



The role of personal development groups in counsellor training: understanding factors contributing to self-awareness in the personal development group

Clare Lennie

To cite this article: Clare Lennie (2007) The role of personal development groups in counsellor training: understanding factors contributing to self-awareness in the personal development group, *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 35:1, 115-129, DOI: [10.1080/03069880601106849](https://doi.org/10.1080/03069880601106849)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069880601106849>



Published online: 05 Feb 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 7742



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 7 View citing articles [↗](#)

The role of personal development groups in counsellor training: understanding factors contributing to self-awareness in the personal development group

CLARE LENNIE

Education Support and Inclusion, School of Education, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK

ABSTRACT *Personal development groups (PD groups) are widely employed in counsellor training with the aim of developing the self-awareness of trainee counsellors, and the intention of this paper is to open a discussion forum of the use of these groups and understand their use more fully. A quantitative and qualitative approach was employed in this study, using focus groups with a cross section of 88 trainees of counselling, at different points in their training, to establish those factors that were felt to contribute to developing self-awareness in the group. A questionnaire was used to measure both trainees' perceptions of their own self-awareness and the extent to which the contributory factors were felt to be both present and helpful in their current PD group (this is referred to as the 'comfort fit'). Statistical findings, from the full cohort of 88 trainees, indicated that they were more comfortable in the PD group at the start of their training and less comfortable at the end, although there was no clear relationship between there being a better 'comfort fit' and increased self-awareness. These findings are discussed in relation to alternative methods of facilitating the self-awareness of trainees of counselling (such as mandatory personal therapy) alongside the associated complexities of undertaking research of this kind.*

Self-awareness and counsellor training

The provision of counselling training has burgeoned following the first course in counselling at Keele University in 1965 (Bolger, 1985). Presently, there are broadly three levels of generic counselling training offered in the UK. These are:

- *Level 1*: a 30 hour introductory course in counselling skills covering the basic skills of active listening with a broad overview of theoretical background and associated self-awareness work.

- *Level 2*: a year long, part time Certificate in Counselling Skills that covers the elements outlined above more fully. Greater attention is given to the self-awareness work of the trainee and consequently personal development groups might well be offered at this level.
- *Level 3*: this is the Diploma level of counselling required if one intends to practice as a counsellor. Previous aspects of training will be developed and there will certainly be some discrete element of personal development work, which is likely to be in the form of a personal development group that meets on a weekly basis for the duration of the course. Additionally, trainees will be required to complete a number of supervised counselling sessions, attend residentials and regular supervision.

It can be seen that each level of training outlined above specifies an increasing element of developing self-awareness; this may form part of the general skills training (as in the level 1) or it may be approached in a more discrete way in the form of the personal development group. There is considerable literature which suggests that developing self-awareness in the counsellor practitioner is to be applauded and that they are open to a process of change (Johns, 1996), although methods to promote this, particularly at the Diploma (level 3) training area, are diverse. Some suggest that mandatory personal therapy is the best approach as it gives the trainee counsellor a greater insight into the role of the client (Grimmer & Tribe, 2001). However, research findings regarding the extent to which this experience is helpful are mixed (see, for example, Aveline 1990) and the idea of coercing trainees to have therapy to pass a course goes against the ethical principles of counselling. This approach is, however, standard practice in many training courses.

A possible alternative to this approach is the personal development group, an experiential group which is widely employed to promote the self-awareness of counselling trainees. Generally speaking such groups are non-directive, closed and aim to 'offer opportunities for reflection on interactions and other important learning of counsellor skills and processes' (Payne, 2004, p. 511). Clearly, the confidential nature of the group, alongside the constraints of researching live participants in a group environment, results in difficulties regarding research opportunities and validity of results and findings obtained. However, the widespread use of the personal development group in counselling training and the strength of feeling generated by involvement in the group means that this is a phenomenon of importance in terms of systematic, empirical research. It is surprising then that a number of researchers have suggested that the personal development group is under researched (see, for example, Donati & Watts, 2000; Payne, 1999).

