

# Difference and belonging

**Sarah Morley** explores the challenges and benefits of mixed-gender therapy groups for sexual abuse survivors

It was usual for the women being assessed for the single-sex therapy groups we run at Sheffield Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (SRASAC) to ask, 'Will there be any men in the group?' I would find myself reassuring the woman sitting opposite me, as it seemed 'normal' that our female clients (the majority of whom have been abused by men) would be understandably nervous about entering an arena where they may feel vulnerable again in front of a man. It was much more of a surprise to me, in my naivety, that when we began offering men-only groups, the men were reporting the same fears.

'What could happen in the group that would put you off coming again?' I asked Frank.

'If I get left on my own with only men,' he said. 'But it's a men's group.'

'Yeah, but my biggest fear is being in a group with men.'

For the first three sessions of our men-only group, the other female therapist and I would take turns to go for a loo break, as at least one man in the group had made it a condition of their attendance that they would not be left alone with just men.

By the time the group came to an end, the bond between the men was strong. The group gave men who may have endured horrendous sexual abuse from multiple male abusers, often in childhood, a chance to have respectful, bonding and nourishing conversations with other men. It was an honour to witness how they supported each other and watch them respond so movingly to being with other men who 'got it'. We wondered whether our single-sex groups meant we were denying women the chance to experience men as fellow survivors rather than just perpetrators, and experience healing with them?

The second indicator that mixed-gender groups should be part of our regular offering was the many overlaps we saw in terms of recurring themes in the groups. One Thursday evening, Graham was tentatively asking the group, 'Does anyone else struggle with relationships? You know, close ones.' He went on to report how he finds it excruciating to be touched and often had to get high to manage it. 'Maybe it's better not to bother. I just don't think I'm normal.' Others in the group could relate and were able to share their experiences and offer him support. The next morning, the chairs were still laid out from the night before in the usual circle, awaiting the women's group to arrive. Gina began crying in check-in as she told the group how 'freakish' she felt. She couldn't have a 'normal' sex life with her husband because she couldn't bear him to touch her. She breathed out, as the rest of the group could relate to what she was sharing. They offered comfort and support.

This synchronicity of topic was common in our single-sex groups. The men's group all nodded sagely as Ben expressed how he would 'never wear sandals'. They all understood his shrinking back in horror from the vulnerability of showing an open toe. The women's group all felt they couldn't wear tops that showed their upper arms, no matter that it was boiling outside. It was just understood between them

that this would be 'crazy, risky behaviour'.

At times, the topic had a slightly different slant depending on gender, but often the issue was the same and common to most survivors of sexual abuse. Group members often report that the best thing about the groups is meeting others who make them feel 'normal'. Rather than the therapists being privileged to learn how common a survivor's experience is, cutting across gender, class and racial boundaries, why not offer that opportunity to the clients?

### Shared awareness

The shared awareness of overlaps between different survivors' experiences can do much to lift the stigmatising shame that goes hand-in-hand with being abused. Knowing that another reacted similarly or is left with the same 'symptoms' can be useful to help the healing from such an alienating experience. In the face of such commonality and solidarity, the gender of the 'other' becomes, potentially, less important.

Shared gender also does not eliminate other differences. One client from a single-sex group gave feedback that she'd felt different to others in the group, as her abuse happened in childhood, whereas all the other members had been assaulted as adults. There are additional complexities when abuse happens in childhood ▶

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at the hands of trusted loved ones. Many incest and childhood abuse survivors may find it harder to relate to the experience of a survivor of 'stranger rape' who is the same gender as them than they do to that of a childhood abuse survivor of a different sex.

Previously a women-only service, SRASAC opened the service to support all genders in 2016. We are a member of Rape Crisis England and Wales, which historically has been a place for women to find solidarity with other women and heal from the impact of sexual abuse. But, as our definitions of gender changed along with our awareness of who was enduring sexual abuse, Rape Crisis centres needed to change how they worked and who they worked with. This also informed our decision to tentatively introduce our first mixed-gender therapy group in April 2021. It was an online mixed-gender, post-therapy group that met for 12 sessions.

