

Making sense of group dynamics:

An exploration of educational psychologists' experiential group experience

during training and the application of learning to post-qualification practice

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Abstract

Experiential group (EG) is a method of learning from experience. EGs are predominantly facilitated as part of postgraduate training in counselling, psychotherapy and psychology disciplines in the United Kingdom and overseas. The purpose of EG is for trainees to enhance their intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and explore group dynamics as they emerge in the moment. A scoping review conducted as part of this study identified a research gap concerning EG experiences underpinned by psychodynamic principles. Also, the EG experiences of trainee educational psychologists (EPs) training at the Tavistock Education and Training – North London NHS Foundation Trust have not been investigated. Given the importance of group work within the EP profession, this study addresses the research gap by exploring EPs' EG experiences, examining their learning about group dynamics and identifying how they applied it in their post-qualification group work. This study employed a qualitative methodology, involving data generated through semi-structured online interviews with 19 Tavistock-trained EPs, which were subsequently analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. By interpreting the dataset through a systems psychodynamic lens, four key themes were generated: 1) containment and psychological safety, which shaped participants' engagement in EG; 2) group roles, which were fluid, context-dependent and socially constructed; 3) affective responses, which were drawn upon to interpret group dynamics and generate hypotheses; and 4) participants valued EG despite the challenges it presented. The study introduces a conceptual framework underpinned by unconscious group processes, linking experiential learning to professional practice. Limitations are presented, followed by implications for EG practice in the Tavistock EP training, focusing on trainees' orientation to the task, different facilitating styles, and supporting exploration of diversity and differences.

Post-qualification recommendations address promoting EPs' group work through reflective practice spaces, supervision and group relations training. The study ends with the researcher's positionality and questions for future research.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgments.....	4
List of Figures.....	8
List of Tables.....	8
One: Introduction.....	9
Experiential Group.....	10
A Pocket-Size History of Experiential Groups.....	11
Concepts Defining EG.....	13
Experiential Learning.....	13
Boundaries.....	14
The Facilitator's Role.....	14
Differences in Purpose of EG.....	16
Theoretical Foundations of Experiential Group.....	16
EG in the Tavistock EP Training.....	23
Research Reflexivity and Positionality.....	24
Research Aims and Objectives.....	25
Roadmap of the Thesis.....	27
Two: Literature Review.....	28
Chapter Overview.....	28
Stage One: Rationale, Objectives and Review Questions.....	28
Stage Two: Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria.....	30
Methods.....	32
Stages Three and Four: Planned Approach and Search Strategy.....	32
Stage Five: Selecting the Studies.....	32
Stage Six: Data Charting.....	33
Stage Seven: Analysis of the Evidence.....	33
Stage Eight: Findings.....	34
Numerical Summaries.....	34
Content Analysis of Concepts and Context.....	35
Concepts.....	35
Context.....	36
Addressing the Review Questions.....	39
Theme One: Safety.....	41
Theme Two: Group Dynamics.....	45
Theme Three: Personal and Professional Development/Learning.....	47
Stage Nine: Discussion and Conclusion.....	50
Three: Methodology.....	56
Chapter Overview.....	56
Research positioning.....	56
Axiology.....	56
Ontology.....	57
Epistemology.....	58
Subjectivity.....	59

Reflexivity.....	60
Research Design.....	61
Qualitative Design and Rationale.....	61
Research Questions.....	62
Ethics and Ethical Considerations.....	64
Research Methods.....	66
Participants.....	66
Recruitment Strategy.....	68
Data Generation.....	68
Data Management.....	70
Data Analysis.....	70
Phase One: Familiarisation.....	71
Phase Two: Coding the Data.....	72
Phase Three: Generating Initial Themes.....	73
Phase Four: Developing and Reviewing Themes.....	75
Phase Five: Refining, Defining and Naming Themes.....	76
Phase Six: Write-up.....	79
Research Quality.....	80
Methodological Congruence.....	81
Transparency.....	81
Four: Findings	83
Chapter Overview.....	83
Theme One: Safety First.....	84
Subtheme One: The Paradox of Safety.....	84
Subtheme Two: The Containing Function of Boundaries: Task, Time and Territory.....	89
The Task.....	90
Time and Territory.....	91
The Permeable Boundary Between Experiential Group and Other Course	
Experiences.....	92
Tolerating Not Knowing.....	94
Subtheme Three: Keeping the Peace, Losing the Depth.....	94
Theme Two: Discovering Roles and Valencies: Self and Others in Groups.....	100
Subtheme One: Know Thyself: Learning About One's Role Through Group	
Participation.....	101
Subtheme Two: The Social Construction of Leaders and Followers.....	105
Subtheme Three: Silent Participation: Contribution or Withdrawal?.....	110
Theme Three: Feelings as Information.....	114
Subtheme One: Us Versus Them: Basic Assumption Dynamics in EG.....	114
Subtheme Two: From Feelings to Formulation: Attending to Beneath-the-Surface	
Information.....	116
Subtheme Three: Mindful Sharing of Feelings-Informed Hypotheses.....	121
Theme Four: The Dread and Value of Learning Through Experience.....	123
Five: Discussion	128
Chapter Overview.....	128
Interpretation of Findings.....	128

RQ1: How do EPs Describe Their Experience of EG?	128
Groups as Anxiety-Activating Systems	128
Containment and the Paradox of Safety	130
Cohesion as Social Defence	132
Role Experimentation	134
RQ2: What did EPs Learn About Group Dynamics Through Participation in EG?	135
Recognising Unconscious Processes	135
Containment and the Importance of Safety	137
Valency and Role Positioning	138
Authority and Leadership	139
RQ3: How do EPs Apply Their Learning From EG in Their Professional Work With Groups?	140
Creating Conditions for Psychological Safety and Participation	140
Working With Emotional Processes	141
Role Awareness and Shared Leadership	142
Conceptual Contribution	144
Limitations	148
Implications	149
Preparation and Orientation	150
Facilitation and Containment	151
Exploring Differences and Diversity	153
Post-Qualification Practice Development	155
Dissemination and Impact Strategy	156
Reflective Statement and Conclusion	157
References	161
Appendices	185
Appendix A: Literature Search History	185
Appendix B: PRISMA Diagram	188
Appendix C: Data Charting	189
Appendix D: Frequency Analysis of Reviewed Sources	194
Appendix E: Letter of Ethics Approval	196
Appendix F: Participant Consent Form	197
Appendix G: Participant Information Sheet	199
Appendix H: Recruitment Advert and Poster	203
Appendix I: Interview Schedule	205
Appendix J: Overall Dataset Familiarisation Notes	207
Appendix K: Code List Generated by NVivo	209
Appendix L: Generating Candidate Themes and Subthemes	219
Appendix M: Candidate Themes and Subthemes: Definitions and Code Labels	220
Appendix N: Developing Themes and Subthemes	228
Appendix O: Log of Excerpts Used in the Findings Chapter	229
Appendix P: Handout Describing EG to Trainee EPs	230

List of Figures

Figure 1: Final Thematic Map.....	78
Figure 2: Conceptual Framework.....	145

List of Tables

Table 1: Theoretical Concepts Describing Unconscious Group Processes.....	18
Table 2: Scoping Review Framework.....	29
Table 3: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Evidence Searching and Selection.....	31
Table 4: Content Analysis of Concepts and Context.....	37
Table 5: Thematic Map of the Studies' Findings.....	40
Table 6: Participants' Demographic Characteristics.....	67
Table 7: Thematic Map of my Findings.....	84

One: Introduction

Experiential group (EG) is a pedagogical method of experiential learning that offers group members opportunities to study interpersonal and group behaviour as they happen in the moment. EGs are facilitated predominantly during postgraduate training courses in counselling, clinical psychology and psychotherapy in the United Kingdom and overseas. EGs' theoretical underpinnings differ depending on the traditions they developed from – such as psychodynamic, field theory and humanistic approaches – which may not be immediately evident. However, EGs share similar objectives and formats that enable comparisons to understand trainees' experiences when attending these groups, and the learning they may develop from them.

To date, empirical research, particularly in the United States, has explored both trainees' experiences of participation and their intrapersonal and interpersonal learning. In the United Kingdom, the empirical literature on EG is underdeveloped, which opened up an opportunity to explore how trainees experience EG, and what they may learn from group membership. EG is a compulsory part of the Child, Community and Educational Psychology doctoral programme at the Tavistock Education and Training – North London NHS Foundation Trust (hereafter the Tavistock). Informed by psychodynamic and group relations theories, the Tavistock-EG represents a unique opportunity for trainee educational psychologists (EPs) to study group behaviours in the here and now. These theories posit that unconscious processes influence group behaviour, decision-making and relationships, and provide interpretations of what might be happening at the beneath-the-surface level. By doing so, they provide a different understanding of group dynamics than that provided by field theory or humanistic approaches.

As someone deeply interested in how the unconscious can influence group behaviours,

I value the uniqueness of EG as a training method and I wanted to explore how EG may prepare EPs for group work. Group work is a fundamental part of the educational psychology (EP) profession, from consultation to supervision and training, involving both small and large groups. The limited and unequal EP capacity across educational psychology services in England (Zuccollo & Hutchinson, 2026) makes group work even more valuable. In addition, the stresses the education profession is currently facing, impacting teachers' wellbeing and retention (Moulds, 2025), call for supportive group supervision and reflective spaces facilitated by EPs. To date, learning from EG as part of EP training at the Tavistock has yet to be empirically researched. This prompted me to investigate this phenomenon, aiming to explore EPs' experiences in EG, what they might learn about group dynamics and how they might apply that learning in their post-qualification group work. I interviewed 19 Tavistock-trained EPs who completed their course between 2011 and 2022. To situate my study, this chapter defines EG, provides a short history of the approach, describes key concepts and outlines EG during EP training at the Tavistock. I reflect on my positionality as researcher and conclude with my research aims and objectives.

Experiential Group

EG is a training method usually provided to counselling and psychotherapy postgraduate students in the United Kingdom and overseas. The primary task of the learning experience differs depending on the traditions within which EG developed, but generally speaking the purpose of the group is to offer here-and-now learning opportunities to experience and develop awareness of intrapersonal, interpersonal and group processes (Hall et al., 1999). Groups are generally facilitated by a group leader who provides, if deemed necessary, interpretations and comments about what might be happening in the group. The groups are small enough to allow members to see each other as they sit in a circle, usually

between eight and 12 (Barrett-Lennard, 2017). EGs are time-bound, generally lasting between one and one and a half hours, and scheduled to run regularly for usually a minimum of 10 sessions and up to 16 (Kivlighan et al., 2019).

The here-and-now focus is an essential feature of EG, entailing that group members should focus on the immediate, present-moment interactions, feelings and dynamics that happen during the group session itself, rather than discussing past events or outside issues. This usually requires members' cognitive and affective processes, and how these processes influence each other in the moment (Lawrence & Armstrong, 1998).

A psychodynamically-informed EG is characterised by a focus on the group's rather than individuals' behaviours (Shapiro & Carr, 2012). Facilitators occupy a distinct position that challenges standard understandings of authority and leadership. Their role is to provide interpretations of group dynamics based on psychodynamic processes (Fraher, 2004; Oatley, 1980).

A Pocket-Size History of Experiential Groups

EG was developed as a therapeutic practice in England during the Second World War to support the large numbers of soldiers experiencing a wide range of psychiatric conditions. Initially conceived as an experiment, EG was introduced and led by Wilfred Bion (1897-1979), a British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who worked for the British Army at the Northfield Military Hospital in Birmingham. The task, still relevant today, was for members to observe group dynamics in the here and now without relying on the facilitator's authority. Whether the group was intended for therapy or for learning, Bion argued that the task remained the same (Bion, 1961).

Around the same time, efforts to develop learning groups for interpersonal development were being pursued in the United States, driven by Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), an

influential figure in the development of group dynamics as a discipline. Lewin, a German-American social psychologist and academic, developed field theory, which emphasises that to understand individuals' behaviour, one must look at the whole situation and the competing forces acting on a person within their specific moment in time (Lewin, 1947a, 1947b). In 1946, Lewin used the here-and-now focus for members to learn about group dynamics through experience rather than didactic teaching. This practice played a key role in the establishment of the National Training Laboratories (NTL) in 1947 in Bethel, Maine. The NTL consisted of a series of workshops that provided experiential training opportunities for participants to learn about their behaviours in groups (Fraher, 2004). EGs were called T-groups (for "training group"), subsequently known as sensitivity training, mostly centred on personal and interpersonal development. In the United States, the popularity of the T-group methodology led to the development in the 1960s of "encounter" groups in the therapeutic community, largely influenced by the work of Lewin and later by the American humanist psychologist Carl Rogers (1902-1987). Encounter groups, however, lacked the structure and theoretical orientation of the more organised T-groups and were criticised for using exercises of dubious therapeutic value, led by untrained facilitators (Fraher, 2004). Differences in names and practices contributed to the confusion over the variety of EGs developing in the United States (Smith, 1980).

In the United Kingdom, the first civilian training group – drawing on Bion's wartime work – run for six sessions in 1945 at the Tavistock Clinic in London (Fraher, 2004). This was followed by weekly "study groups" led by Bion in 1947-1948, also at the clinic (Rice, 1965). During this time, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations – dedicated to the study of group dynamics – was established as part of the clinic in 1947, influenced by Kurt Lewin's theories (Fraher, 2004). Initially borrowing methods, theories and terminology from the NTL

workshops, the Institute organised the first Group Relation Conference (GRC) at Leicester University in 1957. Subsequently, GRCs were increasingly influenced by what became known as systems psychodynamics, integrating psychoanalytic theories (Bion, 1961; Klein, 1946), group relations theories (e.g., Rice, 1965) and open systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968), marking a stark differentiation from the NTL workshops. GRCs feature different group events, including the small study group, which, over the course of 12 sessions, focuses on observing group membership's here-and-now interactions (Shapiro & Carr, 2012). The small study group shares characteristics with EG in the EP Tavistock doctoral training, making group relations and systems psychodynamic literature relevant to my study.

Concepts Defining EG

Experiential Learning

The distinctive attribute of EG is cued in the name itself, “experiential.” The learning experience is fundamentally different from traditional learning methods that entail a one-way transmission of information, such as lectures and didactic teaching. In EG, members are given the opportunity to experience, observe and study behaviours that occur in the group, with the facilitator's and members' help.

Stein (2004) differentiates between theories of non-group-based experiential learning, such as Kolb's (1985) cycle, and group relations theories. The former approaches emphasise the importance of practice, concrete experience and action for developing knowledge. The group relations approach, instead, shifts the focus to the unconscious processes that are taking place in group interactions as well as in people's minds (Stein, 2004; see also Vince, 1998). The format and structure of EG are designed to enable people to experience their relationship to authority and leadership roles, where group dynamics remain the focus of attention and interpretation (Shapiro & Carr, 2012). By contrast, EGs such as T-groups and encounter

groups aim to modify individuals' observable behaviours and attitudes using a range of feedback-based exercises (Fraher, 2004; Smith, 1980). This important distinction helped me ascertain which types of EG have been the subject of empirical research.

Boundaries

A psychodynamically-informed EG is a boundaried learning space, with boundaries of three types: spatial, temporal and psychological. Spatial and temporal boundaries refer to group members usually meeting in the same room at the same time for a set duration (for each session and lifetime of the group) (Gosling & Turquet, 1967; Redlich & Astrachan, 1975), free of interruptions and contact with the outside (Oatley, 1980). Psychological boundaries include confidentiality, the presence of a facilitator, however undefined the role may appear to members (Rice, 1965), and members' experience of belonging to a specific group with specific individuals for the established time (Redlich & Astrachan, 1975). To this set of boundaries, the explicit task of studying the group's behaviour defines the purpose of the group.

The Facilitator's Role

EG is usually facilitated by group leaders occupying different roles within an institution. In a non-psychodynamically-informed EG, sessions are often led by tutors or doctoral students, who model behaviours (e.g., providing or responding to feedback) that trainees can emulate. Instead, a psychodynamically-informed EG is facilitated by a staff member with a leadership style that group members usually find difficult to comprehend initially, as facilitators tend to avoid instructing them, providing interpretations about the group's behaviours instead (Redlich & Astrachan, 1975). Based on Bion's (1961) work with groups, the EG facilitator uses their feelings to offer interpretations only when they benefit the group, and resists the temptation to speak for themselves. As members often see the facilitator

as the leader of the group, particularly at the outset, they have unconscious expectations of the facilitator that conform to their idea of authority. The facilitator becomes the recipient of members' projections of their unconscious reactions towards an authoritative figure, parallel to the transference relationship between client and analyst (Freud, 1912/1958). The facilitator is, therefore, often subject to the group's pressure to act in ways members expect them to (Gosling and Turquet, 1967).

Group members' experiences depend to a large extent on the facilitator's interpretations and engagement within the group. Members often feel a range of emotions that are unanticipated due to the here-and-now experience. Such emotions originate from feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, resistance, boredom and playfulness. The facilitator's role is fundamental in balancing the strong emotions experienced by members with a developing sense of trust that enables risk-taking (Miller, 1990). Their involvement is also critical in enabling the kind of experiential learning that is more the result of intuition and reflection rather than teaching (Lakin & Costanzo, 1977). The complex role of the facilitator is often not acknowledged at first, leading to group members developing resentment toward a leader who withholds guidance, interpreted as refusal to share expertise. A leader who does not lead in the expected, directive way provokes frustration and anger, yet this very frustration becomes productive. By blocking dependency rather than satisfying it, the leader does not eliminate dependence but may transform it into peer-to-peer engagement. As a result, members are pushed to rely on one another, learning to collaborate, negotiate meaning and solve the shared problem of "what to do" without the leader doing it for them (Lakin & Costanzo, 1977). The role of the facilitator often evolves over the time of EG, as members may start to expect less or something distinct from them (Barrett-Lennard, 2017). Bion's theorisation of the basic assumption mentalities helps understand some of the dynamics between the facilitator and the

group, such as dependency and fight-flight (Bion, 1961).

Differences in Purpose of EG

A significant difference between sensitivity training and psychodynamically-informed EG resides in the group purpose. In sensitivity training (e.g., T-groups) and EG at training institutions the primary objective consists of intrapersonal and interpersonal development and an understanding of group processes limited to developmental stages (forming, transition, working and closure). By contrast, the emphasis in a Tavistock-style EG is on the group-as-a-whole dynamics and the unconscious responses to authority and leadership based on psychoanalytic concepts such as projection, transference, valence and social defence (Neumann et al., 2004). By recognising these group functionings over time, members can start to understand what unconscious processes can impact group behaviours and how they themselves may contribute to those behaviours (Shapiro & Carr, 2012).

Theoretical Foundations of Experiential Group

While the structure and purpose of EG from different traditions appear similar (the boundaried here-and-now study of interpersonal and group behaviour), their theoretical underpinnings are markedly different. The US tradition developed from field theory and Lewin's social psychology work in understanding human behaviour in social contexts and was based on conscious and cognitive behaviours in groups (Hinshelwood & Chiesa, 2002). It was also more person-centred, with the group leader taking a facilitative rather than interpretative role (Miller, 1990). By contrast, the psychodynamically-informed small study group draws on psychoanalytic theories, particularly object relations theory. These are informed by the processes described by Austrian-British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1882-1960), namely splitting, projection, projective identification and the polar positions of paranoid-schizoid and depressive (Klein, 1946). Bion applied these concepts and processes to

the study of group behaviour, identifying the oscillation between the work group mentality (managing anxiety and task-oriented) and the basic assumption group mentalities (driven by anxiety and being off-task). In addition, he developed the container-contained idea from Klein's work, and introduced the idea of valency, defined as the unconscious positioning of oneself within a group based on unconscious expectations (Bion, 1961, 1962). Group relations theories and systems psychodynamics more broadly developed these concepts to explain unconscious processes in groups and social contexts and applied them to group relations conferences and organisational consultancy. Table 1 provides definitions of these concepts and processes.

Table 1*Theoretical Concepts Describing Unconscious Group Processes*

Author(s)	Concept	Description
1. S. Freud (Freud, 1912/1958)	Transference	Unconscious displacement of feelings, expectations and relational patterns that originally formed in early significant relationships onto figures in the present. In groups, this occurs toward a leader (experienced as withholding or omnipotent), other members (positioned in a sibling role) and the group-as-a-whole.
2. M. Klein (Klein, 1946)	Splitting	Unconscious division of self and objects into all-good or all-bad categories as a primitive defence against anxiety. In groups, leads to idealisation of leaders, scapegoating and in-group/out-group formation.
	Projection	An unconscious defence mechanism in which intolerable feelings, impulses or attributes of the self are expelled from the inner world and projected into another person or object. In groups, projection enables members to reject difficult emotional states by locating them in others, shaping how individuals perceive and relate to fellow group members and leaders.
	Projective identification	Unwanted aspects of the self are unconsciously placed into others, who then enact these projected qualities. In groups, explains how certain members carry emotional states or roles on behalf of the group.

Author(s)	Concept	Description
3. W. Bion (Bion, 1961, 1962, 1963)	Paranoid-schizoid position	Anxiety managed through splitting and projective identification. Experience is defensively acted upon rather than reflected upon; no real learning can occur in this state.
	Depressive position	Capacity to tolerate ambivalence and hold contradictory feelings. Enables reflection, integration and insight, creating the mental space necessary for learning.
	Object relations and internalised relationships	Early relational patterns are recreated and enacted within group settings in adult life, shaping the roles individuals gravitate toward and the emotional positions they occupy.
	Container-contained (Theory of learning)	Learning often requires an external mind (the container, such as a parent or group leader) to receive projected raw emotions, hold them without being overwhelmed (the contained), and return them in more digestible/thinkable form. Adequate containment enables safe risk-taking and genuine expression; failure leads to defensive roles and avoidance.
		Bion's theory of learning posits that mental growth occurs when an individual can process raw emotional experiences (beta-elements) into thoughts (alpha-elements) using the mind's "alpha function." Learning is an emotional rather than purely intellectual process that requires containing unbearable emotions and tolerating uncertainty.
		Idea of the "hatred" of learning by experience refers to the unconscious resistance people

Author(s)	Concept	Description
		have to the discomfort that genuine change and development inevitably demand.
	Countertransference	Facilitator or member's emotional response to another's transference, encompassing reactions based on the facilitator's history as well as responses induced by the projective identifications of group members. In groups, countertransference is data to be used: the facilitator's inner experience may signal what the group cannot yet articulate.
	Work group vs basic assumption functioning	Two fundamentally different modes of group operation. The work group maintains focus on its primary task and can think rationally while keeping anxiety at bay. Basic assumption group mentalities, by contrast, operate under shared unconscious assumptions that defend against anxiety but impede real work. They satisfy the emotional needs of group members that are interfering with task-oriented activities. Three basic assumptions are identified: dependency, fight-flight and pairing.
	Basic assumption dependency (baD)	The group unconsciously acts as though it exists solely to be sustained by an omnipotent and omniscient leader, from whom all knowledge, direction and safety are expected. Members adopt a helpless, passive stance, abdicating responsibility for thinking and abdicating their own authority. The leader is idealised and treated as the source of all solutions, while the group remains stuck waiting to be rescued or told what to do.

Author(s)	Concept	Description
Basic assumption fight-flight (baF)	The group behaves as though its survival depends on identifying an enemy and either attacking it or fleeing from it. Anxiety is managed by uniting against a perceived threat, which may be an external group, the facilitator, a scapegoated member or an idea. Someone takes up the role of enemy or advocate of retreat, while others become fighters or escapers. Action replaces reflection, and the group's energy is consumed by fight or avoidance rather than its primary task.	
Basic assumption pairing (baP)	The group invests hope in an idealised dyad, two members (or a member and the facilitator) whose relationship is unconsciously fantasised as generating a future saviour, idea or solution that will resolve the group's difficulties. The group watches the pair with messianic expectation, sustaining hope as long as the promised outcome remains unborn. Real engagement with the task is deferred in favour of this shared fantasy of future rescue.	
Valency	An individual's unconscious readiness to enter into combination with the group in making and acting on basic assumptions. Explains why people consistently take up similar roles across different groups.	
PS↔D oscillation as a mechanism for learning	Learning in EG occurs through cyclical movement between paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, facilitated by containment. Repeated oscillation enables group members to internalise the containing function and apply it in professional practice.	

Author(s)	Concept	Description
	Group relations method (Tavistock approach)	The task is to learn about the obstacles to learning within a group. Minimal structure and withheld conventional leadership create uncertainty that activates unconscious defensive processes, making role patterns observable. Roles emerge from the interaction between individual valencies and group need. Members are offered opportunities to learn about these dynamics.
4. Systems psychodynamics (interdisciplinary field involving group relations theory, psychoanalysis and open system theory) (Gould et al., 2004; Miller & Rice, 1967; Rice, 1965)	Anxiety, role, authority, boundaries (task, time, territory)	Focus on the functioning of organisations conceptualised as open systems. Groups and organisations are understood based on these concepts, and the systems psychodynamic consultant supports service-users in thinking about relationships between parts of systems and the whole, the primary task, conversion of inputs into outputs, boundaries between systems and group membership. Roles are both consciously chosen and unconsciously assigned through projective processes. Learning involves developing the capacity to recognise one's agency while understanding how the group positions people beyond their awareness. Roles are not predetermined but enacted from the interaction of individual valencies and group need at particular moments. The same person may take up different roles across sessions depending on what the group unconsciously needs.

EG in the Tavistock EP Training

EG is a mandatory component of the three-year EP doctoral programme at the Tavistock, the only UK institution currently offering EG as part of its EP training curriculum. Trainees also participate in a Group Relations Conference (GRC) once during their training, where they participate in the small study group as well as other group events. The small study group resembles the doctoral training EG in role, task and boundaries, but differs in two key ways: EG members know each other from shared academic and social experiences outside the group, whereas GRC members are typically strangers chosen for their diversity. EG also spans three years, whereas GRC groups typically last only one to two weeks. During the doctoral training, around 32 sessions are scheduled, fortnightly in year one and monthly in years two and three, making EG markedly different from US models, which include up to 16 sessions in one academic year.

Sessions tend to be in the same room and at the same time, although rooms, times and facilitators may all change from year to year, showing a consistency of boundaries within each year rather than across years. The task is the only consistent boundary.

The number of trainees on the programme has changed over the years depending on the Department for Education funding allocation for the EP training scheme. Based on available data from the Association of Educational Psychologists, the number of successful applicants at the Tavistock in the period 2017-2019 was 14 trainees per year, and since 2020 has been 16 per year (AEP, n.d.). Before 2006, EG was also part of the curriculum during the EP master's programme.

Although EG has been part of the Tavistock training for EPs for more than two decades, no study to date has ever been conducted to explore the trainees' experiences, nor its possible impact on their professional development as EPs. Empirical research investigating

EG outside of the EP training in the United Kingdom is also lacking. McMichael (2023) recently hypothesised that the lack of studies in this area may be due to the absence of glamour, excitement and dynamism in EG compared to the GRC. Given these gaps, there is a clear need for empirical inquiry into the role and value of EG within EP training and beyond.

Research Reflexivity and Positionality

Psychodynamic thinking was somewhat novel to me when I joined the EP training. While I was familiar with Freudian terms used in everyday conversations, such as the unconscious mind and repression, and had heard about defence mechanisms and the work of Melanie Klein with young children, there was so much I did not know until joining the programme. Yet, since the beginning, I was open and curious about the psychoanalytic theories and concepts taught to us during lectures. The work of an EP is relational in its essence. It involves working with others in different capacities, as a consultant, trainer, assessor, researcher and team member. Seeing relationships and group dynamics through a psychodynamic lens started to help me observe my feelings and use them as “data” (Trainor, 2019) to reflect, understand and manage professional relationships, in the moment and afterwards (Schön, 2016).

Despite my intellectual curiosity about psychodynamic theories, I was finding EG a difficult, complex, puzzling and overall troubling experience. My learning of the theories in year one did not help me see what I could gain of value from EG. Once, I purposefully avoided attending EG due to something that upset me in the previous session. In an act of defiance, I refused colluding with such distressing experience. That confusion, perplexity and doubt about the value of EG that I experienced was akin to a “felt difficulty” moment, described by Dewey (1910) as the time when we want to think about a problem to explore it and achieve genuine learning. However, rather than being a watershed moment, I would

describe it as a spark that evolved over the following months. Only after desperately trying to explain to two friends (unrelated to the training) what “experiential group” was, I decided I wanted to explore this unique learning experience further. I wanted to know what it is that trainee EPs learn from this experience, about themselves as group members and about group dynamics, and how they may apply that learning to their work with groups.

