

# The Resident Athletic League: A sports-based ‘interpersonal effectiveness’ group for adolescent males in residential treatment

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**Abstract:** *In this paper, I discuss the Resident Athletic League [RAL], a sports-based ‘interpersonal effectiveness’ group for adolescent males in residential treatment (Linehan, 1993b, p. 115). I introduce the groupwork theories that underlie the RAL. I explain how I implemented these theories through group planning and facilitation, and I explore two examples of residents’ group experience. In conclusion, I consider the emergent or synergistic quality of groups, suggesting a relationship between effective groupwork and House culture (Halperin, 2002; Forte, 2007).*

**Keywords:** *socialization; interpersonal effectiveness; groups; adolescents; residential treatment*

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## **Introduction**

In October of 2008, the residents of Greenborough House huddled on Broad Street Field for the opening game of the Resident Athletic League (RAL). Passers-by might have seen boys gathering for an afternoon football game, but the residents were doing so much more. They were participating in their first 'interpersonal effectiveness' group (Linehan, 1993b, p. 115). The boys placed one end zone by the spruce tree that shaded the sidewalk and the other by the maple saplings, and we all faced off on the 'fifty-yard line.' It seemed so simple. Four boys, two staff, and a football: we were starting our group. Of course, creating the group had been anything but simple, and what the group itself created was anything but anticipated.

In this paper I introduce the groupwork and human behavior theories that provided the foundation for the RAL. I explain how I formally implemented these theories through group planning and facilitation, and I explore two examples of the residents' group experience. I conclude by discussing the relationship between effective groups and House culture.

## **Practice context**

### **The site**

Greenborough House was an 8-bed residential treatment facility serving males aged 13 to 20. Greenborough offered individual, group, and milieu therapy based on trauma-focused, cognitive behavioral, and dialectical behavioral models. Other services at Greenbrough included weekly or monthly groups on independent living skills and relationship building, as well as medical and educational case management.

### **The population**

Residents of Greenborough House were diagnosed with at least one DSM-IV Axis I disorder, for which they had received multiple community-based interventions. Despite their diverse histories and presentations, residents often showed similar deficits in social skills. As

a result, maintaining relationships could be difficult for this population. They struggled to balance personal wants and needs against the wants and needs of others, and they tended to respond to interpersonal stressors with self- or other-harming behavior.

### **The need**

The residents of Greenborough needed to learn interpersonal effectiveness. According to Linehan (1993a), interpersonal effectiveness is the ability to achieve desired ends in social situations while maintaining both relationships and self-respect. Interpersonal effectiveness can be divided into four domains: 'attending to relationships,' 'balancing priorities vs. demands,' 'balancing the wants-to-shoulds,' and 'building mastery and self-respect' (Linehan, 1993b, p. 115). Each domain addresses issues of self-respect, self-assertion, other-awareness, and communication.

### **Relevant theories**

Having identified the site, the population, and the need, I looked to the literature to answer three questions:

1. Why is groupwork the preferred format for meeting the need?
2. How do I get members to invest in the group?
3. What kind of group structure is indicated by my answers to the first two questions?

### **Why is groupwork the preferred format for meeting the need?**

Social groupwork is especially suited to 'improving social functioning' (Drumm, 2006, p. 28). At its most basic, a socialization group is a series of therapist-facilitated interactions between individuals. Through these interactions, individuals practice new ways of thinking and acting in a controlled social context (Toseland & Rivas, 2004). Instead of simply talking about change, they achieve change within the meeting, and the successes they experience make them more likely to incorporate these new ways of thinking and acting into their everyday lives. Therefore,

the use of enactment during meetings makes the group an ideal venue for interpersonal effectiveness training.

### **How do I get members to invest in the group?**

Of course, sustained interactions require an investment of time and effort on the part of those involved. Individuals are more likely to invest in groups that provide them with a sense of inclusion, identity, status, power, and access to preferred resources or activities. Should there be a reference in the brackets? Groups unassociated with therapy also seem 'less threatening' to children, because they perceive these groups as less likely to elicit 'painful experiences' (Coholic, Lougheed, & Lebreton, 2009, p. 43).

