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Psychotherapist's experiences of co-facilitating large encounter PCEP groups: An interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of six interviews.

Abstract

Background/aims: Despite the available literature on facilitative conditions noted in numerous writings on encounter groups, co-facilitators' experiences are substantially under-researched. This present study aimed to explore psychotherapists' experiences co-facilitating encounter groups with 2 or more co-facilitators. A subsidiary question was: How do therapists who have facilitated large encounter groups make sense of their experience of the encounter process? A large group in this study group is described as thirty to three hundred individuals.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six psychotherapists who had experience of facilitating large encounter groups. Their accounts were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Findings and Discussion: Three main superordinate themes emerged from analyzing the data. (1) Facilitator's role identity; (2) Importance of managing dynamics between the encounter co-facilitation team members; (3) Working within the encounter group space and process.

Future research should investigate the experience of encounter group participants and compare it to that of co-facilitators.

Keywords: Large encounter groups; Co-facilitation experiences

Introduction

It is well documented within literature that person-centered encounter groups were developed by Carl Rogers and his colleagues at the University of Chicago counselling center in the late 40's, soon after World War II (Rogers, 1970; Schmid & O'Hara, 2013). The aim of the encounter groups was to improve participants' self-knowledge and self-awareness. Schmid & O'Hara, (2007) suggested that the main principle of an encounter group is to allow participants to experience empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence. Thus, promoting self-enhancement and behavior change through relationships and receiving feedback about oneself within the group. In line with this, Brison, Zech, Jaeken et al., (2015) noted that there are different qualities to person-centered encounter groups. They named that they are non-directive, experience-focused and self-directed.

Numerous authors have offered linguistic and etymological perspectives which have influenced deeper understanding of the word 'encounter'. For example, Lago (2015) drew attention to the emphasis of encounter aspects on contact, intimacy, commonality and vicarious empathy. Furthermore, Lago went on to cite the root meaning of the word 'encounter' from the word 'encountre' developed from the old French word 'encontrer', which means 'to meet.' Schmid (2015b) drew on aspects of encounter which related to standing counter to one's expectations out of an attitude of curiosity, and empathy, whilst being open to being surprised by the other. In addition, Schmid (2018, p.1) stated that

etymologically, "encounter" originates from the Latin word "contra," for "against" and therefore asserted that to *en–counter* another person has to firstly acknowledge difference and thus recognizing that both really "stand counter".

As part of this research, I conducted a literature review and most of the existing research literature on encounter I found, relates more to the broader literature on small group therapeutic processes than to person-centered and experiential large group encounter. There are however some empirical studies which relate more closely to encounter groups than to group therapy: I included them in my literature review.

Mikuni's (2011) study for example, explored through qualitative inquiry the development of the person-centered approach in Japan and particularly focused on group encounters in Japan. This study offered perspectives which give insight into the importance for the facilitators to have transcultural awareness (for example in working with complexities such as the tension between the Western perspective of equality in encounter versus the preference by Japanese encounter group members for traditional settings and the respect for hierarchy and seniority).

The Burlingame, McClendon, and Yang (2018) study, albeit being on group cohesion, was a meta-analysis of 55 studies involving more than 6,000 group members. Their study showed that cohesion amongst group members even in small groups is significantly related to facilitators' behavior. They found that when a facilitator implements specific interventions which foster facilitative group climate, such as paying attention to and speaking out when conflict arises or responding when 'encounter group member'- co-facilitator relational difficulties are named, then there was higher cohesion amongst group members. Their research highlights the importance of facilitators paying attention to the following encounter

group relationship structures: member–member, member–facilitator, and member– group. Thus, their meta-analysis warned of how failure to address conflict or misuse of power can often result in stagnating in group cohesion problems when co-facilitating encounter groups.

There is a specific focus in the client-centered literature, as well as within this research on the role/tasks/attitudes and interventions of encounter group co/facilitator(s) [and not primarily on the process of the group members]. Bozarth, (1986) argued that Rogers was quite clear throughout his writings that the facilitator's attitudes are important in creating the facilitative climate that will promote the actualizing process of the individual members and the group as a whole. It has therefore been argued that similar to individual therapy, group facilitators require the same qualities in relation to their influence in the moment-to-moment actions within relationship/group encounter, without resorting to speculation and explanations of the group process (Wood, 1984).

