

EVOLUTIONARY GROUPS

IN SUPPORT OF INTELLECTUAL LABOUR AND BETTER PERSONAL AND SOCIAL LIFEWORLDS

For nearly two decades I have been organizing small groups of graduate students for the purpose of providing intellectual and emotional support to those students in their roles as novice researchers and professional practitioners in counselling. My decision to promote such group grew out of three observations.

First, for those students enrolled in off-campus graduate programs, it seemed to me that some form of support system was required to support their continuation in the programs of study and to increase their chances of program completion. Off-campus students often live great distances from one another, their seminars are held less frequently than on-campus, and contact with each other and with instructors is much more infrequent than for on-campus students. Sustained interest in research projects and continuous efforts to improve the quality of counselling practice are difficult to maintain without contact with peers or faculty role models.

Second, the status of support systems on campus for graduate students often leaves much to be desired. Campus-based educational programs for graduate students are not structured so as to produce a sense of community for students, and in some instances, procedures such as mentoring, role-modelling, or support systems given little more than lip service. Feelings of alienation, aloneness, and exclusion from decisions affecting their own fates are common amongst graduate students. Opportunities for graduate students to form authentic apprentice relationships with faculty members who are experienced researchers or practitioners are the exception rather than the norm.

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for graduate students who seek apprentice relationships with faculty members to find themselves being exploited (as sources of labour and good ideas) by faculty members who seem noticeably more concerned with their own career development than they are with student development.

Third, there is overwhelming research evidence in education, and social psychology and organizational studies that learning quality is increased under conditions of support--both

material and emotional¹. At all levels of learning and for the development of intelligence² and creativity, structures of encouragement and inclusion in combination with challenge³ produce more and better results than structures of isolation and exclusion.

For reasons such as those I have just enumerated, I have developed a group method to counteract anomie, discouragement, exclusion, and exploitation of graduate students by [some] faculty members. Positively, these small groups are designed to support intellectual labour-- especially research activity and conceptualization in relation to counselling psychology and counselling practice [While my research and area of specialty is counselling, I see no reason why the method I am describing does not apply as well to other disciplines in the social sciences or applied psychologies]. I have described both the research groups and the practice groups in the same terms. While there certainly are differences between counselling research and counselling practice, there are many more similarities than most recognize. In my opinion, both research and practice are grounded in common world views. Over the years, these groups have been largely successful in the sense that students found their participation to be rewarding and they functioned over periods of one to three years. Some failed.

In this short paper, I will outline some features of the groups-- what they are designed to do, what principles they are based on, and some prescriptive guidelines for making such groups function.

Basic Assumption. The most basic assumption underlying my attempts to form the research and practice support groups is that **intellectual labour**(studying, thinking, reflecting, composing, writing, researching, and engaging in intellectual argumentation and dialogue) and **practice to improve professional counselling competency** cannot, and should not, be partitioned off from the practice of everyday life.

¹deCharms, R.(1968). *Personal Causation: The Internal Affective Determinants of Behavior*. New York: Academic Press.

²Gardner, H.(1993) *Creating Minds*. New York: Basic Books

³Rathunde, K.(1989). The context of optimal experience: An exploratory model of the family. *New Ideas in Psychology*. 7:91-97.

Every person is in possession of a **worldview** which is the perspective from which that person receives and interprets all forms of data impinging upon consciousness. This worldview is the foundation of our *way of being* in the world--a way of being a researcher, or a family member, or a friend, and so on. This world view is composed of what we think is *valuable*, what we think is *ethical*, and what we think is *significant*. It is a kind of mental map of how we conduct ourselves in the world--personally, aesthetically, morally, intellectually, and professionally. Our worldview informs our practices and actions and, conversely, is informed by them.

To be concerned with our capacity as researchers is necessarily to be concerned with our quality of life. To strive to become a better researcher or practitioner is to have a vision of the future for oneself. Our ability as researcher or as practitioner and our experienced quality of life are intertwined now and in the future.

Forming evolutionary groups⁴. There is an old saying, "*Sine ecclesia, nulla religio*" meaning "there can be no religion without a church". This is not only true of religion, but also of science, the humanities, and professional associations. A community of participants can generate the support as well as the critical feedback needed to develop and confirm the worldviews of individuals, and can evaluate knowledge claims and help to refine research and analytical activities. The term "evolutionary" refers to a belief that both individuals and groups can best be construed as systems which are **complex, evolving and counteractive to entropy**. An evolutionary group is one which favours complexity, promotes the search for balance between order and disorder; and which is itself constantly being constructed and reconstructed by the actions of its members.

⁴ Originally, I referred to the groups as "research support groups" and "counselling supervision groups". However, I have more recently used the title "evolutionary groups" which I borrow from Csikszentmihalyi, M.(1993)*The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium*. New York: Harper Perennial. The word "evolutionary" fits well with my conception of the group process, the changes which participants experience in their self, and with how I conceive both the research process and the counselling practice process..

