

# Group Work in a Large Local Prison

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FOR ME, group work in the institutional setting means group work at H.M. Prison, Wandsworth, for this is where most of my experience has taken place. I am, however, convinced that, basically, some of the approaches, problems, advantages or otherwise are common, no matter where one embarks on this or other new approaches in our institutions. I have tried to set out the situation and developments as I saw them at Wandsworth and would hope that other readers would do the same. Out of our sharing experiences in common areas so we may progress.

In 1958/59 Mr. Richard Hauser came to Wandsworth. Amongst other things he introduced a form of group work with groups of officers and inmates. The effect of his impact on the prison was to seriously divide the staff for and against him and his ideas but group work was started and was maintained. After Hauser left a handbook was taken into use. This handbook consisted of an elaborate

working out of some of Hauser's "sociological" theories, some use of Freudian terminology and a concept of social age. The book was intended as a guide to be studied by groups of inmates. A "reader" would read a passage and then lead a discussion. The terminology and sentence construction were such that the handbook was probably understood by only a small group of inmates. This tended to create a "status" position for the "readers" and an avenue of escape when discussion placed any individual or individuals under pressure. Nevertheless, group work continued in this form in a small area of the prison with a small number of staff but so did the staff split. Space does not permit further discussion in this area as the purpose of this article is to describe an approach to group work which was felt to be more acceptable in the Wandsworth setting at that time.

My first introduction to group work in any form was as a teaching technique in the Probation Service,

for staff, not for clients. At the Staff College I was a member of a "counselling" group for almost six months, meeting at the same time for the same period, with the same "worker" each week. Prior to joining the Service I had visited Pollington B.I., a counselling establishment, when Mr. Bishop was the governor. Since then I have attended a supervisors' course, have visited Grendon, Holloway, and the Henderson Hospital and sat in on a two-week course for staff at Portsmouth B.I. I have been group work supervisor at Wandsworth since 1964 having been involved from the start. It is from this background that this paper is prepared.

The introduction of anything new to the Prison Service as a whole or to an individual establishment is usually seen as a threat. There is the combined fear of the unknown and the automatic desire to maintain the safety of the *status quo*. It is one of the few areas where the feelings of staff and inmates are alike, suspicious and resistant. In this situation it is essential that sufficient time is set aside for efficient planning, the ground must be prepared and there must be an acceptable form of introduction.

At a later stage I shall be expressing my general views about group work but I am primarily concerned with its implications at Wandsworth. Here it was introduced, rightly in my opinion, as

part of an overall staff training scheme.

The first stage was the setting up of a staff training sub-committee which was fortunate in that it had the services of a very able and well-liked P.O. who was later promoted chief officer *in situ* and has continued to maintain an interest in, and support of, staff training. An acceptable father figure. All aspects of in-service staff training were discussed together with methods of introducing a variety of useful and acceptable courses. The advice of the Assistant Director i/c staff training was sought and he attended meetings in the establishment. Approval was given for Wandsworth to be placed on the list of establishments approved for Group Counselling and approval was given for an increase in authorised complement in order to release members of staff for training. This new staff complement was in post for one day in February 1964 but on no other occasion since.

The planning having taken place and the decisions having been made, a full explanation of all aspects of training was prepared by the governor and was delivered to staff verbally and as a document. Courses for staff in Group Counselling were included as part of the Wandsworth In-Service Training Scheme.

We were perhaps fortunate that the discussion, planning and introduction all took place shortly after

the passing of resolution 8 at the P.O.A. Annual Conference 1963. This timing at the outset assured a large measure of support and 119 members of staff volunteered for group training.

It would be useful at this stage to express how I see the value of group work and how group work was seen at Wandsworth.

It is my convinced opinion that to refer to Group Counselling in the institutional setting and to refer to it as primarily a therapeutic aid is wrong for three reasons. Firstly, we do not at present have the necessary training or skills to be therapists in the full sense. Secondly, to do so sets up unreal expectations in staff and inmates that cannot be met, creates false approaches and relationships and cannot fail to do anything but lead eventually to frustration. Thirdly, it sets up group counselling as the panacea which it most certainly is not.

To me, group work is a way of providing an efficient means of communication at all levels. As a result of better communications there is better understanding, there is a change in atmosphere. In a changed atmosphere people can express themselves honestly as the people they are, in the variety of ways that is necessary to deal with the wide range of problems and problem people that are in our charge. In this group situation,

therapy may incidentally take place.

In Wandsworth the introduction of group work was seen as a means of reducing staff/inmate tensions: as offering some increase in job satisfaction; as offering status and career prospects to the counsellor/worker: as a source of overtime payment; as an opportunity for junior members of staff "to speak their minds" to senior members of staff; as something a bit more hopeful than traditional methods or lack of them for "helping inmates to go straight" or "helping them to keep out of trouble".

Training was to be the responsibility of myself as supervisor with the principal psychologist as adviser and I found his help invaluable. Subsequently a senior psychologist became assistant adviser. Another useful event was that the chief officer I have previously referred to became actively involved in the group work and became deputy supervisor. He was the first uniformed officer to take the supervisors' course.

In January 1964, we were ready to start and ran two five-day courses. The purpose of the courses was to attempt to provide some factual information but the main emphasis was to attempt to provide training through experience and participation in a non-directed group.