 It has also been noted that in line with PC philosophy, it is important for facilitators to embody to embody attitudinal qualities which include giving autonomy to persons in encounter groups, for them to be free to express their own learning, feelings, thoughts, communicate empathically, facilitate learning and be open to receive and give feedback (Bozarth, 1986; O'Hara 2003).

As far back as (1970), Rogers highlighted an example, of how the facilitator as part of his authenticity can be as much a participant in the group as well as being a facilitator. He stated, "Each facet is a real part of me, not a role" (Rogers, 1970, p.49). Lietaer, (1993) in his writing on authenticity and congruence, added that in relation to transparency, when such qualities are engaged the process becomes an *I-Thou* encounter [see Buber 1996].

To cut the heart of the matter there is no one overriding facilitative attitude in relation to group co/facilitation. There are but several key attitudes which all interact (O'Hara and Wood 2003). The literature does indeed demonstrate this from different perspectives. For example, Rogers (1970), describes the role of facilitators as helping to provide an optimal reflective environment in which members can symbolize and process their experiencing optimally. Other authors mention the following facilitator tasks: actively supporting the development of a cohesive group climate (Bozarth ,1986); the importance of authenticity, congruence, and transparency (Lietaer, 1993; Schmid 2018). Another important attitude of facilitators *is the willingness to let go of being an "expert," suspend assumptions, open oneself up to see things afresh, risk being vulnerable, and learn in public"* (O'Hara 2003 p.76).

Furthermore O'Hara in her writing on large groups and cultivating consciousness offered a point which is worth facilitators taking note of, when she stated the importance of a different kind of attunement which goes beyond individual empathy but which becomes relational empathy, where individuals go beyond simply entering into the world of the other individuals but enter the mind of the group as a whole (O'Hara, 1997). She went on to argue that if we as therapists, could understand the reciprocal interplay between individual and collective consciousness and learn the conditions under which encounter groups were more likely to emerge, then in line with what Carl Rogers hoped, we will "have a pedagogy by which to facilitate in a relatively short time the achievement of higher level human capacities with which to address the pressing large-scale systemic problems" (p.75).

Given these assertions, it may be that group co-facilitators wonder how they may know the experience of group members who engage in encounter groups. Dierick & Lietaer (1990) and Lietaer & Dierick (1996) offered a questionnaire which cannot only be used as a research

instrument but also as a clinical tool which offers therapists a monitoring instrument of the experience of therapeutic factors in group sessions.

Having outlined these studies and literature it is evident that they all contribute to understanding the qualities, and attitudes that co-facilitators need in order to foster facilitative conditions within encounter groups, which enable potential shifts in personal growth, congruence, higher abilities of self-perceived emotional expression and self-efficacy. It is however clear that there is paucity of research which directly explores the actual lived experience of encounter group facilitators.

Aim of this study

This study therefore aimed to explore therapists' experiences of facilitating or co-facilitating large encounter groups. In line with Bozarth's (1995) description, I define a large group as constituted of thirty to three hundred people, who meet for three days to two weeks in a psychological atmosphere founded upon the principles of the person-centered approach.

Method

For data collection, this qualitative study used semi-structured interviews. The method used in this study was *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA). The central underpinning theoretical aim of IPA is to explore in depth a participant's personal lived experience of how they make sense of that personal experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA is influenced by symbolic interactionism and phenomenology which are concerned with how meanings are constructed by individuals, thereby seeks to understand subjective experiences and personal accounts (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). Thus, in line with IPA

recommendations, all the interviews conducted started with more general questions and gently progressed on to the more specific subjects. This included for example, questions like: Can you tell me how you first became involved with person-centred, experiential/encounter large groups? Can you tell me about the large encounter groups you have been recently or are currently involved with? There were also prompting questions like: What does the role of encounter involve? Then later in the interview shifting to questions like: Can you describe to me how you facilitate or co-facilitate large encounter groups? Thus, the approach of gathering data was through shifting from asking facilitators about their interest and experience of working with groups through to their philosophical influences/approach to facilitating large encounter groups, and then more to their detailed experiences of co-facilitation. This enabled respondents to settle into the interview, to establish rapport and openness with the researcher (Skourteli & Apostolopoulou, 2015) and to speak in-depth about their experience. The semi-structured interviews were informed and kept on track by the materials relating to the consent form, the interview schedule, and debrief.

