

DO YOU THINK WE'RE MENTAL?

A THERAPEUTIC APPROACH TO
GROUPWORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE



Contact Youth
Counselling for young people



A group work approach to working with young people

“When we look back over our own developmental journeys through adolescence and identify what we received from the adult world that helped us to get through (or what was missing that would have made a difference), we nearly always discover something simple and largely unintentional, but, by the same token, something profoundly human and reassuring. Some senior member of the tribe stopped and took us in, got interested in us, and thereby got us interested in ourselves, in ways we had not quite expected.”

(Mark Mc Conville, 1995)

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Section 1 Introducing the Resource	4
• Using the resource	6
• Origins and Context of the Work	8
 Section 2 Theoretical Frameworks for working with young people	 14
• Gestalt Therapy Theory	15
• Adolescent development	17
• Working with a group	22
• Groups and Trauma Recovery	28
• Supporting workers	31
 Section 3 What happened in the group	 34
• Organising the information	34
• Content, themes and figures	39
 Section 5 Key learning	 52
• For organisations	54
• For group leaders	55
• For carers and parents	56
 Appendix 1	 58
• Interventions – examples	58
• References and further reading	58
• Resources for working with young people	60
• Websites	60

1

SECTION

INTRODUCING THE RESOURCE

Supporting adolescent development is to work with the human process of becoming an adult. Some young people will get support from a variety of sources and will manage this process well. For others, extra help and sometimes therapeutic support is needed.

In this resource we address the adult community, in particular those directly concerned with supporting young people through the process of adolescent development - parents and teachers, youth and religious organisations, the health service, etc¹ (James, 1989 Pg 39).

Four major questions were at the heart of the work:

1. What do adults need to know in order to provide relevant and effective support for young people in the North of Ireland / Northern Ireland, and in doing so provide support for our co-created future?
2. What and **how** do young people tell us about their specific needs?
3. How can adult experience support young people's greater awareness of themselves and their environment?²
4. In the specific relationship of the group, what would we co-create that would be of benefit to the young people as members of the community?

Adolescent Development

Early years' development (0-7 years) is increasingly part of an everyday understanding of childhood and so offers parents and those involved with children's lives a greater sense of being able to support the development of children. Adolescent development however, is less commonly understood.

Young people are generally seen by adults as a homogeneous group and often bewildering. They are frequently referred to as teenagers or youth - words carrying multiple layers of meaning - and when used can leave young people feeling powerless, provoked or excluded ie 'something apart.'

Adolescent development as outlined in this work, is understood as the process of discovering and experimenting with the environment to achieve a sense of self as young people engage with becoming an adult.

Rather than respond **as if**, young people were all the same, or **as if** they were a loose collection of individuals connected only through age, this resource is aimed at exploring, encouraging and supporting the view that young people develop **in relationship to their environment** i.e. the influences and relationships that come together to create the unique life space of each young person.

Trauma

In the process of adolescent development, in Northern Ireland, trauma takes place within a context of the experience of direct and intergenerational trauma. It is in the ground of young peoples'

¹ Beverly James (1989) Treating Traumatized Children: new insights and creative interventions. New York: the free press.

² 'Most adolescents are hungry for adult contact; they just don't want it at the expense of being judged and unvalidated.' Mark Mc Conville in discussion with Sarah M Toman and Ann Baue in Adolescents: Development and Practice from a Gestalt orientation. Chp 10 pg 186 Gestalt Therapy History Theory and Practice Eds. Ansel L. Woldt and Sarah Toman (2005) Sage Publications

experiences of growing up and understanding its nature and effects is a significant part of the work of supporting adolescent development.

The young people who helped us put this resource together share the experience of adolescence in the aftermath of armed conflict. The eldest group member was eight years old in 1994 at the time of the first ceasefires, and the youngest 4 years old. They did not all have the same experience of trauma and members of this group were not similarly impacted by it. However, trauma was and is a strong feature of community life in inner city Belfast and therefore informs and influences young peoples' journey to adulthood.

Trauma can occur as a result of a single incident such as a car accident. It is also experienced as part of the developmental process when trauma is within the environment of the child. In addition trauma can result from a continuous experience such as poverty, deprivation, and structural discrimination. Inevitably, many people experience trauma as a result of war.

Not so well-known or understood, however, is trans generational trauma. This is the process whereby the traumatic responses of a previous generation are experienced in the current generation.

In this resource, we recognise that direct and/or transgenerational experiences of armed conflict, form part of the field of experience of the young people we worked with in this group.

When referring to trauma there is a danger of swinging too far in the direction of pathology, medication and mental illness thus holding the experience of trauma as individualised and abnormal, separate from 'normal' experience. This increases the felt sense of isolation which is at the heart of trauma itself.

*'There is a danger that both the difficulties faced in growing up - and likewise the features of intergenerational trauma - can be misunderstood and at best treated as a problem, at worst as illness'*³ (Danielli, 1998).

On the other hand, helplessness in the face of the complex and daunting, wide ranging consequences of armed conflict, may result in an impatient desire to

be 'over it', 'to move on' and an irritation with those who cannot or who seem to be stuck in the past. There may also be exasperation with what is seen as a catch all, theory-of-everything, which does not help to explain specifically (and often seen to excuse) various personal and social experiences.

Added to that is the hierarchy of experience, that is the grading of experience - the most direct being at the top and therefore perceived as needing the most resources and most immediate support. This has an impact on the competition for and allocation of scarce resources leaving people feeling resigned to 'nothing really being done'. The allocation and distribution of resources needs to recognise that traumatic responses emerge from many sources and in many ways over time and will need a timely and effective and relevant response.

It is essential that those working or caring for young people in Northern Ireland, develop an awareness of how they view both adolescent development and trauma as their perspective will configure how they respond to young peoples' needs. It is also crucial to our understanding of how the adult community can work together to support young people in their process towards adulthood. This resource is designed to support awareness of adolescent development in the context of trauma.

To summarise the four central statements of the resource:

1. Young people are in **a process** of development between the end of childhood and entry to adulthood.
2. In order to support and guide the work with young people, **the tasks of development need to be as clearly understood, defined and valued** as those of the Early Years.
3. Young people's actions are **efforts to engage in the development process** and need to be considered in the context of development in the first instance.
4. The **experience of every young person is unique and at the same time inextricably connected to their environment, each influencing the other.**

³ 'Intergenerational trauma is not yet officially recognized as victim related pathology... Until it is... the behaviour of some children of survivors may be misdiagnosed, its etiology misunderstood, and its treatment, at best, incomplete.' Yael Danielli, (1998) International Handbook of multi-generational legacies of trauma. New York: Plenum Press.

Using the Resource

This resource is organised in six sections:

1. **Introduction – history, purpose and context of the work**
2. **Theoretical framework**
3. **Working with the group**
4. **The role of adults**
5. **Key learning**
6. **References and bibliography**

Section 1 - Introduction - history , purpose and context of the work

This section offers an overview of how our work with the group and writing the resource was planned, organised and facilitated. It also outlines both the context of the work in terms of the expectations of those involved and the policy context as it relates to support and services for young people.

Section 2 - Theoretical framework for working with young people

This section provides a brief overview of the interconnecting theoretical frameworks informing our work with this group of young people. We have included this theory section because we believe that it is essential to be familiar with these theories when carrying out therapeutically informed work with groups of young people, and specifically, in this context - in a society in transition from armed conflict.

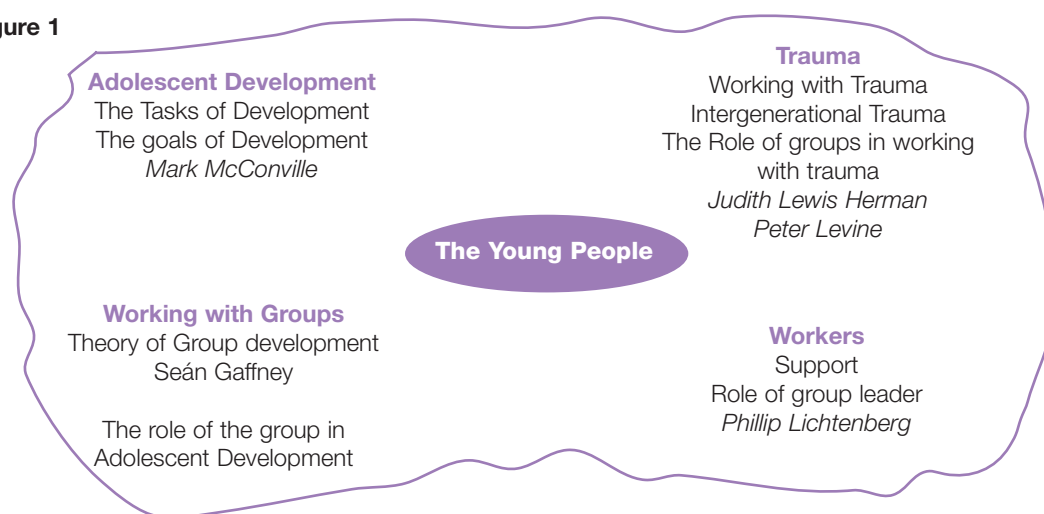
Although underpinned by the work of many researchers, practitioners and theoreticians, we rely in particular on the work of:

- **Mark Mc Conville⁴** for the theory of Adolescent Development
- **Seán Gaffney** for working with groups
- **Judith Lewis Herman and Peter Levine** for understanding trauma and its effects transgenerationally
- **Phillip Lichtenberg** for the support needed by workers

We have included some basic concepts from Gestalt Therapy Theory as these form the basis for many of the ideas contained in our work and as gestalt practitioners represent the foundation of our approach.

The aim is to provide a theoretical 'lens' for reading the group experiences in section 3. This section can be read on its own, but ideally each section read in sequence informs and deepens the understanding of the other.

Figure 1



⁴ Where Mark Mc Conville is quoted in this text - unless otherwise stated - we are referring to *Adolescence - psychotherapy and the emergent self*. A Gestalt Institute of Cleveland publication Jossey-Bass Publishers San Francisco, 1995

In applying these theories we are looking at:

- 1 how they overlap with and support understanding of working with young people
- 2 how this affects our understanding of groupwork as a support to adolescent development.

Our references are introductions only and reflect in a limited way the extensive theories and practice of the authors we cite. We hope that readers and users of this resource will follow their own interests through the bibliography.

Section 3 - What happened in the group

Section three is an account of what happened in the group. The central role played by this group of young people, their issues, concerns and discussions, inform and extend our understanding of adolescent development.

When we talk here about group process we mean not only **what** was discussed but **how** - who spoke and who did not, how the group interacted together and with us - the dynamics of the group. The data is organised in relation to the young people's main themes or areas of interest. We have organised this section under the following headings:

- The **group organisation and development** (including process and dynamics)
- The **content (themes and figures)** - provided by group discussions
- The **role of the adults**

Ethical Issues

The young people readily agreed to allow us to use the experience of the group in order to help to develop this resource for use by others working with young people. It is our concern to honour our commitment to anonymity as part of this agreement. (This sometimes leads to awkward and repetitive phrases and ways of describing phenomena, a tendency we attempt to minimise).

Section 4 - The role of adults

In this section we take into consideration the impact of the facilitators on the group. We look at our own life experiences in relation to how they reflect and influence the life of the group. This is included to support facilitators to become more self aware and focussed on the central role of relationships and connection in the group. We attended clinical supervision prior to and during the life of the group and throughout our writing of the resource. Our supervision group coined the term '**Chaos and Containment**' as the title for this section reflecting strong polarities within the work.

Section 5 - Key learning

This section summarises key learning for organisations, group leaders, parents and carers emerging from the group and our reflection and writing of this resource.

This is not an exhaustive list of key learning and we hope that as people read the resource they will build upon our learning with the young people.

Section 6 - bibliography and references

Section six includes a bibliography and references selected to support the theoretical framework offered in this resource.

The origins and context of the work

Origins of the work

This resource was written following group work facilitated by two psychotherapists with young people from two interface areas in Belfast between December 2004 - April 2005.

The work was commissioned by Contact Youth Counselling Services and Groundwork N.I. in partnership with community leaders.

Purpose of the resource:

This resource is intended to influence how we as a community of adults think about and respond to young people and their needs.

In particular, to:

- I. Think about what is needed to support therapeutic work with young people
- II. Challenge organisations to consider the ways in which they support both those who work with young people, and young people themselves
- III. Consider how to target therapeutic work with young people who might need and benefit from it
- IV. Offer a theoretical framework to support adult understanding of adolescence specifically in our context.

The resource is for:

- I. Organisations with an interest in the mental health and emotional well being of young people in N. Ireland
- II. Counsellors and psychotherapists

- III. Youth and community development workers, educators, social workers, and others engaged in providing and developing services for and with young people and interested in reflecting on their practice.

Who was involved:

Contact Youth was established in 1977, and is the leading voluntary Youth Counselling Organisation in N. Ireland working with young people aged 11-25. The mission of the organisation is 'to help young people to help themselves through counselling towards a better understanding of themselves, their relationships and their environment'.

Groundwork is a 'not-for-profit' organisation working in partnership to effect neighbourhood renewal in the most marginalized communities through a process of environmental regeneration. The organisation links environmental regeneration with key issues such as community safety, community cohesion, and developing community capacity and participation. The vision is 'a peaceful and inclusive society made up of vibrant, healthy and safe communities where people prosper.'

The young people

Contact Youth and Groundwork were responsible for finding a potential group of young people, and setting up support structures for the work. Following initial discussions the organisations arranged a meeting with a potential group of young people and two group therapists in December 2004.

The young people, aged between 15-18 years, came from an interface area of Belfast. This group had been meeting since 2002, following serious violence between two inner city interface areas. While some members had come and gone, a small core group remained with others joining. This core group had been involved previously in action research and had produced a document on young people and interface issues.

The group therapists

Contact Youth selected two facilitators who both had experience of group work, community education and development, therapeutic work with children and young people, action research and writing. They also have a particular interest and experience in researching and working therapeutically and educationally with the effects of political conflict, and the transgenerational effects of conflict-related trauma on children and young people.

Need

As part of a consultation exercise carried out with a Belfast Youth Strategy group, it was agreed that mental health issues were a priority which required focussed work and support. The need for a therapeutic group work intervention was identified by organisations working closely with young people and emerged from urgent concerns to find ways to support young people's well being and resilience in a context of ongoing political conflict, trauma, stress, rising levels of drug/alcohol misuse, risk-taking, self-harm, and suicide/attempted suicide. In response to the latter, an interagency suicide task group was set up.

Following discussions between Contact Youth, Groundwork, and community based youth leaders, it was agreed to pilot work with at least one group from an 'interface area' on the general theme of mental and emotional health and wellbeing which would be written up as a resource for interested organisations and individuals.

Planning and organising the work

There were several distinct phases to the work:

Phase one - preparation

This phase included meeting with the organisations concerned, drafting initial aims, objectives and intended outcomes, developing a contract, a first meeting with the potential group, and research on other relevant work with young people.

Phase two - working with the young people

This phase included preparation each week and review after every session, direct work with young people, facilitator reflection, clinical supervision, and reading.

Phase three - review and write up

Meetings to review the work and write up draft resource, clinical supervision, meetings with agencies as well as young people, reading and research, meetings with the external evaluators, receiving feedback on the draft and rewriting.

Approach to the work

Our approach was to seek to clarify the various expectations of the work, and to work with the expertise and interest of the participants - including our own - as they emerged.

The young people's expectations can be summarised as follows:

- Opportunities to bond more
- Trips – *'getting away from Belfast'*
- Talking about what they want to talk about without the adults coming in with a set theme or structure
- Being able to cut across others and change the subject at anytime if they felt *'bored'*
- Wanting to ask questions and hear about things they had no experience of but were interested in
- A residential but not sure if they could find a time that suited most of the group because of work, family holidays and exams

The joint agency expectations of the work can be summarised as follows:

- A therapy group
- A structured group/training programme on mental and emotional health
- A group that might support the development of peer educators
- Action research on young people's mental and emotional health needs in Belfast
- A learning process which would be written up as a product/resource to be shared with other organisations
- A creative group process that would involve young people trying out new ways of working that would support their well being

Our expectations can be summarised as follows:

- To be available and ready to work with whatever emerged in the group
- To bring in the theme of mental health and emotional well being and ask the group to respond to it in their own way
- To support the young people to set the agenda for each meeting and not to make assumptions about their needs
- To seek clinical supervision to address our own process in order to support the group
- To learn from and with the group about what it means to be an adolescent in the context of transition from conflict
- To research what has been written for group therapists working with adolescents
- To read any relevant books, websites, articles
- To liaise with the organisations concerned
- To write a resource based on our experience for organisations working with young people

Initial aims, objectives and intended outcomes were as follows:

Overall aim of the work:

To support the mental health and well being of young people.

Objectives:

1. To co-create a safe space with young people to identify and explore important issues in their lives
2. To identify key issues affecting the mental health and well being of young people
3. To write a resource for organisations working with young people in order to:
 - identify key learning and issues arising from the work of the group
 - identify their concerns in relation to what supports they need and what is missing
 - identify themes in this environment including those which reflect the wider international context
 - provide guidance for facilitators in relation to theory and practice including international thinking on adolescent development.

