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Retrospective accounts of emotional experiences during personal development groups in qualified counsellors and psychotherapists

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Abstract

Personal development (PD) groups are routinely used in the training of counsellors and psychotherapists. Experiences during such group processes are thought to contribute to the development of self-awareness, a quality seen as crucial for good practice in many therapeutic approaches. However, evidence from trainees suggests that the PD group experience may not be a positive or facilitative one for many. We also do not know how trainees, once qualified, process their PD group experiences over time. This paper reports findings from a qualitative study in which 12 experienced therapists were invited to reflect back upon their PD group experiences during their training. Their experiences of PD groups were invited through semi-structured interviews and the data analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The findings show that most participants found their PD group experiences to be challenging, and that for some participants this was a welcome and facilitative experience. However, a significant number of participants had negative experiences in their PD groups, which at the time they felt to be damaging and which remained so in their view at the time of interview. Such experiences included feeling re-traumatised by recalling and sharing old traumas, feeling afraid of the volatility and punitiveness in their group and feeling overlooked or abandoned by the group facilitator. Nevertheless, all participants had made persistent efforts to process these experiences and had drawn from them what they regarded as valuable learning. Recommendations for counselling and psychotherapy training are put forward in the light of these findings.

KEYWORDS

counselling training, personal development, personal development groups, process groups, psychotherapy training, self-awareness

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The research was conducted at the University of Huddersfield, UK.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Personal development (PD) groups are a long-standing and pervasive feature of training for counsellors and psychotherapists in the UK, and are often used to supplement training on courses internationally. Their aim is to develop self-awareness in trainees, a quality that is seen as crucial for good practice in many therapeutic approaches (Hughes & Youngson, 2009; Ieva et al., 2009; Pieterse et al., 2013). The Health and Care Professions Council (2015) state in their standards of proficiency that counselling psychologists must 'be able to critically reflect on the use of self in the therapeutic process' (p.12). The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2018), the UK Council for Psychotherapy (2017), the British Psychological Society (2019) and the Council for Accreditation and Related Educational Programmes (2016) all state that self-awareness is a core requisite of counselling training; it is regarded as necessary for practitioners to work at the 'relational depth' (see Mearns & Cooper, 2005) with clients that has been shown to benefit client outcomes (Knox, 2008; Knox & Cooper, 2010; Tangen & Cashwell, 2016). It is generally accepted that a counsellor who has explored themselves in some depth will be better prepared for working with clients. If counsellors do not develop an in-depth insight into their own personality and emotions, then arguably they will be unable to fully understand others and their responses to them.

Despite little evidence, it is widely claimed that PD group experiences contribute to the development of self-awareness. Furthermore, little research exists that examines the experience of taking part in PD groups either during training or retrospectively.

In this paper, we report findings from a qualitative research project, which aimed to explore (a) the PD group experiences of qualified counsellors and psychotherapists gained during their training and (b) how they use these experiences in their current client work. Specifically, we report on a key finding from the research, which identified intense emotional experiences during PD group work as having profound effects upon trainees, which were still significant for them several years later. We conclude with recommendations for the use of PD groups in counsellor training. We will use the generic terms 'counsellors' and 'counselling' to refer to both counselling and psychotherapy.

2 | PD GROUPS AND THEIR PURPOSE

Personal development groups, sometimes called experiential groups, 'self-awareness' or 'process' or 'reflective practice' groups, evolved from the encounter groups developed by Rogers (1970) to train counsellors to help war veterans after WWII; the earlier work of Moreno in 1914 had generated the term 'encounter', meaning a meeting with some relational depth between two people (Treadwell, 2014). Encounter groups, consisting of clients in therapy, were thought by Rogers to enable participants to develop self-awareness through exploring how they interact with others. The PD group is a training method intended to increase self-awareness and self-acceptance in counselling trainees (Hughes & Youngson, 2009; Johns, 2005).

Implications for Policy and Practice

- *Participant support.* The aims and potential difficulties of PD groups should be explained clearly to trainees from the outset regarding the process, risks and benefits of PD learning. In line with the conclusions of Newman et al. (2017), a gradual introduction of challenge over time may be beneficial. Participants need to be thoroughly debriefed through discussion, preferably with an objective, external facilitator independent of the training course. It is recommended that participants should be debriefed soon after the PD group experience using discussion, personal journaling and making use of ongoing therapy.
- *Facilitator training.* As previously recommended by Knight et al. (2010) in regard to the training of clinical psychologists, group facilitators should have specialised training in group work; they should also receive training in its ethical issues and in clinical support. There should be consistency in facilitator experience and training with the use of a guidance framework.

Personal development groups focus on the 'here and now', self-awareness and interpersonal relationships within a group setting (McMahon & Rodillas, 2020). They generally have no specified aims and an open agenda (Moller & Rance, 2013), offering trainees opportunities for self-development and reflection on their impact on others through facilitator interventions and group members' responses. Members may raise issues arising from the previous session, from life experiences or from encounters with clients. The role of the facilitator is to encourage participation and the exploration of interpersonal relationships through either dialogue or experiment, such as role play. The overall aim is to increase self-awareness, particularly awareness of attachment styles, defence patterns and relational styles, which are relevant when working with clients. However, styles of facilitation and group size have been found to vary (Knight et al., 2010).

