

The client as citizen

Self-determination and empowerment through the group experience

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This paper describes the process and outcome of a self-help group involving six parents, and then proceeds to analyse the self-help group as a polity.

This analysis of the self-help group incorporates the notion of the parents as citizens who act and make decisions as a group or social polity. Concepts of generalised exchange and justice which have integral roles in social action within a polity are applied within the analysis.

These concepts are used to explain the personal growth of parents as citizens demonstrated through their participation in the self-help group as a social polity and in their social functioning within the community.

The paper argues that by promoting the clients' citizenship development, the process facilitates their participation within the community and contributes to improved social functioning and self-determination.

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The disempowering consequences of the life situation of families involved with the child protection system are well known. The deleterious effects of this life situation for the well being of families has, however, become more evident in recent research. These deleterious effects are associated with families experiencing a perceived lack of control over life events and subsequent stress which contributes to negative outcomes (Wilson 1987; Brunner, 1992).

In these circumstances families develop a sense of learned helplessness as an apparent vicious circle of negative experiences establishes an ambience of stress. This stressful situation saps their energies, hopes and aspirations (Bate, 1992).

The debate which arises, episodically, about the efficacy of casework to respond to families undergoing these negative experiences does not contribute to improving service effectiveness. It is more germane to reframe the debate to identify practices which contribute to positive outcomes for these families.

One such practice is outlined below in the description of a group of six mothers, five of whom are single, who formed a self-help group.

Following the description of the parents' life situation and the practice methods adopted, the rationale underpinning practice will be extrapolated. This rationale will be discussed in terms of the parents working through their experiences of disempowerment to achieve wider

social participation and a sense of social rights.

DESCRIPTIONS OF PARENTS' BACKGROUND

The six women were involved with a casework service in a country town in Victoria, Australia. Initially, they each individually sought help for family conflicts and child management problems and concern about possible involvement with child protection services.

During the casework phase it became evident that in each case their concerns were associated with background problems, including their own experience of childhood and adult abuse, as well as problems with their current social functioning.

Five of the six women were either raped as children or raped as an adult. All of them had experienced abusive relationships with adult males including domestic violence. In addition to this legacy of background problems, the six parents experienced financial hardship, led relatively isolated lives and experienced family conflict with extended family members, parenting difficulties and low levels of personal satisfaction.

The six women had a total of 13 children, one of whom was above pre-school age. Only one parent had part-time employment, the other five found themselves excluded from the labour market and dependent solely on Social Security provisions.

Initially, the parents made progress in their individual casework relationship with a substantial reduction in their sense of crisis. However, they also displayed a 'stuckness' in their social functioning and a seeming inability to work towards an improvement in their restricted life circumstances.

They were assessed by their caseworkers as 'surviving', but potentially at risk with the care of their children, particularly if their life circumstances deteriorated. Their financial situation, social isolation, limited social opportunities and supports, less than satisfactory accommodation/neighbourhood and continuing parent-child care management issues underlined their potential vulnerability.

As a means of working through this apparent impasse in their progress, the caseworkers thought about the possible value to them of participating in a group.

GROUP ESTABLISHMENT AND PROCESS

Initially, the caseworkers planned the establishment of a self-help group and took responsibility for two aspects of the group – the selection process and the ground rules for the operation of the group.

The group selection was a subjective process in which the caseworkers made an assessment of compatibility by focussing on personality and similarity of background and issues. The parents' backgrounds and issues were seen as similar, as outlined above. The criteria for personality involved an assessment of the parents on a continuum of dominance-submissiveness. None of the parents were considered to be dominant; in contrast they were seen as lacking in self-confidence and experiencing a sense of 'learned helplessness' (Seligman 1975).

The ground rules for the group included confidentiality, the right of a person not to talk if they did not wish, respect and non-judgement of each other.

The group was established through the caseworkers introducing the idea of the group as a matter of choice, individually, with each of the six

parents selected from the screening process. Each of the parents was also advised that they had some things in common with other group members although they were not told what these might be.

