

Post 1989 ✓

GROUP COUNSELLING: A CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUP COUNSELLING

ACTIVITY FOR IDENTIFYING PERSONAL STRENGTHS

This chapter is designed to assist counsellors in conducting counselling groups in a constructivist mode, especially groups for youth and young adults who are in a career decision-making process.

In preparing this chapter I am especially indebted to Haldane(1988)¹ and Forster(1989)² and their discussion of the **Dependable Strengths Articulation Process**. We do not necessarily share the same theoretical framework, none-the-less there is much in their ideas which I find compatible with my own conception of group counselling.

I have had years of experience working with groups in various settings: mental health, rehabilitation, student groups, family counselling, and special topic groups such as loss and grieving, addictions, and more. Over the years my own ideas about how groups should be conducted have changes radically. For the most part, I now believe that group counselling should provide participants with two things: 1) activities which can build a stonger sense of self and affirm a constructive identity, and 2) democratic discussion which supports planning,

¹ Haldane, B.(1988) *Career satisfaction and success*. Seattle:WA: Wellness Behavior(N.W.)

² Forster, J.(1989). Rationale of the Dependable Strengths Articulation Process. Paper presented at the annual Convention of the American Association for Counselling and Development. March 15-18, Boston, Mass.

deciding and making ethical or moral decisions in regard to daily life issues. I now have a very conservative view toward groups which purport to put participants through behavior change procedures, or which encourage interactive confrontation and painful inter-group feedback, or which are organized around utopian, romantic notions of unlimited growth and personal development. Instead, I take Sartre's maxim: "By your acts, you create yourself" to heart. I believe that the greatest value of group counselling lies in its use as an opportunity for participation in meaningful activities which in one way or another add to one's sense of resiliency, strength, and ability to participate better in social life. I also believe that group discussions which are democratic and along the lines of genuine dialogue can be very valuable in clarifying, organizing and trying-out moral and value perspectives.

Assumptions underlying constructivist group work

- Contemporary society is complex and in flux. Living successfully is not simply a matter of learning "the rules" of social life. It is also necessary to recognize and respect a wide range of differences. Contemporary life is increasingly diverse and people lead many different life styles and exhibit cultural differences. A counselling group is an environment which respects difference

- Just as society is composed of multiple realities, individuals develop multiple selves. Self-identity is constructed out of relationships and personal experience. Who a person perceives him- or her self to be (qualities of self of which the individual is aware) is a direct function of the contexts the person is living in – family, friends, gang, employee group, religious group, school associates, ethnic group, etc. A self is not a thing. The word “self” refers to a subjective “sense of self” which can be recognized by the qualities which a person uses to describe him or her self.
- The constructivist counselling group provides opportunities for the individual to construct and validate his or her self-identity. Individuals with positive self-identities are more likely to find a valued and successful place in society than those whose identities are characterized by negative qualities, or by lack of personal meaning. It certainly is more desirable to build and manifest an active, self-empowering self than a negative or disempowered sense of self.
- Most of the qualities which we accumulate through living and which we use to describe our sense of self are acquired through interaction with others – in other words through our relationships with others. This is why constructivists tend to place considerable emphasis on the social aspects of personality and self and not so much emphasis on individualism. Social life,

webs of significance, community memberships, networks, relationships, patterns of influence are important concepts to constructivist counsellors and underlie group counselling activities.

- Individuals who have accumulated a large number of negative qualities (as they describe themselves) will have a sense of inadequacy, despondency, or powerlessness. Fortunately, negative qualities can be abandoned, and empowering qualities can be acquired through learning and participation in social life activities. It is to try to achieve this latter goal that constructivist groups are formed and structured.

General guidelines for conducting constructivist groups

1. Constructivist groups are organized for the purposes of providing participants a supportive and reliable environment for constructing and reconstructing their identities and increasing the ability of participants to participate constructively in social life activities such as finding and keeping a job, evaluating self, relating to others, envisioning desirable futures, etc.
2. While every group has dynamics which are unique, and the purposes of a particular counselling group may not be the same as other groups, and while no two participants are exactly alike in terms of experience, expectations and

modes of behavior, none-the-less certain “rules” can be recommended for the conduct of constructivist-oriented counselling groups. These rules apply to both counsellor and participants. However, it is the responsibility of the counsellor to articulate and re-iterate the rules as seems necessary.

