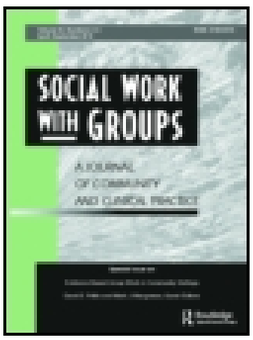

Social Work with Groups

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A narrative of hope in group therapy with adolescents who have sexually harmed

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ABSTRACT

This narrative will detail our first experience co-facilitating a group for male adolescents who have sexually harmed. We believe it is socially unjust for adolescents who sexually harm to simply be labelled as deviant and predatory. We see group work as a path that may allow these young people to take responsibility for their actions, acknowledge their harmful behavior, make amends in some way, and for them to be teens again. We believe that aspiring to and accomplishing this is a profound act of social justice.

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Setting the stage

Group takes place on a Wednesday night at Radius Child and Youth Service (Radius) in Toronto, Canada, usually after a busy day filled with meetings, trainings, and individual client sessions. From 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm, we gather in the largest room at the agency to create a safe and private place. We order pizza and eat before group starts. There is general chatting, maybe about music or the latest Marvel movie. At 6:00 pm the doors close, and group begins.

Our group is for adolescents who have sexually harmed. They are all males between the ages of 12 and 18. They have all sexually abused someone: younger family members, neighbours, peers at school, or strangers.

Few group members will share the specifics of what brought them to sexual offense-specific treatment, but they are welcome to disclose if they wish to. Sometimes they are accompanied to the agency by their parents who have their own concurrent group, which gives them the opportunity to process their feelings about their sons' offending, perhaps for the first time and in the presence of others who are also dealing with the impact of sexual harm.

The belief that guides the programs at Radius is that for families where sibling sexual abuse has occurred, treatment is required not just for the child who experienced the abuse but also the adolescent who has harmed. This leaves room for apology work and reunification, bringing families together and restoring hope for future relationships.

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For adolescents who have sexually harmed someone outside of their family, perhaps a peer or a child, their work in therapy does not include reunification, but rather mobilizing their guilt through apology letter writing that is delivered to their caregiver or a witness. This work is informed by a solid literature base and clinical wisdom garnered over three decades of service.

Our group focuses on building hope for youth. Their stories do not end at the harm that they have caused. Instead we aim to enable them to take steps towards living fulfilling lives by becoming the men that they wish to be beyond the harm they caused. For adolescents who have sexually harmed, group is a way for them to realize that they are not alone in their shame, and to learn that they can address their behaviours with the help and support of their peers.

Our clients are often misunderstood and labeled as deviant and predatory. They tend to be more socially isolated and less antisocial than their peers who engage in generally delinquent behaviours. Youth who have sexually harmed cite curiosity about sexuality as the main reason they chose to sexually abuse. Practice wisdom tells us that access to victims and opportunities to sexually harm are significant factors leading to this destructive behavior.

Treatment for sexual offending generally occurs individually with a therapist and involves identifying the factors that led to the offending and development of a prevention plan. For adolescents who have sexually harmed family members, which is a large proportion of the adolescents we work with, a goal of treatment is family reunification.

Fits and starts

I (RP) was asked to revitalize the group therapy program when I first started working at Radius. Looking back, the first group, a 10-session psychoeducational group was somewhat clumsy and content-driven. An emphasis on directive facilitation likely inhibited any major disclosures by the youth and left little room for processing in the group.

Our second group was co-facilitated with co-author Rebecca Nicholls (RN), a newer clinician in the adolescent sexual offending field. We are both white women working in a large Canadian urban city. Almost half of our clients are racial minorities and face systemic barriers such as poverty and discrimination. We are aware that there is an inherent power differential between our clients and us. We name this and offer it as a discussion point with the group, to build conversations about power differentials in the group members' lives.