I decided to use IPA because of its inductive characteristic (Smith, 2008) which relates to openness to use techniques which are flexible enough to allow unanticipated topics, or themes to emerge during the data analysis process. It is therefore closely related to the interpretative and hermeneutic tradition; it thereby provides opportunities for interpretative analysis and contextualizing participants' own accounts in reflections (Palmer, 1969). IPA therefore draws from different theoretical perspective and it has thus been suggested as having three distinctive characteristics. That it is idiographic, inductive, and interrogative. The idiographic feature of IPA relates to a process of detailed examination of one case, having commitment to detail and depth of analysis until a degree of closure has been achieved, then moving onto detailed analysis of the following cases (Smith, 2008). In

analyzing the transcripts in this research, I examined in depth what each therapist was saying about their experience of co-facilitating a large encounter group, then I would move to the next case once I was satisfied, I had explored the transcript and emerging themes in depth.

The aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world. The focus therefore is the attempt to explore personal experience and the individual's personal perception or experience, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement (Smith et al. 2009). The interpretation involves asking critical questions of the texts from participants, such as the following: What is the encounter facilitator trying to achieve in the encounter group? Is something leaking out in the description of their facilitation role that wasn't intended? Do I have a sense of something that maybe the facilitators themselves were less aware of? Thus, there are two aspects of interpretation: one of which is attempting to gain deeper understanding of what encounter co-facilitation is about, and furthermore empathizing with their understanding and how they are trying to make sense of encounter facilitation.

Some personal reflections

Given my own heritage and gender, I reflect daily on issues of power, diversity and difference. Through the interviews I conducted with facilitators, I was reminded of my own engagement in encounter groups at home and whilst in Vienna, as well as my own feelings of how challenging it is to co-facilitate a large group. This would have influenced my interpretations and direction of questioning the facilitators. As a man of color, being personally drawn to the importance of difference in encounter, I also found myself reflecting on how Rogers and others utilized the person-centered approach to resolve intergroup and international conflict conducted encounter with multicultural groups (Kirschenbaum, 2009).

Knowing of the work of Carl Rogers and Ruth Sanford did in South Africa in the 1980's during the time of Apartheid (having been in South Africa myself at some point during apartheid) I was very interested in hearing any experience the facilitators had of working with difference particularly among antagonistic groups. I was also interested in the personal experiences of the facilitators, and this informed my comparative analysis of the cases. In my analysis of cases I reconstructed the similarities and differences of the cases, thus seeing the cases not only against the backdrop of my own view but also against the backdrop of each case. In working this through, I drew from Blackburn's (2006) perspectivism philosophical stance that different perspectives are a result of being positioned at different viewpoints and that there is no absolute standpoint from which one can see the universe, but rather a multiplicity of perspectives.

Given what I have written in my reflexivity in this section it is evident that I did not come to the research without assumptions, thoughts, and perspectives. However, having completed my analysis, I was left with the deep believe that large groups have incredible potential for encounter, healing and can be a forum for engaging with diversity as well as influencing personal and social transformation (Rogers 1977; Bozarth 1995).

Procedure

Recruitment

I sent a recruitment invitation with brief information via email to colleagues who I identified through their writing on encounter groups or their experience of co-facilitation of large groups. The outcome of the recruitment effort was that four individuals responded in the first three weeks and following a resend of the information three more responded in the following week. However, one dropped out.

Sample of facilitators

Participants for this study were 6 psychotherapists (3 female and 3 male) in total, who had experience of co-facilitating large encounter PCEP groups. Geographically they lived in England, Scotland, Austria and the United States of America. It is noted that small sample sizes are the norm in IPA as the analysis of large data sets may result in the loss of potentially subtle inflections of meaning and in limitations in conducting detailed nuanced analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). I followed the general guide suggestion of between 4 and 10 interviews to allow for deep analysis both within and across cases (Smith et al., 2009).

