Adolescent girls and group activity within the field of child welfare

Often times, adolescents do not receive adequate open-care services in the field of child welfare because they tend to be seen as a challenging client group. Group activity is one way of meeting the needs of adolescent clients. In this article, the use and application of group activity is examined through the experiences of adolescent girls. The girls participated in a peer group which met for a year and a half, and the research includes their experiences of the group process.

The research portrays girls’ experiences through the concept of dialogue. The group had a positive impact on the difficulties the girls were facing in the group. Feelings of detachment and estrangement were replaced with feelings of belonging, trust and being able to deal with emotions. The experience of the peer group also gave the girls a brighter outlook on the future. The main conclusion of the article is that group activity should be utilized when working with adolescent clients.
Introduction
This article deals with maladjusted teenaged girls who those working in the conventional sphere of basic services - such as school and youth services – considered too challenging to help. Young people, who show strong signs of being troubled, often tend to be referred to child protection services. At the same time it seems that there are too few workable out-care means of helping adolescents available in the sphere of child welfare. Thus they often run the risk of drifting between the specialized sectors of the psycho-social services – special education, drug rehabilitation and mental health. This frequently leads to taking the adolescent clients into custody and placing them in residential care (Myllärniemi 2005).

The inability of open care to adequately meet the needs related to adolescents’ problems has challenged social workers in the field of child protection to develop services which could be used to help this often non-committed and difficult to reach group. Group activity represents one such attempt. In this article, I will discuss five girls’ experiences of group activity in the field of open care child welfare. Prior to being directed into child welfare, each of the girls had been going through an extremely troubled time in her life. The aim of the article is to shed light on the significant elements that contributed to the positive outcomes of the group. This aim is reached for by analyzing the subjective experiences of the girls themselves.

Group activity in the sphere of child welfare
Group activity challenges the traditional methods of social work by incorporating peer groups into the clientele-related process. Peer support is utilized in social work in a number of ways, including self-help groups and other social network-based working methods. Subjective knowledge that is acquired through personal experience is highly valued, and there is a sense of loyalty and consideration amongst peer groups (Nylund 2004). In the field of child welfare, however, peer groups have been used quite sporadically. Group activity has tended to manifest itself mainly as projects aimed at meeting the short-term needs of a small group of clients, and has failed to become a commonly used method in the field of child welfare.

The utilization of group activity has been hindered by both a lack of resources and a lack of research-based knowledge on its potential benefits, which is partly due to the fact that group activities can take a broad range of different forms. With a caution, the approaches can be divided into three orientations - educational, psychosocial and socio-pedagogical - although the above-mentioned approaches obviously overlap each other. Educational functions of peer-relations are often utilized not only in traditional institutions such as schools, but in adventure-, reality and experience-pedagogical groups as well (see e.g., Nyqvist 1995; Telemäki & Bowles 2001). In the psychosocial orientation it is solving people’s social problems, regarded as part of the system of hu-
man interaction and relationships, which is the focus of the activity. Thus the goal is to provide the client with support through for example group discussions and therapy (see e.g., Nyqvist 1995). In the socio-pedagogical approach, social problems are interpreted in a pedagogical context, and the aim is to find pedagogical means of dealing with them, such as through art, communal education or socio-cultural encouragement (Hämäläinen & Kurki 1997).

I suggest that the use of children’s social networks in child welfare practices should be further developed, because peer relations have the potential to produce everyday experiences of belonging (Törrönen 2005). Group activity may also carry the potential of increasing child’s social competence; peer groups are challenging settings, because the members of the same age and social position have more or less an equal share of social power (Salmivalli 1999; Heikkinen 2005). Thereby there are certain prerequisites of successful group activity. According to Alpo Heikkinen (2005), group activity must be long-term – sometimes lasting many years. In addition, the group members must be carefully selected by professionals with experience in the particular field in question. The activity must be goal-oriented and well planned, and it must be established and funded as a legitimate component of regional child protective services. Thus we might be able to create groups which truly support individuals and benefit open care child welfare services as well.

The girls and the research process

This article is based on in-depth interviews which I carried out in the summer of 2003 with five 16-year-old girls who participated in a peer group organized by child protection authorities. All of the girls had spent their childhood in the same suburban housing blocks. The girls had differing family backgrounds ranging from single-parent households to nuclear families with many children. The girls began to have severe problems at school and at home by the time of the eight grade. Four out of the five girls had had serious substance abuse problems, and three of them had been placed in a rehab program, youth home or psychiatric facility. The group, which was tailored to the girls’ specific needs, was co-operatively established by the school, child welfare services and a regional urban project. The group’s operational ideology emphasized the use of both discussion and action, and called for the intensive participation and interaction between the girls. The group was preparing to terminate its activities at the time the interviews were carried out.

