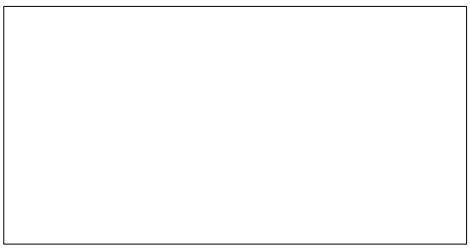

ACCOUNT OF PRACTICE

An anger management programme as an action learning set

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Reports of anger and aggression within the general population of the UK have been on the increase since the 2008 financial crisis. Traditional anger management programmes utilise Cognitive Behavioural and Mindfulness theory within a psychoeducational setting to help angry participants adapt and change their behaviours. These approaches have a mixed success rate and have led researchers to call for anger management programmes to adopt different methodologies. This account of practice describes a different anger management programme which incorporates the action learning cycle within its weekly structure. Utilising thematic analysis, the author reflects upon the way in which participants responded to this new approach and considers the promise and limitations of using action learning within future anger management programmes.

Keywords: anger management, group reflection, action learning, thematic analysis

Introduction

Anger and aggression within the UK population has been on the increase since the 2008 global financial crisis, with the general public feeling the worst effects of the economic shock. In 2011 the UK experienced riots in its major cities as anger and aggression spilled out onto the streets. A Mental Health Foundation study found that 64% of people surveyed agreed that the country is getting angrier, with 32% knowing close friends or family who would benefit from anger management classes. Along with these figures and more recently lawlessness, violence and knife crime in London have proliferated with the authorities struggling to bring this under control (Barber, 2018)**.**

Anger itself is a complex emotion which can be triggered by a wide range of experiences which differ from person to person. Typically, people who have anger problems seem unable to control their physiological 'fight or flight' system which is responsible for the resulting angry outbursts. Many people experiencing chronic anger tend to see other people as quite hostile and report an increased level of rumination on their past angry episodes. Prolonged rumination begins a cycle of misinterpreting the actions of others which in turn, reinforces the notion that people around them are hostile. The cycle perpetuates as individuals become more angry and aggressive as a consequence of their continuing misinterpretations (Owen, 2011).

In this account of practice and as a way to respond to the wider call for action learning (AL) as a tool for general social change, I would like to share my experiences of using AL within a mental health framework. I appreciate the difficulty in translating AL into the field of anger management and concede the approach has both practical and theoretical issues for researchers to contend with. This methodology is also a departure for me, as my research experience derives from using AL in a critical context within the organisational and management field (Shepherd, 2016a; 2016b).

In 2011 as well as gaining my PhD in management, I became a psychotherapeutic counsellor and began working with individuals suffering from a range of mental health problems

including chronic anger. Over the next few years I worked in both private practice and as a support worker within two psychiatric in-patient hospital settings. As I learned more about the size of the anger problem and the effects of chronic anger on individuals, I decided to develop a group programme seeking to combine my AL skills and psychotherapeutic experience. The programme I subsequently developed began in 2013 and is still helping people change their angry and aggressive behaviours today.

Popular anger management programmes combine Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness theory to initiate behavioural change (Fix & Fix, 2013). I regard these approaches as useful to an extent, but feel they miss the opportunity to really emancipate learners in the Freirean sense (Freire, 1972a). Within the CBT model for instance, practitioners tend to view individuals as empty vessels to be filled up with knowledge which they then expect will lead to behavioural change. I am not so sure of this and believe that facilitating people to reflect, act and learn within a structured environment has much more potency. Along with this, CBT based anger programmes have faced criticism from some researchers who note their often moderate effectiveness and who subsequently recognise the need for research into new ideas and approaches (Lee & DiGiuseppe, 2018).

Action learning and Anger Management

Using AL within an anger management group can be problematic as the technique itself does not translate completely, leaving some to question the 'purity' of the approach. Krystyna Weinstein (2012) for instance, explains the tenets of AL as being a group of people working on individual *organisational* projects in a collegiate way typically through day-long, monthly meetings with a set advisor who guides the set through the whole process and who may become redundant as the set becomes more experienced.