The limited research that has been presented is mixed in its conclusions regarding personal development groups; indeed some even suggest that the terms 'personal development' and 'personal growth' are poorly understood (Irving & Williams, 1999, p. 517). Overall research findings are somewhat polarised; while there are those who suggest that the group is helpful in promoting counsellor skills, attitudes and personal development (see, for example, Fairhurst & Merry, 1999), others associate it with coercing trainees to adopt the road of personal growth

espoused by their training providers (Dexter, 1996). Within this context of confusion there are other research findings suggesting 'severe negative outcomes' (Lieberman, 1981, p. 241) or that individuals may experience discomfort with this type of learning activity (Anderson & Price, 2001), indeed that some had become 'casualties' by the experience (Lieberman, 1981, p. 241). Such polarities are further echoed in the anecdotal reports of trainees who experience a trust, empathy and genuineness in the group of a nature that they have never experienced before to those who hate the group and comment on its dysfunctional nature (Lennie, 2000). The polarities in attitudes of those who are aiming to understand the personal development (PD) group more fully can also be seen in their research and writings (see, for example, Lennie, 2005; Payne, 2004; Robson, 2005).

Difficulties in definition

Understanding the role of PD groups requires attention to be paid to nebulous concepts such as 'the group' and 'the self' and associated definitions. The complexities of such terms can only be touched upon here but a flavour of them is outlined below.

The self

Understandings of the self fragment into our inability to separate our selves from the society that we find ourselves in (see, for example, Mills, 1998) and a consequent life of compromise, suppression and repression (see, for example, the writings of Freud, 1937) which is in stark contrast to the optimism offered by humanistic psychology emphasising self-actualisation and potential for growth (see, for example, Rogers, 1961).

The group

Theories essentially divide around Foulkes's notion of the rich source of growth offered by the group and his belief in it as something of an all embracing mother (Foulkes, 1964) and Bion's rather more pessimistic stance focusing on regressive, primitive fantasies and archaic patterns of relating to others (Bion, 1959). Nitsun (1996) argues that the somewhat optimistic flavour of our conceptualisations of groups comes essentially from our belief in the necessity for cohesion within a group. Nitsun believes that destructive forces are essential if the group's creative potential is to be fulfilled.

Final statement of the problem

It is difficult to doubt that some discrete element to promote self-awareness within a counselling training programme is to be applauded and it is recognised as such by the BPS, BACP and increasingly the UKCP. However, it seems important that a learning

activity so widely employed with such potent potential to be labelled as 'injuring' by some participants deserves serious and in-depth research.

There has, as yet, been no clear exploration of the 'experience of the personal development group' or attempt to identify those factors which are felt to be helpful in promoting self-awareness. In summary, it is almost as if the personal development group is beyond empirical research and is left as an enigma, in an unquantifiable form but with potent, human effects both good and bad. In an attempt therefore to understand the group more fully so informing practice, the research questions that this study attempted to explore were:

1. What factors contribute to developing self-awareness in the personal development group?
2. What is the 'comfort fit' experienced in the trainee's current personal development group? ('Comfort fit' is defined here as the relationship between the perceived 'help' of each factor in developing self-awareness and its 'presence' within the current group.)
3. What is the relationship between 'comfort fit' in the group and self-awareness rating?

Bearing in mind the strength of feeling generated by the personal development group it is likely that there will be some requirement on the part of the researcher to 'bracket off' their own beliefs and expectations, particularly if they have previously been part of a personal development group (as indeed this researcher has). Consequently, a bracketing off occurred in two ways in this study, first by using a grounded theory approach in analysing the initial data collected from the groups (personal researcher reflections were kept alongside in a journal in an attempt to prevent contamination). Following identification of the contributory factors to the PD group experience an objectivist epistemological position was adopted whereby a Likert type scale was attached to each of the factors and statistical analyses applied. The application of these two approaches allowed for some element of triangulation to be achieved, thus developing the reliability and validity of findings reached. Acknowledging the same epistemological question, Payne (2004, p. 514) takes a more subjective stance when bracketing off 'her own bias and vested interests' in exploring the use of a dance movement therapy personal development group, using a 'phenomenological, grounded theory and collaborative methodology followed by an interpretative framework' (Payne, 2004, p. 511). Differing positions of the researcher can be taken and positions adopted will be reflected upon.

Method

After introductory briefings were held with staff and students from College X to obtain their consent to involvement in the study, focus groups were held with a cross section of trainees (from 1 month into their Certificate training to 2 weeks before end of their Diploma training) to establish factors that they felt contributed to their self-awareness in their current personal development group.