An ideal social unit⁵ for accomplishing tasks is a group 1) small enough to allow intense face-to-face interaction (in principle this is at least four members, but not more than eight, 2) in which members participate voluntarily, and 3) in which each person can contribute to a common goal by doing what he or she knows how to do. A group should be small enough to encourage spontaneity and creativity of members, and should promote what Csikszentmihalyi⁶ calls "flow" experiences in individual members. Flow experiences, are most common in such life activities as moments of intellectual insight or discovery, games of skill, artistic performances, and religious experiences.

Conditions which favour flow are:

- 1) concrete, personally meaningful goals,
- 2) contexts with manageable non-authoritarian rules,
- 3) opportunities for adjusting challenge to skill, and vice versa,
- 4) access to information on "how well I am doing",
- 5) reduction of distractions; enhancement of concentration

Tasks of the evolutionary groups. In order to continue its existence a small group must accomplish four tasks. It is probably more precise to say that these tasks must be accomplished by group members, sometimes individually but more frequently by working in concert with other members. A group must acquire resources (material or intellectual) from the environment. For a research or practice group this entails acquiring documents, articles, books, films, tapes, computer programs, and oral information. It also means space in which to meet, and access to various means for communicating such as E-mail, telephone numbers, fax capabilities, and access to computers.

Second, a group must coordinate its efforts with other groups in pursuit of common goals. This means, for example, establishing communication networks via E-mail with other research groups; or assuring consistent fax communications with similar groups. Such

⁵Parson, T.(1951).*The Social System*. Glencoe,ILL.: The Free Press.

⁶Csikszentmihalyi, M.(1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.

intergroup communication reduces the need to "re-invent the wheel", keeps groups competitive with each other, reduces unnecessary duplication or acting at cross-purposes, and facilitates sharing of environmental resources.

Third, a group must function so that resources and tasks within the group are judiciously divided and shared in ways which optimize on talents and resources yet maintain harmony and cooperation amongst group members.

Fourth, a group must develop and embody values and beliefs that give the group hope, identity and purpose.

These four functions can be performed by a single individual. However they are usually performed by different individuals according to the preference, experience and competence of the individual.

As a research(or practice) group, what do the members of an evolutionary group do? Probably the most important function is to provide members with accurate and relevant information about research(or practice)--information in reference to the unique research(or practice) activities of group members and, more generally, about various aspects of the "research (or practice) enterprise".

A second activity of the group is to analyze the information gathered and to evaluate its potential value to the research activities of the group members. This increases the capacity of individual members to make principled decisions regarding their own research activities and to improve their competency in evaluating and offering critiques of research methodology and procedures in general. Similarly with counselling practice. To share with a few like-minded individuals one's new understandings and knowledge of "how things are"(or aren't) in reference to research or practice can be an enormously gratifying experience in itself.

Basic tenets. The basic tenets upon which an evolutionary group operates are fairly simple and can be stated in a prescriptive credo. Not only are the tenets applicable to the functioning of an evolutionary group, but they also underlay a perspective about doing research and about the conduct of practice in the everyday world. The tenets are:

1. **You are part of everything around you: all living things, the material planet, the**

atmosphere, people in your group and beyond your group, the past, the present the future.

If you bring wilful disorder or neglect to any of these, you harm yourself as well.

2. Each human being is an open possibility⁷; do not deny uniqueness, either your own or that of others. You are the **only** consciousness in the centre of your time-space location. As an agent, your thoughts, feelings and actions are rooted in your personal knowledge and experience.

3. Being human is being-in-relation. Consciousness is so organized that being conscious is always being **conscious-of**. This means that your knowledge is socially constructed--meaning is built out of relation. There is no teacher without student; no judge without criminal; no parent without child; no prey without predator. While we have our autonomous aspect, we are most certainly social beings. Our (social) self, our group, our society--all are constructed through symbolic interaction with our fellow humans.

4. You are responsible for your actions. As you extend your understanding and awareness over your mind, your desires, and your actions, you are almost certain to increase balance and order in your life. The more you let yourself be controlled by genes and habits, the more you are denying yourself the goal of self-fulfilment and the opportunity to move toward authenticity of self⁸ Through your actions you create the self you are and contribute to the relationships in which you participate with others and with the world around you.

5. We live in a world which is uncertain, unpredictable and contradictory⁹. On the one

⁷"[Each]...human being is an open possibility". This is a quote from Jaspers, K.(1923/65). *General Psychopathology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁸A very interesting discussion of authenticity in the modern context and the place of self-fulfilment in reference to authenticity can be found in Taylor, C.(1992). *The Malaise of Modernity*. CBC: 1992 Massey Lectures.

