A Group Training Programme Dealing with the Problems of Senior Staff in Custodial Institutions

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SUMMARY:

Penal Institutions have dual aims of custody and therapy, Prison structure copes with anxieties generated by holding in custody those who, for whatever personal reasons, are suffering the consequences of hurting society. Accordingly staff experience special stresses. Social systems are stabilised by pivotal people who tolerate situational tensions of ambiguity and conflict. Within this context the aim, structure and functioning of an on-going weekly group training programme for therapeutically-orientated senior prison staff and psychiatrists are described and consultative techniques outlined.

It may be argued that the groups function only to conserve the existing penal service by helping these senior personnel to tolerate their role ambiguity and strain. But it may also enable them to master their consequent feelings, free them to assimilate new ideas and increase their capacity to discover and exploit flexibilities in their role systems and in their personalities.

In dealing with such professionals the importance is stressed of having an institutional frame of reference whilst providing a setting wherein these responsible people may safely explore their roles and their feelings. Thereby both personal growth and a deeper appreciation of the inter-relationship between socially generated and personal problems and their impact on prison institutions are facilitated

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Penal Institutions serve various purposes. Goffman called them 'social graveyards'.[1] Mathieson emphasises that they are built on the main premise of retributive justice, and are primarily custodial in purpose, therefore predominantly commonweal rather than service organisations[3]. However, from the point of view of the personnel who attend these training sessions, these total institutions* have the dual aims of custody and therapy. The Staff problem is how to reconcile themselves to working towards aims that are not necessarily always compatible.

Antisocial behaviour results from the interplay between a distressed personality and psychosocial stress[4]. Prison staff suffer the emotional strain of holding in security on behalf of society "those to whom a neutral stance is impossible"[5], those who behave hurtfully, intolerably and dangerously, who have weak egos and poor impulse control, who are inadequate, deprived, and increasingly, psychiatrically ill people who seek asylum and total care[6, 7, 40, 45, 46]. Society tacitly acknowledges these stresses in paying staff well: nonetheless there is a chronic problem of staff shortage.

Like the social system described by Menzies in her study of Nurses in a teaching hospital[8], staff operate within an authoritarian rule-ridden, change-resistant routine: a social system which serves to defend them against anxieties inherent in penal work but limits their measure of autonomy and the degree to which they may exercise their personal resources. It has been pointed out that the traditional penal service routines represent 'institutionalised lack of confidence'[9]. Staff in effect may serve even longer sentences than their charges[10], equally succumb to 'prisonization'[11]. If their orientation is also therapeutic their role strain[12] is considerable.

Complex social systems are stabilized by those pivotal people who can

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*Erving Goffman[2] defines a total institution as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.

tolerate situational tensions of ambiguity and conflict. For people to change within the system whether that change be called training, rehabilitation, therapy or education[13, 14], these leadership people must be capable of personal growth, receptive to new ideas, and able to sustain the further stresses (such as e.g. frustration[42]) inevitably concomitant with the overcoming of institutional resistance to change[3].

At times of change role expectations are more ambiguous or contradictory and the influence of the personality of the role-player on social relations increases[15, 24, 17, 45]. Much work in executive and professional technical roles is extremely diffuse, difficult to specify and changeable over time. Effective performance depends only partly on personal attributes but also largely on the attributes of colleagues and the network of relations with them which constitute the very core of organisations[16]. 'Improving' the behaviour of another requires skill in assessing possibilities of personality change and in helping the person to change. This requires the ability to bear ambivalence, hostility and a variety of projections as well as unavoidably disappointing the expectations of some people in carrying a total role complement which is more than can be met [12, 17]. Factors in the penal system which deter change away from custody towards treatment have been analysed by Mathieson[3]. (See also Thomas and Znaniecki[9] and Cartwright[13]).

Every social system is stratified in terms of power and prestige amongst its members. Any action of a senior prison staff member will be evaluated differently hierarchically[17]. From above "productivity" is required ('run a quiet nick; protect the Home Secretary's reputation'; 'turn in good paperwork'): from peers and below consideration is demanded; from prisoners and patients care. These staff additionally play 'boundary' roles[39, 18] vis-a-vis the particular prison institution and related organisational networks, viz. the courts, parole boards, remand centres, visitors, prisoners' families, probation and aftercare service, employers, tradesmen, voluntary and religious service organisations, and not least the Home Secretary and the Civil Service. Their families may serve as a

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retreat from work stresses, but role overload, that is conflict among tasks and problems in setting priorities, may be such that family relationships become strained or illness intervenes or staff may seek outside commitments or training.

With this background it is understandable that initially a group of psychiatrically trained prison medical officers and later mixed senior staff from therapeutically-orientated institutions approached the Tavistock Clinic for help.

This supportive-training programme started in National Health Service time on an experimental basis and is now funded by and officially contracted between the Home Office Prison Training Department and the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations School of Family Psychiatry and Community Mental Health and myself. Two groups meet weekly in a relatively low stress neutral setting outside the penal establishment. Some members are self-selected, some instructed to attend[18]. Aside from their probable need physically to get away from prison buildings, the distance they travel to attend may be an index of their positive motivation and of the support the group gives them.

The groups have spent time in teaching me something of the special objective intricacies of the penal system, the formal and informal organisational networks which constitute their objective work situation. They and the Head of Training in the Prison Service considered it important for me to experience contact with the institutions. This is in contrast to most psychiatric group consulting work done on Tavistock lines where the people concerned are isolated and protected in island groups from the objective realities of the work situation[19]. The functions of assistance are such that to be well filled they demand feelings of solidarity between assistants and assisted, a certain intellectual and moral homogeneity such as the occupation produces[20]. Because they experience core problems rooted in their actual objective working situations, in one sense are themselves prisoners in a total institution, it is essential that we arrive at shared definitions, which are real and not defensive of the ideologies, constraints, conflicts and tensions which

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they have to tolerate[21]. So in order to get a purchase on their actual working situations I have had some contact with penal institutions and at their request I have attended some of their working conferences. This has enabled me to operate more effectively in assessing their actual institutional and interpersonal frames of reference (See McConville[22]). Like them, I too am bound by the Official Secrets Act.