Research in the United States indicates that self-reflection can foster the self-awareness regarded as necessary for this. A study of 100 trainees and postgraduate students (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003) found that continuous self-reflection was seen by participants as leading to greater self-awareness; Schmidt and Adkins (2012) report that trainees considered reflection as essential for personal growth and their development as counsellors.

The role of group work in developing such self-awareness is thought to be in the opportunities it provides for challenging one's view of oneself through receiving feedback from others and through bringing unconscious motives and drives to consciousness for reflection, increasing self-awareness and self-acceptance (Cooper, 2005; Mearns & Cooper, 2005). This can be seen as a form of 'transformative learning' (Mezirow, 1991). Consequently,

the PD group has emerged as the default model for facilitating the development of self-awareness in counselling trainees, although the question of whether personal therapy should be mandatory for counselling trainees has been debated for a number of years (Edwards, 2018; Kumari, 2011; McMahon, 2018). von Haenisch (2011) notes that the BACP dispensed with the requirement in 2005, although Chaturvedi (2013) reported that 50% of courses still required it. There is still a strong feeling from theoretical and research papers that personal therapy will support trainees in their PD, enhance learning and develop insights about working with the therapeutic process (Edwards, 2018).

3 | THE IMPACT OF PD GROUPS ON TRAINEES

Personal development groups have been described as ambiguous, undefinable and having elusive outcomes (Donati & Watts, 2005; Irving & Williams, 1999; Payne, 2010). A limited amount of empirical research, carried out in both the UK and the United States, has examined trainees' experiences of PD groups and indicates that PD groups are often valued by trainees, offering opportunities to challenge one's view of oneself through receiving feedback from others, increasing self-acceptance (Jorgensen, 2016; Mearns & Cooper, 2005) and aiding reflection or 'transformative learning' (Mezirow, 1991). Furr and Carrol (2003) found their master's trainees valued PD activities such as experiential groups as important for counsellor development. In their survey of 25 counselling trainees, Moller and Rance (2013) found that PD groups led to the development of self-awareness and learning about differing perspectives, important to aid work with clients. Similarly, Anderson and Price (2001) surveyed 99 training programmes in America, concluding that experiential groups were an effective and even vital tool in training.

However, PD groups have also been found to sometimes have a negative impact on trainees and may not contribute to their learning, although it has been argued that 'feelings of discomfort or fear associated with group participation should not necessarily be construed negatively' (Anderson & Price, 2001, p. 118).

Moller and Rance (2013) found that although trainees sometimes highly valued PD groups as an instrument of PD, facilitating learning about themselves and helping them better understand their clients' needs, they also reported that trainees were uncertain about the purpose of PD groups and that they experienced fear and anxiety in their groups, which could negatively impact their learning.

Some trainees feel uncomfortable in PD groups due to issues around trust and psychological safety. The issue of psychological safety appears to have been principally researched in relation to the workplace and has been defined as 'the belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking' (Edmondson, 2019, p. 7); psychological safety means feeling able to speak up in an environment where there is trust and respect (Liang et al., 2012). If individuals in a group fear negative consequences from speaking out or sharing their feelings, such as being judged, ignored, shamed or even

ridiculed, members may withdraw (either psychologically or physically), affecting their learning; a culture of trust, without these fears, can encourage collective risk-taking (Deng et al., 2019).

A limited amount of empirical research in counselling suggests that safety may be an issue in PD groups. Using focus groups, Lennie (2007) explored perceptions of PD group factors contributing to self-awareness development in counsellor trainees at various stages in their training. Participants identified a number of factors such as fear and courage, group conflict, dominance of and challenge from others, and trust from group members as contributing to the development of self-awareness. However, trainees at the end of their training appeared to be less comfortable in their PD group compared with those at the beginning and self-ratings of their self-awareness were also lower. Lennie highlights the struggles described by some trainees during their PD group experiences, including the dominance of certain group members and concerns about being able to trust others, experiences which participants felt did not necessarily help them in their client relationships. Robson and Robson's (2008) diary study of counselling trainees' perceptions of their PD groups also found significant concerns relating to safety and lack of trust between group members.

Longitudinal research reports similar findings. Luke and Kiweewa's (2010) study of master's counselling trainees explored their experiences in PD groups over the course of one semester, using reflective journals to record the impact of their experiences on their personal growth and self-awareness. The trainees identified a number of factors they felt to be significant to their development, including safety and the ability to take risks. But they also reported aspects of their experiences that they felt hindered their personal growth, and that the group often made extreme emotional demands upon them that they felt they could not meet. McMahon and Rodillas (2018) report the findings of a longitudinal study of the PD group expectations and experiences of Irish integrative psychotherapy students over one academic year. They found a small increase in students' self-ratings of interpersonal awareness and skills at the end of the year. But while students reported feeling moderately safe in their PD groups, they also felt vulnerable and were concerned about being judged by others.

