
NETWORK THERAPIES

by

Veronica Coulshed

When Rose Speck's pioneer venture into psychotherapeutic Network meetings was published in 1967, it seemed that the reported dramatic emotional outpourings would prove too florid for the everyday British social work scene. Speck's techniques were based on a six stage spiral model moving from Retribalisation, Polarisation, Mobilisation, Depression, Break through to Exhaustion/Elation. Frequently up to fifty people attended what was often a "healing ceremony" in the family and community network of someone in crisis. Early therapy focused on schizophrenic clients; (chronically mentally ill have been found to have very limited networks, 15 or less people compared to 30 in a "normal" network). Welfare agencies find that sometimes long term difficulties result, or are caused by, a network being drained of energy. Rejecting or being rejected by one's social circle can have a toxic effect on human functioning. Thus Speck found that, by using the energy flow of significant people brought together for shared concerns and planning, a distressing impasse or possible exclusion from the community could be avoided. An individual might equally be helped to separate from a destructive network and encouraged to construct a new one.

Very few examples have appeared of this large groupwork technique and this may be due to British people being reluctant to "wash their linen in public" and professionals being daunted by the size and passion of the operation. Instead we see in the literature, (Dimmock and Dungworth, 1985) an adaptation of the idea. These workers use occasional network sessions to augment ongoing work, to help with difficult decisions in statutory child care cases, to unravel non-complementary professional networks and to help prevent "burn-out" from family and professionals alike. Below is a brief overview which can be contrasted with the succeeding section on Partial Network Assemblies.

A Network Session

Unlike the full scale assemblies devised by Speck, this is really an intense negotiation session where a smaller number of participants, who have an important impact on the client's life, are encouraged to discuss their views of the problem and to rationally undertake a problem solving strategy. This is the structured sequence of defining the difficulty; transforming complaints into goals; generating solutions; deciding; testing and then recycling

through the process if necessary. This model was developed by Garrison in 1976. (Garrison and Howe, 1976) Dimmock and Dungworth's consultation to professional networks, referred to earlier, is similarly a structured meeting with family and professionals who are stuck and who need clarity about each other's powers and responsibilities. These authors have used concepts derived from family therapy and thus tend to be in charge of the action, delivering messages and managing the meeting in order to intensify the "network effect". (This is a tendency for change to be created simply by bringing people together in a new whole).

On a recent visit to New York I was able to confirm the usefulness of such straightforward meetings as this but an equally helpful modification of Speck's ideas was presented by him and some of his "followers". This was termed Partial Network Assemblies

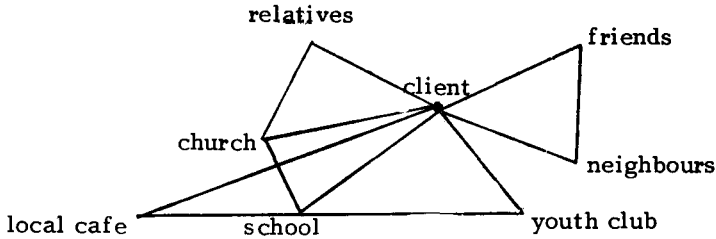
Partial Network Assemblies

The initial referral is normally taken by a team of three or four workers who know and respect each other's strengths and weaknesses. A client, a family or helpers who have reached desperation or stalemate attend for a preliminary assessment interview to ensure that a network meeting is the appropriate method. All the significant players are given a full explanation of what the session(s) entails, and a "Question and Answer" handout. This is a valuable additional tool including who to invite, how the meeting will be recorded, the location and rules,

etc. The number of participants may be as low as a dozen. The aims are, not only to explore the potential for practical and psychological support for the client, but also to improve communication, understanding and compassion. The irrational, unconscious processes which occur when a group of people is brought together are exploited by the skilled team. This aim is in contrast to the network session where conscious, rational problem solving is encouraged and where emotional exchanges would be deemed to be harmful. The role of the workers differs too since the session is less structured and the main activists are the network members.

Often, the referrals reflect a group's willingness to accept some publicity for their concern and the problems are usually life threatening, such as suicide, child abuse or the loss of a family member to an institution. This first assessment interview allows all to deal with resistance and a lack of motivation which could render the intervention hopeless.