⁹For a thoughtful discussion of how uncertainty, unpredictability and contradiction have greatly increased under the onset of postmodern conditions, and how these changes have severe

hand you are no more and no less, than the self you create. On the other hand you are always evolving in relation to--others, objects, events. How can we be simultaneously indeterminate and determined? This is an ageless dilemma. A great author was once challenged by an aggressive audience member: "How can you say X and then say Y which clearly contradicts X and claim that both are true?" To which the author replied, "My dear sir, I have no doubt that there are countless contradictions in the world and in myself as well. My aim is to develop a personality wise enough and large enough to incorporate contradiction."

6. Life becomes significant and more enjoyable precisely at those moments and points where self-centredness and desire to control no longer are the guiding goals. When the self becomes invested in a **transcendent purpose** --be it to carry out a research project, make a break-through in one's practice of counselling, write great poetry, craft a beautiful piece of furniture, nurture an abundant garden, reduce homelessness, make children happier, or compose a symphony, it becomes much less vulnerable to the ups and downs of daily existence. In such moments, our psychic energy becomes focused on goals that are **personally meaningful**, that advance **order and complexity**, and that have the potential of influencing the consciousness of future generations of researchers and everyday folk. This is true with reference to both research and practice.

If we could constantly keep our mind fresh to the idea that each of our actions, whether as researcher or as practitioner, when carried out with full consciousness and without harm to others, has the potential of helping create a better future, we could stop right there. But it is very difficult for individuals acting alone to keep up such a vision. That is one reason why being a member of an evolutionary group has considerable value. In this way the efforts of one can be joined to the efforts of others who share common goals such as carrying out valuable research or improving practice. In this way movement toward concrete goals through both unique and joint efforts is brought about.

practical implications for how individuals are living their lives, see: Giddens, A.(1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Essential group member functions. As a group is established, certain tasks need to be carried out in order to maintain the life and direction of the group. Members should reflect on these and try to ascertain where their specific competencies and confidence seem to fit best.

Accessing resources. Some individuals are quite interested in getting access to intellectual resources and making them available to other members of the group.

Analyzing information. Some individuals are especially invested in the analysis of data, knowledge and information which has been made available. This may take the form of dialogue, writing, creating conceptual maps, and analyzing documents, tapes and accounts.

Creating communication networks. Some individuals are intrigued by communication and enjoy establishing fax, e-mail, personal or other kinds of networks. These networks can be intra-group, between groups, or between group members and supervisor, etc.

Sensitivity to group dynamics. Some individuals have an ability to remain alert to intra group dynamics and are able to help keep a balance power and harmoniousness of relations in view. Such individuals usually are especially good listeners, fair-minded, have an ability to resist being entrapped by pettiness or manipulateness on the part of group members. These persons are interested in the process by which groups evolve.

World-view building. Some individuals are especially interested in articulating belief-systems, values, assumptions and in witnessing the ways in which individual members develop their own perspectives in relation to self, others, the group, and goals. These individuals are often reflective, like to write and develop descriptions of how world-views are organized.

Searching for "how-to". In research groups these are the individuals who are primarily concerned with "how-to" conduct research. They want to incorporate various research procedures into their own performance repertory. In practice-oriented groups these individuals are intensely interested in various counselling "procedures" and wish to enlarge their counselling method repertory. They want to learn how to "do things that count" with clients.

In an ideal group all of these functions would be found in each individual. However, in actual practice, most individuals are only interested in, and have skill for two or three of the functions. While no function should be completely neglected, some functions are much more important at times in different groups. Of course, each group member is responsible for the

organization and conduct of his or her own research project or program of improving counselling practice.

Group leadership. It is extremely important to resist any form of authoritarian leadership or coercive direction either by the supervisor or by a dominating group member.. The leadership function should be either **distributed** within the group, or **shared**(with members taking turns at facilitating the meetings). It is helpful to have meetings at different members' homes or at some place arranged by members in sequence. Also it is important symbolically to share food. However this should not be the duty of any one person, at least on a regular basis. Force of habit should not be allowed to replace the practice of mindfulness in either research or counselling practice.

Role of supervisor. The supervisor is a kind of "ex-officio" member of each group, although the group should function without the presence of the supervisor as well as with the supervisor present and participating in the group discussion. The supervisor should actively contribute to providing intellectual resources to the group, both in the form of documentation and other material resources, and in the form of his or her own expertise and experience. However, the supervisor should keep in mind that the quality of the group discussions and learning on the part of group members depends not only on the supervisor's brilliance but also on the opportunity for all members of the group to contribute and help create better quality research and more intelligent practice. What the groups are designed to do is to assist members apprehend, evermore precisely, more differentiatedly, and more deeply, the **reality of doing research and doing practice**. In the words of Ilya Prigogine¹⁰, a Nobel laureate in chemistry, "Whatever we call reality, it is revealed to us only through an active construction in which we participate".

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¹⁰Prigogine, I., & I. Stengers(1984). *Order out of Chaos*. New York: Bantam.