Intended outcomes:

1. That young people have an experience of working in a therapeutically informed group and have identified resources and issues affecting their mental health and well being
2. That a transferable resource for organisations working with young people would be produced including review and evaluation that can be used to guide future developments
3. That the resource would provide support for workers experienced with young people of mental health and well being issues, thereby increasing the quality of support available for young people.

Group Selection Criteria

An initial willingness to commit to an approximately 30hr programme and to try out new ways of expressing themselves, to be willing to allow the themes and issues of the work to be written up in a way that protects privacy and anonymity of each person, and to review the work and offer feedback on written materials.

Criteria were also developed for organisations which included:

The need for a key person in each area willing to support the ongoing work in a variety of ways, to support the young people involved and inform Contact Youth of any relevant issues in relation to participation. To attend meetings as necessary, to provide or identify a suitable venue for the work, and to give feedback on the work.

The broader context of young people's lives

The current total number of children and young people in N.Ireland under 18 is 447,564, approximately 27% of the population (2002 Mid-Year estimates). Patterns of social exclusion affect many children and young people, including:

- Poverty - 38% live in households that are 30% below the average household income.
- Disability - 14,600 children and young people aged under 16 were recorded as disabled in 1990. (There are no up to date statistics). 1 in 10 young people leaving care were disabled (DHSSPS, OC1 Collection).
- Ill health - 5.5% of under 18s are reported as having a limiting long term illness.
- Racism and homophobia - are prevalent and reported incidents increasing in Northern Ireland.
- Educational disadvantage - 41.3% of young people leave school without achieving 5 GCSEs (grade A-C).
- Domestic violence affects the lives of at least 11,000 children and young people.
- Mental health issues - 1 in 5 children and young people here are said by General Practitioners to be suffering from problems related to mental health (Investing for Health, 2002).
- Drug and alcohol use - has increased, with many young people smoking and drinking for the first time at 12 years of age.
- Political conflict and trauma - there are no accurate figures on the number of children and young people affected by cumulative/chronic trauma. However, research consistently shows greater levels of family and political cohesion during war, and increased problems and oppression in personal and family relations beyond war. Ongoing political conflict and violence has been a feature of many young people's lives. The complexity of our context in transition from violent political conflict, where we experience trauma carried between generations of parents and children (transgenerational trauma) and across communities has not been sufficiently recognised.

Brief policy context

The N. Ireland Executive (2001) stated that young people's future must be central to our vision, while the absence of an Executive means the implementation of this vision is faltering.

The policies and strategies that shape the context for young people's lives in N. Ireland include the appointment of a Children's Minister in 2005, and a Children's Commissioner in October 2003 to act as an independent champion for young people. Equality legislation, including Section 75, now outlaws discrimination on the basis of age.

The UK Government are signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and therefore obliged to take action to give effect to these rights. Article 39 determines that *"State Parties shall take appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse, torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment or armed conflicts. Such recovery and integration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self respect and dignity of the child."*

Other relevant documents are:

Draft strategy for children and young people - Making it R World 2

This 10 year strategy aims to give children and young people a higher priority, to address gaps in information, to enable organisations to work together, and to help realise the rights contained within the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC).

Promoting Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan (2003-2008, DHSSPS)

The Executive in the 'Programme for Government' committed itself to work for a healthier people, and to take specific measures to promote mental and emotional health. The Health and Social Well being Survey shows that people in Northern Ireland are at greater risk of mental health problems than people in England and Scotland, and recognise that poverty and political conflict affect people here. The strategy seeks to promote an integrated approach which addresses the wider influences on

mental health, particularly inequality. Targeting distress among children and young people is viewed as important given the long-term benefits of intervention.

Services for Victims and Survivors consultation (March 2005)

Building on the overall strategic approach agreed in Reshape, Rebuild, Achieve, with its vision for 'a society where the suffering of all victims is recognised', this consultative strategy proposes joint planning between statutory, voluntary and community sectors, the setting of regional outcomes, and a Commissioner for victims and survivors. The strategy focuses on services and does not outline wider level processes to facilitate recovery, reconciliation and justice. The strategy acknowledges the importance of transgenerational issues.

Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (N.Ireland)

The task of the Review was to present recommendations to Government by 2005 in order to set a strategic framework for improving mental health and learning disability services. There were several relevant working committees, including committees on Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Community and Primary Care, and Mental Health Promotion. Issues raised on the Child and Adolescent Committee included: the prejudice associated with mental health issues, the importance of valuing and including children and young people's views, the importance of information on mental health and services, and delivering programmes for positive mental health in accessible, non stigmatising settings.

Youthnet (2003) Research on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered young people

indicated the degree of severity and prevalence of discrimination and mental health issues experienced by GLBT young people (e.g. of those interviewed 29% had attempted suicide).

'What works?' in mental health improvement, a briefing for the Scottish Executive (Health Education Board, Scotland) found that a key priority in working with young people is to consult young people themselves, draw on and make use of their own expertise, and to consider the different ways young men and young women deal with mental distress.

2

SECTION

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

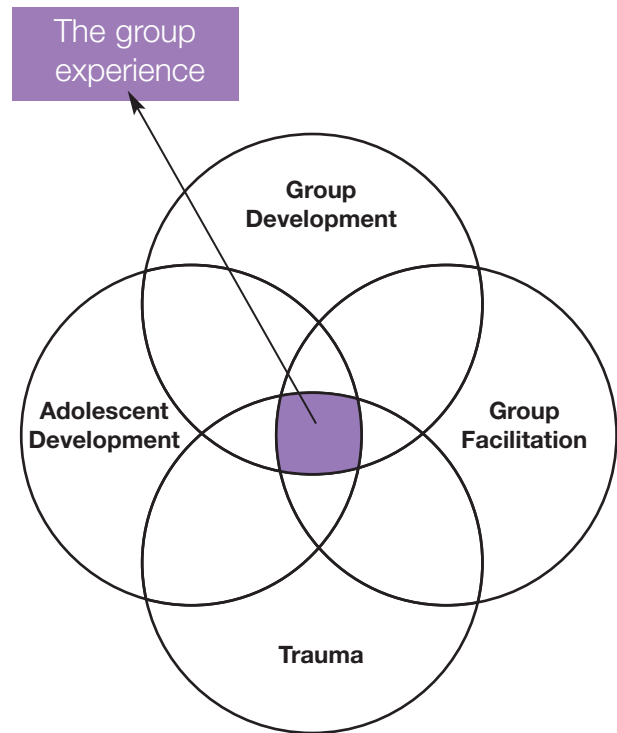


Figure 2 Influences on the group

Introduction

This section contains an overview of the theoretical framework which informed our work with the group and a brief summary of each of the main theories which influenced it. The foundation of the work is based on core concepts in **Gestalt Therapy Theory**⁵. To this we have added theories relating to:

- **Adolescent development**
- **Group theory related to adolescent development**
- **Working with Trauma / intergenerational trauma working with trauma in groups**
- **Supporting workers**

⁵ Gestalt! ejournal for Gestalt Therapy and the field of Gestalt practitioners Vol.7 No.1 2003 <http://www.g-gej.org/7-1/a-c.html>

⁶ Gestalt therapy theory placed an emphasis on the whole person (and sense of self),on experience, the process of experiencing and affect; on an appreciation of the impact of life events on personality development (e.g. childhood sexual abuse); on a belief that people are motivated toward growth and development rather than regression; on a belief that infants are born with a basic motivation towards, and capacity for, personal interaction and attachment; on a belief that there is no organism without environment, no "self" without an "other;" and on a belief that the structure and contents of the mind are shaped by interactions with others, rather than by instinctual urges." Jacobs, 2002 quoted in Gestalt! ejournal for gestalt therapy Vol 7 No 1 2003 <http://www.g-gej.org/7-1/a-c.html>

Gestalt Therapy Theory

Gestalt is German word meaning whole. Human beings are innately driven to make meaning from experience, to put together disparate experiences, memories, and ideas in a way that helps people to make sense of the world they live in.

Gestalt has at its core the relationship between the person and the environment and the process of making meaning out of experience: Gestalt is a German term for “wholeness”, a complete pattern or configuration. The catch is the word ‘complete.’ There are three parts to a definition of gestalt: a thing, its context or environment, and the relationship between them’ (Wymore, 2002)⁷.

Awareness – awareness is a process of noticing and recognising involved with our lived experience. It is not simply seeing. It is a physical experience and also we have an emotional response. There are mental and some would say spiritual dimensions. When we become aware of something, change occurs - for example, when a child becomes aware of how dangerous the traffic is or where I become aware that you are feeling embarrassed.

Self-awareness – is when you become aware of things that were not known before at a personal level and are changed by that awareness.

Awareness and self-awareness also have to do with how we relate to other people, how we affect them and how they affect us, in other words, how we change one another when in a relationship.

Contact – is the way in which we meet each other - eg. to engage openly with curiosity and interest, become withdrawn and anxious, following the rules or refusing to be influenced, wanting to be liked and accepted. However contact is made it can happen only in the present moment. What happened in the past will influence the present moment, as will hopes and dreams for the future. All contact happens in cycles with others - something draws our attention, interest develops, contact, withdrawal from contact, rest and regeneration.

Dialogue – is the connecting interaction between people characterised by openness, responsiveness and mutual respect. Gestalt Therapy Theory says that I can only know myself in relation to you. Dialogue also suggests a horizontal relationship

where there is no top dog nor underdog. Dialogue exists in between the two people - being in connection with another and being separate from the other.

Field – the field consists of all the complex experience of individuals and their environment - the total situation, rather than reducing that situation by piecemeal, item by item analysis. So when referring to the field of the group we mean a whole sphere of influence contained by the group. When we talk about the field of adolescent development we talk about the integration of the biological and psychological and social influences that make up the process of development. The life space of an individual:

‘includes the genetic and physiological givens, the familial, social, cultural, political and geographical contexts of development and the experiential domains of thought, need, fantasy, feeling, and personality organisation’
(Mc Conville 2003 pg 5)⁸.

Figure/ground – figure is the focus of attention, the interest that rises out of the background and becomes foreground. Sometimes in a group many figures will flicker and not really take the full attention of the group. Eventually a figure will emerge that will represent something of everyone’s interest.

Self – the ‘self’ means sense of personal existence. We are used to thinking of the self as something fixed and familiar - e.g. myself, yourself. And yet self varies as it encounters each new person. So for example we often say, ‘I didn’t know myself,’ or ‘I was like a different person’. We respond in unique ways to different people in different environments. For example, the self who is at home and in the family may be radically different from the self at the youth club or at school.

Yet self *also* includes things that are consistent - personality, personal characteristics and so on. Self is both changing and an enduring identity, not mutually exclusive but opposite ends of a continuum which allow the person both to change and to remain recognisable.

In addition there is a need to restate and emphasise two key concepts which are woven throughout our approach. These are:

⁷ Gestalt! ejournal for Gestalt Therapy and the field of Gestalt practitioners Vol.6 No.2 Summer 2002 <http://www.g-gej.org/6-2/gestalten.html>

⁸ Kurt Lewin as quoted in Mark McConville *Lewinian Field Theory, Adolescent Development, and Psychotherapy Gestalt Review Vol 7 No 3 2004*

1. Resilience

Resilience is a key concept in promoting and supporting young people's mental health. Individual young people cope very differently in the face of stressful, traumatic and adverse life experience so that resilience (the capacity to recover from adversity), has become increasingly important as an area of study.

Rutter⁹ (1985) identified the timing of incidents, self-esteem, the ability to attach meaning to and make sense of events, and relationships with others as 'protective factors'. While Smith¹⁰ (1997), summarising a range of studies proposed that secure attachments, connection to a wider community, a capacity for organised thinking and problem solving, a sense of humour, good social skills and a supportive peer network, a sense of autonomy and purpose, and an adaptable temperament build resilience in young people.

Above all, three fundamental building blocks appear to underpin resilience:

1. A secure base, whereby the young person feels a sense of belonging and security
2. Good self-esteem, an internal sense of worth, belonging and competence
3. A sense of self-efficacy, sense of mastery and control along with an accurate understanding of personal strengths and limitations

2. Creative adjustment

Malcolm Parlett¹¹, the Gestalt theorist most responsible for articulating contemporary field theory has also addressed the question of development throughout life. He takes the question of human development back to the concept of 'creative adjustment'. Parlett (2000, p5) states that creative adjustment means promoting an *active* process of learning and practising the abilities of creative adjustment.

These abilities need to be seen as a continuum of:

i. Responding to challenges and opportunities

ABLE -----	UNABLE
Resourceful, willing	Feeling helpless, overwhelmed, alienated

ii. Relating satisfactorily with others

ABLE -----	UNABLE
Relating unfearfully, Feeling safe, respected, clear boundaries	Relationship difficulties Lack of safety, respect

iii. Knowing ourselves in a changing field

ABLE -----	UNABLE
Sense of direction, knowing your needs	Confused, unaware

iv. Experimenting with an ever changing field

ABLE -----	UNABLE
Risking the unusual, trying out new ways	Clinging to habits, addiction, On 'automatic'

v. Health - relating in an embodied way

ABLE -----	UNABLE
Living with one's whole being	Desensitised, disordered relation to sleeping, eating, etc

These 5 abilities and inabilities can be applied to our work with the young people at the level of the group, in that we were all involved in a challenging experiment in a changing field that supported exploration of needs and relating to others. This framework can also be used as a dynamic assessment framework for working with groups of young people.

⁹ Rutter, M. (1985) Resilience in the face of adversity: protective factors and resistance to psychiatric disorders, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 147: 589-611.

¹⁰ Smith, C. and Carlson, B. (1997) Stress, coping and resilience in children and youth, *Social Service Review*, 71, 2: 231-56.

¹¹ Parlett, M. (2000) Creative Adjustment and the Global Field British Gestalt Journal Vol.9 No.1

Adolescent Development

Adolescent Development

Adolescent development is the process by which the young person leaves the world of childhood and through deeper and more complex experiences prepares for and then becomes part of the adult world.

Often adolescent development is understood in terms of biology, psychology or social influences. Sometimes professionals are concerned to work with how to identify problem behaviour and how to manage or change this. Others may tend to focus on interpreting and solving the personal experiences of the young person. Whatever the orientation, in focussing on one aspect of development rather than another, there is the danger of reducing growth and development of the whole person to one or other of these significant influences.

If we consider the whole person in adolescent development, we are considering a:

'transformation that stretches between the embeddedness of childhood and the potentially differentiated contact of adulthood and to trace that evolution at the boundary of self and environment' (McConville 1995 pg 101)¹².

In other words, what we are tracing in development is how this unique young person, living in this environment, experiences him or herself in relation to others, that is the evolution of the boundary¹³ between the organism and the environment. The young person cannot be considered in isolation from his/her environment.

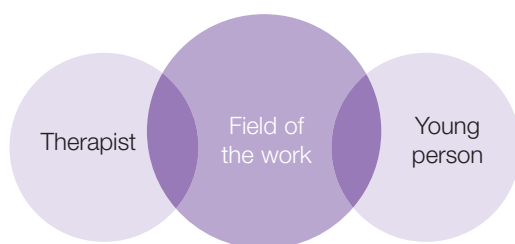


Figure 3

When we are involved in work with young people, we are relating to everything that affects them - the biological, psychological and social dimensions of the 'life space' (McConville 2004, pg 5)¹⁴ of the young person are the foundation and ground of the work. (Of course the person working also brings their unique life space to the relationship with the young person).

The Purpose of Adolescent Development

The purpose of adolescent development is to facilitate the separating from childhood by developing a sense of self and of autonomy that then creates the basis for connecting with and becoming part of the adult world. It is both the time period and process which gives us the opportunity to explore what it is to be an adult. Therefore *everything* a young person does (even extreme ways of being), reflect this experimentation and exploration and say something about how they are experiencing this process.

Any theory of adolescence must reflect the sense of movement between being **a part of** something or **apart from** something in this process. This is not to suggest that either childhood or adulthood are fixed states but are the ways in which we relate to the environment.

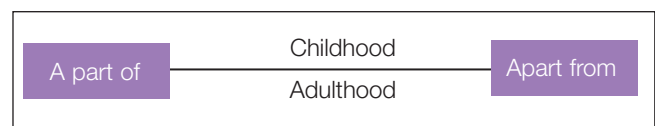


Figure 4

Mark McConville has devised a model of adolescent development which has three major features corresponding generally to the phases of development in traditional models. However he names and describes the process as follows:

1. the disembedding process - early - (12 – 14yrs)
2. the process of interiority - middle - (15 – 16yrs)
3. the process of integration - late - (17 +)

¹² Mark Mc Conville (1995) Adolescents: Psychology and the Emergent Self Gestalt Institute of Cleveland Jossey-Bass Publishers San Francisco.

¹³ Gordon Wheeler (1998) Towards a Gestalt developmental model. British Gestalt Journal, Volume 7 No. 2 page 117

¹⁴ Kurt Lewin as quoted in Mark McConville (2004) *Lewinian Field Theory, Adolescent Development, and Psychotherapy* by Gestalt Review Vol 7 No 3

Unlike traditional models, these are not discreet stages of development but reflect tasks contained in **the development process** that emerge at different times and in different ways. He describes the process as 'nested and recursive'¹⁵. These three processes are linked to the tasks of creating what he refers to as an 'authored self'. By this he means that the young person develops a sense of themselves as a unique entity in the world who can think and act in a way that reflects their differentiation from parents and family and 'having a life for which... (he/she)... is individually responsible' (McConville 1995 pg 36).

