

RESEARCH REPORT

Explorations of participants' experiences of a Personal Development Group held as part of a counselling psychology training group: Is it safe in here?

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This paper aims to extend understanding of student counsellors' perceptions of participation in personal development (PD) groups during training. PD participants were invited to record their experiences in relation to these groups over a three month period. The accounts were then subjected to thematic analysis. Safety was found to be a dominant theme – both in the sense of how the group felt safe for them and also how the safety was threatened. These concepts are discussed and lessons the data has offered in terms of good practice in facilitating PD groups during counsellor training programmes are elucidated.

Keywords: personal development groups; counselling psychology; safety

Introduction/Background

As a counsellor trainer I have always been fascinated by the power of the personal development (PD) group in enhancing self awareness, self exploration and aiding the ability to be congruent. For some students, the PD group appears to be the most powerful experience of their counsellor training. For others, they never really seem to understand or engage in its purpose. Izzard and Wheeler (1995) concluded that it was unclear if PD groups did indeed facilitate change in counselling trainees. This research aims to capture the experience of being a member of a PD group and asked participants to reflect upon this experience.

Within the Humanistic perspective, PD groups are viewed as an integral part of counsellor training where the purported purpose is to develop personal awareness, the ability to reflect on self and practice and the ability to identify and address ones own issues and self in relation to self and others. Johns (1996) acknowledges the centrality of these groups to counsellor development and Mearns (1997) comments that: "...[in] person-centred training, the dimension of personal development is central" (p. 104).

Dryden et al. (1995) argue that:

The personal development group...is also a vibrant context for identifying personal development needs. If an atmosphere of trust and spirit of encounter can be developed in the group, the members can help each other identify needs which might otherwise have been blind spots.

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Rowen (1999) suggests that group work can help us “cross the great gap” between levels 4 and 5 of Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs. This gap is between self esteem/status needs and self actualization needs. Rowen argues that:

This gap is between needing esteem from others, and looking at them to see how they expect us to behave, and moving on to giving esteem to ourselves and being open to discovering what each of us can be.

The most important crossing on our journey towards being able to offer a relationship to others can be characterized by the core conditions (Rogers, 1951). Rowen (1999) suggests it is at this point we are able to “see out of our own eyes rather than the eyes of others... (and) take full responsibility for what we say and do”.

The PD group aims to aid us in doing this.

Research question

What is it about the experience of PD that makes it, for some students, the most important element in their training, and for others, a waste of time? Previous research of mine with a cohort of Kenyan students revealed that for some, the experience of PD allowed them to transform their view of themselves into people who felt they could “dance naked” – even more of an affirmation of self acceptance and love in Africa than here, perhaps, as nudity is often considered shameful. An explanation offered for this transformation was of it coming from the deep love, empathy and acceptance experienced in the group which allowed members to accept and love themselves and cross the gap described by Rowen (1999). For other students, it seemed to touch them not at all. The aim of this research was to try and understand individual experience in order to try and understand why PD engendered these differing responses and so participants were asked “What is your experience of PD?”

Method

Sample

Participants in two counselling training programmes were invited to keep an anonymous journal (in Microsoft Word) of their experiences in PD from January to Easter 2005. PD groups are considered to be an integral part of the training and are held weekly for an hour and differentiated from other areas of training by not having a defined task other than that of experiencing each other. Members are randomly assigned to the groups and each was facilitated by a tutor. Participants in this study were from groups formed in September 2005. This is “purposive sampling” and allows the researcher to seek out groups where the process that is being researched is occurring (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Eleven people agreed to take part and record their reflections of the PD experience.

Data collection and ethical issues

Because of my dual role as researcher and tutor, it was important to reassure students that anything they handed in would not form part of any assessment. It was also important that I could not identify the participants in case, inadvertently, my knowledge of their views coloured my perceptions of them. Accordingly, the participants were invited to hand in their accounts anonymously. However, some participants were unconcerned about being

identified and chose to either hand in the disc personally or email their reflections. I then transferred the accounts into a folder, without first reading them, and anonymised them. I was then unable to attach any data to a respondent who had identified themselves.

Data analysis

The data was analysed by both authors using thematic analysis. Thematic Analysis involves the engaging in an interpretative relationship with the data, trying to understand and interpret the meaning of the words written by the participants. It is a similar process to that which Smith (2004) describes happens when employing an Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA). What he suggests is happening in this approach (in common with other qualitative approaches) is a double process of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world: the researcher trying to make sense of the participant who is trying to make sense of their own personal and social world.