Membership

Due to the arrangements outlined above for involvement in the focus groups it was not possible, or felt desirable, to manipulate numbers so that the groups comprised of six to eight members as suggested by Thomas (2001). It was hoped that a cross section of trainees would elect to be involved in the research and the mixed nature of the research outlined above in terms of optimum group size (Green & Hart, 1998; Pugsley, 1996) suggested that a rather more relaxed approach could be taken regarding group size. Indeed, it was felt that involvement should be driven more by interest rather than exclusion and adherence to a strict methodological design.

Moderator and question schedule

This research used an approach that was felt to be between the two extremes suggested by Morgan (1988) of self-managed groups to groups with a high degree of control. Due to the limited experience of the researcher in facilitating focus groups a framework of questions was devised that could be used flexibly to identify what contributed to the trainees' work in the personal development group. These were hoped to cover the issues of range, specificity, depth and personal context to which Merton *et al.* (1956) refer.

Recording of the data

All focus groups were tape recorded because, although it is possible to remember the generalities of what people say, it is impossible to recall full detail, nuances, pauses, overlaps and in-breaths (Sacks, 1984). The tapes were then transcribed. Silverman (1993) highlights the different levels involved in the transcribing process that will depend upon practical considerations and the researcher aims for analysis. Transcribing is a time consuming and complex process where an attempt should be made to transcribe all reported speech including the 'umms and errs' (Bloor *et al.*, 2001). The audio tapes from the focus groups were analysed using a grounded theory approach.

The focus group sample was:

- Certificate (January 2002 start): 1: one group of 16 trainees
- Certificate (September 2001 start): one group of 13 trainees
- Diploma year 1 (September 2001 start): one group of 15 trainees
- Diploma year 2 (2000 start): one group of 22 trainees

Ethical issues

This research adhered to the ethical guidelines set down by the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy in their *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2002) and the British Psychological Society in *Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants* (1993).

In attending to these 'minimum rights' (BACP, 2002, p. 7) briefing sessions were held to explain the aims and objectives of this research, to explain participants' involvement in the research and to explain any questions or concerns that they may have. These sessions were an attempt to come close to attaining informed consent but it is acknowledged that group work can take on a 'life of its own' and the extent to which participants were able to offer their 'informed consent' is questionable. However, this was an issue that participants were familiar with from their training in counselling.

A statement of consent was explained to the participants at the briefing session along with issues of confidentiality of their responses and their choice to withdraw both their data and their participation from the study at any time. Trainees were offered the opportunity to discuss the focus group and questionnaire on an individual basis immediately after the activity to allow debriefing to take place. They were also given contact information for the researcher to access if necessary at a later date.

Factors contributing to intrapersonal, interpersonal and environmental scores

A grounded theory analysis was performed on the data due to its requirement of a more 'distanced' researcher position; this was felt to be an important issue due to their previous experiences as outlined above in the 'final statement of the problem' section. Additionally a grounded theory analysis allowed for the data to be segmented and quantified into the meaning units and overall themes that occurred most commonly. These themes can be seen in Table 1 and were incorporated into a Likert type questionnaire where trainees were invited to rate the 'presence' of the factor in their current personal development group and the 'help' of it in contributing to their developing self-awareness. The relationship between 'help' and 'presence' gave an indication of the 'comfort fit' in the group. Connor's objectives for personal development (Connor, 1980) were also incorporated giving an indication of the

TABLE 1. Factors contributing to intrapersonal, interpersonal and environmental scores

Intrapersonal	Interpersonal	Environmental
Courage	Group cohesion	Personality of facilitator
Fear	Group involvement	Student support
Humour	Group conflict	Comfort of physical surroundings
Confidence	Difference in personalities	Choice regarding fellow group members
Academic intelligence	Dominance of others	Choice regarding facilitator
Extroversion	Outside contacts	Residential
Spirituality	Regular attendance	Guidance of facilitator
Honesty	Challenge from others	Adherence to time boundaries
Control	Group ownership	
Self-esteem	Trust from group members	
Self-acceptance	Continuity of group membership	
Popularity		
Hope		

trainee's level of self-awareness. Additionally, trainees were asked about their preferred time and size of the personal development group.

The questionnaire was then offered to all counselling trainees at College X to improve generalisability of the results collated.

Results

Questionnaire return rates

Return rates can be found in Table 2.

