the chances of a response six months later. Yet the groupworkers felt this was a group that had gelled very well and they were surprised that members had gone their separate ways. We considered making a further call, but time and distance (between researcher and group members) made this problematic. Also, it is difficult to judge how appropriate it is to pursue participants, much the same as the dilemma groupworkers have about group members who do not show; except that any permission to pursue felt very tenuous six months after the group members had given their goodbyes.

The other curious finding was the fact that, though Mandy and Richard both rated the group highly, they felt that their son's behaviour was on balance worse than at the time of the group! What had transformed their lives (the word they themselves used) was their response to their son's behaviour, which they attributed entirely to the group. Although it is the testimony of only two people, it is nevertheless a strong message about the complexity of outcome-based evaluations. If we measure the group's impact against the son's behaviour it failed; if measured against how the parents are managing themselves in relation to that behaviour,

it has been an outstanding success. Mandy and Richard felt motivated to turn out these six months later to explain this; they were not seeking 'new advice' or continuing work and felt able to continue to use the skills and confidence that they had developed in the group. They had been looking forward to renewing contact with the group members and expressed considerable surprise and regret that no others were there.

## Good practice in participant observation in groups

Given the suggestion that 'practitioners of participant observation have resisted formulating definitive procedures and techniques' (Jorgensen, 1989. p.8), the following practice principles are given with some caution. The significance of any one guideline is, of course, likely to differ from one group to another and one participant observation to another.

- clear communication with the group about the rationale and purpose of the observation
- clear understanding of the difference between the observer and the groupworkers
- discussion on when during the group's life the observation is best made
- informed consent from all group members, so it is they who invite the observer
- consideration of the observer's role and how much to be involved in group processes
- preparation around how the evaluation will fit with the session and contingencies if the evaluation leads to difficult or strong emotions
- active use made of the observer's status as a temporary insider
- agreement with the group about how observations will be recorded and corroborated
- agreement with the group about follow up and how information will be used.

We have considered the notion of participant observer as temporary insider and the possible value of this idea in practice. We need more systematic experience on which to build the evidence base (Preston-

Shoot, 2004; Trevithick, 2005). However, these experiences suggest that a temporary insider can balance independence from the group with the opportunity to influence group processes positively, in order to help groups to evaluate themselves. There is some evidence to suggest that the role of temporary insider can be used as a positive force to encourage the development of a *group* identity.

## Acknowledgements

Our thanks to Pamela Trevithick for her continuing professional development and consultancy to the groupworkers in this agency; to Phil Lewis and Stuart Matthews for providing supervision to the staff and supporting the groupwork service; and to Sarah Robinson and Kate Canning, the other facilitators in the group that illustrates this article. We would like to give acknowledgements to Alison Botha, is an independent training consultant and groupworker from the Isle of Wight. Alison trained the original team of facilitators and introduced them to the framework and contents of the Managing Difficult Behaviour groups she had instigated on the Isle of Wight in 1999.

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