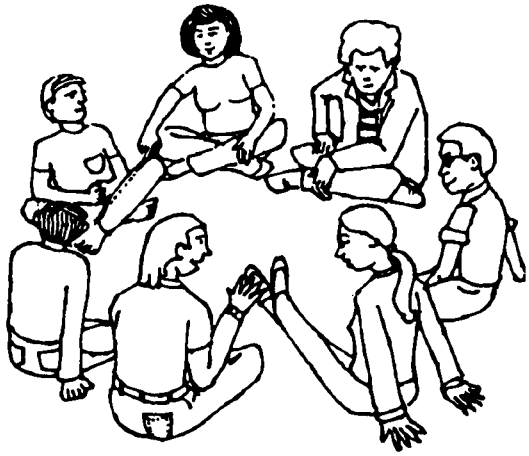
GROUPWORK



Safety in Numbers: Creating Safe Space in Groupwork

John Button

I often ask myself why it is that groupwork in psychotherapy is frequently seen as secondary to the 'real', 'important' and 'basic' one-to-one work done by most therapists, when my experience is that both groupwork and one-to-one have a great deal to offer. Is it that groupwork is intrinsically scarier and more exposing? Is it that groups are harder work? Is it that practitioners who venture into groupwork are afraid of becoming gurus, or are jealous of those group leaders who have become gurus?

Whatever the reasons, I suspect that the result is something of a split between those therapists who rate therapeutic groupwork and those who don't, and between those clients for whom groups are exciting (and rather addictive) and those who wouldn't touch them with a barge-pole. This is a pity, because I imagine that many clients who currently experience only one way of working could usefully gain something both from the intimacy and personal attention of one-to-one work and from the exposure and shared task of groupwork. I have seen many people successfully weaving the experience of letting go in a group into the safe haven of their one-to-one sessions, and usefully developing the insights of their one-to-one work in a group setting.

The term 'groupwork' covers an enormous range of organisational forms and structures, and even within psychotherapy it includes every process from

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long-term training and peer support groups to weekend workshops and one-off single-purpose exercises. I want to stress that my experience of group facilitation — and this is the mode that I am primarily discussing here — has been mostly in working with fixed-term therapy/personal growth groups, varying from two days to six weeks in duration, and that most of the participants have already had some experience of both one-to-one therapy and groupwork. I also work as a one-to-one humanistic therapist, and have several clients who have experienced me both as one-to-one therapist and as therapy group facilitator.

I shall start by looking at those aspects of personal work which can sometimes be more easily and safely explored in groups than in one-to-one work, and go on to enumerate the considerations and precautions which group therapists might usefully take into account in order to provide the most potent mix of opportunity, support and safety.

What Groups can Offer

One person 'working' for many

There will always be braver clients and more reticent clients, and one of the necessary shortcomings of one-to-one work is that the client never sees another working on emotional and practical issues. While this may create a safer setting in which to explore difficult areas of their experience, one-to-one clients never get much of a chance to 'practise being a client' from people who have already trodden the same path, or whose therapist has intervened in a different way. There is much for them to learn from other participants in a therapy group, and although while they are working they may feel that they are doing so for themselves alone, indeed may feel that they are hogging the group's time, the work they are doing is almost always important both for other individual participants and for the group as a whole.

Recognition of shared issues

Another potential shortcoming of one-to-one work is that many clients believe that the problems they are experiencing are unique, a result of their unique history and their unique coping strategies. In a sense, since we are all different, this is true, but there are far more similarities between different people's circumstances and strategies than many imagine. A group setting enables people to recognise shared issues, and thereby the potential to share possible tactics and solutions. The problems faced by many clients have to do with arbitrary externally imposed power-structures which reduce them to powerlessness and inertia. While sensitive one-to-one work is often the only way to work with the personal effects of trauma, a group setting allows for the building of solidarity and mutual support against external pressures and limitations.

A range of real people to interact with

In one-to-one work the client will be bringing a range of relationships to the therapist to be examined. While a good therapist can use the client-therapist relationship to look at many of these issues and to help the client explore difficulties around blame, repression and guilt, a therapist can only ever be one person for the client to react and respond to. A group, on the other hand, provides a range of real people for the one who is working to interact with,

and there is usually sufficient variety for them to find a 'mother', a 'father', a 'partner', a 'child' or a 'teacher' among the other members of the group. With skilled facilitation and roleplay this can help the individual participant to understand their relationship dynamics, and can also help the group to recognise its own structures and dynamics.