### The power of groups

In our 'normal lives', we often inhabit echo chambers, where what is fed to us from the algorithms of our omnipresent smartphones are views we already hold and subject matter we are already drawn to. We often mix in social groups with like-minded others. A therapy group is an opportunity for people who may have otherwise never met to talk and compare notes. Our supervisor talked about how, in her groups, she invites 'the cleaner to sit with the politician'.

Group participants are chosen on how ready each person is to share space with others, rather than how similar they are to other participants. The first mixed-gender group at SRASAC could have been seen as a contrived advert for 'diversity'. The eight members included three women and five men (two of whom were trans), five of whom were white, one Asian-British, one black Caribbean and one of mixed heritage. The group ranged in age from 22 to 50. One member of the group was Muslim and two identified as gay. However, the diversity was not by design as the group was self-selecting, and for every person who said 'yes' to the idea of a mixed-gender group, there was at least one who said 'no'.

Interestingly, the process that this group went through was similar to what we typically observed in our single-sex groups. There was a sense of nervousness in our first sessions, as well as open expression of relief by group members at finding others with whom they

expected to feel understood. Groups of survivors often unite and find belonging with each other around their experience of being misunderstood by the world at large. This group was no different. However, the real sense of togetherness often develops at around the mid-point when people begin to feel more genuinely comfortable with each other.

We noted in our first session that this group was marked by the theme of transitions. We were emerging from lockdown, two people in the group were at different stages of gender transition, new jobs were being started, medications being stopped, and for SRASAC, this was a transition into a mixed-gender group offer.

Just as in single-sex groups, bonding was aided by shared experiences. In one of the early sessions, the group members were virtually leaning into their cameras to send love and support to George, who was explaining how his mother must have known about his abuse as a young boy because he remembers her stroking his head and telling him it would be OK after it happened. How do we square the knowledge that the person who should love and protect us above all others tolerates (or worse) our abuse? This group of very different individuals all 'got that'.

A difference that emerged in this group compared with our single-sex groups was that this group could not bond around the idea of having a 'shared enemy'. This group didn't have the luxury of being able to demonise the different gender or an 'other' group of people. They had to bond almost exclusively around their many shared experiences. Shona, a woman in her 40s, felt the group offered an antidote to what she described as 'toxic solidarity': '[This is] something I have experienced many times before, particularly in groups of women. I think groups of same-sex or like-minded people can sometimes demonise a person/object/phenomenon over and above reality.'

Shona also reflected that the mixed-gender therapy sessions added 'diversity to collective

experience. I found that I could recognise my own past experiences or stages of instability - looping unhealthy thoughts in particular - in others, and that helped me reflect on why, when and how they are not healthy. The diversity in the group reinforced both the understanding that this is a human condition not specific to me, my phenotype, or my type of trauma.'

In session six, the mixed-gender make-up of the group was directly addressed. Interestingly, both a man and a woman expressed finding it helpful to hear the other gender expressing themselves openly. This helped reduce fear and heal some of the ways they'd pigeonholed the different gender due to bad experiences. The group reflected that 'compassion can come in all forms' and 'evil people don't care about gender'.

Initial anxieties about whether group members would offend each other by saying the 'wrong thing' soon dissipated. In the opening session, when Mike - a white man in his 50s - was asked what his preferred pronoun was, he answered, 'I don't know. I don't really mind.' He had never given it much thought and seemed slightly bemused to be asked. So, it was surprising and heartening to watch the relationship develop between Mike and Craig, a trans man in his 20s, as the group progressed. We wondered in supervision whether Craig's protectiveness of Mike came from his experience of being an oldest sibling, looking after the younger ones. Mike had been a youngest sibling and was certainly in need of care and protection.

Craig later shared: 'Throughout the sessions, I was able to see myself and my own struggles in someone older than me, someone of a different ethnicity to me, someone who was a different gender to me. I could see my trauma in so many different people that it helped me to stop viewing the world as full of people who could never understand. I stopped feeling so afraid of every person around me. I stopped viewing the strangers on the street as me versus them, because in them I could see my fellow group members.'

