

# **Psychology in the Real World: Understanding ourselves and others January – March 2008**

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## **Introduction**

*Psychology in the Real World: Understanding ourselves and others* is a course that has been run over several years at the Gateway Arts and Education Centre. It provides the opportunity for group members to collectively explore and reflect on psychological theories and research in response to particular topics. Many of these topics challenge individualistic notions of mental distress, and feedback has indicated, although not a therapy group, the courses do seem to provide benefits usually associated with therapy groups. This present evaluation focuses on these 2 areas (for an in-depth description of the philosophy and values of the course and data on general evaluations of these courses see Holmes & Gahan (2006) and [www.shropsycho.org](http://www.shropsycho.org)).

## **The 2008 Course**

In 2008 the course was run over 11 weekly sessions of 2 hours at the Lantern, a community venue which is part of Shrewsbury's Library Services. The venue was available free of charge and group members were not charged for attending. The course was advertised in Community Mental Health Teams (CMHTs) and other mental health services, as well as being advertised at the venue and at several locations throughout the community including libraries and local cafes. The course was organised and facilitated by Guy Holmes and Lucy Gahan, local psychologists. People were not referred to the group – rather the group was open to anyone who saw the fliers and expressed a wish to attend. As in other Psychology in the Real World ventures, people sign up as people – there is no need to have had or disclose a history of involvement with mental health services, although as the groups are well advertised within these services many people with such experiences do attend. 14 people signed up for the course, with 1 person dropping out before the course started, and one person having to stop attending after the first session for personal reasons. 12 people attended the course through to the end.

In the first session, group members were provided with a list of potential topics to explore. These differed from those covered in previous courses as a number of people had requested a similar course to one that they had attended previously. 50% of the people who signed up had come on a previous course. Group members chose the topics that they were most interested in, and were also given the option of suggesting additional topics and joining with the group facilitators in leading a session (none of the group members opted to do this). Figure 1 shows the topics selected by the group.

**Figure 1**

**Topic list for Psychology in the Real World: Understanding ourselves and others**

Beginnings: What is it like at the start of things? What is psychology? What is 'psychology in the real world'?

To what extent does our personality affect how we behave?

How sane is it to be well-adapted to a 'sick' society?

Food: 'Friend or enemy'? Why do we have such a difficult relationship with food?

Why do some psychiatric treatments seem so cruel?

Why are people troubled by feelings of shame and guilt?

Why are we so afraid?

Are symptoms of 'mental illness' more accurately thought of as people's best ways of coping?

Why are we so conforming? Should we be careful who we pretend to be because we are who we pretend to be?

Are we the authors of our own lives?

Endings: what is it like when things come to an end?

Sessions usually began with a short talk by one or both of the facilitators, followed by whole-group discussions, work in pairs, smaller group discussions, and exercises or activities. Certain sessions were more experiential than others. For example, *Food: Friend or enemy?* involved group members choosing from a selection of foods and exploring their own reactions to choosing and eating the various foods. *Why are we so conforming?* involved facilitators presenting classic psychological experiments (the Milgram and Stanford Prison experiments) followed by group discussion. The aim of the course is for group members and facilitators to jointly reflect critically on particular areas of life relevant to group members. It explicitly is not set up for students to be 'filled up' with knowledge from experts (see Holmes & Gahan, 2006).

**Evaluating the group**

Evaluating groups which focus on delivering information and skills may be more straight-forward than groups which focus on facilitating interactions between group participants (Gutierrez & Scott, 2004). At the end of *Psychology in the Real World* courses there is always a feedback session. The richness of the discussion in these sessions can never be fully encapsulated through questionnaires, although we have

attempted to do this in the past. One person did write to us about the 2008 course and we have included this as part of this report, as it gives a taste of what it can be like to come on a course like this:-

