

**An Evaluation of *Psychology in the Real World:*
Understanding Yourself and Others Course**

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Introduction

Psychology in the Real World: Understanding Yourself and Others is the title of a 12 week course that the first author has run 3 times over the past 18 months at The Gateway Arts and Education Centre, Shrewsbury. This article is an evaluation of the course and is based on detailed questionnaires sent to 40 participants in July 2005. (A satisfaction survey of *Psychology in the Real World* courses run previously at CHEC in Telford can be found on www.shropsych.org). Several articles based on this evaluation are currently in preparation for submission for publication in academic journals.

The course

The courses run for 12 weeks at an arts and education centre. Participants sign up in the same way they sign up for other courses (e.g. Art or Language classes). It costs £48 (£5 with concessions). The course is actively advertised and promoted at local Community Mental Health Teams (CMHTs) and at other mental health services as well as generally advertised alongside other courses by each venue. People who attend a CMHT have constituted 20-35% of the group each time (Shropshire CMHTs focus on people who have been in psychiatric hospital or are at risk of admission/MHA assessment or have severe problems and multiple needs). Approximately 10% of participants have held professional positions in mental health services. I was available to talk to anyone interested in coming on the course about any worries they had and provide more information than that available in the flyer advertising the course. The Gateway employs a Learning Support Worker (Hugh Cullen) who was able to help anyone who might struggle to attend to fully participate (e.g. show them around the building beforehand, meet to discuss and try and alleviate any worries, arrange for someone to accompany the person free of charge).

In the first meeting participants select from a menu of topics what they are most interested in exploring (see Fig. 1) and are encouraged to suggest other areas that, given sufficient interest from the group, can be included. In subsequent weeks each topic is looked at from a different angle. The course is a product of its postmodern time in the sense that there is an “appreciation of the plasticity and constant change of reality and knowledge, a stress on the priority of concrete experience over fixed abstract principles, and a conviction that no single a priori thought system should govern belief or investigation” (Tarnas, 1996). For example, ‘Why are we so afraid of mental illness?’ involves a lecture and discussion on the history of the concept of mental illness, drawing upon historical accounts (e.g. Porter, 2002) as well as following Foucault’s genealogical investigations into the social construction of knowledge. During ‘In what kinds of ways do our experiences during childhood affect us?’ participants listen to a recording of ‘95 Theses 95’ by Garrison Keillor, a (fictional) account by a man describing his childhood experiences and early adulthood; the participants then do a formulation – a theoretical map of why he is like he is based on the information they have. This tends to include illustrations of object relations theory, Freudian personality theory, transactional analysis and cognitive theory. ‘How come so many people don’t like the way they look?’ takes a social materialist stance looking at the role of capitalism and distal powers (see Smail,

2005) in influencing people's behaviour; an example of material used to convey this can be found on www.shropsych.org/leaflets.htm. 'What is the point of being alive?' starts with Bertrand Russell's quote: "Is man what he appears to the astronomer – a tiny lump of impure carbon and water impotently crawling on a small and unimportant planet?" It draws upon existential psychotherapy (e.g. Yalom, 1980), develops into a group discussion with citations from French existentialists Sartre and Camus, and ends with exploration of what for each of us makes life meaningful. 'What helps us feel safe and secure?' starts with an invitation to the group to think about this question themselves, and involves word association to the word 'insecure' and participants drawing 'safe' 'What is it like to be listened to?' involves paired listening/co-counselling as well as reflection on whether people have ever felt listened to outside the group, whether people feel they have been listened to in the group, and other group reflections. Although the above paragraph contains some complex language (for the sake of brevity), all of the sessions are conducted in 'everyday' language and any technical terms are explained.

The Participants

Either 13 or 14 people signed up for each course, with 6 people in total dropping out before the end of the three courses. The 40 people who had attended the courses over the 2004-05 period were sent a detailed questionnaire asking them about their thoughts on the course (see Appendix 1). 23 questionnaires were returned - a response rate of 58% which is comparatively high for a relatively lengthy postal questionnaire. 82% of the respondents were female (compared with 78% of the overall sample) with a mean average age of 49 (range 21-77). 8 respondents attended the first course, 6 the second, and 9 the third.