There is also a tension between traditional organisational practitioners and people like me, who cross the divide between working within a mental health paradigm and who utilise AL in novel ways. McGill and Brockbank (2003) for instance, are clear that AL is not therapy or counselling. Therapeutic activities involve specifically trained experts who work with the therapy group to embark on a journey of self-discovery towards an unknown destination. According to the authors this journey often involves a re-experiencing of 'distress and pain' (p. 146). McGill and Brockbank suggest counselling or therapy groups seem to be more concerned with self-actualisation than they are with problem solving and reflection. My research aims to question the reluctance of researchers to use AL within mental health groups and would suggest there is room within the canon of AL to incorporate more socially empowering approaches.

The most noticeable departure from traditional AL in this research is the inclusion of teaching elements within the set. Typically, after the group have completed a cycle of presenting, the set facilitator will teach a piece of anger management theory and invite set members to reflect on how this theory relates to their own circumstances. In this teaching/reflective space, set members will often volunteer to take a particularly relevant idea and use it as the basis of their action in the coming week. I have learned over the years of running the anger management set that it is extremely valuable for participants to go through their own action/reflection/learning cycle and to have the opportunity of either accepting or rejecting the new ideas presented to them.

My departure of teaching theory within the cycle challenges the traditional organisation and leadership roots of AL. Traditionally there is a taken-for-grantedness that set members

working within organisations already have a working knowledge of the problems they face and which they work on. In this type of group, organisational set members only require an understanding of AL and the encouragement of a facilitator to reflect and act, using their own organisational knowledge as their guide.

The set member embarking on an anger management course is different in that they seem to be doubly disadvantaged. On one hand participants are disadvantaged as they do not understand the AL process of reflection and action and furthermore, individuals are unaware of the range of knowledge which can be utilised to help control their anger and aggression. By introducing a teaching element within the weekly set meetings, participants are gradually introduced to epistemological ideas which they can then integrate into their own learning cycle.

I consider that the AL approach adopted in these groups shares more similarities than differences with Revans' ideas and that there is potential for the approach to be extremely useful within the field of mental health. At its heart AL is emancipatory; as Mike Pedler reminds us, Revans himself held high aspirations for AL which he considered to be a moral philosophy. Revans writings suggest to me he also held a broader humanistic ambition for AL than just the organisation as his approach engenders the values of honesty, doing good in the world and creating a collegiate environment through the power of the reflective cycle (Pedler, 2008, p. 72).

At this point it would be useful to explain the similarities and differences of my approach and traditional AL, before I go on to describe participants experiences of the programme itself.

The anger management programme incorporates the following ideas from the AL model:

- Regular organised meetings where set members work on problems they are committed to solving and which they have the power to change
- A skilled facilitator who is active in guiding the reflection processes within the set
- The facilitator does not use therapizing or counselling techniques but concentrates on reflection, action and learning
- An establishment of boundaries of behaviour within the set with the emphasis on reflection, action and learning
- Set members allocated time each week to present their problems and report back on their progress since the last meeting
- Set members support each other in reflection without providing advice
- Individuals propose action for the coming week
- Membership of the set and the psychological cohesion this generates encourages set members to act, reflect and learn throughout the process
- The AL model generates real, quantifiable change

The anger management programme differs from the AL model in these ways:

- Set members work on personal as opposed to organisational problems
- Set members bring the same initial problem but discover different solutions based on their personal circumstances
- The facilitator spends some time teaching theory to the group in a structured way

- The theory often forms the basis of future reflection and action

Method

This Account of Practice is based on research from an anger management programme of 10-weekly meetings each lasting 2 hours and which I facilitated in 2017. As part of the research I was interested in how my set participants would respond to an anger management intervention which relied on its members to embark upon a process of reflection and action in order to change their angry behaviours. Group participants consisted of six men and one woman whose ages ranged from 24 to 60 years old and who all reported high levels of chronic anger.

The weekly data gathered from the group sessions was analysed using thematic analysis. This method helps create an understanding of an individual's phenomenological experience and has been developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Within the thematic analysis process I read and re-read each participant's transcript and made initial notes. I then began to identify a number of descriptive, linguistic and conceptual ideas which helped me create emergent themes, which I defined as subordinate and superordinate (Appendix 1). At the conclusion of the analysis stage I had identified nine subordinate and three superordinate themes. The three superordinate themes which I describe here all helped to surface how participants responded to the AL cycle and which I have labelled 'Modelling the action learning cycle, 'Engaging with reflection' and 'Action on relationships'.