A multifaceted mirror for reflection and feedback

An important function of the therapist in one-to-one work is sensitive resonance with, reflection and feedback to the client, but again the individual therapist — however good — is only one person, with a necessarily limited life-experience. In a therapy group there are as many 'mirrors' as there are participants, and with sensitive facilitation the working participant can gain great insight into how different people perceive his or her behaviour and strategies. The freedom to choose which of these reflections feel right, and which not, can be very empowering; it can also provide an important counterbalance to the reflection and feedback, however good and insightful, that a client may have been receiving from their one-to-one therapist. I am not suggesting that groupwork provides a better quality of reflection and feedback than one-to-one work, since the other participants are unlikely to have the experience, sensitivity and depth of understanding of a good therapist, but it does offer a variety of offerings from a range of different experiences.

The capacity to hold big feelings

For the client, one-to-one work provides an excellent arena in which to articulate feelings such as anger, fear or sorrow, and to learn to identify, be with, and stand aside from emotions such as rage, terror or shame. Sometimes a client's understanding of their feelings can be further helped by providing a safe space for emotional catharsis. Even with the most skilled therapist, however, the appropriate expression and catharsis of 'big feelings' — anger, rage, frustration, grief, passion and joy — can be hard to contain. Consulting rooms are often not big enough or soundproof enough: the therapist is concerned about physical damage (to room, client and self), and about their ability to contain the client's feelings (and their own), both emotionally and physically. Holding big feelings in a group setting requires skill and courage, especially when there is the risk of the whole group catharting at the same time (a very rare occurrence in my experience — with good and responsible modelling by the facilitator other participants are almost invariably very supportive of the person needing to cry or scream), but because of its physical and communal setting a group can be a very safe and empowering place in which to explore anger, grief or passion. It can also be an extremely important experience for a participant to express big feeling, hitherto usually done in private and usually unsatisfying, within a group of other people and not to be judged and rejected for being loud, excessive and antisocial.

A common factor in the thwarted expression of big feelings is the sense of being unmet, unseen and unheard, so one important function of the therapy group is to meet, to be seen and be heard — by a lot of people. In order to recognise this connection with others and grasp the truth of it, it is sometimes important for a working participant to be louder and more physical

than would usually be possible in one-to-one work. In my groups, for example, I have sometimes asked the working participant to stand at one end of the room and shout 'Listen!' to the rest of the group at the other end until they feel heard. I have on occasion encouraged (and demonstrated to) participants ways of meeting someone else physically, using techniques such as arm-wrestling or clapping games, in order to help understand the way in which the energy associated with big feeling can be outwardly directed in a safe way. I have even used the group to hold someone to the floor (on a mattress, at his direction, and with his right to stop the exercise at any time) in order for him to experience — for the first time in his life, and with enormous post-exercise insight — what it was like to use all his strength without being judged or told to stop. I repeat, to work in this way requires care, experience and sensitivity, but can provide safe space for big feelings which one-to-one work rarely offers.

A tighter check on the practitioner's contribution

Much has been spoken and written in recent years about therapist abuse and therapist responsibility. With the best will and the best safeguards in the world, what happens between practitioner and client behind the closed doors of the consulting room can simply not be regulated, and inevitably there will be times when a client feels judged, unseen, manipulated, coerced and misunderstood. In one-to-one work there is often little space for these perceptions to be aired and fully examined, even if the client dares (or is quick enough) to voice them. In a group, however, the other participants' antennae are often alert and well-tuned enough to catch many of the subtle instances of power-play between facilitator and working participant which might otherwise be missed, and which can usefully be included in the group analysis of the action. At the grosser end of the spectrum of abuse, while it is certainly true that group collusion and 'brainwashing' can make a group blind to a facilitator's excesses, it is nevertheless very rare for one to let a facilitator get away with blatant sexism, racism, favouritism or other form of abusive behaviour. I'm not saying it doesn't happen, but my experience is that when a group facilitator has verged on the abusive and got away with it, this is usually because the organisation or other teachers involved in the event have turned a blind eye, rather than because the group itself was unaware of what was happening and chose not to take action.

The opportunity to take bigger risks

Though less so than it was twenty years ago, psychotherapy is still an inventive, leading-edge project, and must involve itself in a certain amount of risk-taking on both sides of the therapeutic relationship if it is to be alive and effective. Much inventiveness is going on in one-to-one work, especially as both practitioners and clients become aware of the range of approaches now available with therapy, healing and personal growth, but inventiveness in this context often involves too much risk; it is simply not safe enough for practitioner or client to try experimental and slightly 'scary' procedures and techniques. In a group context, however, it is possible to try out new ideas in a clear and supportive setting, while making it plain that what is being suggested is experimental and therefore carries a greater risk than tried

and tested methods.

A group setting also provides participants with the opportunity to take greater risks, insofar as any disclosure or experimental strategy will be heard and seen by many more people than in one-to-one work. If, for example, a participant is experimenting with saying 'No!' she risks a far greater range of reaction (rejection and displeasure as well as support and approval) from the other participants than she would from a single therapist.

