

Trust the process

Personal development groups during training can be transformative ~ but process groups are not just for students, says Sonja Falck

You take your seat in the circle. There are about 10 chairs in the circle. You tend to gravitate towards the same chair every week. You get there early enough to prevent someone else from taking your preferred seat, which could leave you ending up having to sit right next to the group facilitator. And then, with a sense of (choose between relief, happy anticipation, excitement, 'bored already', dread, or terror), you sit and wait for the 90-minute session to begin.

This is a ritual many readers will be familiar with. It is the personal development group (PDG) – sometimes called process group, or experiential group – which is commonly a part of counselling and psychotherapy trainings. And I am the group facilitator who nobody wants to sit beside.

Why is it a known fact that members of a group avoid sitting next to the leader of the group?¹ Why is it likely that each person who sits waiting for the group to start is experiencing strong feelings, and feelings that can be totally different from what others within the exact same circle might be experiencing? These are the kinds of intriguing questions that PDG gives participants the opportunity to immerse themselves in and discover the

answers to – all towards the aim of increasing participants' self- and other-awareness, psychological acumen and effectiveness at interpersonal relating.

My experience

It's a few decades since I was first a member of a group like this, as part of my clinical psychology undergraduate degree in South Africa. Since then I've participated in several more as part of further qualifications I have completed in the UK, and for the past 10 years I've run such groups, including for the past two years being head of PDG at the BACP accredited counselling training at the University of East London (UEL), where I've managed the running of eight weekly groups and supervised the work of the staff who facilitate the groups that I don't myself facilitate.

I am passionate about the benefits of these groups. It's a part of my job of training therapists that I find gripping and

deeply moving. I now also run such groups in my private practice – not limited to therapy trainees but for already qualified therapists, and for interested non-therapists who are selected as suitable through application and interview.

But I'm well aware that vastly different experiences can be had in such groups. This week I've been reading back over the last few years of reflective essays written by graduating students about their experiences in PDG, and these range from negative to neutral but bewildered ('What's the point?'), to naming it as the most important and transformative experience of their whole three-year training. This range is also reflected in the limited research literature on PDG, such as a study carried out by the University of Northampton.²

So what makes the difference? I'll come back to this question. First, I want to talk about why groups can have such a strong impact.

Groups are powerful

As humans we are genetically designed to want to belong to a group. Our Stone Age ancestors relied on group membership for survival, collaborating with others to hunt and gather essential supplies for food and shelter and creating safety in numbers to protect against predators. In those times, whether you were accepted within a group or rejected and excluded – becoming isolated – could literally mean the difference between life and death.

Today, whatever our culture, we still grow up in some sort of family or community group, because our extreme vulnerability as infants makes our survival fully dependent on being cared for by others through the first several years of our lives. Attachment theory³ provides

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extensive international research evidence of how, from birth, we develop patterns of behaviour to adapt to who our particular caregivers are and what it seems to us will make them approve of us and want to keep looking after us.

Even though in modern life, once we have reached adulthood, acceptance or rejection from any specific group is unlikely to be a life-or-death issue, we continue to experience it viscerally as though it is. Positive biochemicals of dopamine, oxytocin and serotonin surge in us when we feel included, accepted and supported in a group,⁴ and improve our long-term health and wellbeing.⁵ We experience signs of rejection as acutely as we experience physical pain.⁶

In PDG, every single time anyone opens their mouth to say something, these are the stakes that their neural hardwiring makes them feel they are facing. And when a person does speak, how the group members and their leader respond will determine whether the group experience becomes a waste of time, a bruisingly difficult experience, or yields profound benefits. Let's look at some of the benefits and how these come about.

Patterns

When you approach a group – for example, you arrive alone at a party – the primitive fear of rejection gets activated. In such situations we automatically and often unconsciously start rolling out the old behaviours we have developed to try to maximise our chances of being accepted, whether or not these are appropriate for this new context.

Did we survive best in the family we grew up in by being dominant? Or a doormat? Or by clowning about and being funny? Did taking on the role of peacekeeper, trying desperately to quell any conflict, keep us safest? Or reassure us of making a useful contribution so that others would value us and secure our ongoing membership of the group?

In PDG we start to notice each other's patterns of behaviour, and our own. We can bring these to each other's attention. We can be encouraged to drop the old behaviour and try something new.

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Constructive new behaviours are modelled for us by the facilitator.

For example, say your role has been that of peacekeeper. You think it's positive. You're shocked when someone says to you, 'I find your behaviour bland and controlling. You never say what you really think, and you try to stop others saying what they really think, which infuriates me.' How is it that staying neutral and trying to keep the peace, which you have believed kept you safe and gave you your value to others, are now being described as problematic?

Next time there's disagreement within the group, you feel your customary fear of it, but instead of trying to stop the conversation, you let it happen. You breathe through it in the way that the group facilitator teaches you. You survive. After that, when someone is next saying something that you see differently, with your heart pounding, you say, 'I disagree!' And you risk putting forward your thoughts. Again, you survive. You are learning that disagreement can be refreshing, and that it's not the same as damaging conflict. Your brain is being rewired.

