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Therapeutic factors in the first stage of men's domestic violence groups: Men talk about universality and how it becomes operational in the group

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Abstract: This article reports on the qualitative findings of a Québec study on therapeutic factors (TFs) in three ongoing men's domestic violence groups. The study's aim was to discover which TFs are important for male group members in their first stage of the group, and in particular, to explore how these men experienced and described universality. A content analysis was performed on interviews conducted with 72 group members following their third group session. We found that what was most important to the men was the knowledge they acquired about domestic violence, being able to share common concerns, and helping other members. The second part of the article reports on our qualitative analysis of universality, one of the most important TFs: how it was experienced by group members and how it became operational in the group. We believe that the methods of analysis developed in this study – examining symbols, characteristics, processes, and effects of TFs – can contribute to our understanding of the underlying elements of group work as an intervention method.

Resumé: S'appuyant sur une analyse qualitative d'entrevues menées auprès de 72 membres de groupes québécois de thérapie pour conjoints violents, cet article vise à identifier les facteurs d'aide jugés importants par les conjoints violents au début de leur démarche de groupe et de façon plus spécifique, à explorer l'expérience qu'ils ont de l'universalité comme facteur d'aide à partir de leur discours. Dans un premier temps, les résultats de la recherche indiquent l'importance pour les conjoints violents d'acquérir des connaissances relatives à la violence, de partager des préoccupations semblables face au problème et d'aider les autres membres. Dans un deuxième temps, l'expérience qu'ont les conjoints violents d'aide de l'universalité et les mécanismes par lesquels ce

facteur émerge sont approfondis. Le cadre d'analyse développé dans cette recherche, qui met l'accent sur les symboles, les caractéristiques, les processus et les effets des facteurs d'aide, présente un intérêt certain pour la compréhension des éléments qui sous-tendent l'intérêt d'utiliser le groupe comme méthode d'intervention.

Keywords: *groupwork, therapeutic factors, domestic violence, perpetrators, qualitative research, universality*

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Introduction

Since the early 1970s, a number of studies have been conducted to identify therapeutic factors (TFs) in intervention groups. Several of these TFs are today known to be common to all types of treatment groups – groups for violent men among them (Helms, 2002; Schwartz and Waldo, 1999, 2003). However, few studies have examined how group members experience TFs and the processes by which TFs become operational within groups. This article aims to broaden our understanding of these issues, using the findings from our study on men's domestic violence groups (see Lindsay et al, 2006). We set out to answer the following questions: First, which TFs do violent men find important in the first stage of a group programme? Second, how do these men describe and experience the TF of universality?

Therapeutic factors in men's domestic violence groups

According to Yalom (1995), TFs, as elements of the therapeutic process, can at times be preconditions for change, and at other times, they can be learning or behavioural changes. Various systems for classifying TFs have been proposed, e.g. Yalom's (1995) model of 11 TFs and Bloch et al's (1994) system of 10 TFs. These classification systems can also vary depending on the type of group studied. For example, Shechtman and Perl-Dekel (2000) used Yalom's (1970) model to identify 10 TFs specific to art therapy groups, such as *creativity* and *art as a mirror*.

Our review of the literature found three studies on TFs in men's domestic violence groups: two by Schwartz and Waldo (1999, 2003) and one by Helms (2002). Schwartz and Waldo (1999) investigated educational groups based on the Duluth model. Thirty-eight participants in four ongoing groups filled out the Critical Incident Questionnaire after each group session. The three most mentioned TFs were: the imparting information, the development of socialising techniques, and group cohesion. Also named were: universality, catharsis, instillation of hope, interpersonal learning, and altruism. But imitative behaviour, corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, and existential factors were left unmentioned by the men. The results showed a significant relationship ($p < .01$) between the number of meetings attended and the

TFs of group cohesion and universality. While universality occurred at the beginning stage of the group process, cohesion needed more time to become significant.

