Group psychotherapy with incarcerated offenders: a research synthesis

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Authors' objectives
To evaluate the efficacy of group psychotherapy with incarcerated offenders.

Searching
PsycLIT, ERIC, MEDLINE, Sociofile and NCJRS were searched (search dates not stated) for publications in the English language; the search terms were listed in the review. Additional articles were found by searching the reference lists of articles, books and other relevant publications. Unpublished dissertations and convention papers were excluded from the review.

Study selection

Study designs of evaluations included in the review
The inclusion criteria specified studies with a treatment and some form of control procedure. The included studies also had to have sufficient data or summary statistics for the calculation of effect sizes (ESs).

Specific interventions included in the review
The inclusion criteria specified interventions of group psychotherapy located in a correctional institution or community corrections residential setting.

Participants included in the review
The inclusion criteria specified incarcerated adult offenders.

Outcomes assessed in the review
The inclusion criteria for the outcomes were not stated. The outcomes included in the review were: institutional adjustment, anger, anxiety, depression, interpersonal relations, locus of control, and self-esteem.

How were decisions on the relevance of primary studies made?
The authors did not state how the papers were selected for the review, or how many reviewers performed the selection.

Assessment of study quality
The authors did not state that they assessed validity.

Data extraction
The authors did not state how the data were extracted for the review, or how many reviewers performed the data extraction.

Data were extracted for measures of institutional adjustment and several psychological constructs used as outcome measures in this review. Further participant and study characteristics were extracted and summarised in two tables. Details of the individual studies were not reported.

In each of the included studies, an individual ES using Hedges's g was extracted for each of the outcomes of interest. Hedges's g is the standardised difference between the mean of the treatment group and the mean of the control group, both measured after the therapy has been administered. Where data were available, separate ESs were calculated for each subpopulation within a study. In those studies where there was no independent control group, and where repeated measures were used instead, the ES considered the pre-therapy scores equivalent to results from an independent control sample. An overview of the results of these ES extractions was given in an appendix to the review.
Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
A series of univariate meta-analyses were calculated, with a separate meta-analysis reported for each outcome of interest, using a random-effects model. Where there was homogeneity in the regression models, a fixed-effect result was reported. In addition, a supplemental analysis was performed in which the ESs for each outcome were averaged to create a global assessment of the efficacy of group psychotherapy.

How were differences between studies investigated?
Heterogeneity was assessed using the Q statistic. Additional analyses were performed to identify factors that contribute to the efficacy of group psychotherapy; whether there was any publication bias; and whether there was any offender response bias (e.g. faking good).

Results of the review
Twenty-six studies were included in the review; the number of participants was not stated.

There was not a significant amount of heterogeneity among the studies that could not be explained by the model.

Institutional adjustment: in 12 studies with 13 ESs, the weighted mean ES was 0.66. When one outlier with a large ES result was removed, the overall ES dropped to 0.43 (P<0.0001) for those inmates who received group treatment relative to the control groups. Hence, studies that used true control groups reported improvement for inmates relative to the control.

Anger: in 7 studies with 11 ESs, the weighted mean ES was 0.50. When one outlier with a large ES result was removed, the overall ES dropped to 0.45 (P<0.0001) for those inmates who received group treatment relative to control groups. Hence, inmates who participated in group psychotherapy reported less anger than those inmates who participated in control procedures.

Anxiety: in 3 studies with 7 ESs, the weighted mean ES was 0.85. When one outlier with a large ES result (due to the large number of males in the sample) was removed, the overall ES increased to 0.94 (P<0.0001) for those inmates who received group treatment relative to control groups. Hence, inmates who participated in group psychotherapy reported decreased anxiety compared with control group inmates.

Depression: in 3 studies with 4 ESs, the weighted mean ES was 0.57 (P<0.01) for those inmates who received group treatment relative to the control groups.

Interpersonal functioning: in 6 studies with 6 ESs, the weighted mean ES was 0.74. When one outlier with a large ES result was removed, the overall ES dropped to 0.36 (P<0.05) for those inmates who received group treatment relative to control groups. Hence, inmates who participated in group psychotherapy displayed improved interpersonal functioning compared with inmates in control groups.

Locus of control: in 5 studies with 5 ESs, the weighted mean ES was 0.79 (P<0.001). Publication bias was suspected in this result. Hence, group psychotherapy led to improvements in locus of control for participants receiving treatment relative to the control groups.

Self-esteem: in 4 studies with 7 ESs, the weighted mean ES was 0.52. When one outlier with a large ES result was removed, the overall ES dropped to 0.31 (P<0.05) for those inmates who received group treatment relative to the control groups. Hence, inmates who participated in group psychotherapy experienced increased levels of self-esteem when compared with inmates who participated in control groups.

Supplemental analyses: there were 23 observations available for supplemental analyses. The only secondary variable that was statistically significant was the weighted mean ES for homework exercises (ES=1.22) compared with no homework exercises (ES=0.53). Other secondary variables that failed to reach statistical significance were type of theory implemented, group format, and reason why inmates participated in therapy groups.
Authors’ conclusions
Positive treatment effects were found for the use of group psychotherapy with incarcerated inmates across all outcomes. Supplemental analyses found that the use of homework exercises resulted in significantly improved outcomes, and that participants mandated to treatment did not negatively influence the efficacy of group psychotherapy.

CRD commentary
This was a fairly well-conducted review with a clearly stated research question and inclusion and exclusion criteria. The literature review was quite thorough and took notice of publication bias in its analyses. The study was limited to English language publications, therefore some additional data may have been missed.

The process of the review was not well reported. No formal method for assessing validity was reported, although the quality of the studies was addressed in the narrative discussion in the review. The statistical analyses were appropriately performed and the conclusions of the review appear to follow from the results reported.

Implications of the review for practice and research
Practice: The authors stated that the result of this review offers valuable information for group psychotherapists regarding factors of treatment programmes that are most efficacious.

Research: The authors stated that future research, to address the limitations noted in this review and to identify those factors that contribute to the most efficacious use of group psychotherapy with offender populations, is warranted. Such studies should provide empirical data with adequate statistical information.

Bibliographic details

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Record Status
This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.