My aim in this article is to give the reader an intimate glimpse into the experiences the girls had during the group process. My approach is phenomenological and based on the philosophy of science, which requires the ability to marvel at the reality which one takes for granted; the willingness and ability to question and reinterpret everyday life (Schutz 1967; Perttula 1995). I used phenomenological in-depth interviews as a method of data collection (Seidman 1998). In this method the interviews are
comprised of three interrelated components which support one another. In the first interview the participant is asked to tell about herself in the light of the subject being studied and thus aiming at constructing a framework for their experiences. The second interview aims at reconstructing specific details of the participants’ experiences in the topic area of the study by asking her to tell concrete examples of what happened. In the final interview the participant is asked to reflect the meaning of her experiences in the light of what she has told in the previous sessions. The girls were surprisingly eager to participate in the interviews and were more open than I had anticipated.

I applied a phenomenological analysis when analyzing the interview data: I distinguished units of meaning and connected them together to form a network of meaning under different themes (for a thorough introduction of the method, see Perttula 1995; Giorgi 1996). Through the analysis, the girls’ experiences began to appear as interactive and internal processes of transformation, which I was able to conceptualize through the concept of dialogue. In colloquial language dialogue is used to refer to a discussion which aims at transferring or sharing of different meanings. To this type of a dialogue I refer with dialogical dialogue. The concept can, however, be used in different depth by applying it to the analysing of the ways people construct their inner lives. Thus I refer to internal dialogue, which I define as one’s effort to construct an inner consciousness using past and present experiences, and as one’s ability to imagine and thus create anticipation of the future. In this article I carry the idea of dialogical process with the empirical data in order to illustrate, how the lack of dialogical and internal dialogue was manifested in the girls’ experiences of estrangement, and how their participation in dialogical relations with other people became a conscious and guiding resource for them. (On the concept of dialogue see Koski-Jännes & Hänninen 1998; Hänninen 1999; Mönkkönen 2002.)

According to Alfred Schutz (1967), an individual’s subjective experiences and the meanings he assigns to them are what creates his reality, which is then subjected to the interpretation of others aiming at an intersubjective understanding. When interpreting the results of this study, it is important to remember that instead of an objective truth, we are examining the subjective experiential worlds of the girls studied, which have been filtered through my own interpretations of them. Having to act as an interpreter has forced me to operate within an ethically sensitive zone. I have used a great deal of care to ensure that I have taken ethical questions into account at every step of the research process. In addition to the official forms of consent, I obtained written consent from both the girls and their guardians. The interviews were structured so that the girls themselves decided the themes of discussion. The girls reported that they found it important and rewarding to share their experiences, and hoped that they would result in a book. Riitta Granfelt (1998, 40) has argued in her doctoral dissertation on homeless women that “the narratives of women who belong to small and marginalized groups enrich the discourse of women’s studies, and they also have
sociopolitical relevance.” This study on girls can be justified on the basis of virtually identical arguments - this narrative is an ethical choice.

Dialogical process within the girl-group

Starting of the group

Before the group, all the girls shared a lack of interaction with adults. The girls reported feeling alienated in social situations with adults, and withdrew to the company of peers or to solitude. This lack of dialogue was not limited to certain specific relations: all of the girls described experiencing a lack of interest in much of anything, which caused them to become increasingly removed from social relationships. The girls had no plans for the future and shared deep feelings of hopelessness, and at worst, thoughts of suicide. This detachment and lack of perspective can be interpreted as a silencing of the internal dialogue, in which a person no longer experiences meaning in life and loses the will to go on. The lack of dialogical and internal dialogue manifested itself in deep experiences of social and psychological estrangement.

For all of the girls, the intervention by welfare officials took place during the fall semester of the eighth grade. Should the process had proceeded in a normal child protection manner, the girls’ paths had most likely been departed to individual services. In this case, however, girls’ contact to social services was constructed in a different manner: a girl-group was established. The group was organized by two social work professionals from the local child welfare agency and two physical education instructors from a local urban project. It gathered once a week for one and a half years - from the winter of the girls’ eight grade to the end of the ninth grade. The girls were chosen with the aid of their personal social workers. The entry into the group was voluntary, but required commitment. The girls were induced to the group with a promise of a trip abroad, and bond to the group by an agreement to collect pocket-money for the journey by delivering fliers and cleaning up local parks. The journey abroad functioned as a motivating element, “a social draw” (Heikkinen 2003) which made it easier for the girls to justify, why they committed to a group where they knew they had to participate in social interaction with strange adults.

