

## STAGES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT – A PCP APPROACH

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*Groups and their members can be seen as experiencing a 'life cycle', characterised by a sequence of developmental stages. Life cycle models typically present these stages as phenomena of group experience. This paper experiments with the application of Personal Construct Psychology to phases of group development, describing these as processes of construing and elaboration made more vivid by the intense 'laboratory' of the group. The group context serves to highlight the experimental nature of our actions, and the analysis of group interaction reveals some recognisable patterns of behaviour as groups develop. A potential 4-stage model using personal construct theory is described, and implications for group facilitators are explored at each stage.*

Key words: *groups, group development, facilitation*

### INTRODUCTION

The development of a group has typically been described as a 'life cycle', characterised by a sequence of developmental stages. The most commonly used model is the work of Tuckman (1965) who described the four stages of *forming*, *storming*, *norming* and *performing*.

- *Forming* refers to the early stages of a group's life as people come together and begin to find ways to interact and share common purpose;
- *Storming* is the stage where group roles, relationships and values are contested and negotiated, including issues of leadership and control;
- *Norming* refers to the stage at which group roles, norms and expectations begin to be established; and
- *Performing* describes the point at which group processes are established and the group is able to work within these constraints in relatively effective ways.

This 4-stage model has very wide currency in the world of group facilitation. While the stages cannot usefully be seen as either linear or universal, we will often recognise some distinctive patterns as groups develop, and Tuckman's work is considered by many to be a useful starting point for

considering appropriate facilitator interventions. An awareness of these possible stages seems to help, not least by normalising the inevitable difficulties of group process, and the model can usefully highlight the way in which task and process run concurrently through the life of the group, both part of its essential work. Descriptions of group development tend to present these 'stages' as phenomena of group experience, sets of behaviours which occur specifically when people come together and form a group with a common task or purpose.

In this paper I look at group development through the lens of Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955/1991). Kelly himself outlined the stages of a group, largely in terms of its function and activities. Ideas for structuring group activity have since been elaborated, notably by Dunnett & Llewellyn (1978) and Neimeyer (1988). The notion of what constitutes 'a PCP group' has been explored creatively by Stringer & Thomas (1996).

I am proposing the application of PCP to the developmental life cycle of groups in terms of process as well as task. Viewed from the perspective of Kelly's theory, the experiences of a group might be seen less as phenomena unique to groups, and rather as particularly vivid examples of everyday processes of construing. Personal construct theory applies to all of us, all of the time, and our construction processes are likely to be thrown into sharp relief by the intense 'labora-

## *Stages of group development – a PCP approach*

tory’ of the group which serves to highlight the experimental nature of our behaviour.

Recognising the established usefulness of a 4-stage approach to understanding group development, and making connections as far as possible with Tuckman’s ideas, I am proposing a group life-cycle from a PCP perspective, comprising

- *Stage One*: Individual Anticipation
- *Stage Two*: Individual Experimentation
- *Stage Three*: Collective Construction
- *Stage Four*: Collaborative Action

The first two stages refer primarily to individuals, which perhaps reflects our felt experience of group process. PCP describes the personal and unique construct systems through which we each make sense of our worlds. When we first come together there may be little ‘groupness’ but rather a collection of individuals with their own systems of meaning making and anticipation who need to find connections and gradually develop and share constructs. Many of us will be aware of the early stages of group process where our engagement with the group is intermittent and we are primarily focussed on our own thoughts, feelings, and reactions in and to the group. It is in the later stages that we are more fully engaged as group members, becoming less consciously and less frequently preoccupied by our internal process.

The stages could be elaborated more fully as:

- *Stage One*: Individual Anticipation - *of* the group
- *Stage Two*: Individual Experimentation - *in* the group
- *Stage Three*: Collective Construction – *by* the group
- *Stage Four*: Collaborative Action – *as* a group

This sequence illustrates the gradual emergence of the ‘groupness’ of the group, out of an initial coming together of individuals.

