

Overview of a Group Work Programme: The Choices and the Challenges

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Summary: The ‘Nothing Works’ and ‘What Works’ debates were central to discourse on recidivism in the 1970s and 1980s. When the outrage subsided and the research based on meta-analysis was reviewed, one simple message for practitioners emerged: some things work with some people some of the time. The challenge is to find the right intervention for the right person at the right time. As agents of change, no practitioner can afford to be a ‘one-trick pony’ but will draw from a toolkit of interventions to address the factors that contribute to offending behaviour. Programme interventions, specifically CBT-based group work programmes, are recognised as providing an appropriate and structured environment in which to address pro-criminal thinking and attitudes in order to achieve reduced offending and ultimately desistance and reintegration into communities. The Probation Service Strategy 2011–2014 identified the introduction of a range of programmes to enhance and support effective practice as a key goal. The Choice and Challenge Group Programme was the Service’s first nationally approved offending behaviour programme. Developed in accordance with evidence-based principles, its central focus is to challenge negative beliefs and attitudes, promote prosocial behaviours and enhance individual capacity for problem-solving and personal growth and development. This is a narrative about its implementation.

Keywords: Choice, challenge, change, rehabilitation, CBT, programme, probation, supervision, group work, desistance, offender, Ireland.

Getting started

- *Thinking:* This is not going to work. Nobody is going to turn up.
- *Feeling:* Very nervous and fidgety as I observe the empty room.

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- *Behaviour*: Sitting stressed in the group-work room at Tallaght Probation Project (TPP),¹ surrounded by 15 empty chairs and trying to control nervous hand movements.

Having facilitated Choice and Challenge – a thinking skills programme that targets offending – for a number of years, I should by now have a good understanding of how thinking affects feeling and behaviour. Anxiously I get up again and walk around the empty group-work room. I then go and check the canteen area of the Tallaght Probation Project, for the third time. I know from running groups that the first days of each programme can be fraught with anxiety and uncertainty, even when everything possible has been done to achieve a good start. Working with groups is an exciting experience, as you never quite know what is going to happen next.

The first day of each Choice and Challenge group is always a little daunting. It's not just about filling chairs (although that helps everyone's morale) but also about creating a learning and developmental environment that supports individuals in their stated commitment to desist from crime. The anxiety/tension around group work, which, of course, is part of its attraction, stems in part from the fact that each group is so different. One does not have any real sense of the individuals who are going to arrive or of just how the relationships will develop and work out during the group process.

Seeking participants

The very first challenge of any group is getting sufficient appropriate referrals. Group work is all about good planning and preparation. Good relationships have been established over a number of years, with supervising Probation Officers, Community Service teams and the Tallaght Probation Project. Those links have been critical to embedding the Choice and Challenge programme within the Probation Service.

In the search for participants, the net is cast ever wider. Appropriate referrals are accepted from all over Dublin. Indeed, without that larger pool, as well as the support of referring Probation Officers, the chairs in the group-work room might remain empty. The eligibility criteria are: males over the age of 21 years; at medium to high risk of reoffending

¹ Tallaght Probation Project, Westpark, Tallaght, Dublin 24. Tel. 01 4270600; project@tpp.ie

based on recent LSI-R scores;² on a period of supervision with a case management plan in place; and display a level of group readiness.

In assessing group readiness, the Probation Officer will focus on substance misuse issues, medical and mental health issues and literacy capacity. The presence of one or all of these issues should not exclude a person, lest group leaders be doing what a colleague once described as a ‘Goldilocks assessment’: that is, accepting only those who are ‘just right’ (who are best placed to succeed even without the programme rather than candidates with needs and challenges). Candidates are assessed to ensure that they are capable, with all available supports, to actively participate in the programme and will not be unnecessarily vulnerable in a group setting.

For about six weeks before the group is due to start, the Choice and Challenge programme is promoted widely using leaflets, emails and the internal Service newsletter. Group facilitators also visit each of the Probation teams in Dublin, as well as Community Service and Community Return³ teams. Probation Officers can discuss the programme and review caseloads in the search for suitable candidates.

The right venue is vitally important for any group. The Tallaght Probation Project has proved to be a valuable resource, providing an environment that balances structure with flexibility and challenge with support. The canteen area of the Project, where participants are welcomed with a cup of tea and a smile, helps set the right atmosphere for participants who arrive, with varying levels of anxiety, to take part in the Choice and Challenge programme.