This research was not motivated by academic curiosity alone. Having experienced the difficulty and confusion of EG, I was committed to understanding whether this learning was valuable for trainees and how it can inform practice. Professionally, I was intrigued about how EG experienced during training prepares EPs for group work, how experiential methods were employed and how trainees who may struggle can be supported. As someone who strived to make sense of this experience, I brought my passion to the investigation in an effort to *understand* the learning gained from EG. Following the guidance of reflexive qualitative researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willig, 2022), I committed to making my assumptions and interpretative framework transparent throughout the research process, recognising that my analysis was shaped by my positionality as I strived for rigorous findings (Denzin et al., 2024). This research represented an attempt to move from my personal “felt difficulty” toward a more comprehensive understanding that could inform training practices and support future EPs in their learning journeys about group dynamics.

Research Aims and Objectives

While the theoretical foundations of the Tavistock model are well-established (Bion, 1961; Klein, 1946) and anecdotal accounts of its value exist within training communities, there remains limited empirical investigation of what EPs learn about group dynamics through EG, and crucially, how this learning informs their professional practice with groups. This study was thus organised around three interrelated research questions:

1. How do EPs describe their experience of EG?
2. What did EPs learn about group dynamics through participation in EG?
3. How do EPs apply their learning from EG in their professional work with groups?

By addressing these questions through an in-depth qualitative investigation, this research therefore aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of EG and illuminate the relationship between EG during training and subsequent professional application, with particular attention to understanding group dynamics, role patterns, risk-taking behaviours and conditions for containment.

To address these research questions, the research had the following specific objectives:

1. explore participants' experiences of group dynamics during EG, focusing on roles taken up or avoided, patterns of risk-taking and silence and factors enabling or inhibiting containment;
2. understand the emotional and relational dimensions of participating in EG and how these affective experiences shaped participants' learning and professional development;
3. identify what participants understood themselves to have learnt about working with groups from EG, and how they articulate this learning;
4. examine the relationship between EG and future professional application, including facilitating factors and barriers to informed practice; and
5. contribute empirical evidence that can both inform training programme development and support for trainees engaging in EG.

Roadmap of the Thesis

Having here identified the aims and objectives of this research, Chapter Two reviews empirical studies on postgraduate students' experiences from participating in EG during training. The methodology is presented in Chapter Three, which outlines the qualitative inquiry based on a critical realist ontology and epistemology, and a reflexive thematic analysis approach to analysis and interpretation of the findings. Chapter Four then presents the findings, systematically reporting and analysing the data based on the research questions and objectives. Finally, in Chapter Five, I discuss the findings in light of existing theory and empirical research, presenting the limitations of my study and its implications for practice.

Two: Literature Review

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the findings of my scoping review. A scoping review is a type of literature review aimed at mapping the available evidence about an identified topic to illuminate the breadth and diversity of knowledge within a given research focus (Peters et al. 2020). Originally proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), the scoping review framework was subsequently advanced and modified by Levac et al. (2010) and Peters et al. (2015). Unlike systematic reviews, which use strict inclusion criteria and quality assessments to answer narrow review questions in areas where there is an established body of knowledge, a scoping review is better suited to exploring an emerging or heterogeneous body of literature where the range of evidence may be unclear (Peters et al. 2020). I identified a scoping review as the most appropriate approach to examine trainees' EG experiences, as it allowed for a broad, exploratory mapping of the existing literature across diverse contexts, training programmes and theoretical underpinnings. My scoping review followed Peters et al.'s (2015) nine-stage framework, outlined in Table 2.

Stage One: Rationale, Objectives and Review Questions

Given that EG is used as a training method across multiple disciplines, including counselling, social work and psychology, a scoping review offered the opportunity to synthesise findings across diverse contexts. Anticipating differences in pedagogical approaches, the objectives of this review included clarifying key concepts, understanding the breadth of students' experiences and examining the methodologies used in the literature.

As recommended by Peters et al. (2020), I used the population, concept and context (PCC) mnemonic to develop my review questions and define the scope and boundaries of the search strategy as follows:

Table 2*Scoping Review Framework*

Stage	Description
One	Define the scoping review rationale, objectives and their alignment with the review questions. Define population, concept and context (PCC) elements consistent with the review questions.
Two	Develop the specific inclusion criteria based on the review questions, to inform decisions on the sources to be included.
Three	Describe the planned approach to searching, selecting, data charting and presentation of the evidence.
Four	Search the literature. Describe search strategies.
Five	Select the sources for review. Provide a PRISMA diagram to illustrate the selection process.
Six	Extract the evidence and arrange it in a table according to fields such as author(s), year of publication, country of origin, methodology and concept.
Seven	Analyse the evidence and approach to the synthesis of the findings.
Eight	Present the findings in tabular and narrative format.
Nine	Discuss the findings, including their implications.

1. The *population* comprised postgraduate students undertaking courses in subjects including counselling, psychotherapy and psychology courses.
2. The *concept* was centred on students' experiences of EG participation, including understanding of group dynamics.
3. The *context* referred to EG in postgraduate courses and encompassed a variety of models.

As I was interested in exploring trainees' experiences of group dynamics at three

levels (here-and-now experience, learning from that experience and application to practice), I formulated two review questions, one centred on trainees' *understanding of group dynamics* and an ancillary one about their *here-and-now experiences*. Therefore, the questions of this scoping review were:

1. Primary question: What is known about *postgraduate students'* (population) *understanding of group dynamics* (concept) through participation in *experiential group during training* (context)?
2. Sub-question: What is known about *postgraduate students'* (population) *experience* (concept) of participating in *experiential group during training* (context)?

Stage Two: Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Complementing the PCC elements, I developed inclusion/exclusion criteria related to the types of evidence, language, geography and timeframe. These are summarised in Table 3. During an initial search for relevant sources conducted in preparation for the thesis research protocol (in the summer of 2024), I identified that most empirical studies exploring trainees' EG experiences had been carried out in the United States, with some in the United Kingdom. Due to the comparability of their training systems and their contextual relevance, I decided therefore to include studies from these countries only. However, during the subsequent, more thorough searches conducted for the literature review informing my thesis, I identified two additional empirical studies through handsearching, one from Lithuania and one from Ireland. Given the limited evidence on trainees' EG experiences, I recognised the importance of including these additional studies to broaden both the geographical and contextual scope of an otherwise limited empirical evidence base.

Table 3*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Evidence Searching and Selection*

	Included	Excluded
Population	Postgraduate students in counselling, psychotherapy and psychology courses (included master's and doctoral levels).	Empirical studies with participants other than postgraduate students, e.g., group facilitators, course instructors or undergraduate students.
Concept	Students' perceptions of their experiences of participating in EG.	Empirical studies that, while focusing on some aspects of EG, did not centre on students' experiences.
Context	EG in postgraduate courses, encompassing a variety of models.	Other forms of experiential learning in graduate courses (e.g., reflective spaces).
Type of literature	Empirical research with diverse methodologies (quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods) to ensure a comprehensive mapping of the literature not restricted to one specific methodology.	Books and articles centred on theoretical understanding, anecdotal evidence and/or historical notes of group processes in EG in training settings. Review articles on the use of EG in higher education settings.
Language	No restrictions on language.	
Geography	Empirical studies from the United Kingdom and the United States, since most of the work carried out in this area have been published in those countries.	Empirical studies on EG that were carried out in countries other than the United Kingdom or the United States.
Timeframe	Post 1997. Kline et al.'s (1997) study was a key paper, the first to focus on participants' perceptions of their EG experiences, employing a qualitative methodology.	Empirical articles published before 1997 and after the time I carried out the literature searches.

Methods

Stages Three and Four: Planned Approach and Search Strategy

Peters et al. (2020) recommend a three-step search strategy for scoping reviews: 1) an initial limited search of at least two databases to identify key terms and understand how the literature describes the topic; 2) a comprehensive search across all relevant databases using full Boolean search strings; and 3) handsearching the reference lists of identified articles to discover anything missed. Adapting this strategy, I found it more effective to use specific terms, rather than strictly following the subject-heading approach in step one, as subject headings proved too broad. I started with APA PsycInfo and APA PsycArticles to identify the EG literature, conducting individual database searches to maintain transparency and account for differences in database-specific indexing vocabulary. I then extended the search to three further databases using specific terms rather than full search strings: Medline Ultimate (for clinical and healthcare perspectives), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global (to include grey literature and reduce publication bias) and ERIC (for the educational dimension). I also searched Google Scholar as part of my systematic approach. Individual database results were then combined using the Boolean operator AND to inform the initial screening stage. I marked these results in bold in Table A1 (Appendix A), which provides a list of search term used.

Stage Five: Selecting the Studies

Based on the title and abstract of each source, I screened the results from the database searches. Since the searches from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global and Google Scholar produced results in their thousands, for the sake of feasibility, I screened the first 100 results for each database. After discarding duplicates, 110 sources were identified as potentially relevant to my review questions. Full text articles were retrieved and a second

stage of screening undertaken to ensure that they met inclusion/exclusion criteria. Although I had initially excluded non-UK and non-US empirical studies, I identified two articles (from Ireland and Lithuania) that were relevant to this review and, therefore, decided to include them. Following screening, 19 articles remained. Six more studies were identified through handsearching, bringing the total number of sources to 25. Informed by the guidelines provided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Page et al., 2021), a flow diagram detailing the screening process can be found in Appendix B.

Stage Six: Data Charting

In scoping reviews, data charting is the systematic process of organising key information by each included study relevant to the review questions (Pollock et al., 2023). Unlike systematic reviews that generally focus on synthesising data on effectiveness, data charting is more descriptive and exploratory rather than evaluative, helping identify patterns, gaps and the nature of the evidence base to create a map of the existing literature. Key information extracted included author details, study aims, methods used, population details, characteristics of EG models and key findings. Table C1 (Appendix C) provides a sample of my data charting containing a summary of extracted data by study.

Stage Seven: Analysis of the Evidence

Data synthesis involved a combination of complementary approaches to provide a comprehensive overview of the included literature. Charted data were analysed using descriptive numerical summaries and inductive thematic analysis (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), consistent with a descriptive qualitative content analysis that is typical for scoping reviews (Levac et al., 2010; Pollock et al., 2023). I firstly used frequency analysis to quantify the distribution of studies across key characteristics, including country of origin, study design and

population groups, thereby mapping the overall landscape of the field (Appendix D). By applying content analysis, studies were categorised according to the conceptual and contextual focus of the included sources. Finally, I organised findings thematically, with themes derived inductively from the charted data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), before being integrated through narrative synthesis to produce a coherent account of the evidence base.

Stage Eight: Findings

This section presents the findings from my scoping review. I begin by providing brief numerical summaries of the included studies, organised by country of publication, methodology and population. I then offer an overview of the literature using the PCC mnemonic. Finally, I present a synthesis of my analysis through the themes and subthemes that I developed from the studies' findings. Together, these findings address my review questions, which focused on postgraduate students' EG experiences and their understanding of group dynamics developed through EG participation.

Numerical Summaries

Country of Publication and Methodologies

Most studies in this review were carried out in the United States (17 of 25). Of the remaining eight, six were conducted in the United Kingdom, one in Ireland and one in Lithuania. Twelve used a qualitative methodology (eight from the United States, three from the United Kingdom, and one from Lithuania), nine a quantitative methodology (seven from the United States and two from the United Kingdom) and four a mixed methods methodology (two from the United States, one from the United Kingdom and one from Ireland). The relatively even distribution between quantitative and qualitative research reflects methodological diversity, highlighting the value of understanding both the effectiveness of EG in increasing self-awareness (as shown through quantitative designs) and the nuanced,

subjective and interpersonal aspects of group processes and personal change (as explored through qualitative approaches).

Most studies reviewed (21) included cross-sectional and longitudinal designs with participants enrolled in postgraduate courses at the time of the research. Four were retrospective studies exploring participants' reflections on their EG experiences, a design similar to that used in my research.

Population

In most studies (17), participants were master's-level counselling students, with only three studies involving doctoral-level students in counselling or clinical psychology. In three studies, participants were counselling trainees up to diploma level, whereas three other studies provided no specification about the training level. Therefore, the population group in included studies was relatively homogenous.

Content Analysis of Concepts and Context

In the following sections, I provide an overview of included studies by concept (students' EG experiences, including understanding of group dynamics) and context (EG in graduate courses, encompassing a variety of models). Table 4 reports the themes and subthemes that I identified through a thematic analysis of the studies' aims and the pedagogical approaches to EG.

Concepts

Included studies addressed students' EG experiences in three main ways. The first, Experiences in Experiential Groups, captured a broad range of experiences, including unspecified lived experiences, therapeutic factors and participants' expectations of EG. The second theme, Group Dynamics, focused on group processes, covering leadership skill development, cohesion, the dual role of facilitators and stages of group development. The

third theme, Personal and Professional Development, addressed growth in self-awareness (understanding one's emotions, thoughts and behaviours) and interpersonal awareness (recognising and empathising with others in interaction).

Context

The context refers to the pedagogical approaches of EG that students experienced. I generated four themes that map the contextual features of EG across the reviewed studies. The first, EG Models, described a continuum from fully unstructured (here-and-now, psychoanalytically-informed) to structured, curriculum-based formats. In between, lie models where members set personal goals and different models (humanistic, integrative, systemic). Some studies left the model unspecified. The second theme, Number and Frequency of Sessions, showed a diversity of programmes, grouped around 4-10 or 10-16 sessions, with a subset not reporting this detail. The third theme, Facilitator's Role, identified four distinct arrangements: co-facilitating doctoral students, course instructors (known to students from shared teaching), external professionals, or group members themselves co-leading some sessions. The fourth theme, Names for Experiential Group, listed the varied terminology referring to EG. Together, these themes provided a map of what has been studied, in what conditions and where the research gaps lie.

Table 4*Content Analysis of Concepts and Context*

	Theme	Subtheme	Source
Concepts	Experiences in experiential group	Generic (unspecified experiences)	Hall et al., 1999; Anderson & Price, 2001; Robson & Robson, 2008; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008; Anderson et al., 2014; Jakubkaitė & Kočiūnas, 2014; Liu et al., 2021; Smith & Burr, 2022
		Therapeutic/growth factors	Kiweewa et al., 2013; Young et al., 2013
		Expectations	Moller & Rance, 2013; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020
	Group dynamics	Group leadership skills	Ohrt et al., 2013; Urkmez & Singhani, 2023
		Group cohesion	Steen et al., 2014; Kivlighan et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2025
		Dual relationships	Anderson & Price, 2001; St.Pierre, 2014
		Stages of group development	Young et al., 2013; Ohrt et al., 2014; Anderson et al., 2014; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020
	Personal and professional development	Self-awareness/growth	Lennie, 2007; Ieva et al., 2009; Knight et al., 2010; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Kiweewa et al., 2013; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020; Liu et al., 2021
		Interpersonal awareness	Kline et al., 1997; Ieva et al., 2009; Ohrt et al., 2014; Kivlighan et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022
Context	EG models		
		Unstructured – here and now	Kline et al., 1997; Lennie, 2007; Robson & Robson, 2008; Moller & Rance, 2013; Young et al., 2013; Anderson et al., 2013; Ohrt et al., 2014; Kivlighan et al., 2019; Smith & Burr, 2022
		Unstructured – with personal goals	Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008; Ieva et al., 2009; Ohrt et al., 2013

Theme	Subtheme	Source
Number and frequency of sessions	Different models	Hall et al., 1999; Knight et al., 2010; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020
	Structured – curriculum-based	Ohrt et al., 2013; Urkmez & Singhani, 2023
	Unspecified models	Anderson & Price, 2001; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Kiweewa et al., 2013; Jakubkaitė & Kočiūnas, 2014; Steen et al., 2014; St.Pierre, 2014; Liu et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022
	Four sessions	4 x 2hr weekly (Steen et al., 2014)
		4 x 90m (Urkmez & Singhani, 2023)
		8 x 90m weekly, 12 x 90 weekly (Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008)
	Eight-16 sessions	10 x 90m weekly (Ieva et al., 2009)
		10 x 80m, 12 x 60m (Ohrt et al., 2013)
		10 x 60m (Young et al., 2013)
		10 x 90m weekly (Ohrt et al., 2014)
		10 x 90m every three weeks (McMahon & Rodillas, 2020)
		11 x 90m weekly, 11 x 60m weekly, 13 x 90m weekly (Kiweewa et al., 2013)
		11 x 60m weekly (Liu et al., 2021)
		11 x 60m weekly (Liu et al., 2022)
		12 x 60m (Robson & Robson, 2008)
		12 x 90 weekly (Anderson et al., 2014)
		12 x 90 over three days (Jakubkaitė & Kočiūnas, 2014)
		13 x 90 weekly (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010)
		15 x 90m (Kline et al., 1997)
		16 x 60m weekly (Kivlighan et al., 2019)
		One year long x 60m weekly (Moller & Rance, 2013)
	Sessions and frequency not specified	Hall et al., 1999; Anderson & Price, 2001; Lennie, 2007; Knight et al., 2010; St.Pierre,

Theme	Subtheme	Source
Facilitator's role	2014; Smith & Burr, 2022	
	Doctoral students	Kline et al., 1997; Ieva et al., 2009; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Ohrt et al., 2013; Young et al., 2013; Ohrt et al., 2014; Steen et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Urkmez & Singhani, 2023
	Course instructors	Anderson & Price, 2001; Robson & Robson, 2008; Kiweewa et al., 2013; Anderson et al., 2014; St.Pierre, 2014; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020
	External professionals	Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008; Moller & Rance, 2013; Jakubkaitė & Kočiūnas, 2014; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020
	Group members	Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008; Anderson et al., 2014; Kivlighan et al., 2019; Urkmez & Singhani, 2023
Names for experiential group	Names with the word "experiential"	Knight et al., 1997; Anderson & Price, 2001; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008; Ieva et al., 2009; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Kiweewa et al., 2013; Anderson et al., 2014; Jakubkaitė & Kočiūnas, 2014; Ohrt et al., 2014; Steen et al., 2014; St.Pierre, 2014; Liu et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Urkmez & Singhani, 2023; Zhu et al., 2025
	Names with the word "personal"	Lennie, 2007; Robson & Robson, 2008; Moller & Rance, 2013; Ohrt et al., 2013; Young et al., 2013; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020; Smith & Burr, 2022
	Other names	Hall et al., 1999; Knight et al., 2010; Kivlighan et al., 2019

Addressing the Review Questions

In what follows, I address my review questions:

1. What is known about postgraduate students' understanding of group dynamics through

participation in EG during training?

2. What is known about postgraduate students' experience of participating in EG during training?

Based on the thematic map of my analysis of the studies' findings (Table 5), my literature synthesis is organised into three main themes: Safety, Group Dynamics and Personal and Professional Development/Learning.

Table 5

Thematic Map of the Studies' Findings

Theme	Subtheme
One: Safety	One: Factors contributing to feeling safe
	Two: Self-disclosure
	Three: Harmful experiences
	Four: Dual relationship
Two: Group dynamics	One: Stages of group development
	Two: Facilitator's role
Three: Personal and professional development/learning	One: Intrapersonal development
	Two: Interpersonal development
	Three: Learning about group dynamics
	Four: Application of skills/learning

Theme One: Safety

Safety was a primary concern in a substantial proportion of studies (12 of 25). Students reported being unclear about group purposes and expectations, found open-ended structures unsettling and expressed mixed feelings about self-disclosure, feedback and trusting group members. Participants questioned whether they would receive adequate support during difficult moments and struggled to establish comfortable roles within the group. These findings suggest that ambiguity regarding boundaries, norms and expectations undermined students' sense of psychological safety, potentially limiting their capacity to engage fully within EG. This theme comprised four subthemes.

Subtheme One: Factors Contributing to Feeling Safe. This subtheme summarises the factors that participants mentioned as contributing to feeling safe within the group: session structure, group purpose and norms, feeling heard, and support. The open-ended and here-and-now structure of sessions was noted as impacting participants' worries (Anderson et al., 2014). In their interview-based study exploring students' perceptions of their EG experiences ($n = 8$), Jakubkaitė and Kočiūnas (2014) found that the lack of clear group goals contributed to participants' difficulty to define their personal goals. By contrast, students' clearer understanding of the group purpose provided at the beginning of the programme was found to be important for students' feeling of safety (Knight et al., 2010; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020; Ohrt et al., 2014; Robson & Robson, 2008).

Establishing group norms contributed to participants' feeling of safety, as agreements within the group allowed students the freedom to share without undue pressure (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010) and regulated participants' behaviour based on honesty, openness and confidentiality (Robson & Robson, 2008). With uncertain rules, instead, students experienced groups as unpredictable and unstable, even turbulent and dangerously chaotic (Smith & Burr,

2022). In a mixed methods study using a critical incident methodology based on students' journal entries ($n = 27$), Kiweewa et al. (2013) identified Group Structure as one of the 12 growth factors contributing to students' personal growth and awareness. They found that students perceived clear group norms and goals and the facilitator's supportive role as enabling them to self-disclose and cultivate interpersonal skills through their interactions with group members.

Feeling heard was important for participants' sense of safety. When unheard or dismissed, they felt unsafe (Robson & Robson, 2008). Students' experiences of group facilitation were mixed, positive when facilitators were perceived as supportive, and negative when they were not (Smith & Burr, 2022; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008).

Subtheme Two: Self-Disclosure. This subtheme illustrates issues related to self-disclosure and sharing during EG. Nearly half of the studies (12) described participants' anxieties or worries about sharing personal information, feelings and thoughts to group members. In their interview-based study, using reflective papers and a focus group ($N = 10$; $n = 8$), Anderson et al. (2014) found that some participants tended to share less as they worried that personal disclosures might be met with negative responses from other group members. Similarly, participants across studies reported feelings of vulnerability, anxiety and wariness about sharing in the group (Ieva et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2021; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020), with some sharing less due to concerns about post-group support (Jakubkaitė & Kočiūnas, 2014) or fear of judgement from peers (McMahon & Rodillas, 2020). Smith and Davis-Gage (2008), in their grounded theory study involving a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews ($n = 11$), found that members' relationships significantly influenced sharing, with positive relationships encouraging openness and negative ones causing students to feel more guarded. In their sequential mixed methods study exploring the effects of journalling on group

cohesion ($n = 25$), Steen et al. (2014) found that familiarity with peers from other classes actually hindered deeper self-disclosure among students in EG. Zhu et al. (2025), in a survey-based study exploring the effects of self-disclosure on students' perceptions of group cohesion ($n = 44$), found a consistent association between self-disclosure and perceived group cohesion, though the direction of this relationship remains unclear.

Despite the uncomfortable feelings related to sharing, some participants reported its benefit for personal and interpersonal awareness development (Ieva et al., 2009; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020). In addition, in their survey-based mixed methods study on students' reflections and recommendations ($n = 32$), McMahon and Rodillas (2020) found that the support provided by group members enabled many students to share personal information. Furthermore, through thematic analysis of students' anonymous journals of their EG experiences, Robson and Robson (2008) reported participants' perceptions that self-disclosure contributed to an increased feeling of safety. The majority of participants in St.Pierre's (2014) study – a survey-based study exploring students' attitudes and facilitator participation in EG ($n = 330$) – felt that they were open to sharing, although a quarter reported feeling uncomfortable self-disclosing in front of the facilitator. Notably, while students were initially cautious about self-disclosure, their sense of safety increased as the group progressed, enabling greater sharing and deeper benefit from the experience (Liu et al., 2021; Ohrt et al., 2014). Kiweewa et al. (2013) reported that most participants (62.9%) recognised that self-disclosure facilitated gaining insights into the values and beliefs that motivated them within the group. However, not all students developed this confidence, with some feeling that self-disclosure remained work in progress by the programme's end (McMahon & Rodillas, 2020). In their Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis retrospective study involving semi-structured interviews ($n = 12$), Smith and Burr (2022) found that the majority of students

associated self-disclosure with anxiety, shame and fear of rejection, with some describing it as traumatic when unsupported, and only a minority viewing it positively. Despite the challenging experiences, however, some participants reported gaining learning and positive outcomes (McMahon & Rodillas, 2020; Smith & Burr, 2022), and an ability to reframe difficult situations (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010).

Subtheme Three: Harmful Experiences. This subtheme considers students' perceptions of EG as not merely uncomfortable, but harmful. Five of the studies reviewed reported evaluative terms describing participants' experiences as distressful, psychologically damaging, traumatising and painful. Hall et al. (1999), in their survey-based retrospective study on students' perceptions in two different EG models ($n = 92$), investigated whether participants perceived EG as psychologically damaging. They found that two (in the Rogerian small group) and one (in the Group Dynamics small group) participants reported experiencing long-term psychological damage, whereas a larger number (12.4% and 10.9% respectively) reported short-term psychological distress. Nearly half of the participants (43%) in Knight et al.'s (2010) survey study – using a questionnaire on students' perceived impact of EG on their personal and professional development ($n = 124$) – reported experiencing high distress. Just less than a third found the groups high in value and high in distress ($n = 28$), while one-sixth found them low in value and high in distress ($n = 17$). Moller and Rance (2013) – a questionnaire-based thematic analysis of students' perceptions of EG purpose ($n = 25$) – also noted that some participants' accounts signalled anticipation of distress and potential harm from the group. Some participants described their EG experience as traumatising, particularly where little support was provided, suggesting that any meaningful learning came at significant emotional cost (Smith & Burr, 2022). Finally, St.Pierre (2014) noted that close to a quarter of students (24.2%) reported experiencing short-term stress, with 4% experiencing long-term

stress.

Subtheme Four: Dual Relationship. This subtheme concerns participants' perceptions of the challenges arising from the instructor occupying a dual role as both course tutor and group facilitator. Five studies found that some participants felt uncomfortable disclosing or participating in the group when the facilitator also held a teaching role. In their survey-based study on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of EG ($n = 99$), Anderson and Price (2001) reported that between 3% and 29% of students had difficulties with issues related to dual relationship and invasion of privacy, and found that many students were concerned about their participation being judged by others. Ieva et al. (2009) – a grounded theory study analysing journal entries and interviews about students' perceptions of their EG experiences ($n = 15$) – noted that participants reported preferring doctoral students as facilitators over course tutors, believing they would have engaged less openly had their tutors led the group. McMahon and Rodillas (2020) found that, while students generally felt safe and trusted their facilitators, some reported that dual relationship issues were not effectively addressed by the end of the programme. St.Pierre (2014) found that 17% of participants believed or were unsure whether their EG disclosures had affected their academic assessment, with the majority reporting that ethical concerns, including the facilitator's dual role, negatively impacted their experience.

Theme Two: Group Dynamics

This theme describes the group processes that participants experienced during EG. It includes two subthemes: Stages of Group Development and Facilitator's Role.

Subtheme One: Stages of Group Development. This subtheme concerns the feelings, behaviours and insights participants experienced in EG, reflecting patterns at different group stages. Cohesion was often being identified as the vehicle for developmental

progress, emerging gradually as trust deepened, with participants reporting increased interpersonal risk-taking, authenticity and vulnerability. Studies described how participants' emotional states changed over time, from initial resistance and guardedness, experiencing feelings of discomfort and anxiety, to more openness and sharing (Anderson et al., 2014; Ieva et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008). Increased familiarity with other group members as the programme evolved also meant becoming less dependent on the group leader's authority (Jakubkaitė & Kočiūnas, 2014). In their survey-based study exploring the relationships between group cohesion and students' social learning and interpersonal awareness ($n = 8$), Kivlighan et al. (2019) found that participants who felt greater group cohesion demonstrated more social and interpersonal learning. Similarly, Young et al. (2013), in their survey-based study enquiring into students' perceptions of the therapeutic climate ($n = 43$), reported statistically significant results when exploring students' perceptions of group climate (i.e., engagement, avoidance and conflict) at different points in time of the programme, indicating that participants became significantly more engaged while experiencing less conflict over time. In their thematic analysis of participants' reflective journals ($n = 52$), Ohrt et al. (2014) identified four stages of group development: exploration, transition, working and closure. Early on, members felt awkward but also supported; this gave way to cautious self-disclosure in the transition phase. The working stage saw more open emotional sharing, deepening group bonds, before members pulled back in the closure stage to avoid discomfort. This developmental pattern is consistent with some therapeutic literature (e.g., Corey et al., 2018).