The inclusion criteria were set to include therapists with over 3 years post-qualification of co-facilitating large groups. All participants voluntarily gave information in their interviews which enabled demographic details to be tabulated with all names anonymized as noted in Table 1.

[Please insert Table 1 here]

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research was obtained through the Leeds Beckett University's School Ethics Committee where the research proposal was reviewed. Through interviewing all participants and working through the research processes, the researcher abided by the principles in the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2010) as well as the Data Protection Act 2018. Lastly, every attempt was made to safeguard confidentiality, through removal of identifying details from interview transcripts, giving pseudonyms to the participants in presenting the findings.

Data Analysis

All six transcripts were analyzed using IPA guidelines and the analysis followed the staged process as outlined by Smith and Osborn (2003). Starting with analysis of one transcript and then repeating the procedures for each transcript. Smith et al. (2009) highlighted the importance of approaching each case on its own merit, doing justice to its own individuality, while also acknowledging the difficulty of what they discussed as 'bracketing the ideas' that may have emerged from earlier transcripts. This difficulty in bracketing relates to the challenges in which the researcher does their best to suspend their own preconceptions and prejudices to avoid influencing respondents' experiences (Smith et al. (2009). I kept a reflecting diary where I noted my own preconceptions to avoid influencing respondents in the next interviews I was conducting. I followed an iterative and inductive cycle which involves close, line by line analysis of the participants experiential narrative (Larkin et al., 2006), identifying emergent themes within each case and consequently across participants and through a double hermeneutic process (Smith et al., 2009).

In the final stage of the analysis, a final table of themes (Table 2) was established representing all six participants and providing an illustration of superordinate themes with clusters of themes under each heading and transcript extracts from each participant for whom the theme was relevant. Three distinct themes that illustrated the participants' experience were established and are noted in detail in the presentation of the findings section.

Commitment and rigor in this study was demonstrated through the process of immersion and dwelling in the data of over 6 months and through triangulation (Morse, 2005). For each interview I was guided by similar questions from the interview schedule and attending closely to participants' narratives. I also clarified specific words or phrases during the interview. My analysis process started by generating codes (Smith, et al. 2009), which were

based on my initial analytic observations of the data. This was through looking at the 'initial comments' and 'initial notes', I had made in the right-hand side of the transcript when I first read each transcript. These initial notes were 'descriptive' or 'conceptual' comments, questions, phrases, explanations, simple notes, label words or groups of words. These are intended to help identify, develop and link themes (Smith, et al. 2009). For example, the following from some of my transcripts.

"...Not working together as co-facilitators has terrible consequences".

"...But we have to be all together as a team".

These initially formed the theme of dynamics between co-facilitation team members.

From re-reading each transcript the process of breaking down the data into manageable chunks allowed each chunk to be analysed and compared with others for subsequent grouping.

The second level of data analysis after re-reading the transcript and recording the emerging themes as described above, was a process of looking less at the "how" questions but more at the "why", such as: Why did they say it that way? Why would they facilitate that way? The third level of data analysis is not specifically to identify new themes, but to cluster themes of a similar conceptual nature together under a larger term. The emerging themes were grouped under an abstract theme, and the abstract themes grouped under a larger theme 'Super-ordinate theme'. The outcome from these levels of analysis resulted in the sub-ordinate and superordinate themes as presented in Table 2. and are conceptualised and discussed further later in the paper.

Additional aspects of ensuring trustworthiness in this study included evidencing table of themes and direct quotes which demonstrate explication of the analytic process (Smith et al., 2009). The interpretation in analysis involved asking critical questions of the texts from,

such as the following: What is this encounter facilitator trying to achieve in the encounter group? Is something leaking out in the description of their facilitation role that wasn't intended? Do I have a sense of something that maybe the facilitators themselves were less aware of? Thus, there are two aspects of interpretation in analysis: one of which is attempting to gain deeper understanding of what encounter co-facilitation is about, and furthermore empathizing with their understanding and how they are trying to make sense of encounter facilitation. This then enabled identification of particular patterns across cases. I managed to dialogue with some of my participants after the initial interview, for confirmation that the themes I had noted were an accurate representation of our interview. They all responded with confirmation of the accuracy or with minor clarification which related to grammatical inaccuracies, which I took on board.