The response rates for the questionnaires, when calculated as a percentage for the full training cohort at College X (an average rate of 59% across all groups), was disappointing particularly bearing in mind the energy and passion stimulated by the research participants. The overall response rate is skewed by the two certificate groups whose rate was particularly low (47% and 42%, respectively). The time of year when the data were collected impacted on the number of trainees present in these sessions (the week before the Easter holidays) and clearly a low attendance rate in the session limited the number of trainees who were available to be questioned. Due to the ethical implications that were attended to in briefing students fully on their involvement in the study, prior to giving out the questionnaires, it was not felt to be appropriate to 'cold' contact those who had not been present at this session. However, it is hoped that the triangulated nature of this study provided an in-depth understanding of the cohort of trainees who were involved in the research. Clearly, the extent to which the data can be generalised is questionable but, in its defence, it tells us something of the personal development training experience for a particular cross section of counselling trainees.

Preliminary questions

Preferred start time for the PD group. The majority (84%) of preferences were for the PD group to fall at the end of the training session—indeed only 14% thought it should be at the start and 2% in the middle of the session across all groups. The data collected here seemed to echo the practice already in existence at College X: there

TABLE 2. Questionnaire return rates from College X

Training cohort	Number returned/given out	Percentage of full training cohort	Percentage of total sample
Certificate (January 2002)	17/25 (68%)	17/36 (47%)	17/88 (19%)
Certificate (September 2001)	17/32 (53%)	17/40 (42%)	17/88 (19%)
Diploma year 1 (September 2001)	29/36 (81%)	29/36 (81%)	29/88 (33%)
Diploma year 2 (September 2000)	25/38 (66%)	25/38 (66%)	25/88 (29%)

was a feeling that the PD group offered a 'safety net' at the end of the evening for material to be 'caught' and explored before the evening ends. However, there was also some discussion about the time lapse that existed for trainees in terms of returning to their colleagues to continue these personal explorations. This was particularly so when rather more challenging material had been shared in the PD group. The confidential nature of the group means that material cannot be explored outside of the setting and therefore there is a week's time lag before such material can be revisited, highlighting a potential strength of the residential. This may account for those trainees who would prefer the group to be at the start of the training session. Only two trainees considered the middle of the training session to be an appropriate time for the PD group.

Preferred size of PD group. The majority (73%) of the trainees stated the preferred size of their group to be between six and eight members (6–20%, 7–13%, 8–40%), thus stating their precise preference; only 8% stated '6–8' as their answer. The spread of responses is greatest for those new to their training (4–17), as training progressed suggested group sizes of six to eight clustered around that suggested by the literature (Thomas, 2001) and in existing practice at College X. Nobody in either of the Diploma cohorts suggested a group size above nine or below six.

Self-awareness ratings. Mean scores for each cohort demonstrated little variance in self-awareness ratings although the highest scores were for Certificate September 2001 start (those in the middle phase of their training) and the Diploma year 2 group who were close to completing their course (see Fig. 1). The calculation of mean scores disguises the extreme nature of the self-awareness ratings described above; the skewed nature of the scores results in an 'average' that does not reflect the actual ratings of the trainees. Additionally, when considering self-awareness scores, there are a number of important caveats to bear in mind. It is possible that, as the course progresses, trainees become more questioning about their self-awareness, reflected in a lower perception of their own self-awareness and thus resulting in a lower score. This greater self-questioning may indeed be an example of greater self-awareness but the associated score does not reflect this.

Questionnaire data inevitably bring with them problems of social desirability and this may be a particular issue when collecting data about a sensitive issue such as self-awareness from a cohort of respondents in their training institution; the context of the 'self-report' is likely to impact on the perception of the attribution being measured (McLeod, 2001, p. 215). The notion of the 'good student' may be triggered for some and it is anticipated that this may be particularly so for those in the early stages of their training—indeed one trainee in the Certificate cohort gave a maximum rating for self-awareness outside of the personal development group.

What is the 'comfort fit' experienced in the trainee's current personal development group?