Research aimed at investigating PD group experiences retrospectively is almost absent from the literature. However, Knight et al. (2010) used a self-report survey to measure the personal and professional impact of 'Reflective Practice Groups' in a UK sample of clinical psychologists some years after their training. Their principal components analysis revealed two dimensions—'value' and 'distress'. The majority of participants reported their group experiences as valuable, both personally and, subsequently, professionally. However, a large minority (43%) found them highly distressing, with some reporting the groups to be both highly distressing and of little value. Knight et al. call for qualitative research in order to further explore such distress and the individual differences in how participants manage this.

In summary, although there appears to be limited research evidence that PD groups can facilitate the development of

self-awareness, there is also evidence that they may not do so. Twenty-two years ago, Irving and Williams (1999) claimed that 'not only do some individuals fail to benefit from this experience [the PD group], some may be damaged by it' (p. 139); contemporary evidence suggests group members may feel vulnerable and unsafe, and the group experience can be anxiety-provoking for some members. The existing empirical research on PD groups focuses on trainees during the course of their education. Moreover, there is very limited research that explores the longer term impact of the PD group experience upon those who have completed their training and how qualified counsellors view their PD experiences in retrospect, and none that explores these experiences qualitatively. This is important since the aim of PD groups is to have an impact on the trainee that lasts beyond the period of their training. In the research reported here, qualified counsellors were asked about their current feelings about their PD group experiences during their training.

4 | METHOD

4.1 | Recruitment and participants

Invitations to participate in the research were placed in six training organisations in the north-west of England, explaining the research aims and requirements for participants. The inclusion criterion was counsellors who had been qualified for at least five years. This was to allow a period of time for reflection and assimilation of learning. Although retrospective studies may sometimes be criticised for relying upon participants' memories of events distant in time (Cohen et al., 2011), in the case of this research, it was precisely the current sense that counsellors made of their past experiences that was of interest. No upper limit was placed on time since qualification; although the meaning of personal experience changes with the passage of time, this does not mean that it necessarily becomes any less significant for the person.

Potential participants were sent an information sheet in which they were told that the purpose of the study was to explore their experiences in PD groups during their training and how they use these experiences in their client work. Nine women and three men volunteered to take part, aged between 38 and 65 years. This reflects the gender split and typical age of the UK counselling population (Brown, 2017; UKCP, 2017). Eleven participants were White British, and one was of Anglo-Indian origin, recruited from four different geographical areas. All were currently practising and had been qualified for between 6 and 21 years. Five had additional teaching and/or training roles, and one was a full-time counselling trainer. The five participants with training roles were all currently facilitating PD groups.

Twelve participants might be regarded as a relatively large number for an IPA study. However, although there is a move towards smaller sample sizes in IPA studies (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2003) in order to prevent the loss of

'potentially subtle inflections of meaning' (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 626), Brocki and Wearden (2006) found considerable variation in participant numbers, with up to 48 transcripts being analysed.

The sample size in the present study was considered appropriate in relation to the aim of 'providing sufficient cases for the development of meaningful points of similarity and difference' (Smith et al., 2012, p. 51). It was felt important to include such a range of experiences in order to capture the complexity and diversity of a process of learning and transforming for the participants.

The first author is a qualified Gestalt psychotherapist and psychotherapy trainer, and the research was prompted by her own negative experiences of PD groups during her training. She found their purpose mysterious, and their lack of structure and clear aims produced much anxiety. It was only after a long period that she was able to make sense of her experience in relation to self-discovery and relationships with others. These negative experiences also helped her in training work when an insight into trainee support and clarity about the nature of PD was needed.

There was therefore an awareness that the first author's own experience might predispose her to search for negativity in participants' accounts. However, this was tempered by adopting a Gestalt practitioner stance, which involves using 'creative indifference' whereby the practitioner aims to put aside their own past experience. The practice of co-creativity also involves the phenomenological practice of 'being in the moment' with the other, paying attention to what arises in that moment.

The research journey has helped in understanding the length of time that may be needed in order to translate PD group experiences, particularly negative experiences, into an application to client work.

4.2 | Data collection

Face-to-face individual semi-structured interviews were carried out by the first author (a qualified counsellor) in participants' place of practice; this location was agreed with participants as it was comfortable and familiar to them, and acknowledged the restricted time they could make available for participation.

The flexibility of a semi-structured interview was chosen to achieve rich and authentic data, encouraging a relational dialogue in keeping with the first author's Gestalt approach as a counsellor, and allowed a full exploration of participants' lived experience. It was also expected that this approach would engender a strong rapport, allowing the interviewer to work relationally and non-judgementally with each individual, and generating trust and confidence (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The accounts were collected in the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology (Husserl, 1919/1983), placing value on the individual's subjective reality and acknowledging that both the latter and the 'here and now' recall of memory are subject to filtration through one's broader, holistic experiences. The emerging data are viewed as a co-construction, in line with Etherington's (2004) view that the researcher and participant together influence, inform and shape the emerging knowledge. The topic guide included

	Under the spotlight	Sparks and fireworks	Integrative theme: learning from the experience
Sub themes	Exposure	Volatility	
	Shame	Unpredictability	
	Abandonment	Uncertainty	

TABLE 1 Themes and subthemes

questions such as: 'What can you remember about your experiences in this group?' 'What effects did that have on you at the time?' and 'What do you think and feel about those experiences now?' The interviews were each approximately one hour in length. They were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

4.3 | Ethical considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with the guidance set out by the Oates (2021). Participants were fully informed of the nature of the study and had the opportunity to ask questions before giving their written consent to take part. They were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the research without any consequence to themselves, and their identities were protected by the use of pseudonyms. Any information that could identify them, their training organisation or their clients was excluded from the data. The potential for the recollection and reporting of upsetting events was recognised in this research, so participants were signposted to appropriate sources of support. It was important to monitor any distress during the interview (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), and participants were informed that they could choose to stop the interview at any time.