The Process of Adolescent Development

1. Disembedding

The early years of adolescence is primarily taken up with disembedding from the field of family relations, in other words moving out of the life of the family as it has been experienced as a child.

'The behaviour and emergent personality of the child stand against the ground of the family field as a figure stands against its background'
(McConville, 1995, pg 15).

Both psychological space and geographical space are dominated by the life of the family. The family is the ground from which its members move to engage with the world. So we can say that the child is embedded in the family. The childhood world is largely one characterised by introjection (McConville, 1995, pg 25).

Introjection is the way in which the child absorbs the explicit and implicit rules, regulations, structures, beliefs and values of the family. The child's world is organised for her from within the family. Meanings are given rather than constructed by the child and this is largely the lived experience for the child. Life bounded by the family provides the space for the child to do the work of development.

The contact boundary of the child and parents - how they relate to each other, how they understand each other's place in the world, now needs to be

renegotiated. Often this process of differentiation becomes ritualised around stretching and breaking 'adult' rules, experimenting with the forbidden, complaining about being misunderstood, or of being treated like a child.

McConville introduces to our understanding of disembedding, the idea of the "over" and "under" bounding family (McConville, 1995, pg 136-138) as a way of relating inside the family. These are broad distinctions but do give us an insight into relationships inside the family - ways of relating - that form the ground which the young person brings into the landscape of adolescence.

The underbounded family is where the parents tend not to see children as choice makers but at the same time, insist that they must accept the consequences of their own behaviour. This results in young people being confused about who they are or what responsibilities they have in the world. Making choices becomes very painful and difficult learning. Parents in these families tend to carry certain functions, maintaining safety or planning for the future, well into the adolescent years when the young person may also be expected to take on these responsibilities for themselves.

Underbounded families tend to contain parents who are overly concerned with the private world of the young person. They're more concerned with attitude than actual behaviour - worrying about how to influence or change it according to their own design and beliefs.

An underbounded child therefore tends to:

- give up the self in the service of the other
- bury his or her own need deeply out of reach
- remain enmeshed in the field of childhood experience
- conflict with adult expectation
- experience an early capacity for differentiation as alien and dangerous.

¹⁵ McConville links these processes to Levine's model of adolescent development. Levine describes

0.1 the extension of the life space - the space of free movement - the region both geographical and psychological that the child finds accessible.... key areas of the life space that are opening up are, at best, unfamiliar and vaguely determined and in many cases ambiguously permitted and prohibited at the same time... for example experimenting with tobacco and alcohol. This opening up of the life space also "include(s) increasingly more distant representations of the past the field of experience becomes polarised between the all-too familiar ways and means of childhood and the daunting expectations and possibilities of becoming grown-up."

0.2 the increased differentiation of the life space - Differentiation first of all means that the child's behaviour displays greater and greater variety over time. Secondly it also refers to relations between the emerging parts of the life space e.g. the young person at home and young person with peers. Differentiation also includes the polarities of experience, for example being childlike and grown-up, being compliant and rebellious. Adolescents also become increasingly realistic in how they judge the world around them taking fantasy away from what they see as the real world of their perceptions.

0.3 the change and organisation of the life space -this refers to the ways in which different parts of the field are reorganised over time e.g. the emotions and thinking processes "so the different parts of the child's feelings are integrated by a principle that Levine calls "simple independence" and overtime this gives way to a higher order of integration that he calls "organisational integration". So for example in early adolescence, a young person may tend to do very well in a subject at school if they like a particular teacher and feel liked by them. An older adolescent can separate these feeling out so that they expect the maths teacher to teach maths and whether they are liked or not is not really relevant.

The overbounded family tends to miss the personal dimension of interest and involvement and the children do not really think that their parents know them. The inner world of the adolescent does not seem to interest these parents, and they seem to be more absorbed in their own private lives and problems (this could be as a result of poverty, family illness, hopelessness, trauma etc) and they miss the inner world of the children.

An overbounded child therefore tends to:

- close his or her boundaries to any contact that might be strange
- disengage (feeling isolated and alienated)
- disavow dependency needs and childhood history

Disembedding and the development of self

At this disembedding stage, the young adolescent is moving out of the family and beginning to see it from a distance and to see it more clearly.

The purpose of disembedding is to establish a boundary between the young adolescent and his/her family and parents, to establish and develop a sense of difference. The young adolescent needs and strives to maintain this difference and to support this new experience of self.

As the world of childhood recedes, there is a general increase in both the sense of psychological space and access to geographical space. The world is opening psychologically, through increasingly complex relationships and also geographically in that the young person can physically go to places beyond the family home and do things that she has not done previously in her family life. For example a young person might go to the shopping centre after school instead of going straight home. She might smoke cigarettes with her friends. In doing so not only does the young person do something new but she begins to know herself as the kind of person who can do these things. This realisation makes her aware of a greater capacity for choice and the extended range of choices opening up to her as she organises her life (McConville pg 6, 2004)¹⁶.

The child is gradually reorganising the field of experience of the self as a 'separate and potentially free standing human being' (McConville, pg 36 1995). She is laying the ground for who she is becoming.

Often before this is visible on the outside, the adolescent may make sweeping changes - make up, new clothes, and change of music. They have not yet developed a language to describe inner worlds so what develops is a marked ability to describe experience at the boundary of self and the environment (i.e. talk about everyone but themselves).

Because the child still feels in the family system, the intrapsychic processes are unavoidably externalised, mapped as it were across interpersonal contact and boundaries. For a young teenager the intrapsychic dimensions of self are limited and they often identify with only one part of the field of experience. Their focus is turned outside and relates to the field of interpersonal relationships:

'The social field of the 13 year-old is almost like the psyche turned inside out ...a projection of the broader field of experience of the self' (McConville, 1995, p106).

The young teenager projects onto others things that may be too difficult to hold inside in the form of polarities or ambiguities. So the adolescent will identify with one polarity and rely on the environment to carry the other. For example, a young person whilst protesting that they do want to stray further from home angrily accuses his mother of not trusting him to take care of himself. By projecting onto the mother his own fear and lack of trust, he allows these difficult emotions a voice. At the same time he feels his own curiosity and excitement as well as seeing himself as the kind of person who could stray further if only he was allowed to do so.

'Younger teenagers have a remarkable capacity for projecting unwanted aspects of themselves, often seeing themselves as victims and making others responsible for the outcomes of their own behaviour' (McConville, 1995, pg 61).

Supporting the disembedding process

At this stage it is important to provide a container for the emerging self and holding projections in order to allow the young person to explore all aspects of themselves safely.

¹⁶ Mark McConville *Lewinian Field Theory, Adolescent Development, and Psychotherapy* by Gestalt Review Vol 7 No 3 2004

2. Interiority

During this phase the adolescent in his/her own experience:

'Begins to develop a heightened sense of the divergencies of inner, private experience from the outer world of social relatedness. The defining of boundaries has taken place and the identified self has become operational. Now the young person begins to explore inwardly and outwardly, these differentiated fields of self experience' (McConville, 1995, pg 113).

For example, friendships are chosen now not because your best friend agrees with you but because there is an appeal to expanding experience. Boyfriend/girlfriend relationships allow attachment and dependency to come back into their lives but experienced in a new framework - taking the risk to become vulnerable and attached again but from the place of having discovered him/herself as an autonomous person. This is the time when journals are kept, poetry and song writing starts, hours spent alone in the room, moral dilemmas are wrestled with.

'In this way the adolescent becomes more interior, more reflective, and more conflicted within. Issues previously wrestled out with parents or peers now become struggles within the boundaries of self' (McConville, 1995, pg 115).

Young people begin to become more interested in adults as their sense of authorship of themselves becomes confirmed or disaffirmed in their relationships with adults. Are adults really interested in them as people with ideas and opinions? Do they really recognise the autonomy of the young person? For example, the adolescent's sensitivity to phoniness is a manifestation of this new and painful awareness of the experience of 'being really me' in the world - the divergence between the inner and outer experience of being with others. So what used to be projected onto the environment or was not really taken notice of by the young person, is brought into an expanded sense of self.

During this phase of the process young people begin to take back the ambiguities and polarities which they had been projecting on to the environment and these begin to be experienced as the internal landscape of the young person. For some young people this process can be very difficult.

'The polarity dynamics of the child self and the adolescent self lead either to a heightening and broadening of contact between the parts of the self or to a richer contact boundary between the self and others' (McConville pg 83 1995).

There are three examples of polarity dynamics which are common in therapeutic support with young people.

a) ambivalence - the relatively normal phenomenon acquiring support to experience the difference and the movement between the child self and the adolescent self.

b) frozen - this occurs when young people discover meanings in a childhood experience that they had not hitherto fully understood and may emerge very painfully.

"Insight always involves reorganisations of the field, and these invariably (at least for a time) diminish the individual's sense of worth and value, and raise the developmental dilemma of whether or where this is even bearable." Where there isn't much environmental support for the young person, it may be that growth carries too high a price. Often young people experiencing this reject the possibility of any contact and may resort to drug use and other methods of 'heightening stimulation to the point of distraction or blunting it to the point of anaesthesia' (McConville, pg 91, 1995).

c) interrupted - the young person experiencing the interrupted polarity between the child self and the adolescent self, 'often identifies with one end of the polarity while actively dissociating from and disowning the other'. For example we might find children who are "parentified" or children whose behaviour may be much younger than their years because growing up causes great problems at home.

Supporting the process of interiority

The therapeutic work at this time is to tolerate and respect the movement to and from the experience of the self. It is to support the young person to include more and more self-awareness, to broaden and deepen their knowledge of themselves in relationship with their environment. In this way they develop a greater understanding of their power to influence what happens and to understand how they are influenced by their world.

3. Integration

In a sense the self of late adolescence integrates the earlier experience and creates a new meaning of self. With that comes a greater ownership of experience. The young person can hold not just impulses and wants but contradictions, dissonance and ambiguities as part of the process of experience. In this way the older adolescent can support mature contact (i.e. to engage with others and with mutual influence without risking disintegration). Perceptions and judgement become more accurate as they are not bound up with the needs of development.

'This is the age when identity formation comes front and centre as the measure of developmental accomplishment'
(McConville, 1995, pg 119).

Older teenagers often 'return' to their parents at this stage and as the old joke goes – are often surprised at how much the parents have learned!

Adolescent development and gender

McConville states that there are some fairly clear gender differences in the way the three tasks of development work get done:

'Boys are more likely to follow a clear age related sequence..... girls are more likely to do the work simultaneously or in smaller loops, bounding and re-engaging recursively throughout their adolescent years'
(McConville, 1995, pg 103).

Boys often need to suppress the child-self and separate from adults and often the capacity for interiority is neglected. Previously with adolescent girls the sense of self in relation to autonomy was undervalued, though this is changing.

Girls tend to preserve a stronger sense of relatedness even as they push beyond the restrictions of childhood. Boys generally keep their experimentation to themselves vis-à-vis their parents whereas girls disclose their evolving sense of self and experiments with change and look for acceptance within existing relationships
(McConville pg 48 1995).

Gender differences often appear in the 'acting out' and 'acting in' process with boys tending to act out and girls tending to act in. Acting out/in is a way of showing how a person is relating to the adult world.

'The function of acting out in adolescence is the enactment of self. The adolescent sense of self is not yet so strong that words and thoughts - symbolic representations - are enough to anchor its reality in the world' (McConville, 1995, pg 71).

The adolescent self is very tentative, still being formed, so acting out/in is an important way of making the self real and actual and of substance.

Acting out is when a young person acts in ways that can be seen by others and which reflect the strong emotions that cannot be expressed currently in other ways. We notice acting out because it is done in public. Generally young men act out but this is increasingly changing.

Acting in is when strong emotions are turned into actions relating to the self. Generally, young women 'act in' through various kinds of self harm and withdrawal. We tend not to notice acting in as this is more hidden. However, such gender demarcations are not as clear cut as they may have been represented in the past.

Working with a Group

Young People in Groups

*'Adolescents are social creatures, in the midst of learning their social skills and are often more trusting of others of their own age than of adults. This can make the group therapy setting an ideal choice when counselling becomes necessary for this age group'*¹⁷.

Often young people are referred to therapy by adults evoking reluctance/resistance and so attending therapy may become problematic from the very beginning. They may put a negative connotation on attending therapy - 'Do you think we're mental?' - or simply reject any effort on the part of the adult. Yet, when therapy begins young people generally respond well - often more easily than adults.

Research suggests that group therapy offers a fertile environment for young people to benefit from the therapeutic process. The group offers the opportunity to experiment with how to be with others, how to co-operate, to disagree, to be different, to compare their thoughts and behaviours to those of their peers. The group is a natural setting for young people since young people learn more from each other and generally seek out groups that support their process of movement into the world of adults. It is a highly complex field of relationship possibilities.¹⁸

In addition to this, the group offers a range of relationships including each person having the opportunity to be with one another or in pairs or threes or small groups. There is also the possibility of exploring how to relate to the group as a group. Each individual also has the opportunity of exploring how he or she relates to the facilitator or indeed how to be part of a sub-group relating to other sub-groups.

If the business of adolescent development is about being in an increasingly complex environment of relationships (McConville pg 3 2004)¹⁹, then the group context seems to offer a greater range of possibilities than individual therapy within an environment where there is support to explore the possibilities of these in safety. For some young people individual support will still be needed. However, to offer a range of support in response to their unique needs, a combination of group and individual settings seems appropriate.

The 'right' group

The tasks of development emerge in different ways and with different emphasis related to their unique experiences and whether they are at the early, middle or later stages of adolescence. Groups organised in relation to the unfolding process of development are more likely to support cohesion more quickly than those where various stages of development are present.

Identifying where potential members are in relation to development is therefore very important in organising and planning groups. For example, a thirteen-year-old will not experience concerns about the future in the way a fifteen year-old might or an eighteen year-old whose future is becoming a very concrete and pressing reality.

In general, Woods²⁰ identifies therapeutic groups under four broad headings -

- Prevention
- Diagnostic
- Specific problems or life crisis
- General life adjustments

These reflect the general areas of need experienced by adolescents. Indirect support and counselling may arise through other groups e.g. youth clubs, sports groups.

• Prevention

They may be strictly informational focusing on working with timely and relevant information in relation to specific issues, concerns and interests of young people such as drug abuse, sex and sexually transmitted diseases. They may also be aimed at improving coping skills through such techniques as problem-solving, learning to say no, etc.

• Diagnostic groups

These groups are smaller and aimed at direct therapeutic work to identify mental health issues.

• Specific problems / life crisis

These groups tend to have a shorter life span and are aimed at understanding consequences, exploring alternatives, attitudes, feelings and actions.

¹⁷ Derek Woods Mental health matters <http://www.mental-health-matters.com/>

¹⁸ Tom Douglas Survival in Groups Open University Press 1995. The range of possible relationships in a group can be identified by the following formula:

$$\frac{3^n - 2^{n+1} + 1}{2} = X$$

(N is the number of people present in the group and X is the number of possible relationship resulting from the interaction) Therefore with 3 people in the group - not counting the facilitator - there are 9330 possible relationships. Adding the facilitator there are 28,501!

¹⁹ Kurt Lewin as quoted in *Lewinian Field Theory, Adolescent Development, and Psychotherapy* by Mark McConville Gestalt Review Vol 7 No 3 2004

²⁰ Derek Woods Mental health matters <http://www.mental-health-matters.com/>

• General life adjustments

These groups are aimed at supporting the process of adolescent development itself i.e. making satisfactory adjustments to the developing environment, learning more about themselves, resolving serious long term problems, helping to understand the self in relation to others, to explore what they want out of life, and their own behaviour and feelings.

Any decision as to which group would be most suitable for a young person, would require a thorough understanding of the self and environmental support available to the young person. Some of these considerations will include the general health of the young person, any history of therapeutic support, and what they hoped to achieve in the process, support for the process at home or within the realm of close relationships, responsibilities carried, and demands on their time and concentration.

Group process, development and dynamics

'A group is "three or more people, connected in space and time, who a) are defined by the environment as a group and/or b) who define themselves as a group.the group development process is the process of self-defining, with group dynamics as how the process expresses itself at any given moment' (Seán Gaffney, 2004).

Whatever the group purpose, the work is experiential in nature. This means that the unique experience of each participant, as well as their relationships with each other and the group as a whole, are central to the focus of the group. So **how** young people relate to each other in the group is as crucially important as any content or focus the group might have. In other words, facilitating a group means supporting the relationships - and the group as a whole - to allow the contacting process to develop. It is this experiential field of the group that supports the exploration of the developing adolescent and the development process itself i.e. separating and joining in a range of ways and increasingly complex situations.

A part of and apart from - group process and dynamics

There are many theories of how groups develop. Such theories describe the stages of development in relation to how participants manage the business of being together. Whereas some may refer to three stages, others five, some six, there is disagreement as to whether these are discreet stages or overlapping, easily recognised or difficult to pinpoint. All agree that the stages include being aware of what people are likely to be doing in the early stages e.g. exploring similarities, establishing rules, then refining rules and exploring differences, and the stage of co-operation, being together productively and finally leaving the group.

Group theories also describe how the participants manage the stages e.g.