The relationship or correlation between 'presence' of the contributory factor and its 'help' in developing self-awareness (the 'comfort fit') was calculated using

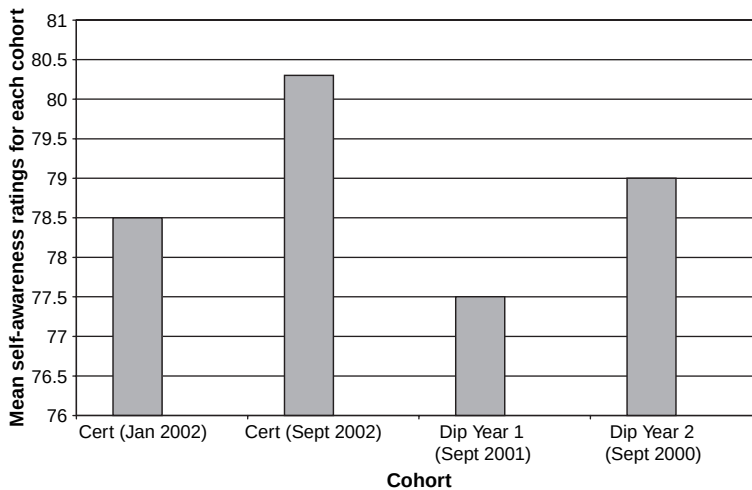


FIG. 1. Bar chart of mean self-awareness ratings for each cohort.

Spearman's Rho. Statistical relationships or 'comfort fits' were more significant on all three variables (environmental, inter and intrapersonal factors) for the Certificate (January 2002) cohort. Relationships were less significant on all three variables for the Diploma year 2 group—indeed, only one 'comfort fit' was found to be statistically significant, that of interpersonal factors. Environmental and intrapersonal factors were not significant at the $p < 0.05$ level for this training cohort. These findings suggest that overall trainees are more comfortable in the personal development group at the start of their training and less comfortable at the end.

What is the relationship between 'comfort fit' in the group and self-awareness rating?

This part of the analysis did not present any clear statistical relationships. Indeed, the only significant result in this analysis was noted between environmental 'comfort fit' and self-awareness for those at the end of their training which is interesting as relatively little has been written about the environmental conditions of a group; it seems that Posthuma (1989) may be right in suggesting that we dismiss environmental factors of group work at our peril.

The ambiguities of the statistical results outlined above, alongside researcher reflections on the self in the process of the research and the chosen design, resulted in a 'methodological shift'. It is suggested that further reflection on the epistemological positioning of the researcher in undertaking a study of this kind is required to understand the phenomena further; a discussion of these points regarding self-reflection in research can be found elsewhere (see Lennie, 2005). Design issues in the current research are discussed below.

Discussion

Training experiences

Gender differences. Although not analysed statistically, there did appear to be a particular gender divide in self-awareness scores for those new to the PD group experience: three out of the five males in the Certificate cohort (September start: indicating less experience of personal development groups) reported higher self-awareness scores in the personal development group, i.e. they were more able to be self-aware in this learning setting compared to their 'outside' life. This gender pattern was only noted in this cohort of trainees and contrasted strongly with all females questioned who reported higher levels of self-awareness outside of the personal development group. This might be an indication that for males, who chose to enter training, something is found within the personal development group that is missing from the outside environment; something which sits more comfortably with them so allowing an increased openness. Foulkes (1964) suggests that the therapeutic group is indeed different from other groups because of the healing potential that it offers. It is worth noting here also that, despite the fact that fewer males enter counselling training, many more are able to progress to the higher echelons. This could be for a variety of reasons, including issues of discrimination, but it could also indicate a fuller and more complete engagement with the 'specialness' of counselling which might be in stark contrast to the outside world. It might be that females were more equipped to deal with a learning environment such as the personal development group because of their increased emotional and conversational skills which are utilised more in everyday life and that, for men, the personal development group offers the opportunity to engage more fully and in a more satisfying way, in the way that Foulkes proposed of the therapeutic group.

Methods of developing self-awareness. Personal development groups and one-to-one therapy are not the same thing and the 'struggles' identified for some in this research do not necessarily indicate that they will be a poor one-to-one therapeutic practitioner. The array of definitions offered for the process of counselling are indicative of the complex nature of the activity. The resulting data from trainees in the personal development group echo this complexity.