Creating Safety in a Therapeutic Group

It is crucial for the group facilitator or therapist — just as it is for the one-to-one practitioner — to recognise both the commitment and the risk involved for someone who elects to embark on a journey of therapeutic discovery. The provision of a holding environment is vital to the success of groupwork, and especially during the opening minutes of a new group it is important that the facilitator both provides and models safety, for it is only when participants feel safely held and respected that therapeutic change can take place. How can you as a facilitator best create safety in a group?

Explain/develop the ground rules

Withholding of information will almost inevitably inhibit safety in therapeutic work. As Abraham Maslow wrote in a 1963 essay entitled 'The Need to Know and the Fear of Knowing', 'Where we know fully and completely, suitable action follows automatically. Choices are then made without conflict, with full spontaneity.' This has many implications for the creating of safety in a group, from participants knowing where the toilets are to clear and prior agreements about confidentiality, or about what is and is not acceptable within the group. As far as is possible this must be done at the beginning, otherwise you run the risk of being accused (probably fairly) of arbitrarily changing the rules partway through the session, or of having withheld important information. It is also important that group participants know how much power they really have. Can they influence the timing of breaks, for instance, or change the confidentiality guidelines? You must be very clear about this for yourself: the group can be unsettled just as much by a facilitator's woolly thinking about 'group democracy' as by curt dogmatism.

Encourage participation and the active rejection of suggestions

For a participant to gain useful insights and strategies from a group, she or he must feel safe and protected, *and* be prepared to take risks. In a group setting, even more than in one-to-one work, there is a tendency both to trust the practitioner's exhortations to take risks (especially when the rest of the group appears to be trusting), *and* to retreat into the safety of known behaviours and strategies. The facilitator's role, taking these tendencies into account, is to question both the participant's blind acceptance of the group norm and the usefulness of seemingly safe inertia. Simply put, your function is to elicit or suggest risk-taking strategies for the participant to explore, to check carefully that they do want to explore that avenue (pointing out as appropriate both group pressure and the safety of the known), and to support them in their choice — whatever it may be. This involves clarifying what it is that you

are suggesting they might try, thus addressing their fear of the incompletely understood request. It involves offering real, clear, achievable choices. It involves making it plain that choosing not to risk is as valid and empowering as choosing to risk, even when you as the facilitator (and perhaps the rest of the group) believe that the greater gain would come from taking the risk. In some instances (as when other group members are saying things like 'Come on Jane, you can do it') it can be the facilitator's role to rescue a participant from group pressure to perform; it can also be the group's role to rescue a participant from the facilitator's pressure to perform.

Know why you're doing what you're doing

One principle I try very hard to keep to in all therapeutic work, and it is especially important in groupwork, is to know all the time why I'm doing what it is that I'm doing. I don't mean this in a general, textbook-example way; I mean in a very specific, here-and-now-in-this-exact-situation way. 'I'm introducing the idea of revenge now because it might help Tom understand his feelings towards his mother.' 'I'm not passing the tissue box to Sue because it might interrupt her catharsis.' Especially when I'm on the edge of not being quite certain, I find it useful to imagine what I might reply if a participant were to stop me and ask why I was doing what I was doing. This way of working keeps you on your toes as well as providing purpose and direction to the group process.

Know your position on self-disclosure

As in one-to-one work, it is enormously helpful for a group therapist to be clear about their position on self-disclosure and the boundary issues which this raises. In groupwork you must take into account the nature of your relationships with a number of people, not just one, and you have a number of people, not just one, constantly on the lookout for integrity and consistency in the way you conduct and expose yourself. In particular, watch out for any temptation to self-disclose more to some group members than to others, and if the temptation arises then question your motivations. Where the group task involves exercises in pairs or small groups, consider carefully whether you will choose to become involved in any of these exercises. On the plus side for involvement is being seen to be willing to take the same risks as you are asking of participants, and there is also a possible benefit when it comes to flexibility in numbers (when a group has an even number of participants, for example, I will usually sit out of pair exercises, and when it has an odd number I will offer to join in, though always being aware, especially in the early stages of a group, of what significance this might have for the person I am working with). On the minus side is the temptation to become a participant and forget that you are in charge. On balance, my experience is that group participants — like one-to-one clients once the therapeutic alliance has developed — value a degree of self-disclosure and facilitator involvement in risk-taking which is honest, cleanly motivated and appropriate.