At each stage I offer some ideas about the role of a group facilitator. This may be a professional facilitator but is more often a manager, trainer or team leader in an organisational setting, a teacher or tutor in educational practice, or a therapist or

psychologist in clinical work. Referring to Tuckman’s model, Clarkson has suggested that

*‘predictable patterns...can be perceived by an initiated observer over the course of a 3-year training or a half-hour committee meeting. Knowledge of these phases is therefore relevant and potentially useful to any person who is either a member or a leader of any group of individuals for almost any conceivable purpose: from bringing up children to conducting an anti-nuclear demonstration to running a psychotherapy group.’* (Clarkson, 1995, p. 88)

While acknowledging a variety of leadership roles, I refer throughout the paper to the ‘facilitator’. Given the generic applicability of group development models and of PCP theory, I hope that the suggestions for facilitators will have a wide range of convenience, at least as starting points for reviewing our own practice.

### **STAGE ONE - INDIVIDUAL ANTICIPATION**

This stage would be roughly equivalent to Tuckman’s ‘forming’, which is usually described as a tentative testing of the boundaries of interpersonal and task behaviours. Group members may be quiet and watchful as they orientate themselves in the group, and they are often highly dependent on the group leader, thus avoiding early issues of power, control and preference between themselves. A cautious politeness regularly dominates.

From a PCP perspective, the focus would be on *anticipation*<sup>1</sup>. Our theory describes us as living in anticipation, continually forming our hypotheses about what is happening and what might be our next best move. From day to day much of this process happens outside our awareness, but the intense social experience of a new group pushes our anticipations into the foreground. Group members are likely to be highly occupied with their own personal questions (what is happening now? what is it like to be here? who are these

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<sup>1</sup> Terms introduced or modified by Kelly are set in *italics*

people? how will it be? why am I here? what do they make of me?) and will be trying more or less consciously to form some provisional answers for themselves.

A primary experience will be that of Kellyan *anxiety*, as we may not have many existing constructs for dealing with the experience of this group. The more that is unfamiliar to us (the members, the venue, the purpose, the facilitator, the experience of being in a group) the higher our levels of anxiety may be. There is also the possibility of *threat*, the awareness that our *core constructs* may be about to be challenged by this experience. In some settings, such as therapy groups, joining a new profession, or a first experience of higher education, there is little doubt that we are opening ourselves to a life-changing experience. However sought-after this change may be, our system will be experiencing some threat. All change involves loss, and we cannot yet be sure that the change will be better, or even manageable.

Those members with considerable experience of groups are likely to have quite well-developed constructs of 'self-in-a-group' which may allow them to make more confident predictions and experiment more quickly with their behaviour. In most cases, our behavioural experiments will be cautious, characterised by *circumspection*. We will be leaving ourselves plenty of opportunity to withdraw before getting out of our depth. Alternatively, some of us, while lacking in ready-made constructs, may adopt the characteristic impulsivity of *preemption*, throwing ourselves rapidly, even recklessly, into the experience. In these circumstances, we are likely to gain a massive amount of feedback very quickly, which we may or may not have consciously anticipated, and which we may find more or less validating. We become the first-time gambler rapidly throwing all our chips on to one number as the best option we can see in a setting where we don't really know the rules of the game.

This stage of 'Individual Anticipation' may be very marked in 'stranger' groups where members are meeting for the very first time, such as the early meetings of a support or therapy group, or the first contact between students beginning a course of study. It is also likely to be a feature when groups are required to suspend previously established roles and rules, for example in highly

experiential or outdoor training programmes where existing hierarchies and work experience lose their usual power to structure and control the group experience.

## THE FACILITATOR AT STAGE ONE

Facilitators at the stage of 'Individual Anticipation' will need to accept that *dependencies* are unlikely to be dispersed through the group, and members may be looking to them for a fairly strong lead, and for guidance about what might happen and how things might work. Where a facilitator wants to increase group safety, they might helpfully offer some *tightening* interventions, clarifying expectations and thereby helping members to form some provisional constructs about the group and its task. Information and a degree of control from the group leader can help to minimise the anxieties of the unfamiliar.