However, patterns were not uniform across studies, indicating diverse experiences that may depend on individual differences, EG model and facilitation. Lennie (2007), in her mixed methods study with a focus group and a rating questionnaire ($n = 88$), found that participants

felt more at ease with group conditions early on, but could not establish whether this greater ease translated into greater self-awareness. Zhu et al. (2025) found that participants who viewed their group as more cohesive early on – reporting stronger positive bonding or fewer negative relationships – experienced slower growth in their cohesion ratings as the group progressed. McMahon and Rodillas (2020) reported no significant difference in perceived group engagement, avoidance and conflict from middle to end of the programme, nor significant difference between expectations of safety at the beginning and reported experiences at the end. Steen et al. (2014) used Tuckman's (1965) five-stage model (forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning) to examine student resistance and group cohesion, finding that sharing electronic journals unexpectedly worsened cohesion due to a resistance to emotional disclosure.

Subtheme Two: Facilitator's Role. This subtheme considers participants' perceptions of facilitation characteristics that contributed to group leaders being experienced as supportive or otherwise. Generally speaking, participants regarded group leaders as models for vicarious learning. Participants reported the development of their leadership skills through the facilitators' modelling behaviours (Ieva et al., 2009; Ohrt et al., 2013; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008). Similarly, Knight et al. (2008) found that participants valued EG more highly when facilitators offered frequent and useful observations about group behaviour, and less so when they were perceived as distant. In their growth factors taxonomy, Kiweewa et al. (2013) considered the facilitator's interventions as one of the key factors in aiding students' personal development. In addition, a supportive facilitator was considered critical for making participants' anxieties more tolerable (Smith & Burr, 2022).

Theme Three: Personal and Professional Development/Learning

This theme describes the personal and professional learning participants gained

through EG, encompassing intrapersonal, interpersonal and group levels.

Subtheme One: Intrapersonal Development. Most studies reported personal-level changes in students as a result of EG participation. These include enhanced self-reflection, introspection and emotional insight (Anderson et al., 2014; Kline et al., 1997; Moller & Rance, 2013; Ohrt et al., 2013; Ohrt et al., 2014), increased self-awareness through self-disclosure and exploring one's experience (McMahon & Rodillas, 2020), insights into one's strengths and the need to address areas of development (Ieva et al., 2009; Kline et al., 1997; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010), the importance of experiencing one's own vulnerability to understand a client's experience (Ieva et al., 2009; Moller & Rance, 2013) and increased empathy (Kline et al., 1997; Liu et al., 2022; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020; Robson & Robson, 2008). Furthermore, participants reported gaining insight into the experience of being unable to express one's authentic self (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010), their awareness of how one relates to others (Liu et al., 2021; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020) and improved control, understood as enhanced competence in achieving personal goals (Young et al., 2013). In addition, participants reported positive cognitive and behavioural changes and increased confidence (Anderson et al., 2014), an awareness of the impact of one's history, views and behaviour on others (Anderson et al., 2014; Kiweewa et al., 2013; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008), a self-awareness about their intuitive sense of rhythm and timing in group interactions (Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008) and a greater awareness of individual and cultural differences (Anderson et al., 2014; Jakubkaitė & Kočiūnas, 2014; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008). However, Lennie (2007) found that whilst trainees perceived certain factors as contributing to self-awareness development, comfort with these conditions declined as training progressed, and no clear relationship was established between perceived group conditions and self-awareness outcomes.

Subtheme Two: Interpersonal Development. This subtheme defines interpersonal development as the ability to understand and interpret the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of others in social situations, while also recognising how one's actions affect them. Interpersonal learning encompassed a range of developments, including gaining self-knowledge and skills applicable to professional practice (Anderson et al., 2014; Kline et al., 1997; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020; Ohrt et al., 2013) or to personal relationships (Ieva et al., 2009), and learning to express oneself through observing peers taking risks (Kiweewa et al., 2013; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010) and facilitator modelling (McMahon & Rodillas, 2020; Ohrt et al., 2013; Urkmez & Singhani, 2023). Students also developed awareness of acceptance and universality (Kiweewa et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2021; Ohrt et al., 2014; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008), explored how one is perceived by others (Kline et al., 1997; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010), developed counselling skills (Moller & Rance, 2013), and formed connections with group members (Ohrt et al., 2014; Robson & Robson, 2008), including awareness of quieter participants (Ohrt et al., 2014). More broadly, Kivlighan et al. (2019) found that social and interpersonal learning increased alongside greater perceived group cohesion.

Subtheme Three: Learning About Group Dynamics. This subtheme describes students' perceptions and learning about group processes developed from participating in EG. Participants reported that EG provided the opportunity to learn about group processes in real life and to translate into practice the theoretical understanding of group dynamics that they learnt from books (Anderson et al., 2014; Ieva et al., 2009; Jakubkaitė & Kočiūnas, 2014; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008; St.Pierre, 2014). Overall, studies noted that students reported gaining insights into group processes, such as relational dynamics (Moller & Rance, 2013), and experiencing stages of group development (Anderson et al., 2014; Ieva et al., 2009; Ohrt et al., 2014; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008; Steen et al., 2014), including a reduced dependence

on the group leader as the group progressed (Young et al., 2013).

Subtheme Four: Application of Skills/Learning. This subtheme focuses on the application in their work of the personal and interpersonal skills and insights that students learnt from EG. Four studies explored participants' perceptions of their experiences in EG after they qualified. Their findings showed that the application of learning was more likely to take place over time. Hall et al. (1999) analysed students' ratings of the usefulness of EG for their work post-qualification. They found no evidence that the value ascribed to EG diminished over time, on the contrary, temporal distance appeared to enhance rather than reduce perceived impact, particularly for those who completed training decades earlier. Similarly, participants in Knight et al.'s (2010) study valued more their EG participation after qualifying, although this study also found that a substantial number of participants (40%) identified alternative methods as more effective for learning reflective practice. Likewise, St.Pierre's (2014) study reported that two thirds of participants found that EG influenced their development as group counsellors. Participants in Smith and Burr's (2022) study acknowledged their acquired ability to sit with discomfort and apply learning from that experience in their post-qualification work. Furthermore, Anderson and Price (2001), enquiring into students' perceptions of the usefulness of EG as a positive learning experience, found that most students (between 77 and 97%) agreed or strongly agreed that the experience was positive and useful. While many studies explored the personal and interpersonal awareness and insights that students developed by participating in EG, details about how these skills and understanding impacted students' subsequent professional work remain scarce.

Stage Nine: Discussion and Conclusion

This scoping review aimed to map the available evidence on EG as a tool for

developing self- and interpersonal awareness in postgraduate training, focusing on students' understanding of group dynamics and their perceptions of EG experiences. Informed by guidance provided in Peters et al. (2015) and Peters et al. (2020), this review provided a framework to situate my experience of EG as a Tavistock-trainee EP, enabling comparison between the Tavistock model and existing EG research.

Most studies, carried out in the United States, involved master's counselling students, showing a dearth of research involving doctoral students. In particular, no study was found that researched the experiences of doctoral students in educational psychology. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that, in the United Kingdom, EG has been part of EP training exclusively at the Tavistock. However, the limited research is striking when one considers that the EG component is used as a training method in postgraduate courses at the Tavistock and other training institutions, such as clinical and counselling psychology doctoral programmes, psychotherapy courses and counselling and social work master's programmes.

The dominance of US research exploring students' EG experiences is likely to reflect at least two factors. Firstly, EG has strong historical ties to the United States as various models (e.g., T-groups, Rogerian style) and their theorists (e.g., Kurt Lewin, Carl Rogers) were US-based. Well-documented historical analyses of the evolution of EG in the United States (e.g., De Board 1978) illustrate how it contributed to the establishment of frameworks, training programmes and research traditions that continue to be popular. Secondly, the standards set by US accrediting bodies specify experiential group activities. Both the Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) require graduate programmes to provide direct experiences where students participate in small group activity approved by the

programmes for a minimum of 10 hours (CACREP, 2024) and 20 hours (ASGW, 2000) respectively, over the course of one academic year.

A strong tradition in group theory also developed in the United Kingdom, particularly in the field of psychoanalysis. Work by Bion (1961) and Foulkes (1964) influenced the use of small group work both in therapy and training. For example, the Tavistock model includes the small study group in the conference format. As a requirement for accreditation and proficiency in practising psychology, the regulators for EP training (the British Psychological Society, BPS) and health and care professions (the Health and Care Professions Council, HCPC) consider the ability to “demonstrate self-awareness and work as a reflective practitioner” (BPS, 2023, p. 25) and “critically reflect on the use of self in the therapeutic process” (HCPC, 2023, p. 15). However, neither body specifies that trainees/practitioners should undertake a group experience during training to facilitate awareness of self in group activities.

The findings were specific to a narrow population (master’s level counselling students) largely comprising female and white students, mostly consistent with the population that makes up counselling courses in Western academic institutions (e.g., UK Council for Psychotherapy, 2024). This means that the findings may not apply to other training contexts (e.g., doctoral, continuing professional development), may not transfer to other disciplines (e.g., social work, education, organisational development) and the evidence base cannot speak for EG outside training contexts (e.g., clinical). In addition, master’s-level training may represent a particular developmental stage whereby students at this level may respond differently to EG than more experienced practitioners (e.g., doctoral students). While this is a limitation of current knowledge, it represents a significant opportunity for future research that could expand to include both different population and context.

The diversity of approaches to investigating students' experiences and learning in EG made comparisons of findings difficult. This is consistent with a previous review, which noted a lack of consistent programme delivery, presenting challenges for synthesising evidence and drawing clear conclusions about effectiveness (Zhu et al., 2018). The diversity reflected the multifaceted nature of EG, yet the evidence base consisted of scattered findings about different phenomena rather than cumulative knowledge building around core processes or outcomes. Furthermore, some findings were contradictory. While some studies found that participation led to increased empathy (Kline et al., 1997; Liu et al., 2022; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020; Robson & Robson, 2008), the study by Ohrt et al. (2013) concluded that empathy did not increase for the participating students.

The studies reviewed here have mostly explored participants' subjective experiences, leaving largely unexplored how learning from EG was applied in their professional work. This was compounded by most studies' reliance on self-report measures (closed or open-ended questionnaires, or interviews), which are susceptible to methodological biases such as social desirability bias and recall bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Therefore, while individual studies provide valuable insights into some aspects of EG, fundamental questions cannot yet be answered about how different elements may interact or what mechanisms influence group behaviours. This is particularly relevant in the context of psychodynamically-informed EG practice, which brings to the fore the possibility of beneath-the-surface processes impacting participants' experiences. Therefore, practitioners and programme designers have limited evidence-based guidance as the fragmented literature offers multiple perspectives without clear integration. The conceptual diversity observed across the 25 studies may reflect an appropriate response to the genuine complexity of EG, particularly given the variety of theoretical and practical orientations across course providers. This suggests that EG research

remains in a relatively exploratory phase, and that researchers are still appropriately exploring EG from multiple angles, building the empirical foundation necessary for future theoretical integration, at least based on the different pedagogical approaches.

A major knowledge gap was related to the absence of research on students' experiences in psychodynamically-informed EG. Only two studies, UK-based, mentioned psychodynamic theory. Moller and Rance (2013), drawing on Bion (1961), explained how students' anxiety and defence mechanisms are necessary for learning in EG. Lennie (2007) differentiated between negative experiences in EG, informed by Bion's (1961) understanding of group work, and positive experiences, based on Foulkes's (1964) conceptualisation of the therapeutic group. However, neither study further explored the range of psychodynamic processes that may emerge and develop in EG.

This review highlighted the knowledge gap in the application of learning from EG in the professional context. Most studies researched students' perceptions of their EG experiences, focusing on exploring different constructs including personal insights, interpersonal awareness and understanding of group dynamics. Given that most studies took place during students' training, it is not surprising that research focused on their experiences rather than the application of their learning, since the students were still in training during data generation. In addition, the exploration of participants' understanding of group dynamics was limited to the stages of group development. Concepts such as boundaries, authority, role and task, informed by systems psychodynamic thinking (Green and Molenkamp, 2005) and used to understand group and organisational functioning, have not been utilised to frame neither the scope of the research nor the interpretation of the data. Psychodynamic group processes such as splitting, projection and projective identification (Klein, 1946) or the basic assumption modalities of group functioning (Bion, 1961) have also not been used to provide a

framework to explore and understand the unconscious processes that may be operating in groups. Therefore, research has not illuminated the application of learning from EG in professional practice and also neglected to explore psychodynamic group processes despite significant theoretical developments in understanding these dynamics.

To conclude, through this scoping review, I identified several research gaps and limitations, two of which were significant and provided the rationale for this research. While it was outside the scope of my study to address all the limitations identified here, I planned to explore trainees' learning about group processes and the application of such learning in the professional context, aiming to provide evidence of how the EG experience can contribute to trainees' professional development. At the same time, I hoped that evidence of the impact of EG on trainees' personal and professional development could provide practical and helpful implications to be considered and addressed by course directors, tutors and facilitators providing this unique experience to trainees.

Three: Methodology

Chapter Overview

This chapter provides a detailed account of the qualitative research design framing my study, introducing my values and my ontological and epistemological assumptions, my reflexive positionality and my personal, professional and theoretical influences. I restate my research questions, describe the rationale for choosing a qualitative design and highlight ethical considerations. In the Methods section, I present the strategies I used for data generation, management and analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach to research. I conclude by considering the quality of my study through the lens of methodological congruence and transparency.

Research positioning

Axiology

Axiology is the branch of philosophy concerned with how a researcher's values influence their study, from topic selection and methodology to how findings are reported. Rather than considering axiology to ensure objectivity (Saunders et al., 2016), acknowledging one's values reflects a value-laden epistemological position where knowledge production is inherently shaped by context and social conditioning. Therefore, being transparent about values represents both methodological integrity and ethical responsibility (Pretorius, 2024).

Since starting the doctoral training, I developed an appreciation for how group behaviours may be shaped by unconscious mechanisms, reflecting a belief that understanding human experience requires moving beyond conscious report toward the deeper structures of meaning and relating that underlie it. This sensitivity informed my choice of a psychodynamic lens to interpret my dataset.

I brought to this research a commitment to intellectual humility and genuine curiosity.

I approached this study not to confirm existing beliefs but to understand something I found genuinely puzzling. I feel confident about the knowledge it produced, while remaining open to the possibility that other approaches can illuminate aspects of relational dynamics that this study left unexplored.

Finally, through my personal history, I developed a sensitivity to whose experiences are considered worth knowing about. Growing up in a working class family, leaving my country of origin and spending thirty years navigating institutions and cultures different from those I was raised in, have given me an attentiveness to what is prioritised and what gets left out. This value shaped my decision to research Tavistock-trained EPs' experiences of EG, reflecting a commitment to making visible what academic and institutional cultures overlooked. My broadly left-leaning political values reinforced this orientation, inclining me towards a critical awareness of the power relations that operate within training institutions and shape what trainees feel able to experience, express and change.

Ontology

Ontology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of reality, i.e., what exists in the human world and can be made the focus of research knowledge (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Underpinned by a critical realist ontology (Bhaskar, 2016), my study assumed that reality exists independently of our knowledge of it, that different interpretations of such reality are possible and that reality is stratified, composed of layers that are not equally visible or accessible. At the surface, lies what can be directly observed and reported (empirical); beneath that, lie the events and experiences that occur whether or not they are articulated (actual); and at the deepest level, lie the generative mechanisms and structures that may contribute to those events and experiences (causal) (Pilgrim, 2014; Saunders et al., 2016). My study further assumed that generative mechanisms, considered as “complex, plural

and not always currently understood” (Pilgrim, 2014), do not necessarily provide causal explanations of events. Instead, descriptions of behaviours and relationships between events are context-, value- and theory-dependent (Pilgrim, 2014), and what can be interpreted from the data is always partial and indirect (Willig, 2019). These assumptions, however, do not undermine the claim that a real world exists independently of our knowledge of it (Maxwell, 2012).

Drawing on systems psychodynamic theories, my study was consistent with this ontological position. Klein (1946) and Bion (1961) assumed that real psychological and group mechanisms (internal objects, projective identification, basic assumption mentalities, the container-contained dynamic) operate beneath conscious experience even though not directly observable, contributing to what individuals feel, perceive and narrate. Psychodynamic theory and critical realism thus share an understanding of reality that go beyond what is available to observation or self-report. The aim was not to establish law-like causal relationships, but to identify mechanisms contributing to participants’ EG experiences (Maxwell, 2012). The theoretical lens provided me a conceptual vocabulary to interpret aspects of participants’ narratives, grounded in a theoretically coherent account of how groups generate anxiety, mobilise defences and create conditions for, or obstacles to, developmental experiences such as EG.

Epistemology

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the study of how knowledge is created. Consistent with a critical realist ontology, this study was underpinned by epistemological relativism, defined as knowing and speaking about the world with descriptions that are theoretically determined (Bhaskar, 1975). To recognise that our knowledge of the world is always shaped and mediated by individual perspectives and

theories is not to deny that a real world exists independently of those perspectives. Rather, it is about acknowledging the conditions under which that world can become knowable (Bhaskar, 1975; Yucel, 2018).

This epistemological position had the following implications for my research. The narratives participants produced in interviews were not transparent windows onto their experiences of, and learning from, EG. They were accounts produced under particular conditions, shaped by memory, language, the relational dynamics of the interview encounter and the participants' own interpretive frameworks. Equally, my analysis of those narratives was informed by specific theoretical orientations, which illuminated certain dimensions of the dataset, inevitably highlighting some features over others. In this sense, epistemological relativism provided the boundaries within which an open and reflexive, rigorous and theoretically self-aware qualitative research was built.

Subjectivity

Researcher's subjectivity is defined as the acknowledgement of how personal, professional and contextual experiences influence and shape the research process, including the topic of interest, the participant group and theoretical inclinations (Braun & Clarke, 2025). Rather than a limitation, subjectivity is considered as a crucial resource for conducting research, making irrelevant any attempt at reducing/controlling biases or bracketing (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Consistent with a critical realist ontology and epistemological relativism, being reflective and transparent to how my subjectivity shaped this study offered a lens through which my interpretation of the participants' accounts can be openly understood.

At the same time, my interest in psychodynamic thinking meant that I approached the dataset with a particular set of sensitivities. My developing awareness of what may lie beneath the surface may influence my interpretation of relational dynamics and group processes in

ways that a researcher working within a different theoretical tradition might not. My personal characteristics – an introvert, committed to listening and attuning to others, with a curiosity about the interior life – further impacted how I related with others during the research process and how I approached the dataset for interpretation. Rather than being neutral, my personality influenced what participants felt able to share based on their perception of me, what I noticed in their accounts and what questions I brought to the analysis. Naming them here is to recognise that the knowledge produced in my study was shaped by the subjectivity through which it was produced.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the practice of becoming aware of how my theoretical and philosophical assumptions (*epistemological reflexivity*) and personal positioning (including my values and personal and professional experiences, or *personal reflexivity*) influenced the research process (Willig, 2022). It involved active engagement with questions about how I related to my topic of research, the suitability of my research design to answer the research questions, the power relationship between interviewer and interviewees, about my role as an insider researcher and the ethical considerations around recruitment, data analysis and report of findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflexivity required me to consider the language used when reporting the research process, as language has a constructive side when describing a reality rather than merely mirroring real events. In addition, reflexivity, intended as an activity over time, enabled me to pause, observe and evaluate how the research impacted me personally and professionally (Willig, 2022). Therefore, rather than fitting neatly and solely into a stand-alone section in this thesis, reflexivity involved self-monitoring throughout the research process (Willig, 2019).

As a Tavistock trainee EP, I occupied an insider position that brought both advantages

and disadvantages (Mercer, 2007). It enabled a shared understanding of context, a shared language and trust based on having gone through the same training experience at the same institution. However, my position also carried the risk of sharing assumptions and blind spots, a difficulty in achieving a critical distance and a potential reluctance to critique shared experiences (Unluer, 2012). I also brought my assumptions, concerns and hopes to the research, requiring deliberate reflexive practice to remain open to perspectives that differed from my experience (Finlay & Gough, 2003). I used research and personal supervision to engage in reflective conversations about different aspects of the research process, discussing queries, impressions and doubts as well as sharing discoveries and insights about the research and my wider experiences in groups. I kept a reflective diary about my experiences and feelings during EG, noticing the impact that participants' accounts had on my engagement in EG. When reading and coding interview transcripts, I was aware, as much as I could, to what resonated with me as familiar, new or different to stay actively engaged with all aspects of the dataset relevant to my research. Importantly, I remained aware of how the theoretical lens I chose to interpret the dataset was influencing my reading of it, cognisant that other understandings could produce different findings. Rather than trying to eliminate the influence of my positioning on the research, these practices helped make that influence transparent, analytically productive and available for scrutiny.

Research Design

Qualitative Design and Rationale

Consistent with the philosophical assumptions underpinning this study, the research design is *qualitative, inductive/deductive* and *flexible*. The methodology evolved as the research progressed. It centred on open-ended research questions formulated to describe and explore participants' experiences of, and learning from EG, gathering their views on those

experiences, analysing transcripts using reflexive thematic analysis, and interpreting selected findings through a systems psychodynamic theoretical lens. I focused on the meaning participants made of their experiences, placed myself as a tool, from conception through to the wider implications of the study, and used data analysis inductively by generating themes from coded transcripts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Robson & McCartan, 2016). The design aimed to develop an understanding of EG across three levels – experience, learning and practice application – with an emphasis on group behaviours. Its flexibility reflected the recursive nature of qualitative research, requiring ongoing methodological congruence across philosophical assumptions, research questions, data generation, analysis and interpretation of participants' lived experiences (Maxwell, 2012; Willig, 2022).

This qualitative design employed a hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970, 1996), a theory-driven, interpretative approach that seeks the latent meanings of experience, particularly suited to exploring beneath-the-surface group dynamics. Drawing on systems psychodynamic theories, I interpreted the data deductively, consistent with a critical realist position in which suspicious interpretation identifies underlying explanatory mechanisms (Willig, 2022). However, I used both empathic and suspicious (inductive and deductive) approaches, recognising the importance of remaining close to participants' sense-making of their EG experiences while acknowledging that my researcher subjectivity inevitably shaped the interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Research Questions

Qualitative research questions tend to be open-ended and process-oriented, enquiring into what and how something happens (Willig, 2022). My research questions aimed to answer:

1. How do EPs describe their experience of EG?

2. What did EPs learn about group dynamics through participation in EG?
3. How do EPs apply their learning from EG in their professional work with groups?

These questions rested on several assumptions. Most fundamentally, EG was understood as a real phenomenon, as a developmental space and formal training practice that was psychologically and relationally significant, generating genuine experiences with lasting consequences. The lived experiences of EPs were likewise treated as real, not simply subjective impressions, and that, therefore, could be meaningfully investigated through qualitative inquiry. The group dynamics unfolding within EG were understood as real mechanisms, shaped by forces that operated and influenced participants' experiences. Similarly, the learning generated through EG, and its application to professional practice, constituted real outcomes: something genuinely occurred in EG that informed participants' professional lives.

These research questions were underpinned by political assumptions (Willig, 2022). Firstly, investigating psychodynamically-informed EG within a research vacuum was a political act of claiming that the emotional and relational dimensions of the EP training mattered and deserved to be recognised. Secondly, EG reflects the power asymmetry within the EP training at the Tavistock between the institution and the trainees. EG is a compulsory part of the course yet qualitatively very different from most didactic experiences. Therefore, offering EPs the opportunity to reflect on those experiences provided the research with the voice of the less powerful party within the training course. This voice could be taken seriously and contrasted with the institutional account of what EG is supposed to do and be. Thirdly, given the emphasis on group dynamics based on systems psychodynamic thinking, these questions underlined the relevance and explanatory power of such thinking within the EP profession, which is largely removed from it. Finally, they considered the value of EG as a

form of potential development and that any empirical evidence generated from this study could support the argument of maintaining it, while modifying it based on the findings.

Ethics and Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (Appendix E). Completing the application for ethical review involved a process of thinking about the possible ethical issues raised by my research. The objective was to reflect on any potential harm to the participants and myself as a result of the research process, and anticipate potential risks. While the ethics application had a purpose within a specific timeframe, ethical considerations permeated the entirety of the research process, from the initial idea through to the completion of my study and further into its practical implications. Based on the BPS *Code of Human Research Ethics* (BPS, 2021) and the *Code of Ethics and Conduct* (BPS, 2021), I reflected on the importance of respecting the autonomy, privacy and dignity of my participants, valuing their contributions and insights, minimising harm and contributing with recommendations and dissemination that can be beneficial to others. I ensured that consent was informed (Appendix F) by providing a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix G) and checking that they understood the purpose of the study, allowing time to ask questions about the research, restating their right to withdraw at any point during the interview, and checking, half way through the interview, if they wished to continue.

Asking someone to narrate an experience retrospectively carried the ethical obligation to create conditions of genuine psychological safety in the interview, to be attentive to signs of distress and to handle the material shared with discretion. I was vigilant to the possibility that the interview itself could become a space in which difficult experiences were re-encountered. Therefore, I prioritised the participants' wellbeing by adopting an interviewing style that respected their narratives, allowed for pauses and reflections, and was generally

open-ended to permit them to share what they wanted to without compromising the confidentiality of other individuals or situations. At the end of the interview, I asked each participant how they felt about sharing their EG experiences to check that talking about it did not raise unmanageable discomfort.

Given that the EP community in the United Kingdom is relatively small, and training cohorts are small groups in which individuals can be recognisable to one another, the privacy and confidentiality of participants' details required me to think strategically to maintain their anonymity and the anonymity of potentially other members of their training cohorts who did not consent to be part of the study. Therefore, I reported the demographic data aggregately, to reduce the chances of identification (Braun & Clarke, 2025), I avoided using excerpts from transcripts that could make participants and other cohort members recognisable and used the plural form "they/them" to avoid identification by gender. I also did not report on detailed examples of their experiences and practices in groups, providing generic summaries instead to support my interpretations.

To address my dual position (as insider and researcher) in relation to my participants (Braun & Clarke, 2025), I was transparent about the purpose of the research and my role within that, both in the Participant Information Sheet and in the interview, and maintained the boundaries of the researcher-participant relationship even with those few participants I knew from before the study.

Interpreting participants' narratives through a systems psychodynamic lens carried specific ethical considerations. Participants consented to share their experiences, not to have those experiences subjected to a form of interpretive analysis that could attribute to them unconscious motivations, defensive or psychological dynamics of which they were unaware and which they might not recognise or accept. This does not make the interpretive approach

ethically unacceptable, but it does create an obligation to be transparent in the methodology about the nature and limits of the interpretive claims being made. It also meant writing about participants' experiences with sufficient care and respect that the analysis did not feel reductive or distorted. My use of a systems psychodynamic lens as an interpretive tool was in service of understanding a phenomenon and not to analyse participants.

As a socially responsible researcher, I was interested from the start in thinking about the potential benefits of EG for EP practice. Based on my third research question, this study had the potential to generate knowledge that aims to be genuinely useful to the profession. It could inform how EG is designed, facilitated and supported within the Tavistock EP training programme, potentially contributing to the professional development of EPs working with groups. This potential benefit was ethically significant, as it offered a rationale for asking participants to share potentially sensitive personal experiences.

Research Methods

Participants

Participants were 19 Tavistock-trained EPs who completed their doctoral programme between 2011 and 2022, representing half of the cohorts qualifying between 2009 and 2022. This timeframe was selected because the EP programme in England and Wales was established as a three-year course in 2006, with the first cohort qualifying in 2009. Inclusion up to 2022 allowed some temporal distance for participants to practice and reflect on their learning by the time I carried out the interviews. Table 6 provides a summary of participants' demographics, collected anonymously through a Microsoft (MS) Form.

A population group of 19 participants was considered sufficiently adequate to generate data for an in-depth exploration and interpretation of the phenomenon under study (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The "information power" model provided a framework to make informed

decisions about the population group (Braun & Clarke, 2025; Malterud et al., 2016). Based on this model, the aim of my study was broad, the specificity of the target group was dense (i.e., homogenous), established theories were applied, the quality of the interview was generally strong (i.e., depth of dialogue, rapport, psychological safety) and the analysis strategy was cross-case (i.e., concerned with presenting a range of patterns relevant to the study aims) (Malterud et al., 2016). These considerations made a population group of 19 participants appropriate in the pursuit of generating knowledge from a diversity of experiences.