Our supervisor at Radius is clinical director Bente Skau who encouraged us to take a more process-orientated approach and stretch the length of

group from ten sessions to the length of the entire school year. We had hoped that this would enable us to address the high level of shame and isolation experienced by the adolescents and families that we had observed in individual therapy.

Group therapy was seen as a way for the adolescents to feel that they are not alone in their offending behaviours, and that by supporting one another they could take responsibility for the harm they have caused. The improved format that extended well beyond ten sessions and was not tied to a curriculum, allowed for greater integration between group and individual therapy. For example, the goals of the group were discussed by clinicians during individual contact, thus making the transition smoother for clients and their families.

This reflection is about one of the first groups that we (RP and RN) facilitated together. In retrospect, we were able to see that this group was an important learning experience and a valuable demonstration of how social justice can emerge from well-facilitated group therapy with youth who have sexually harmed.

Once the group established rapport and cohesion, we were able to guide difficult conversations easily and mutual aid between members became increasingly apparent. The members' conversations about social justice were nuanced and challenged our assumptions about them.

We see group work as a path that may allow these young people to take responsibility for their actions, acknowledge their harmful behavior, to make amends in some way and to become teens again. We believe that accomplishing this is a profound act of social justice.

Getting started

We knew that our anxiety was nothing compared to that of our clients, some of whom were in the waiting room, quietly looking down at their phones or with their individual therapists, finishing up sessions. Our pre-group ritual of setting the chairs up in a circle helped us to feel organized and focused before inviting four adolescent boys into the room. As is normal for the first day of the sexual offending treatment groups, very few members ate the food we offered them. We tried to invite them to feel more comfortable, making small talk and sharing food. We secretly hoped that we were able to hide our own anxiety at facilitating and normalizing the group process for the boys.

We were aware that early on in the group we need to help the members to connect through an ice-breaker, take steps to establishing safety such as discussing group norms, and speak explicitly about why the members were in the group.

We hoped that by introducing the term "sexually offending" early on in the group, it would challenge the members to use unambiguous language about the

sexual abuse, instead of vague terms such as "the thing that happened" or "that time" or "what I did."

In planning the group, it was important to us as co-facilitators to identify and dispel any discomfort that we had about sexual abuse so that we would not betray it to our group members. We did this by talking with one another at length about our feelings and identifying how, in spite of socially abhorrent behaviour, there was genuine humanity in the clients we saw individually, like their need for love from their parents and feelings of success from regular teenage activities, like sports. We were looking forward to seeing how this played out in the group. In co-leadership, careful planning before and debriefing after meetings is essential.

Our careful planning helped to get the ball rolling. The group members filed into the room and introduced themselves to each other by sharing their names. When asked what they wanted to get out of the group, to our surprise, they began to provide answers that directly addressed the sexual harm: "I want to get back to having a relationship with my sister," "I put my mom through a lot and I feel bad about that," and other vulnerabilities like: "I never knew my dad."

We were taken aback. In no way did we think that they would so quickly get to the heart of the matter. Heartened by the members' willingness to share, we encouraged conversations between them. Within that first session, the boys revealed experiences of being bullied, the death of a beloved caregiver, and the anguish and shame of leaving the family home after the abuse was discovered by adults. We were impressed and pleased by the process of this first group.

A gradual shift takes place

In the weeks following this session, the sharing between the members intensified and the rapport and cohesion deepened, including attention to their grieving losses they had experienced as the result of their sexual harming. We became aware, and it was discussed in supervision meetings, that this sharing concerned the clients' own pain and suffering. They were identifying themselves as victims and reinforcing this identity with one another. We knew that this was not the perspective that would lead to empathy with their victims, and so we planned an entire session around feminism and the victimization that occurs as a result of toxic masculinity.

We developed an activity that focused on the depiction of women in advertisements and the media. We faced resistance to this activity by the group members who discounted the importance of intersectional feminist perspective and engaged in a defensive standoff with the two of us (two white female group workers). We were taken aback again. Our group that appeared to have become a safe space did not serve to facilitate members delving into their own complicity in harm against others!