There does not seem to be a typical Choice and Challenge participant. They are of a range of ages and circumstances. What they do have in common is a commitment to change. Moreover, get them in the door with a positive welcome and enthusiastic attitude and you have a good chance of keeping them for the life of the programme.

The programme

So, what exactly is Choice and Challenge, and how was it developed? In seeking to bring about a reduction in offending, Probation Officers

² The Level of Service Inventory–Revised™ (LSI-R™) is a risk/needs assessment instrument developed by Andrews and Bonta (1995).

³ Community Return is an incentivised, structured and supervised release programme for prisoners combining unpaid work for the benefit of the community with early release and resettlement support.

recognise that pro-criminal thinking is one of the central influences affecting recidivism. Based on knowledge and experience of a range of cognitive behavioural programmes and in collaboration with the Programme Development Unit at the Bridge Project,⁴ the Probation Service developed Choice and Challenge, a structured group-work programme to address pro-criminal thinking.

When our main goal is to reduce the likelihood of the person committing a new offence, we must explore the individual choices made. It is in that exploration that positive change can occur: as Christopher Alexander says, ‘when they have a choice, people will always gravitate to those rooms which have light on two sides, and leave the rooms which are lit only from one side unused and empty’ (Alexander *et al.*, 1977).

The Programme Development Unit conducted a pilot Choice and Challenge programme in 2011. An evaluation of the pilot found that some of the materials and language did not adhere to the requirements of the responsivity principle (Andrews and Bonta, 2016) and there was a lack of connectivity between sessions. The Probation Service approved a second pilot in a number of centres nationally in 2012. Recommendations from that second pilot have been included in the current programme. The programme manual consists of a programme outline and session description accompanied by the facilitator’s notes for each session. There is also a workbook for each participant.

Since 2013, at least two group-work programmes have been delivered annually to Dublin-based referrals. A total of 12 sessions are scheduled for two days a week over six weeks. Once a referral is made, a three-way meeting with the candidate and the supervising officer is arranged and the assessment form is completed by a programme facilitator. The aim and nature of the programme are discussed and the demands of participation in the group clearly set out. Other practical details, such as dates and times and possible literacy support, are agreed.

This meeting provides an opportunity to clarify with busy Probation Officers just how the programme fits into the supervision order, with current risk assessments and with related case management plans. The ongoing method of feedback to and from Probation Officers and the constraints of confidentiality are also outlined. This ensures that there is

⁴ The Bridge Project is a community-based alternative to custody for adult males with a history of offending in the Greater Dublin Metropolitan Area. Based in Francis Street, Dublin 8, Bridge is a limited company with charitable status. www.bridge.ie

a shared understanding about support mechanisms and the management of compliance.

The assessment and selection process aims for a mixture of age ranges and offending history to balance the group dynamics. The programme uses therapeutic, educational and video material together with role-play inputs that guide participation through a challenging journey of understanding the past and building hope and confidence for the future.

Central to the Choice and Challenge intervention is a structured group process that brings together a group of individuals with a common aim – to stop offending – and challenges them to live better lives. The group-work setting allows a particular dynamic of social interactions and learning situations that encourages collaborative working to manage the shared risks. Within the programme's structure, old, entrenched criminal ways of thinking and behaving are challenged and the development of pro-social lifestyles is advanced.

What is modelled in the group for participants is, often, a completely new culture of social interactions. It is within the process of group socialisation and new learning opportunities that change starts to take place and enables participants to realise their potential and identify paths to desistance. In the group and in their social interactions within the project, in general, skills are developed in areas such as active listening, constructive feedback, affirmation and openness.

These skills and attitudes are modelled, encouraged and practised in a dynamic way that can be challenging for the participants and facilitators: 'We must accept life for what it actually is – a challenge to our quality without which we should never know of what stuff we are made, or grow to our full stature' (a quote attributed to Robert Louis Stevenson). It is within the combination of the group process, programme content and experience of facilitators from Probation, social work and youth-work fields that the 'magic' of a functioning group dynamic can be conjured, to effect change and growth.

Even with all the enthusiasm and encouragement, there can be great reluctance on the part of clients to sign up for a group programme. The thought of having to speak in front of other people can be daunting for most participants' self-confidence when one goes under the façade. While some participants may have attended groups while in custody, for many, group work reminds them of the classroom, which they may have left at an early stage with poor memories.