Working rules:

- Protect and respect listening
- Do not interfere with a participant when he or she is speaking. Each participant will have a turn and time to speak.
- Make sure that participants and counsellor are known to each other by the name the individual wishes to be called
- Use language which is suitable to the context and which is familiar to the participants – be careful not to “professionalize” the vocabulary.
- In the case of behavior which is harmful or clearly intrusive use a three step intervention strategy:
 - Step one: remind of the need to show respect and to stop harmful behavior. If this is not effective,
 - Step two: ask the participant to take time out and collect his or her thoughts/behaviors. If this is not effective or if the participant repeatedly violates the group process or is harmful to others, and will not re-orient his or her behavior, banish the participant from the group.

3. Make sure that meeting times, place, length, and eligibility to participate are clearly announced.

As a leader, the counsellor should take a friendly, matter-of-fact stance and use humor and respect as tools for providing a successful counselling ambience in the group. The group process should be guided democratically, but the counsellor/leader has primary responsibility for protecting the emotional safety of participants, providing a working structure, and modeling good communication skills and a stance of involvement and respect.

Use a vocabulary of proficiency

Today we are besieged--in the media, in the worlds of mental health and therapy, in education and family life – with images of pathology and signs of self-deficiency. A recent article in a widely read magazine points out that the institution of psychiatry has now concocted a pathological name for every possible human behavior. In other words we live in a time where one can “go wrong” and need to be cured in every aspect of life.

From a constructivist point of view, it is much more healthy and empowering to use a vocabulary of proficiency, rather than a vocabulary of deficit and pathology when doing counselling. Since the self is “constructed”, then we can use language which is empowering in the construction process. The focus of the

group activity is on potential and learning new ways rather than on the past and on what is wrong in the individual's life. This is not to be taken as a Pollyannaish attitude or a denial of difficulty and painful experience. Constructivist thinking does not use rose-colored glasses, nor is it assumed that everything is "fine" and "positive".

From a constructivist point of view, words are tools for getting things done. If we wish to build an empowered sense of self and a self-identity capable of sustaining oneself in the face of a world which is often dis-empowering and hurtful, then we would do well to choose tools which will enable us to build a resilient and healthy identity. The tools which the constructivist uses are language tools – words, images, expressive activities (such as mapping, drawing, gesturing). The recommended vocabulary is one of potential and empowerment.

Group Activity for Identifying Meaningful Experiences & Personal Strengths

In groups which are oriented to vocational guidance, participants often talk about life and career goals, how to look for work, how they should present themselves in job interviews, and their preparation and skills (and lack of skills) needed for employment.

One constructivist group activity which helps participants to define and uncover taken-for-granted abilities and meaningful life experiences is the **Personal Strengths Activity(PSA)** which is structured and implemented as follows.

Purposes The purposes of the Personal Strength Activity(PSA) are: 1) to promote the sharing of “good experiences”, and 2) to help participants to identify personal assets. Participants are engaged in articulating the proficient aspects of their social identity through the interactions in PSA. The activity can also model the interpersonal communication skills of listening, articulation of meaningful experience, and respect for the experiences of others.

Practical learning focus Participants get practice in telling personal “stories”, listening to the stories of others, and practice in using supportive interaction to gain knowledge and to help others learn. PSA promotes reflexivity – participants are encouraged to reflect on, and consider the value of good experiences which they have had in their life.

The PSA is structured leaning and has three steps:

1. The counsellor orients participants to PSA

2. Modeling an example of PSA
3. Guiding members of the group through the PSA

Step 1: Counsellor Orients Participants to PSA

Some individuals have no difficulty at all in expressing good experiences from their lives. Others find it nearly impossible to do. It is the counsellor's responsibility to give examples, respect the readiness of individuals to share their experiences, and provide clear instructions.

Orientation statement. The wording of an orientation will depend upon the counsellor's preference and experience and on the composition of the group members. The counsellor should always speak to the participants in a level of vocabulary which seems familiar to them. The orientation statement should be something like:

I am going to introduce you to the Personal Strengths Activity. We will be spending 2-3 hours, so we do not have to rush. [The amount of time needed and available will of course vary from time to time and setting to setting]. We are doing this activity to provide each of you with an opportunity to find and clarify personal abilities which you may not have thought of before, or recently.