### **What kind of group structure is indicated by my answers to the first two questions?**

The RAL was structured after Malekoff's (2007) 'Flexible Organizing Framework,' which advocates for an informal, fluid approach to groupwork, based on group momentum rather than on a predetermined path (p. 85). From this perspective, group purpose is a 'dynamic, evolving concept that changes over the life of the group' (Kurland & Salmon, 2006, p. 107). Lang (2004) explains,

'The technology of social work with groups, then, is a *moment-seizing strategy*, delivered in a pattern of interventions which are *distributed, partial, and concurrent, lodged in multiple spheres* of individual, interpersonal, and group interaction.' (p. 44)

So, I hypothesized that a sports-based group might provide a familiar venue in which members could practice interpersonal effectiveness, while enacting the preferred role of athlete (Wright, 2006; Forte, 2007).

## **Background to practice: Group formation**

Based on the described theory and context, I incorporated ten elements into the group. The first three elements involved group planning. I asked a specific resident, Bret, for advice about starting a football group

(Element 1) (Toseland & Rivas, 2004). I asked Bret to share the idea for the group with the other residents and to report on their thoughts (Element 2). Bret and I then collaborated on designing statistic sheets, team rosters, and Most Valuable Player Awards (Element 3).

The actual group meeting (game), on the other hand, comprised four elements. The group met more than once per week in order to maximize the opportunities for the residents to practice their social skills (Element 4). Although the group was entirely voluntary, 'official games' required at least three residents and one staff member (Element 5). Aside from ensuring that the group maintained its numbers, this element offered several benefits. Residents had to recruit participants on a daily basis, making the group member-driven. Bret and his peers cooperated *and* competed with staff members as symbolic – if not actual – equals, and residents directly determined when and for how long the group met, an impossibility in other House groups, which were mandatory (Toseland & Rivas, 2004; Schulman, Krause, & Cameron, 1999).

The rules did mandate that the group involve a non-playing referee and statistician, though (Element 6). This element offered a group role for residents uncomfortable with the game, and it provided members with situations in which they must tolerate the ref's unfavorable calls. The members also rotated between teams for each game, thereby distributing talent and allowing for novel peer interactions (Element 7) (Toseland & Rivas, 2004; Schulman, Krause, & Cameron, 1999).

When away from the field, staff and residents discussed previous games (Element 8). Staff acknowledged feats of athleticism, but more often, they praised residents for balancing personal 'interests' against the 'demands' of others (Linehan, 1993b, p. 115). Staff and residents also considered instances during which players' critical comments, externalizing, or refusal to share hindered a team's performance.

Athleticism was measured on the biweekly Cumulative Statistics and Ranking Sheet, and the RAL Update provided anecdotes related to each player's use of interpersonal effectiveness during the games (Element 9). Both the statistics and the updates were posted in the dining room, a high traffic area. This element provided concrete proof of each member's participation in the group, and it also served as a starting point for conversations around the use of interpersonal effectiveness, distress tolerance, and reacting smart in games and in the House (Linehan, 1993a).

Finally, during the weekly House Meeting, members reviewed the current state of the RAL, and resident volunteers assigned the Most Valuable Player Award[MVP] to a group member who distinguished himself through his effort, rather than his ability (Element 10). In the role of MVP judge, members practiced recognizing positive qualities in others (Toseland & Rivas, 2004; Schulman, Krause, & Cameron, 1999). Thus, Elements 8 to 10 reflected Cohen and Graybeal's(2007) use of solution-focused methods in mutual aid groups, by concentrating on specific strategies for improving teamwork, based on client strengths.

## **A flexible framework for learning social skills**

As shown by the following two examples, our flexibly formatted group allowed for individualized planning and member-driven purpose (Malekoff, 2007; Kurland & Salmon, 2006; Lang, 2004). I have chosen to include both an individual and a group example to demonstrate how social groupwork is '*distributed, partial, and concurrent, lodged in multiple spheres*' (Lang, 2004, p. 44).