Group-work begins

Back in the group-work room, things have improved as many of the chairs are now occupied.

- *Thinking:* 10 out of 16 places offered is not bad for the first day – about average.
- *Feeling:* Much better – I am an 8 out of 10 on the feeling scale.
- *Behaviour:* Ready to start and do an introduction and opening round asking how people feel.

At the start and end of each Choice and Challenge session, all group participants are asked how they are feeling, from bad to good, expressed in a number from 1 to 10. Being active in the group, the Choice and Challenge facilitators model the behaviour expected in the group by being open, warm and enthusiastic about the programme. Ten participants in a group is a good size for Choice and Challenge. To get this number consistently demonstrates the importance of an effective referral process. Experience shows that the programme, in its current format, has the ability to engage, educate and interest the participants once they have committed to attend.

Programme content

The first session covers the introduction and the aims of the programme. The concerns and expectations of participants are reviewed and discussed as part of the formal check-in. Modelling the goal of a pro-social culture within the group underpins all engagement. To support a group culture of learning and change, the requirements of a pro-social group – openness, active listening and respect – are promoted, and the level to which participants are seeking change in their lives is established.

With the inclusion of opening rounds, ice-breaker exercises and energisers in each session, the process of group building begins and the culture of the group starts to take shape. Respect for others, active engagement in the group by listening and contributing, timekeeping, attendance and, importantly, switching off mobile phones are highlighted. The limits of confidentiality are discussed, as well as how Choice and Challenge attendance fits in with general Probation supervision. Vitally important is the requirement not to attend affected by drugs or to engage in drug use while attending the programme.

At this early stage role-play is introduced, which is usually a bit dramatic as suddenly the group observe two facilitators start a conversation which quickly turns into a row. It plays out with two people shouting, no longer listening to each other, who clearly don't have respect for each other. They continue to shout over each other, with the sole aim of point scoring. Everything we don't want in a group!

At the end of the session, there is a review of what was covered. Practical matters are clarified. A check-in round is undertaken and participants are again asked to rate their feeling levels.

In the second session further work is done on completing the group rules and agreement. Icebreakers and energisers are used to get participants involved and discussions started on key concepts, such as the connection between thinking, feeling and behaviour, and how we learn and change. Video aids are used in the group tasks and more modelling is undertaken by facilitators on how groups work together successfully. When discussing key concepts such as the ability to change and taking personal responsibility, participants are encouraged to use positive group skills around active listening, contributing, valuing opinions and building of trust.

By session three, participants are usually getting into what is required in the opening and closing rounds and the group explores further the links between how we think, feel and behave. The concepts of pro-social and antisocial behaviour are introduced, and how we think about crime in a cost-benefit analysis is explored.

At this stage, participants are increasingly challenged about behaving antisocially, criminally and selfishly. Often at this point, the group is following Tuckman's (1965) five stages of group development and the polite stage of forming is moving on to storming, with negative beliefs stated and maintained and positions set out.

At this juncture, we often lose one or two participants, but usually we have seven or eight people who continue to the end. Issues about drug misuse, particularly 'benzos' (benzodiazepines) – the scourge of any group-work programme – often come to the fore here.

The fourth session continues to work on problem-solving skills. The concept that 'you always have a choice' is explored. This challenges the belief of many participants that they had no choice but to commit crime. The fifth session looks at thinking errors and negative self-talk, and how these can be a barrier to problem-solving and cause a relapse into criminal behaviour. In each session, group behaviour and social skills are reviewed,

and participants are encouraged to get the best from a group setting and move the group on to its performing stage.

Exploring the link between justification and offending behaviour is the core focus for session six. Session seven looks at morality and the concerns of the wider society regarding crime. The group also examines how society responds to crime, and considers rights and responsibilities.

At this point, the group is coming together well and has resolved any differences as it moves on from the storming stage to the performing stage of group dynamics. This is characterised by the group working together, respecting differences and giving constructive and genuine feedback.

In session eight, 'cartooning' takes place, which is a core part of the programme. Graphic recording or 'cartooning' allows the participants to present an honest and real account of their offending on a flipchart before the group. This visual representation is an attempt at an honest portrayal and narrative of the factors that led up to the offence and the effects of that behaviour on the victim, their family and themselves.