Methodological issues, limitations and challenges

Although the level of analysis offered by IPA of 'going beyond' immediately apparent content (Smith et al., 2009) has been praised, there have been criticisms given. It has been argued that this in-depth and interpretative analysis can be seen as drawing the researcher away from the original meanings (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). In response to this however it is suggested that IPA is not a 'prescriptive methodology' and should be used flexibly with the ability of the researcher returning to the data to focus on meanings throughout the process of analysis (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). In line with this I demonstrate this by drawing on quotes which show how I stayed close to the original meanings.

Results

Following completion of looking through patterns across cases it emerged that the superordinate themes aligned themselves as entitled 'the co-facilitator's experience and role' and therefore I have encapsulated the results in line with this.

In analyzing the data from the six transcripts that I had, I noted the following Superordinate themes:

(1) Co-Facilitator's role identity.

(2) Importance of managing dynamics between the encounter co-facilitation team members.

(3) Working within the encounter group space and facilitating the process.

Consequently, I was able to make sense of the data through my own analysis of the participants making sense of their experience, engaging thereby in a double hermeneutic process (Smith et al., 2009). Table 2 that follows outlines not only the superordinate themes that emerged but also the subordinate themes.

[Please insert Table 2: IPA analysis of the data: Superordinate and subordinate themes]

Co-Facilitator Role identity

The first superordinate theme 'co-facilitator's role identity' refers to the main characteristic of what it meant for the participant to be a co-facilitator of a large encounter group. The facilitators reflected on experiences of being group members in encounter groups. Half the participants had engaged in large encounter which Carl Rogers had co-facilitated and they drew on this to explore what they felt about the role of being a co-facilitator.

Subtheme 1: *Understanding what encounter co/facilitation means*

Most participants described to me what they felt were essential characteristics of encounter. All the participants identified firstly their understanding of encounter and then made links to what they felt their role was. For example, Fane went on to explore what he believed the role entailed.

> *.... being a good facilitator, is about the nurturing of the group as well as empathically responding to what's going on*. (Fane)

Other participants referred to their experience of working with Carl Rogers and used that as their way of reflecting on a way of being when co-facilitating. Nick for example in speaking about the importance of authenticity stated:

> *I was stunned with how Rogers and some of the others… with their personal authenticity and that occasionally when they spoke there was no front...or an artificial thing in front of them…There was something much more genuine and interpersonal about it.* (Nick)

Subtheme 2: Importance of facilitator's competence in moment-to-moment processing/ presence and responding without resorting to hiding in analyzing and explaining the process.

All six participants described the importance of being able to respond moment by moment. Nick spoke about not always having to say something, whilst Rose reflected on the importance of congruence in the group moment by moment:

> *So, I think part of the task of facilitation is maybe silence…. So... that you're not hiding behind a mask... there are a couple facilitators for example in that large group in xxx [names country] …. who were playing a role and it was not appreciated. In*

large groups you don't want to try too many times without having your fortune read really. (Nick)

.... you're totally not present without congruence ...... you can't be present and..... it can never be because you want to be heard.... but it has to be because you can't not bring that part of yourself. You are in this moment and you can't sit on it or hide it. (Rose)

Subtheme 3: Complexity of managing personal responses as group member versus responding as a co-facilitator.

Most of the participants spoke of the challenge they faced in managing their own process and responding as a member of the group whilst bearing in mind their responsibility as a member of the co-facilitation team. Ian mentioned how he managed his own internal process by trusting the other co-facilitators would hold the group when he was responding to an individual.

... So, I am interested in more like my capacity to assess the others' reception of UPR and congruence and I am deeply interested in what is the others' conditions of worth. (Ian)

Both Ella and Fane reflected on balancing being a facilitator and being also part of the group and not losing this focus in making individual responses.

To do both but sometimes to be a member of the encounter group and as well of course …. You are not only in part responding to your own needs, but you care about the group in another way…., sometimes on a meta-level…so to facilitate is to be close… with warmth and depth. (Ella)

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The facilitator is also part of the group, so you cannot put yourself outside of that.