Most people find this activity enjoyable, beneficial and helpful in thinking about the future. I am going to define two things for our use in this activity:

- **Personal strength.** *A personal strength is a skill, talent, piece of knowledge, value, attitude or personal quality which you have developed sometime in your life – from childhood to the present – and when used consciously can help you do certain tasks well.*

- **Good experience.** *A “good experience” can be defined as a time in your life when you:*
 - *Did something well – it may have been small (helping a child across a busy street) or large (organizing a conference)*

 - *You enjoyed it*

 - *You felt proud of it*

As group leader, you can anticipate that some discussion will be needed to clarify what a personal strength and a good experience are. I often put up some examples on a flip chart and am always prepared to give personal examples. It is very important to keep the examples clear and small. Don't overwhelm participants with a major life experience. Also you need to promote respect for

individual differences. What is a good experience or personal strength or asset to one person may have no meaning to another.

Step 2: The Counsellor Models a PSA

Recruit a volunteer from the group to help you demonstrate how to conduct a Personal Strength Activity. Sometimes I ask a person ahead of time if they are willing to help me if I know that they can express themselves easily in public.

Arrange the group seating in a U shape and put two chairs at the open end of the U for you and your volunteer to sit. Place a flip chart close at hand.

Give the following instructions to the rest of the participants. *As you listen to the story which X is going to tell, make some notes in your notebook on what you hear. Especially make notes about what X must have known how to do, or what qualities X must have had in order to have the experience. Listen for the positive skills and talents which X has that enabled him/her to have that experience. You will have to listen carefully, for X will probably not mention the skills...you have to infer(guess at) them from what you hear.*

When you have given the rest of the group their instructions, and answered questions which they may have, turn your attention to your volunteer(X).

Explain to X what you want her to do, that is, recall a time in her life when she did something well and which she felt proud about. Again, stress that it need not be an earth-shaking experience. Just one where she can recall the details and remembers it as important and personally rewarding.

You can say that this will take about 10-25 minutes and it is very helpful for the recollection to be full of details. Who, where, when, what happened. Ask X to begin by saying something like: I'd like to hear you tell a story about a time in your life which you would call a "good experience". It can be anytime, from your early childhood up to the present. I will ask you some questions as we go along.

Depending upon the experience of the volunteer in telling her stories to others, and depending upon the experience she chooses to tell about, you may have to do quite a lot of prompting or may need to say very little. Some questions to have in mind are(which you may or may not need to ask):

- Can you remember how you felt at the time?
- Who else was involved besides yourself?
- What seemed important about this experience to you?
- How did you manage to.....?

- Is there anything about that experience which you think helped you later on in life?

As the conversation (quasi-interview) goes along, use good listening skills, extend a supportive, empathic stance toward X. Remember that what is a meaningful experience to one person may be strange, or without meaning to another. Your role is to show respect for X's experience no matter what you may think about it as it might apply to you. Express appreciation to X when she has finished her story. Ask her to share any feelings, reactions, thoughts she had as she told the story, if she wishes to do so.

When the story is finished, ask the other participants to look at the notes they have made, remember what they heard from X, and brainstorm the skills, values, attitudes, talents, knowledge which they think X must have had in order to have the good experience she has related. Write these briefly on the flipchart or chalkboard. If the same strength or asset is mentioned more than once, put a check mark beside it each time it is mentioned.

When the participants and you have built up a list of the story-tellers personal strengths, ask her to describe how she feels seeing and hearing these positive qualities about herself. I usually ask each participant to give the story-teller the

list of qualities which they have observed and written down on the piece of paper. This is usually a very empowering experience for the story-teller.

Step 3: Deciding Which of Two Paths to Take

At this point, you, as counsellor, will have to make a decision about which of two ways you should proceed with this group learning activity. If you think that the group of participants have a sufficient level of confidence and have the basic communication skills to operate without your face-to-face guidance, then divide the group into smaller groups of 4 persons each. I usually work with groups with at least 8 participants(ideal) but not more than 16. If the group is divided into smaller groups, then give the smaller groups the following instructions:

- In your small group, decide who will tell a story, who will facilitate the story-telling, and who will be listener-observers-recorders. You are to then go through the same activity which you have seen X and myself do. First, one of you is volunteer to tell a good experience story, another is to help the story teller, and the other two are to make notes on the qualities which you guess that X must have in order to have the experience which she relates.