- | | |
|---------|---|
| Stage 1 | being polite, referring to previous groups as a way of establishing expectations, creating safety, asking questions |
| Stage 2 | conflicting, challenging the rules of the group, using 'I' statements, expressing difference |
| Stage 3 | using 'we' statements, encouraging a sense of the group |

In some groups the facilitator may pay attention to this only as background information for handling relationships or supporting the structure of the group whilst focusing on the tasks or content e.g. information giving groups.

In other groups the nature of the relationships between group members and the group as a whole forms the content and agenda. And there are many combinations in between. What is important is to understand the flow of development of the group in order to support the relationships wherever and however they emerge.

In this work we have considered the group development as

- a. group process
- b. group dynamics

1. *'the **process** over time is the group self-defining along with individual group-member's awareness of this process and its impact on them'*²¹.

²¹ Seán Gaffney Gestalt with Groups - A Developmental Perspective, Gestalt Journal, Australia & New Zealand. (to be published in Summer) 2006. Sydney, Australia.

²² ibid.

In this case the group were defining themselves as a group different from how they had been together in previous formations. This is illustrated in the number of references made to previous group membership and frequent attempts to clarify the purpose of this group.

2. *'The group **dynamics** are how the process expresses itself at any given moment in group behaviours at all levels of complexity – personal, interpersonal, sub-group, group-as-a-whole, group + facilitator and group/environment (and, where relevant, purpose, task and other specifics of the setting over time)'*²².

Let us start from the premise that to be in any new group creates the opportunity to develop awareness of how we are with others, regardless of the task involved (often having a clear task makes good participation easier e.g. 'it doesn't matter if we liked each other as long as we get the task done').

The individual experience is always to find out how to be **part of this group or apart from this group**²³, in other words how to be myself in contact with others.

Being in a group is always a negotiation about the position on the continuum at any given time:



Group process is about exploring this relationship, this contact boundary within the experience of the group. To be **a part of** the group involves joining other members in forming a group, being able to identify with the group as a group. Identifying similarities between group members supports this process of joining. This is also known as developing **confluence**. Holding back on your difference (**retrofection**) and generally following the rules of the group (**introjection**) supports the ability to join with the group.

To be **apart from** the group means that the emphasis is on difference, having the sense of being outside the group - a stronger sense of self rather than the group. This is also referred to as **'egotism'** (staying separate). In making assumptions/guesses about what is happening either in the group or at the level of the individual, without actually finding out what is actually going on, is referred to as **'projection'** and serves to support the sense of

being on the outside.

Holding back from the influence of group members is known as **deflection**, keeping others and their opinions at a distance. The group process is always about how we manage this movement along the continuum of being a part of or apart from the group - in other words the process of connecting and differentiating.

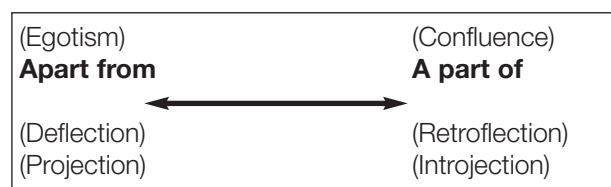


Figure 5

Whereas these ways of of being and responding to the group are out of the awareness of the participants a central part of the learning in groups is to become aware of them.

The important point here is that the development of the group through its process and dynamics does not take the form of discreet stages but rather loops back and forward along the continuum of being a part of and apart from. Issues of wanting to be the same (confluence) appear throughout the group process as a way of supporting what is new in the group. Being different (egotism) may be experienced many times as the group members learn more and more about each other. Participants may be more (retrofecting) or less (deflecting) prepared to be influenced by others in the group.

In this way group development resembles the process of adolescent development itself - not discreet stages but movement backwards and forwards throughout the process and also as a general movement of becoming part of the adult world. Each new experience becomes part of the ground of the next experience.

The role of the facilitator is to be aware of this movement in the group and to encourage the members to become aware of where they are along the continuum - in other words how they are responding and relating to other group members. Group working reveals predominant individual styles of contacting others and offers the opportunity to explore this or to experiment with doing something different. So the group offers the opportunity to explore the way in which we are in contact with the

²³ ibid.

other. When we are more aware of being in contact with others, change occurs. This is the essence of adolescent development.

The group experience is also to trace how the group itself, the group-as-a-whole moves and flows along the continuum and in this case, in relation to the facilitators. For example, do they identify with the facilitators, go along with the facilitators' agenda, views, rules and hold back on their own wishes and interests? Or do they conflict, disagree in relation to the facilitators, reject their influence, day-dream, miss sessions and generally find ways to deflect the influence of the facilitators? The important role of the facilitator is to recognise the ways in which the group members move along the continuum with each other and how they do it with the facilitators. This does not involve making value judgements but simply to notice and support the group to become aware of itself and the participants to be aware of what they do and how they are with each other i.e. the group dynamics.

Group members will also try to manage the negotiation (between being a part of or apart from) by identifying with some people in the group to the exclusion of others. In other words, they may form **sub groups**. Sub groups are not fixed but can change membership and regroup around different shared interests. This is often the experience of adolescents who will frequently form friendships on the basis of shared interest.

In tracing the movement of the sub groups and raising awareness of this process in the group, the facilitator or therapist can support the members to become clearer about how they relate to each element and consequently learn more about themselves.

Figure / ground

Throughout the life of any group, figures will rise and fall. When we talk of figures we mean an area of interest that has arisen out of the group and stands out against the ground of the group i.e. all of the possible discussions, interests and concerns that

they could have chosen. Sometimes the figure does not fully catch the attention of the group but nonetheless it forms part of the life of the group.

Gradually, through the rising and falling of attention, references, comments, a particular figure of interest that is shared by the group, emerges. Over time, as they appear again and again, these figures become **themes**. Such themes - together with the group process - gives each group its unique character.

The Cycle of Awareness

The flow of the group can be understood as the Cycle of Awareness or Contact Cycle (Zinker, pg 97 1977)²⁴.

This cycle can be explained in the following way. I am reading, I become aware of a sensation which is other than my absorption with the book. I notice that I'm thirsty. I begin to mobilise to get something to drink and cannot refocus on the book. The figure of the water becomes more insistent as my attention is drawn to it. I go and drink some water. I'm satisfied and return to my book but now my attention for reading is heightened having been refreshed by the water.

We can also refer to this as the figure/ground/figure:

figure	- reading the book
ground	- feeling contented
new figure	- thirsty
ground	- not so content any more
figure	- getting water
ground	- reading and contented again

Where a figure (an interest, idea, sensation) is not attended to then it will keep re-emerging in some way until it finally gains the attention it needs. So for example, different cultural and political backgrounds in this group, which were not discussed when they were together in previous groups, came up again and again in various ways. By paying attention to these in the group and by talking about them, the group established a new identity for itself as a group of people who could talk about these issues.

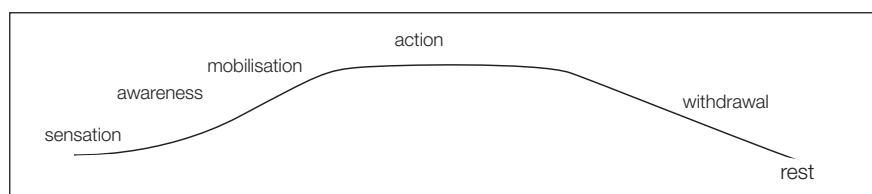


Figure 6 The Cycle of Awareness

The Life of the Group and Adolescent Development

In considering the group in relation to adolescent development it is interesting to notice the ways in which the development of the group and adolescent development itself relate to and mirror each other.

'Adolescents present complementary sets of developmental needs that derive from the fundamental nature of contact - needs for connectedness and needs for differentiation' (McConville, 1995, pg 133).

The Group

1. The stages or the continuum model

Adolescent development

As with group development, adolescent development is not made up of discreet stages but rather in McConville's words a 'nested' and 'recursive' process. Issues to do with disembedding for example may also be present in the later stages of adolescence. However, with an increase in awareness and support, the young person can respond differently to the issues that arise.

2. A part of and apart from

The process of adolescent development is the movement towards adulthood and away from childhood. As the child disembeds from the family environment, the world of childhood fades and the new world expands both in depth and in space.

This recalls the way in which group members at the beginning of a new group often refer to previous groups they have been in - including their families²⁵. As the group develops, the previous group experience whilst remaining as part of the group life also recedes as new experiences become more figural.

In adolescence, the feeling and actual experience of being a part of or apart from, relates the major issues of development - to childhood and the family, the world of adults and the future, moving through peer and friendship groups, and intimate relationships.

3. Starting from where they are

Young people seek out groups as they disembed from the family and move into the world. This allows the opportunity to experience the self in many relationships and contexts. At the same time it offers the ground of the group as a support to this discovery. So in working with a group the therapist is working in the natural environment of the young people i.e. starting with where they are, not just in terms of interests or content but in terms of the psychological space being occupied at this moment of development.

Of course for some young people, any group seems like a hostile environment. In this case, it may mean that individual work is also necessary to support the young person to become more skilled at entering the new environment both of the group and of adolescence itself.

25 Kolodny, RL, Garland, JA, Jones, HE (1965) A model for stages of development in social work groups. In Bernstein, S (ed) Explorations in Group Work, School of Social Work, Boston University, Boston.

4. The importance of resilience and the role of the facilitated group experience

Resilience is the ability to 'bounce back' from what happens in life. The capacity for resilience in young people developmentally is supported (amongst other things) by the presence of an adult - outside the family - who is available for the young person²⁶.

The facilitated group itself therefore, with the presence of an adult(s), can be that available adult outside the family, with whom the young person can be recognised and experience themselves as:

'a self, an author, a centre of experience and synthesis that legitimately holds its own place in the field' (McConville, 1995, pg190).

and in doing so support the growing sense of power of the young person.

5. The group and importance of attachment experiences

Attachment is the way in which we learn about emotions, behaviour, perceptions, sensations and others.

Where a young person's experience of attachment (Siegel, 1999, pg 21)²⁷ has been unresolved or disorganised (with all the attendant difficulties that flow from this), it is possible through 'good attachment' experiences with other adults or caregivers, to feel connected to others and to have relationships that are meaningful, nourishing and supportive of continuing development.

This 'learned attachment' (Siegel, 1999, pg118)²⁸ comes about in therapeutic and personal relationships. A facilitated group, supporting the process of joining and differentiating seems to provide an environment which could foster the experience of 'good attachment.'

Often by the end of the group life, the sense of having had a good experience allows the young person to establish some more ground to engage with the coming experiences and a reference point for what they can do in difficult times²⁹.

6. Self and the environment/group

In a group, the person, in relation to others, experiences the self as changing in contact with others. They have to move with the experience of being with others. (Sometimes, this could mean being more determined not to be influenced and even this determination means added effort to remain the 'same'). In the process of becoming aware the young person is opening up the possibility of being different. The sense of 'self' is where this happens. This reflects clearly the understanding that:

'the developmental needs and tasks of adolescence are largely organisational, serving a new integration of mental life, personal identity and interpersonal relatedness - a new gestalt called the adolescent self' (McConville, 1995, pg 72).

It would seem therefore that the experience of the self, relating in a group, offers a rich and complex ground to explore the business of becoming adult.

²⁶ Newman, T., with Yates, T. and Masten, A. (2004) *What Works in Building Resilience?* Barking, Barnardo's.

²⁷ 'a balanced capacity to regulate emotions, to feel connected to other people, to establish an autobiographical story, to move out into the world with a sense of vitality...The capacity to reflect on mental states, both of the self and of others, emerges within attachment relationships that foster such processes.' Pg 21. Daniel J Siegel *The Developing Mind- how relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are.* The Guildford Press 1999

²⁸ *ibid.* pg118

²⁹ Kolodny, RL, Garland, JA, Jones, HE (1965) A model for stages of development in social work groups. In Bernstein, S (ed) *Explorations in group work*, School of Social Work, Boston University, Boston.

Groups and Trauma Recovery

Groups and Trauma recovery

In considering the group in this particular context we must add an extra lens with which to understand what is happening and thus be better placed to offer support. This is the framework of trauma either directly experienced or transgenerationally.

In our context we want to find a way of working with trauma that acknowledges the complex manifestations and deeply rooted structures of trauma that criss-cross and organise the community in which we live. It is clear therefore that in the context of continuing trauma such as armed conflict, abuse, poverty and other forms of victimisation, a more complex understanding of trauma is needed.

The World Health Organisation (WHO 2004)³⁰ developed a framework focussing on **three main determinants of mental health**:

- **social inclusion** - supportive relationships, involvement in group activities and civic engagement
- **freedom from discrimination and violence** – valuing diversity, physical security, self determination and control of one's life
- **economic participation** - this includes work, education, housing and money

A further determinant of mental health - **human rights** (WHO, 2004) also reflects the wider context:

'A climate that respects and protects basic civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights is fundamental to the promotion of mental health. Without the security and freedom provided by these rights it is very difficult to maintain a high level of mental health (Gostin, 2001)³¹.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provides an additional framework which endorses the right to protection against discrimination (Article 2), the right to an identity (Article 8), the right not to be punished in a cruel or hurtful way (Article 37), and the right to help to recover from the effects of war, neglect, or hurt (Article 39).

Judith Herman argues that trauma is complex and political (Herman, pg 9 1992)³². The person experiencing trauma is caught in the dilemma of

speaking out or keeping silent - the 'dialectic of trauma' (Herman pg2, 1992). Speaking out involves risking further isolation and keeping silent means repression of the experience and isolation (Herman, pg 8, 1992³³). This happens both at the level of the individual and the community. The community needs to stand by the traumatised person or people and work for resolution of the trauma as a human right:

'In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting, repression, dissociation, and denial phenomenon of social as well as individual consciousness' (Herman, pg 9 1992)³⁴.

Trauma in the Body

'Trauma is an internal straitjacket created when a devastating moment is frozen in time. Trauma stifles the unfolding of being, strangling our attempts to move forward with our lives and disconnects us from ourselves, others, nature and spirit. When people are overwhelmed in effect we're frozen in fear. It is as if our instinctive survival energies 'are all dressed up with no place to go' (Levine, 1997)³⁵.

These are frequently referred to as the symptoms of PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) and it is the symptom that is treated, not the trauma. Some people reject this preferring a term which de-pathologises the experience and its aftermath and includes the complex and continuing experience of continuous trauma - one that includes the effect on relationship (post trauma stress response Levine, pg 105-7, 1997)³⁶ and trauma at the level of the group (complex post trauma stress syndrome (Herman pg 119, 1992)³⁷.

Response to trauma is not pathology. It is the body doing what is necessary in order to survive and handle a system charged with trauma energy.

Trauma forces the person outside the normal range of resiliency (the natural ability to bounce back from terrible events), resulting in the need to make **creative adjustments** to survive the experience. These adjustments are often perceived as problems

³⁰ *Promoting Mental Health: Concepts, Emerging Evidence, Practice* was produced by World Health Organization, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse in collaboration with the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. (WHO, 2004)

³¹ Gostin, L. Beyond moral claims. A human rights approach to mental health, Special section: keeping human rights on the bioethics agenda. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*. 10: 264-274(2001)

³² Judith Lewis Hermann Trauma and Recovery - from domestic abuse to political terror London: Pandora (1992)

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Judith Lewis Herman Trauma and recovery: from domestic abuse and to political terror. London: Pandora (1992)

³⁵ Diane Poole Heller and Peter Levine Somatic Experiencing beginning Level 1 Training Manual 1997 Foundation for Human Enrichment www.traumahealing.com

³⁶ Peter Levine Waking the Tiger: healing trauma - the innate capacity to transform over whelming experiences. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic books (1997)

³⁷ Judith Lewis Herman Trauma and recovery: from domestic abuse and to political terror. London: Pandora (1992)

located with the individual (e.g. misusing alcohol, prescription drugs, depression, addictions of all kinds, fragmented memory, poor sleep and other expressions of a destabilised system).

However, in describing this process as 'creative adjustment' emphasising survival, focuses on the power of the individual to handle devastating experiences.

Trauma causes a disconnection from the body and from others around us. Isolation therefore is a key feature of trauma and from the feeling of being alone the response of hypervigilance is a major component of the experience of living a restricted life, key features of which are isolation and a deadening of sensation.

Trauma does not only affect the individual. The family and community are also affected by the experience - even where the experience is a single event. We are profoundly affected by other peoples' affect states and where someone tells terrifying stories we resonate to the emotion (Bloom pg 42-3 1997)³⁸. This is often the source of secondary traumatising. Likewise, we also resonate to joy and excitement. Caregivers can transfer the traumatic experience to babies who never directly experienced the event³⁹.

Transgenerational trauma

Transgenerational trauma is the way in which these traumatic experiences move across generations. The transferring mechanisms are (Burrows and Keenan pg 112, 2004)⁴⁰:

• Attachment relationships

the nature of the bond between carer and child that influences how we organise our emotional and behavioural responses throughout life. This is affected where the caregiver is already traumatised or there is trauma in the family (trauma bonding).

• Memory

attachment and memory allow a child's brain to develop 'a balanced capacity to regulate emotion, to feel connected to other people, to develop an autobiographical story and to move out into the world with a sense of vitality' (Siegel pg 21, 1999)⁴¹.