Modelling the Action Learning cycle

Throughout the 10-week programme I introduced the set to a number of ideas surrounding anger which were based on notions of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) and Transactional Analysis (Stewart & Joines, 2012).

As I facilitated the group, I became aware of the importance of demonstrating the reflective cycle to set members who were unfamiliar with AL. My action learning experience came in useful to help keep the reflective cycle on track and to keep individuals engaged in the presenting, reflecting process. My experience also enabled me to identify when individuals were struggling to reflect, in such cases I often employed the group itself to help in the reflection process. In this example Alan asks a struggling Mandy to reflect on her thinking.

> *A: 'Do you regret the thoughts after you've had them or not?' M: 'If it's my fault yes but if it's somebody's done something to me then no and it's like all hatred and all the things I could quite happily do to that person' A:'So you don't feel no remorse at the end of it?' M: 'no'*

Another approach I used to model AL was to paraphrase a presenter's experience and report back to the rest of the group as a way to stimulate the sets own reflective cycle. This was quite effective as it helped set members become more aware of the importance of listening to presenters and modelled reflection on their own experiences. In this example I highlight the importance of a presenter's point for the whole group.

> *Gary (G): 'Thanks for checking in and I heard a couple of strategies that I've not really heard before which is great, the grounding strategy which is to walk for a few hours afterwards, as well as when you're walking splitting the breathing up into five-minute blocks. Especially for people that have trouble breathing, in this sort of weather it's a bit 'claggy' and there's no real air around'*

By way of an example, in the next excerpt Jeremy demonstrates his listening skills and uses self-reflection to support Richie in a difficult moment.

> *J: 'I just wanted to say to Richie that he reminded me of when my mum died actually and I remember soon afterwards coming into conflict with my sister … it just reminded me of how hard it must be for you'*

Most set members were quite quick to pick up the AL process and became skilled in recognising the roots of their behavioural problems. In this excerpt Peter reflects difficulty in changing his angry behaviours.

> *PA: 'I think what you've gotta (sic) remember is that I've been doing this for- I don't know how long- for a lot of years so it's habitual so you're trying to break that habit, you're going to have relapses you know you're going to have days where you can't do it'*

An important part of the initial group work was to help set members create a new understanding of their emotional states by describing and then naming the experiences they had. In doing so, set members became more in-touch with their phenomenological experience and were able to re-label their emotions in new ways.

By reflecting on the new emotional labels, set members began to link their moods and anger to their wider environments such as their home or workplace. This was an important step as the group then discovered different ways to act on their emotional states. The following extracts demonstrate the early stages of this process.

> *G: 'So you've had um a rough week?' R: 'yeah, self-destructive really, well and shouting at the kids and stuff and at the wife but it's different to normal when you feel the emotion you hold on to that and it's hard to let go of it, but the anger at the moment I seem to be expressing it and then not long after it's disappeared but it's self-destructive because I'm doing it out in public'*

> *A: 'Yeah I've had depression as well it's a horrible, thing the thing I find about it is as well, when you've had it, just doing the simplest job you're just absolutely knackered at the end of it, you've just got no energy and you're clammy, you just sit there and think, you don't do nothing (sic) at all you think "I've got no energy to do this it's awful absolutely awful"'*

> *PB: 'Obviously my wife suffered, we've been married 31 years, my wife suffered on the basis of that I had an underlying aggression problem which goes back to childhood which I'm still trying to identify what caused that anger, obviously it's caused my wife a lot of mental issues [and] mental abuse'*

Engaging with reflection

Interestingly I noticed from the very early stages, set members on this programme seemed to have a deeper rapport with their colleagues than in other sets I have run. I found individual

engagement within the set very rapid, as each person seemed to be determined to seek the maximum help and support from others for their anger management efforts.