Check carefully with participants

As in all therapeutic work, the dividing line between the suggestion that a client try something and unwanted coercion is a fine

one, and this is particularly the case in groups, where the risks are often greater and peer pressure stronger. If, as I believe, our purpose in therapy is to empower people, it is very important that, once we have explained what it is we are suggesting a participant should do (including the associated risks), we check carefully that they still want to do it. If they are unsure, it is probably best to suggest that they wait until they are clearer, even though this may run the risk of losing the particular moment in the group's process. Sometimes another participant will suggest some action that might be taken by the person who is working: this may be entirely appropriate and be met with their approval, but again it is important that you check (clearly and lightly, with no judgement of either participant) that the step being suggested is what is actively wanted.

Be fair and evenhanded

Almost nothing disrupts a group more than a sense that the facilitator (so easily seen as 'boss', 'teacher' or 'parent') is being unfair, deliberately choosing some people and ignoring others. It is impossible for a group facilitator to be too sensitive to this issue, though this does not always mean making everything comfortable or agreeing to every request for attention. Much can be done in the way group activities are structured: if you ask for a response from the whole group, for example, watch carefully that everyone has had a chance to respond, individually asking the quieter members if they would like to contribute. If a task or exercise involves 'going round the circle', always make sure that this is completed, even if something happens in the middle which involves twenty minutes dealing with one participant's issue. The hurt of uneven and arbitrary justice is an issue in everyone's lives: by modelling clear evenhandedness a group facilitator empowers both individuals and the group as a whole, demonstrating that injustice can be effectively met and challenged.

Change pace when necessary

One of the classic signs of poor groupwork is boredom, so be prepared to change pace whenever the process seems to have reached a natural pause. 'Changing pace' means moving from one way of working to another — from sitting down to standing up, from moving to resting, from silence to noise, from whole group to pairs. This is not only to encourage the movement and change which is an essential part of any therapeutic process, it also has the therapeutic purpose of challenging blocks and unnecessary defences which can easily hide within one particular way of working. A word of warning, as ever: there is always the danger of the facilitator feeling uneasy with the group's process or direction and suggesting a change in order to avoid confrontation or criticism. An intelligent group (and groups are intelligent) will almost certainly see this avoiding tactic for what it is, so if you value your integrity make sure that you do see a process through to its natural conclusion before moving on.

Be prepared to make mistakes

If a group facilitator is to be human and responsive, he or she must be able to make mistakes: mistakes of judgement, mistakes of timing, even mistakes of fact. When you work one-to-one you only risk making mistakes in front of one other person; when facilitating a group your mistakes are much more public and potentially that much more embarrass-

ing. You can make it easier for yourself by not pretending to be all-wise, all-knowing and superhuman. If you're not sure whether something will work, say 'I'm not sure that this will work, but I'd like to give it a try'. Use the favourite therapist's phrase 'I wonder if . . .', which is more empowering to a participant as well as less dangerous and dogmatic for the practitioner. When a participant says 'Are you sure that's what negative transference means?' (and you're not) be prepared to explore your unease with them (and remember not to use jargon next time).

Keep time

Time is a precious resource, and when you take charge of a group you are taking charge of a large number of person-hours which you can use either to enhance or throw away the opportunity for important change. Everyone has had painful experiences of other people's bad timekeeping, so it is part of your task to model clear and responsive timekeeping. It is a participant's right to know when the group is stopping for lunch, or that there will be a tea break, and it is the facilitator's responsibility to clarify timings and negotiate any changes to the timetable. In particular, especially if you have asked participants to be ready to start at a specific time, you need to know how long you will wait for, and how you will respond to, latecomers.

Practise handling criticism

A good therapist knows how to hear, filter and work with criticism, wherever they see it in the spectrum from negative transference to honest feedback. This capacity needs to be even further developed in groupwork, because the dynamics of a group will necessarily from time to time throw up criticism of the facilitator, compounded by the temptation for every participant to take sides. You need to be clear that, in a group, you cannot provide what everyone wants all the time, and that there will be some participants who have come to test their response to authority with you. I have experienced participants whose sole motivation in being in the group appears to have been to disrupt it by casting aspersions on me and my methods as facilitator. If such a group is not to descend into hostility and mudslinging this must be seen both as a particular need of that participant, to be addressed and worked with (though not at the expense of the rest of the group), and as an opportunity for the facilitator to test the truth of the allegations (though again not at the expense of the group). In my groups where this has happened, I have frequently been pleasantly surprised by the group's ability to take charge of and incorporate the criticiser/disrupter, and the experience has almost always moved the group to new levels of insight and tolerance.

Don't be afraid to enjoy yourself

If this has left you with the impression that the facilitation of groupwork is impossibly demanding, requiring almost superhuman levels of experience, responsibility and sensitivity, that's not a bad place to start. It is demanding, does require responsibility and sensitivity, and it helps to have a good deal of experience. But it can also be very rewarding, immensely inspiring, and a lot of fun, and there is nothing in the Great Therapy Rulebook to say that you can't enjoy yourself as you share with and inspire your group.