Participants bring together what they have learnt so far in the programme. Also included in their representations are what they were thinking, what choices they have made and what problems may have overwhelmed them. Each participant has to present their 'cartoon' to the group in a realistic way that is respectful and sincere, as well as listen to feedback from the group. During this session, the purpose and power of the group are very evident, as is the individuals' progress and confidence to deal with challenge.

Session nine is a very powerful session that examines further the impact on victims of offending behaviour and crime. The session aims to facilitate an awareness of the impact of participants' offending and to support the development of empathy for the harm that has been suffered as a consequence of their actions. Victims' stories/experiences are discussed and examined and as part of that discussion, participants are encouraged to own their feelings about the impact of their offending on the victim.

Session ten moves on from direct victims to how we respond to crime, both as a society and on an individual basis. Participants are asked to view crime from a range of perspectives: the courts, An Garda Síochána, the community and the primary and secondary victims. They outline what personal changes they can make and the related actions to put an end to the cycle of harm they have caused.

Thus far in the group programme the emphasis has been on challenging offending behaviour and looking at the effects of criminality. However,

from this point in the group process the challenge becomes more about the future and building the commitment to change with new ways of thinking, feeling and behaviour. The group works towards affirming a positive attitude to life, and examines what a 'good life' is and what it means to have an expansive, positive attitude with aspirations, goals and acceptance of responsibilities.

In session eleven, the group is moving towards the end of the programme and participants are encouraged to look at their life choices for the future and the challenges of leading a pro-social, crime-free lifestyle. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) is used to stimulate reflection on priorities for living. Pro-social goals are set and the challenges in areas such as addiction, employment, relationships and self-fulfilment explored. At this stage, I have on occasion, and with good effect, drawn from some Shakespearian sonnets to illustrate the significance of self-actualised personal achievement.

Due to the structure and time constraints of the programme, particular issues that arise cannot always be explored in great detail. An opportunity is provided to revisit any outstanding issues before the conclusion of the programme. Typical concerns raised include alcohol and drug abuse, sleep deprivation, family law problems, diet and homelessness. There are no easy solutions, but a group discussion and a mindfulness session can help some participants move from being overwhelmed. The validation and encouragement from their peers is now a critical influence.

Finally, session twelve brings the programme to a close and, for those who have persevered through the whole process, there is a sense of achievement, but also a sadness that the programme is about to end. All participants complete an 'action plan' targeting how they will avoid future offending. Brief presentations are made on training and employment opportunities that will support some of the planned actions.

The level of retention and understanding by the participants of the material covered in the programme is evaluated. There is a discussion on the process of the group, during which valuable feedback is provided on what did and didn't work for them.

Finally, certificates are presented: a formalised ritual with plenty of time for affirmative commentary. In an acknowledgement of Tuckman's mourning phase of group dynamics, the group members are provided with an opportunity to reconvene in a month to reflect on the group and review progress on their goals. In a group that has come together successfully, an average of eight participants complete the process.

Reflections

... guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions.⁵

If you really want to know your clients (and indeed yourself), get involved in a group-work programme. The Choice and Challenge provides a real opportunity to engage actively with your clients, and to achieve a broader understanding of their background, level of social skills and willingness to change. In my work, I have observed the many ways in which participants can meet challenges and effect changes. The following are some examples (all names changed).

Dave was a homeless man living in hostel accommodation who completed the programme. During the assessment process, concerns were raised about his ability to complete a group-work programme. A long history of drug abuse and chaotic living suggested that he would not be able to cope with its structure and demands. However, with support around reading and writing, he successfully completed the programme. Allowances were made for his morning appointment for methadone and the fact that this could limit his engagement at times.

He was able to make a real contribution to the group, and often had thoughtful statements to make when given the space and encouragement to give his opinion. His long history of drug abuse and public order offending signposted a wasted life, in his view, which he hoped younger participants could avoid. The recognition he gained in being asked his opinion and being heard, getting a proper cooked meal each day, and being helped with bus fares enabled him to successfully finish something for the first time in his life. This provided him with a real sense of achievement. In his case, the risk taken proved successful.

Paul, a young man just turned 20, initially played the fool in the group but was able to grow and mature as the programme progressed. He was seriously involved in drug dealing but was able to listen to older, wiser group members who talked about what real friends are, not just drug-taking associates. Paul recognised that he needed to make big changes in his life, particularly changing his so-called friends, if he was to avoid a significant prison sentence.