> *Voice3: 'sounds great, sounds really positive, I think that's a great approach with your dad as well' PA: 'cheers' Voice3: 'Just keep it up, keep going!'*

Some set members were keen to replace their angry behaviour with other, less familiar emotions as a way to express their feelings. Initially close partners would seem suspicious of the changes and become defensive. Rather than deterring the individual, the response provided set members further information on which to reflect.

> *PB: 'Yeah, had a good week actually, I've had a new kitchen work surface and sink fitted and my partner got stressed about it… so I tried to sort of reassure her, tried to be adult about it and we had a bit of an argument cus (sic) she said I was condescending and not sincere. I analysed that afterwards, I thought well maybe it's because I've not done it properly before in the past, maybe it came across a bit robotic?'*

It seems that as a result of the deep group support, individuals felt more confident and began to broaden their awareness of situations and critically reflect on themselves and their past behaviour, which was sometimes unsettling.

> *R: 'the kids...[pause] are scared of me at times when I do lose my temper, I try and stay as...calm as I can but to a certain point, I can't and then I end up losing my temper and...all of the kids have this look of...absolute fear in their faces and...uhm...I've been trying to change that'*

In the following excerpt Jeremy reflects back to Patrick how his critical reflections are valuable, yet uncomfortable. Patrick agrees, stating his determination to protect his wife from any more of his anger.

> *J: 'I think it's great that you've got this awareness of what you've been doing in your part of the dynamics. It might not make you comfortable but…'*
> *PB: 'It's not, it's not making me comfortable but at least I've taken it on board and recognised it. Hopefully I'll take it on board and not do that so I don't incite my wife'*

Action on relationships

Throughout the project it was important to track the utility of the anger management programme and establish if set members were benefitting from the AL style of problem solving. With this in mind, I asked set members to complete a quantitative psychological anger scale (Snell Jr, Gum, Shuck, Mosley, & Kite , 1995) which I administered in week one and week 10.

The results showed participants who completed the programme were able to successfully change their angry behaviours through reflection and action. Set members anger scores demonstrated that by the end of the programme their anger had reduced to similar levels than those of a 'non-angry' population (Shepherd, 2019).

As a result of our participants action, both set members and the people closest to them began to remark positively on their decreased anger and changing behaviour.

A: 'I think the thing that capped it all this week is when the kids said "you know dad, you no longer get angry" which I thought was... they weren't even asked that they said that when they were talking about something else and I thought that was absolutely the icing on the cake. It was really good, I was really quite chuffed with that you know, they volunteered it and so, yeah it was good, yeah'

Such feedback from family members often spurred individuals on to re-enter the AL cycle and engage in more action based behavioural change.

PA: 'I [said] to my parents "is this course changing me?" And my mum and dad could see a major change in me, since I'm not losing my temper as much anymore, I'm not shouting or anything like that'

The route to an anger free experience was still difficult for participants to navigate of course. Many set members reported unsuccessful efforts to curb their moods especially in the first few weeks of the programme. The most positive aspects of these experiences were the way in which participants adopted self-reflection and showed trust in the AL process as the path to reducing their angry reactions.

PB: 'I felt I'd had a great week until yesterday and then some of the things came in from the past and I had a row with my wife and got into a bit of a row. It's not making me comfortable but at least I've taken it on board and recognised it. Hopefully I'll take it on board and not do that, so I don't incite my wife to feel even more hurt than she already does'

Finally, a further powerful form of action some set members engaged in was the act of making amends by apologising to people they had previously hurt. This kind of action indicated a departure from the chronic angry behaviour set members reported before entering the programme. It also helped underline the strength of the AL approach when it is utilised within a non-traditional way, such as within an anger management programme.

R: 'I went down to see my dad as well this week and I spoke to him about it because his mum suffered badly from mental illness and I apologised [for] how I've behaved and stuff in the past and he said "you've got nothing to apologise it's one of those things, I saw how it affected mum and it affected her a lot worse than it affected you"
Voice: 'sounds like you're building bridges'
R: 'I'm trying to yeah'

Discussion

At the beginning of this AoP I stated my wish to respond to calls for a wider use of action learning to help social change. I did this by sharing the results of the anger management programme I ran in 2017. My hope is that this study has highlighted some of the issues and opportunities of translating AL into the field of mental health. I believe the approach can demonstrate that AL in this context is emancipatory in a real Freirean sense of the word.

