The Men's Group

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Abstract: Groupwork is a process of enquiry, discovery and action in which all participants are prepared to engage. It is a shared endeavour towards resolving problems or circumstances felt by participants to be both real and urgent. (Preston-Shoot, 2007, p.27). *This is a reflective piece about my first fieldwork placement experience of establishing and running a therapeutic group. The work was based in a day-centre for clients with mainly mental health issues. The piece opens with an analysis of the theories used and effectively examines the first six weeks of a 'Men's Group'. The aim has been to include an honest reflection about what worked and what didn't. As a first piece of groupwork, the Author feels it was an extremely valuable experience and one which he intends to build on in the future.*

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Introduction

This paper will look at the work I carried out on my first social work fieldwork placement and specifically at a weekly 'Men's Group', that I had the opportunity to establish. The paper will seek to: position the theoretical perspective being used; to discuss roles and behaviours within the group; and, will provide an honest reflection on my learning experience as a result of being relatively 'dropped into the deep end'. As per the opening quote this process of 'discovery' has been one of the most challenging and enjoyable aspects of this part of my course. In particular the paper will attempt to analyse the processes that were used to ensure that the group becomes 'self directing'. From the outset I felt it was important to apply as much as possible of the information we had covered during our time in college around the notion of empowerment and ensuring that a group effectively 'takes off' (Mullender & Ward, 1991). This was of great concern to me throughout; in terms of effectively measuring my own impact on the group i.e. as Brown (1986, p.55) states: 'much that happens in groups revolves around issues of authority, power and control'. I have also been concerned about what would happen to this particular group after I have left.

Placement context

The service in which my placement took place was the Rehabcare Centre in West Cork. The service is based in a rural location and is delivered between four main service units:

1. an independent-living housing unit;
2. a physical and sensory (P&S) disability day care service; for clients with physical disabilities, degenerative diseases or acquired injuries;
3. a respite care service;
4. the long term service Unit (LTSU) which is a day service for clients with mental health issues and/or intellectual disabilities.

My time within the placement was split between one day each week in the P&S service and three days in the LTSU; my roles have included carrying out one-to-one work with individual clients and running a

number of my own groups. The programmes I have been facilitating have been: Walking Group; Bingo / Quiz Group/Session; and a Books and Music Club.

The main programme I was involved with, which is the focus of this paper, was the development and activation of a Men's Group. This group was made available to all male service users from both the LTSU and P&S sides of the service. There had previously been a similar group which had been disbanded when the last male member of staff moved on. Whilst working throughout this programme I have been concerned to ensure that each of the members had their needs met as far as possible. This is especially relevant in light of a commonly held misconception that 'coming together as a group…is necessarily supportive' in itself (Doel & Sawdon, 1999, p.50). A breakdown of how the Men's Group came together and the activities I facilitated is given below:

Launch of the men's group

The group was set up within the first ten days of my arrival on the placement. It was decided to invite all male clients from both sides of the service; I took time to personally speak to all of the potential members to explain what we were planning to do. In terms of facilities we mainly used the centre's computer room which has a large square table which can easily seat 10 to 15 people. There was also ample room for additional seating or for any clients who may require the use of a wheelchair. The only negative aspect for the selection of this location was that it also held the client's personal lockers, which often needed to be accessed between/during sessions. The group had available to them: a flip chart, papers, pens, computers and a large TV with a DVD player. In terms of bringing the group together: most of the clients already interacted daily with each other in different programmes and were on first name terms – so technically the group can be considered to have been 'formed'.

Positioning the group

I have consistently tried to ensure, during this programme, that I made the activities stimulating but not over-threatening. The aim of the various exercises has been to bring the group together in a 'therapeutic' setting where the members could experience a sense of joint endeavour. This also echoes the notion of the 'common third' which we had covered in college i.e. the achievement of group-fraternity through a common task or goal. The main value I have striven to keep to the core of the group is one of acceptance. Garvin (in Kelly *et al*, 2001, p.63) suggests that this can be done by

> enhancing the cohesiveness of the group through the promotion of enjoyable program activities …; by enhancing the status of the group in the larger environment; by helping members value group purposes; and by reinforcing the bond[s] among the members.