Explicit memory is language based and is a co-created family narrative. This may not be the child's experience but has been created in the family.

Children say they 'remember' things when in fact these are stories about their experiences told in the family.

• Family responses

where family structures have developed around keeping secrets, telling stories or taking other action to protect the family from the impact of traumatic events. 'Separated from their original purposes, these emergency measures become family styles of interacting, family belief systems that rapidly become impermeable to change' (Bloom, 1997 pg 68).

• Re enactment

Re-enactment behaviour is repetitive, ritualised and highly symbolic behaviour often out of awareness that re-invokes trauma. It is a signal to the community that trauma has occurred and help is needed. Bloom argues that there is a direct connection between ritualised, wordless behaviour resulting from trauma and the lack of response from the community. In terms of speaking out/staying quiet, this behaviour is an attempt to manage the dilemma.

In the context of this complex framework, we can begin to understand social phenomena familiar in our culture as trauma responses, particularly transgenerational processes. This might be a reason for adults to look again at aspects of our community life for example car theft, drug use including alcohol, youth suicide and, child neglect etc. as aspects of unresolved transgenerational trauma⁴².

• Community

where trauma is generalised across the whole community then for the child, this is 'normal' life. The community reflects, reinforces, expands the child's initial experiences and vice versa.

³⁸ Sandra Bloom (1997) *Creating Sanctuary* Toward the evolution of sane societies Routledge 1997

³⁹ Yael Danielli *International handbook of multi-generational legacies of trauma*. New York: Plenum Press

⁴⁰ R. Burrows and B Keenan *Bearing Witness: supporting parents and children in the transition to peace* *Child Care in Practice* Vol.10 No.2 April 2004, pages 107-125

⁴¹ Danielle Seigal *The developing mind: Towards a neurobiology of interpersonal experience*. New York: Guilford press (1999)

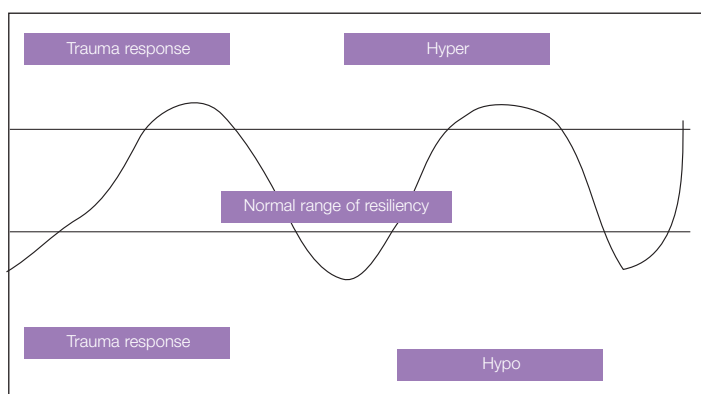
⁴² R. Burrows and B Keenan *Bearing witness: a supporting parents and children in the transition to peace* *Child Care in Practice* Vol.10 No.2 April 2004, pages 107-125

Trauma and resilience

If trauma attacks the normal range of resiliency ⁴³ in the individual that allows us to 'bounce back,' this also holds true at the level of the group, family and community.

Figure 7

The range of Resiliency



Hyper responses are those which involve the adrenaline pumped into the system during trauma and involves hypervigilance, high levels of activity always using lots of energy. We could think of working too hard, cleaning, arguing, and any other activity that triggers the adrenaline to stay stuck in the 'on' position. The **hypo** response is that which keeps the system below par, always feeling tired, using alcohol, prescription drugs, sleeping a lot. We could start to look at other phenomena differently too e.g. car theft, despair, suicide, addictions and some of the 'psycho somatic' illnesses and conditions.

⁴³ Diane Poole Heller and Peter Levine Somatic Experiencing beginning Level 1 Training Manual 1997 Foundation for Human Enrichment www.traumahealing.com

Supporting workers

Working in groups

'Intergenerational trauma is not yet officially recognized as victim-related pathology... Until it is... the behaviour of some children of survivors may be misdiagnosed, its etiology misunderstood, and its treatment, at best, incomplete' (Danielli, 1998).

We need to understand the overlapping theoretical frameworks which appear concretely in the groups we work in. Herman states, *'The restoration of social bonds begins with the discovery that one is not alone. Nowhere is this experience more immediate, powerful or convincing than in a group'...* (Herman pg 215 1992).

The group can provide a container for the trauma energy by providing witness and support allowing the opportunity to reconnect slowly and safely and to re-establish relationships that focus on the present. However, it is very important to remember that simply to retell the story does not shift the underlying trauma and may serve to activate both the teller and the listener. Story telling has to be carefully 'titrated' (Levine and Heller pg 45 1997)⁴³ - a bit at a time to avoid being flooded by the memory or being overwhelmed.

Judith Herman (pg218-236, 1992)⁴⁴ describes three types of groups supporting trauma recovery linked to the the three major processes involved – safety, remembering and reconnecting.

Although she describes these as stages, it is more appropriate to consider them to be focuses which are more or less figural throughout the recovery process.

• First Stage Group

In the early stages of trauma recovery, people need to re-establish a sense of safety, routines for living, self care, and to reduce isolation through being with others who have had similar experiences. This is often in a **self help** group where the focus of the group is to support the practical business of living.

• Second Stage Group

Groups primarily involved in the business of **remembering and mourning** act as a witness. By its attentiveness and witnessing, the group supports new understanding and insights into the traumatising experience. The group boundary is tightly maintained and the group is closed to additional membership as soon as optimal membership is established. To engage in this work, members must be committed, so careful selection is important. The trauma-focused group is time-limited and so rituals of celebration and farewell are vital. Much of the integration of the work is done in the ending. Finding appropriate ways for members to give appreciation to each other is extremely important as this supports the movement out into the world with new strength and dignity.

• Final Stage Group

Groups where **reconnecting** is the focus concern themselves with the quality of relationships. These groups typically are open-ended and relatively unstructured. Relationships need to be negotiated and the leader encourages difference to emerge. This is a huge challenge to people who once experienced being totally outside human organisation and social contact.

The group requires active leaders who are well prepared, highly committed and have a clear conception of the group process and task. The group leader must be able to hold the group boundary so that members may explore safely. It is emotionally demanding as the leader must model bearing witness and be prepared and able to hear the stories without being overwhelmed. Because of this, co-leadership of groups is always advised. Co-leadership can also model complementarity and co-operative handling of differences. In this context, it is also important in addressing safety, to carefully consider issues of political/cultural background.

⁴³ Diane Poole Heller and Peter Levine Somatic Experiencing beginning Level 1 Training Manual 1997 Foundation for Human Enrichment www.traumahealing.com

⁴⁴ Judith Lewis Herman Trauma and recovery: from domestic abuse and to political terror. London: Pandora (1992)

Facilitation, Adolescent Groups and Trauma Recovery

Often, where trauma has occurred the victim is seen either as helpless and innocent or somehow responsible in some way for what has occurred. In fact the victim is both. When a worker identifies only with the innocence and helplessness of the victim, he or she is unlikely to be able to support empowerment - a feeling of being able to regain mastery over life again. On the other hand, if the worker primarily identifies with judging the responsibility of the victim for the situation, they are unlikely to be able to give support to someone feeling guilty or shamed by what has happened to them. This will not support mastery either. Often many workers will move up and down this continuum. The important thing for the worker is to be aware that this is likely to happen and to find a way that allows the injured person to experience their innocence or helplessness and their culpability and influence, and to understand how all of these relate to the process of recovering from trauma.

Lichtenberg⁴⁵ refers to these two attitudes as (a) the **Emphatic Sympathizer**, and (b) the **Disaffected Other**.

'An Emphatic Sympathizer is a helper who, like an overprotective parent, takes up the cause of the victim and makes it his or her own. By becoming overly involved in the cause, the Emphatic Sympathizer often neglects or obscures the individuality of the victim and the uniqueness of his or her experience.'

'A Disaffected Other is a helper who, after an initial period of caring and sympathy for the victim, begins to regard the victim with aversion.' This can happen as a worker begins to feel burnout due to heavy workloads, poor working conditions and lack of support.

When working with young people against a background of political conflict both participants and therapists / facilitators are affected. When workers can accept and contain their own painful experiences and feelings, these become a rich source of support and understanding for the injured person. When the worker has engaged with her

own emotions she is able to maintain a clear sense of self. This separateness allows us to appreciate the full experience of victims and to support their exploration of the whole range of feelings present. Lichtenberg refers to this person as an **Empathic Helper**.

Resourcing for both the group worker and group participants is extremely important. Resourcing is seen as "anything that helps a person maintain a sense of self and inner integrity in the face of disruption" (Levine and Heller pg55,1997). A resource can be anything that gives a sense of support and well-being.

For example a resource can be, a memory of a holiday, a feeling of safety, it can be a sense of warmth in the body and feeling comfortable, it can be hearing a friend speak to you, it can be an imaginary helper. So, resource can be anything drawn from the realms of fantasy / imagination, memory or reality, and can include current and remembered physical sensations supportive connections with friends, family, the self and the environment.

Working with young people in the Northern Ireland / North of Ireland context requires a high-level of self-awareness, self and environmental support which includes knowing how to access resources. It is crucial to:

1. **create safety** in the group, a container for the young person to begin to explore the impact of their life experiences. This will be an ongoing feature of the group.
2. include in its work some activities and processes which **encourage mastery** - physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual (James pg 14, 1996)⁴⁶. This sense of gaining mastery - of completing the developmental tasks - is a focus of adolescent development in any case, but there needs to be a clear understanding on the part of the facilitator or therapist of how transgenerational trauma has configured the issue of mastery.

⁴⁵ Lichtenberg, P, Gibbons, D, & van Beusekom, J. Working with Victims Clinical Social Work Journal, 22, 211-222 (1994)

⁴⁶ Beverly James Treating Traumatized Children: New Insights and Creative Interventions. New York: the Free Press. (1989)

- 3 support some understanding of transgenerational trauma to **encourage the sense of power and self agency.** This needs to reflect also the transformative power of trauma, expressed in strong community development, art, music, creative activities, and changes to how we live.

The adolescent developmental tasks of disembedding, interiority and integration must be reconsidered in the specific ways in which these incorporate the experience of conflict and a history of trauma.

3

SECTION

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE GROUP

Introduction

In this section we describe in more detail the often complex experience of working with this group of young people and, using the theoretical framework outlined in Section 2, draw out the learning for those involved in working with young people.

We will describe the flow of the work, illustrate the main issues emerging in the young peoples' discussions and link these to an understanding of the field of adolescent development.

Organising the information

After each session we reviewed our experience of the group using a proforma which included the following:

- Who was involved in the group and what were the levels of participation?
- What were the issues that arose and polarities that appeared in the work of the group?
- What themes emerged?
- What metaphors were used that seemed to reflect something of the life of the group?
- What was the structure of the situation and contact boundary styles?
- How was leadership appearing in the group?
- What evidence was there of development?

We also used some prompt questions, introduced activities and included self-reflection on our work as facilitators.

We have divided the information into 3 areas:

- The group organisation and development (including process and dynamics)
- The content (themes and figures) - provided by group discussion
- The role of the adults

These represent three interrelated ways of understanding what was happening in the group over time. These general headings represent how we reflected on the group and our relationship with the young people. They also often structured our interaction as a group together and seemed to provide the underlying framework for the time spent together.

- **Under group organisation and development,** (process and dynamics, we describe the history of the group, how the young people organised and participated in the group and responded to outside influences. This illustrates how each negotiated being a *part of or apart from* this group.
- The **content of discussion** was provided by young people themselves and was often controversial as it was unclear as to whether the young people wanted us to bring an agenda or form them to develop this for themselves i.e. to decide what they wanted to talk about, how and when. We will say more about this later when we discuss the organisation of the group. We also have organised the content under general headings as these arose on a week-by-week basis to illustrate the numbers of ways in which a particular area of interest was discussed over the weeks.
- The final section, **the role of the adults,** was a very important contributing factor to the development of this group not only because of our role as co-facilitators but also because of the various adult agendas that criss-crossed the life of this group.

Introduction to the group

We met this group for the first time in December 2004. This was in effect a pre-meeting. The group began formally in January 2005. At this meeting there were six potential group members - three young men and a young woman from the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (C/N/R) community and a young woman and young man from the Protestant/Unionist/loyalist (P/U/L) community.

The pre-group meeting also included a youth worker from each area, responsible for the group between meetings, (who was in fact the mother of one of the young women and the brother of one of the young men). The manager of the project from Contact Youth was also present.

All the young people had a history together in a previous group as well as other connections through family, school, community activities and work.

When we formally began the group in January 2005, the number had risen to 8. Two of the young

Catholic men from the pre-meeting had gone - one to work in the South and another to GAA training on the night the group met. Their places were taken by a young man and woman from the same area. In addition a young woman from the protestant community and young man of Trinidadian/Irish origin whose family lived in the Protestant community joined the group.

In the following week, another young woman joined the group. This session had the greatest number participating - 9. At this stage there were 4 young men and 5 young women, with ages ranging from 15-18. With two of the young men being the eldest at 18+ and almost 18. 5 group members came from C/N/R community and 4 from the P/U/L community.

Group organisation

Over the weeks, every meeting saw a new group - that is, some combination of the maximum number of young people (9) who joined. This meant in group theory terms there was a 'real' group (those actually present) and a 'virtual' group (comprising all nine members and also a notion of the group as it was held in memory⁴⁷). The fluctuation in attendance was explained by work commitments, holidays, school trips, school work and other activities e.g. playing music, dance competitions. However three major issues seemed to have specific impacts on attendance.

1. The purpose of the group - the young people constantly asked about the purpose of the group. This experience clearly was not the kind of group they were used to, such as discussion and activity based outdoor pursuits. They had enjoyed their group life and history together, and talked about wanting to bond more and to go on trips. During the first meeting, when we discussed the purpose of the group, they talked about their experiences on other outdoor activities such as the Terry Enright Award. Indeed it seemed that these young people as a group, were very well supported already.

Often the purpose and activities of our meetings when seen in the context of their experience of traditional youth work activities seemed strange and unfamiliar. As with all new groups, participants attempted to find what is familiar in this new environment⁴⁸, and referred frequently to other shared group experiences. As a group, they had previous experiences of providing information for

⁴⁷ Sean Gaffney describes the virtual group as the maximum number of participants plus one. The one is the idea of the group or the picture of the group as an entity which each person holds in their memory. (In supervision December, 2005)

⁴⁸ Kolodny, RL, Garland, JA, Jones, HE A model for stages of development in social work groups. In Bernstein, S (ed) Explorations in group work, School of Social Work, Boston, University, Boston.(1965)

outside agencies, so the research element - with a view to producing this resource - was familiar and accepted very early on.

However the question of obtaining therapeutic support or that they might have issues in relation to mental health and well-being seemed much more difficult. It was either not relevant to the group at that moment or they were not willing to discuss this with strangers. It seemed that mixing the development of a resource, mental health and personal support was not providing a clear enough focus.

As illustrative of this: one evening early in the programme, we were discussing the question of mental health. One young woman mentioned having seen a programme on television where a man suffered a psychological 'breakdown' after the death of his wife. *'Sure you could tell that he was in a bad way because of the state of his house. It was a tip.'* We asked how this reflected his state of mind. Quickly a number of the young people began talking at the same time explaining that the *'state of your house says a lot about you.'* They then told us about their bedrooms - one at a time round the group - how well they kept their bedrooms, the colour schemes and what they kept in their bedrooms for example guitars, books, TVs, videos and who they shared with and what that meant for their privacy. Generally nothing was too out of place and they managed to get some privacy.

References to mental health and well-being - if made at all - were in reference to the adult world - in other words, **adult** mental health and concerns about it.

2. A serious community incident

After a serious incident in one of the communities, none of the young people from that area attended the group the following week. Three young people from the other community did attend. Nobody knew what happened to the absent members and it proved very difficult to get any information. This community incident was never formally spoken about in the group - even though we mentioned it - nor was the absence of all of the young people from that particular community. However difficult it may be to determine the direct impact of this event, the group never regained its full membership.

3. Weekly regularity of meetings

During the last meeting the young people restated they were confused as to the purpose of the group. Of more importance to them however, and had

greatest impact on their attendance, was the regularity of meeting every Wednesday night. (They referred to this as 'too formal'). The regularity of group meetings made it very difficult for them to attend every week. The young people were involved in many activities - earning money (sometimes two and three jobs) often a financial necessity in the family, some had care responsibilities and family arrangements, hobbies, pastimes and activities, homework and school functions/trips, sometimes abroad, offering a glimpse of the very busy and often pressurised lives of young people.

Paradoxically, the weekly meeting also allowed members to miss a group session knowing it would still be happening the following Wednesday with a certainty that someone would be there even if they were not.

The group or groups

As stated above, when we met the young people they already had a history together. In addition, 2 major sub-groups reflected their communities of origin. (This was clearly evident the week when no one from one community was present and this was accepted with apparently minimum curiosity). The need to have a youth worker from each community available between sessions with responsibility for arranging travel to the venue, supported the existence of the sub groups.

Within the sub groups, the young people were also connected through family ties, community involvement and school life and to the youth leaders.

The group was very skilled and experienced in the spoken and unspoken rules of various kinds of groups and shared an expectation that this group would be similar.