This approach appealed to us as it does not reduce complexity but tries to order so as to reveal perceived “truths” about the phenomenon under scrutiny. However, it is not without its challenges, as pointed out by Willig (2001) in her evaluation of the IPA approach. She describes three limitations:

- (1) Language: This is the means by which perception is conveyed and relies on representational validity. However, language is symbolic and can construct reality as well as describe it. How, therefore, can we be sure that the reflections of the participants are valid representations of their perceptions. Might they not construct a different reality in order to meet a need either in themselves (to perceive themselves as a successful group member perhaps) or in us (to be reassured that PD groups “work”)? Can we be sure that the meaning they intend to convey is the meaning I receive?
- (2) Connected to this is another issue described by Willig (2001) as “suitability of accounts”. Will the participant be able to articulate their experience?
- (3) The third limitation is explanation and description. Our experience is made up of a combination of different experiences channelled through our previous experience, beliefs and value system and therefore: “Behaviour is the function of experience as it is perceived” (Cook, 2000).

In asking the participants to reflect on the PD experience are we asking them to falsely attribute meaning to one experience by denying other conditions. For example, we may have an experience of feeling powerful in a PD group. We may perceive this to be due to validation of an insight gained through the process of interacting within the group. However, it may be a bright, sunny day and this may trigger in us feelings of well-being that contribute to the feeling of powerfulness but without being aware of this.

Despite these limitations, our approach aimed to understand the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences. The purpose of this method is to

... reveal the structures of experience through descriptive techniques’... thereby... disclosing the nature of structure in the form of meaning. (Valle & King, 1978, pp. 15–16)

This can only be achieved by asking respondents to reveal their perceptions.

The transcripts were divided into units of analysis sentence by sentence and read through many times until themes emerged and then connections between them were sought. Themes were checked against the accounts to make sure that they were true to the original source material and clusters of themes were given an overarching title. In order to

Table 1. Safety and its sub-themes.

Major theme	Sub theme	Sub theme
Safety	Establishment of safety • through contract • through self/others sharing intimately • knowing each other • physical environment • having a focus/purpose that is shared • feeling listen to/belonging • need to feel safe • positive effect on safety by absence of members	Safety lost/missing • through perceiving they were dis-approved of • through group having different agendas/focuses • through changes e.g., physical environment • lack of privacy and confidentiality/physical space not right • not knowing purpose of group • not being heard • size of group/not knowing group members • negative effects on safety by absence of self/group • members not trusting self/others

triangulate the process, some of the data were analysed by both authors and a comparison made as to themes identified. If discrepancies arose, these were negotiated to reach a common understanding.

Results

The analysis of transcripts revealed 12 major themes:

- (1) Safety
- (2) Congruence/Realness
- (3) “Quiet” members of group
- (4) Connections/Awareness of other group members
- (5) Facilitation
- (6) Awareness of process: self and others
- (7) Power of sharing
- (8) Detachment/withdrawal from group
- (9) Search for who to be
- (10) Anger in group
- (11) Response of group to one member dominating
- (12) Experiencing empathy

Each theme had a number of sub-themes associated with it. However, the richness of data that the transcripts yielded inevitably precludes discussion of all themes within this paper. Therefore, this paper will focus on safety and its sub themes which are shown in Table 1.

Discussion

As can be seen from the above table, participants described their perceptions of both how safety was established and also, how it was lost and this discussion will focus on these perceptions. As with all thematic analysis, categorization of themes necessitated

decision making. These decisions about which category data belongs to means that some data, which could be appropriate to many categories, is placed unilaterally in one. The data we have categorized as being about safety is that which seems to have it as a major focus. However, all themes identified all have something to say about safety.

Need for safety

Yalom (1985) describes safety as “our desire to render the unexplained harmless through understanding”. Rogers (1951) stresses the importance of safety for therapeutic change and argues that if a relationship can be established, characterized by the perception of the core conditions, people will become more able to enhance their self awareness and increase their feelings of self worth. If experiences in PD groups are to help trainee counsellors to develop increase self awareness in order to aid their client’s therapeutic journey, then it follows that participants must feel safe. All learning involves risk taking as McGuiness (1989) argues:

Every invitation to learn is an invitation to change; it is an invitation to leave the familiar, the mastered, the comfortable and the position of competence we have now, and move to a new place, where, for a time we feel unfamiliar, not in control, uncomfortable and incompetent.