Group activities

To give a feel of the sort of activities we undertook during the first six weeks of the programme I have detailed below some of my recorded notes around each session. A significant amount of pre-planning took place along with consultation with other staff members. Following each week's activities I also included a reflection around what had worked and what could have been done differently:

Week 1: Introductions, launching the group, formulating group rules
Activities / Reflections: In terms of the first week I was pleasantly surprised as to how things went. We had around 16 members from both services and importantly all of the attendees would be familiar with groupwork of one form or another. In this regard agreeing group-rules for our sessions was easily completed.

I also took time to find out what expectations people had and what might have worked well in the past when a previous / similar group had been in place..

Week 2: Developing group cohesion
Activities / Reflections: Prior to commencing the programme I had gained approval from the Centre Manager for a group trip to take place later in the programme. In this

session the plan was to narrow this down to two options: either Cork or Dublin. The group agreed a planned date. We then went on to consider potential destinations. On reflection I found that several ideas for different trips were flying around and it was difficult to control. My main consideration for me as Facilitator was that the group reached a consensus which would be physically suitable for al participants, in the interest of group solidarity.

Family Tree Exercise: after that part of the meeting I took the group through the process of how to draw a simple genogram and then asked each person to draw out their immediate family back to their Grandparents. Some people were then willing to stand up and to describe their picture to the group

My reflection would be that I was not sure everyone knew what was expected when this first came up. I noted that some people needed a lot of one-to-one help in completing their family trees. Some of the clients did not have great literacy so I was conscious to include them and I assisted them.

We also discussed the idea of people bringing in artefacts i.e. items that might have particular significance to them. In terms of modelling I brought along a personal item which is relevant to my only family's background as coal miners. I talked about how this item enabled me to connect with my own roots and that hard life that they lived only two generations ago.

After the break I showed people how to draw personal timelines of major events in their lives.

Week 3: Group activity and joint endeavours

Activities / Reflections: We continued our group discussion around the potential for a trip. I decided to focus on two venues so we could have a simple vote. In this way I felt it was important to take a lead role to overcome the decision-paralysis we had experienced in the last few weeks

In the end the group felt that a trip to Dublin would be too far i.e. over 10 hours travelling for most people. We all felt that it was important to make the final decision a realistic one.

Survival Exercise: I managed to find a simplified version of a 'theoretical-survival' group exercise and I spent some time preparing enough sheets for all of the group. I decided not to use a fixed list of correct answers but instead I wanted to focus on the discussion / negotiation / decision making part of the exercise.

Overall the exercise went well. I had originally planned that it would take around 30 minutes but in the end it only took around 20 minutes. The reason being that the room was perhaps too small to allow each of the two groups to split up and engage in the group communication process. The other stumbling block was that some of the

group would not be able to read too well and I needed to spend some time with some members going through the exercise again.

If I was to do this particular exercise again or anything similar I would split the groups between two rooms and then ask them to come back with the task completed to compare results. I would also spend more time briefing nominated team leaders on how to complete the task. I would also try and disengage more from the actual reading of the items lists and so when I came to the final part of the exercise I would have not influenced the final outcome. Despite all of this the group seemed to enjoy the task and we also had a group discussion about survival in general.

After the tea break it was optional for group members to come back to the room –most of the group came back and we had a free-flowing chat about other things we could do during this session. One of the members is an ex-Teacher and we discussed if he might consider doing some Irish language classes for the group.

Week 4: Group activity and developing cohesion
Activities / Reflections: Family Crest Project; I prepared some materials for the group to design their own Family Crest. This included blank shapes for each member, pens, colours and some magazines for people to cut images from. I felt that this exercise, once, explained, went very well. It also fitted into the previous theme of families / personal history.