At the first meeting the caseworkers facilitated the introduction of group members to each other and established the initial ground rules with the participation and agreement of the members. The group was then advised that the members, as a group, would be able to exercise control over what happened in the group and that the caseworkers could only attend a meeting if the group believed there was a need for their attendance and they were invited. This process facilitated the transfer of the locus of control for the group from the caseworkers to the group members.

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The group met on a regular basis over a period of six months, initially meeting in the caseworkers' meeting room and after that in each other's homes. Some two months into the life of the group, there was a crisis associated with a group member who had adopted a leadership role. The group considered that this member was attempting to 'highjack' the group and had breached confidentiality.

The group sought help from the caseworkers to resolve the crisis, although they maintained control of the group process and decision-making. The group resolved the crisis by expelling the person from the group. They also decided to meet in the offices of the casework service as a number of them felt uncomfortable about their

children's behaviour in another person's house and felt some degree of unease or embarrassment about the state of their own house.

Following this crisis, group solidarity and trust developed and strengthened. Members also met each other in pairs or together, informally, outside group meetings. Two members who were self-conscious about shopping, as they saw themselves as different from other people, began meeting for a cup of tea 'up the street' when they went shopping. This experience assisted them in developing confidence in conducting their shopping.

GROUP OUTCOME

Normalisation of their level of self-confidence, broadening of their social activities and parenting and capacity to 'move on' in their lives were reported by the parents following completion of the group. Four of the five remaining parents in the group obtained part-time employment. The caseworkers in their individual casework with the parents reported that members displayed improved levels of self-confidence and competence in their parenting and conduct of their personal affairs.

Group members maintained friendships with each other and met in pairs or as a small group informally.

The content of the group process as reported by group members included:

- 'small talk' such as what they were doing 'yesterday', innuendo and joking remarks, such as the attraction of a maintenance person doing repairs in the office;
- shared cooking and household hints;
- shared problem-solving experiences; and
- some degree of sharing of personal trauma.

This brief overview indicates that the group operated on an informal basis with no set agenda or process. Following the turmoil associated with the breach of confidentiality by one member, the members strongly bonded to each other. The group was egalitarian and members felt in control of group processes. They shared common

concerns and assisted each other in developing their problem solving practices. In summary, they established a self-help and mutual support process within the group and an informal support network with each other outside the group meetings.

As noted, the outcomes of this group experience were assessed from self reports by members and by assessments made by the caseworkers in their individual contacts with group members. These outcomes included improved self-confidence and a self-acceptance that they were 'normal', improved problem solving skills and improved parenting competence. They also noted that the parents took more care in their personal presentation and dress, developed a sense of personal pride about themselves and about their homes as well as improvements in their extended support networks and involvement in social activities.

The caseworkers also noted a reduction in the frequency of requests for contact with them. As noted, four of the five parents also gained part-time employment which further reinforced, for them, the developments they had achieved.

After the completion of the self-help group, members met informally usually in pairs and they also achieved a reconciliation with the member who had been excluded from the group.

RATIONALE UNDERPINNING PRACTICE

Self-determination and empowerment were emergent principles which describe both the principles and practices of group members.

Self-determination as McDermott (1975) points out involves the capacity to choose freely, to make up one's mind freely. An individual may be subject to influence and persuasion, but finally a self-determining person must be a freely choosing individual even if such a choice is unwise.

Members of the group were able to exercise choice about the nature and level of their participation. While it is the case that group norms were established, for the operation of the

group the participants exercised self-determining action as to how, what and when they would participate in the group life. It is also clear that they transferred the experience of self-determination, in a way they had not previously experienced, to other facets of their lives.

Empowerment is regarded by Shera and Page (1995) as a process whereby individuals gain mastery over their own lives and participation in the democratic processes at local, community and wider levels. The concept thereby links individual competencies with social change and development through democratic participation.

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The concepts of self-determination and empowerment may be seen as two sides of the one coin. The self-determining individual typically needs to feel empowered. In these terms the parents exercised their rights as citizens and to that degree moved away from a disenfranchised status.

Citizenship may appear to be an extravagant concept to be applied to this group experience, however, it does provide the opportunity to widen the scope of conceptualising the parents in their life situation and assists in taking

account of the empowering effects or otherwise of practice.