Here follows a description of the training groups.

Group discussion is unstructured and open-ended. The range of topics covered is very wide. The aim of the groups is not primarily therapeutic, but it is recognised that this is what some seek and that education and therapy are kindred processes (akin to Piaget's concepts of assimilation-accommodation[23]) in that both are growth-promoting (c.f. Bacal[14]). The groups aim at increasing personal insight and dynamic understanding by examining the relationship between the limitations of their social roles and the possibilities inherent in their individual selves.

Personality dimensions mediate significantly the degree to which a given intensity of objective (situational) conflict is experienced as strain[45, 17]. By gaining better dynamic understanding of themselves in relation to themselves, each other, their colleagues and prisoners and the institutions within which they work and with which they inter-relate as well as to the Prison Service and society as a whole, the group enables them to function more effectively.

The groups provide a relatively low stress setting for discharge of tensions, examination of feelings, information exchange, mutual support and solidarity, internalization of the consultant as a model, reconciliation to failure by realization that others face similar problems, enhancement of social and psychodynamic understanding and facilitation of personal growth. Members learn to identify situations where the "core" problem is located principally in the objective environment; where there may be mismatching between role requirements and personal capacities and where there are difficulties that are of extra-occupational origin or

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primarily intrapsychic but which are acted out in the work situation.
In problem situations coping depends on personality and in coping
secondary 'derivative' problems are created. Thus stress may appear in
situations other than where it originates. By establishing common
tensions and referring back to common work situations, they examine
what constitute the primary core problems of their work situation and
what constitute the secondary problems which may be generated by their
solution and appear elsewhere in the system[45, 17] or outside of their
occupational situations such as family life.

The greatest strain is in middle management. The particular strain
to which Kahn et al[24] call attention arises from failure of such people
to acknowledge that pressure from their role senders are largely directed
towards their personal style of handling problems. A man may perceive that
he faces difficulties, but externalise the source of difficulties. A
man's first loyalty is reserved for himself[43]. Self-esteem must be
preserved[44, 45]. His work task may be central to his personal identity,
so that expectation from the work situation is high and dissatisfaction
or frustration especially painful[17]. Therefore all areas of the job are
fraught with potential or actual danger in the interplay between ob-
jective reality and personal style.

By alternating discussion of their objective situation with what
they are making of it, they are freed to work differently. The effects
of the group are clearly not only conservative because innovative behaviour
has occurred as a result of group discussion.

My consultative technique is an amalgam of many influences.[*]
Under the educative influence of the Group the consultant's role has

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adaptively changed. As Zulliger[38] put it: "An educator who has stopped inner development has ceased to live".

As an outsider the consultant provides a measure of objectivity impossible for personnel immersed in the system, provides a stimulus for redefining the situation uses professional knowledge of interpersonal dynamics both to educate and to effect changes in the worker's perception of his clients. Like the therapist in re-educative psychotherapy the approach used aims at equipping group members with the necessary skills to solve their own problems. A social organisational reference is maintained for the disadvantage of interpreting only in "here and now" intrapsychic terms is that it may promote regression behaviour in members who consciously or unconsciously want to turn the situation into a therapy group. Sensitizing interpretations of behaviour in the group are sometimes stragetically related to situations in their "back home" institutional settings [34, 35].

When it has seemed appropriate the consultant has been didactic especially with the psychiatric group.

As in all such training groups it is recognised that content of discussion is both overt and covert, that there is a "here and now" content or attitudinal focus to group dynamics which has to be handled interpretatively either when intra- or inter-personal tensions between group members vis-a-vis each other or the consultant interfere with group work or in order to increase the sensitivity of group members to the inter-personal dimensions of their relationships by providing a model for such work[36, 1, 28], and also to increase awareness of group dynamic factors which may be largely ignored or denied in the typically authority-orientated custodial setting of penal institutions. Thus the consultant also aims at enabling group members to become aware of the nature of group behaviour and the unconscious collusions which maintain the "built-in" social defence system which resists change[37], thus providing a caution to more "rational" theories that try to account for such resistances in the basis of the "contemporaneous field of forces" (Lewin[38]) or role theory alone.

/Conclusions

Conclusions

1. It is suggested that the dynamically-trained psychiatrist can make a social contribution towards the In-Service Training of people who work in custodial Institutions.

2. This kind of group provides a setting where those who occupy positions of responsibility and authority may safely explore their feelings and their roles. By so doing, personal growth and a deeper appreciation of the inter-relationship between socially-generated and personal problems and their impact on prison institutions are facilitated.

3. This paper has focussed on the importance for the dynamically-trained social psychiatrist of having an institutional frame of reference in dealing with people working in these very special institutions. This raises the issue as to whether we are in general taking institutions sufficiently into account when working individually with people.

4. Such training groups function not only to conserve the existing penal service by stabilizing and supporting such workers, but by enabling them to enhance their appreciation of the inter-relationship between their socially-generated and personal problems they increase their capacity to discover and exploit flexibilities in their role systems and in their personalities. It can also free them to assimilate new ideas and to bear the inevitable anxieties which occur with the increased role ambiguity and strain of a more therapeutic model of behaviour within the penal system.

/Acknowledgments

Acknowledgements

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