My reflection would be that I should have positioned this exercise either before the Family Tree Exercise as there was potential for more linkage between the work we did that week. Both exercises have great potential in terms of the notion/origin of self in a societal context.

Week 5: Group activity (empowerment / self identity)
Activities / Reflections: Informal Irish Class: One of the group members took a 30 minute Irish class which was enjoyed by all.
The Famous Person Game: we then had a roundtable discussion about who had met the most famous person. Most of the group contributed with the joint-winners having met JFK and Pope John-Paul II !

Week 6: Group cohesion
Activities / Reflections: This week we had a general discussion around the topic of 'Being a Man in 2009: What it does it mean?' The group made suggestions of words to include on our whiteboard (below). I was not sure if all of the group fully engaged with a discussion of this depth / type but I think it was food for thought for some: Words Developed by the Group:
• Being a man in 2009: What does it mean?

- Demanding
- Responsibility
- Breadwinner
- Versatility
- Hunter / Gatherer / Provider
- Intellectually Aware
- Obsolete
- Redundant
- Human / Humane
- Stronger?
- Complicated
- Cautious

One point of note was that the group continued to effectively develop over the twelve weeks of my placement and in the final week we held our much anticipated trip. The day out was a great success for all who attended, which was all but one of the original group. The only negative incident which stands out for me from the day was around how the group were treated by some of the staff at the wildlife park we visited. As I have tried to make clear I was very conscious that the group should be be self-directing and therefore I was keen to ensure that our trip was viewed as a selection of like minded people just going out for the day. Perhaps that was a little naive of me, but I had tried to ensure that we were not seen as being on a day trip from a 'centre'. All went well until we came to the entrance of the park and the staff requested that I collect the admission money from each of our members and to pay them in one lump sum. After that the group were ushered through the gate *en masse*. My point here was that everyone else who attended the park was allowed to pay for themselves and to individually go through the turnstiles. Also I was conscious of being singled out as the 'Leader'. So immediately I felt we were being treated differently from the 'general population'. My dilemma here was whether to make a fuss and ask the staff to be more respectful. I chose to ignore the slight and I am not actually sure any of the group were actually offended. As a learning point I made a mental note of this for any future trips I might be involved with and that I would ensure that I call ahead next time to make sure it does not happen again.

Lessons learnt

In terms of what else I learnt from running a group like this I feel that it was a highly challenging but ultimately rewarding experience. The main learning-points I would draw reference to are:

1. To ensure that each person is comfortable with the work being carried out but to accept that sometimes the 'level' of exercises attempted needs to be changed. This might be key to the overall success of the group in that it is difficult to please all of the members and sometimes it is worth trying something challenging.
2. It is OK for the facilitator to sometimes not prepare anything for the group to do and to see what agenda people can set for themselves. This is something I tried in the later sessions with mixed success. I feel that in a dynamic group something will always happen.
3. It is important to analyse what went on, after the session, and to make notes. In this regard I also ensured that I found the time to speak to another staff member to tell them what I had done, how the group had gone and to consider their ideas or suggestions.
4. To ensure that groupwork does not become individual work for some clients; on several occasions I had to avoid becoming dragged into work which is better done in an individual session. This is for the sake of the client and the larger group.

Roles and behaviours

In terms of analysing the roles and behaviours of the group there are a number of interesting issues. Like all groups, for example, there were a number of individual characters who played a key part in the group-dynamic. We have two members who could be classed as being the 'Jokers' and who can always be relied on to lighten the situation or to fill any silences. During the first week of the group I had been very conscious of whether I should try and split the two individuals up from each other when I was organising the seating, but on reflection I have decided that it is often their light-hearted contributions that enable the group to explore issues or to move on to new points.