Table 6

Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristic	Number of participants
Race and ethnicity	
Black British, Caribbean or African	1
White (English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British)	15
White Irish	1
Any other White background	2
Gender	
Female	16
Male	2
Prefer not to say	1
Age at the time of the interview	
28-34	4
35-41	7
42-48	5
49-55	1
56-62	2

Recruitment Strategy

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling (Robson & McCartan, 2016), the selection criterion being that they had been trainees on the three-year doctoral programme at the Tavistock between 2006 and 2022 (Braun & Clarke, 2025). Their training in one single institution made the group homogenous (Patton, 2015), although the focus of this study was on investigating the variety of EG experiences and analysing similarities and differences in those experiences. Participants were recruited nationally by emailing the advertising poster (Appendix H) to EPNET (an email-based forum for the exchange of ideas and information for those working in the EP profession), the Association of Educational Psychologists (the UK-based trade union and professional association for EPs) and edpsy (an online space for EPs to share, create, engage, debate and work together). In addition, I posted the poster on the social media platform Bluesky using the hashtags edpsychs and edpsyUK. I sent the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form to those who responded to the advert and offered them the possibility to ask me further questions about the study before committing to participate. I chose to use email-based communication to reduce the potential pressure to consent if asked face-to-face or by telephone.

Data Generation

I generated the data through video call interviews with each participant, using the MS Teams collaboration platform. I used semi-structured interviewing informed by an interview schedule that I used as a prompt (Appendix I). The interviews lasted approximately one hour, a time that has been deemed appropriate to generate sufficient data without placing unreasonable demands on participants with busy schedules (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Semi-structured interviews are considered as one of the most popular method of data generation in psychology research (Willig, 2022). They allowed me to frame the questions

within the context of the information I was seeking while making it possible for the participants to talk freely about their experiences and for me to ask clarifying or other questions that I had not initially thought about (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015; Willig, 2022). I quickly realised, however, that my interview schedule was too ambitious as I could not ask all the questions within the one-hour timeframe. Therefore, with each interview passing, I tended to ask the questions I deemed most important to my study, allowing the participants to speak freely and openly within a loose structure (these questions are highlighted in Appendix I). Given the nature of the EG experience, I was alert to the possibility that the interview could make participants remember difficult and unpleasant moments related to EG. Therefore, I felt ethically responsible to reflect during the interview on how the participants may have been impacted by my questions and refrained from advancing interpretations (Long & Eagle, 2009).

The rationale for choosing remote interviews included their accessibility and convenience by removing geographical barriers. I could interview participants from diverse locations across the country, reducing the inconvenience related to time and cost of travel. Online interviewing also enabled participants to feel comfortable in their familiar environment (Carter et al., 2021; Keen et al., 2022). I hoped that this interview strategy could facilitate a more candid response from participants due to their increased comfort. To ensure confidentiality, at the start of the interview I informed participants that they would not be seen or heard since I was alone in a room and used headphones (at home or at the Tavistock).

Semi-structured interviewing was a retrospective data generation method since the participants had to look back to experiences that took place in the past (Longhofer et al., 2013). For some, experiences of EG were recalled as far back as 17 years before the interview, while for others it was three years. Questions related to the application of

participants' learning to practice, however, required them to recall more recent group work experiences.

Data Management

MS Teams provided a transcription service that generated an automatic transcript at the end of each interview. I downloaded the original transcripts from the server (OneDrive), screened them to anonymise participants' names with randomly allocated numbers from one to 19 (P1, P2, etc.) and facilitators' names with the generic title "group facilitator," then deleted the original transcripts from my files (Braun & Clarke, 2025). Working with the anonymised transcripts, I tidied up the transcripts by checking them against the video recordings (Willig, 2022). The original transcripts contained several errors, both in capturing the correct spelling of some words and in providing accurate punctuation, affecting the understanding of participants' responses. Consistent with recommendations in Braun and Clarke (2022), I re-watched twice the video recordings of each interview while correcting the anonymised transcripts, before data reduction (Longhofer et al., 2013). I kept the transcripts near verbatim, leaving incomplete sentences, false starts and repetition of words. However, I decided not to include utterances, hesitation or laughter, more suitable to analyses such as conversational or discourse analysis (Willig, 2022). This phase was part of phase one (familiarisation) in the six-phase data analysis approach of reflexive thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

I used Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach to data analysis. RTA involves a process described as one of six phases: (1) familiarising yourself with the dataset; (2) coding the data; (3) generating initial themes; (4) developing and reviewing themes; (5) refining, defining and naming themes; and (6) writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This analytic method aligned with the values of a qualitative research

framework underpinned by a critical realist ontology and epistemological relativism. In critical realist RTA, data do not offer a direct window into reality but rather a mediated, interpreted version of it; specifically, participants' perceptions of reality were shaped by their cultural context and language. The researcher then interprets this already-interpreted data through their own cultural lens. The aim is to produce a coherent, compelling reading of the data that remains grounded in participants' accounts while acknowledging that reality is experienced differently across people and contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

RTA allowed me to work with and make sense of the dataset through a process described as recursive rather than linear or sequential, since it required flexible revisiting and refining of both codes and themes. Considered as one variation within the thematic analysis family of methods, RTA values the role of the researcher in the process of meaning-making and interpretation of the dataset. The researcher's reflexivity permeates every aspect of the study, reflecting on and reporting how personal, professional and philosophical assumptions influence the study (Braun & Clarke, 2025). I used both inductive and deductive approaches to make sense of the dataset. Inductively, the research questions were broad and exploratory enough to allow the description of the phenomenon under investigation. Deductively, participants' experiences were made sense of by using a systems psychodynamic lens, providing a framework to understand the meaning of those experiences.

Phase One: Familiarisation

This phase consists of fully immersing in the dataset to develop a deep and thorough familiarity with its content. I repeatedly read through my dataset, watching and listening to the video recordings while jotting down brief notes on any analytic thoughts or observations that arose, both at the level of individual data items and across the whole dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This phase started during the data management process of checking the

interview transcripts against the recordings. This phase took longer than I had anticipated, which appears to be typical in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2022). While the tidying up of the transcripts enabled my familiarisation with the dataset, I started to become more distant from it and able to engage my critical thinking in recognising some patterns. This is consistent with the duality of immersion and distance during this phase (Braun & Clarke, 2022). From notes of my impressions and questions while engaging with the dataset, in preparation of the next phase, I dedicated some time to reflect on the whole dataset and recorded my notes into an “overall dataset familiarisation” document (Appendix J). The purpose of writing this document was to approach coding thinking critically and analytically (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Phase Two: Coding the Data

Coding involves giving meaning to data extracts systematically, based on the research questions, and applying code labels to describe those meanings. Normally considered as a method of data reduction (Longhofer et al., 2013; Willig, 2022), coding can capture the semantic – evident to both the participant and the researcher – and latent or hidden meanings of dataset extracts. This process means that codes can be applied both inductively and deductively, particularly in contexts such as my study where the focus was both on the experiences of participants reported as close as possible to their narratives and the interpretation of those experiences through my theoretical orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

I used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to organise, visualise and interrogate my dataset. I found it highly effective in supporting the coding process, enabling the storage of transcripts, the coding and labelling of extracts, the organisation of codes into nodes and efficient retrieval of data. I could manage the large dataset and have a visual overview of the code labels. This helped me remain close to the dataset while simultaneously

keeping sight of the broader analytical picture, a balance that is central to the rigour of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2025).

As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022), I analysed the dataset using NVivo twice. I found it extremely useful since when I started coding the first few transcripts, I was still experimenting with code labels. The coding process was recursive, meaning that I revised code labels and extracts as I became more cognisant of how the theories were helping me make sense of participants' narratives. Over time, by reviewing some of the code labels and organising them within an evolving coding framework, I started to arrange the codes based on the three levels highlighted in the research questions: EG experience, learning from EG and application to practice. The distinction between semantic (more inductive, data-driven) and latent (more deductive, theory-driven) codes supported the layering of analysis, allowing me to move between what participants explicitly said and the deeper theory-laden meanings that could be drawn from their accounts. The full list of codes (Appendix K) contained 253 codes organised into nodes, the main ones representing the three levels of experience, learning and application. I colour-coded the list to help me cross check the codes against those that I allocated in each theme and subtheme. I could then identify the codes that were left out and consider whether they were relevant to the analysis based on the three research questions. This was consistent with the RTA process where not all coded extracts become suitable to the final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Phase Three: Generating Initial Themes

This phase involved organising and aggregating the codes based on a shared idea, concept or meaning into initial, potential themes related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This was an active and engaging process of sketching potential themes, identifying links between themes and potential subthemes, changing themes' names and

organising the codes based on those themes. Appendix L illustrates an early attempt at theme generation. The initial challenge was to keep in mind two aspects of this process. Firstly, the congruent aligning of the core concept of each theme, the research questions, the tentativeness of these themes and the coherent story that they would be telling while staying close to the participants' meaning-making of their experiences and learning. Secondly, avoiding the reduction of themes to topic summaries, which organise participants' diverse responses around a topic rather than a core concept (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Guided by the research questions, my organisation of codes into nodes through NVivo helped me during this phase. However, I soon identified some commonalities in meaning-making across the three levels of experience, learning and application. For example, the importance of psychological safety within groups was a recurring theme in participants' accounts, when they talked about their EG experiences, their learning from it and the application of learning to practice. Similarly, participants' views and experiences of authority and leadership were narrated across the three levels. This prompted me to consider themes that could cut across the three levels to avoid such overlap while respecting shared meaning.

During this phase, themes were tentative and temporary, respecting Braun and Clarke's (2022) advice to avoid getting attached to themes prematurely. The recursive nature of RTA meant that theme generation and development involved moving back and forth between codes and emerging themes. While the theoretical lens informing my study allowed me to identify patterns across the dataset during this early phase of theme development, I remained cognisant throughout this and the following phases of the importance of interpreting the dataset inductively as well. To avoid trying to fit the data into a conceptual or theoretical framework, I reviewed the coded extracts to check that they reflected the generated themes.

Phase Four: Developing and Reviewing Themes

In this phase, I used a checklist based on Braun and Clarke (2022) to support both horizontal (*across* themes) and vertical (*within* themes, through subthemes) development of themes and subthemes. Horizontally, I checked that each theme represented a shared pattern identified by a core idea or concept, had identifiable boundaries informed by what it included and excluded and had sufficient meaningful data to justify it being a theme. I ensured that data within each theme reflected coherent shared understanding, rather than encompassing experiences that were too diverse to constitute a meaningful pattern. In addition, I checked that themes reflected important core concepts relevant to the research questions, the dataset and the wider context. Vertically, I developed subthemes for each theme depending on the aspect I wanted to draw analytic attention to. This process was consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidance on how to check that themes are unique, supported by the data, coherent and contributing to the overall analysis.

To help me define the boundaries and richness of each theme and subtheme, I adopted two strategies. Firstly, I provided draft definitions of what each included to ensure that they represented robust and distinct aspects that I identified in the data. I also specified how the subthemes related to the themes to ensure vertical coherence. While theme definition is formally associated with Phase Five of RTA, I found it helpful to think and write about the boundaries of each theme and subtheme early in the process of theme development. It helped me gain a better understanding of them while referring to the extracted data to ensure internal coherence.

Secondly, I created a document with my definitions, where I copied and pasted the individual code labels into each theme and subtheme (Table M1 in Appendix M). This strategy provided a visual representation of whether there would be sufficient data in each

theme and subtheme to provide both richness and coherence to the analysis. I used colour-coding when working with this document to help me manage the information more easily. The colour-coding matched the colours in the list of codes (Appendix K).

During this phase, rather than relying exclusively on the code labels, I reviewed the themes and subthemes against the extracted data to ensure congruence between the data and the temporary themes. This involved adjusting and strengthening the robustness of the themes and subthemes to ensure both vertical alignment and horizontal distinctiveness. Importantly, this direct engagement with the extracted data contributed to checking that the data within themes were coherent to the central organising idea. This enabled me to develop robust subthemes by merging some and rejecting others to ensure internal coherence and congruence within the theme. For example, the initial subtheme Tolerating not-Knowing was subsequently abandoned as a subtheme because of its narrowness and limited richness, and extracts pertaining to it were integrated as evidence to support the interpretative analysis in other themes.

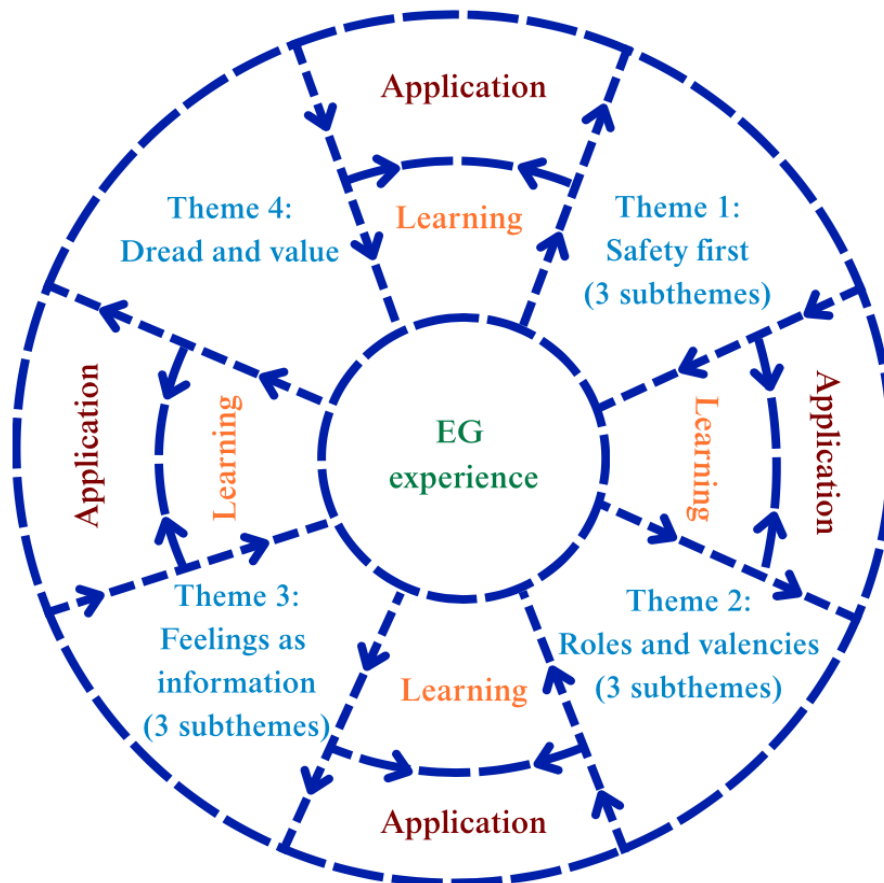
Phase Five: Refining, Defining and Naming Themes

Consistent with the recursive nature of RTA, I found that refining and naming of themes continued to develop up to and including the write-up of the analysis. Having defined themes and subthemes and checked for their consistency against the extracted data and between each other, I restructured the themes and subthemes framework as I started to write my findings. This rearrangement involved considering the initial themes as umbrella terms defined by their boundaries and uniqueness without being directly supported by an analysis of data. Instead, the analytic process was centred around each subtheme, providing a coherent interpretative narrative that supported the respective themes (Braun & Clarke, 2025).

Figure N1 (Appendix N) provides a visual illustration of the developing themes and

subthemes. My initial concern was how to illustrate the relationships between them and across the three levels in non-hierarchical ways, as I felt that a hierarchical diagram would have misrepresented the relational nature of my thematic structure. I opted to hand-draw with an iPad as a deliberate methodological choice to enable me to draw how I visualised the relationships between themes within a circle that combined the three levels and the four themes. The arrows going in and out of the centre indicated the recursive or spiral movement from experience through learning and application. The arrows going to and from themes reflected the relatedness between themes in ways that suggested their interdependence to narrate a coherent story about the dataset. Finally, the dotted lines indicated the permeability of boundaries, both across themes and across levels and beyond, conveying the idea that experience, learning and application were not discrete or fixed stages but rather fluid and interconnected processes, and that the four themes, while analytically distinct, were mutually informing and could not be fully understood in isolation from one another or from the broader context of EG practice. The final thematic map is provided in Figure 1.

The recursive process of naming themes involved generating headings or short sentences that captured the meaning of the central idea of each theme and subtheme. Rather than merely labelling content, theme names are the entry point into the analysis, and need to signal both what is being examined and how it is being analytically approached within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Naming some themes and subthemes was straightforward (e.g., Safety First and The Social Construction of Leaders and Followers), while I found it more challenging with others. The problem came up when the main idea was hard to pin down, or when the analytical approach relied on theory that was difficult to explain simply without losing accuracy. In such cases, I generated several candidate names and tested them against the coded extracts and theme definitions, asking whether each name would orient the

Figure 1*Final Thematic Map*

reader towards both the content and the interpretive direction of the theme. For example, I identified a subtheme capturing the sensitivity with which some participants drew on their feelings to formulate and share hypotheses with service users. Initially, I used the following theme names to stress this sensitivity: Voicing/not Voicing Wonderings; Context-Based Risking; Feeling Comfortable with Addressing What's in the Room; and When to Voice Affect-Based Hypotheses. Finally, I felt that the name Mindful Sharing of Feelings-Informed Hypotheses captured the participants' sensitivity. This name succeeded where the others had not because it held together the emotional and relational dimensions of the practice without

privileging one at the expense of the other. It also resonated with my theoretical lens, in which feelings are understood as meaningful data.

Phase Six: Write-up

The last phase of RTA involved the analytical write-up of the findings consistent with the philosophical assumptions, theoretical underpinnings and the thematic map. Critical realist assumptions, supported by systems psychodynamic thinking, provided the framework for a suspicious, theory-driven interpretation of the accounts to describe and explain psychological processes taking place within groups at beneath-the-surface levels (Willig, 2022). The Findings chapter was organised into themes and subthemes, providing a brief analysis around the central organising idea of each. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidance, the Findings section was used to develop a brief interpretative account of each theme, while the Discussion section provided the space to draw out theoretical, scholarly and wider contextual connections and implications. While this division provided a useful organising structure, it remained somewhat fluid in practice as interpretative moments that began in the Findings were inevitably developed further in the Discussion, consistent with the recursive nature of RTA.

Using data extracts illustratively and analytically, I identified and selected clear and coherent excerpts that supported the interpretation of analytical points (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2025). Since excerpts were not used for discourse or language analysis, I made the editorial decision to remove false starts and repeated words, as well as irrelevant portions of text in the middle of a quote that did not add to the analysis, indicating these removals with [...]. Reporting participants' quotes, non-italics text in square brackets included participants' words, while italics text in square brackets were my suggestions for a better understanding of the excerpt. I remained mindful, however, that any selection and

editing of extracts involved a degree of editorial choice. To manage this and respect participants' accounts, I returned to the wider transcript context at times to ensure that excerpts' meaning was not altered by their separation from the full account. I also created a log of excerpts that I used for each participant, by theme, to avoid over-quoting some and ensure instead balance and variety across the dataset (Figure O1 in Appendix O). Throughout the write-up, I remained attentive to my dual position as practitioner and researcher, recognising that the interpretative narrative inevitably carried the influence of philosophical, theoretical, personal and professional assumptions. I treated this not as a limitation to be eliminated but as a reflexive resource to be acknowledged and worked with. The analytical write-up was in the first person, reflecting the deliberate epistemological choice that positions the researcher not as a neutral speaker but as an active interpreter of meaning.

Research Quality

Evaluating quality in qualitative research can be done using general principles and criteria particular to the study itself. Whereas general criteria consider dimensions such as the clarity of the research objectives, the appropriateness of the methods used and ethical reflections, criteria particular to the study are dependent on their attunement to the epistemological assumptions underpinning the research (Patton, 2015; Willig, 2022). These two levels of criteria are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they complement and at times overlap with each other. For my research, I relied on Braun and Clarke's (2025) *Big Q Qualitative Reporting Guidelines* (BQQRG). It offered a methodical and robust guidance organised according to the different sections of a report and presenting practices to consider and avoid in the spirit of what constitute Big Q type of research. Wherever possible, I referenced the guidelines in the write-up of this study to document the practice of evaluating quality. Braun and Clarke (2025) reworked two established quality ideas – methodological

congruence and transparency – considered below.

Methodological Congruence

Methodological congruence refers to the fit, coherent thread or alignment linking together the philosophical and theoretical assumptions, the research aims and questions, the research design and methods, the reporting of findings and the discussion. Such alignment aims to demarcate the boundaries of the research process, within which the different parts of the research can coherently flow. To ensure methodological congruence, I clearly identified my ontological and epistemological assumptions, aligned my research questions to these assumptions, developed a research design to answer my questions, selected data generation and analysis methods that were suitable to the design and audited my choices by consulting the BQQRG. I also used my research supervisory space and my supervisor's feedback on my written work to inform the fit of my choices, revisiting the alignment recursively during the research process itself, including returning to earlier decisions as the study evolved.

Transparency

Underpinning methodological congruence is transparency, defined as the practice to be reflexively open about the philosophical and theoretical assumptions, the methodological choices made, the personal and professional experiences impacting the study and taking epistemic responsibility for one's perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2025). In practice, transparency meant openly reporting such assumptions and the choices made so that the quality of the study could be assessed against them. Throughout the study, I endeavoured to be explicit and reflexively open about my interests and positioning while respecting the boundaries of providing anonymity for the participants and their accounts. At the same time, I was aware that, despite self-reflection, I could be open about what I know, while less so about what remained hidden to my conscious awareness. Further intellectual and empirical

engagement with understanding group behaviours from systems psychodynamic thinking, as well as other perspectives, philosophical assumptions and methodological approaches, could illuminate understudied or still hidden dimensions of this topic and the role of the researcher in it.

Four: Findings

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I present the synthesis of my data into the themes and subthemes generated through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I acknowledge that my EG experience greatly impacted my reading, interpretation and analysis of the dataset, as I found myself relating to some of the participants' experiences. However, I remained open and curious throughout the data analysis process towards the experiences, points of view and interpretations that felt similar or different to mine, as well as new to me. I was also reflexively aware of my positionality throughout the process and selected excerpts from the dataset that supported my interpretation of it. Not every participant will have gone through all the experiences described here. Instead, themes are meant to give an overall picture of what participants experienced in EG, including the learning implications.

Because of the overlap of meaning across the three levels of experience, learning and application, I decided to report my synthesis based on the four themes I generated rather than by each research questions. Instead, I will address the research questions individually in my Discussion chapter, drawing together the empirical evidence and theoretical basis. The themes and subthemes reported in this chapter are summarised in Table 7.

Table 7*Thematic Map of my Findings*

Theme	Subtheme
One: Safety first	One: The paradox of safety Two: The containing function of boundaries: task, time and territory Three: Keeping the peace, losing the depth
Two: Discovering roles and valencies: self and others in group	One: Know thyself: learning about one's role through group participation Two: The social construction of leaders and followers Three: Silent participation: contribution or withdrawal?
Three: Feelings as information	One: Us versus them: basic assumption dynamics in EG Two: From feelings to formulation: attending to beneath-the-surface information Three: Mindful sharing of feelings-informed hypotheses
Four: The dread and value of learning through experience	

Theme One: Safety First

This theme explores the core idea of the importance participants gave to feeling contained within EG and in groups in general, so that group members can feel safe enough to speak, be open and curious and challenge others in appropriate ways. The theme encompasses the experience of safety or lack thereof, learning about its importance and how the learning was then applied in group work. Crucially, I identified some of the factors influencing one's experience of safety, including facilitation, understanding the group task, time and territory boundaries and the prioritisation of group cohesion.

Subtheme One: The Paradox of Safety

This subtheme considers how safety and containment in EG were variably experienced

across participants, impacted by facilitation, group dynamics and the relational stakes of a shared training context. Containment functioned on multiple levels (facilitators, peers and the gradual accumulation of shared experience), with both its presence and absence carrying significant implications for participants' capacity to engage, learn and use those experiences to inform their practice.

By far, participants attributed their perceived sense of safety to the facilitators' presence, comments and contributions. Those who reported feeling safe, described the facilitators as "containing in mind and physicality" (P2), "very experienced [... and with] a very containing presence in that they had a quiet command" (P8), "really quite good" (P6), "more containing and certainly less provocative" (P13) compared to other facilitators, and able to listen and respond in helpful ways (P15). Where the facilitators were perceived as providing useful interpretations and guidance, participants felt "held" (P2) and able to make sense of their group experiences (P14; P15).

Lack of safety inhibited open exploration of group dynamics, reducing the opportunities for repair that might have restored it. As P18 aptly put it, "the lack of psychological safety and trust within the group did prevent some of those opportunities for repair, which would have actually then aided that safety and trust in the group." P8 recalled the "sense of unease, this feeling of just being completely out of control" that is characteristic of group experiences in which the uncontainment function left participants exposed to the raw, undigested anxiety that the group itself could not process and hold.

Where positive facilitation was experienced, some of these participants still felt uncomfortable at times. P8 acknowledged that containment was "beyond what [the facilitators] could offer to reassure me in those more tricky times." P6 shared that "there was still a whole lot there that it clearly didn't feel contained enough because people still didn't

talk.” P2 summed it up with “I always felt safe, just a bit uncomfortable at times.” These comments highlight the difference between psychological safety and containment.

Containment, understood as the capacity to receive, hold and render tolerable the raw and unprocessed anxieties arising within the group, varied during EG, which had significant consequences for participants’ felt sense of psychological safety.

Preoccupation with how participants wanted to be perceived by group members meant that taking risks (being challenging, explorative, experimental, playful) was difficult. Some avoided bringing things to discuss that were “too raw” and could have positioned group members as vulnerable (P15); some spent “a lot of time thinking about what I should or shouldn’t be saying [*for fear of offending somebody*], which then causes that feeling of being quiet” (P16), and “if I thought something that I was going to say could cause offence, I would have always cushioned it” (P3). Some others described that sense of “we’ve still got to get along together and study together outside of this space, so not wanting to say anything that was going to offend anybody or maybe even set myself up in a particular way” (P7). Similarly, P18 shared how their readiness to be playful and experiment was restrained by the strong feeling that “people’s opinions of me are being formed in this space, maybe more so than other spaces, because we are sharing views and things.” P9 fittingly described this preoccupation, reflecting the paralysing effect of hyper-reflexivity within EG:

It felt like your words had a lot more weight than if you were just chatting with a friend or you’re just saying something quite casually. You had to be quite careful about what you were saying [...]. So, there’s a lot of emphasis on “Am I saying the right thing? Why did I say this? What am I saying now? How’s everyone else receiving what I’m saying?”

Some participants’s accounts conveyed the tension between challenge and safety. P12

reflected: “I think that it would have been really interesting to be able to explore that, of actually, ‘Why? Why? Why are we feeling resistant?’ But actually, that just didn’t happen.” P17 recognised this tension: “It’s just something about a desire to be good and correct in that way, and then also a desire to avoid conflict and be liked, and those two things can conflict with each other as well.” This quote is suggestive of the dialectic of safety and challenge, which reveals a paradox: safety appears unattainable in the presence of challenge, yet challenge itself may be taken as evidence of safety. Acknowledging this dialectic, P6 shared that when EG is done “really well, people feel safe enough.” Similarly, yet from a different perspective, P14 recognised that “it was ironic that we should have done that [*discussing group dynamics in EG*], but that was the place that we felt the least safe and the place that we felt least able to think about anything.”

For some, containment improved over time as participants gained a better understanding of the task and of each other. P2 recalled that, over time, the space created “the safety to have difference.” P9 expressed the different stages of containment in this way:

Towards the end, I think it was [*more containing*], because in year three, we knew generally what was expected and we knew a little bit more, as a group, what was going on. But definitely in first year, [...] when it was just not containing at all, I would say it was quite anxiety provoking.

Some participants reported being held by the group. P3 described a discussion that was “received and thought about, and it did make it a bit more tolerable,” as an example of containment provided by the group. Containment was a “group event” (P3), and group members provided containment for each other (P11; P14; P19). P8 noted that “as the group became more of a group, perhaps [...] you felt more at ease, but also, perhaps, more difficult things came out at the same time.” P13 acknowledged wider aspects impacting a felt sense of

safety: “It’s quite reductionist to locate that in the facilitators, even though I found the facilitator provocative, because how much of that is what I’m bringing into that space even before that space has happened.” These accounts support the idea of a multi-authored understanding of containment.

