Reflective Practice

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Inside it was orange squash concentrate: Trainees experiences of reflective practice groups within Clinical Psychology training.

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<u>Abstract</u>

Despite many Clinical Psychology training programmes utilizing reflective practice groups as the preferred method to develop reflective practice skills, there remains little research examining the experiences of such groups from a trainee perspective. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to explore the experiences of eight qualified Clinical Psychologists who attended reflective practice groups on one Clinical Psychology training programme in the United Kingdom. A purposive sample was recruited for a single, semi-structured interview. Five superordinate themes were identified: '*The process: there were so many layers*'; '*The impact: an ongoing process*'; '*Commitment: I hated it, but I still went*'; '*The facilitator: a presence who was not always present*' and '*Getting through it: finding ways to cope*'. The findings illustrate the varied and complex experiences of the participants. Whilst the experience was often difficult, participants appeared committed to attending and sought out ways to navigate the experience. The results are conceptualised in terms of existing psychological theory and literature. A critique of the research and suggestions for future studies are offered, including exploring the views of the facilitators of such groups and comparing how groups are utilized within different training programmes. Recommendations are made relating to the development of future reflective practice groups, which include consideration of the style of facilitation and the frequency and size of the group.

<u>Introduction</u>

The training route for Clinical Psychologists (CPs) in the United Kingdom (UK) involves a professional doctoral degree. Whilst there is some variability across training programmes, at their core is university-based learning, clinical work within the National Health Service (NHS) and a research thesis. The aim is to equip trainee CPs with core competencies set out by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2014). Embedded within the BPS standards for training CPs is a drive towards a scientist-practitioner model alongside a reflective-practitioner model. This includes skills, knowledge and values relevant to working with people (BPS, 2014).

The value of reflective practice in the learning process

Reflective practice (RP) can be hard to define; being described as "atheoretical" and intangible (Cushway & Gatherer, 2003; pg.6). RP has its roots within the field of education (Dewey, 1938) yet there has been minimal research within Clinical Psychology to support the assertion that it is beneficial (Bennett-Levy, 2003) and there is little consensus regarding its key components (Carroll et al., 2002).

Nevertheless, it is conceptualised as a process through which "we learn by doing and realising what came of what we did" (Dewey, 1938, pg. 367), suggesting that reflection is essential to learning and development (Kiemle, 2008). Schön (1987) argues that the concept of RP is important because professionals often need to make complex decisions based on

known technical or academic knowledge alongside thinking in the moment skills. These comprise reflection-in-action (during the event) thinking and reflection-on-action (after the event) thinking, both important skills for CPs. RP can be seen as a reaction against professionals becoming overly simplistic and technique driven in their application of knowledge (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). Lavender (2003), a CP, developed Schön's early ideas by adding two further themes applicable to the work of CPs: *reflection about one's impact on others* and *reflections about the self*. CPs routinely work in emotionally challenging contexts; as such, when working with the distress of others, professionals should be able to engage with their own distress (Gardner, 2001).

Incidents leading to barriers and facilitators of RP were examined by Wong-Wylie (2007). Various conditions facilitated RP, including trusting relationships and risk-taking. Several conditions served as a barrier: including untrusting relationships and receiving unsupportive feedback. Engagement with RP may facilitate the ability to manage the uncertainties and complexities of therapeutic practice (Schön, 1987), theory-practice integration (Klenowski & Lunt, 2008) and building therapist resilience (Hughes, 2009). Further, it is an ongoing learning process reaching beyond the formal training process.

Reflective Practice as an ongoing professional learning process

There is value in encouraging RP as a learning process yet there is minimal research on how CPs use RP post-qualification (Fisher et al., 2015). It is argued that reflection enables therapist self-awareness which helps the therapeutic relationship when feeling stuck; however, CPs are unable to give a clear definition of RP, nor describe their own process of reflection (Fisher et al., 2015), suggesting that further research is warranted.