- Take about 10 minutes for the story-telling, and another 10 minutes for describing the qualities of the experience which you have been told about. Be specific, clear, respectful and don't forget to listen carefully.
- After you have used about 20-25 minutes, take a brief break and then change roles and do another PSA. Keep going in this fashion until each member of your group has told a good experience story and heard what personal strengths the others heard in the story.

As counsellor you must be prepared for the fact that the groups will probably not move in the same speed. You may also have to help if a group seems to be unable to do the activity. You should trouble-shoot, but not take over unless absolutely necessary.

If you decide that the group does not have the necessary confidence and skill to proceed in smaller groups without your constant orientation, then stay in the large group and continue the process taking additional volunteers. This will take quite a lot longer. In general, I have found that the smaller grouping works out satisfactorily. I only remain in the large group format if I am feel quite certain that the communication resources of the group are indeed very limited.

Regardless of the path you choose to take, when the process is finished, bring the large group together and ask some “debriefing” questions such as:

- *What was it like, for you as story-teller, to tell your story?*
- *What was it like to hear what others had to say about your personal strengths and your story?*
- *Do you find it easier to identify your own strengths, or the strengths of others?*
- *What about this activity do you think is useful to you in your future?*
- *How did you find your role of observer-recorder? Of facilitator of the story-teller?*
- *What is the most important thing you will take with you from this activity?*

Final thoughts. I and my associates have carried out this group counselling activity with many different types of people: immigrants, at-risk youth, unemployed, single parents, typical clients, mental health patients, counsellors-in-training, First Nations groups, secondary school students in guidance classes, institutional employees engaged in a worker re-integration project, and others. It seems suitable for youth and adults, and for all educational levels.

The most critical factor in the success of this activity is the confidence and skill of the counsellor. It is very important to go through the process yourself as a participant before attempting to apply it in your own counselling practice. Key ingredients for success are:

- Familiarity with the personal strength activity
- Respect for difference
- Willingness to take the time needed to carry out the activity
- Commitment to the goal of building a sense of “proficient” self
- Adequate communication and interpersonal skills as a counsellor
- Ability to provide a safe, supportive and carefully structured group environment
- Appreciation of reflective conversations

There are many activities which can be carried out in a group counselling session. The example which I have presented in this chapter is designed to show, in general, what some of the guidelines are for conducting groups from a constructivist perspective. In preparing for a constructivist group counselling process, questions to ask oneself are:

- Am I familiar and confident about the activity which will be the focus of group participation? Have I personally experienced it?
- Is the group oriented to democratic and dialogical communication?

- As group leader, am I prepared to enhance the personal meaning of the group activity and the experience of the group participants by making sure that what is done and discussed in the group is directly related to aspects of the group participants' daily lives about which they feel concern and desire to do something about?
- Do I feel confident about protecting listening and supporting dialogue?
- Am I committed to providing (as best I can) activities and experiences which are meant to be self-strengthening and resiliency-building? Am I ready to be patient and provide clear and repeated examples and instructions on how to engage in the learning activity? Conversely, am I ready to leave learners on their own enough so that they can gain a sense of empowerment in the doing of the activity?
- Am I able and ready to contact the group participants at the point of their own readiness for participation and learning? Or do I feel compelled to charge ahead, no matter what?
- If there is a lot of information and data coming into the group, have I prepared learning activities which are meaningful and which help the participants convert information into personal knowledge and know-how? Am I willing to turn the faucet of information off as needed or do I subscribe to the inundation theory of learning?
- Am I prepared to provide the time for reflection and pondering for the slower members of the group? Or do I feel compelled to "cover the ground"?

and get every goal met, no matter what? As a group leader, do you plan to act as a "seed-planter" or a "slave-driver"?

It takes time to learn how to be a constructivist group leader. It takes time to find a balance between leading and joining, between listening and speaking. The most central ingredient in good group leading is respect: that is, demonstrating unwavering respect for others, respect for democratic process and dialogue, and respect for your own self as one who is trying to assist others to build better lives.

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