Gilmore (1973) suggests that skills training could be a part of personal development work and this suggestion highlights one of the many challenges of the group for a trainee that might explain the difficulties expressed in this research. The groups are task-based (in that trainees are expected to practice the philosophy and skills espoused by the philosophy of the training course; Johns, 1996) whilst also focused on personal material and the process of self-development. This identifies a particular struggle for those involved in the personal development group as opposed to those undertaking mandatory one-to-one therapy. It is possible for the trainee in one-to-one therapy to immerse himself or herself in the role of being client and fully engage with the process of personal development. Indeed, research was quoted earlier that the increased familiarisation of client role and observation of clinical methods was particularly helpful (Grimmer & Tribe 2001); there is clarity of role in

personal therapy of 'being' the client and 'experiencing' the therapy, although not all experiences of therapy were considered to be positive and Greenberg and Staller (1981) warn that the emotional turmoil involved in undertaking counselling can disrupt client outcome. Recent research has suggested that both the availability of money and finding an appropriate time to embark on personal therapy are particular considerations for trainee counsellors (Robinson, 2004). Such choice about the right time is particularly important when considered in the light of the fragility of the trainee counsellor (Baker, 1999), but these are also issues when undertaking personal development work in a group.

The personal development group requires a to-ing and fro-ing between the role of 'client' and 'counsellor' within the group. It may be that such a to-ing and fro-ing dilutes the potential for personal growth for individual members and this might have presented itself in terms the first year data as superficialities and a need to remain safe.

Particular issues for the personal development group. Groups are a central component of counselling training in the form of the whole group, case discussion, small group work and personal development groups. They are complex and even understanding when a group is open to debate. Certainly the notions of the 'visible' and 'invisible' group referred to earlier by Agarzarian and Peters (1989) are of particular pertinence to the student counsellor who is training in the material of the 'invisible' group (understanding of group dynamics and process). The invisible group is, according to Agarzarian, greater than the whole of its members accounting for the poignancy of the personal development group experience. It is impossible not to do anything in a group, and those who take a less vocal role are still adding to the ingredients of the group process.

For those who were more vocal, the focus group activity also resulted in an opportunity to reflect on their behaviour within the group. Wheeler (2000) suggests that it is difficult to list the characteristics that we associate with being a good student of counselling. If we use Johns' (1996) rationale for the inclusion of personal development groups into the course, that they support the trainee whilst dealing with the roller coaster of experience that is part of counselling training, then we would expect that trainees have an expectation that 'talk' is indicative of a 'good' student. However, 'talk' may be used as a way of dominating or controlling a group.

Opportunities for honest feedback are available in the group but are embedded within its complexities. If the group is experienced as Foulkes (1964) observes, as a rich source of growth or a place to play, opportunities for such feedback and to make mistakes may be more available. If the group is experienced as Nitsun (1996) describes, destructive forces may keep it in a state of regression; indeed its creative potential may be lost resulting in a process of 'going round the houses'. Nitsun's assertion that understandings of groups are broadly optimistic because of the centrality of cohesion may help us to understand the data collected here. The optimistic view of the group may account for the prevalence of the personal development group in counsellor training and its lack of associated research. There may be a prevailing belief that a personal development group has an inherent

cohesion in that all have elected to enrol on the course and embark in the group but, within this, there will be a multitude of differing needs and methods of expression that is sure to impact on its workings. Wheeler (2000) suggests that it is difficult to list characteristics of a good therapist and this lack of clarity has implications for selection onto training courses; it is naïve to assume a harmony and inherent cohesion when a group of potentially quite different individuals get together in a personal development group setting. The suggestion that trainees in psychotherapy are more able to cope with the dissonance thrown up by a heterogeneous group might account for the more negative experiences reported by trainees. The group might not be experienced in the way that Foulkes had hoped.

The context of the personal development group. There is a difficulty for the trainee in the personal development group. How one operates in a group that has an expectation of sharing and a need to be a certain way to pass a course (Dexter, 1996) will be influenced by the Love (laws of attraction and fusion in a group) and Will (separation and domination) principles outlined by Assagioli (1983). Individuals within a personal development group share relationships in other spheres, for example, they will see one another informally outside classes and in other training situations; all of those ingredients will impact on how the individual communicates within the group. The personal development group is not an isolated experiential group; it is part of a larger social setting which will undoubtedly impact on whether we truly experience within the group and are able to get to know others in a meaningful way or whether we remain safe and hidden within the group.

Limitations in methodology

Questionnaires

Questionnaires pose particular problems of social desirability where students, despite the anonymous nature of the questionnaire, may have awarded themselves ratings to be seen in a better light. Additionally, a low score awarded to self-awareness, far from suggesting a limitation, may indicate the reverse in greater self-questioning. It is unlikely, however accurate the score, that self-awareness is fixed; rather it is likely to fluctuate as we progress throughout our training; certainly, the way that the respondent makes sense of the questionnaire item is influenced by the experiences on the training course (the 'response shift' referred to by McLeod, 2001, p. 215). The reductionist nature of attaching a figure to the self-awareness does not reflect the complexities of the phenomena.