Generally, we only take these risks if we feel safe. Bowlby (1988) emphasizes this point by using the metaphor of a commanding officer leading an expeditionary force who will only take this risk when he is confident his base is secure. Two of the participants echoed this need for safety:

I think I recognise my need to feel safe if I am going to work at any depth. (H)

I have always felt safe in PD I feel no-one is going to rip me apart or leave me in a mess. (S)

Despite the importance of safety as a pre-requisite for risk taking and learning, as is the case with personal development in counsellor training in general, little has been researched regarding it in the context of counsellor training. (Payne, 1999, 2001). Payne’s (2001) study is one of the few pieces of research in this area and her participants also identified feeling safe as being essential to the success of their Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) experiential group.

Establishment of safety

The data from participants suggested seven sub themes regarding the establishment of safety. The first of these was through contracting.

Contracting

“When the whole group contracted to be open, honest and what was said would be confidential. This made me feel quite safe within my group”. (V)

Robson (1994) suggests that that one element of creating emotional safety is for the facilitator to take responsibility for the safety of the group and then work towards sharing this responsibility with the group through making the issue overt. This is often facilitated through group contracting. Inskipp (1996) argues that contracting is necessary to build the working alliance that is a necessary part of personal development groups and Connor (1994) believes that clear contracting is a way of trainers demonstrating respect for the trainees. However, my experience of contracting with groups, especially with trainees who have experienced a lot of “group contracting”, is that it can become an exercise which is

engaged in without thought or commitment. Participants can offer the rhetoric of respect, support, confidentiality and the commonly negotiated valuing words without true engagement or commitment. The key seems to be to facilitate the group with something Alred (2004) describes as “associative learning”. This is a process of “bringing together ideas and concepts and insights so that each learner linked them in their own way, hooked them into personal experience and existing understanding”. In this way, the group contract can be a negotiation between facilitator and group on what should be included; this can become a way of being and can extend to how we learn to be with the client.

Sharing

Another perception from the participants regarding the establishment of safety was the idea that sharing (of self and witnessing others sharing) increased the feelings of safety within the group. Examples are shown below.

Someone in the group says, “I can hear in your voice that you are very upset”. This feels strange and I am aware of having shown some vulnerability in the group, which I am aware, is really risky for me, as I prefer to stay hidden. Maybe this is what the group is enabling us to do, a place to risk being vulnerable. (A)

A growth in confidence in sharing within the group. I feel I am more aware of sensing other’s feelings within the group and recognising my own. (Anon 2)

Joan Rogers (2004) when reflecting upon her experience of PD during counsellor training demonstrates the importance of this to client work:

A mass of stories, feelings, emotions and sensitivities were spread out and shared in the group in our months together . . . But the important point remains that I needed the *felt experience* of exposing feelings, and vulnerabilities, receiving and understanding these in others, to know a little of where my clients are. I am profoundly grateful to the sensitivity groups in offering me this. (p. 46)

Several of the themes that established safety were matched by themes where safety was lost. The following section discusses these “mirror images”.

Establishing safety and safety lost. Knowing each other versus not trusting self/group: knowing each other

The third element identified by the participants in the establishment of safety was the importance of knowing each other.

I am prepared to take the risk in a group where I feel safe and where I think that people know me well enough . . . (A)

In many ways I feel that a half a day course limits relationship building between other students and this hinders my abilities to open up on a personal level. (A1)

I have had other experiences with PD but its been some time ago the groups were much smaller and I was already known to the other members so perhaps an element of trust was already there and other members from the start felt able to contribute to the group. (S)

Not trusting self/group

Participants experiences include:

The least safe moment was when I was confronting one person in the group about my experiencing of them. I felt very uncertain – I wanted to be real but also constructive. When I

started, I wanted to challenge a particular statement, but I realised halfway through I was really challenging aspects of the person's way of being. I felt unsafe when my feelings of frustration with the person started to feel more intense than I thought they were. I felt unsafe because I was not sure I could trust me. (B)

With this group, I think I doubt their understanding of me somehow. (H)

Today I tried hard not to let my feelings out, but then there is some trigger and it spills out and I hate myself for getting upset and letting others know how I feel inside. (J)

Trust is said by Friedlander (1970) to be a state in which people know others have a capacity to harm them but are confident this will not occur. To enable this state to be entered into, it is imperative that group members get to know each other. It is only through knowing each other that members are able to predict others response and develop trust and safety.

However, some of the participants believed they were unable to trust themselves. Does this suggest that they don't know themselves and/or are not sure of their capacity to harm themselves? Mearns (1997) links the idea of trusting oneself to the development of congruence. He argues that counsellor training necessitates the fostering of congruence which in turn leads the participant towards greater trust of themselves. He goes on to explain this theoretically:

... the direction of movement of the course member is one of enhancing self acceptance which brings with it an internalising of the locus of evaluation, a decrease in the need to defend oneself and consequently a reduction in the counsellors vulnerability and a reduced sense of self consciousness.