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### Conflict

As well as the beauty of the connections that emerged, as with all groups, there were several points of conflict and difficult processes to manage. What surprised us was how little the points of conflict related to gender or differed from the conflicts that emerge in single-sex groups. A typical example happened in session nine. We noticed a very fractious energy in the group - there was a lot of moving around and people looking disconnected and sighing or eating crisps. When we reflected this to the group, it seemed we got nowhere, with one person reporting she 'couldn't be bothered with the drama'. One person left the group early, obviously distressed. I had recorded in my notes that it felt the group was in a 'storm' and I was wondering how we would 'rebuild our boat and make sure everyone was comfortable again within it'.

In a therapy group, people are invited to share with each other their vulnerability as well as their power, and this can lead us to feel raw. We began our next session by showing the group a bag that was bursting full with 'stuff'. We explained that the bag contained the 'Achilles heels' of this group. We asked the group to think about what of theirs was in the bag. They were then asked to share what belonged to them in the bag if they wanted to.

This group all chose to share. It was a moving session and a reminder of how vulnerable we all are and how healing it can feel to have others hold our vulnerability with care and attuned attention. It was a good way to remind the group to be careful with each other's bruises and scars - whatever our gender - especially when we may push on them due to the intimacy of a therapy group.

### Healing

As a society, we are catching up with new ways of defining ourselves, so we need to be allowed to make mistakes, as long as we notice how this feels to others. When, in one session, both my co-therapist and I misgendered one of our group members, we wanted to make

sure we gave space in the following session for that person to say how that felt. We wondered about asking someone else in the group to speak up for him, so he could just watch from the sidelines and say if they'd understood the impact accurately or not, so it wasn't just him having to always point out the same old insensitivities. We didn't do that in the end, as the group got more interested in discussing labels in general and how they are so often a simplification of the much more complex states of being we find ourselves in.

Increasingly, there is an awareness that we don't fit neatly into boxes any more. This must be reflected in the types of structures and spaces that we as therapists offer. Following the end of the group, Craig reported that, 'As a trans man, the concept of single-gender groups gives me discomfort. I often feel out of place in men-only groups, given that the first 22 years of my life were experienced as a woman, but as a trans man, I do not want to butt into women-only groups as it is their space, not mine. Given that much of my community includes people outside the binary system of gender, such as genderfluid, agender and non-binary individuals, single-gender groups are often not applicable to people.' He continued, 'I certainly do not claim that mixed-gender group therapy is appropriate for every situation. Single-gender group therapy has its place and has helped a lot of people to feel safe. I feel that there should however be an option for people to choose between single-gender and mixed-gender groups.'

We wondered afterwards whether the fact that we met online reduced the tension of the initial meetings. It may have done for some, but we reflected it's also important for us not to collude with the idea that, if we're online, it will be 'safer' somehow. Group members shouldn't have to be 'safely' behind a screen to be reassured that the group won't hurt or humiliate them. To risk revealing yourself to another and that 'going well' (either virtually or in person) can be an important part of the experience of healing from abuse. As Yalom

says, 'The act of revealing oneself fully to another and still being accepted may be the major vehicle of therapeutic help.'<sup>1</sup> Avoiding and mitigating the clients' fears of each other may also avoid that important part of healing.

The overall success of the group means that mixed-gender groups are now part of SRASAC's offering, subject to the availability of members. We need groups that are welcoming to all people. For some people, this may be within their own gender. For others, this may be among a mixed group. Whatever the group, at SRASAC we believe that our therapy spaces need to be as diverse as the people who need them.

The potential of therapeutic groupwork is that it encourages connection among groups and individuals who may never get to talk or interact at depth in 'normal' circumstances. In our fractured society, where we are encouraged to polarise ourselves into competing groups, what better way to heal than to get together, listen to each other and compare notes? ■

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### REFERENCE

1. Yalom ID. *The gift of therapy: an open letter to a new generation of therapists and their patients*. New York: Harper Perennial; 2003.

### About the author



**Sarah Morley** is a person-centred psychodrama psychotherapist and supervisor. Alongside her work at Sheffield Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (SRASAC) with survivors of abuse, she works in private practice with groups and individuals.