Some participants stressed instead the lack of containment they experienced throughout the three-year period. They described how some facilitators “allowed something to happen that was dangerous” (P6) and did not address or facilitate conversations about ruptures to enable repair. Where rupture within the cohort took place, it “wasn’t really being addressed in experiential group, [*yet it*] dominated the experiential group in a way, because it didn’t feel, for some people, like a safe space” (P3). Similarly, P15 recalled how rupture was “addressed on the sidelines, in experiential as well, but never to the point that it was repaired. So, I wouldn’t say that, through experiential, I learnt about repair.”

Participants’ experiences of safety in EG contributed to their learning about the importance of providing safety and containment when working with groups. P14 acknowledged that without containment, defined as “feeling safe,” “you can’t do anything, you’re paralysed or in that fight or flight mode, and so I think that’s been the main learning for me.” Similarly, P4 spoke about valuing the creation of “a psychologically safe space, enabling [...] a carefully bounded, boundaried supervisory space, and creating the parameters around that, and thinking about what people are bringing into that.” P5 reflected on the balance between challenge and safety in ways that enables opportunities for growth:

How do we have a discussion if we disagree about something or if there’s an issue?
 [...] You have to help them to form a group that is safe and contained, and to talk to each other about, to be a bit vulnerable, I think.

P5’s reflection speaks directly to the dialectic of safety and challenge, suggesting a vision of

group facilitation in which containment is not synonymous with the absence of difficulty but rather constitutes the condition under which difficulty can be productively engaged.

Time appeared to be essential in allowing the development of trust and a sense of safety. P6 worked at making group members “feel secure enough in their togetherness that then allows them to be able to be confident to be different.” Having experienced during EG the impact on group safety that a “provocative facilitator” can have, P13 stressed that such role “it’s not what I want to inhabit. I don’t feel the need to disrupt the group.” Similarly, P6 reflected on how the disruption of safety experienced in EG impacted their current approach to group work: “I would never have let that happen [*rupture*], I would have wanted to have named, come back, done a whole lot of other stuff [...] that would never have left it where it was left.” P19 acknowledged their “enthusiasm” for working with groups that “feel psychologically safe”:

I think you probably feel more inclined to do group work, and also more confident [...]; if I hadn’t have done a training where we did experiential, I don’t know whether I would have had the same enthusiasm for group work, whereas, coming out of training, it was something I knew that I really wanted to do [*and*] looked for those opportunities.

Some of the factors that contributed to a felt sense of safety consisted of the boundaries provided by the task, time and territory, explored next.

Subtheme Two: The Containing Function of Boundaries: Task, Time and Territory

This subtheme considers the idea that boundaries, such as the task purpose, time and territory, provide a structure that can contribute to feeling contained. It examines what happens when boundaries are unclear and how important they can be when working with groups.

The Task

Trainees EPs are introduced to EG with a one-sided A4 handout that explains that the primary task is “to learn about the dynamics of small groups, the sub-groups within them and the formation of leadership and followership relationships, as these phenomena happen in the experiential group” (Appendix P). Some participants recollected that the handout did not help them understand the task. P13 highlighted this gap clearly: “Even though the handout was written in very plain, accessible English, the meaning of those sentences was unclear.” Similarly, P11 reflected: “When I read the piece of paper afterwards, I was still no clearer in my understanding.” Almost resenting the lack of preparation for the task, P12 referred to the handout too: “To be honest with you, we had nothing. We had no preparation at all, nothing. I think we were given a piece of paper, and it was like, ‘Well, you were given a piece of paper.’”

Combined with the non-directive facilitation of the group, confusion about what to do led participants to question the rightness or wrongness of being and participating in that space. Some described this confusion by asking themselves initial questions such as, “Why are we here? What are we meant to be doing?” (P11), “If you don’t tell us what we’re supposed to be doing, how do we know what to do?” (P10), and “Are you doing the task? [...] Are we off task? But actually, is being off task ‘the task’?” (P13). Others acknowledged that there was no task other than “listening and hearing” (P1), “just being there together and sort of working this out together” (P2), “being in the group, that is the task” (P17), and “the task is ‘the group,’ which we grappled with until the day we left” (P16).

Preoccupation with doing EG “right” seemed to have steered discussions to “figuring out if we were getting it right” (P9), but also acknowledging that doing it “right” could have been “more disruptive to the group dynamic to go ‘You’re not on task.’ And then what? What

are we doing? Policing the group?” (P13). Being off task was variously described as “not remaining on the here-and-now, jumping ahead or looking back or talking about things in a way that was avoiding” (P3), “go off on different tangents, [...] reflect on different situations and think about things together, [...] although we never brought things about our own group dynamics” (P14), and “a lot of the time it was giggles and other things, but then also, it was more off-task behaviour” (P5). Being uncertain about what to do, avoiding exploring the dynamics of the group in the here-and-now and engaging in off-task behaviours appear to have heightened feeling uncontained.

Time and Territory

EG has set boundaries about time and territory, intended to provide containment and predictability. Over time, some participants experienced them as containing: “having all those usual things, of it being the same space, same time, same day each month, you absolutely knew, ‘Oh, okay, we’re doing this thing again’” (P2). Reflecting on the sense of persistence with which EG was consistently offered, P1 described the “gradual creeping in [...] of realising that actually, this is important, and I can make it then useful as well”:

If nothing else, I will sit here and I will spend an hour of my week not doing something else. And if nothing else, that will have made a difference somewhere, because even if I don’t say anything, I’m sitting here thinking, [...] you don’t just switch off or go to sleep in that space.

When recalling the end time, however, some participants described the paradoxical experience of sensing that something was unfinished, instead of containing. P7 reflected on the feeling of loss after “whoever was facilitating it, would be like, ‘Okay, 2 o’clock now,’ right? And they would just get up and go, and then you just think, ‘What the heck?’” P13 shared that “the facilitator’s standing up at exactly the right time and walking out [has] its

own uncontained element,” and P5 experienced the end time as “odd,” “weird” and as a “shock,” still questioning that style: “I’m not sure it does only what it aims to do to the group.” Some others “found it hilarious the way that they just get up and leave at the end, which was always an endless source of amusement for us” (P4).

Territory boundaries were generally perceived as containing, particularly when participants experienced unpredictable room changes or cancellations. Some participants valued learning about the holding and containing function that task, time and space boundaries could give to group members, whether they experienced it or not. Embedded in their practice, was the “consistency of the space [...] and the] meticulous planning of the time where it’s going to be, the contracting of those spaces” (P1), the importance of “time boundaries [...] and not coming out of your role” (P6), and the consistency of providing containment in supervision groups through agreed and predictable set days, place and time (P13).

The Permeable Boundary Between Experiential Group and Other Course Experiences

This section considers how participants’ experiences in other parts of the course impacted their EG experience. In this respect, the territory boundary can be understood beyond the physical space of a room to encompass the different areas in which individuals within an organisation work and interact. Course experiences included the Group Relations Conference (GRC), experiences with tutors, placement and group tutorials, as well as personal circumstances. For some, taking part in the GRC helped them attune better to the task of EG (e.g., P13). For others, the lack of safety and containment experienced in the GRC led to a subconscious refusal to a purposeful engagement in EG, having defined their GRC experience as “almost traumatic” (P14; P15). Relationship breakdowns between group members and personal life situations also impacted what was brought or avoided in EG, even though

avoidance did not mean that it did not have an impact (P1). Students' challenging experiences with tutors were projected into the space, which "made it very hard to sit in the group" having that knowledge (P9), or created a competitive environment outside of EG, "so then when we went into experiential, we were not a safe group" (P6). Having heard from other cohorts of ruptures within EG, prompted some to avoid conflict (P11), while trainees' practical experiences on the course (e.g., room arrangements, timetables, etc.) led participants to discuss them in EG, creating "an us-versus-them kind of mentality" (P1). Placement experiences, managing caseload and assignments were other topics that were brought into EG for thought and discussion, helping participants reflect on their role, address feelings and feel responsible for their own emotions (e.g., P15; P16).

The permeable boundary between EG and other course experiences directly undermined the containing function of the group. P7 reflected on this tension:

It's all very well setting up the situation where anybody can say anything and we can challenge and we can be a bit rude and we can be a bit weird, we can do whatever we like. [...] but we have to leave this space and crack on and be in lectures together and be in study groups together and do all sorts of other things. And how on earth we do that if we've just had this weird and crazy session together?

Those who had other experiences of EG with individuals whom they did not know (e.g., the small study group in the GRC and multi-disciplinary EGs) stressed the different impact that knowing and not knowing individuals had within the group. P18 shared that doing EG with colleagues is "an added pressure." P3 reflected on the "intricate" and "interconnectedness" of trainees' experiences and on how "there really is something about us being on a course and being very closely connected and involved and learning and working from each other, and also then have that experiential group." Comparing their GRC small

study group experience to EG, P5 expressed how people “could explore a bit more in group relations because they’re all strangers, so it felt a bit easier, or harder. [...] People took more risks.” They felt that the learning was “really good” because of that. Similarly, P19 shared how “there was a deeper sense of connection formed within the group [*in the GRC*] than in my cohort, which is really interesting because obviously that’s over four days.” They also noticed how group members “brought more of themselves into the space. Differences between the different members of the group were discussed more openly. There was less silence” (P19).

Tolerating Not Knowing

Dealing with uncertainty was a key learning for participants, arising from unclear purpose, task and role boundaries. P14 aptly described how “sitting with uncertainty” helped them manage difficult situations in the workplace:

It’s easier to have that sense of calm and to sit and wait and see what comes out of it. And to not worry about that is helpful, and to know that there is an end point and the uncertainty will become clearer. The more we’re able to sit with it is something I probably wouldn’t have been able to do as much without that experience [*EG*], for sure.

Similarly, P17 related how uncertainty enabled them to cope: “I realised, ‘Oh, actually, I can cope when I feel uncertain,’ or ‘I can cope when I don’t have an answer given to me straight away.’” Likewise, P9 shared how EG made them “sit with tensions and anxieties more, so, to veer away from that inclination to wanting to solve and fix things.”

Subtheme Three: Keeping the Peace, Losing the Depth

This subtheme examines how the prioritisation of group cohesion made participation, exploration and experimentation difficult. Such prioritisation came at the cost of courageous

engagement with difference, with the demands of shared training life outside of EG functioning as a significant deterrent to such exploration. Participants' accounts conveyed the dialectic of safety and challenge, inherently a paradox: the very conditions that might have enabled genuine exploration (challenge, rupture and repair) were experienced as threats to the social bonds participants were invested in protecting.

Keeping the peace, politeness and niceties within the group was a coping strategy in response to having to share the various learning spaces during the training: "Everyone was too polite to have that rupture and repair. I think maintaining relationships within our cohort was the most important thing for our cohort and we all wanted to be seen as colleagues and getting on" (P11). P17 described the high stakes of disrupting group cohesion:

We were worried about that the group would end, or that the group would be destroyed, and that things would be irreparable, and that we wouldn't be able to get over it, that there would be some conflict, and that would be the end of our nice, positive, "We're all here to support each other," experience, that we were really desperately trying to create. [...] But I think the other part of it is not wanting to be rejected or expelled or obliterated, maybe, to just completely end, because it's the unbearable pain of being rejected from the group when it felt so important to be a part of that group.

P17's language suggests anxieties that extended well beyond social discomfort into something closer to a fear of annihilation, pointing to the profound psychological stakes that group membership carried for some participants.

The tension between keeping the peace and exploring group dynamics meant that participants resorted to superficial and off-task conversations to maintain the illusion of togetherness (P15; P16). P16 found it difficult to bring up challenging conversations and

acknowledged that “we were quite almost surface-level in what we were discussing and not discussing some, maybe, deeper issues that were going on.”

The Social Graces (Burnham, 2012) provide a useful framework to think about similarities and differences (S&D), where different aspects of oneself, visible/invisible, voiced/unvoiced, can impact how one’s role within a group is taken up and perceived by others. Aspects of identity discussed included race, ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality, gender, cultural background, age and political affiliation. Participants also drew on S&D in professional backgrounds, placement experiences, academic abilities and personal viewpoints. However, participants recalled that only a fraction of these aspects were explored in their cohorts, and the depth of discussion varied. Some remembered engaging conversations about S&D, while others felt these were only briefly touched on, notably less substantive than the discussions they experienced in the GRC, where “much more explicit conversations about race, upbringing, childhood, social class” took place (P19). Others recollected how “class” (P16), “power, position, privilege” (P3), “gender” (P1), being “a quite homogeneous group of young white women” (P12) were some of the aspects of identity that they would have liked being considered in EG, but were not. P17 echoed that “we didn’t really enter into discussions about things like race or sexuality or anything like that.”

The prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 seemed to have marked a watershed moment in how systemic inequalities and racial injustices, oppression and biases were then addressed in public discourse. However, EG continued to present significant challenges as a space where S&D issues were explored. Participants training at around that time and beyond recalled of questioning who had the right to speak on behalf of others’ experiences. P9 summarised such feeling in this way:

It was acknowledged, but wouldn’t say it was properly dealt with [...]. I feel we all

still had a lot of anxieties as a group and we all didn't want to be that person who was standing out or being difficult.

The difficulty came from the awkwardness and anxiety around who should be bringing up difficult conversations and how to respond to those comments. Some participants spoke about their frustration of feeling they had to speak about specific aspects of their identity that were visible, such as gender or race (e.g., P5). P10 found certain conversations frustrating when “things were dismissed, where someone hadn't experienced something themselves and couldn't quite grasp why it was so important or so relevant to me as an individual.” Other participants acknowledged the potential for resentment and frustration when group members from minoritised backgrounds, or those with lived experience of discrimination, were implicitly positioned as the sole voices responsible for raising issues related to particular aspects of identity.

The tendency toward group cohesion often led to the avoidance of difficult conversations around the Social Graces. Noticing early agreeableness, P10 described how “people who agreed with something, would voice that they agreed with something, and people who perhaps disagreed didn't necessarily voice that they disagreed.” For P19, a survival instinct was paramount to keep group cohesion:

To preserve that superficial sense of group cohesion, a deeper sense of connection was not taken. [...] What happened with the cohort is that there was a real fear of disrupting this superficial sense of group coherence: “What would happen if we discovered differences and emotions that we couldn't recover from?”

Similarly, P3 observed: “Maybe there was times when we didn't want to acknowledge difference and that we were all the same when, quite clearly, we weren't.” P14 reflected:

We weren't really able to consider difference that much. [...] the only differences were between us and the facilitators. [They] tried to put some of those in, at times, when talking about the lack of difference and saying that "We're all in together," but it's not something that we took up or reflected on. I think we just agreed with it, "Yeah. Yeah, there's not a lot of difference here. We do all agree. Yeah."

Discussing S&D also seemed influenced by questions of power and privilege. P13 wondered: "How much can people say about their worries and concerns depending on their position of power and privilege in a space, and the impact?" This led them to acknowledge that not everyone might have felt "equally heard in a group in relation to social graces. I wouldn't feel confident to say that, and I think some people might have had much harder experiences in relation to power and equity" (P13).

As time went by and some group members became more comfortable with each other, talking about different experiences became easier:

Over time, we got to the stage where people were able to voice some very differing opinions, but I guess with the security that when we leave this group, that doesn't mean you're going to be ostracised from the group. (P10)

P2 echoed this feeling: "Gradually, over the three years, you could say, 'No, it's okay, we are a group enough to have difference.'" P17 also expressed how time made it possible to discuss S&D:

We almost pretended to be more similar than we were at the start, or ignored the differences, pretended that they didn't matter at all. And then, [...] only once we were more comfortable with each other and knew each other a bit better, we could be like, "Oh, actually, I have this thing around this," or "I do that thing."

However, feeling safer over time to explore S&D was not a shared experience. It seems that it was easier to share S&D about placement experiences and aspects of the course such as assignments and theses than aspects of identity. Feeling different from others also meant that some participants felt less safe to talk about differences within the group. P12 decided that, “already feeling quite different to the rest of the group, I didn’t want to make that even more explicit for myself,” when thinking about voicing differences. P6 shared that “there are total aspects of myself that I would never have revealed in the group because it wasn’t a comfortable place to do so.” These and other participants described how they felt that the cost of being agreeable and keeping the peace was the missed opportunity to explore S&D in more explicit ways (P3; P6; P19).

Reflecting on how these experiences impacted their learning and application to practice, some participants shared how they “celebrated” working with people having different styles and opinions (P2), felt “confident” to talk about and bring up issues related to differences (P1), felt “more open and honest and ask challenging questions that may be there, but under the surface and haven’t been spoken about” (P11), and were “curious” about service users’ “philosophical and spiritual positions” in the context of, for example, grief work (P6). P6 further reflected on their delicate role in “putting cognitive dissonance” when supporting groups to discuss and dealing with differences, whilst recognising that allowing different voices “is a very difficult task within a group.” When writing a report, P15 reflected on how they may notice that aspects of identity could play a role in understanding dynamics in a piece of work, “whether it is a racism thing, whether it’s a religious thing, and it’s like, ‘Oh, actually, something doesn’t seem to add up on here.’”

Generally speaking, participants described how EG helped them consider, observe, discuss and work with aspects of identity and differences of opinions both with colleagues

and service users. However, some spoke of the difficulties of engaging in S&D conversations with colleagues within their EP services. P1 noticed:

One of the things that annoys me in my job when I've been trying to do race and ethnicity work is that whenever I talk to other psychologists about it, they're very comfortable if that topic is about how we engage stakeholders. They are not comfortable talking about it as a group.

Similarly, two participants described how, when joining their teams as newly qualified EPs, felt less confident to speak about S&D as these conversations were not generally held (P15; P19). Even for an experienced EP, trying to set up a peer supervision group focused on noticing differences turned out to be “really, unbelievably challenging and it just showed me how difficult it is to talk about EDI [*equality, diversity, inclusion*] issues” (P8). At the same time, being confronted with such difficulties “was really helpful in terms of understanding what was going on.”

In sum, this subtheme highlights how the imperative to maintain harmony within training cohorts was a factor in constraining the group's capacity to engage meaningfully with exploring S&D.

Theme Two: Discovering Roles and Valencies: Self and Others in Groups

This theme conceptualises role understanding as a developmental process, operating intrapsychically and interpersonally. At an individual level, it traces participants' evolving awareness of themselves as self-in-role, that is, how particular aspects of identity, history and positioning are played out within group contexts. At an interpersonal level, it examines how participants came to recognise and interpret the roles, valencies and power positions of others, including how these are shaped by visible and invisible dimensions of difference. Integrating all three levels of the research, the theme highlights authority and role negotiation as flexible

and relationally created.

Subtheme One: Know Thyself: Learning About One's Role Through Group

Participation

This subtheme explores the development of participants' reflexive awareness of themselves as active subjects within groups. It considers participants' questioning of how they habitually positioned themselves, how they were positioned by others and how implicit expectations impacted their participation. Central to this analysis is Bion's (1961) concept of *valency*, understood as an unconscious predisposition to perform in groups and collude in the enactment of basic assumption dynamics. From this perspective, participants' emerging awareness of their own valencies represented a shift from unexamined participation in group processes to a more reflective approach on how automatic responses, identifications and projections can influence group experiences.

Participants described how particular roles became increasingly visible to them: the popular "charismatic leader," the "mothering" type, the quiet yet valued person who helps others "sense-check," the "nurturers [...] who would make people feel good about themselves when they needed it" (P1), the "host" who tries "to make sure things are okay" (P8), those who "rebelled and rejected," those who used "comic release" and "humour to try and break the tension or deflect situations sometimes" (P14), those who used diplomacy, a wider perspective and feeling a duty of care towards others for wanting to keep the peace (P3; P18), those who took risks and put their "head over the parapet" by breaking uncomfortable silences and speaking up during difficult conversations (P8; P9; P10; P15; P18; P19), and the quieter members who would "be reliant on the more vocal members of the group" (P11).

Participants also acknowledged EG as a space for role experimentation and seeing how a theory was enacted in practice. They drew the distinction between spaces where role

exploration is given permission to (EG) versus spaces where this is less so (professional contexts) (P8; P19). However, enacting different roles proved challenging in practice. Some participants acknowledged their tendency to people-please within the group, which led them to avoid conflict and wanting to be seen in specific ways. P18 recalled their experience of “not sharing what was going on for me because I wanted to people-please in the experiential group setting, and that was big learning.” Similarly, P8 reflected on their preoccupation with “how I was being perceived and what my role was, being the ‘good’ student, [...] feeling I was saying good things, intelligent things, thoughtful things. I guess, wanting to please.” For these participants, contemplating playing different roles was hampered by their preoccupation with what others might think of them, as well as by a sense of self-preservation.

For P15, instead, occupying a different role one day due to personal reasons, than the one they usually played, led them to a “turning point”:

Even though the reason why I didn’t say anything was a personal matter [...], it actually made me think, “Oh, these people aren’t expecting me to instigate things.

These people have their own thoughts and feelings that they want to bring. And maybe I have overshadowed them a bit.” And maybe that I have unknowingly pushed people into certain roles myself by being someone who spoke more.

Similarly, for P14, EG was the place where they could experiment with *not* occupying their usual leadership role, possibly because of “a defence mechanism and because I didn’t have to.”

Some participants recognised how a sense of shared responsibility enabled exploring different aspects of themselves. P2 reflected on how the shared responsibility meant that they were “able to actually just be in the group rather than feeling responsible for the group, which was quite a good position to be in, [...] we were all a bit more equal.” Some questioned their

role and sense of responsibility within the group. For example, P1 wondered whether their tendency to challenge and ask difficult questions was meeting others' needs to have problems solved for them, rather than encouraging others to take responsibility for solving problems themselves. Likewise, P5 described the feeling of being "thrust" into occupying a leadership position based on specific identity aspects, while P3 noticed those who may feel responsible to keep conversations going. P13 became more attuned to how others perceived them as the repository of particular skills, and wondered: "How do I not just become the expert of that skill, the one that everybody then sees it? So, then, will others not do it because they think I own it?" These participants noticed that taking up these roles (the expert, the one who calls out, the one who speaks on others' behalf) was narrowing, in ways that disempowered and silenced others, generated predictable expectations of group members and restricted everyone's freedom to explore different roles. P1's perspective, echoed by others, illuminated the tension between the roles one is comfortable playing and those one is routinely positioned into:

I think it's always [...] hard to unpick how much a role is placed on you and how much you invite it, because if you find that you're repeatedly in that role, in lots of different groups, you have to assume that it's a little bit to do with you, and it can't just be because people are putting it on you. But, equally, it can be frustrating as well, and you are aware of, "I know that I have become the person who"

Similarly, P13 wondered: "How do you become more plural in the group to be able to take up different positions rather than be singular and probably fairly predictable?" Usefully, P14 reflected on the distinction between renegotiating roles that are imposed on one and those that one creates for themselves:

Whilst other people might put roles on you, you have the ability and the autonomy to give them back as well, and you can create your own roles. I think the hardest ones to step away from are the ones that you create yourself as opposed to ones that other people put on you.

Participants' reflections pointed to an emerging recognition that roles are co-constructed, shaped simultaneously by group needs, valency and social positioning. They described how this heightened awareness informed their current practice, including attention to how roles were perceived in new groups such as supervision groups (P12), and to dynamics playing out in their teams (P10), training groups (P12; P16), and consultation groups (P6; P17), among them "competition and rivalry" (P3), and the influence of gender on power dynamics (P6). They reflected on their influence on the group, how they might interpret the messages that group members, including themselves, may give through their body language (P10; P16), how in-group and out-group might be felt within teams (P14) and how they could "spot things a little more quickly about what's happening within a group when they're forming, when certain tensions arise" (P17). P19 shared that observing group dynamics within a group could sometimes give them "really helpful information for how to go about a piece of work." P16 shared how, navigating a complex dynamic between colleagues, they could work collaboratively with them and manage it, while P13 commented on how a group member may be positioned to be always the one to "advocate for social justice" or the one who is "scapegoated" by others, and wondered:

Does the group rely on that person to always be the watchful eye of social justice and social inequality and then devolve their responsibility to that person and be like, "OK, we're good because they didn't say anything."? And then, thinking about the person who might be scapegoated by others, what happens for them in that group? And can

they remove themselves from the scapegoat position or can others remove them from it and notice that they're doing that?

In consultation groups, P14 would notice “who answers first? [...] Who's got loads to say? Who actually doesn't have that much to say?, or who waits for something to say? [...] Those are things I probably wouldn't be as aware of without experiential.” Likewise, P8 and P9 remarked on people who talk and people who do not talk in groups, why they themselves might feel the need to talk and what roles they take up in groups. P18 reflected on how they “don't see groups in the same way” after studying at the Tavistock:

You do see groups through a really interesting lens of the power dynamics and the roles that we take up or don't take up. [...] There's [...] the different choices in the moment and what might be behind those choices in terms of whose voice has more influence or whose voice gets taken up more within a group and why might that be?

For some, the concept of valency offered a framework for understanding how individuals may unconsciously assume particular roles within a group, while also shifting between roles as circumstances evolve. This realisation enabled P19 to recognise that valencies are not fixed attributes, but dynamic and context-dependent.

Subtheme Two: The Social Construction of Leaders and Followers

This subtheme explores the leader and follower roles and how, by deconstructing them, EG provokes uncertainty and brings to the fore participants' expectations of leadership and the discomfort arising when these are unmet.

Some participants considered how facilitators supported their experience and learning during EG by describing them as being “spot on,” “very perceptive of everything,” “so clever and so talented,” and “right on a lot of it” (P2), “really good” (P6), “quite gentle” and

“nurturing” (P1), sometimes a “saviour,” at other times unhelpful and “critical,” really good at ensuring that they were not positioned as the “experts” (P18), “very experienced and, at the beginning, [they were] very traditional in [their] psychodynamic approach” (P5), and “very sharp, [...] very intelligent and maybe a little bit harsh” (P3). Other participants experienced the facilitators as being “unkind, targeting people and being difficult” (P12), “slightly inhumane” and “stone”-like (P14), and “stressed, [...] pissed off, [looking] like [they] didn’t want to be there” (P6). Some recalled never feeling they “fully got to grips with what their exact role was” (P17). P11 described the facilitators as “really unhelpful. They would sit there, they would be very quiet. [...] They didn’t say anything. They certainly didn’t facilitate or lead.” Similarly, comparing facilitators, P5 described one as “someone who was much less interventive”:

[They were] very quiet. [They] barely said anything [...] and I actually found that really difficult. I really wanted a bit more from [them]. I wanted the style of the person previously, who was much warmer, and didn’t intervene a lot, [they] let the group flow, but then, when [they] did speak, it carried quite a lot of weight and what [they] said was very useful.

P18 saw the facilitator as “the leader of the group,” someone with “more experience, [...] who understands more about what this is supposed to be. [...] You’re looking to them like you would a teacher or a parent for, ‘Did I get that right?’ or, ‘Am I doing good?’” P17 experienced “frustration” and wondered “Why are they not telling us what the right way to do this is or what the right answer is?” Trying to manage the “awkwardness” of the silence in EG, P9 would look towards the facilitator, “who was there, but very rarely intervening or saying anything. We would look to [them] for guidance. And [they’d] go, ‘I don’t know why you are looking at me, like, this is the group.’” Other participants spoke of the need for

“guidance” from the facilitators, for reasons that included the need to “make sense of it for us” (P5), compensating for the already “paralysing” effect of the “lack of a very specific task that we didn’t understand” (P14), the habit of growing up in didactic systems where “we get told what to do” (P18), and coping with some of the discomfort in the space (P4). These reflections can be interpreted as the participants’ projections of their own anxiety and discomfort onto the facilitators, who mirrored those feelings back to them. P6 clearly identified this dynamic when considering the expectations group members placed on facilitators, what they thought they “should or shouldn’t be doing or saying. [...] people becoming quite irritated or frustrated to the facilitator, and I think there’s a lots of feelings, of putting our feelings into them.”