In effect we did not meet as a single group in this work. ***In every session there was a different combination of the full membership - in fact a new group each week.*** In group development terms each week contained the full group experience. That is,

- continuum of a part of and apart from
- the holding of the old group formation as a reference point
- the influence of the 'virtual' group
- the group's pairings, special relationships reflected each new configuration - e.g. one friend continuing to attend when the other had stopped, forming a new pairing in relation to the common experience of a parent's death

- new sub groups reflecting the interest of the group each week.

Often the movement in the group from week to week and during sessions seemed like a kaleidoscope, with the ability to expand, reconfiguring with patterns forming randomly.

The actual group and the virtual group

Many group workers and group leaders are puzzled and concerned about the fluctuating attendance of young people in groups even where the activities and agendas have been organised around the expressed needs of the young people involved and meticulously attended to.

How might this fluctuation be understood in terms of Group Theory?

It is important to say something about the difference between the actual group and the virtual group and the important role they play in the life of the group. The actual group is the combination of young people in the room at any point in time. The virtual group is the maximum number of participants plus one – this additional notional '1' member representing the idea of the whole group. In a sense therefore there were ten in this virtual group.

So by holding the notion of a virtual group of 10, the group was always in the room and with this certainty, combinations of young people attended as they needed or wanted.

It seemed to us that the young people had a very strong sense of themselves as a group and there seemed to be some understanding of the group as consisting of all nine members even though all nine members attended only once. This action of combining differently each week provided a way of managing participation in the group and to give us some insight into how young people manage the experience of having a group available to them. For example:

1. The young people had made a commitment both to the youth workers and to us to attend the group. They found a way to honour the commitment without having to attend every single week. Those who did attend would represent the group.
2. It is also possible to say that the young people honoured and preserved their sense of being a group of nine, by preserving the connection with each other. This sense of connection was a resource for them as changes in their lives began to pull them in different directions or as current forces in their lives outside the group supported their moving away from each other - to differentiate at this time (e.g. the serious incident in one community, some preparing to leave school, some seeing the next stage of their lives, or balancing the increasing complexity of their lives as adulthood approached with demands made on them by increasing responsibilities). In effect they were using the current group to end their history of being together in groups.
3. We could also understand the combinations of young people in terms of what needed to be spoken about. For example, when two young people spoke about the violent deaths of relatives and when a sub group of girls seemed to want to speak of what could be seen as 'girly things'. On the evening when the two eldest boys returned to the group, they wanted to talk about the structure and organisation of the group and indeed how to bring it to an end.
4. The various combinations also seemed to reflect the difference in how they related to and participated in the adult world. We couldn't reach an agreement on how to end which included the whole group and this seemed to mark the gap between the older and younger group members. The young men wanted to meet us for lunch and a drink and did not see any need for a residential. This seemed to reflect their relative freedom, being the legal age to drink alcohol, their focus on the future and their commitment to career development, preparing to leave home or join the adult world. The younger women, potentially with less freedom legally and socially, wanted a residential as it provided them with more freedom to drink, to dance, to stay out late, to be away from home.
5. As the young people moved in and out of contact with us over the weeks, it became clear that we also held some notion of the 'real' group as being the group of 9 and that on a weekly basis we addressed a sub set of that group. As we kept a record of who attended and what the issues were that week, gradually patterns and meanings began to emerge which illustrated the power of a group to choose how to engage with each other and what the agenda would be.

6. Holding space for the absent members at the weekly groups was important in providing safety for individuals to prioritise, and decide what was important for them in each week.

A part of and apart from

There were many examples of being a part of and apart from. In the table below we have outlined some broad indicators of this and these can be seen in greater detail in the section on **content**.

only two people actually left the group

joining in their common experience of being young
- stories, recalling their previous experiences

explaining each other's absences and keeping a
place in the group for them to return to

sharing experiences which were not spoken about
in previous groups - liking Irish, wanting to learn it;
relatives' deaths and who was responsible for
them

breaking the 'rules' of the previous group

wanting to include us in the group - we could all
go away on a trip for '*bonding*'; wanting to go to
the pictures

not formally ending the group so in some way it
still exists



a part of

apart from



going away on trips like the last group -
comparing to previous activity groups

wanting an agenda like other groups

smoke breaks, lateness

staying silent and hidden in the group
'I don't want to talk about any of this'
disappearing from the group

having other activities on the same night

too much formality meeting every week
and so not always attending

not meeting as a group again even to
end the group

Content - Figures and Themes

Often work with groups is organised around an agenda albeit agreed between the group facilitator and the young people themselves. This generally means that each time the group meets it will be organised around a particular issue or interest. In a way, this mirrors the curriculum at school. It also assumes a particular way of focusing on an interest (i.e. within the boundary of that particular session or that particular week's topic).

As facilitators approaching the work, we were also influenced by the idea of establishing a common agenda, which would require specific preparation for the sessions. What became clear very early on was that our preparation for the sessions was regularly changed by the emerging interest of the young people in the moment of the group.

The group generally decided the content for discussion. From time to time we intervened with a question or activity though usually only in response to the group process. By using the word **content** we are referring to the figures of interest that returned again and again, catching the attention of the group, forming these themes for the group's work.

Often the figure emerged from what seemed to be 'general chatter' although the group assured us that they could follow connections in the discussions, even where there seemed to be a great deal of 'over talking'. Interest rose and fell and it was often during the review at the end of each session the theme stood out clearly.

For example:

- Session 1 Story of Cú Chullain / shared legend/ and the trip to the Cooley Mountains shared enjoyable activities
- Session 2 Religion and beliefs including education
- Session 3 The absence of half the group/ways of handling frightening events and experiences
- Session 4 Death and the political conflict
- Session 5 The Somme / cultural difference / belonging not belonging

Session 6 The Formal / Wealth / Girls' lives

Session 7 The ending / leaving

Having discussed something that caught their interest, the young people would then return to the theme over the following weeks, using many of their life experiences to widen and deepen their individual and group understanding of it.

It is equally important to remember what was **not talked** about. Both spoken and unspoken issues contribute to relationships. The choice of what is voiced is determined by many factors - e.g. by what is appropriate in different contexts, people, age groups, social codes and values.

However, there are additional factors in the transition from political conflict which influence choices of what can and cannot yet be spoken about⁴⁹.

At first glance the discussions appear to have wandered very far and wide. Often it seemed very difficult to follow the rapidly-changing interest of the group - so much seemed to be spoken about so quickly. However, by tracing the developing themes of the work, we learned not only what were of interest and concern to young people and how they talk about these themes, but how such themes relate to the tasks of adolescent development itself.

The Themes of the Work

Derek Woods, in his paper Group Therapy for adolescents⁵⁰ suggests that young people are asking four basic identity questions:

- Who am I?
- With whom do I identify?
- What do I believe in?
- Where am I going?

These questions are clearly identifiable in the themes that emerged throughout the group discussions, which are outlined below. However, we would also add that these questions must be **relational** questions rather than, as the questions literally suggest, the young person struggling in isolation.

⁴⁹ Burrows and Keenan (2004) 'We'll Never be the Same': learning with children, parents and communities through political conflict and trauma. Barnardo's publication.

⁵⁰ [Http://www.mental-health-matters.com](http://www.mental-health-matters.com)

As McConville states:

'Adolescents need to feel a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves: to belong to a family, to be part of a group, to participate in a tradition, to be anchored in enduring relationships. In this way, the adolescent self emerges from a ground of connection and commitment of taking in and giving out, of caring and being cared about. With this sort of ground, the adolescent inherits a capacity to manage the continuity of self and other and to integrate an essential interdependency into the self's evolving structure' (Pg 133).

The following is a list of themes which emerged and re-emerged throughout the life of the group :

- Identity
- Economics and work
- Politics
- Culture
- Family
- Staying and going
- Gender and sexuality
- History / stories
- The future and becoming
- Mental health

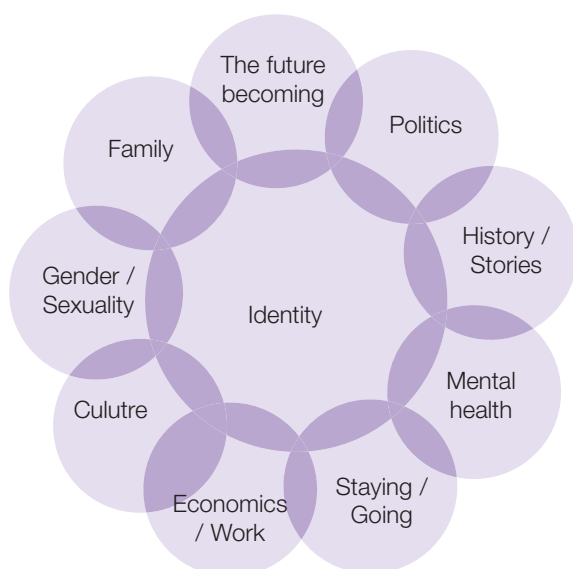


Figure 7

All the themes, with the exception of mental health, emerged organically from group discussions. Mental health is an imported theme specific to the research component of the work and a major focus that **we** brought to the work. Because of this structural difference mental health will be the final theme dealt with in this section.

The themes are outlined on a week-by-week basis/

The main purpose of organising the information in this way is to show the looping (the recursive and nested nature) of the discussions which characterised the work.

Although **identity** is the first of the themes, clearly each of the other themes extend and bring a different perspective to identity, to this developing sense of self.

Futhermore – as a core theme – identity is described in greater detail than the rest.

Identity

Pre-meeting: the theme of identity was taken up by

- Formal introductions
- Informal information
- Coded information

In answer to a suggestion 'to say something about yourself that you'd like others to know about you', the young people formally identified themselves by name, told us where they lived and what they were currently doing or planning to do in the future.

However, they also identified themselves in terms of who they were related to in the group. The group members also identified themselves in terms of what they did (e.g. one person was a musician, one person was a graffiti artist, one person played for the Gaelic Athletic Association, one person admired Che Guevara, and one group member was applying to join the British Army).

Coded identification was carried in the extra information they gave us about themselves for example joining the Army (British), playing sport with the GAA (Irish). Young people also identified themselves informally for example by referring to one person as 'the joker' or 'the quiet one.'

Week 1 (group) The theme of identity was developed

- By the young people describing their connections to each other both inside and outside the group
- Separation
- Formal introductions again
- Difference from the others

There were best friends and cousins in the group. They described their history together through other groups; some attended the same school, were friends outside the group both because of where they lived and their shared interests. One of the new members, with an African/Trinidad/Irish background had very different life experiences.

Two had left because of other commitments. Four new people arrived.

Week 2 This week was characterised by

- Formal introductions with a new member joining
- Discovering new ways to present or describe themselves
- Someone different from the group in general

The new person in the group spoke Irish and attended an *lán-Gaeilge* (Irish medium) school. This clearly connected with another young person in the group who also wanted to speak Irish but didn't think that was possible because of where he lived. There was a lot of talk this week about cultures and religion, in particular the Catholic religion (memories of First Holy Communion, First Confession, going to Mass, the power of the Pope) and African religions and the Koran (memories of being in Africa, hearing stories from parents and grandparents, learning about this in Trinidad).

New words were discovered for example 'agnostic' and applied/tried on for 'fit', 'I think I'm agnostic.'

Week 3 This week was characterised by

- A splitting and re-defining of the subgroups by culture and political background

- Difference and connections inside and outside the group
- Choice of activity /entertainment

Only three young people (from the P/U/L community) attended. The other sub-group made up of young people (C/N/R) did not attend. We guessed this was because of a serious incident which occurred in their area and which deeply affected that community.

The young people who did turn up knew nothing about the others current circumstances. The discussion instead was about how to use the evening. This led to a discussion about types of films they liked, entertainment they liked, what they could attend because of their age. One young woman from this sub-group was also absent due to a dance competition. This was new information about this young woman.

Week 4 In terms of identity, this session was characterised by polarities:

- By saying nothing and saying deeply private things
- Change and no change
- Connection with life and with death
- Hope and resignation

No one spoke about the incident of the previous week that had caused so much conflicting response in one community, nor commented on the fact that no one from that community had attended the previous week. On the other hand, two of the young women were late because they went to Mass for Ash Wednesday and one came to the group with the mark of the ashes on her forehead - a symbolic reminder of death. During this session two people in the group told the story about the murder of a relative - one by loyalists and the other killed 'by his own'.

The young woman who spoke Irish who initially declared that she hated it, now said she wanted to teach Irish. The young woman who wanted to join the Army was no longer sure that that was still what she wanted to do. One young woman declared that in five years she would probably be 'in the bed or dead.' One of the young men was very dispirited about his training and education. 'All this education and you just change jobs every couple of years.' One young woman was despairing and angry

'doing childcare for the fifth year – repetitive and boring. No one seems to check that you keep doing the same thing over and over again. It's a dead end.'

Week 5

In this session identity was characterised by:

- Tradition and change
- Connection to family and community

There was only one young man present in this session, and the young women used the opportunity to discuss their views on the lives of women - effectively excluding him from the sub-group discussion. The discussion included traditional and non-traditional roles for women - work, the future, love and marriage, the inequality of wealth. One young woman wanted to join the Army and to fight in Iraq for her country. Another young woman declared that even if she discovered after her engagement that she didn't love the man she would marry him out of duty anyway.

During the break, the young Catholic women went for 'a smoke'. This seemed to create a space for the young woman who wanted to join the British Army to talk about her visit to the Somme battlefield and how she felt very connected to her culture and history. This was who she was ('it's our culture'). Later, when another young Catholic woman was talking about her job as a waitress, in a coded reference to the political conflict and her loyalties said that she would not work in certain places. During the session, the one young man present was constantly texting on his mobile phone and made it clear that he did not share their interests and did not want to be part of the conversation even though more general topics were discussed such as wealth, political /cultural loyalty. This week clearly evolved as a young women's sub group

Week 6

In this session identity was characterised by:

- Change
- Age/ focus of development

Change was particularly important in this session. Two of the young men also the oldest in the group had returned after a number of weeks' absence. They wanted to discuss how the group should

continue - if indeed it was to continue at all. They seemed to have much more personal authority and wanted to impose more structure on the group. As we discussed how to end the group they wanted to meet us for lunch, being legally eligible to drink alcohol, to move easily between the late adolescent world of part-time jobs and study and surer of their unique and authoritative place in the adult world. The young women, on the other hand, who were a year to eighteen months younger were more interested in a residential which would give them greater scope for freedom away from home and the opportunity for more 'adult' experiences - for example being served in pubs and staying out late.

At this last group meeting, the difference between the older and younger members was most pronounced, illustrating clearly the orientation towards the future among the older members - a sense of the longer term view with experience being open-ended and moving away. The younger people seemed to be focused more on a short term experience, something that would take them out and then loop back to the normal routine.

• Economics and work

Under this theme we included the group talking about

- **their jobs**
- **their commitments at home**
- **their voluntary work or community work**
- **their place in the economic unit of the family**

The young people began talking in the pre-group about their part time jobs outside the home for which they were paid and the jobs they wanted to do in the future. In this first meeting we discovered that already one of the group was intending to go to work in Limerick. He would not be attending the group. This was to happen periodically throughout the life of the group as members work patterns changed, extra work became available or family commitments were prioritised.

As the weeks continued, work and future employment were regular topics for discussion - working at home, in paid or unpaid work, working abroad, volunteering, the level of home commitments, how work was valued and wages paid. To use their own words the 'amount of money some people had was obscene.'

Talking about responsibilities at home led to a discussion of the roles of men and women at home. Some of the young women carried very heavy workloads and some were 'protected because my mother shares the work out with my brothers'. One young woman talked about how she tidied up after her sister because her sister was a wage earner (had to go to work). One of the young men very quickly agreed with this and stated that his father carried three jobs so he had a heavy responsibility at home for himself and his brother.

To leave home for work was already a firmly accepted reality in the minds of these young people. We could speculate about the influence of the history of Emigration and unemployment and different experiences of each community. What was clear from the first meeting was the acceptance that finding permanent work in the adult world would be likely to mean emigration.

Their ability to earn money was a necessity for these young people and their families as well as providing some independence. They came from communities which had a long history of poverty, low wages and unemployment.

Despite this however, many were also involved in volunteering in the community as well as attending youth groups and youth camps.

It was startling to learn of the level of commitment and activities these young people were involved in. When they were finding it difficult to meet with us they were genuinely working with a very heavily committed timetable to other activities.

Some of the young people were very optimistic about what they wanted to do in the future - teaching, a tour guide, music. They liked working at the things they chose to do. One young woman loved outdoor work, another was proud of her work as a receptionist, one young man loved his work as a singer and musician, another his artistic ability. They laughed and made jokes about the accident-prone joiner. Not all were traditional choices. For example, a young woman wanted to be a car mechanic, a young man to be a primary school teacher, or to work abroad, to be an artist.

It became clear that the closer the young person was to late adolescence (integration in development terms), the more the future was a looming reality. In

this case they thought more clearly about the future and had more definite plans as it took shape both in their mind and their immediate time frame. These were the young people who felt they could influence and shape their future lives - clearly not all did.

Others had a much bleaker view, work and economic conditions in the future would simply be a continuation of their present low wages, part-time work, temporary work, child-rearing, living at or near home. Towards the younger end of the age group - the future was too far away, too hazy, too much a part of the world outside to be of immediate concern.