A myriad of potential methods exist which can facilitate the development of RP, for example, reflective writing or case discussions (Brown, Lutte-Elliott, & Vidalaki, 2009). The current dominant model within CP training appears to be Reflective Practice Groups (RPGs) (Horner, Youngson & Hughes, 2009). However, there is a lack of evidence supporting the most effective ways of nurturing this development (Bennett-Levy, 2003).

Reflective Practice Groups in CP training

RPGs are facilitated groups in which trainees explore their experiences of training, clinical work and themselves (Binks, Jones, & Knight, 2013). RPGs are regarded as the most favoured and beneficial learning method for addressing trainee CP's RP development (Gillmer & Marckus, 2003). There are varied ways in which RPGs are utilized across different training institutions, including differences in aims, frequencies, durations, facilitation and mandatory attendance (Horner Youngson & Hughes, 2009). Despite this variability they are typically facilitated by an independent individual trained in a particular therapeutic orientation.

The aim of the current study was to identify trainee CPs experiences of attending a RPG to explore the utility of this favoured method in developing RP. The research question was:

What are trainees' experiences of RPGs within doctoral Clinical Psychology training?

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)(Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Purposive sampling was used to recruit eight qualified practicing CPs who graduated from one UK-based CP training programme –within the last three-ten years and had attended a RPG. Seven women and one man were interviewed. Their ages ranged from late 20s to late 30s.

The semi-structured interview schedule was developed following a review of the literature, in collaboration with the research team and a service-user consultant. A pilot interview was conducted to test the questions and reflect upon the interview process. This data was not included in the data analysis.

In line with IPA methodology interviews were transcribed and superordinate and subthemes identified within and across all transcripts. The epistemological stance was considered throughout, acknowledging a social constructionist position, which holds that knowledge is both culturally and historically specific with meaning constructed through language and complex social interactions (Burr, 2003). To ensure standards of quality and validity were maintained, guidelines for qualitative research were applied (Elliot, Fischer and Rennie, 1999).

Triangulation was used to establish credibility and transferability, through convergences in themes and through discussions within the research team (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Ethical considerations

Ethical Approval was obtained alongside informed, signed consent from all participants (BPS, 2014b). Confidentiality and the protection of anonymity was maintained throughout via pseudonyms, and the secure storage of transcriptions and audio recordings. Potential distress was managed by the interviewer (AL) during and after the interview process. Contact information for sources of support were provided.

Results

Five superordinate themes were constructed from the analysis: '*The process: there were so many layers*'; '*The impact: an ongoing process; 'Commitment: I hated it, but I still went'; 'The facilitator: a presence who was not always present'* and *'Getting through it: finding ways to cope'.* These will now be explored and illustrated with quotes.

The process, there were so many layers

This theme referred to different layers that impacted upon experiences of the RPG. They comprised of practical, personal and relational experiences, alongside wider training demands.

Going through personal life experiences seemed to impact upon engagement within the group, such as illness or parenthood. These seemed to form the heart of the layers as they greatly influenced the experience, as illustrated by Kate:

> But because I was a bit sick sometimes I couldn't engage with it. And that impacted on the way I related to that group. I was like 'oh please leave me alone'! (Kate)

The emphasis Kate places on the need to be alone within a learning process involving others highlights how hard it can be to engage with RP when one's health was compromised. Potentially, this deeply personal experience impacted on a relational level with the 'fear' of being negatively judged by peers as Ewan's quote illustrated:

> I think there was a lot of fear in the room, I think people were scared to say things for fear of either irritating other people or being judged badly for being thought about not using the group as it should be ... it's difficult coz you've only got an hour, and you've got to see these people for the next two years! (Ewan)

Ewan used emotive language ('*fear*', '*scared*', '*irritating*') highlighting just how overwhelming this experience could be in the moment. Participants often referred to the other training demands they faced and how this appeared to impact on their ability to make sense of, and contribute, to the group. At these points the inner layers were almost invisible as these demands took the attention. Jessica commented on having other things to do:

> ...you have those really busy periods where you've got endless assignments due in...so everything around those times felt more difficult and I do remember, ... a sense of when there was a lot on, the reflective group at that time felt like much lower on the priority of...we could be spending this time doing something getting our work done (Jessica)

It was almost as though Jessica's training demands represented basic practical layers leaving little space left to reflect on the more internal, 'heart', layers of the group such as personal, emotional and relational responses and with this the ability to engage with the group. With another practical issue, Gracie reflected on the timing of the group:

> It was really odd, coz we'd always have the reflective group right at the start of the day, and then we'd have a whole day of teaching until about 5 o'clock, and that was really tough. To do that in the morning and then have to spend all that time with the same people, but in a different sort of format, was a bit weird (Gracie)

For Gracie having the group at the start of the day exacerbated the challenge of attending and focussing on teaching and here we get a sense of the emotional layers and impact this had when she says it was '*odd*', '*tough*' and '*weird*'.

We hear of this from Kate and, also, what lies beneath this practical layer when Amanda spoke about the '*uncomfortable*' feelings left behind following the RPG and the impact this had on them during subsequent teaching:

> *I guess that was the one classroom people wouldn't hang out in between ... But it feels like that's the one place we didn't hang out at lunches and breaks because it felt so uncomfortable, that was the space that felt most uncomfortable for most people (Amanda)*

Perhaps this was understandable, given the intensity of emotions that at times emerged evoking emotional responses such as crying, representing another layer of the experience. For example, Janette stated:

> *It was almost like being shamed in the beginning, talking about something that then made you feel, that made me tearful, that for me, kind of left me feeling almost a little bit shamed for being, it sounds ridiculous but that idea of the emotional woman, you know* (Janette)

One can sense Janette's deep fear and the '*shame*' of expressing emotional experiences perceived to be unacceptable or almost minimised when she says '*it sounds ridiculous*'.

Moving on from this experience of multiple layers, the next theme explores the impact of these layers.

The impact, an ongoing process

This theme captured the ongoing process participants underwent throughout the group, and into their careers post-qualification.

There was often a realisation that the RPG was part of a wider training process, including clinical placements, group learning tasks and personal therapy. The impact of these broader experiences on RP was difficult to disentangle from the RP development afforded within the RPG:

> *I suppose I did change a fair bit really throughout training I think coz ... I was certainly a lot more reflective and a lot less vocal by the end of training. Whether that was in part because of reflective group, maybe, but I think it was the whole process (Ewan)*

Ewan highlighted the intangible nature of how RP develops with the RPG forming one, crucial, part of RP development. There seemed a fluid quality to this, as Sharon highlights,

with the ability to utilise the learning therein dependent on wider unarticulated factors suggested through the repetition of '*different*':

> *I think the whole point of the group was that it was part of something*
> *bigger that was happening, and...there were so many kinds of impacts at*
> *different times and in different ways, and I was at different times, more or*
> *less able to engage with it (Sharon)*

This intangible quality of the sense-making process continued as participants valued the space in the interview process to reflect more deeply on their experience. Indeed, it was '*comforting*':

> *I think there's something really comforting about having a space now to*
> *really think about that and think about what I took from it and how helpful*
> *it was…there wasn't a space while we were training to do that sense-*
> *making (Jessica)*

Jessica highlighted the relentlessness nature of training impacting on the ability to reflect on the process. It seemed as though not being able to fully reflect on the reflective process the RPG afforded, underpinned this questioning sense. It was as though a space to process the RPG experience was needed as there were still unanswered questions about the purpose of the group long after attending:

> *But yeah it's just even [ ] years later, you still sort of think about…'what*
> *was that'? 'What was that?', you know? (Sharon)*

Further participants valued the opportunity to share the experience within the research interview process, being still '*hungry*' for the opportunity:

> *I'm very happy I had the chance to talk about it actually …I'm still hungry*
> *about not talking about, about processing it by myself, but then I never*
> *really have shared it with anyone (Kate)*