Over time, participants shifted their perceptions of the facilitators’ function. Recognising that their role was part of a “pattern” rather than being something “personal,” P17 realised that “there might have been a function to the comments as a learning tool. So then I was able to reframe it a little bit.” They also acknowledged that the facilitators, with their “provocative” comments, instead of being “cynical or mean,” “were trying to get us to think about things that we weren’t thinking about already, or reflect on.” P11 understood over time that “their role was just to be there and make sure it’s staffed, started on time, ended on time, and very limited in terms of what was expected of them. And the work comes from within the group.” The consistency in the facilitator’s approach and responses was, for P9, “containing in itself,” while for P2, the facilitators’ observations were an opportunity to rethink what the group was doing in “more helpful” ways, even though it was “frustrating and annoying at times.” P4 realised that the facilitators were “asking us to really reflect on things and not just look at things on a surface level, but to actually think about it a bit more in depth.”

Aligned with participants' increasingly nuanced perceptions of the facilitator, reflections on leadership suggested a shift from viewing leadership as a fixed personal attribute to understanding it as a relational and learnable practice. P2 acknowledged that EG provided the opportunity for group members to practise different roles, including shared leadership. P5 spoke of their resistance to being positioned often in a leadership role to "let the group do some of the work." Reflecting on the group's perception of them being a leader, P10 realised that one can be a leader not for what they know, but for what they do and stand for.

Most compelling are participants' narratives disclosing characteristics of followership. They reflected a more traditional understanding of leaders and facilitators as those who guide and dispense knowledge. Their expectations included: being told clearly and upfront what to do in EG, particularly as the task was so unclear ("nobody's telling you what to do or how to be or what should happen" [P7]), experiencing to be a learner on whom knowledge is imparted ("It's quite hard, I found, to sit and just be" [P9]), feeling the comfort that comes from knowing where people stand ("giving them that power to do the facilitating" [P11]), and receiving helpful reflections and comments to understand group behaviours ("[Their] facilitation was really good. [They] did a lot of commentary, [...] seen as useful to make sense of our experience on the course and what was going on for us as a group" [P5]). The dependency on perceived leaders within the group characterised aspects of followership. P11 aptly described this dependency:

The most vocal person holds the most power, they lead how the conversation's going, or the emotions that are being felt; and in experiential, because it's an uncomfortable, undefined task, then everyone's quite happy to go along with that, assigning who holds the power.

EPs often occupy a leadership position in their post-qualifying work with groups, such as in supervision groups, consultations, multi-disciplinary meetings, crisis work, teams and training. For several participants, a key insight was the importance of empowering others to take part in decision-making and problem-solving processes. P15 shared their practice of giving time to others to come up with ideas and suggestions rather than them always be the “expert.” Likewise, P5 spoke of the balancing act between intervening and sitting back: “When do I need to facilitate a bit and take a lead on? When would be very helpful for me to sit back and wait, and let the group take a lead and discuss something?” Similarly, P10 reflected on the multiplicity of voices that make things happen rather than a singular, expert, voice: “My role isn’t to monopolise the discussion and come up with all of the answers [...]. It’s actually, ‘What can we do together to do that?’” P16 shared their uncomfortable feeling of being put in the “one-up position,” which they try to avoid to “challenge the dynamics of the group [*for*] wanting to feel equal to the schools that I’m working with and the parents and the young people.”

Participants described supporting group members to take others’ perspectives, enabling empathy and collaboration. They reflected on how emotions surfaced during group work could be named and explored to foster mutual understanding. P10, when supervising groups, encouraged members to “step back” and consider multiple viewpoints, fostering a panoramic view of putting “themselves in somebody else’s shoes.” P5 drew on the concept of the primary task to reflect on how different roles within schools (academic teaching vs safeguarding) hold divergent and often unconscious understandings of the organisation’s core purpose. Supporting individuals in groups to recognise and integrate different tasks, P5 would follow this approach:

“Let’s sit down and let’s share some difficult feelings, and let’s really try and

understand each other” and dig into the humanness of it and be human [...]. And then we can maybe get to a better understanding and resolve it.

Similarly, P8 reflected how they “might try and maybe balance things off if I’m seeing splitting, trying to bring people back to that more ‘thinking’ position.” Likewise, P1 shared their “interest in trying to get people to understand each other” and facilitate conversations to that effect. P11 described their use of reflexivity when facilitating groups:

I think I could sit with all the uncomfortable stuff and let people air it, but then I could step back and take it down a different direction, be lighter or be humour or balance it out or be supportive, so taking that meta-perspective of emotions and what’s going on.

These accounts highlighted a movement away from hierarchical, expertise-driven models of leadership towards a more relationally attuned, reflexive and distributed practice, one in which authority was understood as provisional, shared and embedded within the dynamics of the group itself.

Subtheme Three: Silent Participation: Contribution or Withdrawal?

This subtheme examines participants’ perception of quiet members within EG. While some talkers experienced quiet members as withdrawing from risk and responsibility, others came to understand silence as an active and meaningful form of participation. These differing interpretations exposed underlying assumptions about voice, power and contribution within groups.

Participants associated talking with taking risks, filling the silence and thinking about the responsibility to talk and enable talking. The participants who linked silence to “checking out” and “not taking risks” expressed their feeling of frustration towards the more quieter members. P7 found it “really frustrating” when some members would “zone out” or “check

out.” Likewise, P8 identified feeling “frustrated, maybe angry, when people wouldn’t talk up, speak up, when there was really difficult conversations happening and others were doing their best; even if they might be getting it wrong, they were trying”:

I often worried about dominating that space, and what other people might feel. But then I was conflicted because [...] some people would never speak at all. So, then it was almost like, “OK, who has the responsibility to talk? Is it me?” (P8)

Similarly, P13 spoke of their “moments of frustration where I felt, ‘Well, I’m taking the risk to say something’”:

I took the risk, and those that were silent avoided risk. And what does that do? If your mechanism is never to take a position, how does that work in a group if then some members of the group are the ones that are carrying risk more frequently?

For these participants, speaking was constructed as a form of relational and emotional risk-taking.

Other participants viewed the more quieter individuals as taking up the space in forms other than verbal. P18 believed that one “can be engaged without saying anything. You don’t have to contribute [important things] all in the same way or with the same words. Or maybe you don’t need words to contribute your unique value.” Similarly, P1 acknowledged that the “quieter voices in the group still had status and presence within the group.” P10, while finding it “strange” at the beginning that some people did not talk, over time learnt that “not talking is also [...] a contribution. So, you’re taking up space within the group anyway, even if you’re not saying anything.” Likewise, P4 felt that “even if you don’t speak into it or offer any kind of intervention into that space, you are still active in it and understanding the impact on others of your activity.”

Participants who identified themselves as quieter members challenged the equation of silence with disengagement, emphasising internal observation, emotional presence and the inevitability of communicating something through being present. P11 recognised that having an internal commentary about what they observed during EG “may have had some influence at some level that impacts the group.” Their rationale was that because they “definitely would observe what’s going on for others, I would assume others would observe what’s going on for me.” P16 acknowledged being “present, still there, but you’re choosing not to speak.” P9 also recognised the impact they had on the group when at times, for personal reasons, they could not engage verbally. They also described how the emotional charge during EG cannot be avoided, whether one talks or does not:

In normal life, there’s so much to do and so much busyness, you just shove it to one side, but in experiential you have to face it, really. You’re sitting there for an hour, if me and you didn’t want to engage at all, you’re still sitting there. There’s no way to just not be, so, it’s communicating something. (P9)

In their practice, participants considered silence as a source of information. When voices were silent, P4 actively reflected on underlying dynamics such as power, marginalisation, anxiety or unspoken disagreement. Recognising the difficulty in decision-making when “silent dissenters” did not voice their disagreements, P1 acknowledged “the importance of making sure that those voices are heard and how do you actually bring them through.” P9 considered the impact that silent members within groups can have since they *are* part of the group, with their feelings and emotions, and “very aware of what’s going on.” This participant called it the “power of silence” and wondered “what is that silence communicating? What is their presence communicating?” Reflecting on how they apply their learning about silent members in their current group work, P13 wondered:

If someone is silent, how do you find a way that they can talk? [...] What experiences might that person have had when they've spoken before? Have they been shut down, trampled on, excluded? So, that's what I've taken from it. How do you enable speech? If speech is not possible in this space, how do you enable it in other ways?

Similarly, P10, shared how they invited people to contribute, particularly in situations where those who did not hold the power felt silenced and could not participate in decision-making:

“Is there anything that you would like to say?” or, “I realise that this is something that I'm asking you to do. Do you have any views on that?” And often they do, but within their group or their system, their voice isn't typically heard, so they might not put their hand up to say something, they might not bring their opinion forward.

Participants learnt to appreciate silence as an opportunity for thinking. They described intentionally using silence to enable reflection, redistribute power and resist premature problem-solving. P15 described how “we might all sometimes need a bit more space and time.” For them, silence, although possibly “uncomfortable,” could bring up “thoughts and feelings, and sometimes more answers.” They reflected on how they can be “quick to want to contribute, but then giving respect to those people who want to mull things over and actually just want to sit with that thought and that feeling for a little bit longer” (P15). P10 learnt to appreciate silence over time:

I feel completely relaxed to just enjoy that time and to have that time to just sit with whatever the thought is and go through that and not feel rushed to go on to the next bit, but to give people that space as well, to keep exploring things, keep reflecting on things for themselves until we do move on to whatever next thing that we're doing.

P4, reflecting on their tendency to “talk a lot” and describing themselves as “somebody who’d be really eager to contribute,” learnt that they “could consciously exert a different kind of influence by not contributing, but just feeling that space and wondering what that means.” Similarly, P1, P6 and P9 considered how they learnt to value being quiet, how they held their silence to enable other members in a group to contribute, refraining from “jumping in” and “trying to fix things.” P9 clarified that, although “silence has a good purpose [...] it’s hard to maintain it [*since*] school staff often will want the help and want to do stuff.”

The shift in perceptions of silence reflected a developing capacity to tolerate ambiguity and resist equating verbal contribution with participation, a position that participants described as central to their leadership within groups.

Theme Three: Feelings as Information

This theme examines participants’ use of feelings as data. It encompasses the psychodynamic processes of splitting, projection, projective identification and the basic assumption group mentalities that can be experienced in EG and in group situations post-training. Responses to group dynamics were reflected on, prompting participants to question what belonged to them individually and what belonged to the group, sometimes informing the formulation of hypotheses. Reflecting on these affective responses, participants developed a sensitivity toward deciding whether and how to share those feelings-informed hypotheses.

Subtheme One: Us Versus Them: Basic Assumption Dynamics in EG

This subtheme examines participants’ accounts suggesting periods in which task-oriented, reflective engagement gave way to basic assumption functioning (Bion, 1961). Descriptions of collective resistance to facilitators, us-versus-them dynamics and heightened paranoia indicated moments in which the group appeared in fight-flight basic assumption

mentality. While such dynamics were not always recognised in the moment, participants described developing an increased capacity to identify these oscillations over time, positioning this awareness as central to their emerging professional role in maintaining task focus and containment within groups.

Some participants recalled how their groups united against the facilitators, rejecting their interpretations. P2 spoke of acts of “resistance” against the facilitators, “where we decided we would not speak or, we’d sulk” (P2). P17 offered an example when the group was consumed by “extreme paranoia and anxiety,” which, together with the “power dynamic,” highlighted that the “difference between them and us was quite significant, like, the facilitators versus us as a group.” P7 observed how their group “rallied together against the facilitator, [...], rather than it being, ‘Oh, [they’re] somebody who could help us.’ It was, like, ‘Here’s somebody who’s been a bit rude and offensive and let’s not have anything to do with them anymore.’” P6 reflected retrospectively that the group had shifted into what they understood as a basic assumption state:

What the [facilitator] wanted us to do was to argue with each other, and because [they] wanted us to argue with each other, [they] didn’t create a safe environment. So, we all then stuck together like glue, we turned into this really basic assumption.

Similarly, P8 spoke of how the “power of the group,” intended as the “power dynamic that’s more than the individuals in it,” became very apparent to them in EG, indicative of a fight-flight response:

The group takes on this mind where it’s like a gang, a mob, like, “We’re going to get the head of the course. We’re going to take it down!” So there’s so many different aspects of the power dynamics, both within the group and then the group towards

other people outside of the group.

Other accounts were suggestive of basic assumption functioning, where the primary task of reflecting on group processes appeared displaced by collective efforts to defend against perceived threat. P12 recognised that in their group “there was a lot of blaming the facilitator.” P14 recalled that “we united so much as a group against the facilitators, to be honest, because we didn’t feel that sense of containment.” Similarly, P15 described how a group experience that took place outside of EG impacted the group to the extent that an “us-versus-them” mentality developed within experiential, which led to “quite a strong bonding [...] and a dislike for the facilitators.”

Central to the EP role was what appeared to be a developing capacity to recognise basic assumption states and hold a position outside of them. P17 described their confidence “these days” in “saying, ‘Yes, that’s the groupthink.’” Similarly, P19 considered “how a group can get consumed in panic and then lose normal functioning.” Significantly, they stressed the important EP role to “notice that, and not get drawn into [*the panic*], because if we get drawn in too, then we can miss doing the important work.” P8 mentioned how they can observe work “being on task and how often things are off task. People think that they’re on task, but they’re really not, they talk about things that are not related to the job, the purpose of the group.”

Subtheme Two: From Feelings to Formulation: Attending to Beneath-the-Surface

Information

This subtheme examines participants’ accounts focused on how emotional and relational dynamics were constructed not as peripheral to practice, but as meaningful data that informed hypothesis-building and guided professional practice. Participants described attending to power, hierarchy, unconscious processes and their own affective responses to

understand what might be shaping interactions beneath the surface. In doing so, they appeared to move beyond surface-level descriptions of behaviour towards a more interpretative engagement with the emotional life of groups, using this awareness to deepen understanding and shape intervention.

Some of the narratives were indicative of the the power dynamics that individuals might perceive within teams and groups. P5, reflecting on conflict, shared that dynamics of “power, the social graces and roles” that remain unconscious “can all have an impact [*on*] arguments or disagreements.” Similarly, P9 observed how the power dynamics in their team gave them the conflicting message between what was openly said and what was unconsciously transmitted. Reflecting on formal and informal hierarchies within their team, P16 considered how structures shaped participation in meetings, questioning the values communicated by authority figures within the service.

Some participants considered how thinking about the emotions and feelings related to group dynamics helped them shift from personalising affect to situating it within broader group processes, suggesting an increased capacity for systemic or meta-level thinking:

If I wasn't reflecting on the group dynamics at all, I think I would hold all of that, because I'm aware of the emotion. [...] I was so anxious, I was so worried I wasn't performing in a certain way or I wasn't doing something, whereas what's really helpful about having that time, that reflection, means that you can step away from it, you have a bit of space to see what's going on. (P9)

Using oneself in role to understand group dynamics was addressed by some participants. P7 shared that thinking about emotions within groups enabled them to wonder:

What is it that's getting in the way of us being able to relate, adult to adult,

professional to professional?, because if you don't address those, it doesn't matter how many actions and notes and flowcharts and things you put in place, the work will not be very productive.

Similarly, P2 stressed the value of learning to notice emotions affecting group dynamics and to use those as "data": "They taught us to use ourselves, in role, in a way that isn't the intervention or the reading, how do kids read or the questionnaire, that I do definitely feel quite confident to say 'I'm noticing this. Is anyone else?'" For P9, EG enabled them to recognise and tolerate multiple, simultaneous emotions while maintaining clarity about their own role within the group:

Situations like the experiential group really helped me embed myself in the moment and understand what my role is and [...] to recognise those emotions all flying around at the same time, but they weren't too overwhelming, whereas I could imagine they'd be very overwhelming if you weren't aware what you're feeling, what the roles were, what was going on.

The emotional information that participants sensed, felt and worked with from observing and interacting in groups, including their own emotions, was often described as part of their daily work in supporting a deeper, beneath-the-surface understanding of a situation or scenario (P1; P4; P5; P8; P11; P17). The following illustrates the wonderings and reflections that could be advanced, based on individuals' emotional life:

What have we learnt about the organisation from what they brought, the narratives they use, the kind of energy that was in the room, the feelings that [...] was stirred in you? What that's telling you, perhaps, about how that child is experiencing that too?
(P4)

Similarly, P5, when working with organisations, reflected on their thinking about group culture and what individuals and groups have to cope with:

I am always thinking about things like power dynamics and social graces and emotions. So what does this work mean to these people and what does it do to them emotionally? And how are the relationships formed and how are they constructed?

Participants drew on psychodynamic vocabulary to make sense of emotional episodes, suggesting an integration of theoretical constructs into their lived professional experiences. Some described scenarios in which they felt the service users' anxiety and frustration might have been projected onto them (P16; P17) or others (a parent/carer [P19], a principal EP [P8]). Some observed splitting in their descriptions of dynamics within services and professional, school and family systems, whereby parts were perceived as either all good or all bad (P1; P2; P8; P9; P10; P19).

Some described emotional reactions that led them to question their origin, suggestive of countertransference or projective identification. P8 reflected on how they might feel "very paranoid, [...] like I reacted to something and it was obviously countertransference going on." P2 described how, after team meetings, they might "leave with a bad headache or you leave feeling really stressed when you didn't go into that," adding that the training helped them think that that might be related to "what was happening in that group and what I have picked up on," rather than thinking, "Oh, well then, that was me." Similarly, P9 observed that "I'll leave a group and go like, 'Oh my God, I feel so drained because of that. [...] There was so much emotion there that you could feel.'"

Participants' wonderings and accompanying hypotheses at times informed their practice and guided their decision-making. P14 explained how they used emotional information to inform the "different avenues" they could take in a piece of work, including a

follow-up question, observation, assessment, or thinking, “There seems to be a theme in this school that quite a few teachers might be struggling with confidence when it comes to SEN and young people. So maybe that’s a piece of work there.”

Some shared how they, when responding to a crisis incident, “have to hold all of the emotion in the room and get people to a space where they’re able to think and know what they’re going to go away and do next” (P1). Others described the importance of slowing things down and “allow those emotions [before] trying to find what the problem is” (P9). P5 shared their approach in recognising that “it’s about being flexible [...] to what the group needs, but you have to pay attention to what’s going on for them, what’s going on for you in order to do that effectively.” P4 spoke of actively using the information that comes from the question ““What is the feeling of being in this space telling me about what’s happening here?” [...] as a tool to enable a depth of discussion or a different perspective on what might be happening.” Similarly, P18 found it important to share their observations, informed by emotional responses, with a colleague, and acknowledged that the training “has given me the language to speak to what’s going on in the group and it’s so helpful for us because groups can feel really overwhelming.”

Some observed how they unpicked emotional data with trainee EPs or EPs during supervision to make sense of their and/or others’ responses to situations (P1; P4; P8; P10; P15), while others might use their supervision space to discuss and understand the emotional responses they encountered in aspects of their work (P9). However, P7 pointed out that the possibility of bringing one’s or others’ feelings as an item to discuss in supervision depended on whether “somebody [is] very open and comfortable thinking about the unconscious,” which, they acknowledged, was not always the case.

Participants’ accounts suggested a reflexive, systemic approach in which emotional

responses, power dynamics and unconscious processes were treated as integral to practice. Rather than relying solely on procedural interventions, they described working through emotions to generate hypotheses, inform decisions and facilitate containment within complex relational systems.

Subtheme Three: Mindful Sharing of Feelings-Informed Hypotheses

This subtheme examines how participants translated their observations of emotional and relational dynamics into practice by sharing feelings-informed hypotheses with others. It highlights the reflective, relational and ethical considerations involved in naming emotions, unconscious processes or group dynamics, demonstrating the participants' developing sensitivity to context, power and receptivity.

Some participants shared how they name the processes they felt and observed to colleagues, other professionals and/or service users depending on one's confidence to voice it, the purpose of the sharing and the recipient's capacity to receive the information. P10 and P15 considered how, over time, they gained confidence in sharing their feelings-informed hypotheses with others. During a family-school consultation, P16 noted that the group found it beneficial to explicitly acknowledge and identify the felt anxiety: "Once it was named, it then supported things to level out a little bit and be able to then explore what else was going on for that child." Often naming the possible emotional responses of teachers and teaching assistants in an ELSA group, P11 recalled how group members found it therapeutic and helpful, as feelings were validated and they felt empathised with. These examples indicate that the participants' naming of affect could support containment, shared understanding and engagement with the group.

Consistent with the idea that the disclosure of a feelings-informed observation has to have a purpose, P7 reflected that "just noticing it for yourself and having that in your own

mind is the most important thing.” They then found it helpful to wonder: “Does this need some other thought? Do I need to take this somewhere else or not? Is this just for me to think about?” With purpose in mind, and sensitivity towards others, P13 shared that, when facilitating groups, they wanted the “acknowledgement of unconscious processes or emotions or anything that I’m reflecting on to enable the group to take the thinking further so it has to be accessible and not provoke defences.” Similarly, P3 noted that if they felt “that it was important to name a bit of the group process that might be happening or the dynamic, if it was to aid the aim of the meeting, then yes. Otherwise, probably not. I’d probably just think it.” P5 offered a view that resonated with other participants’ ways of thinking:

I have lots of thoughts in my head and I’m not going to share them all. Some of them are useful to the group and some of them will not be. So, it’s more about thinking, “When am I naming something that might be going on for the group that would be useful to name?”

These participants demonstrated a meta-level monitoring of both internal experience and social context, whereby they actively evaluated the relevance and potential consequences of sharing.

Some participants reported that feelings-informed hypothesising may not be received constructively by everyone involved. P17 specified that introducing challenge within a group needs to be done “in a way that’s going to be useful and productive and move things forward rather than just create destruction.” Similarly, P5, while actively opting for “disagreeing agreeably and mining for conflict,” recognised that it may not be received well by everybody: “You have to recognise that these models are not universal and they’re not always the right course; [...] we have to hold them a bit more lightly sometimes.”

P17 shared their awareness of “what the experience can be like [for other people]

when you do say something that might bring up a bit of conflict or do something that might provoke disharmony.” P12 noted that group members may respond with defensiveness regardless of how the views were phrased. The feelings-informed hypotheses may have touched their “emotional Achilles” and “they are likely to react because it’s something that they already [...] feel uncomfortable about, shame, are sensitive to.”

Participants described being mindful of how they articulate feelings-informed hypotheses, tending to frame their observations tentatively and collaboratively, rather than positioning themselves as authoritative or relying explicitly on psychodynamic terminology:

I will sit there and think, “What’s the contribution of naming this, what I think I’m noticing, and can I name it in such a way that it’s digestible, that it’s not going to provoke a defensive response, it’s not going to shut down the conversation?” And, I think, to do that in a way that you’re still attuned to what is actually happening. (P13)

Similarly, P17 shared emotional data with service-users in ways that could be accepted:

“Oh, do you remember when so and so said this part before? Well, let’s explore that.” It can help you to think of another way to approach things without directly tackling, “I think this is what is going on,” or, “I think you’re doing this right now.”

Participants’ careful, reflective sharing of feelings-informed hypotheses illustrated how attunement to emotional and relational dynamics could be actively translated into practice, while maintaining sensitivity to the context.

Theme Four: The Dread and Value of Learning Through Experience

This theme examines participants’ ambivalent views on EG, highlighting the challenges and difficulties of engaging in that space while also valuing the experience and the learning that it led to. EG was described as an opportunity to allow thinking and reflection to

take place, even though participants found that awkward, difficult and demanding. Their accounts suggested that the very features that made EG difficult (uncertainty, lack of structure, emotional intensity), may also have constituted the conditions under which deeper reflective capacities were developed. This theme includes suggestions for changes and adaptations to create better containment and understanding of the processes involved in EG.

Participants variously described the dread and value of their EG experience, indicative of learning processes that can be experienced painfully in the short term yet valuable in the long term. P1 found EG “painful, [...] a difficult space to understand the point of, and it was a difficult space to learn to be in.” Yet, they acknowledged that, over time, they “began to value doing something that was nothing like what I did anywhere else” and found the learning “so incredibly important.” P14 acknowledged that they “learnt a lot despite [experiential] being very different perhaps” from what they would have found more helpful: “there’s lots and lots of things to take from experiential and it has been incredibly helpful to my practice as an EP. But I think, at the time, it was very, very challenging.” They also recognised the necessary “trade-off” between anxiety and learning: “the helpful things I’ve got from it wouldn’t be as helpful and I wouldn’t have gained as much if we’d had more explanation, or if it’d been more tolerable and probably wouldn’t have got as much out of it.” P15 echoed similar considerations: “I think that, in hindsight, there were definite benefits to that space, even though it felt uncomfortable.” Similarly, other participants described this dichotomy in EG, using adjectives such as “challenging” (P11; P16), “abusive” (P1), “inhumane” (P14), “painful, uncomfortable, boring” (P19), “difficult” (P3), “hard” (P5), “anxiety-provoking” (P8; P18), “academic nonsense” (P17) and unenjoyable and dreading (P9), but also recognising that the learning has been “powerful” (P3), “huge” (P19), “beneficial for the job” (P16), and “invaluable” (P2; P9). The diversity of experiences speak of the deeply personal

and subjective nature of group work, where EG was constructed not as uniformly beneficial or harmful, but as a place where discomfort and growth were intertwined.

Learning happened over time, and more often than not, after participants finished their training. They used expressions such as “with hindsight” (P14), “after I finished the course” (P11), “definitely not at the time” (P14), “time afterwards” (P16), “looking back on it” (P7), “on reflection” and “at a later point” (P3). The temporal distancing evident in these accounts suggests that the meaning and value of EG were often not cognitively accessible during the experience itself, but required time, professional practice and reflective integration to be digested as learning. In this sense, the emotionally lived experience only later became thinkable.

EG appeared to have provided participants with a space for thinking and reflection, something that the participants started to value over time. P11 recognised that EG was a space “where we could just focus on what was going on in the here and now, for all of us, that separate space for reflection.” Similarly, P2 acknowledged that EG “could be our space to just think about how we were as a group, explicitly and implicitly, which I don’t think really happened anywhere else”:

Everywhere else you’d have a task, “Discuss your experience of early years” or whatever it was, and that was the one thing we’d just walk in and [...] then something would happen, and you’d never know where it was going to go.

Recognising the “richness in terms of thinking,” P3 noticed how EG provided the space to “actually having to think about our group dynamics or even if it wasn’t always being voiced and talked through, at least it was highlighting [...] competition, group defences, individual defences, allegiances, positioning, differences.” For P4, EG was a “really special opportunity to create space to just be together and work our way through whatever was going

on for us, professionally, personally, sharing what you felt able and confident to share without feeling you had to be exposed.” Comparing EG to other learning and working environments, P9 noticed that “the space allows to have the moment to think, ‘What’s mine, what’s not, what’s going on here really?’ , because you don’t get that reflection normally.” This suggests that EG supported the development of a reflective orientation in which participants learnt to differentiate personal affect from group-level processes.

However, EG did not automatically guarantee reflective engagement. Participants’ accounts of missed opportunities suggested that the availability of a container did not ensure that difficult material was then brought into EG. P7 shared how they felt the group “could have used that space better to [...] address some of those things. [...] It was too late to be able to do anything about it.” P14 recalled that their group did not “take difficult [*group*] experiences to experiential. [...] I don’t remember that happening over the entire three years.”

Although some participants appeared to accept their ambivalence towards EG, often framing it as “short-term pain, long-term gain” (P14), they nevertheless offered suggestions that, if considered, might make the experience more containing and tolerable. Recalling that EG did not “feel particularly contained or containing,” P17 suggested that EG were “more structured,” particularly when thinking about the end time, when “you’re just left with whatever happens in the group, like, the group just ends and then off you go to your next thing.” P18 observed that the “completely different” learning methods between EG (experiential) and lectures (didactic) need to be considered so that trainees were better prepared. They suggested that trainees could be introduced to EG with an explanation such as “This space is a learning space. This is for you to play in. This is for you to explore in.” They also considered a group contracting process including the social graces and the contracting circles as used in supervision contracting to “co-construct a safer place” (P18). P3, comparing

EG with reflective practice groups, highlighted the importance of offering trainees “a bit more explicit aims to the space” that would provide a focus: “This is what we’re thinking about. This is what we’re exploring. This is what we’re talking about.” They felt that EG “wasn’t anchored enough in that” and would prefer a space where “there’s more warmth and there’s more intention to foster cohesion that then promotes norms that I think can be more facilitative.” Describing the different levels of familiarity with psychodynamic thinking and trainees’ developmental stages at the beginning of training, P3 also felt the need for “having a little bit more direction or maybe being a bit more interventive and [...] foster a form of communication that is going to be reparative.”