Questionnaire and Analysis

The questionnaire included 15 closed questions with an invitation to comment on each, and a final page with an invitation to make additional comments. Questions 1-3 and 10-15 inclusive covered areas of interest to the researchers; questions 4-9 mirrored 'Quality of Life Indicators for Learning and Culture' as delineated by the local social services department in terms of adult education.

Data relating to questions 1-15 were analysed in terms of percentages of people responding 'yes', 'no' and 'don't know'/'not relevant' to each question and a content analysis in terms of either positive or negative/neutral comments about each question. In terms of presentation of the data we have endeavoured to use as many quotations as possible as in our opinion the words speak for themselves and to categorise many of the quotations would lead to a potential loss of meaning (this mirrors the ideology of the course regarding the complexities of human beings, of ideas and of ways of expressing things). The final page of the questionnaire which invited people to make further comments was subjected to a grounded theory analysis of the type described by Pidgeon and Henwood (1996). Each respondent's comments were initially broken down into data strips (i.e. pieces of text that contained a coherent idea or piece of information which could stand alone) by the two authors. This led to the identification of 107 data strips

which were then coded by the authors via the method of constant comparison i.e. each data strip is compared with each one previously examined for differences and similarities and thus sifted into a number of groups which have similarities within and differences between groups. This index system is then refined where categories are developed, definitions written, and the system further refined through the process of category linking and splitting (the data strips and groups are re-examined and adjustments made e.g. data strips are re-allocated, definitions altered, categories amalgamated) until key concepts or themes can be named. Fig. 2 shows the outcome of this process.

Data

We are presenting as many quotations as possible from the respondents as we do not want to over-analyse what people said but rather leave readers to make their own interpretations from data which as close as possible reflects what people said (this matches one of the philosophies of the course; in our opinion group facilitators and researchers alike frequently (sometimes subtly, sometimes unconsciously) change meanings when summarising what people say).

Quantitative and qualitative data for questions 1-15 have been written up in a format that matches the format of the questionnaire:

As a result of my experiences of being on the course....

1. I have a greater understanding of myself	<u>yes</u>	<u>no</u>	<u>not relevant/answered</u>
	78%	13%	9%

There were 11 positive examples, including comments relating to “*feeling I have the same thoughts as other people*”, “*being at ease*” and “*beginning to like myself better*”. Other comments included:

“Thought provoking into the way I react in situations and educating in new ideas of handling different emotions and senses” (participant 19)

“Being more aware of things e.g. big companies and advertising, drug companies, mental hospitals; to see therapies as a help, a way of coping with something not a cure all” (participant 7)

“It has confirmed my feelings that being a system survivor is a constant struggle and the system needs to move forward” (participant 1)

“I gained re-assurance that I had successfully coped with difficult childhood experiences” (participant 18)

3 comments related to the process of being in the group being the primary factor in leading to greater understanding:

“Having the opportunity of sharing openly and honestly in such a group seems to be the most effective way of understanding myself better” (participant 11)

“Listening to different psychological theories and studies, and also the experiences of other members of the group, helped me to understand some of the reasons why I have experienced episodes of depression” (participant 3)

“From swirling around my own mass of thoughts it was extremely good to hear other theories, opinions, over-all views, other perspectives” (participant 15)

3 negative/neutral comments were made e.g.

“Cannot say that the course told me anything more about myself. Should it have done?” (participant 17)

“N/A as only a few sessions attended” (participant 13)

2. I have a greater understanding of other people yes no not relevant/answered
83% 9% 9%

11 positive comments were made relating to *“seeing people more positively and with better understanding”*, understanding *“people’s actions towards me in the past”*, *“accepting needs in relation to other people”*, *“using the ideas in conversations with people”*, and learning how *“varied our actions and thoughts can be”*. Other comments included:

“Greater understanding of the negative things that can distress people” (participant 15)

“Learning through contact with ‘strangers’ (course members) that apparently well balanced persons can have deep seated concerns resulting from earlier experiences in life” (participant 20)

One comment related to the process:

“Fortunately we had a wonderful group of mixed ages, backgrounds. I don’t know how well this particular course would run if otherwise” (participant 1)

1 negative/neutral comment was made (“N/A”).