Besides, you notice that others in the group are starting to treat you like you're someone who matters more to them, because you've started sharing your true thoughts with them, showing them who you are. They feel freer to share their true thoughts with you now too – now that you're no longer trying to control others.

And if you can manage to face these fears and speak up in front of a circle of 10 people, you can do it anywhere. This is a breakthrough – you experience a euphoric boost to your confidence.

This sequence explains the powerful vitality of groups – the panic of having an old, no longer useful behaviour pattern exposed, the thrill of trying something new, the revelation that you

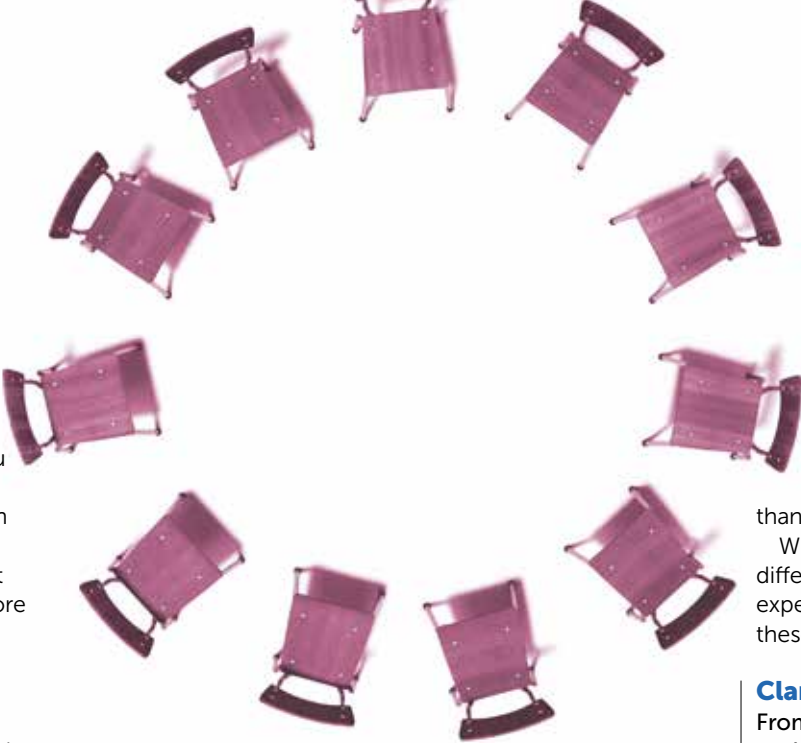
can widen your repertoire of how you behave, the challenge of practising greater authenticity, and the liberation of experiencing that when you do so you can not only still be accepted but as a result you can connect much more meaningfully with others.

Similarity and difference

Ancestral groups relied on the simple organising principle of grouping together with those who are similar to each other and being fearful of, and rejecting, difference. Similarities would include language, features of physical appearance, customs of food, dress and behaviour. The participants of every new PDG begin, unconsciously, in this same way. They seek similarities with each other, and when these are found, a highly rewarding effect of bonding and belonging together ensues.

Here is an example from one of my groups. One group member puts forward that they're struggling with the distress of an old friend having declared to them – by text – that they want no further contact. This stirs up a lot of discussion – how it happened, the emotions it produced and grappling with how to manage it. Several other group members say, 'I've experienced something like that too!' and tell their stories. Universality – that experience of, 'I am not alone in this, or strange for experiencing it, many others feel just as I do' – is one of the seven main therapeutic factors that Yalom and Leszcz cite as deriving from group therapy.¹

We can go even further. The session I have described prompted me to write an article on the heartache of friendship break-ups.⁷ In this way I took that shared personal experience and group discussion, put a lot more thought into it, and connected it with even wider resonances and insights found in worldwide research on related



experiences. I then fed that back into the group by sending them the article.

The relief and validation of finding similarity with others is potent, but PDG also gives the unique opportunity of being exposed to dangerous-feeling diversity within safe conditions. In one of my groups the topic of nudity came up. A rich and lively discussion unfolded, in which different participants explored their views of nudity, such as nakedness as innocence and vulnerability versus the sexualising of nudity. What was the family attitude to nudity in the home you grew up in? And your feelings about it now – who do you feel comfortable undressing in front of? Sometimes, it turns out, not even your long-term lover.

One participant talked about how she goes to naked ecstatic dances. Others who had never experienced this or even heard about it were intrigued and had lots of questions for her about how that worked and what it was like. Another participant could not have presented a greater contrast to this – she sat in the circle in her hijab, visibly part of a culture in which the modesty of covering up your body in public is paramount, and she was able to share what these practices meant to her. All the different participants had so much to learn from each other.

When you learn first-hand from someone what their experience is –

which might be very different from your own – this calm and mutually respectful sharing removes the fear of difference, and brings understanding and compassion for other people's positions and choices. This fosters diversity as something that becomes genuinely welcomed and enjoyed rather than avoided.

What, then, is required to make the difference between an unpleasant group experience, and one that maximises these many potential benefits?

Clarity, safety, skill

From my years of experience in running such groups I have distilled some clear ideas on what creates the best group experience. I see three key factors as being clarity, safety and skill.