P8 felt that some trainees “weren’t supported, and in experiential in particular, it was where all happened [...] and I feel it should have been addressed better by staff in the group.” They emphasised the “need to be done differently, it does need to prepare differently.” This participant raised the ethical issue of accommodating the needs of individuals with neurodivergent profiles:

One could talk about it in the contracting space, but then, of course, people may not even realise that they are neurodivergent or they may not feel comfortable to say that. So how do you meet everybody’s needs? I think that needs really careful thinking about, and probably a lot more support in place.

This participant’s reflection points to the importance of considering how individual differences may impact group members’ EG experiences.

Although valuing the learning gained from EG, participants’ recommendations indicated that adjustments to the programme could bring more insight with less anxiety, thereby striving to meet the needs of a diverse group.

Five: Discussion

Chapter Overview

This chapter positions my study as an empirically-grounded contribution to understanding how EG processes can impact professional development within EP practice. Firstly, I respond to my research questions by interpreting the findings based on existing EG research using a systems psychodynamic theoretical lens. Then, I introduce a framework as the conceptual contribution of my study, linking experience, learning and application to practice. The chapter further provides a critical evaluation of the methodological limitations of the research, presents implications for EP training and post-qualification practice, and outlines strategies for dissemination to academic and professional audiences. The chapter concludes with my personal reflections on the research process.

Interpretation of Findings

RQ1: How do EPs Describe Their Experience of EG?

Groups as Anxiety-Activating Systems

My findings strongly aligned with psychodynamic conceptualisations of groups as anxiety-activating systems (Bion, 1961). Factors that heightened the participants' feeling of anxiety included task confusion, frustration with non-directive facilitation, fear of judgement and rejection, personal experiences with authority figures and managing relationships outside of EG. For the participants, EG remained an anxiety-activating environment throughout the three years of training, not only during early EG sessions. These findings were consistent with EG research reporting participants' feelings of discomfort, stress, anxiety and vulnerability due to uncertainty and fear of judgment (Anderson & Price, 2001; Liu et al., 2021; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020; Moller & Rance, 2013; Ohrt et al., 2014; Smith & Burr, 2022; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008; St.Pierre, 2014). These concerns were connected to participants'

preoccupations with the potential impact of EG on their relationships with group members outside of EG (Jakubkaitė & Kočiūnas, 2014; Lennie, 2007; Moller & Rance, 2013; Steen et al., 2014).

Critically, participants' narratives provided empirical evidence that supports psychodynamic theories on group functioning. Participants' accounts described experiences suggestive of projections onto other group members and/or the facilitators, serving to relieve members of anxiety through splitting, perceiving others as either entirely good or entirely bad (Klein, 1946; Halton, 2019). Similarly, blaming the facilitator or others contributed to the rebound of projections, thereby maintaining an anxious state within the group (Halton, 2019; Stein, 2004). Consistent with Bion's (1961) basic assumption group mentalities of fight/flight and dependency, accounts described groups united against an identified threat (the facilitator, scapegoated individuals or the institution) as a response to anxiety or relied on the authority of a leader to function.

To understand these group processes, Bion's idea of the "hatred" of learning by experience (Bion, 1961, p. 89) helps frame participants' experiences of discomfort. Their anxieties interfered with the desire to know, functioning as collective defences that resisted the uncertainty and discomfort that genuine change and development necessarily entail (French & Simpson, 2010; Hutton et al., 1997). The hatred refers to the challenges inherent in developing self- and interpersonal awareness, particularly when such potential learning was not made clear to participants at the start. The EG format, by withholding the very structure participants sought, repeatedly confronted them with this intolerance, making the hatred of learning not an obstacle to the group experience but a central feature of it.

Despite reporting experiences of anxiety, awkwardness and insecurity, several participants in this study highlighted that EG contributed to enhancing their self-awareness as

group members and understanding of group dynamics. This finding aligned with some retrospective studies in which participants, looking back at their EG experiences, valued them notwithstanding the challenging aspects, recognising the long-term benefits of meaningful and impactful learning (Hall et al., 1999; Knight et al., 2010; Smith & Burr, 2022; St.Pierre, 2014).

Containment and the Paradox of Safety

The experience of feeling psychologically safe within EG was impacted by an unclear task, the facilitator's role, participants' anxieties in an undirected environment and the perception of an essentially leaderless space. Endings of sessions experienced as abrupt added to the experience of material left unprocessed (Wittenberg, 2023). Some of the participants' narratives reflected the need for an authoritative container who could provide clarity and emotional holding, particularly in situations of stress, when groups were likely to regress to primitive modes of functioning (Bion, 1961). Examples of splitting facilitators into helpful or unkind figures reflected paranoid-schizoid processes, where ambivalence was managed through splitting (Klein, 1946).

The distinction between safety and containment was crucial to understanding participants' sense-making of their experiences. I understand psychological safety and containment as related yet conceptually distinct processes. Typically framed as an outcome at the group level, psychological safety refers to a shared perception that it is safe to take interpersonal risks within a group, such as speaking openly, expressing disagreement or acknowledging uncertainty (Edmondson, 1999). By contrast, Bion's (1962) idea of containment refers to the capacity of an individual or system to receive, process and grasp a difficult emotional experience so that it becomes thinkable, and therefore, learnable (Williams, 2013). This process can happen within the individual or between individuals

(Ogden, 2004). Whereas psychological safety describes how safe members feel, containment describes the underlying emotional and structural processes that make such safety possible. From this perspective, containment can be understood as a mechanism through which psychological safety is generated and sustained, particularly in contexts where anxiety, conflict or vulnerability are present (Gustafson & Cooper, 1985). This distinction, not highlighted in the EG literature reviewed in Chapter Two, was reflected in participants' descriptions of their experiences, where the lack of containment made it difficult for some to make sense of their experiences, which, in turn, made them feel less safe. This finding pointed to the dialectic between safety and challenge, which produces what might appear as a paradox: the absence of safety made challenge and exploration difficult, although deeper exploration could have led to feeling safe. Systems psychodynamics helps illuminate this dialectic and explains why both change and resistance are needed for transformation to take place. Challenge can be understood as intrinsically enabling change and transformation. However, these are likely to invite resistance because of the unknown that change can bring about. It is this tension between transformation and resistance, between the unknown and the known, that can, if embraced, become productive (Armstrong, 1992).

Significantly, my study extends EG research by highlighting the relational co-construction of containment. Containment was experienced as co-produced rather than solely facilitator-owned, consistent with the description of the container-contained process described in Ogden (2004). Some participants reported feeling contained by the group, others by the facilitators and others still demonstrated signs of being container and contained themselves as they developed more of a thinking capacity once processes started to make sense for them (Rosenfeld, 1988). In the early stages of EG, participants were expecting facilitators to hold the group, whereas as the sessions progressed, containment was recognised as systemic and

shared. Some EG research identified the feeling of support and validation provided by the group (Kiweewa et al., 2013; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020; Smith and Burr, 2022), while others observed that over time, the group became less dependent on the facilitator and increasingly guided by its own members (Young et al., 2013). The progression from an external holder of containment to an individual's capacity to contain themselves appears consistent with the shift from a paranoid-schizoid to a depressive position (Klein, 1946). In the context of group functioning, the depressive position represents the developmental movement from defensive splitting toward reflective and relational maturity.

Cohesion as Social Defence

According to Yalom & Leszcz (2020), cohesion refers to a sense of togetherness within a group. It is considered both a powerful therapeutic force and a foundation for other healing factors, such as hope, universality, altruism and interpersonal learning, which are less likely to occur without it. Cohesion typically develops after members work through conflict, share vulnerabilities and take meaningful risks together (Corey et al., 2018). By contrast, the findings in my study suggested that group cohesion was in fact the expression of basic assumption mentality, when individuals shift away from rational cooperation and differentiation that is more typical of the work group (Miller, 1998). In my study, participants prioritised group cohesion over a deeper exploration of differences and the dynamics within the cohorts. Also described as an “overinvolved oceanic fusion in which all are part of one big happy family” (Gustafson & Cooper, 1985, p. 140), group cohesion appeared to function as a social defence against the anxiety of fragmentation (Di Biase, 2023; Hoggett, 1998). This is consistent with social defence system theory (Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1960), which suggests that groups avoided difference to manage anxiety. While dialogue about differences in academic abilities and experiences on placement was easier to be held, participants tended to

avoid potentially divisive discussions on race, class and power differences. This was related to a sense of a paralysing anxiety, uncertainty around who was entitled or expected to initiate challenging conversations and dependency on the facilitator or other group members for managing such dialogues. The participants made sense of group safety through cohesion, while difference was experienced as threatening group survival (Short, 2007).

Exploring differences in group relations conferences (GRCs) is reportedly complex and difficult, generating group-level projections, identity-based rigid role differentiation and feeling of shame and disintegration that act to maintain the establishment and status quo of power and privilege (Brazaitis, 2004; D'Apice et al., 2023; Short, 2004). To keep to one's identity and avoid fragmentation, splitting and projection function to hold on to what is wanted and reject what is unwanted or avoided (Skolnick & Green, 2004). My findings were consistent with such processes documented in the group relations literature. They suggested that group cohesion itself operated as a social defence whereby the pull toward unity and belonging functioned to prevent rather than facilitate exploration of difference, as participants unconsciously prioritised the safety of the cohesive whole over the relational risk of genuine encounter with difference.

The prioritisation of group cohesion also shaped participants' self-monitoring of their verbal contributions, suggesting that the boundary of EG was experienced as a permeable space through which relational pressures from outside were continuously imported. In open systems terms, EG could function and survive through exchange with its environment, which explains the permeability of boundaries (Brunning & Long, 2022; Miller & Rice, 1967). Yet, the social stakes of relationships that existed *outside* EG actively entered the space, constraining what participants felt they could share *within* it. This helps explain why EG was used as a reflection space for external events such as the GRC (Bartle, 2015): because the

boundary was permeable in both directions, the group's internal world was never fully separable from the institutional context surrounding it. This permeability appears to have been central to how meaning was made in EG as the outside was always, to some degree, already inside.

Role Experimentation

EG provided opportunities for participants to experiment with different roles and recognise their own and others' valencies. Through observing themselves in interaction, participants narrated the range of roles enacted, experimented with, or resisted, shaped by their identities, relationships to authority and members' expectations (Izod, 2014). EG thus functioned as a live space for witnessing how roles were taken up, projected into, or unconsciously selected in response to group needs. Consistent with group relations theories (Horwitz, 1985), these dynamics reflected group transference processes: participants projected expectations, anxieties and relational histories onto one another and onto the group itself, with authority figures, talkative and silent members each becoming recipients of unconscious attributions shaped by the group's emotional state. Within a group-as-a-whole perspective, participants functioned as vehicles for the group unconscious, demonstrating an interdependence between individuals that reflects the view that groups are different from the sum of individuals that constitute them (Bion, 1961; Wells, 1985). In this sense, participants' interconnected roles, influenced by the group unconscious, were suggestive of the creation of, and response to a group mind, or soul of the group (Kirsch & Spradlin, 2006).

Most accounts aligned with the view that leadership and followership are socially constructed (Chamorro-Premuzic & Edmondson, 2026), consistent with group relations theories contextualising the developmental role of leaders and followers (Rioch, 1971). In the absence of a clear task or directive authority, participants observed leadership as emerging

relationally, conferred through group expectation, anxiety, power or projection rather than formal selection (Alford, 2004; Vince, 1998). Followership appeared not as passive compliance but as active, and at times defensive, positioning within the group. Authority was experienced as unconsciously negotiated on a moment-to-moment basis, shaped by shared assumptions, role valencies and the group's capacity to tolerate uncertainty. This provided empirical support for the psychodynamic view that leaders are "the creature of the group" (Eisold, 1985, p. 46), assuming multiple subtle and shifting forms in service of the group's defensive functioning (Eisold, 1985).

Talkers and silent members were identified by participants as recognisable roles within EG. Some associated speaking with relational risk and experienced frustration toward quieter members, viewing silence as avoidance of vulnerability and an unequal distribution of emotional labour, consistent with EG research noting resentment toward non-participating members (Anderson et al., 2014; Hall et al., 1999; Kline et al., 1997; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020). However, other participants challenged this equation, emphasising observation and the communicative value of non-verbal participation. Quieter members resisted the assumption that contribution is measured through speech alone, consistent with previous EG research that highlighted how group members communicate something whether speaking or remaining silent (Lennie, 2007). My findings extended existing EG literature by documenting the range of feelings toward quieter members and by framing silence as active rather than passive participation (McMichael, 2023).

RQ2: What did EPs Learn About Group Dynamics Through Participation in EG?

Recognising Unconscious Processes

Participants learnt to recognise psychodynamic processes such as splitting, projection, projective identification and behaviours stemming from basic assumption group mentality, in

themselves and others. In psychodynamic thinking, if these processes are unchecked, they can lead to fundamental distortion of communications and actions within groups (Redlich & Astrachan, 1975). Over time, participants developed a capacity to use their emotional responses as meaningful data (Trainor, 2019), gradually coming to use these affective experiences as vehicles to understand what might be happening beneath the surface of the group. This practice of attending to and reflecting on one's own emotional reactions in response to the group mirrors the clinical use of countertransference (Freud, 1912/1958), whereby the practitioner's internal experience is understood as a potential signal of unconscious group processes being activated as group members interact.

Based on Bion's theory of learning, participants' accounts illustrated the development of the "alpha function," defined as the capacity to observe, reflect and learn from experience in ways that one then engages with the external world differently (Bion, 1962; Stein, 2004). Closely mapping onto Klein's (1946) depressive position, learning at the group level exemplified the oscillation from a basic assumption to a work group mentality, in which members could engage with the real task, tolerate uncertainty and frustration, manage anxieties and think cooperatively (Armstrong, 2005; Bion, 1961). Participants' developing capacity to tolerate ambiguity and doubts was akin to the idea of "negative capability" (Keats, 1817, as cited in Bion, 1970), borrowed by Bion to describe the ability to tolerate the anxiety of not knowing. Taken together, these developments suggest that, rather than being a purely pedagogical exercise, EG functioned as a potentially transformative container in which participants changed how they perceived relational dynamics, interpreted emotional data and positioned themselves as reflective practitioners within systems under stress. This was consistent with group relations literature that highlights the possibility of change and transformation resulting from experiential learning (Armstrong, 1992; Lazar, 2004).

Learning, however, was uneven across accounts. It developed over time and continued to be subject to revision. Participants' processing and sense-making of difficult feelings aligned with group relations theories that consider how the generation and control of anxiety in EG offer a learning *opportunity* (Rice, 1965). Importantly, participants' accounts suggested that, as the experience was initially destabilising, meaning-making of their experiences was limited and only retrospectively understood, a sign that experience preceded understanding. In EG research, time was considered necessary to allow participants to process and digest their experiences before being comprehended (Hall et al. 1999).

Containment and the Importance of Safety

Participants' varied experiences of safety within EG deepened their understanding of containment as a central task in group facilitation. Safety meant not that discomfort was absent, but that there was enough support to bear it without disengaging (Williams, 2013). Their accounts support Bion's (1962) conception of containment as the capacity to hold and make sense of the anxiety. They provide empirical evidence by demonstrating participants' developing appreciation that challenge became productive when contained by relational and the structural holding provided by clarity of task and consistency of time and space (Gosling & Turquet, 1967). These boundaries were experienced by some as containing and predictable, allowing anxiety to settle over time. The consistency of the group itself and the facilitators' type of responses were gradually understood as meaningful, with participants recognising that containment can develop through time. At the same time, endings and unpredictable room changes or cancellations sometimes disrupted this sense of containment, revealing how fragile containment can feel when boundaries are experienced abruptly. These findings align with group relations theories (Green & Molenkamp, 2005; Redlich & Astrachan, 1975; Rice, 1965), which conceptualise task, time and territory as primary containers of group anxiety.

Similarly, some of EG research identified clarity around group structure, norms and purpose as personal-growth enabling factors (Kiweewa et al., 2013; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010).

While EG functioned as a developmental space in which participants could experience containment, it is significant to acknowledge that some participants learnt about the importance of containment negatively, by experiencing the absence of it and the detrimental impact such absence can have.

Valency and Role Positioning

Participants became aware of how valencies and relational expectations shaped their positioning, reflecting on people-pleasing tendencies, preoccupation with competence and avoidance of conflict to preserve group belonging. These internal dynamics constrained role flexibility, reinforcing familiar identities such as leader, expert or agreeable student. Notably, externally imposed roles could sometimes be resisted more easily than self-created ones, highlighting the tension between agency and projection: while roles were co-constructed within the group, individuals also participated in sustaining or relinquishing them (Rioch, 1971; Shapiro & Carr, 2012).

Participants increasingly recognised how predictable role allocation could inadvertently silence others, limit plurality and stabilise the group around fixed expectations. Role therefore operated both as a fluid function of the group system and as a constraining identity position shaped by social and relational dynamics (Alford, 2004; Reed, 2001). Developing role awareness involved understanding that roles were negotiated from the interplay of group needs, social positioning and personal valency, and that shared responsibility required stepping out of habitual performance, a shift from unconscious role engagement toward more deliberate, systemic participation (Redlich & Astrachan, 1975). Both talkers and silent members reframed silence as communicative and productive,

supporting previous research indicating that talkers do not learn more in EG than quieter individuals (McLeish et al., 1973). Risk-taking was understood as differentiating *when* and *how* to intervene, including when to hold and how to resist familiar roles in service of collective responsibility.

These findings provided empirical evidence for psychodynamic accounts of how members discover their valencies (Bion, 1961; Rosenfeld, 1988), how task and anxiety shape roles (Rice, 1965), and how organisational roles are unconsciously formed (Halton, 2019) and serve to manage anxiety (Hirschhorn, 1990). Crucially, they extended current understanding by showing how participants developed reflexive awareness of their valencies, something EG research, which has focused on intra- and interpersonal awareness (Kiweewa et al., 2013; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008), has not previously highlighted.

Authority and Leadership

Participants demonstrated a shift from viewing leadership as a fixed, personal attribute to understanding it as contextual, relational, fluid and learnable (Lipgar, 1998). Recognition of shared leadership opportunities challenged hierarchical assumptions. Heightened awareness of occupying leadership roles enabled participants to question whether such positioning inadvertently prevented others from stepping into that function, demonstrating how authority was socially and unconsciously granted through projection and valency (Bion, 1961; Stokes, 2019). Over time, some participants moved from a paranoid-schizoid position (perceiving facilitator's interventions as personal or withholding) toward a depressive position, recognising the facilitator's role as part of a broader systemic pattern maintained by the group. This supported Klein's object relations theory (1946) and Bion's notion of containment (1962), illustrating the oscillation between basic assumption and work group mentality, whereby dependency-driven expectations gave way to shared, fluid leadership in pursuit of

the primary task (Turquet, 1985). Together, these findings reflect social de-conditioning (Rosenfeld, 1988), whereby participants reworked internal models of authority and redefined roles to enhance social communication within a boundaried space (Redlich & Astrachan, 1975).

By contrast, in existing EG research, facilitators function as role models who demonstrate counselling skills aimed at supporting students' learning (Ieva et al., 2009; Ohrt et al., 2014; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008). This is unsurprising, given that most studies examined non-psychodynamic models of EG, with skills-based purposes. This study therefore extends EG research by demonstrating how Tavistock-style EG enables trainees to review traditional conceptions of authority and leadership when learning about group behaviour (Redlich & Astrachan, 1975).

RQ3: How do EPs Apply Their Learning From EG in Their Professional Work With Groups?

Creating Conditions for Psychological Safety and Participation

Participants described a deliberate and sustained approach to nurturing psychological safety within the groups they led. Rather than conceptualising safety as the absence of discomfort, they sought to create environments sufficiently containing to allow interpersonal risk-taking and the exploration of difficult issues (Bion, 1961; Lawlor & Sher, 2022). Central to participants' practice was establishing clear, predictable boundaries around time, space and task, perceived as structurally containing and enabling conditions for trust to develop gradually. This is consistent with supervision models and practices that favour contracting of boundaries, co-creation of collaboration and trust between supervisor and supervisees, and containment of difficult emotions that the group can hold, process and make sense of (Garrett, 2014; Hawkins & Shohet, 2012; Proctor, 2008; Smith, 2022). Participants linked this directly

to group togetherness, suggesting that relational trust is not simply a necessary precondition for effective group work but is itself something developed through repeated, bounded experience of the group (Kahn & Green, 2004).

Participants also acknowledged the challenges inherent in managing this process, as psychological safety and containment are multi-authored processes that do not depend on the participant-as-leader alone. This resonated with Edmondson's (1999) finding that psychological safety operates at the group level yet is experienced differently by individual members. Indeed, individuals' experiences within groups are impacted by their own histories of relationships to authority often operating at an unconscious level through internal working models of attachment patterns (Ringer, 2002). Therefore, participants-as-leaders played a critical role in creating the space for deeper reflections, interpersonal risk-taking and collaborative problem-solving.

Working With Emotional Processes

Participants described paying attention to power dynamics, hierarchical positioning and unconscious processes to understand beneath-the-surface group dynamics, distinguishing between task-focused functioning and anxiety-driven states consistent with Bion's (1961) work (Armstrong, 2022). Their growing capacity to use projective identification enabled reflection on emotional responses to illuminate relational dynamics (Czarnecka, 2020), reframing personal experience as data indicative of wider systemic processes (Trainor, 2019), consistent with systems psychodynamic practice of translating unconscious material and understanding resistances (Lawlor & Sher, 2022). The countertransference response, foundational to understanding unconscious institutional processes, rests on the capacity to receive and make sense of service-users' projections (Halton, 2019), including identifying information about similarities and differences that are not openly expressed (Stapley, 2006).

This has clear relevance to EP practice, where competing pressures, deep-seated relational patterns and unspoken dynamics frequently obstruct collaborative working, teaching and learning (Hulusi & Maggs, 2015; Pellegrini, 2010). Participants also described using their and others' silence deliberately, to redistribute power, create reflective space and resist premature problem-solving, consistent with systems psychodynamic perspectives in which leadership is expressed through restraint as much as action (Armstrong, 2005; Rice, 1965). Attending to feelings in this way has potential to empower others by engaging their anxieties and enabling more systemic change (Lawlor & Sher, 2022), consistent with psychodynamic models underpinning EP supervision and consultation (Ellis, G., 2021; Ellis, K., 2021; Eloquin, 2016, 2021; Farouk, 2004; Hulusi & Maggs, 2015; Jackson, 2008; Pellegrini, 2009).

Emotional insights were translated into feelings-informed working hypotheses, shared tentatively and collaboratively to invite dialogue, or held in the background while engaging service-users in everyday conversational language (Gould, 2004). This reflects both ethical sensitivity (BPS, 2021; HCPC, 2024) and awareness that interpretation can provoke resistance given the anxieties that change can bring (Guttman, 2003; Halton, 2019; Pellegrini, 2010), and is consistent with the collaborative, non-expert stance underpinning EP consultation (Kennedy et al., 2008; Kennedy & Lee, 2021; Wagner, 2000). Participants also demonstrated meta-level monitoring of their internal experience and social context, evaluating when and how to share feelings-informed insights according to context, purpose and the recipient's capacity to receive them, reflecting the relational attunement and ethical reflexivity central to equitable EP practice (Hardy et al., 2020; Schön, 2016).

Role Awareness and Shared Leadership

Drawing on their understanding that roles are unconsciously co-constructed within the emotional life of the group, participants described their alertness to how roles may be enacted

in teams and groups. In consultation and team meetings, they may notice who speaks first, who remains silent, who is deferred to and how in-group and out-group dynamics become established. Participants reported being able to spot patterns more quickly in both newly formed and established groups, recognising early signs of tension, rivalry or dependency, and using these observations to inform how they approach consultation, supervision and training contexts. They may observe how groups may unconsciously rely on particular members to carry specific functions, for example, holding the group's social justice concerns or absorbing collective frustration. Valency proved useful for recognising how individuals may be drawn into certain roles, while also appreciating that these roles are not fixed. By noticing these dynamics, participants adopted what Bion termed a "binocular vision" (Bion, 1962) to describe the dual process of attending to surface-level individual behaviours and the unconscious group culture (Eisold, 1985; Kernberg & Ahumada, 2000). This understanding supports participants to intervene in ways that loosen fixed role allocations, positioning themselves to collaborate with service users to co-construct solutions and create the conditions for movement and change.

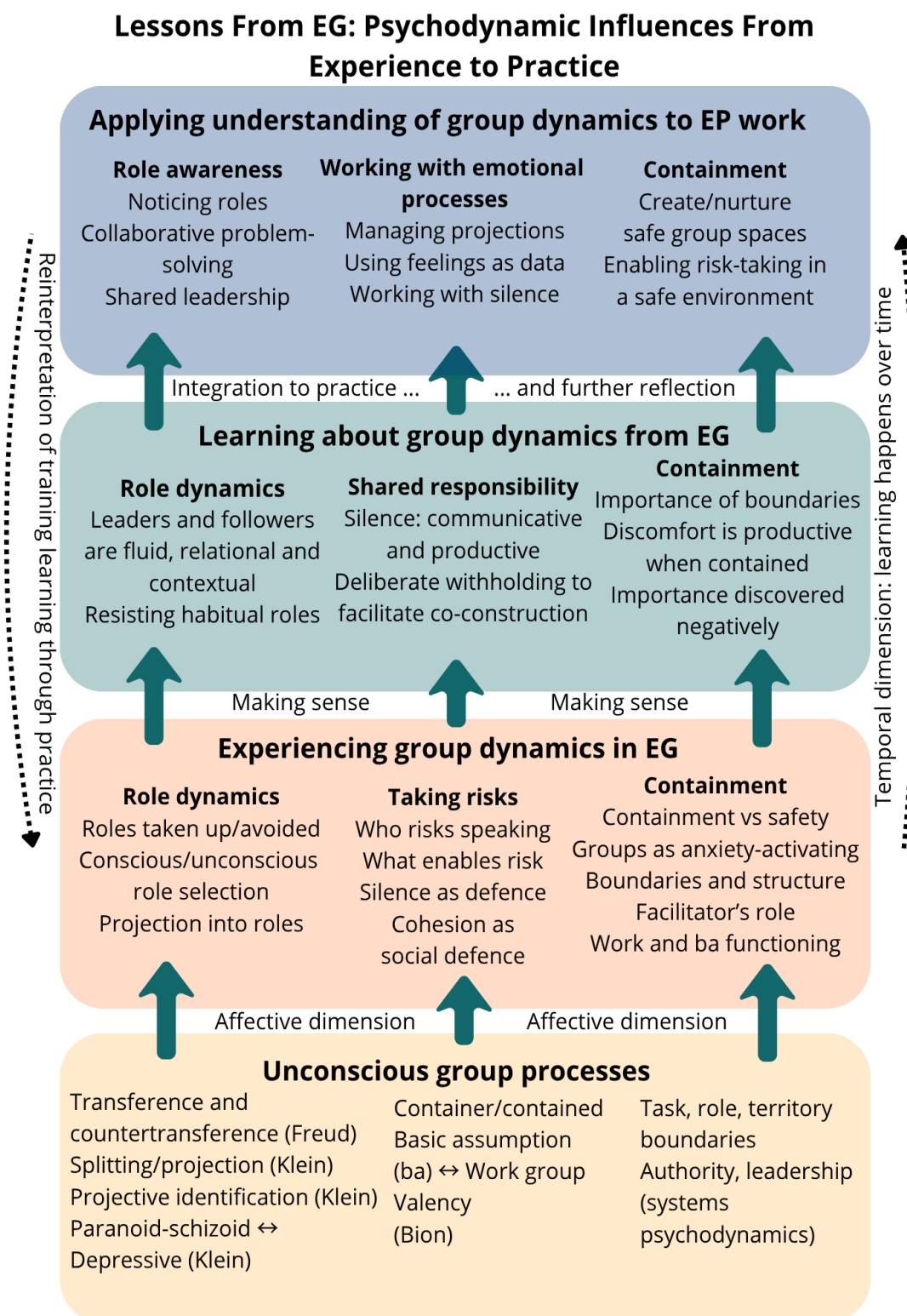
With heightened awareness of authority relationships, participants described a shift away from hierarchical, expertise-driven models of leadership towards a more relational and distributed understanding of authority. Rather than automatically occupying the expert or one-up position, they reported intentionally adjusting their own leadership, sometimes facilitating actively, at other times stepping back to allow the group to think and decide (Schein, 1999). In this role, some participants shared how they supported service-users reaching a depressive position (Klein, 1946) where different viewpoints were valued and frustration could be tolerated (Halton, 2019; Stokes, 2019). This reflexive approach was indicative of a group relations perspective in which roles are understood as embedded within wider organisational

and socio-cultural structures, rather than located solely within individuals (Reed, 2001; Rice, 1965). The findings also underlined the conceptualisation of leadership as the capacity to attune to the feelings and behaviours of others, understand the conscious and unconscious processes underlying group behaviours and act in ways that support task performance (Rice, 1965).