3. I have a greater understanding of things that affect people yes no not relevant/answered
83% 9% 9%

9 positive comments were made, some of which reiterated points made in Q.2. Some comments related to individual topics covered e.g. anger, loss, life not living up to

expectations; others related to having an increased awareness of things that “do not affect me personally but are of concern to others” and other people’s difficulties in general e.g.

“Helped me to be more tolerant and supportive of other people’s concerns that don’t directly trouble me” (participant 11)

1 negative/neutral comment (“N/A”).

4. I have increased my knowledge, skills or confidence yes no not relevant/answered
83% 4% 13%

15 positive comments were made, the majority centring around knowledge of people, psychology and mental health, and increased confidence through being able to speak in the group. Other comments included:

“Knowledge is power; I was also able to confront my fear of talking publicly” (participant 1)

“I would like to think I exercise a little more tolerance to others” (participant 20)

“Feel I am better equipped with reality and truth. Helped me to come to terms with my strong emotions, especially fear and anger” (participant 11)

“See some situations I’m in differently now e.g. other’s anger or frustration” (participant 7).

3 negative/neutral comments were made, including:

“If anything my confidence took a knock” (participant 22)

“...I do not feel any difference in skills or confidence” (participant 17)

5. I have higher self-esteem yes no not relevant/answered
48% 26% 26%

7 positive comments were made, including comments about how attaining higher self-esteem takes time and the course helping in this process through people being able to speak, be listened and “attended” to “in a safe and accepting group environment”, and through hearing other’s experiences and through increased understanding of problems that affect us all. Other comments included:

“Helped me to face deep feelings of guilt and shame by enabling me to accept myself better and not be so self-condemning” (participant 11)

7 negative/neutral comments were made, including the fact that people felt no different in terms of self esteem, they did not come on the course to attain this, and people saying that they had always had high-enough self-esteem. One participant was more critical:

“I did not feel the course addressed personal needs of the participants in any way” (participant 22).

6. I have an increased sense of psychological well-being

<u>yes</u>	<u>no</u>	<u>not relevant/answered</u>
74%	13%	13%

11 positive comments were made, some of which overlapped with comments about self-esteem (Q.5). Comments revolved around themes of having more “tools” to cope, having a “more rational approach when things don’t go as hoped” and taking “different paths from the usual”, as well as people feeling generally OK in this area. Other comments included:

“Helped me to come to terms better with my thoughts and feelings by seeing them in a clearer perspective” (participant 11)

3 referred to the process as being helpful e.g. feeling safe and being encouraged to join in group discussions on sensitive topics.

3 neutral/negative comments were made, including “no different”, and:

“I do feel that the course gave me a lot of information but that I am still sorting out that information. I feel quite unsettled by it all but also sure that it has definitely helped me in the long run” (participant 8).

7. I have an increased sense of physical well-being

<u>yes</u>	<u>no</u>	<u>not relevant/answered</u>
13%	57%	30%

3 positive comments were made:

“Putting my health first by accepting and making the best of how my condition is with me every day” (participant 2)

“I cycled to the class! Also sensing awareness of self and others’ needs is getting better...awareness is the key!” (participant 7)

“Not sure but as my confidence has grown a little I do seem to have more motivation to eat more healthily and take more exercise” (participant 3)

7 neutral/negative comments were made, the majority saying that the question was not relevant. Participant 9 commented:

“I have a chronic illness which tends to override most things”.

8 positive comments were made centring around themes such as insights into the way all of us can be affected by damaging life experiences and a lessening of the ‘ill’ and ‘well’ dichotomy e.g.