The girls’ experiences of the beginning stage of the group ranged from anticipation to strong opposition.

TARU: It really pissed me off to have to be there, but I just figured God damn it, I’ll deal with it, ’cause I want to get to go ((abroad)).

Despite her feelings of frustration, Taru continued in the group. Other girls also expressed feelings of anger particularly toward the instructors. The girls’ negative feelings can be interpreted as being a manifestation of the lack of dialogue with adults; adults were seen as a group with which it was difficult or impossible to make contact.
One of the strengths of the group was that there were four instructors, who were all quite different from one another: two social work professionals were responsible for the discussion meetings, and two physical education instructors introduced the girls to various physical exercises, such as skiing and dancing. The girls’ contact with adults thus took place on a rotating basis, but it was long-term.

**Among equals**
The group instructors were able to create an atmosphere of safety in which the girls were able to advance their mutual relationships. During the journey abroad, the girls’ commitment became stronger, and they continued their participation in the group drawn by the friends, food, discussion and action. Essential for the success was the continuity and regularity of the meetings; each session had a similar structure beginning with a meal, and continuing with a discussion one week, and with activities the other. The girls were encouraged to suggest the content of the meetings and everyone had a point of reference in the group: the girls who found the discussions difficult enjoyed the physical exercises and vice versa. By discussions and activities girls’ dialogical relations deepened as they were faced with other’s emotions and experiences.

The girls were peer group oriented (Honkatukia 1995), which means that peers created the most important reference group for the girls prior to the start of the girl-group. They emphasized their shared experiences of coming from the same premises.

TARU: Yeah, I mean it was a big deal, like if there had been people there who would have been like ‘Yeah, I’m loaded and I can buy whatever I want’ ((imitating)) and who didn't have to worry about anything and who would be showing off in their 300€ pink pants, then it totally wouldn’t have worked. ((thinking)) It was better like that.

The significance of similar past experiences comes particularly clear in comparison with Kaisa’s case. Kaisa differed from the other girls in that she did not have a history of residential care or drug abuse. Prior to the group her main problem was her tendency to withdraw from social settings and not to attend school.

KAISA: (-) All the others were from some sort of an institution and because of that, like ‘cause the others had smoked pot and all, and I just had some difficulties at home and didn't go to school so… The others had so much more. So everyone started to tell a joke of me finding an advert of the girl-group in some bulleting-board or something ((laughs)).

Kaisa was labeled different by joking in a manner which played down her difficulties. She did not feel comfortable in the discussion-meetings and preferred the physical activities. This flaw in the group process highlights the importance of the careful selecting of the group members: shared experiences seemed to have a significant role.
in creating an atmosphere of being amongst equals. Meeting friends in a controlled context was a dramatic change for the girls. The difference was particularly salient to those girls who had previously gathered together to use drugs.

EP: Did you feel like things got taken under control?

HANNA: Yeah, it did, 'cause then it's like there were other things to do besides just smoking. It made me realize I had better things to do.

Hanna’s statement is eye-opening: it can be interpreted as implying that the girls’ use of cannabis was largely related to their sheer inability to think of anything better to do together. In the girl-group the girls learned to face each other without the help of drugs. The feeling in the group slowly became one of trust, and the girls began to confide in one another.

**Experiences of trust**

Trust became the central experiential foundation of the girl group, since various reciprocal disappointments had eroded the basis of trust between the girls and other people. Some girls’ parents had reservations about allowing their daughters to participate in a group whose members had similar past experiences. Admittedly, the girl group included a number of risky elements – it was, after all, comprised of a group of girls whose behavior at least prior to the start of the group activities had remained unchanged. The journey abroad can be regarded as a touchstone of the trust relations, as commitment and courage was required from both the girls and the instructors.

The rules of the group were strict, but at the same time the girls were given experiences of being trustworthy: for example the pocket-money for the journey, which all of the girls had earned, was deposited to the bank account of one of the girls. Slowly but surely, the group developed an atmosphere of trust, which was particularly significant from the perspective of the process of dialogue. The girls went from feeling as though they were being forced to talk about their experiences to feeling like talking was actually a relief and something which made them feel better.

EP: What was it about the girl-group that was helpful?

MARI: I don’t know, it just made me think about everything, like everything that’s wrong. I don’t know, I just thought about things. It was just like we could talk openly about everything.