In 2003, Schwartz and Waldo studied TFs in an experimental 10-session partner abuse prevention programme. Focusing on the notion of gender role conflict (O'Neil, Good, and Holmes, 1995, as cited in Schwartz and Waldo, 2003), two group sessions were devoted to each of the four types of role conflict experienced by men. The programme's topics were arranged in an order that corresponded to the group's development stage: each stage featured two consecutive sessions on a topic of role conflict relevant to that particular stage. In the first stage, which focused on conflict between work and family, the most-frequently reported TFs by abusive male partners were family reenactment, imparting information, and socialising techniques. The second stage, which addressed restricted emotionality, was characterised by catharsis, cohesion, and universality. Imparting information, interpersonal learning and socialising techniques were the most important factors during the third stage, which dealt with affectionate behaviour between men. Imparting information, altruism, and socialising techniques emerged from the last stage, whose theme was success, power and competition. The study concluded that although TFs do not necessarily occur at specific stages of group development, activities on specific topics can promote specific TFs. One such example, which appeared during the first stage on work-family conflict, was family reenactment. The importance participants placed on imparting information and socialising techniques throughout all stages confirmed Schwartz and Waldo's (1999) earlier findings.

Helms' (2002) work focused on male batterers' and therapists' perception of TFs in anger management/domestic violence treatment groups. In this study, group members and therapists alike completed the Therapeutic Factors Questionnaire (Yalom, 1970) at four points in the 24-session programme (sessions 6, 12, 18, 24). At the end of the programme, both groups rated the following TFs highest: instillation of hope, catharsis, altruism, and interpersonal learning input. However, therapists went on to add cohesion and universality. Imparting information (referred to as *guidance* by Helms) and identification were rated the lowest by group members, while therapists considered altruism and existential factors, self-understanding and imparting information less important.

The rating of TFs was not consistent across studies. For example, imparting information (guidance) was given a low rating by participants in Helms (2002), while Schwartz and Waldo's studies (1999, 2003) reported quite different results for this TF. The type of group (educational, prevention, anger management/domestic violence treatment) could account for the difference in the ratings. Certain studies have shown that TFs do not have the same importance to members of psychotherapy, support, and self-help groups (Lindsay et al, 2003). For example, support groups generally view universality as more important, whereas psychotherapy groups put a higher value on catharsis.

Furthermore, studies have shown that the importance attributed to TFs is influenced by the amount of time spent in the group (Lindsay et al, 2003). As Schwartz and Waldo (1999) observed, universality came out in the group's initial stage, while other factors, e.g. catharsis, emerged after participants had been in the group for a while (Lindsay et al, 2003). Yet Helms' (2002) findings did not show any significant relationship between time spent in the group and TFs.

Following our review of these studies, we selected 12 TFs more likely to occur in men's domestic violence groups. These factors, described in Table 1, set the backdrop for our study.

Context and purpose of the study

Most programmes for domestic violence perpetrators use a group format, but groups vary in their ideological orientation, structure, and format (Austin and Dankwort, 1999; Hanson, 2002). Programmes in the Canadian province of Québec are usually semi-structured. While they do include some planned therapeutic and educational activities, their focus is more on group process and here-and-now issues. The length of the programmes ranges from 14 to 21 weeks depending on the programme. Between 20% and 40% of the participants are court-ordered (Gouvernement du Québec, 1995; Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux, 1992). The differences among programmes, i.e., in the studies mentioned above (Schwartz and Waldo, 1999, 2003; Helms, 2002) and Québec's programmes, indicate a need for further study on TFs in men's domestic violence group; all the more so since little is known about how TFs become operational in any type of group.

Table 1
Selected therapeutic factors

Therapeutic factor	Definition
Instillation of hope	The relief and optimism developed by group members when they see other members in similar circumstances making progress and improving their condition, or when they observe their certainty that they will recover.
Universality	Group members' awareness of commonalities in their concerns and feelings and those of other members.
Imparting information	Information and advice provided by the group leader and other group members.
Altruism	What group members feel when they recognize that they are helping other members.
Learning from interaction	When members experiment with new ways of relating to others in the group and when they try out new ways of responding to the approaches of other members.
Imitative behaviour	Results of observing the behaviour of others within the group and hearing how they describe their behaviour outside the group.
Self-understanding	Learning something important about themselves.
Cohesion	Belonging to a group of people and feeling accepted by them.
Self-disclosure	Sharing personal and intimate information in the group that members have rarely, and in some cases, never revealed before.
Catharsis	Emotional expression relating to past events as well as to here-and-now material.
Family reenactment	Correctively reproducing the family environment (roles, methods of relating, feelings, cognitive system) within the group.
Existential factors	Group members' awareness of issues of responsibility, existential isolation, finiteness and the meaning of life.