“The stigma has been dropped since meeting people who have been in that situation – I now understand more” (participant 2)

“I feel a lot less fearful of people with mental health problems. I see mental health now as a scale that we are all on somewhere rather than ‘them and us’” (participant 8)

“Definitely – I feel so like everyone else” (participant 10)

“A little more appreciative of how events and circumstances in early life can remain a hidden burden for others in later life” (participant 20)

4 neutral/negative comments, all on the theme that the person’s views have not changed as they already had thought about these issues a lot previously e.g.

“I have had mental health problems so already have an understanding of mental illness” (participant 9)

“I already had a pretty good idea about both from personal experience! But I think that other group members who perhaps had not had such close experience seemed to gain more understanding as the weeks went by” (participant 3)

11. I feel less lonely

<u>yes</u>	<u>no</u>	<u>not relevant/answered</u>
26%	52%	22%

5 positive comments were made e.g.

“It was nice to feel accepted and talk openly with such a nice group of people who I look forward to seeing sometime in the future” (participant 1)

“While on the course it was nice to be around intelligent people and has now made me seek intelligent conversation with friends” (participant 14)

“I feel less isolated and reassured that I’m not the only one who feels like this! I think one of the hardest things about mental illness is that unless you have been there yourself you just cannot fully understand how it feels, but being with others in a similar situation can be a real relief because no explanations are necessary” (participant 3)

5 neutral/negative comments were made, which fit into two categories: people who said they never feel lonely and people who said they always feel lonely or alone whatever the circumstances e.g.

"I always feel lonely. No amount of interaction will change this. It is the way I am and always have been" (participant 9).

12. I have enrolled on another course

<u>yes</u>	<u>no</u>	<u>not relevant/answered</u>
26%	61%	13%

14 positive comments were made, 9 stating "not yet" but indicating a positive intention to sign up for something in the near future, and 3 people stating that they had enrolled on a course e.g.

"Joined an 'Inner Being' course exploring spirituality, alternative healing, meditation etc which is like the next step I felt I needed to take" (participant 11)

1 neutral/negative comment ("N/A").

13. I have had less involvement with statutory (NHS and Social Services) mental health services

<u>yes</u>	<u>no</u>	<u>not relevant/answered</u>
13%	4%	83%

3 positive comments were made about reducing contact and needing less involvement, compared to 1 neutral/negative comment relating to family factors not related to the course.

14. I have had more involvement with statutory (NHS and Social Services) mental health services

<u>yes</u>	<u>no</u>	<u>not relevant/answered</u>
0%	13%	86%

1 positive comment:

"I would like to feel motivated from acquiring information that I change the system from the inside" (participant 1)

1 neutral/negative comment relating to family factors not related to the course.

15. I am interested in coming to a monthly 'seminar' of the type we had on the course for people who have come on the psychology courses and interested others

<u>yes</u>	<u>no</u>	<u>not relevant/answered</u>
78%	22%	0%

11 positive comments were made, ranging from "possibly" to "most definitely", "interesting idea" to "I think this would make a valuable contribution" and:

"At the risk of sounding a bit 'hippyish' it would be manna to the soul" (participant 15)

0 negative/neutral comments were made.

Analysis of general comments:

Fig. 2 is a diagrammatic representation of categories generated by a grounded theory analysis of 107 data strips from 20 participants who responded to an invite at the end of the questionnaire to make general comments or add anything that seemed relevant regarding their thoughts on the course.

‘Reasons for coming’ related to personal insights into themselves and life and included “*I liked the sound of ‘psychology in the real world’ as it seemed to apply the theory to actual experience*” (participant 3); “*For me, coming on the course was part of a process of recovering from severe depression*” (participant 3); “*The drive for wishing to attend such courses is perhaps to have a closer understanding of myself, why I react the way I do during life, to understand why others react (or I perceive they react) the way they do. To be able to read a little the forces that are at play during everyday situations and armed with that knowledge to be able to contribute or handle them a little more sensitively*” (participant 20).