4.4 | Data analysis

Analysis was carried out by the first author, and discussions of the coding were regularly held with the second author throughout the analysis, so that revisions to the analysis became an iterative and thorough process. IPA is designed to offer rich insight into how people make sense of their lived experience, and to 'give voice' to participants alongside the interpretation and contextualisation of the data (Smith et al., 2012). IPA draws attention to the 'double hermeneutic' in this process; this is the recognition that the data reflect the participant's efforts to make sense of and interpret their experience, but that the researcher then engages in interpreting that interpretation. The findings therefore do not reflect an objective reality but are a complex co-production of interpretations of experience.

The recordings were listened to twice, and the interview transcripts were read multiple times in order to achieve detailed familiarity with the data, and preliminary notes were made about potential emerging issues. This was followed by line-by-line coding of each transcript, in which all statements relevant to the research aims were highlighted and given brief verbal descriptions, which served to place a focus on the participant's understanding as far as possible.

The next step was to develop phrases that Smith et al. (2012) refer to as psychological conceptualisations or abstractions, which is an attempt to make sense of the whole (the theme) in relation to the parts (the lower level codes). Codes expressing similar or related meanings were grouped into themes, and these were discussed and adjusted until the thematic structure was deemed to offer a fruitful and insightful representation of participants' experiences.

The first author's own contextual knowledge and experience as a qualified counsellor was helpful here, for example when participants used therapeutic language or narrated events that occurred in their PD group. Further reflexive notes were made on these occasions in order to set aside preconceived ideas and assumptions, and to allow the participants' realities to become foregrounded.

The findings reported here are those relating to the first aim of the research, that is to retrospectively explore the PD group experiences of qualified counsellors and psychotherapists.

4.5 | Findings

Table 1 shows the themes and subthemes reported below.

An overarching feature of participants' responses was the experience of intense emotions during participation in PD groups, and these featured in their accounts across all the themes. Although participants were not particularly asked to focus on negative experiences, their accounts frequently described fear and anxiety, terror, pain, shock and sometimes even trauma. Participants reported feeling challenged by these experiences and feeling uncomfortable in their PD group. Two key themes were identified, both of which indicate that many participants felt unsafe and unsupported in their PD groups. In the first, 'under the spotlight', participants reported feeling exposed, vulnerable, shamed and abandoned. The second theme, 'sparks and fireworks', describes participants' experiences of unpredictability, volatility and uncertainty in their PD groups. This includes anxieties about the potentially explosive nature of the group process itself and concerns that 'ground rules' had not been properly set or expectations managed. Participants often portrayed their experiences in language symbolic of devastation and destruction.

Despite these extremely challenging experiences, participants explained that they had often, but not always, managed to process them to eventually learn from them and achieve positive outcomes, though this could take a long period of time. Such comments represented a thread running through both themes, and we therefore see 'learning from the experience' as an integrative theme (King & Brooks, 2017). According to King and Brooks, 'Themes which permeate several thematic clusters are known as *integrative themes*.

Integrative themes can be thought of as undercurrents running through participants' accounts' (p. 35). The concept of integrative themes was first developed in relation to a style of thematic analysis known as template analysis (Brooks et al., 2015); however, there is no theoretical reason why it should not be used in other forms of thematic analysis, such as IPA.

4.6 | Under the spotlight

Participants described many experiences in which they felt exposed in their PD groups, for example when making personal disclosures, and feeling criticised or judged. For many of the participants, this exposure involved feeling vulnerable and unsafe; many also reported feeling shamed, rejected or abandoned. The group facilitator was often key to this, with several participants reporting occasions where they had not received support from the group and/or facilitator after disclosing highly personally significant material, and others explicitly reported feeling unsafe.

4.6.1 | Exposure

Exposure was anticipated by participants as an expected feature of PD groups. This exposure was not always experienced negatively, and indeed, a minority of participants found it led to positive experiences. However, many participants feared it and described powerful feelings around being exposed within or judged by the group. For others, there was anxiety about revealing aspects of themselves or disclosing painful experiences, or simply about 'doing it wrong'. In many cases, these fears were connected to past experiences, often in childhood, so that participants felt that they were reliving old traumas. The practice of challenging group members that is at the heart of the PD group process seemed to elicit feelings of anxiety or even threat, but this was tolerated, and even welcomed, where the group and facilitator were seen as supportive.

Rita vividly expresses the experience of exposure and the anxiety this promoted in her when she felt the weight of the group's expectations of her sharing:

In those PD Groups, that's when I realised how anxious I was, because all of a sudden, in a room full of people, that's when I realised how anxious I was because I just felt this intense burning or anxiety all around me...and I just couldn't speak, I couldn't do anything. So that's when I realised how anxious I was... it was terrifying.