• Politics

In this theme, all references to the political world were considered i.e. the relationships of power expressed in all aspects of life.

In the pre meeting, joining the British Army, playing sport in the GAA, Ché Guevara, and Cuba were all explicitly part of the discussion. At the same time, there were a number of coded references to politics belonging to a life outside the group. These figures emerged again in the first group session with the additional references to the Irish language and the murder of Terry Enright.

In the first instance we noted that no one seemed concerned to challenge one young woman's wish to join the British Army despite each community represented by these young people having experienced the British Army very differently. In addition, although the Terry Enright Award was talked about, the origins of the award or the murder of Terry Enright by Loyalists was not discussed.

This illustrated a pattern that was to continue throughout the life of the group. Unionist culture and politics - the dominant ideology, carried by a majority in the broader society - was openly stated, as if this was not problematic - as if it was the norm against which everything else was placed⁵¹. (By dominant ideology we mean the automatic understanding of the world, as if that understanding was common sense and natural. For example often women have to draw attention to their needs or views in a way that men do not).

Nationalist and Republican culture and politics on the other hand was not spoken about freely in the group and were referred to in a more coded way, not

being directly stated. In this respect, the life of the group seemed to reflect the world outside, where the bigger political environment is a key determinant in how we relate to each other. However, change was also evident in that the young people from Unionist backgrounds, mostly talked about the specifics of culture and politics - flags, the Somme - in their own subgroup, and during the break.

By session two, we discovered a rule carried into the group from their previous group experiences, that did not allow the presence of flags or emblems, making the group a 'neutral zone.' Furthermore, there seemed to be an agreement that they did not *'talk too deeply about families'* and family history. This process had provided safety and made room for the group to talk about other issues that affected the lives of young people.

However, having made a break with the rules of previous group experiences, from time to time something was said which jarred against this arrangement. For instance, the Irish language was strongly present in the group and political murders were raised at the very end of one session when there was time only to mention it briefly.

On the other hand, the Catholic Church and religion, Irish legend and folk tales were frequently part of the discussion and seemed a safe enough difference. The young people seemed familiar with this mechanism for talking about republicanism and nationalism. In one session the story of the mythical figure of Cú Chullain was told by a group leader which connected with the groups trip to the Cooley Mountains as well as the two political communities represented in the room. It was one of the few times when everyone was quiet, listening to the story. The Cú Chullain hero from Celtic prehistory is depicted on murals in both Loyalist and Republican areas.

A stark illustration of this occurred on the third week, when a significant event in one community meant that those young people did not attend the group. Only three young people from the P/U/L community attended. They did not discuss the event, referring to it only as a possible explanation for the absence of the others. The following week - when the group came back together again - this event was not referred to despite our encouragement to do so. This seemed very strange as the event dominated the media throughout the intervening week.

It may have been an indication to us that, in its common interests, this group had decided not only what they would talk about but also how they would talk about it. Possibly, there were other places for other discussions.

However, this changed completely again the following week, in a smaller and therefore safer combination, two of the young people spoke about the violent deaths of parents.

Having reached the limit at that time of what could be said about the reality of the political context, the following week the discussion changed tack and encompassed a very passionate critique of 'obscene wealth', the inequality in the world, starvation and poverty, the war in Iraq, the battlefield of the Somme, and gender based inequality as experienced in the home.

• Culture

Here we included references to tradition, entertainment, activities, rituals that show how the community worldview is translated into behaviour and action.

In that sense we don't see youth culture as a separate culture but as a subculture and the way young people express responses to the dominant culture. Youth culture was present in many references made by the group, the use of the mobile phone, dress.

In the pre meeting there was a wide sweep of cultural references which formed the boundary of the cultural environment - Britain and Ireland, youth culture, Gaelic culture, the external world - Cuba and Ché Guevara, socialism and class, women's culture. These themes were interwoven throughout the sessions. This group took great delight in outdoor activities and going away on group trips. This seemed commonplace for them.

They had a strong group culture and a strong history together that they brought to this environment. As the weeks went on we noticed a gradual change with gaps opening up between the different age groups, between the young men and women, and between the sense of themselves as a current group and as a historical group. This was evidenced in the content by choosing to talk about things that prior to this they had had rules about. The fact that they could not reach agreement in the last session about

⁵¹ Antonio Gramsci The Prison Notebooks 1971 Lawrence and Wishart "...ideology is not to be judged by its truth or falsity" but by its ability to act as the cement of social unification.

Jorge Larraín The Concept of Ideology Hutchinson University Press (1979)

"Ideology..... (represents) its interests as the common interests of all members of society that is expressed in ideal form;.....the only universal, valid rational ones"

how to end the group suggests there was a reconfiguration occurring, in this case, around gender and age.

• The family

This theme includes all references to the current family or to thoughts about family life.

A significant impact on the group was the fact that one of the youth leaders was the mother of a group member and this seemed to provide sufficient support for the group to continue when it may not have done so otherwise. The other youth leader was a brother of a group member who left the group early on. Two cousins were in the group and another two members had family connections through an aunt.

The family played a very significant role in the discussions throughout the life of the group. It provided both a backdrop for their emerging difference and a strong connection to history and community even though, during some group sessions, there were no direct references to the family. The family is the ground from which the young person emerges and where they learn their 'basic repertoire' of skills for contacting the environment.

'The ground of family meaning is absorbed in the same way as culture or language are absorbed, sifting experience by implicitly defining the nature of what is, without itself becoming a figural theme of experience'
(McConville, 1995, pg 25).'

To some extent this group were now willing to include their families where previously they had been unwilling to do so. Within the references to family, the group described some key aspects of their life in the family. One of the most significant of these was a clear reference to adolescent development itself i.e. of being 'like two people' - one who was recognisable inside the family when at home, and the second, the person who engaged with friends, peers, work mates outside the family home. Everyone in the group spoke clearly about this phenomenon describing it as a way of surviving, of 'being themselves' knowing that who they were outside the family home could not be brought into the family home.

At the same time, connectedness within the family and to the extended family was also discussed - how young people understood their place in the family and their role in the family e.g. taking care of the wage earner. In one respect, this is not surprising since traditionally the wage-earner has taken priority in the family. However, these young people's **willingness** to take on this role was **impressive**, recognising the importance of their activities to family life.

Earning enough money, holding down two and three jobs, being involved in the community, surviving trauma and supporting mental health and well being, responding to sisters and brothers, were all brought to the group as part of the family landscape with which the young people both connected and identified their differences with statements like *'I'm never going to be like that.'*

Activity shared with parents was an important aspect of the discussion especially where those activities clearly confirmed an emerging life of the young people through interests such as making CDs, song writing, and household chores shared equally between sisters and brothers. (In terms of adolescent development - as mentioned earlier - the emerging 'self' is supported or not by the degree of affirmation given by adults).

One of the most important discussions in the group was in relation to the murder of a parent and the impact this had on the surviving parent, the family and the community. The young people seemed to find support in being able to talk to their peers, to recognise the impact on the surviving parent and take over some responsibilities, and to acknowledge the role of the community in relation to the event. This group of young people had found a way to create enough safety and support for themselves for this discussion to take place.

• **Staying/going represented a significant polarity for the group.**

We included under this theme anything which referred to staying or going re the group, the family, the city, the country, including reference to foreign countries, which suggested an alternative way of living.

From the beginning there was a constant coming and going in the group. Young people leaving Belfast for work permanently or temporarily, having to go to work that night, going on school trips, other activities like competitions and music gigs. In the first session one young person said that they wouldn't be coming back as they were going to work away from home. Another said that she was likely to start work somewhere else 'in a couple of months.' In the second session two young people had left and more joined.

The combination of group members being available to meet each week allowed others to come and go in different combinations.

In the early days of the group the possibility of us all going on a trip together was discussed on a number of occasions. This was seen as creating a possibility 'to bond more.'

Coming and going was expressed also in terms of countries they had been to, come from, or intended to go to in the future. The possibility of going away also included finding a career in tourism and travel, in the army, or volunteering in countries experiencing crisis or deprivation.

Leaving Belfast was of great importance to some group members but living round the corner from the family was deeply important to others. For some young people leaving was a significant marker for becoming fully themselves and for others it was less important. For many young people of course, the possibility of travelling is metaphorically referring to the process of becoming adult before having all the responsibilities that come with adulthood which in some ways, restrict the possibility of experience.

However, specific to this context, it was taken for granted, taken as normal that they would have to go away to work or to fulfil themselves, which seemed to refer to the history and culture of the country (i.e. patterns of emigration/the experience of limited

opportunities at home/possibly only traditional work available/the effect of discrimination/class issues).

• **History and stories**

This includes any reference to formal history, legend, mythology and personal stories.

A number of types of story stand out when considering the work of these young people. The group was always filled with stories. This was significant for us because young people stated repeatedly that they wanted to talk in the way they wanted. They brought the focus of the work through their stories. These stories tell us about the condition of their lives, their dreams and plans for the future, their connection with the past, connection with their families, their experience of the political conflict, and experiments with adult life (e.g. the accident-prone joiner, the Cú Chullain myth, jumping of the pier into cold water, outdoor activities in the Cooley Mountains, drinking too much Red Bull, life in Trinidad, cultural life in Africa, volunteering at summer camp in Austria, a young joyrider being killed, being scared at home alone, playing music, stories from school life, stories from home life, the murders of parents, school formals, ending relationships, a visit to the Somme, the visit to New York).

And of course we shared stories, and through this made connections across cultures and also across generations. For example when we told the story of the Cú Chullain myth a connection was established between the three points of the group - those from the Unionist background who now recognise Cú Chullain as part of their mythology and the young people from a nationalist background who clearly were familiar with the name of Cú Chullain, if not with the details of the story and ourselves, as facilitators.

The stories provided an opening up and deepening of experience. For example when we talked about our school experiences, what seemed to them a universal experience of school (theirs) was not necessarily the only one and that, post-school life could take many different directions.

If the stories told each week were considered to be illustrative of the focus of the group representing their main 'agenda' item then:

Week 1 - could be the connection between working life choices and possibilities and Teenage Dreams

Week 2 - death / strength and excitement for life

Week 3 - real horror and imagined horror

Week 4 - effect of living with the political conflict, grief and humour

Week 6 - the lives of women and girls, poverty and wealth

Week 7 - ending/moving on

Gender/sexuality

This section relates to the delineation of gender roles, expectations, occupations, education and action in the group.

An important point in terms of group structure and gender was that the young women were all around 16 - 17 years old and two of the young men were 18 and 18+. This difference in age was clear in terms of how they saw their ability to:

- a. Influence their surroundings e.g. defending themselves in the face of attack or fear or doing the same course over and over, dullness of education
- b. Ability to move around in the world getting served in bars, getting into '18' rated films, drive cars
- c. The reality of the impending future of life after school

One 17 year old young man spoke about his uncertainty and sense of lacking influence and ability to move around in the world, (he wanted to learn Irish but how and where to go to).

The lives of young women and girls were present in the discussions in many ways. Certainly the young women were aware of the condition of women's lives and the role they occupy in this culture. Partly they wanted something different (*'to be a mechanic in the Army/fight for my country'*). They also expressed despair at the lack of influence and possibility in their lives (*'I'd marry him even if I knew I'd made a mistake'*), (*'I'll be in the bed or dead in five years'*) as well as expressions of their sense of power and influence (*'I refused to work there or serve them'*), (*'I'm not working at home if my brothers aren't helping'*), (*'We'll have a residential then - just us girls'*).

Their mothers' lives were also very important in how they understood women - e.g.

'She was married at 16. That'll never happen to me!'

'My mother protects me at home and makes sure the boys do their bit.'

'My mother works all the time both at home, in the community. The boys do nothing.'

'They always think girls should do childcare. You think we could do nothing else!'

They saw issues of mental health clearly in their mothers' lives when they talked about the stress of rearing a family, coping with murders, always cleaning and not eating properly, having 'nervous' conditions, being married too young, having children too young. Men were generally seen as not being much help with family life or absent through death, responsibilities outside the home, multiple jobs. There was a notable exception to this where one father was seen as carrying most of the work within and outside the home.

Handling relationships was a topic of discussion that caused a lot of humour and illustrated how difficult it was to end relationships cleanly, or feeling trapped by convention e.g. *'I'd just avoid him;'* *'I'd go with someone else and let him hear about it;'* *'I'd marry him anyway even if the engagement was a mistake.'*

Often it was the young women who were strongly critical of the gap between rich and poor and the misuse of money. The discussion about the school formal was clearly a criticism of the 'waste of food and money' although they were excited about going and what they would wear.

It was very clear in the last session when the older participants (young men) wanted to have lunch and talk whereas the younger people (young women) wanted a residential which extended their previous group experiences and was a way of also finding experiences that they couldn't have at home.

• Mental health

In this theme we included any direct reference to mental health or emotional wellbeing or any allusion to it.

At no time in the group was there **any direct reference** to needing or wanting support in relation to mental health and well-being either as individuals or as a group. Personal support was clearly the agenda that we brought as part of the action research. So having asked initially what supported them and what did not in the first group meeting, thereafter we intervened only where it seemed useful in order to support a line of discussion, answer questions, or give information.

Only twice was mental health related by them and this was not in terms of seeking support. In the pre-group meeting one young person did pose the question, "Do you think we're mental?" In session four, one person reported having had panic attacks in the past and another feeling under pressure from too much work. When violent death was raised in the fourth session there was an attempt to deflect from this on the grounds that someone would "get upset."

Furthermore, when the group did make references to mental health and well-being, it was in reference to adults who were not coping well. It seemed they were saying it was the adults who needed support and not these young people.

What became clear therefore, was that:

1. Concerns in relation to the mental health either of young people in general or related to this specific group would not be a focus for discussion in this group. This seemed perfectly reasonable. We were strangers and they were a group that to date had survived very well and were well supported. It may have been that they did not share our concern about the mental health and well-being of young people although this seems to be contradicted by the fact that one of the young people had already addressed a public meeting on the issue of young people and mental health.
2. We would be looking at group process together with our understanding of transgenerational trauma and adolescent development **to deduce** what support might be present.

3. We needed to encourage the view that mental health needs and support can also mean supporting what is already a creative strategy for living. The young people seemed no different from the community in general and in the main saw mental health support as either for people with mental illness or a dysfunction which needs to be fixed or for those who cannot cope.

If we think in terms of the creative adjustments needed to survive trauma, it could be that one of the creative adjustments this group made was simply to be a functioning well supported group and that was enough (i.e. to discuss what they wanted in the way they wanted).

There is a danger in attempting to identify the mental health support needs of young people by focussing on or looking for symptoms and problems rather than **supporting the process of development itself**. What is important for us as adults is to develop whatever skills are available and related to the specifics of that context⁵² and understand these **in relation to the developmental process itself**.

'Therapy with adolescence, distilled to its skeletal structure, is nothing more and nothing less than the art of promoting this developmental process in individuals and families who have become stuck, derailed along the way' (McConville, pg257 1995).

What is clear from the discussion over the weeks is that this group addressed **indirectly**, the mental health concerns of their communities, those specifically related to young people as well as how mental health support is viewed. In attending to the group process, we became alerted to what we were being taught about adolescence itself and therefore could begin to identify support for the developmental tasks of the young people.

To summarise

Mental health support was present in 3 ways throughout the life of the group.

1. How support is seen

- Association of mental health with mental illness, insanity
- General comments in relation to support needs
- Association of mental health with not coping and being seen to be not coping

⁵¹ Burrows and Keenan (2004) 'We'll Never be the Same': learning with children, parents and communities through political conflict and trauma. Barnardo's publication.

2. Specific therapeutic issues identified either through direct comment or through comments in relation to adults or other communities.

- Adults (complex bereavement, violent death, betrayal, being in danger from your own, 'nervous' disorders, problems with eating and self care, alcoholism, explosive aggression, drug use, work, trauma, suicide)
- Others - youth suicide, violence, joyriding

3 Specific developmental needs

- Having to be two people - having to psychologically split in order to relate to different environments (inside and outside home)
- Despair and optimism
- Power and resignation

Family's private history

The political life of the community

The serious incident in the community

Their own mental health and well being

Handling their own emotional responses

Homosexuality

Abuse

Racism

Body Image

Rights - Young peoples', workers, human

What was not said:

It is important to include what seemed not to be talked about. It may seem controversial to attempt to guess at what was not being discussed and we rely on our knowledge and experience of our context and our work as well as the projections and polarities in the group to identify what might have been talked about. Sometimes this was indicated in coded references that would not be understood necessarily by the whole group but would be recognised within subgroups.

We draw attention to this to support those working with young people to trust their instincts and hold what is in the ground of the group - as well as what is made explicit in discussion - as context of the lives of the young people in the group. The fact that such issues are in the ground of the group, existing perhaps as unspoken and unexplored polarities, means that they are available to become figures of interest in the group as safety, confidence, and complexity develops.