The issues referred to above limit the validity and reliability of the questionnaire in this research, although respondent validity (Reason & Rowan, 1981) was felt to be greater in that subjects' responses in the questionnaire indicated a richness and a connection with what was under investigation. The questionnaire seemed to capture something of the personal development group experience (face validity), although the construct and concurrent validity could be questioned. Both the predictive validity of the questionnaire and its ecological validity are important aspects of

personal development group work when one anticipates the extent to which learnings from the personal development group transfer to other settings (ecological validity) and to other times (predictive validity). Certainly, such notions of validity can be questioned for the personal development group itself in that researchers have suggested that the learnings of the group might not be long lasting (Reason & Rowan, 1981) and respondents in this study themselves questioned the ease with which they are able to transfer their learnings to the outside group setting. The extent to which the group experience is 'valid' in preparing trainees for a one-to-one encounter questions the face or content validity of the group.

Focus groups

Parallel roles

There was an attraction in using a group method to collect data about a group experience; this had emerged from previous research which had employed questionnaires to collect data about the personal development group (see Lennie, 2000). However, the initial stage of this present study illustrated a problem in that, by using focus groups to investigate the experience of the personal development group, parallel processes emerged; this certainly restricted the depth and quantity of data that was shared within the first year groups.

Group size and consent

Research guiding optimum size for a focus group is ambivalent and researchers have written of groups as small as three and as large as 14 (see Pugsley, 1996). The lack of agreement regarding optimum group size resulted in a rather more 'relaxed' approach to group membership where it was felt that interest in the subject matter should be the criteria for inclusion. However, as described earlier, some of the focus groups were held immediately after the initial briefing session and, therefore, far from actively including themselves within the focus group, trainees had to remove themselves from the group setting if they chose not to be involved. Groups were set up in a circle in preparation for the evening's training and, therefore, rather than presence in the group indicating some sort of engagement with the research, it felt rather more like a process of entrapment for some. This process of entrapment is felt to have resulted in larger groups than was anticipated. The resulting silence, role inflexibility, and psychological exclusion of some within the focus group members led to the further researcher reflections, described below, and further extension of the study (see Lennie, 2005).

Conclusion

This research has attempted to open the discussion of the personal development group in counsellor training, 'unpick' the group, and identify those factors that trainees perceive as being helpful to their developing self-awareness. An attempt was

made to try and measure the extent to which these factors were felt to be present in their current group, thus identifying their 'comfort fit' within the group. Those trainees at the start of their training were found to be more comfortable than those at the end; however, further statistical findings were ambiguous.

Despite its flaws, this research is intended to present 'real life' data from counselling trainees and this in turn provides an opening forum for discussion and further research in this area. Finally, the researcher suggests that a rather less positivistic stance would help in understanding the personal development group further; although there is an inherent difficulty in using groups to research groups (as outlined) a rather more heuristic stance, where the researcher acknowledges their role in the group process, would help in understanding the phenomenon further.