That questioning was emphasised by Sharon's repeated, almost earnest question of '*What was that?*' For Gracie, aspects of her development could only be realised after training, after gaining more professional experience and, importantly, '*confidence*' in herself ('*I'm ok as a person*'):

> *It's about knowing, having that sense of, I'm ok as a person, I'm ok, I'm*
> *actually quite good as a psychologist, I'm ok at what I do, and therefore*
> *my opinion is my opinion, and, there's that confidence in that, if that*
> *makes sense. And I didn't have that on training at all really. I don't think*
> *you can have that on training, I think that comes with experience (Gracie)*

There truly was a sense of the development being an ongoing process and how the benefits may only really be experienced or known post-qualification. Alongside this was perhaps an inevitable struggle with the reflective process. Trying to understand a process that is difficult to understand can be a frustrating experience and this leads onto the third theme.

Commitment: I hated it, but I still went

This theme encapsulated the difficult experiences many participants described. There was a sense that despite the difficulties, distressing experiences could be valued. The RPG served as a magnifying glass enabling the '*unsaid'* to emerge as Jessica stated:

> *It was like the magnifying glass on all those...difficult things that were*
> *coming out and yeah it was somewhere to really magnify what was unsaid*
> *or what was bubbling underneath (Jessica)*

For others, the group appeared to act as a metaphorical magnifying glass for other difficult experiences running alongside the group. Amanda described this in her account:

> *It was a microcosm of what would happen in the wider cohort outside of*
> *the group so there's almost intensified... like, orange squash you know,*
> *outside the group it's diluted but inside it was orange squash concentrate*
> *(Amanda)*

More directly, Isla appeared to find attending the group a positive experience despite the struggle:

> *I mean I found it useful, to have a space where I could think with others*
> *about things that I might have been struggling with (Isla)*

Clearly Isla was enabled to discuss her struggles, and this shared space was useful for her. Despite the perceived challenges, many of the participants continued to participate in the group, with some appearing to appreciate there was a value in going through a difficult experience together. This included giving others the opportunity to voice discontent:

> *Yeah I always attended because...I feel if you want to be part of a group or*
> *whatever conversation anyone wants to bring you are denying them the*
> *opportunity to talk about it if you're not there (Amanda)*

Allowing words to be spoken seemed crucial for some and this is an important aspect of sharing and relating to each other in an authentic way. Sometimes, words were not spoken at all, and that silence could take on epic qualities, yet as Sharon reflects:

> *I sometimes feel overwhelmed and uncomfortable but it's not the end of the*
> *world and like no one's going to die from sitting in a room in silence for an*

hour feeling uncomfortable. I'm pretty sure no one's ever died from that! (Sharon)

There was one additional presence and voice that emerged as a significant contributor to the reflective process: the RPG facilitator. External to the programme and only in attendance for the duration of the group some were able to form connections yet others struggled. The next theme explores this.

The facilitator: a presence who was not always present

It appeared to be difficult for some participants to experience a perceived disconnected facilitator. The RPG seemed to be about forming cohesive connections based on familiarity. Kate contrasted this disconnection with programme tutor relationships:

> *Maybe we knew their relationship or the way they were a little bit, so more comfortable sharing, rather than someone who is external, which is a good idea somehow, but we didn't, we couldn't relate, or we couldn't create a relationship (Kate)*

This lack of familiarity had an almost paralysing quality for Kate, where she *'couldn't relate'* or *'couldn't create a relationship'.* Programme tutors were more familiar, thus, relatable, making trainees more *'comfortable sharing'* with them*.* This need for familiarity was similar for Jessica –evidencing the lack of familiarity with her term *'this woman'* when describing the facilitator not enabling her to *'speak...freely'* in the way she could with tutors she knew *'relatively well'*:

> *There was no getting to know her and again being in a relatively small cohort you got to know each of your tutors relatively well. You kind of had a sense of people, so it was unusual to be in an environment where you'd be expected to speak so freely to this woman that actually we had very little idea of who she was (Jessica)*