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 2, scene 2.

Paul had a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and found it extremely difficult to sit still in a chair. The group accommodated his need to get out of his chair from time to time. This enabled him to compete the programme and overcome challenges that could have been barriers to his participation. Paul successfully moved on to other programmes at the Tallaght Probation Project.

Colin, at the referral stage, stated his motivation for change and claimed a drug-free status. Soon after starting the group it became clear that he was 'affected' when in the group, and he admitted to abusing 'benzos'. He was asked to leave the group, as he could not participate and there was no evidence of any commitment to change. Colin was offered a place on the programme the following year, to give him time to address his drug use. He did commence the following year, but was still entrenched in a pattern of drug misuse. He was asked to leave again, as his attendance seriously compromised the group. We may yet consider a further application from Colin.

Tony, an older man who had everything – good job, varied lifestyle, fun and money – talked about how unfulfilled he felt about his life and how he had lost close friends and an ex-girlfriend to drugs. He was able to explain to younger members of the group the full cost of drug abuse and its inevitable consequence. Although he had expected a long prison sentence, he had been granted a second chance and was in a new relationship and family.

Tony expressed his gratitude to the Choice and Challenge programme for giving him the opportunity to reflect on life, and stated his determination to have a life and family he can value and care for. Again, he was continuing to build on these changes through ongoing participation in the Tallaght Probation Project.

Patrick, a drug dealer with a number of convictions, had so far avoided a prison sentence. He appeared as the 'wise owl' of his group and was somewhat reserved. He seemed to 'know it all' and was only really engaging on a superficial level. The group revealed how Patrick knew enough to say the right things, but would manipulate younger, less experienced members into antisocial behaviour. He did not complete the group, and was arrested again soon after leaving. Choice and Challenge is very clear that its aim is to stop reoffending and support desistance, not to produce self-actualised and happy offenders who have no intention to stop offending.

Con was a young man from a Traveller background who had a history of drinking and theft. He had just started a family, and was determined to make changes in his life. As a Traveller, he was unsure about the reception he would get from the group, and showed some reluctance to talk in front of others. Once he settled in, and acknowledged the warm reception from facilitators and the other group members, he felt he could trust the group and he enjoyed attending. He said he learned a lot about how his fixed attitudes and drinking had led to his offending. He successfully completed the group and went on to complete other programmes for alcohol and addictions.

Conclusion

Although a group work programme like Choice and Challenge has many benefits, and provides an opportunity for a second chance and for change for participants, programmes require a lot of preparation and planning. It can be a real challenge to deliver a programme effectively when balancing workload priorities. Group work has always been an essential part of Probation practice across jurisdictions. The 1907 Probation of Offenders Act⁶ is the legislation underpinning Probation practice in Ireland: it serves to guide the Probation Service every day in its work of giving offenders a ‘second chance’ and challenging them not to reoffend, while maintaining the spirit of the Act, to ‘advise, assist and befriend’.

In undertaking group work we can broaden the approach to tackling offending: not just on the one-dimensional individual view, with its focus on the individual failings of the offender, but with a multidimensional approach to repair, where possible, the broken relationship between offender, victims and the wider community.

Choice and Challenge ensures that individuals are held accountable for their offending. As it moves through the sessions, the programme views the rehabilitation and change process through a desistance-focused lens where the concepts of redemption, reintegration and personal agency are more visible in the engagement. We know how difficult change can be. There is some evidence that people are more likely to be successful in making and maintaining changes in their lives when they are open to the benefit of skilled and structured group work that allows for what is now termed ‘democratic professionalism’ (Whitty and Wisby, 2006).

⁶ <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1907/act/17/enacted/en/print.html>

The Choice and Challenge Programme, effectively integrated with one-to-one supervision, is a valuable resource within a range of interventions that can work, with the right people at the right time.

Nearing the end of the Choice and Challenge programme, having observed the group go through the forming, storming and norming stages and on to the performing stage, I start to enjoy watching it working well.

- *Thinking*: this has been a good but tough road with lots of twists and turns.
- *Feeling*: great, as I enjoy watching a successfully functioning group.
- *Behaviour*: gently intervening with an occasional Shakespearian reference

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