It could be argued that PD groups are designed to help the development of the never ending process of becoming congruent (for both students and facilitators!) so that this lack of trust in self is part of that journey.

Physical environment/Changes to physical environment/Lack of privacy and confidentiality/Physical space not right

Physical environment was identified by the participants as being crucial both to the establishment and the loss of safety.

Establishment of safety

I know the improved surroundings contributed to everyone feeling safer and more relaxed. (A)

Loss of safety

Now there is always the possibility that someone will walk though the room at any time. With three doors it feels like sitting in a corridor and it lacks the cosy feel of the small room. (A)

We had not realised that another group could be heard and they could hear us. It felt strange as if privacy and confidentiality issue was open to question... The cohesion of the group fragmented and the topics became very superficial until we re-grouped. (V)

Robson (1994) agrees that: "The physical location can threaten or sustain the population within. Thus care needs to be taken with the choice of location".

Payne's (2001) respondents were also concerned by lack of physical privacy "...lack of safety was perceived to be concerned with feeling exposed to others who were not in the DMT group". There were calls for a less physically exposed setting to be provided.

Shared focus or purpose/Group having different agendas/Foci

Having a shared/focus or purpose for the group was seen as creating safety and, conversely, the group having different agendas/foci was viewed as making the group unsafe. Interestingly one of the participants recognized a need in herself for control and admitted that she often wanted to control what was going on but wondered if:

... Maybe I like certainty because it stops me feeling vulnerable like I feel in the PD group. (A)

Perhaps the need here that is being expressed is less of a need for prescribed exercises but one of needing a common understanding of the purpose of the group. This relates to the idea of "organisation in mind" (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994) which comes from business psychology and refers to the notion that each individual member of an institution carries an "idea" of that institution in their mind. If an organization is to work as a coherent whole, a degree of common perception of organization-in-the-mind is necessary. This concept could be useful in developing a "group in mind" where each member carries an idea of the purpose of the group and behaviour appropriate to the group. When group members are unsure of the purpose safety is lost as demonstrated by the following respondents' observations.

How can we start to feel bonded if we have no common purpose? It feels like we are sitting here waiting for, "personal growth" to happen – only nothing is happening only long and embarrassing silences. I want to *do* something, this feels like a great waste of time and I am feeling irritated. I express my irritation and say I feel I really need some type of agenda. (A)

I struggled to understand the process... We spent much of the time 'group counselling' where the group counselled one member of the group, a process about which I felt uncomfortable about both giving and receiving.' (B)

Feeling listened too and belonging versus Perceptions of disapproval and not being heard

Listening is fundamental to the art of counselling and all counsellors share the belief that listening is fundamental to therapeutic movement. Not surprisingly, participants reported feeling safe when listen to and unsafe when they perceived themselves to be not heard or disapproved of:

I felt very safe and supported and listened to by others in the group. A warm feeling of belonging. It felt very important to me. (A2)

we began storming which came out of the blue... This made me feel unsafe, anxious for the people involved and my wish to be a carer to put things back into prospective. This at the time was not received well because it was obviously the wrong time for this to take place. (V)

I shared personal things from time to time, but often did not feel acknowledged... I believe the same thing applied when others spoke. (A)

The powerful effect of being listened to is described by Rowan and Jacobs (2002):

And when we start, as I often do, with some mindless chatter, he joins in for a while. But then he stops and listens, and I sink into my chair and it all spills out. He is just the most marvellous listener. . . . what matters most is that he has listened to me. (p. 1)

The loss of safety when the participant feels disapproved of or not supported is echoed in Payne's (2001) research where one of her participant's comments:

Not much support for getting in touch with anger from the facilitation.

Loss or addition of members

The physical loss or addition of a group member also has an effect on safety. Participants commented:

Positive effects

I was very aware that one member was not present and I wondered if this conversation and topic might have been discussed if she had been present. I am very uncertain as to if this session might have been different. (V)

Today is different because two people are missing. I think I feel safer because the group is smaller and also because we can see each other better. (A)

The PD for the new term felt better again we were down two people and I have to admit that I always feel less inhibited when we are a smaller group. (A)

What felt significant for me was that I was much more comfortable in a smaller group. The dynamics felt different. I do not know why. Was this because of the people who were there or the people who were missing? (M)

Negative effects

I think we were all feeling the absence of two of our group members. Their empty chairs were there and I think we were all aware of them. I believe it will affect the security of the group if someone is missing. (A)

We were all present for the first time in weeks and I think that made a difference. I have felt that people weren't really investing in this group (going home early etc) so it was good to all be together. (H)

My perception of other people's experience is that the group is dissolving. Three members missing again today. I do not think the group will ever meet again with a full complement of members. (M)

The positive effects seem to be related to the size of the group and the preference for small groups that are perceived as being more intimate.