References

- AGARZARIAN, Y. & PETERS, R. (1989). *The Visible and Invisible Group: Two Perspectives on Group Psychotherapy and Group Process*. London: Routledge.
- ANDERSON, R.D. & PRICE, G.E. (2001). Experiential groups in counsellor education: student attitudes and instructor participation. *Counselling Education and Supervision*, 41(2), 111–119.
- ASSAGIOLI, R. (1983). Psychosynthesis typology. In: *Psychosynthesis Monograph: 27*. London: Institute of Psychosynthesis.
- AVELINE, M. (1990). Training and supervision of individual therapists. In: DRYDEN, W. (Ed.), *Individual Therapy: a Handbook*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- BAKER, A. (1999). If I am only for myself, who am I?: from trainee to counsellor. In: FELTHAM, C. (Ed.), *Witness and Vision of the Therapists* (pp. 9–27). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- BION, W.R. (1959). Attacks on linking. In: *Second Thoughts*. London: Tavistock.
- BLOOR, M., FRANKLAND, J., THOMAS, M. & ROBSON, K. (2001). *Focus Groups in Social Research*. London: Sage.
- BOLGER, A.W. (1985). Training and research in counselling. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 13(1), 112–124.
- BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY (BACP). (2002). *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy*. Rugby: BACP.
- BRITISH PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY. (1993). *Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants*. Leicester: BPS.
- CONNOR, M. (1980). *Training the Counsellor*. London: Routledge.
- DEXTER, G.L. (1996). A critical review of the impact of counsellor training courses on trainees. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Durham.
- DONATI, M. & WATTS, M. (2000). Personal development groups in counselling psychology training: the case for further research. *Counselling Psychology Review*, 15(1), 12–21.
- FAIRHURST, I. & MERRY, T. (1999). Groupwork in client centred counsellor training. In: LAGO, C. & MACMILLAN, M. (Eds), *Experiences in Relatedness: Groupwork and the Person Centred Approach*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
- FOULKES, S.H. (1964). *A Memorandum on Group Therapy*, Oxford: British Military Memorandum. ADM.
- FREUD, S. (1937). Analysis terminable and interminable. In: STRACHEY, J. (Ed.), *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press.
- GILMORE, S. (1973). *The Counsellor in Training*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- GREEN, J. & HART, L. (1998). Children's view of accident risks and prevention: a qualitative study. *Injury Prevention*, 4, 14–21.
- GREENBERG, R. & STALLER, J. (1981). Personal therapy for therapists. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 138, 1467–1471.

- GRIMMER, A. & TRIBE, R. (2001). Counselling psychologists' perceptions of the impact of mandatory personal therapy on professional development—an exploratory study. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 14(4), 287–301.
- IRVING, J.A. & WILLIAMS, D.I. (1999). Personal growth and personal development: concepts clarified. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 27(4), 517–526.
- JOHNS, H. (1996). *Personal Development in Counsellor Training*. London: Cassell.
- LENNIE, C. (2000). The role of personal development groups in counsellor training. Unpublished MA dissertation, Manchester University.
- LENNIE, C. (2005). The role of personal development groups in counsellor training: a process of developing self awareness for the trainee counsellor, researcher and person. Unpublished PhD thesis, Manchester University.
- LIEBERMAN, M.A. (1981). Analysing change mechanisms in groups. In B. Bates and A. Goodman (1986). The effectiveness of encounter groups. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 14(3), 240–250.
- MCLEOD, J. (2001). An administratively created reality: some problems with the use of self report measures of adjustment in counselling/psychotherapy outcome research. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 1(3), 215–26.
- MERTON, R., RISKE, M. & KENDALL, P. (1956). *The Focussed Interview*. New York: Free Press.
- MILLS, J.S. (1998). *Utilitarianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MORGAN, D. (1988). *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- NITSUN, M. (1996). *The Anti-group: Destructive Forces and their Creative Potential*. London: Routledge.
- PAYNE, H. (1999). Personal development groups in the training of counsellors and therapists: a review of the research. *European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counselling and Health*, 2(1), 55–68.
- PAYNE, H. (2004). Becoming a client, becoming a practitioner: student narratives of a dance movement therapy group. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 32(4), 511–532.
- POSTHUMA, B. (1989). *Small Groups in Therapy Settings*. London: Boston.
- PUGSLEY, L. (1996). Focus groups, young people and sex education. In: PILCHE, R.J. & COFFEY, A. (Eds), *Gender and Qualitative Research*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- REASON, P. & ROWAN, J. (Eds). (1981). *Human Inquiry: a Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research*. Chichester: Wiley.
- ROBINSON, L.R. (2004). Experiences and attitudes towards personal counselling when undertaken as a training course requirement. Unpublished MA dissertation, Manchester University.
- ROBSON, M. (2005). Innovative Methodologies Symposium: what is the experience of personal development groups? Paper presented at the BACP Research Conference, Nottingham.
- ROGERS, C. (1961). *Client Centred Therapy*. London: Constable.
- SACKS, O. (1984). *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*. New York: Summit.
- SILVERMAN, D. (1993). *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction*. London: Sage.
- THOMAS, M. (2001). Foreign affairs: a sociological exploration of holiday romance. In: BLOOR, M., FRANKLAND, J., ROBSON, K. & THOMAS, M. (Eds), *Focus Groups in Social Research*. London: Sage.
- WHEELER, S. (2000). What makes a good counsellor? An analysis of the ways in which counsellor trainers construe good and bad trainees. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 13(1), 65–83.