Since we started group work there have been 12 courses and

110 members of staff have taken part as volunteers. These include 86 discipline and hospital officers, 12 principal officers, one chief officer (deputy supervisor), three welfare officers, two A.Gs., two chaplains, one psychologist and one psychological tester. There have been inmate groups involving nearly 1,000 prisoners.

At the end of each course it was left to the participants to decide, over the period of about a week, whether or not they wished to take an inmate group. Immediate responses were not accepted and no pressure was applied, every attempt was made to make this a free choice. There were no specific instructions as to what type of group the member of staff should take, i.e. directive or non-directive group, for it is my opinion that in this situation the worker must be seen to be himself in a position where he can express himself honestly. It is ridiculous after a five-day training course to expect the group leader who is naturally verbose to run a non-directive group and similarly the reticent group leader to run a directive group. Briefing sessions were held to clarify any points raised and to remind staff of the interactions that would take place in the group situation as had been illustrated in their own group.

The working week for inmates is already limited so it was decided

that the groups would be restricted to evenings. It was also decided that it would be compulsory for inmates, as many inmates would volunteer for the wrong reasons or would not volunteer at all. Similarly some inmates who might derive benefit would not volunteer. There was also the general agreement that if staff were prepared to volunteer for and undergo training then there must be the required number of inmates available to allow for staff expression and experience.

With some attempt at rehabilitation already taking place in H and K Wings the first groups started there. With increasing numbers of "trained" staff it was possible to introduce group work into the main prison in June 1964.

There were in the first instance two major difficulties. The high inmate transfer rate and loss of continuity which was combatted as far as was possible by the allocation of inmates to groups of common discharge or likely transfer dates. Secondly, escorts and other duties made it extremely difficult to have members of staff regularly at staff group meetings. With the limited training in the first instance it was thought vital by both training staff and group-workers alike that training should be an ongoing process with regular group-workers' meetings. Our failure to maintain such meetings is probably one of the major contributory factors

leading to our present sorry state of affairs.

Despite the difficulties of arranging staff courses, maintaining staff groups and real continuity, work progressed until mid-1965. In June 1965 the shortage of staff and steadily increasing inmate population made it impossible to run further basic training courses let alone the advanced and refresher courses that were now felt to be necessary. Interest was maintained by some members of the staff who attended the now irregular staff group meetings but the wastage of practising staff group leaders was considerable. Whatever the reality of the situation the result was interpreted by staff whose interest and support is essential, as a lack of interest or support from "the top". A loss of continuity combined with such feelings cannot but lead to feelings of frustration and "opting out".

At the Prison A.G's Conference this year I said that group work at Wandsworth was now just about a corpse and would be a difficult one to resurrect. Our staff situation has worsened and the inmate population has continued to grow. I believe that the situation is now worse than I had previously described it but I am still convinced as to the value of group-work and feel that our experience has been of tremendous value.

Out of the staff and staff/inmate groups has come about a

staff/inmate spastic group which continues to do valuable work. An advisory committee of staff group representatives has been set up to look at inmate training and staff involvement. Despite the fact that this group was unable to meet because staff were not available, there was still interest and hope for some time. This too has now died.

It was found in the early stages that demands for action from both staff and inmates are predominant. This means that as staff groups are at different stages of development, whilst there is a need for reassurance and support and the sight of positive action, the timing of any action is of vital importance. Experience has shown us that whilst the feelings of frustration are particularly high in those first trained, this frustration, with reassurance examination and support can be contained. Changes can only be arranged as the temperature of the total institution changes and change it most certainly does.

Through the staff group meetings it became clearly apparent that a large number of staff are not only anxious to change their role but have the ability to do so. It became equally obvious that group work/counselling is not the only approach in that many members of staff prefer to use the person to person relationship and are

capable, with guidance, of doing so to the advantage of staff and inmates. I am sure that it was also clearly demonstrated that even in Wandsworth, if nothing else, group work can create a situation where communications can be effective where there is a growing awareness in staff and a desire for positive expression. It can also promote an atmosphere where a variety of purposeful staff/inmate interactions can take place, both within the group situation and the wider context of the total institution.

As a result of facilitating better communications at all levels there was a better understanding and changes in attitude. Whatever the direct effect may or may not have been on inmates there was a considerable effect on staff with growing demands for change and greater staff involvement. Unless these demands are met in some way and this is another area in which we failed, the result is frustration followed by further "opting out". It is difficult to meet these demands in an institution such as Wandsworth where the prime concerns are discipline, movement and security, with an ever changing and growing population. It is even more difficult to plan staff involvement when there is an acute shortage of staff and the future role of the establishment is under review. One can only hope that change will result in a situation where we can once again use the

material that is available to us to the best advantage.

When I attended the group supervisors' course a practising A.G. supervisor described his relationship with the institution psychologist/adviser as a "David and Jonathan relationship". I must comment that this was my experience. The pressures that are on the supervisor are such that he must have the constant provision of the skilled advice and support of the psychologist.

When starting a group training programme there can be a natural impetus in that there is the offer to staff of involvement and a change of role. In our case there was the offer of an addition or alternative to a situation that was not acceptable to staff. As the programme develops some of this impetus seems to be lost and group work in a large local prison tends to be seen as a peripheral activity accorded little priority. When the working day for the inmate is already short it is difficult to justify group activities during the working day. Staff already subjected to a considerable amount of evening duty find it difficult to justify to themselves and their families that group work should be an extra evening activity.

If group work is to be effective it must be accorded the right priority and this must be demonstrable.