Her sense of exposure is captured in her phrase 'in a room full of people' as she describes her anxiety in this public arena, anxiety that she felt in a very immediate, embodied way, using the words 'anxious' or 'anxiety' four times. Elsewhere in her interview, Rita

says, 'it was quite traumatic, erm, but that was what was expected and that's what you had to do'. She was one of several participants who used the word 'trauma' to describe her experience, though she suggests that, at least at the time, she accepted and expected this.

Fiona also talks about feeling exposed to criticism from group members and the vulnerable positions in which members of PD groups are placed:

There were some real critical things within the group, it was not a very nice place in many ways... Now I'm not used to sisters and I've not got any sisters and that was a bit scary because it's a different dynamic altogether from a brother... So, I think the fact there was a guy in the room made it a bit safer for me...I mean it is the stuff actually, the traumatic stuff... I sat holding back the stuff in PD Group, thinking all this critical stuff that's coming my way... So, I decided I was going into this, that I was going to go into it fully, which was probably a bit, well, a bit dangerous to say the... brave, yeah, a bit sort of stupid... Right and that's the scary part because it kind of puts you in very, err, vulnerable positions where maybe you wouldn't really want yourself to be in.

Fiona relates her feelings of being unsafe to her family structure; the group created for her an unfamiliar relational landscape for which she felt unprepared. Her anticipations of being criticised by the group made her very cautious about disclosing very difficult personal issues and, although she eventually did disclose, her experience in the group led her to regret this disclosure, describing it as 'dangerous' and 'stupid' on her part.

However, not all participants found exposure so distressing and some, like Freddie, seemed to expect it and learn from it:

I suppose I wanted to get the most out of it [the PD group] but I could see right, this is going to be quite exposing, I could see that it was going to be exposing and I was, and I was nervous because, erm, I couldn't see any way round that from my own sort of convictions of how I like to participate and so erm, and then here's the thought 'oh well, what will it reveal, what will it reveal about me?' This mystery of myself that I'm not completely acquainted with which I'm much more, you know, not nearly so scared about now.

Freddie was nervous about being exposed, but felt this was unavoidable and had to be endured in order to benefit from the PD group experience. His fear was connected to the unknown as he refers to parts of himself he is not acquainted with ('*what will it reveal about me?*'). However, Freddie reported that he had a supportive facilitator whom he trusted, and his PD group experiences, in which he felt encouraged in exploring his feelings, produced a feeling of exhilaration in him:

Because it was about owning your feelings in the group... because I went away feeling, it was like feeling as high as a kite and it was very, very strong. So, it was almost like I'd been so encouraged, it was like I'd got this, it was almost like an injection of something into my brain...

Like Freddie, Stuart emphasised the high level of support he received in his PD group, which he sees as enabling him to safely experience the challenges from the group:

We were challenged by each other, it was... it was very, very supportive, very challenging and very sociable ... to feel part of something and feel so valued or important, it was so fantastic a feeling, to have that kind of support... It was like being part of a very close family and a very positive family... I felt very valued.....but there was something about that group that encouraged embodiment of, you know, lived it and it wasn't an easy group, you know, they were very, very... could be very, very challenging.

Although he describes the challenge he faced in the group, he also emphasises its family-like and supportive nature. In his interview, he described his PD group facilitator as 'terrific... the facilitator did it really well, he was very experienced, very human', and described his PD group experience as 'probably the best part of training'. Both Freddie and Stuart appear to be able to cope with the exposure and challenge of their PD group because they felt supported and valued.

4.6.2 | Feeling shame and abandonment

Participants spoke with feeling about occasions when they had disclosed significant, traumatic events from their past, often in childhood, but felt shamed and abandoned or ignored by the group and/or the facilitator. These feelings were often emotions that they had experienced at the time of the original life event and relived within the group context, but were intensified when their account was seemingly ignored or not validated by other group members or the facilitator. Like Fiona above, Susan found that the PD group could readily reconnect her to powerful feelings from her earlier life. Here, she talks about how feelings of shame can re-emerge in the PD group context:

There was something about being shamed... because, you know, these, this is tapping into what can be quite traumatic feelings because you know, we talked about trauma earlier on and erm, you know, to be aware of people's family of origin, how we share and how shame in a group like that can re-emerge and erm and just err, yeah, to do more harm than good.

Susan became visibly upset at this point in the interview. She seemed to experience shaming as something that was done to her, potentially releasing traumatic emotions. In saying that this can do 'more harm than good', she seems to be saying that the good that may come from disclosure in PD groups may be outweighed by its negative consequences. Like Rita, Susan described her PD group experience as traumatising:

We'd talk about being traumatised...there were some very painful moments in that group and I don't know about the definition of traumatic, but very painful where myself and others have left at the end of the day, you know, kind of feeling, erm, regressed and hurt.