The facilitator really needs to be operating under the same rules they are expecting

everyone else to be operating on. (Fane)

Importance of managing dynamics between co-facilitation team members

The second superordinate theme 'Importance of managing dynamics between co-facilitation team members' refers to the experience of working with other encounter group facilitators. All the facilitators voiced the importance of the encounter facilitation team being prepared to co-facilitate encounter.

Subtheme 1: Feeling prepared for each encounter group

Although a couple of co-facilitators spoke about how they prepare in co-facilitation teams they had worked in by meeting prior to every encounter and debriefing after each one, not all of them spoke to me about this. However, what was named by nearly all the co-facilitators was the importance of feeling prepared to work together with other team members. Fane and Nick for example were clear that the capacity to work together was central to having the optimum environment for co-facilitation.

> *If we are ready and in accord it is a much easier experience than when I'm*
>
> *working with someone who has quite a difference understanding of what*
>
> *facilitation means* (Fane)

And if the staff team doesn't do its work then… that has terrible consequences

because the group senses it even if the group doesn't know. (Nick)

Sub-theme 2: Working through difficult process both in the group and within the co-facilitators team

Participants spoke also spoke being open to work through any difficult process which emerges in the group or between the facilitation team members. Nuru, Rose and Ella for example voiced their openness to process with colleagues if difficulties emerged between them and others in the team. For example, as Nuru stated:

Well I like to work with co-facilitators where we can keep the space really clean

between us. So, if anything arises between us before, during or after the group… we

have a commitment to processing that as soon as possible after the group. (Nuru)

And I've asked for those meetings… I think it's helpful… I think whenever that has

happened, I have asked for time and I've said: look I need to talk with you so and so.

(Rose)

But if we have meetings together before and after… we can work it through and sort it

out. But we have to be all together as a team. (Ella)

Working within the encounter group space and process

The third and final superordinate theme was of working within the encounter group space and process. It was clear from all the participants that they felt if there was a good relationship

between the facilitation team members; then the group could work together effectively in the encounter space.

Sub-theme 1: *Holding the boundary and frame*

All six participants named the importance of holding the frame and ensuring the boundaries were maintained when co-facilitating the large group process. This included the boundary of time and of respect for each other's personal space. They felt without this, there may be harm done to the participants for example through not ending on time or in worst case scenarios through physical attack between members if conflict arose without the co-facilitators being robust to name the centrality of boundaries and respect.

> *Mr Rogers talked about potatoes …, you know, and he said that the potatoes needed some care to enable them to…, to make better fruits… even person-centered potatoes need some care to enable them…, so that they can grow. I would point out that this is important to have a good frame so that the potatoes can really grow.* (Ella)

Nick however, stated it was climate setting that enabled the holding of the boundaries

> *So there is, I think, something about climate setting something about holding the boundaries.* (Nick)

Subtheme 2: Co-creating encounter facilitative conditions whilst ensuring maintenance of ethical practice

Whilst all participants agreed that part of the role of the facilitator was to engage in co-creating the facilitative conditions for encounter in the group, maintenance of ethical practice was identified as not often addressed.

> *If we use it for arguing at each other and sniping at each other, fault finding criticizing and whatever…, it is very easy for people to fall into it and say I'm being congruent so it's fine… for me as a facilitator I should have some responsibility for noticing that and naming it.* (Fane)

> *I just pull it back a little bit if someone steps into being too much of a facilitator for the other person…, or attacks someone which I have seen happening and nothing was said by the co-facilitators.* (Nuru)

Rose shared that for her being ethical was about holding onto the core conditions.

> *So I feel like it's the hardest way to be present with empathy genuineness and unconditional positive regard… so that's what encounter means to be in a group with other human beings caring for those three conditions and then come-what-may, trying to hold onto those and not betray them.* (Rose)

Sub-theme 3- *Working with facilitating power*

All the participants stated that power dynamics and how they were managed in encounter influenced the experience of encounter. Ian and Rose for example spoke of how facilitators can embrace power and use it in encounter.

And I think that's a contentious issue in the person-centered approach because we can

see that in responses… we can see them as power over…. and personally, I am

interested in the 'power-with', rather than power over. (Ian)

That I often feel that the facilitators give up their own power and disable themselves

now…, these are subtle distinctions. (Rose)

Nuru on the other hand spoke about managing her own power.