Notably there were particular members who, I felt, enjoyed the group

above all others, Interestingly it was one such client who came up with the group's title of 'A Circle of Friends'. He could always be relied on to contribute to each discussion or project. As I also do some other work with him in other programmes I know that he is a person who likes to have the support of other people and this is part of his own well-being. On a number of occasions he has been much more willing to 'share' from a personal perspective than I would have planned for. For example in our last session (No. 6) when we were discussing 'What it means to be a Man in 2009' he made the point that he had cried at the weekend over the loss of his mother some twelve months previously. At the time I was not sure how the rest of the group would deal with this and I was in two minds if anyone else would come close to such an admission themselves. In terms of how I dealt with this I asked him a few questions to give him a chance to give more information and echoed what he was saying by making the point that it is OK for men to show their emotions.

In terms of other roles in the group it is important to note that there are four or five members who would not seek to actively contribute to the discussions. I know from my knowledge of them on a one-to-one basis they would certainly have a point of view on most topics but that they would not be too comfortable in contributing in a group session. This is specifically why we stressed in our group rules that it is 'OK to Be Silent' and I have been very conscious not to try and pull a response from each person. As each member has the active choice to attend or not I have been happy thus far that each of them continues to attend. After several weeks of being on the placement I have become more comfortable with addressing a group and not getting responses from every member. I noted that some of these members have certainly participated in each of the group tasks we completed but they did not allow me to see the work they completed, choosing instead to take the work away with them.

My Role in the group

As per my opening quotation this programme has certainly been one of 'enquiry, discovery and action'. Throughout I have aimed for this group to become 'self directing'; the main reason for which is that when

I finished my placement the group would most likely be disbanded as there are no other male members of staff to facilitate it. Whilst it is very difficult to be totally impartial I feel that I have had some successes and certainly some failures in the work I have attempted; but I have always tried to be honest about my relative lack of experience and to ensure that the group had realistic expectations.

I have also tried to ensure that I was only guiding the group to make decisions, when required, rather than taking any sort of overt leadership role. This, I believe, has reflected my original aim of striving to achieve a self-directed framework. My understanding being that there is a lot of subtlety to group leadership and one can achieve the desired affect by gentle guidance rather than being overly directive.

Conclusion and reflections

In terms of the overall learning experience this paper has laid out: how this group came about; what its objectives were; and, how successful it has been. I can say that I have felt tremendous relief when things went well and have often been frustrated or disappointed when they have not gone as well.

A key learning point for me is that I have found that I can be more comfortable with silences i.e. many times during the sessions I have found that there has either been no response from the group, or the members have had no suggestion in terms of what they would like to do. In the first few weeks this certainly bothered me more but after this happened two or three times I have found that I can be more comfortable with a silence and have managed to resist the urge to constantly fill any void. The use of silence can be very powerful, both in terms of affirming a point of view and to encourage other members to participate.

An important part of what I have been doing lies in the reflection following each session. After every group I have found that I either strongly felt the work done that week had worked or I have had ideas about what could have been differently. I have also tried to take time to discuss with other members of the team what I had done, what had worked and what I might have done differently. This has been key for planning the following week's session.

An example of a small success was in terms of the use of 'artefacts'.

During the second week I explained that it would be nice for people to bring in items which were important to them and to give a short speech to the group. The following week just myself and one other person brought something in. For the following two weeks I kept the idea on the weekly agenda but no-one offered anything up. On the third week when I was planning to let this one go: two people brought in very personal objects from their past and gave a small talk to the group. This was a good example of achieving a level of mutual trust for the group and perhaps some behaviour modelling. On reflection: I felt that this particular group had taken sometime to get used to this idea but in the end the two members had been extremely brave to be so open with their peers.

On a more general note; my work in this area has certainly sparked a personal interest in the whole area of groupwork and working with men's groups in particular. I have found this type of activity to be very stimulating and challenging. I would hope that in the future I would be able to find a similar opportunity. If group work is not necessarily relevant to the type of professional role that I secure I feel strongly that I might seek it out in some sort of way e.g. via voluntary work or promoting the use of groups in my future practice.

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