Outside the categories ‘Reasons for coming’ and ‘Reasons for stopping and impact of course ending’, the analysis split the categories into key concepts of ‘course content’ and ‘course process’ (see Fig.2), with some categories bridging both. It seemed that the interaction of these categories was crucial to the success of the course.

Under ‘Structure of the Course’ comments were generally complementary e.g. “*Between us we chose the weekly topics for discussion and were encouraged to give our opinions and if we wanted to our first-hand experiences*” (participant 4); “*On the whole the information was presented in an easy to understand way*” (participant 8). There were 5 suggestions for changes to the structure, including “*more case histories and trials in and out of the laboratory*” (participant 17); “*...more exercises/activities rather than sitting, listening*” (participant 1); “*I found that sources were not always provided when facts seemed shocking and somewhat unbelievable. Having looked at the internet, certain facts and figures were not accurate*” (participant 1); “*I would have liked a booklist at the end of the course of recommended or favourite books by the teacher – I know books were mentioned throughout the course which was great*” (participant 7).

5 comments about the ‘Topics’ mentioned individual topics as being helpful, interesting or moving e.g. “*The topic ‘What makes life worth living?’ was amazing. When all the fripperies of life are stripped away it is mind boggling ...to get down to the rawness of our own personal psyche. This might have been thought to be painful but in fact proved to be enhancing*” (participant 15). 3 were more negative: “*I really did not like the week ‘The meaning of life’. I felt it was presented with a negative approach. Even though I have a Christian belief that week comes back to haunt me especially if I am feeling a bit low*” (participant 21); “*The topics under discussion of necessity could at times only be dealt with at a superficial level*” (participant 18).

The structure and topics were seen as instrumental in terms of people acquiring ‘Knowledge’ and ‘Knowledge and Interest in Psychology’ which in turn seemed relevant

in terms of participants signing up for or 'Joining other Courses' (see Fig. 2). Comments relating to the 'Knowledge' category were mostly general e.g. "*illuminating*"; "*enlightening*"; "*I learned a lot and it has made me want to learn more*". Some comments related knowledge to personal growth e.g. "*It is never too late to begin again, and with my increased knowledge of people and their behaviour I feel that I have a better chance of succeeding*" (participant 9). 6 positive comments related to people's 'Knowledge and Interest in Psychology' having increased (meaning psychology as an academic discipline and psychology in a more generic word relating to understanding people) whereas one person felt that the course covered areas that they had previously learned in relation to "*basic psychology*". 6 comments expressed an interest in participating in a similar course in the future e.g. "*I believe that this type of course is life-enhancing and hope that when time and funds allow more courses of kind will be made available*" (participant 18); "*When I first came on the course I wasn't sure whether to do psychology at Uni, but now after the course I definitely want to. The course has also made me think of other life choices, like doing an ECDL in computers to help me prepare for the future (I am on the course at the moment)*" (participant 14).

3 comments related to the 'Venue', including praise and criticism of the room layout (people sit around one large, narrow table); "*The Gateway is a lovely, quiet place to go to, to take 'time out'*"; "*The ladies in the café would all benefit from smiling more! They were a little/a lot grim – lacked a smile*" (participant 10). The 'Venue', alongside the 'Facilitation' and contributions of 'Group Members' were seen as key factors relating to process issues and the development of helpful group 'Atmosphere and Dynamics' (see Fig. 2). In terms of 'Facilitation', 9 positive comments about the facilitation style and its contribution to personal outcomes were made, including reference to the facilitator's "*honesty*", "*clarity*", "*drive*" and "*sympathetic response to some of my obvious past problems*". Other comments included: "*It was good to talk to a professional psychologist on themes I find interesting anyway*" (participant 7); "*...I was particularly impressed with the way he told his own story which removed the 'them and us' feeling. Also the way he is able to listen to the daftest comment as if it is relevant and valid! This should have inspired me to speak up!*" (participant 21); "*Guy Holmes did not patronise nor intimate that our contributions were amateurish or naïve in our general ignorance of the science of behaviour*" (participant 17). Comments about the 'Group Members' related to them being "*supportive*", "*sensitive, nice, clever human beings*", and of "*...various ages, gender and worldly experiences, sitting around a table eyeing each other up and not knowing what to expect and a clinical psychologist with a warm, friendly personality*" (participant 4). Other comments related to how people came to respect each other e.g. "*Some of the group had experienced quite deep depression in their lives (something I hadn't experienced, thankfully) but I was amazed how differently we all cope with sadness and the fact that low self-esteem affects our attitude to life greatly*" (participant 4).