Some of these were:

Republicanism

Prison experience

Role of the State

Personal politics



SECTION

SECTION 4 THE ROLE OF THE ADULTS:

Adults were clearly an important influence in the formation and organisation of this group. The role of the adults was always very present in this group:

- by the presence, absence or influence of the youth workers
- the adult agendas which criss-crossed the work of the group
- history of other adults who hitherto had affected the lives of these young people
- the adult facilitators

This section refers specifically to the role of the facilitators in the group and how that has influenced or affected the group process. Meeks (1971)⁵² argues against the danger of forming an 'unholy alliance' with the adolescent based on either over identifying with the adolescent's propensity to act out, indulge his impulses and challenges to authority, or to tacitly align with the parental 'authorities', the forces of judgement and restraint:

'The therapist must avoid the situation wherein the interactive field becomes irredeemably polarised, with ensuing power struggles which defeat the possibility of a therapeutic relationship.'

Our approach held the facilitator as neither being included in the group nor being neutral. This means that by paying attention to how he/she is responding to what is happening in the group, noticing his/her emotional responses and impulses, making interventions or not, there is both a connection and separateness between the group and him/herself. In effect, the facilitator is holding the boundary of the group, supporting group members raise their self awareness and learn how they relate to others.

In co-working a group, polarities and differences can be experienced in ways which are less threatening and more tolerable. Differences held by each facilitator, including cultural, educational and political background, can be present in a way that supports and encourages exploration of sameness and difference. At the same time the facilitators are aware they will be reflecting the differences of the group in their relationship and this is important information for the group process.

When working with young people:

'It is important to look carefully at what aspects of the experience of self get stirred up and brought by the therapist to the therapeutic field....One such factor is the therapists own developmental distance from adolescence.... The ground we bring to this work, the ground that shapes our perception and judgement, is reflective of our own movement through the life cycle. the wonderful and the painful experiences, the unfinished business, the unique resolutions of various developmental themes' (McConville, 1995, p192-193).

⁵² Meeks J (1971) A Fragile alliance, Baltimore, Williams and Wilkins.

Chaos and containment: a group leader perspective

As group leaders, we each experienced the group differently from our own foundation of experience. This emerged in three main ways:

1. the difference in the experience of our own adolescence
2. our historical, cultural, and political differences
3. our age difference

It became clear that two polarities of experience - chaos and containment, were prevalent throughout the work of the group, and carried in the field of the group by each group leader. For one group leader the experience of adolescence was one of containment, certainty about the family and the world described as a feeling of 'boxes within boxes'. Adolescent development appeared to progress in a very orderly fashion. For the other, adolescence was a time of chaos. The fact that one adolescent period was primarily the 1960s and for the other the 1970s, both raised in Belfast, played a significant role in the facilitators respective experiences of adolescence.

Our projections on the group were surprising:

Leader (A) (with the memory of containment) thought the group was unlike any experience she had had in adolescence. The main sense was one of curiosity and engagement. At the same time, (A) was feeling sure that the group knew what it needed to do and was doing it - even though sometimes the experience of the group talking fast and often over each other with banter and jokes flying thick and fast, was experienced as exciting and dynamic, while at other times as chaotic.

Leader B - (with chaos in her experience of adolescence)- recognised aspects of her chaotic experience of growing up in the stories of the young people and responded to this playfully but with a desire for more group structure.

As co-facilitators this is the reverse of our usual roles and experience with adult groups.

Our projection was also that group members responded differently to each facilitator. Leader A was treated as having had the authority of life experience and could provide safety and containment. Leader B was fun, understood young people, and knew what life as a teenager was like.

The dynamic appeared to be:

Group leader A (memory/experience of containment) In the group	Group leader b (memory/experience of chaos)
Holding back, trust in the process	Desire for more influence
Going with curiosity	Need for order
Interest in how the group discussed and coexisted	Need for sequence
Sense of authority	Playful

Part of this dynamic also arose out of our age difference. This represented differences between each of us in terms of time past and the distance from our own experience of adolescence. Our combined experiences of growing into adulthood and the experience of the young people spans from before the Civil Rights Movement (Mid 1960's), to post ceasefires (1994 - 1996) and the current transitional period. This provided one of the many containers for the work, that as a group of adults and young people we had survived and could contain the experience. In addition, by being aware of this and bringing it into the work, as facilitators we could provide experiences of historical connection and coherence - an unbroken line - to support the young people to develop their own coherent life stories. This seems to us to be of particular importance in the context of the transition from armed conflict.

McConville argues and it is something we were happy to discover in this work:

'I think this common belief - that adolescents will connect better with someone closer to their own age - reflects just how unconnected and alien most adults feel to kids who are in trouble' (McConville pg xii).

SECTION FIVE - KEY LEARNING

'Adolescents can be understood only as part of the larger fields in which they live, and only when we see and appreciate their very personal, subjective struggles to renegotiate their status within those fields, find meaning and a place for themselves, and at the heart of that struggle, give birth to an existential self' (McConville, 1995, p xxiii).

Mental health and emotional well being issues

Mental health is being defined from a field perspective as the resources, challenges and constraints emerging from particular field conditions that are unique for each person. The concept of 'field' 'generates a different way of thinking...where we can recognise that people's lives cannot be separated off and treated in isolation, because their lives overlap and affect one another's in perpetual interdependence' (Parlett, 2000, pg 18)⁵³.

This section draws together and summarises

- a) what the young people said supported their well-being and what did not
- b) what we as facilitators learned from our work with this group

5

SECTION

⁵³ Parlett, M (2000) Creative Adjustments and the Global Field. The British Gestalt Journal Vol.9 No.1.

Examples from the group:**Resources/supports**

- Having an influence
- Interest in Cu Chulainn story as a story for all
- Interest in different religions/beliefs
- Having strong social and political values and beliefs - e.g. wanting to end poverty throughout the world, unhappy about conspicuous consumption
- Group/communal loyalties
- Aspirations and desire for new experiences (e.g. voluntary work abroad)
- Adult support
- Alcohol/drugs
- Bonding
- Not sitting too close to others in the group
- Friends and family
- Humour
- Music
- Sports
- Knowing own abilities
- Being curious, asking questions
- Pride in culture, history, language
- Strong values (e.g. against poverty)
- Sense of connection to others
- Dressing up
- Going out
- Having money
- Qualifications, training, education
- Travel
- Mobiles
- Personal space - bedrooms
- Personal initiative

- Being able to cut into a conversation and change it if bored
- Drawing and other forms of creativity (e.g. singing, music making)
- Careers (excitement about the future, sense of direction)

Challenges and constraints

- Not feeling a sense of influence
- Not being clear about purpose
- Feeling powerless
- Expressions of hopelessness
- Not understanding (e.g. the words some people use)
- Adult agendas
- Not knowing/uncertainty regarding future and no direction
- Boredom
- Not being able to hear others as too many people talking at once
- Deaths - including as a result of the conflict (e.g. of parents)
- Joyriders
- Too much alcohol
- Illegality
- Having to be two different people when at home and with friends
- Being unable to openly end a relationship that isn't wanted
- Not feeling able to be direct in relationships (e.g. running away from, withdrawal), frightened to be direct
- Too many things to do - jobs, cleaning, school
- Bored (e.g. with IT course, aspects of school)
- Negative thoughts (e.g. thinking life won't work out)
- Different loyalties - e.g. flags and how to deal with differences in a mixed group

- Difficulty tolerating differences - e.g. not understanding the language others are using
- Not enough money
- Too much responsibility and pressures (e.g. school, exams, need to work, home responsibilities)
- Other young people who pick on you, bullying
- Concern about a parent/s well being

Other key issues identified by young people

- Place, times and frequency of meeting - venue, residential possibilities and irregular work
- To set the agenda and to be supported with this - neither controlled or left to get on with it

Key learning and guidance for organisations and group leaders

What follows is a list of what we have learned which can benefit future work and contribute to the effectiveness of group interventions.

For organisations

1. **Assumptions** - young people's actions need to be seen as attempts at development, and not pathologised. All young people need particular kinds of support from adults.
2. **Foundations** - there is a need to flag up the various basic assumptions the adults have for the work and to be able to set these aside in the interests of working with the young people's needs (e.g. as research 'objects', 'future citizens', in need of 'treatment'). Distinguishing therapeutic environment from other models of working with young people is necessary. Clarity around competing agendas is essential in order to agree a clear purpose for the work.
3. **Priorities** - young people have different priorities from adults and their lives beat to a different rhythm due to school, work, college, exams and friendship, etc. Greater flexibility is needed (e.g. irregular meetings, residencies, etc), and this has many implications for funders, managers, and practitioners.
4. **Selection of the group** and young people in the group - the needs of the young person need to be assessed - what kind of self and environmental support they have, what kinds of experience, and whether individual or group support would be beneficial. Moreover, there is a need to think about the different kinds of group a young person might need. Experiential group process offers an approach regardless of type of the different kinds of group.
5. **Age** - there will be a need to consider both biological as well as development age on the lines suggested by McConville.
6. **Organisational responsibility and containment** - creating a container for the work needs to be carefully considered in terms of the environment for the work, venue, distinguishing lines of responsibility for organising and for the therapeutic environment. Venues need to be

safe, accessible, with a layout that supports the work, refreshments, etc.

7. **Parents, society and containment** -

transitions and changes in the culture of adults and young people leaves many adults floundering in relation to young people. Frequently, adults experienced what would be considered now as authoritarian, controlling and/or abusive authority. Previous 'containers' of young people such as traditions, church, and certain kinds of adult authority are weakened and new containers have yet to be constructed. Finger pointing at either young people or adults is unhelpful when it assigns blame. Instead, there is a need to structure views in a way that identifies what influences/forces are operating in the field and what supports are missing.

8. **Support** - outside of the group, the kind of environmental support will be needed to support young people to stay in the group needs to be considered.

9. **Funding** - the pressure of funding agenda's impacts on needs led work. This can affect timescale and other issues including an emphasis on numbers attending rather than what is being identified with whatever amount of young people turn up. Slowing down to give consideration to the issues around formation of the group supports the group.

10. **Group leaders/therapists** - are in a specific role with young people and the therapeutic nature of the relationship needs to be understood, supported and safeguarded.

11. **Project management** and organisational work to support the work of the group needs to be carried by the organisations involved.

12. **Resources** - Those working with young people require a comprehensive resource checklist in order to identify and signpost the relevant level and forms of potential support.

13. **An Advisory Group** made up of a mix of relevant skills and expertise can provide vital containment and support for organisational learning, the development of active working partnerships, and support for the work of the group leaders.

14. **Learning** - rather than the funding led focus on numbers of young people participating in a group, it is more beneficial to consider the themes, focus and what actually happened and to recognise the vital role of groups for young people and how young people need and use groups for their development.

For group leaders:

1. **Agenda** - We had thought we might work on one main issue per week. The group preferred to discuss many issues in one session. In this way, the group were managing contact with us and teaching us, and this supported our learning and their authorship. Supporting authorship supports adolescent development.

2. **Therapeutic space** - Discovering and discussing what it means to hold the therapeutic space of the work was central, and the importance of this needs to be more widely understood.

3. **Containment and Structure** - There is a need to focus on containment and understand the difference between containment and structure. In this group, experiential group process was the primary way of working. Experiential group process means working with and supporting the experiences of the group as they emerged. While more structure may also be needed for some groups and we thought about and planned various structured experiments/activities, there is also a need for experiential group process.

4. **Background assessment** - to find out what kind of support (self and environmental) each young person has available is essential in order to identify what they might need. This sort of relational approach to assessment is fundamentally different from individual finger pointing or behavioural checklists. Instead, it focuses on the environment of the young people and how that supports or blocks development. This continues to be a core intervention - e.g. what is supporting this young person to develop and what is not supportive. Thinking about the different kinds of group a young person might need is an important aspect of preparation and pre-group work.

5. **Adolescent development** - knowledge of adolescent development is essential to supporting young people.

wrestle with these issues today in the attempt to become themselves, handle what happens and devise guidelines for their own lives.
6. **Needs and interests** - Working with the needs and interests of the group as they arise requires more from workers in terms of being present and aware of the group as an entity, group members, co-worker, and own experience.
7. **Co-working** in a group setting is desirable in order to facilitate adequate support for the work.
8. **Regular clinical supervision** is an essential support to therapeutic group work with young people.
9. **Group leaders** need to be clear on boundaries of time allocated for the work, while negotiating in order to meet young people's needs.
11. **Rules** - There is a need to consider the sorts of rules operating in youth groups. No politics/no flags, restricts exploration of a vital area of young people's lives.
13. **Facilitators need to learn how to resource themselves** - in order to develop sufficient self support to do this work. Developing self-awareness is central to this as the need to resource effectively will occur in different and unexpected ways in the group.
3. Young people are supported when there is someone outside the immediate family, who with some distance can listen and give advice and support. Research confirms that young people develop resilience (ability to bounce back from difficulties) when there is someone outside the immediate family they can relate to.
4. When things become stressed within the family, young people will pick this up and reflect or 'act this out or in' in various ways in an attempt to understand their feelings.
5. Acting out/in is a young person's way of showing how they are relating to the adult world. Acting out is when a young person acts in ways that can be seen by others and which reflect the strong emotions that can't be expressed currently in other ways. (Generally young men act out but this is increasingly changing. We sometimes notice acting out because it is often done in public).

Acting in is when strong emotions are turned into actions relating to herself (Generally, young women 'act in' through various kinds of self harm and withdrawal. We tend not to notice 'acting in' as this is more hidden).

Guidelines for carers/parents:

1. Everything a young person does is an attempt to develop - even when what they do seems harmful or difficult to handle. Every young person is unique, so their need whilst being similar to others will be personal to them and reflect where they are in their own development.
2. Adults remember their own growing up when they look at their children. Often how we see our children is clouded by our own fears, wishes, expectations and reactions arising out of our own experiences of growing. Adolescent development is the young person's effort to

Adolescents will seek out others of their own age as will their parents and often parents are afraid that they are losing touch with their children. In the process of adolescent development it is natural for parents to seek out other parents, and young people other young people.

When children are young, parents are encouraged to find support with other parents. This needs to be recognised as an important support for parents of adolescent children too.
6. Adolescents will seek out others of their own age as will their parents and often parents are afraid that they are losing touch with their children. In the process of adolescent development it is natural for parents to seek out other parents, and young people other young people.

7. During adolescent development young people are finding ways to leave childhood and engage with adulthood. Often they develop one personality for home and one for outside - effectively developing two separate sides to the one person. By doing so they bridge the gap between home and the world of their peers and also separating home and the rest of the world.
8. In adolescent development young people shift between staying as children and being grown up. Adults provide safety and support by maintaining the adult role and seeking support when they need to.
9. Blaming solves nothing either for the young person or others. Young people's actions are their attempt at growing up and adults give support by modelling adult ways and helping them to think through and talk out ideas and feelings.
10. All actions that young people take are attempts to manage this separation from childhood, their relationships with their families and peers and to maintain a sense of self moving from childhood to adulthood.

Appendix I

Interventions - examples

- Introducing ourselves and what each of us as group leaders saw as the purpose of the group
- Holding a curiosity about and interest in the young people's lives
- Being curious about mental health issues
- Asking what do you want from this group?
- Asking about history of the group? And what keeps you together as a group?
- What supports you/gets you through?
- What doesn't support/gets in the way/makes life difficult?
- Going with the expressed group need - e.g. the group wanting to ask questions of each other and us
- How they saw themselves in 5 years
- Breathing/body awareness and visualisation
- Music
- Flipchart Notes
- Feeding back our learning so far after week 3
- Discussing issues that they raised and questions they asked

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Resources for working with young people (sample only)

Assist workbook: Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (Living Works, Canada)

Exploring Mental Health: a teaching resource for schools - for work with students aged 14-16 (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy online resource)

Fire in my heart: ice in my veins - a journal for teenagers experiencing a loss (Enid Samuel Traisman) Centering Corporation, 1531 N. Saddle Creek Rd., Omaha NE 68104

Go Girls? Supporting girls emotional development and building self-esteem (2002) Jo Adams (Centre for HIV and Sexual Health, Sheffield)

No fear - heading for healthy relationships: a training pack for working with young people. N.I.Women's Aid Federation.

Sound Mind (Design for Living Partnership)
A support guide for practitioners and peer educators working with 13-18year olds giving tips and contacts on communication, friendship, family, bullying, body change, identity and self-esteem. Also, leaflet for young people giving tips for a sound mind.
Tel. 028 90403726

The Little Book of Stuff (Health Action Zone, North and West Belfast) Booklet for young people giving information relevant to young people and a directory of organisations that support young people.
Tel. 028 90237026

Therapeutic groupwork with children (2001) J.Droost and S.Bayley (Speechmark publishing, Oxon)

Youth pack - helping you help young people (2000) Samaritans (available online)

Websites

www.coolsexinfo.org.uk sexual health information

www.contactyouth.org information on N.Ireland's regional counselling organisation for young people

www.DrugsAlcohol.info information on drugs and alcohol

www.heads-away-just-say.com local website for young people with information on wide range of issues including relationships, bullying, depression, bereavement

www.mindbodysoul.gov.uk information about health

www.niccy.org

www.niyouthinfo.org local information on children and young people

www.parentsusingdrugs.org.uk information to support for children and young people affected by parental substance misuse

www.peer-support.org.uk advice and support for young gay, lesbian and bisexual people

www.samaritans.org.uk information on emotional issues including suicidal thoughts and suicide

www.Up-2-You.net information on smoking

www.youngminds.org.uk wide range of articles and information on emotional and mental health issues

www.worldhealthorganisation international information and reports on health, including mental health