Facilitators are also likely to be given responsibility for managing the *CPC cycle* of decision-making in the group, exercising leadership, and helping members orientate themselves by giving some compass points.

A group leader may want to facilitate early experiments in *sociality*, encouraging mutual understanding by initiating some opportunities for the exchange of personal information, views and ideas. The gradual management of personal disclosure/exposure was emphasised by Kelly:

*'We are fully convinced that no member of the group should be encouraged, or even allowed, to put [themselves] in a vulnerable position...until supports have become apparent in the group's interactions and those supports are obviously available to the person who confides'.* (Kelly 1991, p. 421)

We may also need to accept a tendency for *constriction* at this early stage. A lot of process work is being done, and there may be a limit to how far the group can also progress its task. A focus on a limited range of work tasks may help the group keep anxiety to more manageable levels.

Where appropriate, *threat* might usefully be explicitly acknowledged by the facilitator as a feature at the start of group projects, normalising

the experience and helping group members to identify the turbulence they may be feeling.

## **STAGE TWO: INDIVIDUAL EXPERIMENTATION**

This stage corresponds to Tuckman's 'storming' which he describes as characterised by "conflict and polarisation around interpersonal issues, with concomitant emotional responding in the task sphere".

Often groups will be in explicit conflict around issues of control, inclusion and affection, preoccupied with who is taking the lead and how people feel about them, concerned about who is in or out and what sub-groups are emerging, and reacting to whether they feel appreciated, valued and liked as individuals.

Kelly described the stage of group development where differences and contrasts between group members are highlighted and need to be managed. Many of the anxieties, questions and preoccupations of this stage arise from differences in individuals' construct systems, and turmoil and conflict in the group can be a consequence of the various experiments group members engage in to test their hypotheses and gain *validation* for themselves and their contributions. The picture is conjured vividly by Efran et al (1988/1992):

*'Picture a number of playwrights who have been invited to present little playlets, simultaneously, and on overlapping stages. Furthermore, each playwright, since he or she was going to be there anyway, has been given a part in every other playwright's production. Constructivism leads us to anticipate that we will all be enacting our unique playlets in roughly the same performance space, and using one another as members of the cast. Under these seemingly bizarre conditions – what we typically refer to as 'living' – is it any wonder that there are a number of bumps and bruises, accusations and confusions?'*

In PCP terms, the more *core* the issues involved, the more turbulent this phase will be. Where key aspects of personal or professional identity are

involved, there will be more at stake and we will be working harder to maintain the integrity of our own construct system in the face of challenge, striving to retain our sense of self in whatever ways seem possible. Since the group may be relatively unaware of what is core for each member, the levels of volatility and strength of reaction to each others' contribution may be difficult to make sense of and accept.

Kelly's constructs of transition may also be very much in evidence at this point. In addition to *anxiety* and *threat*, there are likely to be differences in the level of *aggression* displayed by group members. While aggression in a colloquial sense is very much a part of this stage, Kellyan aggression – the active elaboration of our construct systems – is what is in play here. Some people will want to move faster, to be more radical, to *do* more, while others will need to reflect and progress more slowly, with more reservations. Kelly suggested that those who go around 'aggressively dilating other people's worlds' are bound to encounter *hostility* in others whose investment will be in *not* changing, (at least, not yet), and whose energy will go into ensuring that events continue to fit their original script. The tension between hostility and aggression may be one of the dominant features of the Individual Experimentation phase.

A further issue causing potential disruption at this stage will be the balance for each person between *individuality* and *commonality*. We need to feel that we can be different, that our uniqueness is accepted and valued. It will be important to be ourselves in the group, and not be taken over or required to conform in ways which feel unacceptable to us.

The time frame of the group will sometimes have relevance to this stage. In relatively short-lived group experiences we will sometimes be more ready to avoid or accommodate differences, and may be content to leave leadership in the hands of the group leader or facilitator. Where we are making a more serious investment of time and energy however – joining a major project team or starting a long course of study for example – we will be more concerned to establish roles and norms which are acceptable to us, may be less prepared to compromise and adjust, and we may also be more concerned to establish a particular

impression of ourselves and our strengths and qualities.

