

Meeting for Change in the Belgian Mental Healthcare System: Reflections of Focus Groups on Mental Health Policy Evaluation

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Background (1)

A mental health policy in Belgium, “107 reform”, further developed in the Brussels-Region.

- Shift from a hospital-centred to a **community-based** mental healthcare system.
- Development of **collaborative** practices.
- Central concepts: **recovery** and **socio-professional integration**.

Background (2)

Where are we now ?

- **Organisation** and **coordination** of mental health care services.
- Service users **needs** through the description of their **journey** within the mental health care system:
 - Main steps and **turning points**
 - **Transitions** between services

Research methods

A **qualitative** evaluation, initially divided into three stages:

- (1) Semi-structured interviews with **professionals managing** mental health services (N=27)
- (2) Focus groups with **service users** (N=12)
- (3) Focus groups with **field professionals** (N=18)

An unexpected ethnography

- Service user representatives *versus* excluded populations (substance abuse, migrant populations, homeless...)
- From exclusion from the mental health system, to exclusion from the evaluation research.
- Visit of **alternative spaces** :
 - Visitors either seek psychosocial help...
 - ... Or develop ties within a local community including (former) service users but not only.
- An iterative process of recruitment **contributes to the research process.**
- Researchers step into the environment in which the focus groups take place.

This paper

Focus Groups as Meetings!

- 1) Meetings are **social systems** – participants' interactions and communications [3]
- 2) Meetings are **disruptive events** – **brackets** in time and brackets in space [4]
 - New, possibly “strange” situations become **occasions for sensemaking** [5]
- 3) Meetings are systems capable of reflecting on themselves and their environment – **meditation.**

The three « waves » of meetings

Having a close look at these social systems developing into the meeting room – or “**small writ societies**” – enables us to identify three overlapping “waves” which combine in the system formation.

- A time for **expression**: essentially related to **social identity formation** (*why did I come?*)
- A period of **exploration**: **social confusion** and **conceptual chaos** through exploration of unknown regions of behaviour and meaning.
- Moments of **meditation**: a **collective reflection** on the environment with a focus on the (shifted) topic of conversation.

The three « waves » of meetings : Expression

- *Participant A : Will there be several meetings ?*
- *Moderator: We will meet only once, and then we will organize another meeting with other former or current service users. But we will only meet you this one time.*
- *Participant A: So it's just this one and only time?*
- *Moderator: Exactly.*
- *(...)*
- *Moderator: Why was it important for you to take part in this meeting today?*
- *Participant A: Why did I come... Because... (hesitates) **I came to socialize**, there it is !*

The three « waves » of meetings : Exploration

- *Participant B : I ask myself more and more... Is it really that different? Except, there isn't all that medical jargon, but come to think of it, is it really all that different? It's also an activity, having to get up in the morning, get dressed, meet other people and talk to them... I wonder if it really is that different, I guess it depends on how you experience it. But I don't know if it's so different. If I had to tell the difference... Yes, we have activities but they aren't medicalized, **we're not seen as patients !***
- *Moderator : How do people see you at the Club House ?*
- *Participant B : **Like a man.***
- *Participant A : Club House, what's that ? Is that one of those things where you have to cook, take out the trash and that kind of stuff?*
- *Participant B : (laughs) Yes, that's one way of putting it (...) It's a place where you get together and talk...*

The three « waves » of meetings : Meditation

- *Participant C : That's what society should offer, through a spiritual language, globally accepted and based on science, on psychiatry, psychology, or who knows what... We need to restore social contact between people because we've become increasingly individualistic.*
- *Participant B : You got that right ! I completely agree ! Yes, we need to restore social contact because **we live in an individualistic society !** (...)*
- *Participant C : Ideally, we should be able to meet a group of people who create a unity in which we feel confident. But such places no longer exist in our society, and so **increasingly more people end up in psychiatry, desperately trying to meet someone who can help them, who can listen.** But psychiatrists are overwhelmed and so all they can really do is prescribe medication on the basis of symptoms which don't reflect the real underlying problem. (...)*
- *Participant B : I agree, but I already said so.*
- *Participant A : Psychiatrist who what? Say that again?*
- *(Participant C goes on)*
- *Participant A : (...) I completely relate to that, we're alone. A psychiatrist once told me: "If we were living in a collective society, we would be rowing along with other people." What he meant was that **our professional careers are solitary**, but that also relates to what you were saying (Participant B), when you said you didn't get on so well with your colleagues.*
- *Participant B : Yes, yes. (...)*
- *Participant A : **Employment maintains individualism !** That's why my psychiatrist wrote up a report saying "there it is, employment can only worsen psychological problems. » There's no room for recovery because of employment !*

Three alternative roles of meetings

These overlapping phases are **distinct** but **complementary** contributions to the research and policy process ...

- **Diagnostic:** uncovering organisational and policy problems.
- **Social knowledge production:** collective and enacted forms of knowledge.
- **Change broker:** new sense of personal and collective situations.

Conclusion

- From focus groups as **tools for doing research** and meeting externally defined objectives to **focus groups as meetings** – **social identities and systems in (trans-)formation.**
- Are researchers and policy-makers prepared for **learning by meeting**
[8] – talking ?

References

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