I am much more comfortable with sharing personal experiences with a small group. I feel quite exposed in the large group. I think carefully beforehand about what I am going to say and often lose the moment in which to say it. (A)

This makes me aware that I don't know other people in the group so well so this feels odd and rather unbalanced. . . . I just don't KNOW most of these people. (A)

The British Association for Counselling (BAC, 1985) Code of Ethics and Practice for Trainers states that “maximum staff to student ratio of 1–12 is preferred”. Interestingly, the respondents in this study belonged to PD groups of 9 or less.

Conclusions

In terms of the findings from the data collected, lessons for good practice in facilitating PD groups within counselling training have emerged:

- (1) Safety needs to be experienced by group members before they can take the risk of learning about themselves or others.
- (2) Safety is a nebulous concept which can be established and lost.
- (3) Most experiences of safety seem to come with trust – trust of oneself and others in the group.
- (4) Trust is established by knowing oneself and others and through knowing others have a capacity to harm us but being confident this will not occur. It is also established through congruence.
- (5) Having a shared purpose is also important and Connor (1994) advocates taking the “mystique” out of it by giving students clear guidelines at the start of the course which allows them to set personal objectives. The difficulty with this in our experience is that deciding what the purpose of PD is, in personal terms, only seems to come through experiencing the group. The development of a “group in mind” may be enhanced through open discussion of what each member hope to learn from the group and what they feel they can offer.
- (6) Acceptance is an important element in experiencing safety. Rogers (1959) has long argued this and Gibb (1964) states: “A person learns to grow through his increasing acceptance of himself and others”. Acceptance by the facilitator is also of paramount importance and Hurley and Rosenberg (1990) claim: “Authentic and congruent leader behaviours . . . were associated with greater learning by group members in studies reported by Rogers (1957) and Barrett-Lennard (1962)”.
- (7) Physical environments need to be free from interruption and members need to feel they will not be overlooked or overheard.
- (8) Optimum group size seems unresolved but absence of members can be seen as either a lack of valuing of the group or viewed as a relief because it makes the group smaller.
- (9) Methodological issues that arose in this study were focused on ethical issues such as trying to ensure participants did not feel pressured to take part in the study and trying to keep the data anonymous despite the permission given by some participants that they didn’t mind being identified. The dual role of the principal author, as both a trainer and facilitator, and the effect that may have had on the ability of participants not to take part in the study and on the experiences they were willing to share was also a concern. Another consideration of the dual role was the effect that it would have on the data analysis. The biggest methodological issue is that of trying to be true to the experience of PD whilst also asking participants to treat it as a separate entity divorced from other aspects of their life.

The first two issues were resolved by giving as much permission to participants not to take part as possible and by immediately making anonymous the data as soon as it was received. The fact that only 11 students participated out of a possible 39 suggests

participants did not feel pressured to participate despite the dual role of one of the authors. The effect of the dual role on the analysis of the data was addressed by both authors analysing some of the data and by both researchers reading each others analysis to see if they could see the logic of the categorization.

The biggest methodological issue of trying to understand the experiences of PD members remains unresolved. It feels analogous to trying to understand deserts through examining an individual grain of sand. However, even grains of sand can offer some insights and Izzard and Wheeler (1995) argue that “creative ideas for methodological strategies to research into self awareness in training counsellors need to be generated so that it can be examined from different angles”. (p. 10).

This paper has explored the experience of personal development groups from one such angle.

Conclusion

In conclusion, feeling safe seems to be a reoccurring theme that affects the subjective success of a group. This paper aimed to develop a greater understanding of the creation, maintenance and importance of safety within PD groups. Creating such safety seems to be vital in ensuring effective therapeutic environments.

Declaration of interest: The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

Note

1. Maggie is a senior lecturer in psychology at a UK University where she trains counsellors to Masters Level. An integral part of this training is membership of a Personal Development (PD) group whose aim is to increase the personal awareness of student counsellors. Jenna, who is Maggie's daughter, is a trainee graduate psychologist with an interest in the therapeutic outcomes of group work. She helped to analyse and triangulate the data and therefore is accorded joint authorship. However, in order to avoid a rather clumsy style of writing, the main 'voice' in the article will be Maggie's.

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