At the same time, this stage may also be a striking feature in one-off meetings, particularly in high threat situations where group members' needs for personal validation may be combined with a tendency to invalidate others. This combination is characteristic of gatherings where individuals perceive that a lot is at stake, for example in groups where judgements are being made such as job interview exercises, group election procedures, and assessment processes of all kinds.

## THE FACILITATOR AT STAGE TWO

Far from being a distraction from the task, the rocky process of the 'Individual Experimentation' stage is a necessary stage through which people evolve and establish the roles they might play, and the degree to which their various needs and motivations can be satisfied.

*Sociality* is again a key tool. The facilitator might want to promote and model discussions and explorations which enable members to understand each others' needs, views and motivations, and to appreciate and value difference and individuality rather than feel threatened by it. At the same time, there will be a need to work towards some *commonality*, defining shared tasks and group groundrules, which will need periodic *tightening*. It may be important however not to push the group towards clarity and task focus too quickly, as some interpersonal turbulence is usually a necessary precursor to productive groupwork. Kelly suggested we keep an emphasis on the 'task of understanding faithfully' the outlook of the individual group members.

Because of inevitable differences in pace and experience, the facilitator may still be managing the *CPC cycle*. They will need to ensure on the one hand that the group does not rush to preemption to get out of difficult conflicts which would benefit from further exploration rather than premature closure, and on the other hand that the group does not stay in circumspection too long for fear of facing up to the difficulties and power clashes involved in making decisions and taking responsibility.

It can help to remind ourselves of the emotionally volatile nature of the 'Individual Experimentation'

phase, construing the conflicts and difficulties of this stage as normal developmental processes and not as an *invalidation* of the facilitator's role in managing and enabling the group. Facilitators who have an assessment or evaluative role, in education for example, need to look relatively benignly on some of the behaviours of this stage which may range from socially inept to seemingly destructive. Members are navigating their way through an unknown social context, using resources and experience with which we are not familiar, based on personal hypotheses which we have yet to understand.

## STAGE THREE: COLLECTIVE CONSTRUCTION

This stage corresponds to Tuckman's 'norming', during which shared norms and values develop, and a degree of cohesiveness is established. This is where the group makes explicit its own sense of 'the way we do things round here'.

At this stage the balance shifts from individuality, which has now hopefully been established, to *commonality*. We need to agree a similar enough understanding of what we are doing and how we will proceed for us to feel that the group has purpose and meaning. Perceived commonality needs frequent checking and exploration, as it is quite possible to have a high degree of superficial commonality (particularly through common language) without a corresponding level of mutual understanding.

As *sociality* develops, members are more able to clarify the roles they might play in the group and the ways in which they can pool their strengths and resources. Patterns of decision making tend to become established and accepted within the group. With more robust constructs about each other, group members are ready to take responsibility themselves with the subsequent emergence of leadership from within the group.

There is likely to be some *constriction* in terms of what the group needs to do. At this stage, members are no longer requiring the group to meet all their needs and expectations, and a more realistic and pragmatic approach to the work of the group develops, enabling more focus

## *Stages of group development – a PCP approach*

on tasks and less preoccupation with interpersonal issues.

As the group attempts to accommodate and include its own variety and differences, individuals may be experiencing different levels of more or less manageable *fragmentation*. Group work often includes a number of sub-systems which are inferentially incompatible, but which can hopefully be subsumed by a useable superordinate construct concerning the overall value and/or purpose of the group. In essence, the group's values need to become each member's values, at least for now, and when in the group.

### **THE FACILITATOR AT STAGE THREE**

We are aiming for 'good-enough' collective construction, with members experiencing enough individual and collective *validation* to progress with their project.

At this stage, the facilitator will focus on the emergence of leadership from within the group, encouraging *dependencies* to become more dispersed between group members, and validating the group's work as it moves to a new level of maturity and self-determination.