Janowski (1998) conceptualises citizenship as membership of a group, formally, of the nation state, involving clear rights and responsibilities based on a notion of equality. He sees this notion of citizenship operating at a number of levels including at the individual and group level as well as the wider community and societal levels. He also notes the link between 'personhood' and citizenship.

That is, the experience of being a person, having status, depends on membership of a group or community. Rothstein (1998) notes that most human action is strategic. That is, what we do depends on or is influenced by what we think others will do. In this respect if we do not participate as a member of a group, it is likely that our capacity to act strategically and therefore effectively is diminished.

Diminished participation or exclusion from a group or community is likely to be due to one or other or both of two factors: a lack in the provision of equal basic capabilities and self-exclusion.

The first of these two factors concerns the provision of opportunities and resources to rectify an individual's inability to achieve a level of social participation due to a disability. That is, it is a normalising provision which contributes to an individual fulfilling their life project and achieving a basic level of equality in group participation (Wolfensberger, 1972).

The second of these factors is the experience of low self-confidence and a sense of alienation and demoralisation. This outcome is likely to involve a reciprocal process between the lack of equal basic capabilities being the primary factor and self-exclusion being the psychological reaction of the individual.

Janowski's (1998) notions of restricted and generalised exchange provide conceptual underpinnings which assist in understanding this development. Restricted exchange is exemplified in the quid pro quo of the market place in which there is a relatively immediate

reciprocal exchange involving goods, services or entitlements.

Typically, those cases involving an entitlement for payment attract monetary interest or a loss in social status. This form of reciprocity is limited to the nature of the exchange, and the level of trust involved in the process is likewise limited to the particular exchange process.

Restricted exchange involves a relatively high level of rational calculation, limited emotional affect and competency specific to the particular transaction. Utility characterises the exchange process.

In contrast generalised exchange from an individual perspective is non reciprocal. From a group perspective, however, it includes a high level of reciprocity of goods, services and entitlements which do not involve rational calculation for their provision. Sharing, caring and helping are typically associated with generalised exchange particularly within the context of support networks.

Janowski (1998) also notes the relationship between generalised exchange and personal development. The construction and development of the self is linked with the generalised exchange process involved with family, networks and community. Developmentally, generalised exchange processes facilitate the development of a person's own values as well as self-reflection and appreciation of others' values. In contrast to the focus of restricted exchange on utility, the focus of generalised exchange is on value and requires a high level of trust.

With these comments in mind it can be inferred that the abusive background experiences of the parents in our self-help group were associated with disrupted positive socialisation and limited opportunity to achieve equal basic capability. Each of the parents experienced extreme levels of personal trauma and stress and limited opportunities to engage in generalised exchange associated with their low levels of self-confidence, limited personal and social networks, and restricted lifestyles.

The caseworkers in their counselling relationship with the parents established strong engagement and a high level of trust. The casework relationship appears to have prevented a deterioration in the parent's social functioning. This relationship, however, was not able to facilitate a process for the parents to achieve or regain equal basic capabilities to enable them to participate effectively in personal relationships, networks and within the community.

The consequences of their stressful and abusive experience disenfranchised the parents from developing their values through the limitations in their generalised exchange experiences and thus limited their personhood development. It also appears that their improved opportunities for generalised exchange improved their capacity in restricted exchange relationships. Previously they had lacked self-confidence in shopping and were non-participants in the employment market.

The parents' 'stress-filled' lives are in contrast to what Smith and Nursten (1998) comment is required to cope positively with stress. They note that successful coping behaviour needs strong support networks. From a different perspective, Thompson et al (1996) in studying organisational stress comment on the impact of group culture on an individual's reaction to stress. A negative or non-supportive culture may induce a state similar to 'learned helplessness' in addition to the fear and anxiety associated with trauma experiences.

The parents experienced stress in their everyday lives as well as suffering with post traumatic stress without the benefit of support networks. As noted at the beginning of this paper, a strong relationship was identified between a sense of control over one's life and a broad range of health outcomes.