It is clear that set members engaged enthusiastically with AL, they bonded very quickly as a learning set and embarked upon behavioural change after reflecting on their emotional triggers. A key part of the process involved individuals appraising their behaviour and adopting a new dictionary of words such as 'self-destructive', 'depression' and 'mental abuse' with which to describe themselves. This was important as I felt this allowed set members to think about themselves and their problems in quite different ways. Once individuals re-framed their anger to a broader set of behaviours and moods, they could then be more empathic, gain a deeper understanding of how their behaviour affected others and seemed more able to motivate themselves into action.

It is true to say that using this approach in a mental health setting was a real departure from the classic organisational management/leadership model of AL. I would argue, however, that this does not mean the potency of AL was diminished; set members entered the set with a stated problem which they worked upon as a group. They used a cycle of reflection and action to tackle the problem until (for most people) it was resolved to their satisfaction. I am also reassured that the set did not become a therapeutic or counselling space, as some writers warn of and which would have turned the programme into an unstructured and undifferentiated 'support group'. I achieved this by implementing tight boundaries of behaviour on the set and held with AL principles which negated the possibility of journeying through the individual's emotional landscape.

One of my main concerns when developing the programme was how to square the circle of avoiding teaching theory to an AL set who had no knowledge of the range of approaches useful for their own anger reduction. In response to this, I would like to reflect on the way in which I see my 'teaching' within the set. Over the years of running the programme I have realised that not all of the approaches available to individuals will help everyone change their angry behaviours. Anger management is not effective by merely 'banking' information inside the participant and waiting for an expected behavioural change. Over time, every individual has developed their own unique set of behaviours and responses to anxiety provoking situations, meaning some techniques will help, whilst others will not. If we then consider that each person has their own preferred learning style and knowledge acquisition abilities, then the 'teaching' question becomes more nuanced.

In the programme I sought to offer individuals exposure to new knowledge and a method of reflecting and acting upon this, without the added requirement of how or if the knowledge was actually used. I think of this approach as offering the group a '*tapas'* of knowledge and techniques which they were free to try out and if helpful, implement as part of their problem-solving strategy. This does not to detract at all from the AL cycle itself, as it is still vitally important participants move through the reflection, action and learning process in order to test out the new ideas.

From this Account of Practice we can see how a committed group of individuals entered into a problem-solving space through AL and began to change their long-established behaviours. The work had a positive impact on set members inter-personal relationships with their partners, children and work colleagues. One of the reasons why I think the approach was so successful is that it gave set members a useful template for discussion and reflection in a way that encouraged them to try out their anger calming strategies in a safe way. This is one of the reasons I believe the AL methodology could be invaluable when adopted by mental health practitioners in helping people with problem behaviours.

Finally, if further research using AL migrates from the organisational to the psychological, I believe there would be an imperative for practitioners to alter their ways of working. I think that future AL mental health practitioners would need to be conversant in action learning, the dynamics of set facilitation and have expertise in their particular field of mental health. There are practical implications here as in order to run an AL set mental health workers will probably need to 'un-learn' some of their therapeutic techniques. Practitioners would need to become less directive and engage less in counselling practices, for instance. They would also need trust in the individual to have the capacity to discover the right intervention for their personal circumstances, through the reflection/action process. This would enable set facilitation to become more emancipatory and allow group members to develop their own reflective cycles through experimentation with a range of psychological ideas.

Conclusion

This AoP has offered an insight into the application of action learning in new ways through the paradigm of mental health. In order to work within the new paradigm, the approach itself has had to change whilst at the same time protecting the key tenets of the reflection/action/learning cycle. Future researchers who adopt this approach may be encouraged by the power of AL to help initiate psychological change in angry individuals. They may also be struck by the way in which the approach engenders wider social change in the family system and within the work environment.

Notes on Contributor

Gary Shepherd is a Lecturer in the School of Psychological and Social Sciences at York St. John University. His research interests include Action Learning, working with anger management groups and working with participants who have difficulty changing their behaviour due to personality development issues.

Conflict of interest

The author reports no conflict of interest

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