The 'Atmosphere and Dynamics' were described as "*non-threatening (no intrusive questions) so there was no tension*" (participant 15), there being "*trust and honesty*" in the group, and general comments relating to the tutor, class and venue all being "*very welcoming*" and "*respectful*" e.g. "*An excellent tutor who at all times encouraged group*

participation and enabled us all to allow our vulnerability to be revealed” (participant 18). In terms of ‘Ease, difficulties and benefits of joining in discussions’ the majority commented that the atmosphere and informality enabled people to overcome their fears of expressing personal views. Particular comments included: “I am quite shy and find it hard to speak in front of a group of people, but a lot of the class did speak quite freely and applying the information to their experiences was fascinating. I felt much more comfortable in the smaller groups of 2 or 3 and felt I was contributing then” (participant 8); “I personally find it difficult to talk in a group set-up but over the weeks I found myself joining in discussions more and more and realising that my point of view was as valid as anyone else’s” (participant 4); “I regret not taking part in group discussions because of my hearing problem....this does affect my confidence” (participant 21).

Many of the factors discussed above seemed key to the ‘Personal Impact’ on people of being on the course (which has been analysed under 4 sub-categories). In terms of ‘Inner Resources and Self-Understanding’ people said they felt “*empowered*”, “*more alive*” and had more “*motivation*”; had greater “*confidence*” including “*confidence about the future*”, “*insight*” and an increased ability to “*come to terms with my situation*”. One person said: “*I felt mentally stronger for doing this course (didn’t do it for that reason, so that was an unexpected bonus)*” (participant 15). Another person said that they left with “*a sense of achievement and accomplishment*” (participant 1). Other comments included: “*It has made my views change a lot and its made me accept and enjoy the fact that they will keep on changing*” (participant 8); “*We were led through a long path to acceptance – accepting others/who we are, not what the ‘Kellogs breakfast ads believe we have to be like*” (participant 10); “*I’ve realised even more so how fragile we are and how easily persuaded or used to a situation we can become – habits are hard to break*” (participant 7); “*I feel that being able to communicate and relate to one another as human beings, accepting and feeling accepted by each other for who we are, in a blame society, is an important contribution that such a course can make in enabling us as a group to acknowledge our humanness, accept our vulnerability, relax and take life less seriously so we can laugh and see reality in a clearer perspective from a position of security, care and love, rather than from insecurity, isolation and fear*” (participant 11). In terms of ‘Understanding Others’ people also commented positively e.g. “*It was so good to realise that in spite of or because of all our faults and failings we are all mortal and members of the human race and it’s ok not to be scared of those who are different to ourselves, live lives and express themselves differently*” (participant 10); “*The course made me more aware of my basic needs as a human being in relating to others*” (participant 11). ‘Life Changes’ participants described included major relationship changes and job/education changes e.g. “*The course made an important contribution to enabling me to get out of the rut I was in and to move on with my life by leaving a long term unhappy marriage, in enabling me to accept and value myself and to sense the care and support of others in the group*” (participant 11); “*As a result of coming on the course I was able to make a decision to end a relationship which was causing me a great amount of mental anguish and illness. I am now recovering well, and beginning a new life, despite a brief period when I was hospitalised due to stress*” (participant 9); “*I feel that this has enabled me to take stock of my life and, rather than just panic, to understand where changes need to be made, and has helped me to start actually doing something about it, for example I’m now*

applying to do some further studying” (participant 3). ‘General Effects’ included 5 comments about the course being “*enjoyable*” and “*interesting*”, one saying it was “*beneficial at the time*” and one saying “*Psychology in the Real World lived up to its title*”.

