

Another Look at Group Counselling

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IT MAY SEEM presumptuous and repetitious to be considering group counselling once more, yet five years have passed since its introduction into the Prison Service, and for many people it still remains something of a mystery. It has developed from at least four different sources:

- (1) Group therapy at Wormwood Scrubs gradually came to include non-specialist members of the staff in the treatment of inmates. From this arose a need to discuss their own attitudes towards the day-to-day problems of dealing with inmates;
- (2) Certain Governors attended a Conference in Group Relations organised at Leicester by the Tavistock Institute, and translated what they had learned into group counselling programmes at Wakefield and Pollington;
- (3) Much encouragement was received from the knowledge of what had been going on in the Californian Department of Corrections in the way of counselling with inmates, in prison, on parole, and in some cases, including their families;

- (4) Many people had visited and read about the experiment in setting up a therapeutic community at the Henderson Hospital.

The factor common to all of these was that the main burden was carried by lay staff.

Counselling has spread to about fifteen establishments—both open and closed borstals, training and recidivist prisons, as it were, from Pollington to Dartmoor via Holloway! The present pattern is that a fairly senior member of the staff is responsible for supervising counselling within the establishment. He will most likely have undergone a course to gain experience of counselling itself, and of the problems involved in getting it going. In turn he organises training courses for members of his own staff wishing to become counsellors, and subsequently arranges regular meetings at which they have an opportunity of discussing their own problems and attitudes towards inmate groups. To most counselling establishments there is also assigned a psychologist, often on a visiting basis,

whose function is to act as a technical adviser.

The general pattern, however, conceals wide variations, so that it is difficult to talk about a unified concept of counselling. Some of the content has already been previously described in this journal. These variations have occurred sometimes haphazardly, sometimes deliberately, others as a reaction to difficulties experienced with other forms.

In smaller establishments there is a tendency for counselling to involve all inmates, on a compulsory basis, throughout the duration of their stay. Whether counselling takes place during working hours, as part of the educational programme, or in "free" time depends on the priority given to it as a training medium, and, in part, on how conscious the staff are of the need to improve communications not only between staff and inmates, but between the various grades and departments.

In some larger establishments, particularly prisons, the tendency is for counselling to have a limited duration; and for it not to encroach on the working day. It may thus be available to a man for only a limited part of his sentence.

Similarly there have been variations in the way inmates have been selected ranging from care of the order one would use in choosing people for group psychotherapy at one extreme, to taking all-comers at the other.

What sort of expectations are held about counselling? That it should achieve some alteration in people's attitudes, increase their insight and awareness of themselves and others, and in some rather vague way, make them "better" people. This, I think, at any rate, is what most people hoped it would achieve. In other words they probably hoped that counselling would do for inmates what group psycho-therapy achieves for certain types of emotionally disturbed patients. Yet when one considers the care with which patients are selected for group treatment; how long the treatment lasts; the amount of training undergone by the therapist himself; and, finally, the sometimes limited degree of success obtained, it is hardly surprising that the immediate effects of counselling on the behaviour of inmates may not be particularly dramatic. Such rather limited investigations as have been made suggest that counselling does not lead to a deterioration in formal discipline—contrary to the gloomy prognostications of some. Indeed, in some cases, an improvement in discipline was noted so long as counselling lasted.

As far as I am aware, nothing like a rigorously controlled experiment has been tried to assess the effectiveness of any of the variations of counselling already referred to. This, of course, while regrettable, is not surprising, particularly if one gives a moment's thought to the difficulties of

staging such an undertaking. On the other hand we shall not be able to capitalise on this varied experience, nor shall we know what we are achieving unless this kind of problem is tackled squarely. As long as the primary function of the service was a custodial one—and many people still see it in this light, there was no logical need to assess effectiveness in other terms. The tradition in training prisons and borstals is a different one, although the notion that one should expose what one is doing and offering to critical description and evaluation is not always widely accepted. Which of us, even in our objective moments, is not sensitive to the threatening nature of this form of enquiry, however well-intentioned?

The fact remains that many counsellors find the experience a rewarding one—in a minor way because their original apprehensions are not confirmed, and in a major way because of the increased insight and understanding they acquire—not only of inmates, but into their own feelings and attitudes, towards inmates and towards each other.

Increased awareness, however leads in its turn to an increase in the number of difficulties and problems one perceives in one's work. Relations with inmates and fellow staff are seen to be more complex, and one's earlier, perhaps comparatively clear-cut, attitudes no longer fill the bill. Unless one can subsequently work through to

a solution of these new problems, increased awareness, of itself, may prove to be a mixed blessing.

If, then, counselling facilitates communication between inmates and staff, one must consider the corollary that counselling improves communication amongst the various grades and departments that comprise the staff. There is not much doubt that this occurs in some smaller establishments where inmate groups are backed up by regular staff meetings. This model approaches the concept of the therapeutic community, developed at the Henderson Hospital. In most of these experiments the size of the unit does not much exceed one hundred, and in one case ("E" Wing at Holloway) is very much less. In addition to the common factor of small numbers it seems to me that one ought not to disregard the comparative homogeneity of the populations involved. There is also a presumption that inmates will tend more or less to speak the same language and the range of their problems will be narrower than in, say, a recidivist prison.

How does this situation compare with a large prison or borstal where many of the staff and inmates are not involved in counselling, and where the regime, however liberal and permissive, is organised on more orthodox lines? One might think that "partial" counselling, considered as a communications tool, would be better than none at all. Experience seems to suggest

however that there comes a point when people having experienced better communications in one possibly circumscribed part of an establishment, become frustrated and annoyed if similar improvements fail to occur elsewhere in the system, whatever the reason may be. They feel undervalued and disregarded. In their disappointment they may turn against counselling and hold it responsible and this leads to the usual throwing out of baby and bath water.

Possibly, in future experiments, one should aim at initiating counselling completely within wing or house, rather than piece-meal throughout a large establishment as a whole, since the results in practice are so vastly different.

Despite the somewhat sketchy and inconclusive nature of the

foregoing, there are certain conclusions one might usefully draw. Firstly, that counselling has not turned out to be what many people originally expected, although its usefulness has not been diminished thereby. Secondly, that to be really effective, counselling activities need to be integrated within the life of an establishment as a whole, and not kept carefully in a back-water of institutional life. Thirdly, that we need more description and assessment of the various forms of counselling in current practice, however wearisome and threatening a task this may seem. Finally, we need to tackle the problem of preserving continuity, and the difficulties which ensue when a counselling supervisor is transferred, so that the dynamic is preserved regardless of changes in personality.

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