And my other philosophical base is … holding 'my own' in a co-created encounter.

No…, sorry.., I don't mean that…. I mean owning my …. own process and 'stuff' … But

neither will I allow myself to be persecuted. (Nuru)

Sub-theme 4: Openness and competency in working with difference

All six participants spoke in some detail and depth about their experience of working

with difference and their awareness that this was important in facilitating encounter

groups. The issue of difference did not just relate to people but also to their views.

Ella for example stated:

Part of his thing is the word counter… which is to be counter to. To be

different from you know…! … to get those people with very different opinions

encountering. (Ella)

I am not a Buddhist but there is something about… striving for that quality of

being present really but without desire…., I try to be absolutely accepting of

this and I'd love to be able to be fully open to listen to sometimes views that
are quite contradictory and that is really a personal hard challenge…. I also
think I think in cross-cultural circumstances the level of sensitivity with which
you respond influences the dynamics of the encounter. (Nick)

Rose talked to me about her experience of being in a cross-cultural group which was facilitated by Carl Rogers. In this group an African American professor had been speaking to the group about interpersonal difficulties that he had since arriving for the encounter. Different group members began to try to correct him and request for him to speak in a certain way to suit their own understanding to which Carl Rogers consequently responded.

…. and Carl was stern and said to the group stop! Then he said to this African-
American Professor … I want you to know that you can talk in any way you want in
this room and I'm fine with it. (Rose).

Discussion

After completion of the analysis of the data from the six transcripts, the three superordinate themes and their subordinate themes which emerged will now be discussed. I went back to the literature and reflected on the findings. Namely relating to facilitator's perspectives of their role and identity; the importance of managing dynamics between encounter co-facilitation team members and lastly the process of working within the encounter group space.

Given the etymological descriptions of the word encounter given by Lago (2015) and Schmid (2017) I reflected on my own understanding of the word from the position of my own African heritage.

The Zulu term spoken '*Ubuntu'* refers to the concept of universal being. In this word *Ubuntu*, *Ubu* refers to 'being' while the *ntu* relates to universal life-force which is found in all things. It is understood in *Ubuntu* philosophy that the highest premium of existence is being in interconnectedness (the collective aspect of our existence) and perpetuating life rather than destroying it. The universal life-force referred to in *Ubuntu*, is found in all things (Washington 2010). Being one who speaks different dialects of some Bantu languages, in one of these (*Shona*) the word encounter translates to *Kusangana*, which means '*to meet'*. Thus, from an Ubuntu philosophical perspective encountering another (which makes us interconnected) is at the very heart of being authentically and characteristically human. It also relates to the potential of encountering the Universe and all that is in it. Whilst I will not go further into Ubuntu philosophical perspectives on encounter here, my aim is to concur with Lago (2015) and Schmid (2017) who stated that the essential realities that may arise in encounter therefore include possibilities of meeting with warmth, authenticity and depth or at times, confrontation and conflict.

In relation to the facilitator's role Identity, I drew from Brison, et al., (2015) who suggested that the role of group facilitators is to ensure that the frame and boundary of the group is named and furthermore that their role is also in facilitating the personal moment-by-moment encounter interactions and expressions between group members (Brison, et al., 2015). This matches with what most of the participants stated in their dialogue with me in which they stated that they viewed their role as that of facilitating the personal power as well as moment-by-moment encounter interactions.

To help understand what encounter co/facilitation means, Roy, Lindsay and Dallaire (2013) highlighted that it is important for co-facilitators to understand essentials of working together.

These include competency in co-facilitating group processes, knowing how to hold the structure and frame of the encounter group, responding appropriately or knowing when to take action/intervene, but also being authentic in naming and responding to meta-communications (Okech & Kline, 2006; Roy, et al., 2013). Furthermore, co-facilitators must be conscious of the symbolic dimension of their behaviors and attitudes, as it is through this that the group members see how the co-facilitators manage power and the group process (Roy, et al., 2013).

In line with what all the participants noted about the harm that can result in some encounter groups such as rejection, attacking, oppressing scapegoating, shaming, and so on, the importance of holding boundaries and ethical practice is key. Mangione, Forti, & Iacuzzi, (2007) cut to the heart of the matter and stated that the group must be a safe container and space where co-facilitators are clear about appropriate and well-managed boundaries to enable members to trust and engage openly. Furthermore, they argued that competence in terms of understanding ethical principles and guidelines is central to professionalism.