The distress and shame that Susan experienced can also be vividly seen in Barb's account. She spoke at length about an occasion when she disclosed a painful incident from her childhood:

Because of my childhood, there was a lot of shame around and when I, I brought to the group, quite a big incident from my childhood, it felt like it was a jump for me to do that. And I think it was handled really badly in fact, really badly... they were predominantly men in the group and I felt, because of the nature of the disclosure, I felt really shamed, and I think that shame is more probable in a group because of, there's more people really looking at you, more people that you can project onto I suppose.

Like Susan, Barb felt shamed by the group and was intensely aware of being under the gaze of others. However, Barb's distress focused on the way the facilitator handled (or in her view did not handle) this disclosure:

But she [the facilitator] never went back to it, the therapist never went back to it and ...I thought, I mean I thought, I sort of thought that was, I was left feeling really sort of, erm, that I'd done something wrong or I felt ashamed or and somehow that what I said was boring, even though it was quite a big issue actually and erm, so I thought next week I will say something about it. But somebody came in with a really big issue the next week and I never got opportunity.

Barb later went on to explain that having taken what seemed to her a big risk in disclosing her experience ('it felt like it was a jump for me to do that'), she felt 'shut down' and abandoned by the facilitator, who did not support her by acknowledging what she had shared openly, and did not refer to it in any subsequent group meeting. Having disclosed what was for Barb a very significant, traumatic experience from her childhood, the issue was left without a response from the facilitator. Just like her childhood self, Barb felt too unimportant to be listened to.

Understandably sensitive to others' reactions to her disclosure, Barb was left feeling that she had '*done something wrong*' and blamed herself, a feeling that echoed her response to the original disclosed childhood event (when, as a child, she disclosed this event to an adult she was not supported). She describes herself as 're-traumatised' by the experience, reliving the childhood trauma of her experience being disregarded, not listened to.

In fact, several participants reported disclosing painful past experiences to their group, which they felt had been overlooked, ignored or not properly acknowledged. Fiona says: 'So I was bringing this stuff in and the fact that as I say, this is how I am, was like well it wasn't, it wasn't being validated'. Rita, like Barb, began to question whether she was 'doing it right', and whether this was a sign that something may be wrong with her way of relating to others, reigniting self-doubt and childhood peer relationship worries about being 'out of the group'. She described how she felt that the group members were not properly supported by the facilitators. Speaking about conflict within the group, she says:

They left us to deal with it. They only summarised at the end and they only spoke in the middle of that if someone had gone off track...that's the only time they'd ever intervene, which I suppose contributed to the lack of safety.

Her words 'left us to deal with it' give a sense of her abandonment and the lack of support she felt, and this absence of active facilitation by the group leaders clearly contributes to what she experienced as a 'lack of safety' in the PD group. Like both Barb and Fiona, Rita spoke about occasions when her disclosures seemed ignored:

I can remember putting something out there and nobody doing anything with it and just thinking 'I've just said something really important and nobody has responded', but not being able to sort of say to people 'I've just said something really important and I'd really like some feedback from the group', because the rules were kind of like not made very clear... so I didn't even know whether it was ok to ask... So, I remember doing that, I remember putting stuff out there and not getting anything back and just sitting there and feeling like really angry or frustrated.

Rita's anger and frustration is partly due to her uncertainty about what is appropriate behaviour in that situation, so she felt she had to keep her feelings to herself. Although PD groups are intentionally without 'rules' in terms of a specific structure or agenda, Rita here seems to be referring to 'ground rules', that is basic expectations about behaviour.

The lack of safety and uncertainty that were features of these experiences are the focus of the second theme, where participants described the volatility and unpredictability of their PD groups.

4.7 | 'Sparks and fireworks'

This is a quote from Fiona's interview and signals the hazardous, risky and potentially explosive nature of PD groups in her experience and that of other participants. They experienced PD groups as volatile, unpredictable and suffused by uncertainty about rules and expectations, leading to self-doubt in some participants.

4.7.1 | Volatility and unpredictability

A number of participants used expressions which indicated powerful psychological experiences, as though they felt in danger or under threat. The volatility and unpredictability of PD groups made them a precarious environment for some participants:

The fact that it's all women makes it for me a very scary place because I don't really trust these women because of experiences in the past... there would be sparks everywhere and it felt like sparks and fireworks, that's the only way I can describe this group, it was really kind of scary. (Fiona)

Fiona, as mentioned above, felt insecure and afraid in an all-female environment due to her experiences earlier in life. She describes her PD group as '*a very scary place*' and '*really kind of scary*', calling attention to her heightened fear. She paints a picture of eruptions of explosive conflict between the group members.

Mary also talked about feeling unsafe when conflict occurred in the group, and here, she uses a metaphor of being 'knifed' by another group member:

She was very nasty and personalised about it... it was this competition about who was right, not how are we going to resolve this, it's back to they were both [the female group member and the facilitator] going to be the winner. She was a very difficult..., I had some run-ins with her myself, yeah, one particular one where I just felt she went to give me a hug and then she knifed, you know, Julius Caesar, I don't know if he [the facilitator] should have trusted that kind of confrontation.

She seems to see the facilitator as engaging in an unhelpful and potentially dangerous power struggle with the group member ('they were both going to be the winner') and implies that this was an ongoing situation rather than a single event ('it was this competition' and 'it's back to'). Mary painted a violent picture ('she knifed'), almost like a betrayal; she approached seemingly affectionately and then unpredictably attacked instead. Her fears that the facilitator may be unreasonably influenced by such confrontations appear to lead her to doubt his judgement.