Deciding who to invite is up to the client and family, who also have the task of "mapping" their network and then contacting the people they want to attend the event. Sometimes help is needed to do this so a worker may help to generate as many names as possible, from many categories of relationship. Once the list is complete, a "spider's web", linking who knows who, is drawn. (The technique is similar to using ecomaps when recruiting foster and adoptive parents). A completed map might look like this:



The diagram can display as much information as required, using whatever symbols one wishes. For instance, linking who knows who with the same colour, showing the direction of more or less conflict by the use of arrows, initialing who is closest/distant to the client on the lines drawn, etc. The family may need coaching so that an explanation of the purpose of a network meeting can be practised, such as, "We would like you to come to our house next week, where everyone who is important to me will meet with a team of helpers. I am having problems with Mary who is depressed". Each core member invites their own ally, someone as support to prevent scapegoating and destructive interactions. The **balance** of the final group is an important component - if change in possibly distorted relationships is to occur, then there have to be representatives from the close and distant zones around the client's world. The composition must include those who can offer practical as well as effective support. Peripheral people, (in one case example a sister's boss) are seen as having no axe to grind, to provide different perspectives and to have more energy for considering

new solutions and even making offers of help themselves. Possibly the only contacts to beware are members of drug communities who may have a negative influence: the so-called "pathogenic" family, on the other hand, can cooperate if treated as partners rather than villains.

The researchers in New York had found that the most successful assemblies took place in the client's home. Those in clubs, churches, or other community facilities never "took off". Neither were refreshments seen as a good idea or having a meeting which exceeded three hours. Van der Velden et al, (1984) (4) presented their modification of Speck's six stage model which they have simplified into a three stage one of

1. **Convening the network:** the process of the family contacting friends and relatives and inviting them to a problem solving meeting stimulates powerful inter psychic forces and strengthens network bonds.

2. **Connecting members with one another:** people may have lost touch: in crisis the social network may have become disorganised and fragmented. The group process

helps to develop new supportive relationships through the use of group discussion, psychodrama, confrontation and expressing feelings and ideas.

3. Shifting the locus of responsibility from the team to the network: the redefinition of the family problem as one in which everyone feels able to offer something and help resolve, rather than assuming that this is the job of the therapists.

These workers have found that most families can find the skills and resources to convene between ten and twenty members, but isolated, distrustful clients may need help in network building. The workers help to identify needs and available resources, coach in social skills so that the habit of seeking help from the network is developed and, by getting the network to offer approval for efforts to change, eventually recruit more participants to a maximum of three meetings over a period of three months.

An example of a partial network gathering was offered. It concerned an explosive relationship between a 16-year-old boy and his father to whom he had been violent. The parents saw their son as the problem but the network helped to broaden their views, pointing out how the boy used to be friendly and happy. Rather than blame him, they were sad at the change. Helpful suggestions were offered around certain specific conflict areas such as encouraging the parents to remain firm in their rules and to express their feelings more directly. Offers of company for the youngster allowed him to disengage from the overly intense family relationships.

The techniques used in the meeting vary according to the particular needs of all involved but usually an ice-breaking exercise helps everyone to relax and get to know one another. (American therapists may even start with a song). Everyone introduces themselves and then listens to the family, who may be in a central position, state their views of the problem. Individual lists of complaints may need to be redefined in terms of goals for change. The outer circle of participants are solicited for their goals and solutions or they may be asked to approach the family separately and be very honest about what they find. Once the workers have "tuned up" the meeting, they mix in with the group to gather information and facilitate responses to the directives being given by one member of the team, (the conductor). The use of two or more leaders helps people to get sucked into the debate and feel the experiences of the large group. Normally, opposing viewpoints emerge and people polarise around these. This is where the energy for change is generated and the workers may plan to intensify or stabilise the disagreements. Psychodrama, role play, experiential exercises and problem-solving discussions are chosen depending on the problem and the needs of the network. Those most affected by the situation tend to provide energy for preserving the status quo whereas outsiders may emerge as "activists" who push the meeting through the remaining phases. Rather than become unhelpfully intrusive, the team promote links between people and constantly return responsibility for solutions to the group.

Conclusion

A depleted and drained network can be revitalised by new ideas, detached perspectives, accounts of personal experiences and offers of concrete support. In fact, people who have taken part in these assemblies say that their own network relationships have improved as a result. The only negative effects reported was in a very small community where some gossip ensued.

Solving problems, reuniting families with forgotten networks and developing a system of change agents who can offer practical and psychological support are some of the benefits of the network therapies. These approaches are being used to call together **professional networks** too: the vast

panoply of health and welfare officials sometimes involved in a situation can develop their collective resources in creative ways. Similarly, chronic users of services, who have become defensive with their helpers, can use a network session to renegotiate and advocate needed changes in both.

People's preference for privacy, and even anonymity in asking for help has good and bad results. Keeping troubles secret from outsiders prevents gossip but may perpetuate the myth that it is not "normal" to have family crises. We all also lose the chance to offer a helping hand to friends, relatives and neighbours. Network ideas embody a belief in mankind's traditional wisdoms and perhaps counteract the trend towards larger scale and impersonal **service**.

References

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