Because group leaders can use TFs in guiding the group's development and functioning, thereby facilitating change (Bloch et al, 1994), a deeper understanding of TFs and the processes by which they become operational seems of the utmost importance. With these tools in hand, group leaders will be better equipped to structure their actions and to achieve their intervention goals.

Most research done in the field of domestic violence on intervention with violent male partners has centred on outcome evaluations of programmes (see Babcock et al, 2004; Ouellet et al, 1993). Along with Edleson (1995) and Wangsgaard (2000), we believe a greater interest in the intervention process itself is essential, in particular, how group members individually experience the process of change, a little-explored subject:

Little, if any, research has focused on what men's batterer group participants report to be critical elements of their treatment that have led them to change the ways they relate to their partners. (Wangsgaard, 2000, p.4)

It is essential to analyze such 'critical elements' to develop our knowledge regarding behaviour change in violent men by means of their participation in treatment groups.

In this article, we are presenting the results of our study on TFs in the initial stage of a group programme. This research topic overlaps with the concern both researchers and practitioners have about men's perseverance in treatment programmes. Understanding how TFs operate in the group's initial stage, which is when men usually drop out (Rondeau et al, 2001), would thus help us to know more about the mechanisms of change that affect the therapeutic process and perseverance in the programme.

Methodology

Participants

Data were collected from 72 participants in three ongoing men's domestic violence group programmes in Québec, Canada. We only met with men who had completed at least three group sessions. In

their second group session, the men were given information about the study by their group leaders. Those wishing to participate then signed a consent form, and their names and contact information were sent to the research team.

Nearly 40% of respondents said their participation in their group was a consequence of a misdemeanour conviction for violence that they had committed against their spouse, family, or anyone else, and 29% were legally obliged to attend such a programme as part of a probation order or conditions of parole. The average age of the men was 36.5 years ($SD = 10.1$). Almost half were married or in a common-law relationship, and 76% had at least one child. Approximately 80% of the men had an annual income under CAN\$30,000 (about EUR20,000). A very high percentage (85%) had previously asked for help from professionals and 40% had specifically sought help for a problem with violence. Two-thirds of the sample had participated in at least one prior group intervention programme, mainly for a substance abuse problem. Therefore, most of the participants had already received professional support, whether in a group setting or some other format, and for many of them, their violence problem was behind their seeking help.

Intervention group format

Each group had eight men and was usually co-facilitated by a man and a woman, with a university-level education in social work or psychology. These were ongoing groups, where each member's participation consisted of 20 sessions, once a week for 2½ hours. All three programmes were based on a feminist analysis of violence, in which violence is understood to be a means by which men control women (Yllö, 2005), and on a model in which society conditions men to dominate (Hanson, 2002). This group model also incorporated notions from the cognitive-behavioural and other therapeutic approaches with male clients (Brooks, 1998). The main intervention goals were to stop the men's violence, engender a sense of responsibility, and encourage behavioural change.

Data collection method

A *critical incident* technique was used to assess the TFs experienced

by members through their participation in the group. This method has been used since the earliest studies on TFs (Berzon et al, 1963). Several researchers in the field prefer this approach because it gives participants greater liberty than an approach based on questionnaires, and beyond identifying TFs, it provides access to participants' experiences (Mackenzie, 1987). To develop our critical incident interview guide, we drew on Schwartz and Waldo's (1999) questions and also added questions that more specifically addressed how TFs become operational. Since the participants were Francophones, we had to translate the instrument into French, which we did using the technique of back translation (Vallerand, 1989). After attending an average of 3.9 group meetings, 72 participants responded to the following questions: What event from this session was most helpful to you? Describe what happened, the feelings you experienced, and how the event was helpful to you? What do you, personally, do within the group to make your experience productive? What do the leaders and other group member do to help you? Individual interviews approximately 45 minutes in length were conducted by a research assistant. These took place after the end of a group session or at some other agreed-upon time. After they were interviewed, participants were paid CAD\$20 (about EUR 14) for their participation.

Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in their entirety. A content analysis was carried out on this material using NVivo software. To start, respondents' comments were coded by a doctoral research assistant according to the 12 TFs selected from the literature (see table 1). These proved to be comprehensive enough that no new categories emerged during the process. Half of the material was coded by a second doctoral research assistant. The inter-rater agreement was 84.3%, demonstrating a high reliability for the content analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The data was then quantitatively processed, by counting the number of times each factor was mentioned. These findings indicated the relative importance of each TF. The text then underwent a qualitative analysis, which identified the symbols (words), characteristics specific to each TF, the processes by which they occurred in the group, and their effects on individual members and the group

as a whole. In fact, this method emerged during the course of the analysis. In studies that used the critical incident technique, researchers first categorized the data by TF, then extracted the TFs present and which ones appeared to be most important. However, in this study, we went further. Using qualitative methods, we undertook a more in-depth exploration of how TFs become operational and how they are experienced by participants.

While 10 TFs emerged from the analysis, we will limit our presentation of the results to the second of the most-frequently mentioned factors: universality. This TF was linked to the benefits experienced by participants from recognizing ways in which they were similar to other group members (see table 1). Studies have demonstrated that universality plays a fundamental role at the beginning of a group, for the development of cohesion among members (Lindsay et al, 2003). Universality is recognized as an essential factor in self-help groups and support groups (Kurtz, 1997). Furthermore, in groups for persons with marginal behaviour, their recognition that they are in some ways similar to others is viewed as a factor worth greater attention, as this recognition can lead members to minimise or even reinforce their problem behaviour (Dishion et al, 1999).

Results

Which TFs do violent men find important in the first stage of a group programme?

Our analysis identified 10 therapeutic factors across the 72 participant interviews conducted in the early stage of each group programme. None of the respondents mentioned any elements referring to family reenactment and existential factors; such topics were not explicitly addressed in the groups, nor were these TFs mentioned in Schwartz and Waldo's (1999) study. Table 2 presents the relative importance of each of these 10 factors, based on the number of men who mentioned them in their interviews and the number of segments coded for each factor.

Imparting information, universality, and altruism, were the most prevalent factors discussed by participants, mentioned by more than 70% of the sample. Next were cohesion, imitative behaviour, self-

disclosure, self-understanding, and instillation of hope, referred to by 60 to 70% of the sample. Seemingly less important TFs were learning from interaction and catharsis, as reported by about 25% of the sample.

How do these men describe and experience the TF of universality?

In the course of the interviews, 60 of the 72 respondents referred to universality, with a total of 180 coded segments for this factor.

What words did the men use to describe universality?

The importance of sharing their concerns, emotions, and difficulties with others was noted by the use of the following words: same, like, similar, different, connect with, recognise oneself, identify with, relate to, being like. Their realisation of this sharing was also underscored by the following terms: realising, discovering, getting it. Participants mentioned 'not being all alone'.

What is universality related to?

The data enabled us to identify the nature of the concerns, emotions, and difficulties shared by male partners attending domestic violence groups. Generally, men first mentioned that they were not alone in having problems:

Sometimes we think that we're the only ones, that everything's OK for those around us, everything's fine [...] But now we see there are others with the problem, too: money problems, relationship problems, sexual problems ... [Participant 021]

It is interesting to note that some men seemed surprised and astonished to meet other men having the same problems:

You think you're all alone. You think that you're the only one, the only one to act like this, since you never heard anyone else talk about it. When you do hear it, you're really taken aback. I think it wakes you up. [Participant 011]

More specifically, universality dealt with the problem of violence and

Table 2
Relative importance of therapeutic factors (N=72)

Therapeutic factor	Rank	Number of participants		Number of quotes
		n	%	
Imparting information	1	62	86	235
Universality	2	60	83	180
Altruism	3	53	74	146
Cohesion	4	50	69	173
Imitative behaviour	5	49	68	150
Self-disclosure	6	49	68	131
Self-understanding	7	46	64	134
Instillation of hope	8	43	60	80
Learning from interaction	9	16	22	26
Catharsis	10	13	18	19

its various dimensions, such as, the forms of violence, the build-up of violence, the problem with managing and expressing one's emotions, not taking responsibility, and, as seen in the following quote, jealousy:

Everybody is jealous, each and every one of us, everybody is violent, but just to a different degree. [Participant 054]

This last quote shows an element of individuality that seems to hang on within the universality experienced by members in the group. Universality allows them to lay the foundations for group unity, 'we', a common ground among members, but without losing their individuality, 'I':

We all experience the same things, but not the same way. [Participant 054]

This recognition of the similarity between a participant's personal situation and those of the other members is not limited to the nature of their behaviours, which could ultimately lead to a process by which the men could minimise their abuse, externalise it, and move into a comfort zone, but also touches on their motivation for belonging to the group. Men referred to the fact of sharing a common motivation and a willingness to resolve their problems:

Here, I think we're all about in the same boat. You see, we come here because we want to get over it, we're here to try to understand. [Participant 071]

Which processes give rise to universality?

Interaction among members plays an active role in the emergence of universality. A few men remarked that observing and listening to others made them see they were not alone:

You see, hearing different things, different topics, different conversations, you see that you're not the only one in this situation. [Participant 021]

Becoming aware of common points comes close to a process of identification:

It hits us deep inside, because we recognize ourselves. My God! He's gone through the same thing as me. [Participant 027]

Similarly, it can lead to a process of comparison:

I compared myself with the guys I met here who had a serious violence problem, and at first, I first judged them. For me it's all the same, I don't think my problem is different from another violence problem of another kind. [Participant 017]

For other men, universality emerged by the act of expressing oneself in a group setting and having other members being able to relate to one's experiences:

In the beginning, I talked, but I didn't think the other guys would really get what I was talking about. But basically, I was surprised that some of them related to it. It's like saying, look, you're not the only one this happens to. [Participant 072]

The dynamic of reciprocity also emerged as a factor that promoted universality in the group. One participant described it as follows:

The fact that anyone can put in his own two cents just because of what he's been through. We all know everyone here has a problem and we're all here for the same reason, that's we're all good sounding boards for each other. [Participant 017]

In general, the idea of the 'group as a whole' stands out as an important element in building universality:

When we're all sitting around talking, all us guys are the same. It's like a bunch of guys sitting together in a bar shooting the breeze, we're all the same type.
[Participant 043]

What are the effects of universality?

The content analysis showed that universality brought about a sense of well-being and relief among the group. One participant had this to say:

Just succeeding in doing this and then hearing from the guy next to you, 'Whoa, the same for me, man', is a relief. It feels like the world's been taken off my shoulders.
[Participant 017]

For certain men, this feeling of relief was linked to the group intervention:

Because it's not like a worker meeting with just one person, just one-on-one. That's a good thing – but even better, being able to see, to connect with the experience of others with problems like yours, that has a whole other effect. [Participant 078]

Mutual aid, another element that is characteristic of the group intervention method, was associated with universality among members:

We all have the same problem, so we help each other out. [Participant 009]

This is similar to Yalom's (1995) and Bloch et al's (1994) observations, for whom universality seems to be associated with a lessening of group members' feelings of loneliness and isolation as regards to this issue.

We were interested to see that some of the effects of universality were like those of other TFs. The following excerpt touched on another TF, the instillation of hope:

It makes things clearer ... it gives you courage because you're talking with guys who have the same problems as you. [Participant 009]

Another factor, self-understanding, could also be observed:

You can really see yourself. You can recognize yourself and just by saying that you're not alone in all this, I think it gives you a better understanding. [Participant 004]

Realizing that one is not alone with this problem of violence is linked to becoming aware of the breadth of the problem of violence:

It helps you see that you're not the only one with such problems. You realize that it's really a big problem in society ... violence is everywhere. [Participant 004]

So, a sense of universality is closely associated with the development of the hope of overcoming it, understanding oneself better, and grasping the gravity of the situation. Thereupon, although it is possible to distinguish the presence of different TFs, these factors are often intertwined and nourish each other. Differentiating and examining TFs in isolation thus has a heuristic function and invites us to ask further questions about the influence TFs have on one another.