After group supervision, debriefing and taking time to cool off and gain some perspective, we were able to return to the group and allow the members the space they were asking for to explore their own experiences of victimhood, which included sharing experiences of poverty, racial discrimination, and loss. This was a valuable lesson for us. We discovered that only by allowing the group members the space to process their feelings, could their collective pain be validated, which was essential for them to eventually acknowledge the pain they had caused to others.

We spent a number of group meetings discussing the members' pain. During these discussions, we selectively began interjecting, with gentle prompts, suggestions about their complicity in harming others in order to widen their perspectives.

For instance, we would say, "It sounds like that moment was very painful for you, what does the group think it would be like to experience this pain as a victim?" or "We can hear that you felt deeply depressed, how depressed do you think the person you sexually abused might feel?" As a result of our prompting, some group members were able to reflect on the pain that they caused. We could see this shift occurring when they discussed how ashamed they felt about the pain that their sexual offending had caused to their parents.

With some additional nudging, several members in the group began to reflect on the pain that their decisions to sexually offend had on their victims. That was when we began to introduce group exercises that focused on this aspect of victim empathy. Some examples include group exploration around the emotions experienced by witnesses and looking at art created by survivors of sexual abuse. Another very activating activity was guiding them to: "Draw a picture of the face of your victim during the sexual abuse."

It took a great deal of ego-strength on the part of the group members to participate in such discussions and activities. We grappled with our own discomfort at eliciting such intensely distressing feelings in our group members.

From taking responsibility to taking action

Next, we introduced questions that steered the members towards behavioural activation. We posed questions, such as, "What would want to hear from the individual who sexually abused you, if they you were the victim?" This led to genuine, resolute apologies.

At this time, many of our members had heard of the #MeToo movement, founded in 2017 by Tarana Burke, a social activist based in the United States. Women all over the world started identifying themselves as having sustained sexually abusive and harassing behavior. The news coverage of these events had a double effect on our group members. On one hand they saw themselves as #MeToo perpetrators, unforgiving and unloved by society. However, as the group progressed, they also began to differentiate themselves from the

media spotlight and point to ways that they could take responsibility for their behaviours, apologize and become better men in the process.

The group examined apology letters published in the media by notable celebrities. This was a helpful exercise in teaching the members what not to do in their own apologies to their victims, which would be completed as a goal in individual therapy.

As a group, however, the members wrote a group apology letter, first to their parents, and then to their collective victims. In this apology letter, we witnessed the members take responsibility ("I decided to sexually abuse you"), apologize ("I am sorry for the offending that I did and its impact on you"), and demonstrate that they would make decisions for the future that did not involve harm ("I have learned in group and with the help of my therapist to be aware when I have thoughts to sexually offend, and to take steps, by using mindfulness and talking to an adult, not to offend"). At the end of the letter-writing exercise we asked the members how they felt. Their responses included "accomplished; lighter," as if a great weight had been lifted off their shoulders. Many identified feeling hopeful, confident in moving forward in life and clearer about the kind of men that they want to become.

The final session of our group was a celebration in which we bought token gifts and wrote cards. We planned an activity but found that one member had brought a videogame and controllers for all the group members. We sat back and watched the members play a videogame together on the television screen in the group room.

We had witnessed our group cycle from defensiveness, to victimhood, empathy, responsibility, and now we were seeing them as they were: adolescent boys, who could be adolescent boys!

The boys were not diminished by the label of "sexual offender" and they were not racked with shame or insistent on denial of their behaviours. Yes, they had decided to sexually offend, but they had also taken real steps towards owning up to their behavior and offering to make amends. Many of the members had additional psychotherapeutic work to do and some would return to the next round of group.

At the end of the group we saw them reborn as teenagers; playing videogames and eating McDonalds, with a hopeful path of becoming men who take responsibility, willing and capable of making amends.

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