Mari describes the initiation of her own internal dialogue as “thinking”. The girl-group presented Mari with a place in which she was able to think through open dialogue in
a trusting environment. Developing of the trust was demanding, however. The girls trusted each other because sharing intimate things made them responsible for each others’ secrets. In relation to the instructors the situation was more complicated: the girls were aware that the instructors had an obligation to share information with girls’ personal social workers in case unforeseen serious problems would arise in the meetings. They did, however, find the opportunity to talk and listen the most essential offering of the group. The girls went from an experience of a lack of communication with adults to interacting and communicating actively with them.

**Facing the emotions**

In the group, the girls went through a range of strong emotions. All of them were obligated to participate in the dialogue within the group. In the early stage of the dialogical process a simple greeting caused feelings of anxiety to the girls. By forcing the girls to talk the dialogical process developed, but the communication was not limited to verbal interaction. By introducing the girls to physical activities the girls became able to express themselves physically as well. Joining in new kinds of activities helped them to build up their self-esteem and offered experiences of success.

Prior to the group all of the girls had experienced serious difficulties in expressing their negative emotions. Constructing and testing of the dialogical relationships was above all related to the ways the group was able to deal with these emotions. There were some conflicts between the girls themselves, but the worst fights took place between the girls and the instructors.

HANNA: A lot of times it’s been like everybody just arguing and then someone always ended up slamming the door and leaving. Then Ritva would start to cry and boo hoo...

EP: What did you argue about?

HANNA: We always argued with Ritva ’cause she was always asking us how we were and then we’d get really pissed and that made us really mad. Or, I guess not everyone, but some people were always getting mad at her and then, I don’t know, about everything.

What is significant about the above quote is that the group instructors, as Ritva in this case, also expressed their feelings. According to Mönkkönen (2002), responsiveness is actually an ethico-moral prerequisite of dialogical relationships, because new perspectives can be created through dialogical interaction. In therapeutic relationships, the ability to respond well to clients puts a significant responsibility on employees in the field. Decisive for the group was that the instructors were able to deal with the girls’ attempts to test the limits of their tolerance. In earlier adult-relations such attempts had ended up in neglect. During a skiing-journey Taru ran away and returned to the
accommodation drunken resulting in an argument with the adults - an incident which all of the girls memorized as one of the most unpleasant in the group.

EP: What about after the trip, as it was so stormy there, did you continue the group anyway?

TARU: Yeah, I did wonder though whether I bothered to go on. But then I talked with Ritva, and she said that I should continue that we’d do another trip in the summer or something. And so I continued.

Despite her aggressive behavior, Taru was convinced to stay in the group. In an article by Koski-Jännes and Hänninen (1998), the authors refer to dialogical moments during which the individual sees herself the way others see her, as if through a reflection in a dialogical mirror. Previous to the group, Taru’s raving fits had led her to being abandoned from her home. Now she was forced to stay and face her emotions and others’ reactions to them. This incident can well be regarded as a dialogical moment in Taru’s life - and in the process of the whole group as well.

The girl-group met once a week for almost two years and became a part of the girls’ everyday lives. When it ended, it left an empty space which the girls felt like they needed to fill with a possibility to talk about the problems they might have. This is a radical change from the lack of communication the girls had experienced prior to the establishment of the girl-group. The girls can be described as having found the ability to face and manage their problems with the help of others. They now had faith that they would be given help if they felt they needed it.

The present and the future
All of the girls returned home and to school during the girl-group and graduated with fair grades. These returns did not go without setbacks, but the girls felt that they were more equipped to face the difficulties. Each of the girls had clear visions and plans for the future, some of which extended all the way to the age of retirement. They each had a clear concept of what a good life is. Some felt as though they were living a good life right now; some had hopes that life would get better in the future.

EP: How would you describe what you think is a good life?

LAURA: Having a family that takes care of you, that you’ve got an ok apartment and that the people close to you are happy.

EP: What do you want to do when you grow up?

LAURA: I want to work and have a family.
In my view, the girls’ plans for the future and their ability to articulate their dreams are indicative of the process of internal dialogue that had begun in each one of them. This process of internal dialogue can be seen as illustrating a situation in which the girls feel as though they are able to influence the circumstances and conditions within which they exist. This ability can be seen as tied to the feedback the girls received through the dialogical process in the group. Taru hints at the importance of having an opportunity to talk about her thoughts and feelings, a direct manifestation of the social dimension of this internal dialogue.

EP: Last time you said that when things were really bad for you, you couldn’t imagine yourself 15 years from now, and now you’re doing a great job with that. Why do you think that is?