The literature on stress and organisational culture and epidemiological studies on stress and health outcomes support the contention outlined in this paper about the negative relationship existing between psychological well being and the capacity to cope

effectively with non supportive networks.

What this literature suggests is that both the exercise of self-determination and the experience of empowerment are integrally linked with participation in generalised exchange processes and with the ability to act strategically. As Rothstein (1998) notes, what we do depends on what we think others will do. The capacity to act strategically appears to depend on our participation in groups and to both experience and learn strategic behaviour within family, networks and community through positive generalised exchange processes.

The experiences of these parents in their networks were clearly dysfunctional, including violence, which contributed to their restricted lifestyles, thereby compounding their difficulties. The violence experienced by the parents both as children and as adults undermined their ability to act strategically due to the capricious behaviour of the perpetrators. Their subsequent stress-filled lives and lack of support networks characterised their lives in parenthood.

The significance of the dynamics between strategic behaviour and generalised exchange may be highlighted through the concept of justice which provides underpinnings for a social polity in group participation. That is, conceptualising group participation as a political process involving values, rights and responsibilities which underpin the resultant normative relationships associated with group membership.

Rothstein (1998) identifies three components of justice occurring within a social polity:

- Substantive justice is associated with notions of fairness to all citizens with the provision of services and resources within the polity designed to provide all with equal basic capabilities enabling citizens to participate in their communities and within society.
- Distributive justice concerns a fair distribution of the burden for shared

action in providing services and resources to achieve equal basic capabilities among citizens.

- Procedural justice concerns processes whereby the benefits and the burden involved in providing benefits may be legitimised.

In treating the self-help group as a polity we may infer that these components occurred at micro level within the group. For example, as the group developed it was the members who decided what they wanted from participating. They also agreed about the burden placed on participants in maintaining the group. Finally, they acted to legitimise and maintain the group by both adopting and enforcing ground rules for the operation of the group.

CONCLUSION

Self-determination and empowerment occur within a polity. It is suggested that the group experience engendered a capacity for strategic behaviour by the participants and generalised exchange. The group norms and practices accepted and developed by group members contributed to substantive, distributive and procedural justice processes which underpinned group solidarity and group sentiment.

The claim for the significance of the group is experiential rather than empirical. The parents had long histories of chronic levels of problematic social functioning. Despite substantial casework input they appeared 'stuck'. Following their participation in the group the outcomes for the parents were substantially positive.

The casework experience, however, appeared to be fundamental for the establishment of the group as the parents were strongly engaged by the caseworkers and established a high level of trust with them which facilitated the establishment of the group.

While applying citizenship to a self-help group process may appear to be an extravagant use of the concept, it does encapsulate at a micro level the dynamics underpinning membership of

a group as outlined in the paper. The key processes identified include strategic behaviours, generalised exchange and the application of norms to achieve fair and just processes.

Unlike casework the process from the participants' perspective was both non-theoretical and non-technical and depended on the practices of the client. This process encapsulates the key term in social work of person-in-social environment configuration from the perspective of the client as citizen rather than as client as such.

While the caseworkers facilitated the establishment of the group they achieved this outcome on the basis of practice wisdom rather than theory informed practice. This paper involves an extended conceptual reach. To embark on a discussion of the disempowering effects of theory as an explanatory concept, rather than as a heuristic device, may open up another area of debate requiring justification. For these parents with their backgrounds and functional problems, change and progress seemed to call for heroism from them. The experience of the self-help group enabled them to courageously move on which is more consistent with normal human endeavour than the need to act heroically.

Suffice to conclude by re-emphasising the concept of seeing the client as within a social polity, sufficient for citizenship, informed by substantive, distributive and procedural justice processes as a practice framework. The client must, to retain the integrity of the conception, be regarded as a citizen who has rights to self-determination and access to empowering experiences. Practice contributes to effective outcomes to the extent that the client is provided with opportunities to learn strategic action and have equal basic capabilities sufficient, at least, to provide a sense of mastery about their life circumstances (cf. Smith, D.M., 1994; Wilkinson, R., 1998; Marmot, M., 1998; Swann, N., 1998a; Swann, N., 1998b; Syme, L. 1998). □

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