We may recognise and usefully tighten shared constructs, identifying *superordinate constructs* to which people can commit, which will give a shared sense of purpose while struggling through conflicts about practicalities. With all projects, robust mutual objectives help support the group when members have equally strong ideas about the different ways this might be achieved. The shared aim becomes a kind of touchstone to keep us on track and make it worth the hassle.

The other key focus for a facilitator at this stage is to monitor the rhythms of *loosening and tightening* – the process heartbeat of the group. Kelly proposed an essential connection between this rhythm and our ability to work creatively. If a group settles into relatively tight modes of construing which might limit progress by excluding alternative ways of seeing things, the facilitator might perhaps ask more open questions, suggest more playful ways of working, or nudge the group to more philosophical musing. Where the group is construing very loosely and may be in danger of being overwhelmed by a confusion of possibilities or by an unwieldy range of implica-

tions, the facilitator might helpfully tighten, by summarising, clarifying, and constricting discussion to more manageable dimensions.

Finally, we can encourage the maintenance of *propositionality*. In group settings we all need encouragement to be Kellyan 'good scientists' – to hold our hypotheses with some lightness, staying receptive to feedback which may or may not validate our experiments. Groups need to stay flexible in their rule-making and their meaning-making if they are to adapt and thrive through inevitable ongoing change.

### **STAGE FOUR: COLLABORATIVE ACTION**

The group is now at the stage Tuckman calls 'performing', where the "interpersonal structure becomes the tool of task activities, roles are functional and flexible, and group energy is channelled into task".

This stage will be an important feature of work and project teams, and of those groups whose core purpose extends well beyond the personal development of members towards explicit or prescribed practical outcomes.

At the stage of 'Collaborative Action', individual and joint constructs about the group are now well elaborated, and *threat* and *anxiety* are consequently lower. Members' roles in the group are adequately aligned with their sense of self. There is enough *commonality* in construing the roles and responsibilities of each member, and *individuality* is respected through the continued allocation of tasks according to strengths and interests. To the extent that group members are working with high levels of *sociality* and are able to construe each others construing, the behaviour patterns of individuals and sub-groups are now more intelligible; they can at least be adapted to, and at best are becoming valued. There is scope for individual members to behave aggressively without evoking instant hostile reactions.

As the group has developed some explicit norms and has some experience of acting together, some *loosening* is possible around time and structure as anxieties lessen and the group's *range of convenience* expands. The group is now engaged in repeated *experience cycles*, acting collaboratively and reviewing the outcomes in

joint terms. The group and the individuals within it will be experiencing the *validation* of achievement.

#### THE FACILITATOR AT STAGE FOUR

At the 'Collaborative Action' stage, the facilitator must be able to be able to let go. The high levels of *dependency* on facilitation at earlier stages can make it difficult for us to re-construe our role as the group develops. We need to be aware of our own levels of *threat*, as constructive leadership emerges from within the group and we are no longer looked to for the same dominant role. Facilitators might usefully elaborate some *superordinate constructs* about the benefits of self-managing groups, and the helpful role we can play in fostering this developmental process.

As the group conduct their shared experiments, we can encourage them to review the outcomes in terms of useful feedback rather than in terms of fear or blame. A focus on using outcomes to make better predictions and plans will ensure that any *invalidation* of shared action does not result in the invalidation of persons, or of our joint project. We can also encourage the recognition of individual contributions and talents, ensuring that *individuality* is still balanced with the high levels of *commonality* operating at this stage.

#### FACILITATING THE LIFE-CYCLE

In summary, we might propose a number of areas for the facilitator to attend to at each stage:

- *Stage One - Individual Anticipation:* Accepting group dependencies; tightening initial expectations; managing the CPC cycle; introducing opportunities for sociality; appropriately constricting the range of early tasks; acknowledging and normalising threat;
- *Stage Two - Individual Experimentation:* Encouraging sociality; accepting diversity; highlighting commonalities; acknowledging threat and anxiety; lightly tightening ground rules; facilitating the CPC cycle; working constructively with invalidation;

- *Stage Three - Collective Construction:* Validating the shared project; encouraging dispersal of dependencies; highlighting superordinate constructs; encouraging rhythmic loosening and tightening; maintaining propositionality;
- *Stage Four - Collaborative Action:* Letting go of group dependency and managing associated threat; overseeing learning and cycles of experience; balancing individuality and commonality; encouraging Kellyan aggression.