“Reasons for Stopping and Impact of Ending” included comments about people stopping for personal reasons, other study commitments, and not getting “*some of the outcomes suggested in the questionnaire*” (participant 22). Effects of the ending included missing the group once it had finished, no longer reading psychology books as the person liked to discuss them on the course, and “*Obviously a dip when it finished but I think the beneficial effects will stay with me and help my life (and hopefully others as well) in the future*” (participant 15).

2 data strips were coded as ‘Miscellaneous’: one was a personal note to the first author, another a statement about being unable to complete the questionnaire (no reason given).

Discussion

The data indicates that the course has met many of its aims. These include: bringing psychology (in terms of helping people reflect on themselves and their lives) to a greater number and wider range of people than is possible through the provision of individual therapy in a CMHT; helping people understand not just themselves but other people and life events that shape us; helping people think less individually and to gain therapeutic benefits of group membership; to combat some of the deleterious effects of stigma regarding mental health by broaching this topic and by bringing groups of people together who engage in a joint enterprise as people and are not segregated into the ‘mentally ill’ and ‘mentally well’; bringing about some modest but significant changes in terms of the ‘terrain of proximal powers’ (see Smail, 2005) regarding peoples social environment e.g. regarding confidence, loneliness, health, understanding of self and others, joining other courses and accessing education, employment prospects, escaping harmful relationships, making new relationships. One of the first author’s fears of running the courses was that after doing the course people would be more rather than less likely to access local mental health services (mental health prevention work often becomes mental health promotion and leads to an increased number of people diagnosing themselves as being individually in need of individual treatments); the data does not indicate this has happened. Local Authority objectives have been met in terms of people increasing their knowledge, skills or confidence, having higher self-esteem and increased psychological well-being, and at a more modest level in terms of physical well-being, employment prospects, and in terms of feeling a greater part of a community or group.

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Fig.1 Topic list from *Psychology in the Real World: Understanding Yourself and Others Course*

1. Introductory session. What is psychology? What is psychology in the real world? What kinds of things lead us to become who we are?

Why are we so afraid of ‘mental illness’?

In what kinds of ways do our experiences during childhood affect us?

How come so many people don’t like the way they look?

Why are people violent?

How can we make major decisions, and help others to make life-changing decisions?

What makes us depressed?

How come so many people are taking psychiatric and other drugs?

Why do people get angry? Why are people troubled by anger?

What is the point of being alive?

What helps us feel safe and secure?

What helps at times of crisis?

Should we “be careful who we pretend to be because we are who we pretend to be”?