Perhaps participants would have liked something more from their facilitator; again, it seemed an unusual experience to share personal experiences in the presence of a person they did not know and who sometimes barely spoke:

> *It kind of felt like we were in the dark, not knowing who she was and that kind of thing, where she was from, and it just felt very painful sitting there every week with a facilitator that didn't say that much (Gracie)*

Gracie had attended the group during a time on the programme when it occurred weekly and she reflected that sitting with a facilitator who did not say much left her *'in the dark'* – which was *'painful'*; this is an emotionally laden word that makes the impact of the experience take on an almost physical quality.

Further, despite lengthy conversations, the absence of a clear rationale shared at the start seemed to trigger lengthy yet bland conversations as some grappled with how to use the group:

> *The consequence of that was we then spent an awfully long time talking*
> *about nothing of any substance and a lot about what the group was for*
> *(Janette)*

Whilst not explicitly stated, this seemed to highlight a lack of safety in the group; with a focus on practical layers there was less time to focus on more meaningful material. Jessica reflected on the ongoing learning she used when setting up a *'reflective group'.* By stating that *'cohesion'* comes from *'a shared goal'*, *'structure'* and *'boundaries'* she seemed to imply that her own RPG experience had been unstructured and un-boundaried:

> *It does make me think around how much of a team's cohesion is in its*
> *sense of having a shared goal and having a structure and having*
> *boundaries and you take a lot of that away when you open a reflective*
> *group (Jessica)*

In contrast, some participants experienced positive and beneficial contributions from the facilitator. For example, Kate recalled the impact of an experience after her return from sick leave. The facilitator showing warmth positively impacted upon Kate's experience:

> *I remember the group after I was sick she checked-in with me, I remember*
> *the facilitator being so lovely, I thought, oh she's lovely, she was very*
> *different…there was something about her being warmer (Kate)*

Inevitably, there were other strategies that the participants used to manage the RPG and gain the value they experienced within them. This leads onto our final theme.

Getting through it: finding ways to cope

This theme described the ways participants found to navigate the challenging process of attending the RPG. This involved utilising other sources and forums to reflect on and process experiences within training. For example, some sought interactions away from the RPG with other cohort members. For some, this provided encouragement to speak up in the RPG:

> *I started talking more to other people who were more aligned to my way*
> *of thinking outside of the group and we would kind of, we would have*
> *debates of gosh it's getting really awkward like can you bring it up next*
> *week (Jessica)*

Similarly, Sharon sought out others, perhaps in an effort to seek validation regarding her experience:

I remember again talking to somebody else in my cohort and do you ever
do that thing, and she was like, all the time (Sharon)

Participants discussed the use of their own personal therapy (PT) in relation to the group. For Jessica, her experience helped her realise the potential benefits of seeking her own PT:

Actually off the back of what was discussed in reflective group I did then
make the decision to start personal therapy (Jessica)

Participants needed to find spaces to talk and reflect – to reflect on the reflection – wherein the RPG may have been a catalyst for this need for further reflective and sometimes therapeutic spaces. Sometimes, this triggered a reciprocal reflective space where PT was utilised to reflect on the relational processes:

So it was something about...when there's something clearly going on but
nobody's able to say what it is, I kind of felt like I was the one who would
say something...and again I used a lot of my therapy time, my personal
therapy time to think about why I felt the need to do that (Gracie)

Aside from Gracie's awareness of her own relational process within the RPG, was an awareness that others may find it hard to voice issues that seemed *'clearly'* there yet remained unspoken. Perhaps it was this constant tension between speaking out and remaining silent that made the process of reflection in RPG bearable or unbearable depending on the dynamics within the group and the role the facilitator took in enabling reflection.

Discussion

Participants spoke of a wide range of experiences, including the challenges they navigated within the group and relating to the facilitation style.