### **Individual example: The Bret<sup>1</sup> Show**

By the time the RAL began, Bret had lived at Greenborough House for over one year. Caplan and Thomas(2004) note that group members often present personal narratives with 'common themes,' such as 'lack of respect,' 'lack of importance,' 'abandonment,' and 'powerlessness' (p.55). Bret's own story reflected this observation. His choices seemed to revolve around a deep desire for approval and a deeper fear of rejection. Breaking the rules allowed him to attract familiar negative attention and prevented him from receiving the praise that he didn't understand, but still feared losing. Whenever a small setback followed a period of success, Bret appeared to self-sabotage. If he forgot to turn in an assignment for a course he was passing, he stopped participating in class and refused to complete exams, so that he might fail and be rejected on his own terms. Bret seemed quite skilled at initiating peer relationships, but he had difficulty maintaining them. Bret's 'closest friends' complained that he 'just wanted to be the best,' intimidating and ignoring them in order to meet his own needs. At the same time,

Bret showed the most complete and persistent lack of motivation of any client at Greenborough. 'Why should I try,' he once said. 'I have nothing waiting for me.'

Football was Bret's deepest and most abiding passion. He wore clothing emblazoned with New England Patriots insignia, and he poured through statistical compilations, sport histories, and player biographies. Bret also valued himself as a 'leader,' and he often directed discussions during the House's psycho-education and living skills groups. Having observed the value Bret placed on football and leadership, the residence counselor and I decided to take a strengths-based approach to Bret's lack of motivation by using environmental resources to build on his existing abilities (Saleeby, 2000). We decided to found the football league that would eventually become the RAL.

Bret seemed to invest in the group from its inception. Unprompted by staff, he polled and cajoled the other residents during snack time, trying to get enough people to play an 'official game.' While there were usually enough players to meet the attendance policy, we often lacked the numbers for independent referees and statisticians. In these cases, Bret played quarterback *and* kept the stats.

Bret admitted that he was 'serious' about the group, and his effort appeared to be showing results. During the first four to five months, he seemed to make noticeable, if not dramatic improvements in behavior and outlook. Although notoriously critical of peers in the past, Bret often complemented their catching and running ability, and when he threw a wild pass, he announced, 'My bad' or 'I'm sorry, man. That was me.'

While strategizing and calling plays on the field, Bret displayed a sustained attention to detail, an ability to multi-task, and a willingness to correct mistakes that he rarely demonstrated in his school work. In a show of other-awareness, he recalled specific details of teammates' performances during the MVP Award ceremony, and he seemed to comply more readily with prompts from staff members who participated in the group. Bret also appeared to increasingly seek out participating staff members to engage in informal conversations or to discuss problems in the milieu.

But many challenges remained. Although Bret had shown obvious changes in motivation and behavior during the RAL, he had not yet generalized these behaviors to teachers or non-playing staff. In fact, in the mornings, Bret was becoming more defiant and verbally abusive

to residence technicians. In addition, the group had recently decided to apply the same 10-Element group format to basketball games, and when the action shifted to the court, Bret reverted to hoarding the ball, criticizing peers, screaming orders, and shoving competitors.

If the RAL was a mandatory group with a preset curriculum, the facilitators' responses to Bret's behavior might have been limited by the format. But the group's flexible structure allowed us to alter rules, activities, and expectations to better suit the group's 'multiple spheres of...interaction' (Lang, 2004, p. 44).

First, the clinical team made Bret's participation in the RAL contingent upon his treatment of the non-playing staff. One morning, within a week of this decision, Bret took an hour shower, swore at staff, left his dirty laundry in the milieu, and departed late for school. As a result he received a one-day 'suspension' from the league. The next morning, Bret complied with house rules, however, and he was back on the field.