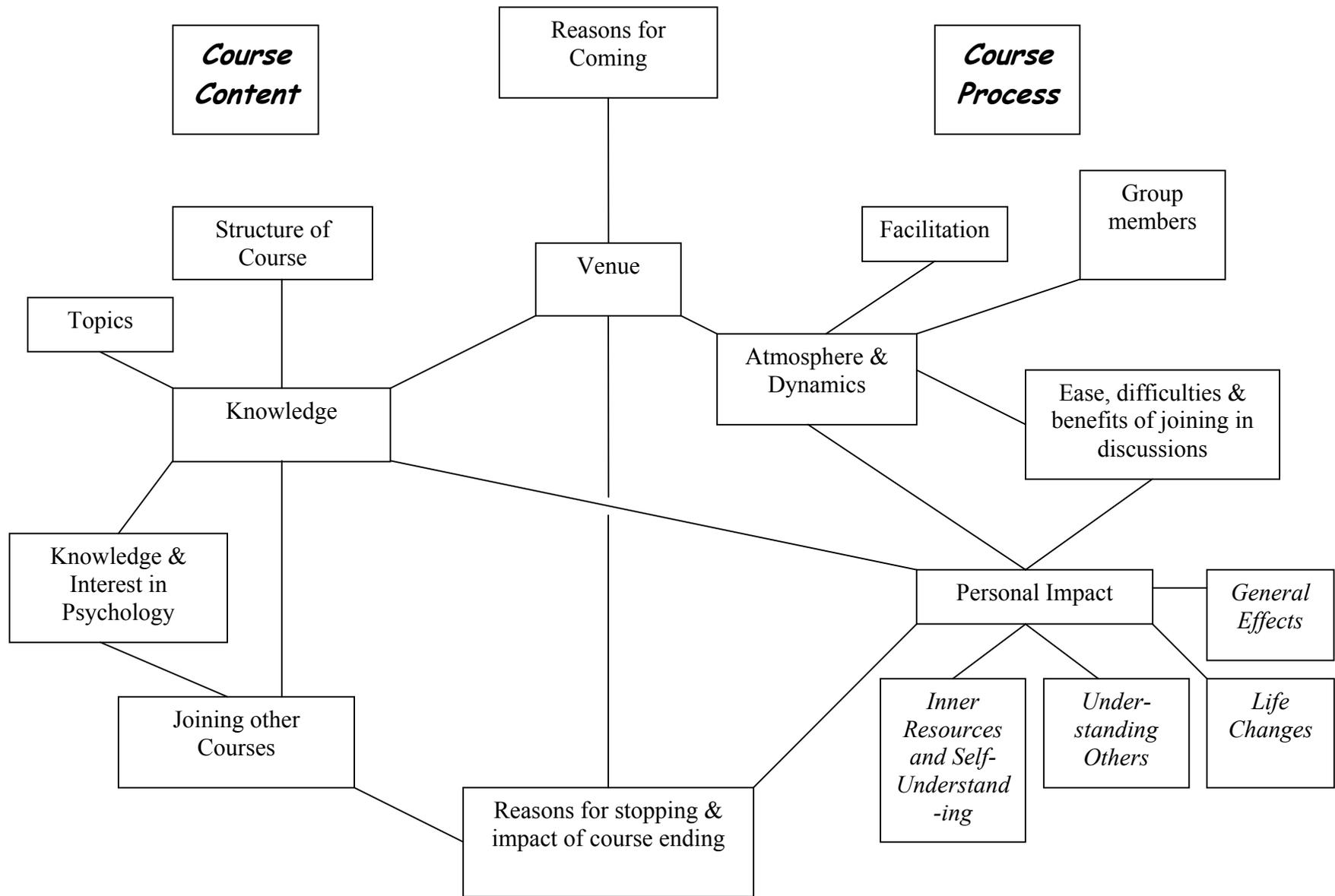
What is it like to be listened to?

In what ways is our environment psychologically toxic?

Is there more to be learned from *The Simpsons* than self-improvement books?

12. Last session: What is it like when things come to an end? Evaluation, what next and saying goodbye.

Fig. 2. Diagrammatic representation of categories from analysis of open question re course



Questionnaire

Age..... Gender.....

Which course did you attend? (please circle) Sept-Dec 2004
Jan – March 2005
April – July 2005

Please answer all the questions by circling yes or no and, where appropriate, making any comments you feel are relevant.

As a result of my experiences of being on the course.....

1. *I have a greater understanding of myself* yes/no
Comment.....

.....
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2. *I have a greater understanding of other people* yes/no
Comment.....

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3. *I have a greater understanding of things that affect people* yes/no
Comment.....

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4. *I have increased my knowledge, skills or confidence* yes/no
Comment.....

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5. *I have higher self-esteem* yes/no
Comment.....

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6. *I have an increased sense of psychological well-being* yes/no
Comment.....

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7. *I have an increased sense of physical well-being* yes/no
Comment.....

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8. *I feel my employment prospects have been enhanced* yes/no
Comment.....

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9. *I feel a greater part of a community or group* yes/no
Comment.....

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10. *My views about 'mental illness' and people called 'mentally ill' have changed* yes/no
Comment.....

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11. *I feel less lonely* yes/no
Comment.....

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12. *I have enrolled on another course* yes/no
Comment.....

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13. *I have had less involvement with statutory (NHS and Social Services) mental health services* yes/no/not relevant
Comment.....

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