1 Clarity involves communicating very clearly what the group's purpose is, how to get the best out of it and how to manage its challenges. I do this by circulating written guidelines before the first session of the group. These guidelines are not abstract and theoretical but explain specific actions that each individual can most usefully carry out during sessions. Rose describes a PDG as a boat in which each member has the responsibility for picking up their own oar and contributing to rowing the boat.⁸ My guidelines help explain how to row. I then regularly refer back to these guidelines during sessions, thereby verbally reinforcing them and further embedding them.

We also discuss confidentiality and the rule that no one in the group should share outside of the group the names or other identifying details of any of the participants, nor the content of disclosures made by other participants during sessions. They are free to talk outside of the group about their own personal feelings and learnings. If a concern should arise about risk of harm caused to anyone in the group or by anyone in the group, the facilitator will raise this concern and will only break confidentiality if it cannot be otherwise resolved.

2 Safety is the defining condition that determines whether group participants will engage, express themselves and risk trying out new behaviours with each other. If participants speak in a group and are ignored, judged, criticised or shamed, they will have a negative experience, shut down and form an aversion to the group, perhaps dropping out of it. A passive group leader who simply leaves the group to try to find its own way with this can harm the group's chances of becoming productive and – worse – might recreate individual members' previously most damaging interpersonal experiences and even trigger retraumatisation.

Especially in the first sessions of a new group, I frequently name and normalise the fear of unsafety, and give deliberate reminders of how to create safety, such as being responsive to each other, and exercising goodwill towards each other even during confusion or challenge. I give reassurance that I as leader will be actively looking out for each person. I differentiate between unsafety and discomfort: you can only grow by moving out of your comfort zone, but you can move out of your comfort zone more freely if you know that however difficult it feels it will not actually be dangerous.

3 Skill means the group facilitator exercising moment-by-moment analysis of what's going on for the different individuals and in the group as a whole, and practising fine-tuned discernment about how to intervene. This includes drawing on relevant knowledge about things such as the stages in a group's development,⁹ and psychological defences. For example, when someone experiences 'boredom' in a group, it is a way of shutting out what's happening for fear of how it could affect them. The group facilitator must constantly assess whether to say something, what to say, when to say it, how to say it and to whom. That doesn't mean they won't sometimes get it wrong. When anything happens that someone finds difficult – termed a rupture – if an openness is

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cultivated around naming this, talking it through together and making an effort to heal it – termed a repair – then having things sometimes go wrong is even more productive than trying too hard to always 'get it right'. Repeated rupture and repair are actually what builds trust and strengthens relationships,¹⁰ so practising this within the group forges a know-how that all group members can beneficially expand into the other relationships in their lives.

This brings us to how skill, as one of the key factors in successful groups, also means the group members actively developing their own skills. This involves maintaining an openness to learning and adopting new skills, and actively trying out in the moment new ways of getting in touch with and managing their own emotions (self-regulation), expressing themselves, and responding to others.

Committing

When a group is brought together well, the commitment to it that grows in all the participants is incredible to see. I have experienced students notifying the university that they would not be attending the day's lectures because they were ill or up against time-pressured deadlines then, despite that, specially travelling to campus at the end of the day just to attend PDG. It's chicken and egg, though – whether, and how much, individuals deliberately commit to a group in the first place is a determining influence in whether the group will come together well.

In counselling and psychotherapy trainings, attendance at PDG is usually mandatory. In the first year of training, such groups inevitably will include members who do not know yet how they feel about the demands of the training or whether it is the right path for them. Sometimes a well-run group can itself convince uncertain members of the value



of persevering because the experience becomes compelling and useful. However, any group members who are ambivalent, perhaps being defensively silent during sessions or attacking towards others, will have a negative impact on the group. If such members are given the opportunity to self-select out of the group, then those who remain are those who recognise its worth and are choosing to keep participating, and this makes for a group that is more cohesive and more reliably productive.

For this reason, at UEL we experimented with making the first two years of PDG mandatory, and then in the third and final year letting attendance become voluntary. Voluntary attendance did not mean dropping in for a session whenever you feel like it – it meant either not doing PDG at all anymore, or voluntarily committing to full attendance every week. It is the voluntary groups that became the ones that were most transformative. In students' final reflective essays, some who had opted not to attend PDG in their third year wrote of their regret at feeling they missed out on what they had come to realise those who did attend experienced as transformative.

If you are an already qualified therapist who missed out on a good experience of PDG during your training, you might consider joining a group as part of your continuing professional development. PDG is different from group supervision in that the focus is on your own experience

and development rather than that of your clients. It is more like personal therapy but costs less than individual therapy sessions and can be more effective because instead of getting the input of just one counsellor during sessions, you are getting input from several others. Joining a group also breaks the isolation many therapists face in private practice and as a consequence of digital working.

It is always a wonder to bring a group of complete strangers together and watch them begin to discover who each other is. Laughter and tears are guaranteed, as is personal breakthrough. I love witnessing how the group members start to care about each other, with deep friendships taking root that soon extend outside session times. This never fails to reinvigorate my faith in the good in all of us and in the life-changing joy of connecting with one another. ●

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