RPGs as a multi-layered and complex experience

Participants reflected that the RPG was difficult to disentangle from the rest of their training experience. Groups during training are not experienced in isolation (Lennie, 2007); they are part of a wider process which undoubtedly impacts upon the extent to which group members are able to engage within them.

In this study, given up to seventeen people were in attendance in each group, the variety and complexity of participants' experiences is unsurprising. Whilst this enables all cohort members to interact together within one group, research on group dynamics suggests an ideal size of seven to eight members, with larger groups allowing less space for individual experiences (Yalom & Lesczc, 2005). Similarly, Lennie (2007) demonstrates participants prefer between six and eight members. When larger groups exist, group members may form subgroups as a result of feeling disenfranchised (Ma & Teasdale, 2004), forming connections with those they most relate to. Furthermore, larger groups have been shown to experience

greater dissatisfaction (Leung et al., 2000) and higher levels of distress (Knight et al., 2010). The descriptions of Jessica's '*magnifying glass'* and Amanda's '*microcosm* highlight the RPG experience intensifies wider struggles. However, the high number of people within the group may dilute the ability to process individual experiences – with simply too many people within too small a time frame. Perhaps this is why some participants sought further individual reflective spaces, such as personal therapy.

Inside it was orange squash concentrate – the magnifying nature of RPGs on experiences

A further theme relates to participants' concerns about being negatively perceived by their peers. Mathur and Rutherford (1996) discuss how socially acceptable behaviour enables reinforcement and acceptance from peers. A fear of expressing 'unacceptable' emotional experiences, such as crying is illustrated in Janette's reflection. The intensity of the RPG seems to magnify emotional responses and the fear of how these might be interpreted; for example fear of jeopardising their sense of membership both within and outside of the RPG.

Setting the aims and objectives in the early phases of the group seems important, enabling members to orient themselves to their peers and clarifying safety in speaking up or remaining quiet. Indeed, Yalom and Leszcz (2005) comment that in the initial stages of group development, the communication style of the group "tends to be relatively stereotyped and restricted, resembling the interaction occurring at a cocktail party" (pg. 313). It is crucial that this stage is navigated and reflected upon; as Yalom and Leszcz (2005) highlight, groups are *epigenetic* - if this stage is not successfully negotiated the group may be unable to move forward successfully.

Maintaining relatedness seems crucial and perhaps 'groupthink' is one way of maintaining this (Yalom & Leszec, 2005). Groupthink posits that conformity to intra-group norms is needed to maintain membership. In this case, the intra-group norm may have been one of stoicism in the face of struggle, and, thus, the importance of not openly expressing emotion. This may have resulted in '*shame'* when the intensity of an experience made the emotion spill out. This is akin to the impact suppression of experiences has on the frequency and intensity of thoughts and emotions (Hayes et al., 2003). Perhaps the competitive nature of CP training may prevent the sharing of emotional experiences if perceived to imply incompetence (Mearns, 1997).

Facilitating RPGs

It seems crucial for the facilitator to foster safety and openness in the group when emotions surface. For many participants, when the facilitator seemed disconnected they in turn felt disconnected. Indeed, at such times participants preferred a more active facilitation style.

These challenges may be inherent to the model of facilitation of RPGs. Within traditional theories of group analysis, the leader provides minimal instructions to members and 'a maximum of freedom in self-expression, a maximum of active participation in what is going on' (Foulkes, 1984, pg. 71). The RPGs within this study were facilitated by experienced group

analysts. However, the reflection of several participants suggests that this minimalist facilitation style was perceived as unhelpful. Despite this, the participants were still committed and motivated to attend, as identified in another study (Knight, Sperlinger & Maltby, 2010). Due to the many potential challenges and layers to the RP process in the context of this programme, a more active facilitation style may be better suited to the needs of trainees.