Again, it feels important to acknowledge that the stages are not linear, universal or mutually exclusive, but they are likely to reflect some of the most likely patterns.

In recent years I have noticed that facilitators, in organisational settings particularly, can feel considerable pressure to move through the stages as quickly as possible. This aim is promoted in contemporary management discourse with its focus on the speedy creation of 'high-performing teams'. Speed is not necessarily the most useful superordinate in the development of a group, and a focus on speed can be at the expense of understanding. The urge to get to 'Collaborative Action' as soon as possible can leave interpersonal difficulties, and conflicts about group norms, grumbling under the surface. These are likely to erupt, often at critical times when group pressure is high, resulting in disruption of the task and throwing group projects off-course. This does not mean that early stages need be slow or protracted, just that they need adequate attention.

It will be apparent that I have written this piece from my experience of working with facilitators whose brief is a fairly hands-on approach to group management, whether in organisational, educational or therapeutic settings.

I have also tried to reflect, as well as I am able, Kelly's own very active style of group management. I am aware that there are alternative styles of group work in which the facilitator will be far less focussed on taking responsibility for managing the group and its progress.

The four stages provide us with a valuable story – a model which can help us when faced with the dynamic phenomenon of a living group. It will be important however that we do not fall

into the trap of seeing these stages as inevitable or strictly sequential. Clarkson (1995) advises us against ‘the assumption of causal, linear, progressive, and left-hemispheric game-rules’ when construing group development. There is likely to be much to-ing and fro-ing within the stages, and the arrival of a new member, or a change or addition to the group task or role, will often necessitate the re-working of earlier stages as the group re-construes itself, incorporating new aspects.

## ENDING THE CYCLE

Tuckman & Jensen (1977) revisited the original model and added the fifth stage of *adjourning*, marking the ending of the group’s life cycle. Interestingly, much subsequent writing has renamed this stage *mourning*, tending to focus on its more painful aspects. (Other stages have also been proposed, though they have often been described as having more emphasis on rhyme than reason.)

Kelly was himself aware of the importance of group endings, and proposed a further task for facilitators over the life-cycle of a group, which is

*‘to help the client extend the lessons...learned about role relationships with a particular group and apply them to other personas outside the group and to humanity in general’* (Kelly, 1991, p. 431)

The generalisation of learning points from the group experience enables the transfer of learning to life in general, counteracts some of the inevitable *constriction* of the group experience, and helps group members capture transferable learning in anticipation of the group’s ending.

In PCP terms the group ending stage involves a kind of meta-construing. The focus is on ensuring the completion of an *experience cycle*, and on the review and evaluation of the overall experiment of being in this the group. As well as developing some collective view of how it has been, group members will be re-claiming their more *personal constructs* and making their own meanings of the experience as they anticipate life ahead without the group.

Realising the centrality of *anticipation* and prediction, the signalling of endings becomes a

key role of facilitators. Reactions are likely to be wide-ranging, and may include celebration and relief as well as loss or sadness. There may be appreciation of some aspects of the experience and some regrets about missed opportunities. The facilitator might usefully encourage awareness of the ending/mourning process, both in the group, and by promoting reflection or journaling outside group meetings. Rituals of collective review or celebration can help the *time-binding* process, which enables us to move from the group experience with our personal constructs elaborated, richer for the experience, and ready for new interpersonal and social challenges.

While use of a developmental model can help us clarify what is happening in groups, I am aware that the wide range of facilitation suggestions included here may appear to add a demanding complexity to the process of group leadership. My intention in sharing these ideas is to offer potential clues or glimpses of what might be helpful, and my hope is that we might each select and further elaborate those suggestions most compatible with our own practice setting, weaving them creatively into our ongoing development as members and leaders of groups.

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*Mary Frances*

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