Strengthening the rules around physical and verbal contact during games also seemed to decrease Bret's on-court aggression, while increasing his opportunities to practice distress tolerance, without self-sabotaging. Acting as the ref, I called more frequent fouls, most of which were awarded to Bret, owing to his overtly physical style of play and his attempts, conscious or otherwise, to intimidate peers. I also issued technical fouls and suspensions for arguing with the ref or verbally assaulting other players. Once again, Bret was the primary recipient of these calls.

As a result, in the more intensely refereed games, the reward (praise/success) was often delayed, and this new schedule of reinforcement seemed to frustrate Bret, reducing his level of concentration. When he experienced a series of fouls, missed shots, or exchanges with the ref, he tended to pass less often. The time between start of play and his shot attempts decreased, and Bret appeared to take riskier shots, leading to a drop in his shot percentage. Yet, if Bret began to pass the ball and to focus on broader game strategy, his shot percentage increased: motivated to play together rather than to win alone, he stopped inadvertently self-sabotaging.

During pull-out conversations after the games, I described these behavior patterns to Bret, and he acknowledged his frustration and anxiety over foul calls, thwarted plays, and varying skill levels among



his teammates. Over the next month, I began to prompt Bret to re-engage with the game when he appeared to be perseverating over an undesirable call or a failed play. More often than not, we jokingly challenged one another, and the transition time to pro-social play decreased.

Given the greater demands now placed on Bret during group, I wanted to ensure his motivation to participate. So, I invited him to write a guest column, entitled the 'Bret Report,' for the RAL Update. Bret began his first column by saying, 'Within the past month, the [RAL] has made a lot of rules that has let's say frustrated some of the players but it seems that everyone has adjusted to the rules.' He then provided concrete details about the efforts and accomplishments of the players he often criticized during games. 'What makes a player good is not his play but his courage to keep going when his team is losing,' Bret concluded.

Indeed, Bret seemed to have initially invested in the RAL because he could control the group's shape and direction. Now, he was working on sharing control as a means of building distress tolerance, internal motivation, and pro-social behavior. Bret could engage in this new form of individual work because the group purpose changed to fit his needs and the needs of his peers, while also offering him new reasons to stay invested in it, such as the Bret Report (Kurland & Salmon, 2006; Malekoff, 2007; Malekoff, 2001; Lang, 2004).

### **Group example: Getting technical**

According to Malekoff(2001,2007), a prime benefit of the flexibly organized group is that it returns authority to the members, making them more likely to invest, sacrifice, and, ultimately, gain from the group experience. When the RAL started, the facilitator tended to respond to verbal aggression during games with warnings or House-supplied consequences. Yet, the frequency and intensity of the negative comments appeared to increase in direct proportion to game length, frequency, and attendance. More residents were playing, but more players were commenting that the RAL 'wasn't worth it' if they had to constantly listen to 'trash talk.' The group needed to formalize a system for identifying, labeling, and consequencing 'negativity,' so that all residents felt safe enough to continue playing (Toseland & Rivas, 2004; Schulman, Krause, & Cameron, 1999).

The facilitators agreed that the referee should issue one warning and

then a foul for 'trash-talking,' 'criticizing,' or 'arguing with the ref.' The staff could then expel a player from a game if the behavior continued. All group members reviewed this new rule during House Meeting, and I posted a notice outlining it on the RAL's 'wall.' This approach resembled Doel's (2006) 'first-stage' and 'second-stage' responses to difficult group behaviors (p.18). Calling the foul was the first-stage response, as it directly addressed the behavior within the meeting, and expulsion was the second-stage response, because even though the resident was asked to leave the game, the facilitator later followed up with him on an individual basis.

Unfortunately, group members continued to report 'too much arguing,' after we had instituted the new 'trash-talking' rules. Privately, residents identified Bret as an individual who 'got on me about missing a shot' or always disrupted the game by arguing. Another resident, Frank, commented that members earned 15 House points per day for participating in an official game, and he suggested that members should 'lose points or something ... for technicals...for trash-talking ... arguing.' 'No, I don't agree with that,' Bret said. 'You do it, too. You know that. I think it's part of the game. If you can't do that, I don't think I'm going to play'.