Discussion and conclusion

This article presents the findings of a study on TFs in men's domestic violence groups in Québec. Imparting information was the TF most often mentioned by the men, matching Schwartz and Waldo's (1999, 2003) results. Our qualitative analysis of this TF indicated that the men acquired some knowledge about the forms of violence, the cycle of violence, the concepts of power and control, the effects of their violence on victims, and conflict management strategies (Lindsay et al, 2004). In this study, imparting information refers to the educational component of the groups studied and is an element frequently found in programmes for domestic violence perpetrators.

Universality, altruism, cohesion, and imitative behaviour – ranking second to fifth respectively – illustrate dimensions specific to a group context, i.e. being present and interacting with other members.

Universality, altruism, and cohesion were also identified as major factors in other studies (Schwartz and Waldo, 1999, 2003; Helms, 2002). However, imitative behaviour, ranking fifth in our study, was not mentioned by Schwartz and Waldo and scored low in Helms' study. Imitative behaviour occurs when group members imitate the modeling of others in the group; this element seems to be more specific to those men's domestic violence groups whose content is relatively unstructured. Furthermore, it may be that the structure of ongoing groups helps foster imitative learning, since participants are not all at the same stage in the programme.

We must further comment on the relative importance and function of the aforementioned TFs, in light of the goals of intervention programmes for abusive men. Like the men interviewed, we view imparting information as an essential TF for achieving program goals. TFs such as universality and cohesiveness should be used for the purpose of having men take responsibility for their behaviour and change it. The group leader's role is thus instrumental in ensuring the therapeutic role of these factors and avoiding a slide towards denying or minimising the violence.

The interaction and reciprocity among group members was revealed by our qualitative analysis of universality. Observation, listening to others, being heard – these were some of the processes that helped make the men aware of what they shared in common and to somewhat identify with other group members. These processes overlap, in part, with the TF imitative behaviour, which results from observing the behaviour of others within the group and hearing how they describe their behaviour outside the group. The effects of universality are also akin to other TFs, such as the instillation of hope and self-understanding. As described by Yalom (1995), these relationships suggest that certain TFs such as universality are preconditions for change, which could explain its importance at the start of the process (Lindsay et al, 2003; Toseland and Rivas, 2005). But as this energy can just as easily take a negative course, i.e. by men minimising their problem behaviours or not assuming responsibility, it is essential that group leaders be able to channel this energy toward achieving the group's goals.

Our qualitative analysis of universality identified the issues shared by the abusive men, which primarily revolved around the problem of violence. Needless to say, in another kind of group with a different

population, the nature of the emotions, problems, and concerns shared would be different. Familiarity with these themes can be a tool for groupworkers to promote the development and awareness of universality among members. Similarly, groupworkers can reinforce and stimulate other processes that develop universality, as identified in this study. In fact, once groupworkers have a better understanding of the characteristics particular to each TF, the processes by which they become operational in groups, and their effects, they should be able to better plan their interventions in a way that enables strategic TF use. Few authors have systematically developed the subject of utilising TFs in groupwork. Garvin (1997) suggested some interesting avenues for practice that promote the emergence of TFs in groups. We believe that a study to analyse the mechanisms by which TFs become operational would contribute to further developing this topic of interest to group workers.

More research is needed about the particular characteristics of each TF. The critical incident technique appears to be an appropriate method for this kind of research. We could increase our knowledge further through the use of additional methods, such as observational data from group sessions and interviews with group workers. Some recent studies on TFs used data from a variety of sources (Helms, 2002; Shechtman and Perl-Dekel, 2000), and we concur that this is a worthwhile approach for future studies. By the same token, it would be relevant to collect data from drop-outs, as to the presence or absence of certain TFs in the sessions before they quit. This brings us to question if the importance of universality at the start of the process could have had undesirable effects on group members who drop out, e.g., by minimising their behaviour. Further research on this topic is essential.

In addition, the analytical methods developed for this study, which led us to examine symbols (words), characteristics, processes and effects, can help us to better understand how TFs emerge and their influence on members, thereby strengthening the rationale for selecting groupwork in practice. But few studies have explored the relationship between TFs and the results of intervention programmes (Bloch et al., 1994; Magen and Glajchen, 1999). A better understanding of this relationship will contribute to increasing the value and fulfilling the potential of group interventions.

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