

Beyond being "the group people": Rethinking the occupational therapy role in a psychiatric group program

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Introduction: Group work has long been used by occupational therapists as a medium for the delivery of therapy in mental health settings. However, running groups is just one facet of contemporary occupational therapy practice. Occupational Therapists in an Australian Community Care Unit (medium-term, community-based residential psychiatric rehabilitation) felt that running a group program had come to dominate their time and role identity. Restructuring the group program presented an opportunity for reconceptualising the role of occupational therapy within groups.

Objectives: This presentation reflects upon the process of reviewing and reshaping the group program, with the goal of providing residents with a more purposeful program whilst enabling a more occupationally-focused and theoretically-based role for occupational therapists. It describes practical measures taken to challenge assumptions about occupational therapy and promote change in an established work culture.

Report/Discussion: Occupational therapists envisaged a role-shift from facilitation to co-ordination: providing supervision, training and education to support team members of other disciplines to take responsibility for well-established groups. This allowed occupational therapists to focus on facilitating therapeutic groups that were skills-based or "occupation-focused"; simultaneously providing other clinicians with opportunities to develop or strengthen skills in group work, and increase their job diversity. Engaging other disciplines required challenging work practices and assumptions about both group work and occupational therapy. Practical measures employed to foster change included: developing written protocols about the group program, linking with the graduate nurse training program, providing education and supervision for group facilitators, and altering the methods used to communicate about groups to the team. The existing group program was re-evaluated: some groups were disbanded, others refined, and a variety of time-limited groups were introduced in response to client needs.

Conclusion/Contribution to Occupational Therapy: The group program re-development resulted in a smaller yet more purposeful program that benefits from the experience and skills of staff from different disciplines. Subjective reports from occupational therapists indicate that the new structure provides greater role satisfaction. This work provides a contemporary clinical example of therapists creating small-scale organisational change by moving beyond being "the group people".