*My most recent group experience has been the Psychology in the Real World: Understanding ourselves and others course and it was the second time that I had participated in such a group. This course has allowed me to reflect on how we all are in groups. A chance to step outside of the roles imposed or created by the other groups to which I belong. To think how we are understood...Is stubbornness really determination? Does hostility disguise fear? What shapes our personalities? In the confines of the group, how we hope and fear, trust and risk, irritate and entertain. What makes us laugh or cry? What makes us hide? What can we learn about ourselves when we are still? How are we "strong in the broken places"? (Ernest Hemmingway). Thus highlighting our differences but, more commonly, our similarities. The same in our uniqueness.*

*So what is different about this course and mental health related therapy groups? The balance of power is central to the outcome. From the moment of first contact and referral from a G.P. the balance shifts from client to health professional. As clients, we wait for an appointment, we come to your workplace, we wait until you are ready. We hope you don't cancel or are late. We know nothing about you, but you already know something personal about us. We retell our story again and again until it is watered down to a couple of sentences on a page and lost. We hear your reassurances about confidentiality and your apologies when records go missing. We are assessed, discussed, judged and allocated. Some of us are told we "don't fit the criteria for the help on offer." Our choices diminish as our part in the process becomes less relevant. We "drown when no one is looking, not wanting to bother anyone" (When Food is Love by Geneen Roth). We are discharged.*

*The Psychology in the Real World course demands that we are and remain proactive from the beginning. We choose. We apply and turn up to the venue which is new to all of us, both facilitators and participants. We are all nervous. Some of us have met before. We are remembered. We are not defined by our problems, diagnoses or hang ups. We have coffee breaks together.*

*It is almost impossible to leave one of these community groups without some new insight into ourselves and others, either because of or in spite of who we are or who we pretend to be. Maybe one of the most hopeful things that can be heard during an exchange of ideas is – "I never thought of it like that before." The belief that there is no such thing as fate, knowledge is power and a chat over a cappuccino can change your mind.*

Previous Psychology in the Real World courses have been evaluated in terms of people's individual aims and the degree to which these are met, and have used questionnaires to make specific enquiries as well as using qualitative research methods on general feedback (e.g. Holmes & Gahan 2006). Rather than repeating this type of evaluation, which analysed general feedback on peoples' experiences of being in the group, the aim of this current evaluation was twofold: (1) to see if therapeutic factors that operate in therapy groups were experienced by members of the group, and (2) to see if members gained access to things that provide people with more power. Yalom (1985) described 11 therapeutic factors of being in a group. Participants' feedback, although subjective, can be rich sources of information about the effectiveness of a group. The more that the mode of feedback can enter into the experiential 'world' of the group members, the more meaningful the feedback

(Yalom, 1985). Therefore, this group was measured using Yalom's 'therapeutic factors'. Participants were also asked to rate the impact of being a member of the group might have had on the 17 proximal powers that Hagan & Smail (1997) identified as being key to having more power and consequently better mental health.

## Results

### *Questionnaire and analysis*

Questionnaires were given to 12 people. 6 were returned, giving a response rate of 50%. The questionnaires were given to participants in the final session, to be returned by post. Alternatively, participants were invited to bring the completed questionnaires to a review session which took place 3 months after the final weekly session. (The review session was an opportunity for group members to meet up again and share their experiences of what they had been doing since the group ended, and reflect on their experience of being in the group after some time had passed).

### *Yalom's therapeutic factors*

The table below shows results for Yalom's therapeutic factors. Group members were asked to provide a score on a scale of 0 (no effect) to 5 (maximum effect possible) for each area and to add any relevant comments. The results are reported in terms of the average score across all respondents, with the number of people who responded to the question shown in column 3. Comments for each question are also shown.