Participants reported experiences of potentially dangerous chaos, and group situations becoming out of control. Their

accounts suggest instability or precariousness of their PD groups. For example, Fiona describes the instability of both her group and a particular member: 'I suppose, well she was right on the edge. We were right on the edge, that group was right on the edge... Yeah, our group was right on the edge'. The group is repeatedly depicted as if teetering on the brink of a cliff and about to plummet uncontrollably into the unknown, and her words imply that this situation had been ongoing.

4.7.2 | Uncertainty

Experiences of uncertainty were apparent in many of the participants' stories. Uncertainty was linked to insecurity, feeling unsupported and having self-doubt. Some of these feelings were related to ground rules or boundaries being unclear, or to a facilitator's lack of support, or to uncertainty about what might be happening in the group, particularly when situations were out of control.

In common with several participants, Anne's uncertainty related to her need for clarity and guidance from the facilitator:

Well the first facilitator, I would say you needed to be more present in the group, we needed to know whether you were part of the group or not part of the group and to make that a bit clearer... because, you know, for weeks we just sat there half looking at her and thinking...'are we saying it wrong, are we right?'...You've got to give some indication as to, don't let us just sit around there month after month not knowing what the hell we're doing, whether we're in the right direction or not. At least give some, some guidance, you know... a bit more facilitation to be a bit clearer.

Anne had concerns about 'saying it wrong' or behaving inappropriately in the group. She seemed uncertain about both the facilitator's role ('we needed to know whether you were part of the group or not part of the group') and her own role in the group. The need for presence was expressed in therapeutic terms—to be present is to work in relation to each other or to connect in some way; she is suggesting that the facilitator failed to make a connection with the group members. Anne goes on to express her frustration in strong language, suggesting this situation was prolonged ('don't let us just sit around there month after month not knowing what the hell we're doing') and again expresses her need for guidance.

For Fiona, her sense of uncertainty was closely linked to the volatility of the group described earlier:

And I'm kind of sat there thinking 'What on earth is going to happen in here then?', because I haven't a clue, and you'd be there, sat there thinking 'Oh God, what's going to come to me now?'

Her sense of dread in anticipating a potential unknown danger or threat to her is palpable in her question 'Oh God, what's going to come to me now?' She expresses her complete lack of grasp of the situation, where events may unfold in ways that she cannot anticipate.

4.8 | Integrative theme: learning from the experience

As mentioned earlier, despite the often distressing nature of their experiences, participants seemed determined to learn from them. Some participants had later undertaken further training and had very positive PD group experiences, which they found valuable.

However, only two participants reported their PD group experiences as a wholly positive learning experience. Both Freddie and Stuart reported feeling a great deal of support and trust in their PD groups and found them very rewarding. Though challenging, they considered them very important learning opportunities. When asked if he had found the PD group uncomfortable, Freddie said: 'Yes, yes it was, but I, I really felt it was going places, you know, I felt it was a really important learning experience'.

Stuart regarded his PD group as 'a really fantastic lesson in boundaries', 'priceless', and saw his facilitator as a role model: 'You're constantly seeing a person centred, err, practitioner working and working really well and working very humanly with different dynamics'. However, he admits that he was 'very, very lucky', recognising that others often do not have his positive experiences.

Millie had belonged to two different PD groups and considered the experience overall 'an invaluable learning experience'. However, she reported finding the group in her first training course 'excruciating' and 'traumatic', saying:

I couldn't tolerate it for the two years of the initial training group... I reflected on it and I had to process the emotion it left me with, the shock, the feelings, the strong feelings it left me with and yeah, it was just full of learning.

For her, processing the discomfort she experienced there took a very long time; when she undertook a subsequent training course: 'My tolerance was increased and I could stay with more discomfort. I think there's learning in that'. Like Millie, Susan had later taken part in another training course and reported, 'Next to my personal therapy, that [her PD group] has been probably one of the greatest learning experiences'.

For other participants, their learning took the form of a deep commitment to protect their own trainees and/or clients from the kinds of distressing experiences they had suffered in their PD groups. For example, Fiona confided:

If somebody [referring to her experience as a trainer]... went 'oh I'm going to go for a group, it would be much

better and safer', actually it's not safer and I will say that and I will think about, you know, and I will say whatever, I'll just say 'but it's not', I would use that experience, you know, I've shared it with students that experience.

Barb, who reported very distressing PD group experiences, said:

The experience turned out positive because it's shaped my practice [she spoke about working 'mindfully' and 'with kindness']. But I think it certainly wasn't positive at the time.

It seems that the learning gained from PD groups, though valuable, may come at the cost of great personal distress for some trainees.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Previous research has frequently reported that PD groups can be distressing for members (Knight et al., 2010; McMahon & Rodillas, 2018; Moller & Rance, 2013; Payne, 2010; Robson & Robson, 2008). This study has provided detailed insight into the nature of this distress, and some of the reasons for it.