A successful group depends on 'cohesion, collaboration, communication,' though, and Frank would not back down (Caplan & Thomas, 2004, p.59). During the weekly house meeting, he introduced the idea of deducting participation points for 'trash-talking' and 'arguing.' Discussion ensued. Frank, Jim, and Mario argued for point deduction, while Bret and Lou argued against it. Finally Frank said, 'How about the person says if he doesn't like it, and then if that person does it again, he loses points.' I called for a vote, and the majority of the boys voted for Frank's final suggestion. If the player stated that he 'did not appreciate' a peer's comment, then the offending peer would be called for a foul. If the resident repeated the comment, he would lose participation points.

This discussion seemed to mark a turning point in the group for several reasons. It was the first instance in which Mario, Jim, and Frank had publicly disagreed with Bret about the structure and content of the RAL. Frank had privately told staff about his displeasure over the verbal aggressiveness in group, but publicly, he preferred to make side comments or jokes, rather than directly address the issue with peers.

Now, he seemed to take on a leadership role in group. Bret, for his part, said, 'I don't think I'm going to play anymore, anyway.' He then went to his room, where he remained into the evening.

Bret did return to the basketball court, however, and during the following week, negative comments seemed to level off or decrease in frequency. When peers criticized Lou's play, he usually remained silent, but on more than one occasion, he said, 'I'm doing my best' or 'Then tell me what to do. I don't know what I'm doing here.' When Mario was the MVP judge, Bret stated that he hadn't won the award in a long time. But, privately, Mario admitted that he couldn't give the award to Bret because 'he hasn't been nice to me.' This was a big step for Mario who had been a frequent target of Bret's physical intimidation.

Power seemed to be slowly returning to the *group*, thus changing the way they viewed themselves in relation to their position within the milieu. Jim Natural (2007) notes,

Involving group members in problem solving is much more powerful than 'peer pressure' which is merely a social punishment for problem behavior. When youth are enlisted in building a pro-social climate, they will naturally influence one another's behavior in helpful ways. But if our goal is to enforce bogus rules that are imposed rather than agreed upon, then group problem solving will deteriorate into tattling and taunting. (p. 52)

## **Discussion and conclusion**

As seen in these examples, fluidly responding to shared goals *and* individual contexts allows for the synergy that gives a group its unique therapeutic benefit (Toseland & Rivas, 2004; Schulman, Krause, & Cameron, 1999). Caplan and Thomas(2004) state, 'The most common problems of people seeking support and change include (but are not limited to) emotional difficulties, difficulties with responsibility, perception and socialization, as well as problems with relationships' (p. 57). Yet, these problems and the attempted solutions that follow them are uniquely expressed in each individual. Group members represent a 'heterogeneity' of life histories, personalities, strengths, challenges, and perspectives (Caplan & Thomas, 2004, p. 55). This heterogeneity is unified by common themes of inclusion, importance,

respect, influence, cohesion, collaboration, and communication. So, by focusing on common themes, members can practice mutual aid and change (Caplan & Thomas, 2004).

Given this synergy around common themes, a group in residential treatment can also grow into a culture that permeates life in the House (Halperin, 2002; Forte, 2007). Every evening after dinner, the boys gathered in the first floor living room to discuss their 'diary cards.' On the diary cards, they rated their interactions with staff, peers, and family members, and they described what they had done to be 'healing' or 'harming.' The boys consistently grumbled and ground their teeth when asked to provide 'concrete examples' of how they had managed their strong emotions during the day. Yet, as Wright(2006) reminds us, sport often provided a simpler, more familiar venue in which residents could see the causes and results of their actions with greater clarity. So, when pressed to provide answers for their diary cards, residents often used examples from the RAL. The group had entered their lives. The group-process had become part of the life-process. I was silently amazed.

## Note

1. Names have been changed throughout this paper to protect confidentiality.

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