TARU: I don’t know, it’s just (thinks) Just from talking, and now everything looks good.

Conclusion

Adolescents are seen as a challenging client group in the field of child protective services, because their problems tend to center on withdrawal from social and particularly socializing contacts. Teenagers are seen as difficult to motivate and reluctant to commit. Group activities are one way of helping these young people. In order to really get results, however, group activities require sufficient financial and temporal resources, and should not be thought of as a “magic wand” with the power to solve the problems of all children who require care and protection. Without the skills and abilities of professionals in the field, the group process runs the risk of getting out of hand, and the worst case scenario is that the group dynamic could even potentially worsen the problems of its members. In order to succeed, group-instructors must be properly trained, the groups have to be established with expert knowledge and they have to have a clear agenda.

With these conditions in mind, group activity may become an effective method in child welfare. As far as this particular girl-group is concerned, it was a success. At the start of the group, the girls had almost completely distanced themselves from their social networks, and were on their way to a life of drugs and psychological problems. The group, which was based on continuity, regularity and a sense of belonging to a peer group, was a supportive and healing means of helping them. With the help of skilled and committed instructors, the group was able to create an atmosphere of trust where all of the members were able to express and face at times difficult and contradictory emotions. Thus the group members moved from a lack of dialogue to creating a dialogical process within the group.

The attachment, commitment and ability to authentically encounter the clients’ difficulties challenge the working practices of social work. Adolescents in need of child protection have often experienced a series of abandoning and disappointments in their
relationships, and thus require settings where they can truly trust in the permanence and tolerance of the people involved. In current social welfare settings this is not an easy task.

Finally, my research challenges the working practices not only in the field of social work, but also in the field of research. This research process encourages me to argue that researchers should utilize people’s personal experiences in social work research. We need an emancipating and critical research approach as well as research methods which ensure that the clients’ voices are heard.

Endnotes
1. A broader version of this article is published (in Finnish) in Forsberg, Hannele; Ritala-Koskinen, Aino & Törrönen, Maritta (eds.) (2006) Lapset ja sosiaalityö. Kohtaamisia, menetelmiä ja tiedon uudelleenarviointia [Children and Social Work. Encounters, methods and the re-evaluation of knowledge], PS-kustannus, Jyväskylä. It is based on my Master’s thesis at the University of Helsinki’s Department of Social Policy, which I conducted with the help of ”Warisryhmä”-development group at Heikki Waris Institute. The group is a network of social work professionals who lead group activities in child welfare. Its members include child welfare specialist social worker Alpo Heikkinen; child welfare specialist social worker Paulina Levamo; development social worker Oona Ylönen; social counselor RR Aili Savolainen and social counselor Maaret Parviainen.

2. Pseudonyms are used for both the girls and the instructors of the group.

References:


Hänninen, Vilma (1999) Sisäinen tarina, elämä ja muutos [Inner Narrative, Life and Change], University of Tampere, Tampere.


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Mylärniemi, Anniina (2005) Huostaanottojen kriteerit pääkaupunkiseudulla [Criteria for...
Summaries

Pað er algengt, að unlingar fái ekki fullnægjandi opna þjónustu á vegum barnaverndar, vegna þess að litið er á þá sem erfðan/kröfuðan hóp skjölstæðinga. Hópastarf er ein leið til þess að mæta þörfum skjölstæðinga á unglingsaldri. Í þessari grein er kennuð notkun og beiting hópastarfs með því að skoða reynslu unglings-stúlka. Stúlknar tóku þátt í jafningjhópi, sem hittist í eitt og hálft ár, og könnunin felur í sér reynslu þeirra af hópferli.


Aðal niðurstöðurnar í greininn eru að hópastarf ætti að nota, þegar unnið er með skjölstæðingum á unglingsaldri.

Avainsanat: Barnavernd, unglingsaldur, jafningjhópur, samtal.

Murrosikäiset nuoret jäävät lastensuojelussa usein vaille tarkoituksenmukaisia avohuollon palveluja, sillä heidät koetaan haastavaksi asiakasryhmäksi. Ryhmätoiminta on yksi sosiaalisyön menetelmä murrosikäisten asiakkaiden tarpeisiin. Tässä artikkelissa ryhmätoiminnan soveltamista tarkastellaan murrosikäisten tyttöjen kokemuksen kautta. Tytöt osallistuivat vertaisryhmään puolentoista vuoden ajan, ja tutkimuksessa kuultiin heidän kokemuksiaan toiminnasta.


Avainsanat: Lastensuojelu, nuoret, vertaisryhmä, dialogisuus.