Participants recounted intense feelings of exposure and vulnerability; they felt shamed and abandoned and sometimes even traumatised. PD groups were often a place of uncertainty, volatility and danger for them. Some participants felt unacknowledged or invalidated by their groups and/or facilitators, and, like the participants in Moller and Rance's (2013) study, they were uncertain about the purpose of PD groups and seemed to have little idea of what was expected of them. Some of these findings therefore echo those of Lennie (2007) and Robson and Robson (2008) with trainees, especially concerns about lack of safety and trust. However, not all participants had such negative experiences; although they described their PD groups as very challenging, they coped with this, even finding the challenge exhilarating, and the experience was for them very worthwhile.

These positive experiences seem related to the support and validation they feel they received from not only the group but also the facilitator, creating psychological safety for participants. Psychological safety means the trust and respect that enables people to speak up (Liang et al., 2012), issues for PD groups that had earlier been identified by Lennie (2007), Robson and Robson (2008) and Luke and Kiweewa (2010). In a meta-analytic review of the relationship between leadership style and psychological safety in the workplace, Newman et al. (2017) identified supportive leadership as being key, with perceptions of safety increasing and evolving over time as leaders developed positive relations with others. Positive role modelling was also held to be a key factor in encouraging psychological risk-taking, honest communication and learning. Their findings are clearly applicable to the facilitator issues raised by this

research, such as being supportive, trustworthy and being able to listen to group members.

The limited amount of previous research on PD group experiences has focused almost exclusively on the experiences of trainees during their training. The retrospective nature of this study has provided an insight into the longer term impact of PD group experiences, from the perspective of qualified counsellors. The clarity and detail with which the participants recounted their experiences was noteworthy in the light of the time that had elapsed since their PD training groups—many years for some. The events they recalled seemed still vivid to them, and, what is more, they appeared to have continued to reflect upon their experiences, as they also did during the interview.

The findings from this study suggest that the, often intense, personal challenge of PD groups can indeed be worthwhile, leading to increased self-awareness and development. Participants reported opportunities for development in the kinds of challenges to their self-understanding that have previously been deemed important (Cooper, 2005; Mearns & Cooper, 2005) and that may be seen as 'transformative learning' (Mezirow, 1991).

But for PD groups to have this positive outcome, key features need to be in place. In the conclusions to their retrospective study, Knight et al. (2010) argued for further qualitative research in order to understand individual differences in the balance between distress caused by, and value gained from, PD groups reported by their participants. Our findings suggest that there needs to be reliable and positive support from both the facilitator and other group members, a facilitator who is able to manage and control difficult situations effectively, and clarity about roles and ground rules. These elements were clearly perceived as absent in the experiences of many of our participants; in such cases, group members may, at best, learn little of value and at worst emerge feeling traumatised and damaged.

5.1 | Limitations of the study

The study focuses on qualified counsellors and psychotherapists in the north-west of England, recruited via a sample of training establishments. As such, the findings reflect the experiences of a relatively small number of individual and cultural perspectives. However, the number of participants is consistent with recommendations for IPA studies (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith et al., 2012), which also highlight the need for homogeneity in the sample. Further research would need to establish whether those from other areas of the UK and internationally, different cultural backgrounds and affiliated to different training establishments have similar experiences. However, the sample is arguably representative of the UK counselling population in terms of age, gender and social class (UKCP, 2017; Brown, 2017).

It is also possible that those volunteering to take part are more likely than others to have had negative experiences that they wish to 'offload'. However, the findings are consistent with several previous

research studies reporting significant levels of distress among trainees in PD groups.

6 | CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Counsellors need to have a thorough awareness of the self in order to understand where their own boundaries end and the client's begin. They also need to recognise the impact they have on others, which can only be learned in interaction with others.

The findings suggest that PD groups can expedite learning and development with an intensity not found in classroom learning. Although many described their experiences as anxiety-provoking and even traumatic, all but one described their process of learning as worthwhile if tolerated in the 'here and now', and reflected upon using various forms of support.

However, despite the fact that participants were often able to learn from very challenging, even traumatic, PD group experiences, we should question whether this level of disturbance is necessary in counselling training. The participants in this research had managed to persevere with their training; others whose experiences were inevitably not captured by this research may have abandoned their training if they felt unsupported and were not able to tolerate the level of emotional disturbance provoked by their PD group. Trainees may indeed require commitment and resilience to tolerate these difficulties, but we argue that only with appropriate skilful facilitation and support can meaningful learning be achieved.

In the light of our findings, we make the following recommendations for practice. First, with regard to participant support, the aims and potential difficulties of PD groups should be explained clearly to trainees from the outset regarding the process, risks and benefits of PD learning. In line with the conclusions of Newman et al. (2017), a gradual introduction of challenge over time may be beneficial. Participants need to be thoroughly debriefed through discussion, preferably with an objective, external facilitator independent of the training course. It is recommended that participants should be debriefed soon after the PD group experience using discussion, personal journaling and making use of ongoing therapy.

The second recommendation relates to facilitator training. As previously recommended by Knight et al. (2010) in regard to the training of clinical psychologists, group facilitators should have specialised training in group work; they should also receive training in its ethical issues and in clinical support. There should be consistency in facilitator experience and training with the use of a guidance framework.

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