<b>Therapeutic benefit</b>	<b>Average score</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Obtaining information, guidance and advice from facilitators and group members</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<i>"Information and varied topics delivered in an enthusiastic way" "I found the information about work done by various psychologists and psychiatrists, studies, concepts and experiments fascinating"</i>
<b>Social Learning</b> (e.g. building on social skills, becoming more confident about expressing your views)	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<i>"It was interesting to see how people behaved in the group. Nice to see people express what were perhaps more contentious opinions, and not just following like sheep"</i>
<b>Interpersonal Learning</b> (e.g. self-understanding and insights about relationships, healing aspects about being in a group, insights about what happened in the group related to what happens in other areas of life)	<b>3.5</b>	<b>6</b>	<i>"Enjoyed the 'metaphors for life' - penultimate session I think" "The group members quickly [took] on the roles of 'listeners' and 'talkers'. Some of the more confident members pressed the 'quiet' ones to speak and I wondered what this was"</i>

			about?"
<b>Catharsis</b> (e.g. 'getting things off your chest', helpfully sharing things and feeling less burdened)	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<i>"Not what I expected to do anyway" "I felt able to speak openly about my mental health issue, as did some others. I sensed that other members may have been surprised at this openness, and may have been inspired to speak frankly about their own issues"</i>
<b>Altruism</b> (helping others)	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<i>"Some group members appeared very vulnerable at times, and others including myself recognised this and were very supportive. I certainly felt motivated to help in any way I could"</i>
<b>Universality</b> (e.g. realising that you are 'not the only one' – other people might have similar difficulties or have had similar life experiences)	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<i>"It is always interesting to hear when people feel comfortable about 'opening up', that so many people have experienced mental health problems. We humans hide our vulnerabilities very well, and have learned that there are situations and certain people where this is not to be recommended!"</i>
<b>Instillation of hope</b> (e.g. that 'things will change, get better')	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<i>"I have not found a solution to my depression, and am becoming convinced that there isn't one, and that I have just got to try to make the best of it!"</i>
<b>Family re-enactment</b> (e.g. groups sometimes mirror families and this can lead to helpful insights about our families)	<b>2.5</b>	<b>6</b>	
<b>Identification with others and imitative behaviour</b> (e.g. we may become a bit like some other people in the group)	<b>2.5</b>	<b>6</b>	<i>"I could certainly identify with some group members and could recognise other 'sub-groups' of people with similar personalities"</i>
<b>Cohesiveness</b> (e.g. helpful aspects of being part of a close-knit group)	<b>3.5</b>	<b>6</b>	<i>"Lots of mutual support, encouragement from those who may have been feeling rather vulnerable during some sessions"</i>
<b>Existential factors</b> (e.g. 'the group, like life, involves a	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	

journey; has a beginning, middle and eventually comes to an end'			
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***Proximal Powers***

Results are reported in terms of number of people who responded to each question. Group members were asked to report on whether the group had had a positive effect, negative effect, or no effect/ not applicable for each area. People were also invited to comment in each area.

<b>1) Education</b>	<b>Positive effect</b>	<b>Negative effect</b>	<b>No effect/NA</b>
	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

**Comments**

*“This inspired me to seek similar groups/courses should they become available”*

*“There is always room to learn more”.*

<b>2) Work</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>
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**Comments**

*“The group/course has made me think about seeking work in a caring profession”*

<b>3) Money</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>6</b>
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<b>4) Health</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>
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**Comments**

*“The sense of not being alone and sharing sometimes very personal stuff felt releasing and empowering”*

<b>5) Physical Environment</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>
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<b>6) Confidence</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
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**Comments**

*“My confidence levels varied week to week, but overall there was a boost to my confidence, as I felt listened to”*

*“Being in a small group made it easier to voice my thoughts and that has helped to boost my confidence in life generally”*

<b>7) Understanding of the past</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
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**Comments**

*“Some previous behaviours made more sense after looking at the psychology behind them”.*

One person who had ticked ‘positive effect’ had commented, *“still ruminating”*

**8) Embodiment (e.g. the way you feel ‘inside’; your feelings about your physical appearance)**

2 0 3

**9) Intelligence**

2 0 3

**10) Associations (membership of groups/clubs)**

3 0 3

**Comments**

*“Groups of people brought together due to similar interests inspire confidence and encourage me to seek more of the same”*

**11) Leisure**

0 0 6

**12) Relationships with friends**

1 1 4

**Comments**

*“Most of my friends believe that getting involved in mental health activities is not good for me, and that they keep me anchored in my illness”.*