These perspectives drawn from conclusion in the research of Roy, et al., (2013) is matching with the views that all the participants shared about the importance of competency and authenticity in co-facilitating and managing the co-facilitation relationship through encounter staff meetings, dialogue and relationship.

The facilitators made reference to the importance of aunthenticity in moment–to–moment responding to group members. They highlighted that it was important to respond without resorting to hiding through analyzing or explaining the of process. Most participants acknowledged the complexity of managing personal responses as a group member and responses as a co-facilitator. The examples that were given about how good co-facilitation can result in everyone facilitating each other in the group can be related to Schmid's (2015a)

view that this encountering of multiple value systems enables increase in possibilities of learning from each other and discovery of one's own perspectives. Cole (2013) offered a perspective that when facilitators are authentic in their responding and are seen by the group along with their flaws and shortcomings, then that can be explored and worked through and their humanness can be seen. It is argued that this can also empower group members who may be feeling vulnerable to share their feelings too (Cole 2013).

Lago (2015) expounded on the many different modes of being facilitative that Rogers noted in his writing on encounter groups. This included trusting the group and not imposing a goal on a group, having a way of being which facilitates feelings of safety, in listening deeply and striving to empathically understand each group individual a responding with feeling to whatever emerges even if it is conflict or difficult process. Furthermore, it is important to accept the group as a complete organism as well as accepting each individual within the group (Lago 2015).

The mention of power and co-facilitators' using their power in encounter groups emerged throughout this research. Both Natiello (2001) and Proctor (2002) offer concepts which are helpful in reflecting about co-facilitation of encounter. That is on collaborative power and the importance of being aware of power, and how to embrace power-with other whilst remaining authentically present. Ultimately, what participants in this research noted was the perspective which is noted in some literature on power: that through encounter, individuals become empowered to contribute and change society too (Natiello 2001; Proctor 2002; Schmid 2015b).

In relation to the importance of facilitators having an openness and competency in working with difference and diversity, I am drawn to highlight factors such as power, age, gender, color, ethnicity, class, culture, belief system, sexuality and ability/disability (Moodley 2009) which may be all present to one degree or another within the encounter group. It is important for co/facilitators to be aware of their impact on the group process. I have reflected on how some participants voiced that in their experiences marginalized groups, can often be the target of attack, scapegoating or they can be ignored in encounter groups. Drawing on Moodley's (2009) ideas of working therapeutically with marginalized groups and how they are positioned socially and culturally, I believe it is important to be aware that such marginalization may also occur within the encounter group. Thus, it is important for facilitators to continue to develop their own awareness and competencies in working with difference and dynamics of power and privilege in encounter groups.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

Given that there were 6 participants in this research, although it is noted that small sample sizes are the norm in IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003) I acknowledge that the analysis of data set has been influenced by my own subjectivity may have resulted in the loss of potentially subtle inflections of meaning and limitations in conducting detailed nuanced analysis. Another limitation is that since my data were collected via Skype, some of the technical interruptions may have impacted the flow of some of the interviews. In relation to future research, it could be interesting to investigate the experience of encounter group participants and compare it to that of co-facilitators.

Conclusion

The main research question was how do therapists who have experienced large group encounter co-facilitation make sense of this experience? In reflecting on their experiences, the findings that have emerged from this research and its literature review may well inform practice for those engaging in large group encounter co-facilitation.

These findings include how facilitators prepare and work effectively as a co-facilitation team, how to work with power, the centrality of authenticity and congruence in facilitating and responding in the group but also within the co-facilitation team, the importance of managing/holding the frame, boundary, and the responsibility in facilitating ethical encounter, the challenges and complexities of working with conflict, difficult process as well as the necessity of having competencies in working with difference and diversity.

I am left reflecting on how through encounter groups, individuals can learn to speak their truth. That the encounter group becomes as Schmid (2018): an important interface and microcosm of the individual's world/society and thus carries a pre-emptive function for individual, societal and political change.

Acknowledgements

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