Facilitators can play a crucial role within the group process and gaining an insight into their experiences may complement what is already known from a trainee perspective. Within CP, the only research examining the perspective of RPG facilitators is by Binks, Jones and Knight (2013). In this study facilitators understood trainees' distress to be inherent, and exploring this distress was beneficial to their development. However, gaining more insight through further research could be useful.

The ability to see value in the difficult and uncomfortable

It seems there are elements of the group process that are difficult to manage but which are better left to unfold. Despite the difficulty with emotions spilling out, this study highlights that participants value the opportunity to sit with uncomfortable experiences. Indeed, despite concerns about negative evaluation by peers, the group experience is seen as beneficial to overall development (Ieva et al., 2009).

Aspects that can be controlled for, and where greater flexibility may be warranted, are the physical and practical elements of the RPGs. For example, one issue highlighted in this study was the group being held within the same room participants had lectures in; this added to the challenge of attending the RPG. This reflects the findings of other studies where the physical environment can enable members to feel safer and more relaxed (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010).

Further, there may be benefits in more explicit contracting in the initial stages of RPGs. In this study, it seems that uncertainty about the aims and purpose of the group resulted in participants questioning its usefulness. Yalom and Leszcz's (2005) theory of group development suggests that groups navigate stages as they evolve and develop. One stage relates to participants' experience of orientation, searching for meaning and dependency. If members are not orientated to the aims of the group this can lead to confusion about its rationale and relevance. Group members may become stuck in a stage of asking questions reflecting their confusion. Further, if the ambiguity about the purpose of the group is mismanaged, an increase in anti-group sentiment and withdrawal may occur (Nitsun, 1996). Thus, clear setting of the aims and purpose of the group may be beneficial for group process.

Reconceptualising experiences into a coherent narrative can help shape a sense of identity and a well-adjusted sense of connection to lived experience (Crossley, 2000b). This sense-making opportunity for participants seems absent during the RPG. Thus, it is understandable

that there were many unanswered questions remaining after the experience had ended. As discussed earlier, in part, this might be due to the larger number of participants in the RPGs but also the ambiguous nature of the groups.

Reflective practice: Learning as an on-going process

Many participants used the research interview to help process and make sense of their RPG experience with another person; which can be a therapeutic experience (Murray, 2003). This may be crucial as participants identified how hard it is to reflect on the reflective learning process as it happens. This might partly be due to time - lack of reflection is also noted among qualified CPs where the demands of the job make it increasingly difficult to formalise RP into the working day (Nutt & Keville, 2016).

Future research

Participants in this research were all qualified CPs, with three to ten years post qualification experience. As the provision of RPG in training is an evolving process; there is value exploring the experiences of recently or newly qualified CPs on the programme, to gain an understanding of their experiences of the RPG as it is likely to differ in format and practice to those in this study.

Further, given the lack of literature in this area, it would be important to replicate the findings from the present study by exploring the experience of RPGs on other programmes. This could enhance the validity of the findings, adding to the small body of literature within this area. In addition, it might be useful for research to compare differing styles of facilitated groups during training from a range of therapeutic models, to gain an understanding of how these are experienced. Research considering the perspectives of RPG facilitators would also be of value.

Conclusions

This research presents the findings of qualitative research exploring the experiences of RPGs during CP training. Whilst it is important to hold in mind that the research does not speak for all qualified CPs, it aims to provide a rich and meaningful account of what it is like to be in a RPG. The experiences are varied and complex; it is challenging at times, which is impacted by facilitation style, perceived lack of safety and an inability to reflect on the RPG in the moment. That said, participants appear committed to attending.

It seems there are some aspects that may be unhelpful to change as these pertain to the actual process of RP learning, including the struggle in the process associated with attendance. Where change may be most useful is in altering practical aspects, such as the size and location of the group, along with consideration of the match between facilitation style and group contract considering the purpose and aims of the group. Finally, providing opportunities for meta-reflection seems important, that is, reflecting about the reflective process during training and after qualification. This would require commitment from

management to ensure time and space in the learning process on training and in employment, thereby facilitating ongoing learning in RP for CPs.

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