**13) Relationship with spouse/partner**

1 1 4

**Comments**

*“It was difficult sometimes to share thoughts and ideas covered on the course without my husband having experienced the discussion”*

**14) Romantic/love life**

2 0 4

**15) Relationships with children**

2 0 4

**16) Relationships with parents**

0 0 6

**17) Relationships with other relations**

2 0 4

One extra proximal power was added to Hagan and Smail’s original list:

**18) Relationships with mental health services**

3 0 3

**Comments**

*“Any more knowledge and insight into mental health issues helps an understanding of helpful ways of coping”.*

### **General comments**

At the end of the questionnaire, people were invited to add any general comments. 3 people gave feedback:-

*“I found a lot of comfort being part of the group and still think about remarks that the other members made about different situations (which helps). I wish I had been able to come on the ‘walk and talk’ but work would not allow it!”*

*“As you probably know, I find talking in this sort of group difficult. Don’t like being ‘put on the spot’, but do understand why it happens...felt pressure to talk at times from other group members...felt the ‘intensity’, too much at times, especially the final 2 sessions. But most sessions well balanced with information, disclosure and humour.”*

*“Thanks for the encouragement and positive comments about the writing. It has started to allow me to question the ‘below average in English’ comments that covered school and college reports and also find a different way to be heard.”*

### **Discussion**

This evaluation suggests that the course may have had some moderate effects on several of Yalom’s therapeutic factors in group psychotherapy, and moderate effects on group members accessing things which provide them with more power. As only 6 out of 12 questionnaires were returned, and some respondents had not answered every question, very limited conclusions can be drawn from such a small number of responses. Spoken feedback had revealed that most group members did not find the questionnaires very comprehensible or meaningful, which indicates that they were poorly designed and insufficient time was spent by the facilitators explaining them. Power mapping (Hagan and Smail, 1997) is not intended to be done by questionnaire, but rather through interview, and this would have probably produced clearer and more comprehensive results (although would not have allowed the anonymity that the questionnaire methodology benefits from).

Despite these limitations, the results do indicate some positive effects for group members. In terms of accessing more power in different areas of their lives, group members generally benefited in some specific areas more than others. All 6 respondents reported benefits in the area of education, 4 reported increased confidence, 5 reported greater understanding of their past, and 3 benefited from increased access to associations, such as becoming members of different groups and clubs. Benefits in other areas included health, embodiment, and intelligence, with 2 people reporting benefits in each of these areas. In terms of relationships, 3 people reported improved relationships with mental health services, and 2 people reported positive effects on relationships in the areas of romance/ love life, children, and other relationships. Areas which seemed least affected by the course included work, money, health and physical environment, leisure, and relationships with parents and friends. Negative effects of the course were reported as being minimal, with just one negative

response for each of the areas of confidence, understanding of the past, and relationships with friends or partners. One of the aim of the courses is for people to access a wider range of benefits than can be provided through one-to-one therapy, and this evaluation indicates that the courses do help people to benefit in these ways.

In terms of therapeutic benefits experienced from attending the course, the minimum average score for the therapeutic benefits was 2, in the area of catharsis, with average scores for all of the other areas being 2.5 or higher. The average scores for social learning, obtaining information/guidance/advice, and universality were particularly high, indicating that these were the areas in which group members gained the most. However, all of these results must be interpreted with the low response rate in mind. Capturing the richness of experience of people in a Psychology in the Real World group is difficult – you have to have participated to really know what they are like – and the methods of evaluation available to facilitators who do not want to clumsily disturb the ‘magic’ that often seems to have been experienced are limited. Rich feedback was obtained in the follow-up session, where people commented on ways in which the group had impacted on them, not only in terms of learning information, for example about different areas of psychology, but experiencing unexpected gains, such as encouragement from the group to apply for a job, or learning how to be with other people. This raises the question of the best ways to evaluate such a course where the aims and the effects in relation to these aims are not easily captured in questionnaires or measurable. Although focus groups may be one way of obtaining such feedback, it was felt that this way of evaluating the group did not fit with the aims of the group, and when such sessions are recorded, much of the richness and meaning can be lost.

### References

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