These findings were consistent with existing EP research and practice indicating that EPs tend to use combined approaches (collaborative and more directive) flexibly in consultation, depending on context rather than adhering rigidly to one model (Jones & Atkinson, 2021). Distributed and collaborative leadership approaches are presented as most congruent with EP values, particularly in group work (Hardy et al., 2020; Martin & Meheux, 2020). However, research has also found a tension between EPs' reported preferred collaborative leadership style and service-users' expectations of expertise (Kennedy et al., 2008; Royle & Atkinson, 2025), indicating that when under pressure, EPs may revert to more directive, expert-led approaches. My findings suggested that participants' confidence in containing some of the uncomfortable feelings of service-users may help them resist becoming directive and facilitate collaborative problem-solving instead.

Conceptual Contribution

The multi-level framework presented in this section is my conceptual contribution that I developed from my research, based on systems psychodynamic literature and my interpretation of the dataset (Figure 2). Defined as “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs” a research (Maxwell, 2013, p. 39), my framework aims to illustrate the mechanisms that generate learning from EG at four levels: 1) unconscious group processes underpinnings; 2) experiencing and 3) learning about group dynamics; and 4) applying understanding of group dynamics to practice.

Figure 2*Conceptual Framework*

At the *foundational level*, lie the theoretical underpinnings explaining the unconscious processes that permeate group life. They describe the processes that take place between people in stressful situations, often unbeknown to them, such as transference, splitting, projection and projective identification. They include Klein's paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions and Bion's idea of containment, which explain the learning process from unprocessed experiences to making sense of them. Furthermore, Bion's work group and basic assumption group mentalities illustrate the oscillation between task-focused and anxiety-driven group behaviours. Systems psychodynamics further exemplifies how task, role and territory boundaries, and authority and leadership impact and influence the unconscious life of groups.

Participants' accounts described experiences within EG akin to these unconscious processes (*second level*). Through *affect*, participants navigated role dynamics (taking up and/or avoiding roles) and were faced with the anxieties of risk-taking, where silence functioned as defence and cohesion as social defence. Containment emerged as a central preoccupation: the difference between containment and safety, the anxiety-activating nature of groups, the holding function of boundaries and the facilitator's role were all discovered through direct, often uncomfortable, encounters.

Over time, experience became understanding and learning (*third level*). Participants began to *make sense* of their experiences and recognise that roles are fluid, relational and contextual, and started to develop the capacity to question habitual role patterns. Silence was reframed as communicative rather than remote, and shared responsibility for the group's functioning became apparent. Containment was understood as a space where discomfort could be recognised as productive when held within appropriate boundaries.

The *fourth level* represents the *application* of participants' accumulated understanding

and learning into their *professional practice*. Participants noticed group roles and fostered collaborative problem-solving and shared leadership. Through affective phenomena such as countertransference, they worked with emotional processes by managing projections, using their own feelings as data and working productively with silence. They brought containment into their professional contexts, creating and nurturing safe group spaces and enabling risk-taking within them. They *continued to reflect* on their EG experiences, making connections between them and the group life they encountered in their work.

The levels in the framework are meant to be understood as loops within a spiral, progressive, dynamic and recursive rather than in a linear succession. Learning developed over time, with understanding often emerging retrospectively as professional experience provided opportunities to observe and integrate what training made available only partially. Equally, the affective dimension permeated every level: experiential learning constituted a form of knowing that theory alone could not provide.

This research was exploratory and did not test predetermined hypotheses. However, the framework serves important functions: it makes transparent the psychodynamic theoretical lens informing my research, identifying the concepts that guided the data analysis, and it offers a coherent structure for integrating the findings. The framework holds group dynamics as its central concern and acknowledges that group dynamics, role patterns, risk-taking and containment are theoretically significant dimensions of EG at the Tavistock. Participants experienced the intensity and variety of these processes depending on their readiness and openness to exploration, attachment history, relationship to authority, relationships within the group, life experiences and neurodivergence. The uniqueness of their experiences, however, should not deter one from recognising that beneath-the-surface processes were some of the mechanisms through which participants felt what they did within EG.

Limitations

This research has a number of limitations, pertaining to the methodological, contextual and research positionality domains. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is an interpretive method that centres the researcher's subjectivity as a feature rather than a flaw, but this inevitably means that the themes generated represent one possible reading of the data rather than a definitive account (Braun & Clarke, 2022). My interpretations were theoretically situated within a systems psychodynamic framework, which, while coherent and well-justified, means that other theoretical lenses (e.g., humanistic, cognitive-behavioural, social constructionist) might have produced meaningful yet different readings of participants' experiences. This is not a weakness of RTA per se, but it is a boundary condition of my findings that I must acknowledge.

While my qualitative design was not intended to establish relationships of causation or correlations (more appropriate to a quantitative or mixed methods approach), my findings could not support a definite link between the learning gained from EG and EP practice. This was acknowledged by the participants themselves, who recognised how learning about group behaviours was embedded within the course structure to such an extent that it would have been difficult to unpick the specific learning from EG alone. However, participants' vivid descriptions of experiences around containment, safety and group behaviours underpinned by leadership and authority expectations could be traced back to EG. Negative experiences of EG in particular enabled participants to learn from what was missing or absent.

The nature of the design meant that participants' accounts were subject to retrospective reconstruction. Memory is selective and shaped by subsequent experience, professional development and the meaning-making that occurs over time. The accounts I gathered were necessarily post-hoc interpretations rather than contemporaneous reports,

which introduced a degree of distance from the raw experience itself (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015).

While 19 participants is a reasonable population group for qualitative research, all were EPs who trained at a single institution, making the group relatively homogeneous. The group demographics were consistent with a UK EP workforce that is predominantly white and female (AEP, 2021). This may mean that different experiences influenced by race, class and privilege within EG, which were identified as particularly difficult to address, were underexplored in the dataset. Participants from African, Caribbean, Asian or other ethnic backgrounds may have had qualitatively different experiences of safety, cohesion and containment that were not fully represented in my themes. In addition, my study reported the experiences of those who agreed to participate. It is possible that participants who had particularly negative or damaging experiences of EG may have been less likely to volunteer for the study, introducing a potential self-selection bias that could mean the most difficult or harmful experiences were underrepresented in the data. Self-selection in qualitative designs is a recognised limitation affecting the range of perspectives gathered, thereby shaping the boundaries of what this study could claim (Patton, 2015; Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Finally, my insider positionality, as a trainee EP participating in EG and studying at the Tavistock, meant that certain assumptions about EG, psychodynamic theory and EP practice may have remained unexamined or may have shaped which aspects of participants' accounts felt most significant or resonant. Such assumptions likely impacted the data analysis process and the knowledge produced (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for how EG is designed, facilitated and supported within the Tavistock EP training programme, and for how the

learning from EG can be understood and developed in post-qualification practice.

Implications are organised around four areas, the first three specific to EG: preparation and orientation; facilitation and containment; exploring differences and diversity; and post-qualification practice development.

Preparation and Orientation

Consistent with the broader EG literature, my findings suggest that pre-EG preparation and ongoing support during the doctoral training period significantly influence trainees' capacity to engage with and learn from EG experiences. Given that learning is a fundamental principle underpinning EG, it is therefore recommended that the Tavistock EP training programme provides thorough preparation prior to the start of EG, including contracting (Johns, 2012), a clear explanation of the purpose, process and the psychodynamic traditions informing it, as well as honest communication about its potential risks and benefits (Anderson & Price, 2001; McMahon & Rodillas, 2020; Smith & Burr, 2022; Yalom & Lezszc, 2020). This preparation is particularly relevant when trainees join at different developmental stages, in terms of their experiences, self-awareness and knowledge of psychodynamic processes. Students new to the programme tend to experience greater anxiety and self-doubt (Anderson et al., 2014), therefore the needs of individuals with existing high-levels of anxiety should be proactively considered before the beginning of EG. Both preparation and support measures should be put in place to make the experience bearable and meaningful for them. Given that EG is a compulsory part of the course, such preparation and ongoing support should be provided to them to minimise unnecessary distress. Indeed, key texts in the group relations literature underline the responsibility of institutional staff to deal with individuals who find experiential learning too stressful to bear (Rice, 1965; Rioch, 1971).

At the same time, my findings suggest that preparation should not be understood as a

means of eliminating anxiety. Some degree of uncertainty is inherent to Tavistock-style EG and is what makes learning possible. Rather, the aim of preparation should be to ensure that trainees can locate their anxiety within a meaningful framework, so that the unstructured format of EG is experienced as purposeful rather than arbitrary. Outlining potential growth opportunities and the mechanisms underlying personal growth may reduce unhelpful uncertainty without undermining the potential of the experience (Liu et al., 2021). Making intended learning outcomes explicit, both before and throughout the EG experience, would support trainees to connect their learning more deliberately to their developing professional identity and practice. Consistent with the pedagogical intent of EG, supporting trainees to reflect on experience and make links between EG and professional practice would move beyond the traditional group relations approach, which is limited to providing “opportunities to learn” (Miller, 1990, p. 180).

It is also recommended that the Tavistock EP training programme reviews how EG is integrated into the wider curriculum. Specifically, trainees should be supported to reflect on and integrate their EG learning in relation to their broader professional development, through reflective practice seminars, supervision or journaling that invite them to draw connections between their EG experiences and their developing understanding of group dynamics in professional contexts (Ieva et al., 2009; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008; St.Pierre, 2014; see also Froggett et al., 2015).

Facilitation and Containment

My findings highlight the centrality of containment for meaningful learning within EG, and point to several implications for how EG is facilitated within the EP training. A balance between a structured and unstructured approach based on the needs of the group can be a productive way to support trainees’ sense-making (Lakin & Costanzo, 1977; Sutherland,

1990). Revisiting Bion's work, Sutherland (1990) highlighted the importance of balancing non-direction with some guidance to help members reconnect with their ego states after being detached from it due to anxiety (see also Skolnick, 1998). Bion himself acknowledged the importance of containing group members' emotions to avoid an "explosion" (Bion, 1961, p. 126). Such balance would, for example, entail that facilitator and group members work collaboratively to make sense of difficult material by highlighting possible reasons why some members may experience resistances (in the fashion of basic assumption mentalities) (Gustafson & Cooper, 1985). This collaboration may need to consider different facilitation styles (interpretative, facilitative, collaborative and protective) depending on the group's needs and receptiveness of the facilitator's interpretations, as well as the developmental stage the group is at to avoid undue dependency on the facilitator (Herbert & Trist, 1990). In particular, awareness of the different impact that facilitation styles can have on group members' learning can support how facilitators and members collaboratively engage to develop learning (Lipgar, 1998). In addition, introducing challenge gradually over time, rather than presenting trainees with maximum ambiguity from the start, may be a means of sustaining tension without producing unnecessary high levels of distress (Smith & Burr, 2022). For example, facilitators could initially provide some scaffolding guidance, when trainees are still unsure about the task at hand, while reducing support as trainees develop a better understanding of how EG works.

The understanding of containment as multi-authored has implications for how facilitation is conceptualised and carried out. Based on Ogden (2004), containment can be provided by those who help others make sense of their experiences, but it can also be achieved within oneself, as individuals learn to process and comprehend the events that happen to them. In the context of EG, therefore, facilitation should support trainees in

experiencing the shift from a paranoid-schizoid to a depressive position as they start to grasp the possible meanings of group behaviours. In this way, facilitation can function as the provider of containment, yet aiming towards trainees' understanding of some of the conditions that contribute to making containment possible, both within EG and in subsequent group work practice.

Endings and closure within EG also emerged from the findings as an area deserving attention. Facilitators should give careful thought to how endings are managed, ensuring that sufficient time and space are devoted to closure and that trainees are supported to process and make sense of their experience as the group concludes. EG is often embedded within a compressed timetable that demands trainees to go from one lesson on to the next with limited time to process, reflect and digest their EG experiences. Therefore, timetabling should be considered when planning for EG sessions to create opportunities to debrief after EG with someone such as a supervisor, who could support the trainee to reflect on what happened in the session. Indeed, the need to provide containment for the conscious processing of group relations events has been suggested as key to facilitate the integration of learning (Miller, 1985; Skolnick & Green, 2004).

Exploring Differences and Diversity

A significant finding was that group cohesion operated as a social defence against engagement with difference. Exploring differences in EG, while theoretically promising, is practically hampered by challenges. The encounter with difference – racial, cultural or identity-based – risks exposing members to shame, fragmentation and the loss of power, privilege and certainty that stable identity depends upon (Skolnick & Green, 2004), generating powerful defensive responses including splitting, projection, rigid role differentiation and the othering of those who represent what is rejected or unwanted

(Brazaitis, 2004; Skolnick & Green, 2004). Even when members risk speaking of their difference, silence or polite acknowledgement, instead of genuine empathic recognition, reproduces rather than repairs the wound, leaving the risk-taker more isolated and the group more defended (D'Apice et al., 2023).

Yet, EG remains a powerful pedagogical method for trainees to explore the complexity of diversity issues in ways that can lead to changes in thinking and relating with others (Iannaco, 2018), particularly when one considers the focus on equality, diversity and inclusion within the EP profession. The HCPC standards of proficiency include the expectation that psychologists should actively reflect on personal unconscious biases, respond appropriately to the diversity needs of service users and challenge barriers to inclusion (HCPC, 2023). EG research suggests that facilitators should enable participants to reflect on how their cultural backgrounds shape their roles and behaviours within the group, as failing to do so may limit the group's effectiveness (Steen et al., 2014). Anderson et al. (2014) recommend using multiple methods to adequately address diversity issues, including didactic and observational, as well as experiential.

At the Tavistock, EG facilitators should draw on the idea of containment to support trainees make sense of group dynamics impacted by diversity so that they can think about relating with others in ways that are not always predictable and certain. This demands that facilitators go beyond creating a space for the sharing of diverse experiences, and actively contain debilitating anxiety, track shame and splitting as group-level dynamics based on differences, resist premature resolution and hold the conditions necessary for the group to abandon false certainty and move from paranoid-schizoid splitting toward the reparative potential of the depressive position (Brazaitis, 2004).

The permeable boundaries between EG and other components of the doctoral training

programme appeared to limit deeper exploration of diversity issues, reinforcing the tendency to maintain a superficial politeness and prevent the relational risk of genuine encounter with difference (D'Apice et al., 2023). Therefore, it is strongly recommended that consideration is given to multidisciplinary EG sessions that bring together trainees from different courses across the Tavistock. Such a configuration would introduce greater heterogeneity of identity, role and professional culture into the group membership. Rather than working with a membership whose shared training context may inadvertently sustain the status quo of power and privilege, a multidisciplinary group would potentially press members toward tolerating the ambiguity, contradiction and multiple realities that genuine diversity work demands (Skolnick & Green, 2004).

Post-Qualification Practice Development

Learning from EG has potential meaningful applications to post-qualification EP practice, particularly in relation to group work, consultation, supervision and organisational development. The findings related to application to practice suggested that the value of EG as a component of EP training should be more explicitly recognised and articulated within the profession, with the caveat that not all trainees would report positive or learning outcomes following participation. The findings also have implications for post-qualification continuing professional development. Based on my conceptual framework, reflection on experience, learning and application involve a spiral rather than linear process, with understanding of experience taking place over time, through reflection on group engagement. This suggests that the profession might benefit from providing qualified EPs with ongoing opportunities to develop their understanding of group dynamics and systemic thinking, through supervision, peer consultation, reflective practice spaces such as work discussion groups or further training in group relations approaches.

Finally, the findings point to the emotionally demanding nature of facilitation work and the need for those occupying containing roles within groups to have access to their own reflective and supervisory support (Dunsmuir et al., 2015). This is relevant to EPs undertaking group work in professional contexts. The capacity to contain other people's anxiety requires ongoing attention to the practitioner's emotional and relational wellbeing. Training programmes and organisations alike might consider how to ensure that those in containing roles are themselves adequately contained (Bostock & Grant, 2025). Failing to care for one's emotional experiences at work (felt through projective identification) can lead to feeling hopeless, demoralised and ultimately to burnout (Moylan, 2019).

Dissemination and Impact Strategy

My findings are relevant to several audiences: EP training programmes and trainers, EG facilitators, EPs engaged in group work and researchers working within EG, group relations and psychodynamic traditions. The dissemination strategy outlined below is organised by academic and professional channels.

Academic Dissemination

The cross-disciplinary nature of this study makes it possible to consider submission across more than one peer-reviewed journal. Contributions to the EG literature make the study suitable for the *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, *Psychodynamic Practice* and the *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, while its specific relevance to EP training and practice makes it suited to *Educational Psychology in Practice* and *Educational Psychologist*. The study's empirical grounding of Tavistock-style EG is likely to be of particular interest to the group relations community (e.g., *Organisational and Social Dynamics*). Accessible summaries of key findings shared through the online professional platforms ResearchGate and LinkedIn could reach practitioners who may not have free access to academic publications.

Conference and workshop presentations represent additional channels for dissemination, such as those organised by the British Psychological Society (BPS).

Professional Dissemination

The findings have direct and actionable implications for the Tavistock EP training programme and the group relations conference (GRC) committee. As a first step, I plan to meet with programme leads to discuss my findings and implications. This may include a concise briefing or offering to co-produce new or revised preparation materials using my findings. This could initiate a broader professional conversation about standards for EG within EP training and the wider public participating in GRCs, support reflection on current practice and inform ongoing programme development.

The wider EP community can be reached through a practice-focused article in the BPS-based Division of Educational and Child Psychology's *Debate* magazine, for example, and through a blog in professional networks such as edpsy (edpsy.org.uk).

Reflective Statement and Conclusion

This study set out to explore how EPs experienced EG during training, what they learnt about group dynamics through that experience and whether and how they apply that learning in post-qualification practice. Reaching the end of this journey, I now pause to summarise my reflections on the process of producing this study, both as a researcher and as a practitioner.

Reflections on the Research Process

Undertaking this study required me to occupy an unusual position: that of an insider researcher investigating an experience I was myself living through. This meant that I brought to the process both a familiarity with the experience and a set of pre-existing assumptions, feelings and interpretations that formed an integral part to how I approached existing literature

and interpreted my dataset. I was touched by my participants' openness when sharing their experiences, though I had to actively resist over-identifying with their accounts, remaining close to what they said rather than what I might have expected or wanted to hear. Conversely, accounts that diverged from my experience required openness and curiosity. Returning repeatedly to the dataset was an important safeguard against both tendencies.

The interviews themselves were a significant part of my learning. I felt privileged to have been the person who listened to my participants relating their EG experiences. They spoke with an openness that I had not anticipated, particularly given that the subject matter touched on their professional identities and their relationships with peers and the training context. When analysing the dataset, I felt deeply responsible to capture the meaning of their experiences without distorting their significance. This ethical and methodological responsibility ensured that the findings remained close to the participants' sense-making of their experiences.

Researcher Reflexivity and the Knowledge Produced

My research questions helped me stay close to my focus, i.e., group dynamics across the three levels of experience, learning and application based on systems psychodynamics. A researcher grounded in a different tradition would have produced a different account of the same material, and that account would also have had validity. I do not regard this as undermining the value of what I produced, but I consider it as an important caveat. The themes I developed, the conceptual distinctions I drew and the interpretations I offered were my reading of the data, informed by theory, shaped by experience and inevitably partial.

I can say with confidence that the interpretations offered in this study were grounded in close and repeated engagement with participants' accounts, were theoretically coherent and illuminated aspects of EG experience that have not previously been examined in the EP

context. The safety-containment distinction, the articulation of the paradox of safety, the reframing of cohesion as potential social defence, the identification of containment as co-produced and the view that roles are fluid, flexible and relationally constructed were interpreted from the data rather than being imposed upon it, even if my theoretical positioning made me more receptive to these patterns than a researcher with different theoretical orientations might have been.

Personal and Professional Development

Undertaking this research impacted how I think and practice. The process of analysing participants' accounts of their EG experiences, and of situating those accounts within systems psychodynamics, deepened my retrospective and current understanding of my EG experience. I have come to understand more clearly the significance of containment in my learning, how my valencies shape my positioning within groups and the degree to which my responses to authority and facilitation are shaped by processes that are largely unconscious while they are happening. In this sense, the research itself functioned, at least in part, as a form of reflective meaning-making of my own EG experience.

More broadly, this study deepened my commitment to psychodynamically-informed, relationally-attentive EP practice. The participants' accounts of their post-qualification practice enriched my sense of what it means to practise as an EP with groups and organisations. They also made me feel more confident in thinking about working with groups employing psychodynamic and systems thinking orientations, reinforcing my belief that the emotional and relational dimensions of professional practice are not peripheral but central to group work. Training experiences that develop practitioners' awareness of these dimensions are genuinely valuable. At the same time, I recognise that group work is not solely about beneath-the-surface processes. Individuals may experience groups differently for other

reasons too, including neurodivergence or developmental differences. Therefore, I feel I need to cultivate an open, curious and respectful approach to group behaviours that takes into account different ways of being in groups.

Closing Reflections

This study represents a beginning rather than an endpoint. It is the first empirical investigation of EPs' experiences of EG. As such, it opens more questions than it resolves. How do these experiences differ depending on individuals' developmental stage and/or neurodivergence? How are experiences shaped by race, class and other dimensions of social identity? What would EG look like if it were designed with explicit attention to the implications put forward in this and future research? These are questions I hope this study will inspire others, and myself, to take up.

What I am most certain of, having spent nearly three years in close engagement with this material, is that what happens in EG matters. It matters to the individuals who experience it, because of the potential personal and interpersonal growth; to the quality of professional practice that follows, because the learning can be applied to it; and to the profession's capacity to understand and engage thoughtfully with the complex emotional and relational dynamics present in the groups, teams and organisations within which EPs work. If this study contributes, however modestly, to a more informed, more respectful and more effective approach to EG within the Tavistock EP training, it will have achieved its purpose.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Literature Search History

Table A1

Literature Search History and Search Terms

Database/Source	Date	Search	Search Terms	Search Logic	Search Limit	Number of Records
APA PsycInfo	24/04/2025	S1	Educational psycholog*, school psycholog*, applied psycholog*	OR, *	None	345,623
		S2	Experiential learning, experiential group*	OR, *	None	7,122
		S3	Group dynamics, intergroup dynamics, teams, boundaries psychological, interpersonal interactions, group characteristics, organizational behavior, psychological safety, teamwork, group structure, group performance, group participation	OR, ?	None	269,669
		S4	S1, S2, S3	AND	None	119
		S5	Psychoanalytic theory		None	56,777
		S6	S1, S2, S3, S5	AND	None	1
		S7	Counselor trainees, psychologist, social workers, therapists, counselor education, therapist trainees, trainee educational psycholog*, trainee school psycholog*	OR, *	None	288,778
		S8	S3, S7	AND	None	18,953
		S9	S3, S5, S7	AND	None	160
	20/09/2025	S1	Personal development group		None	271
		S2	Counseling training		None	5,228
		S3	Psychology training		None	11,635

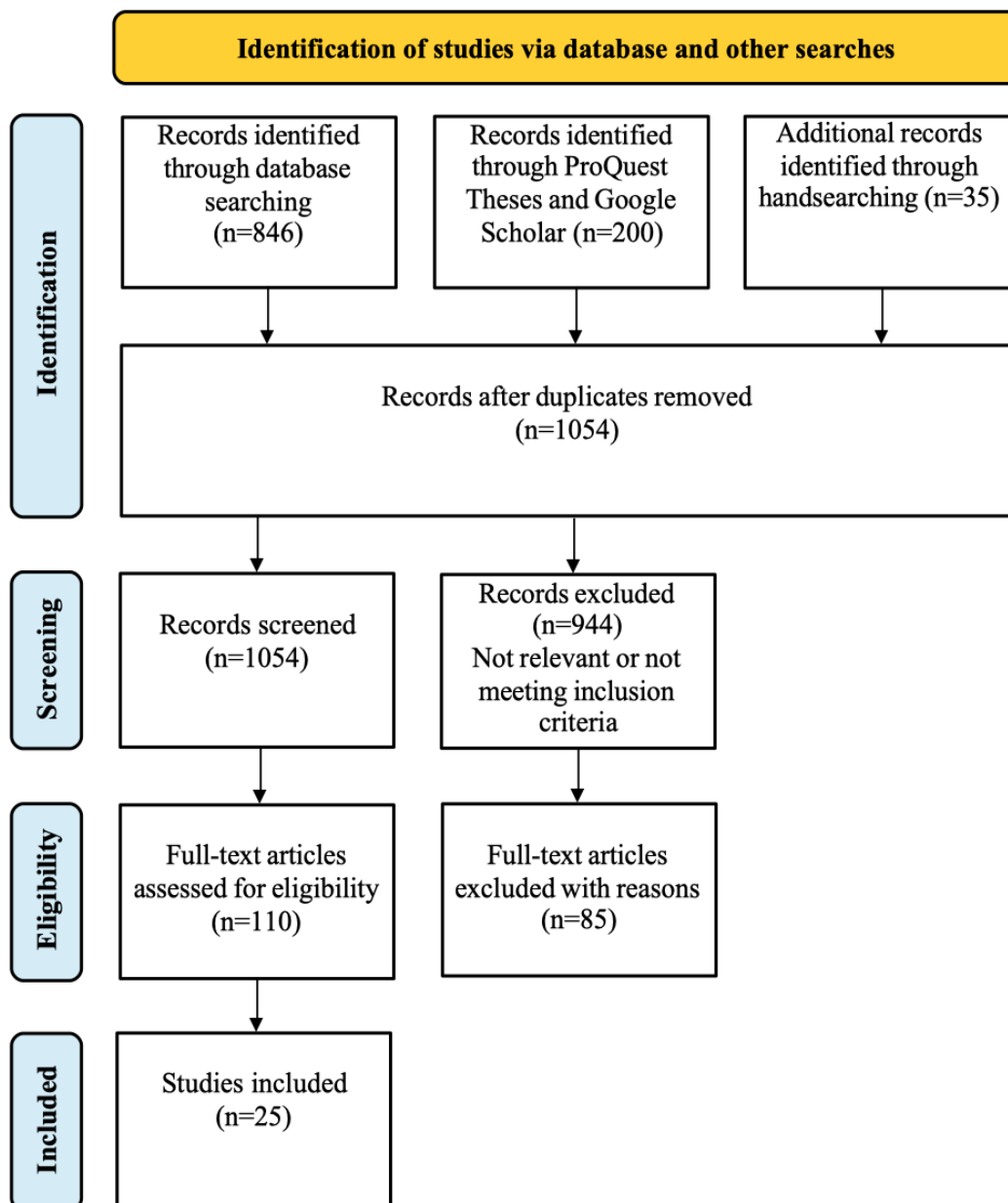
Database/Source	Date	Search	Search Terms	Search Logic	Search Limit	Number of Records
APA PsycArticles	27/04/2025	S4	S1, S2	AND	None	8
		S5	S1, S3	AND	None	8
		S1	Educational psycholog*, school psycholog*, applied psycholog*	OR	None	46,360
		S2	Experiential learning, experiential group*, group process, personal development group	OR	None	6,331
		S3	Group dynamics, intergroup dynamics, teams, boundaries psychological, interpersonal interactions, group characteristics, organizational behavior, psychological safety, teamwork, group structure, group performance, group participation	OR	None	13,700
		S4	Psychoanalytic theory		None	2,106
		S6	S1, S2, S3, S4	AND	None	2
		S8	S1, S2, S3	AND	None	525
		S9	Counselor trainees, mental health counselors, trainee psychologist, social workers, therapists, counselor education, therapist training, trainee educational psycholog*, trainee school psycholog*, trainee clinical psycholog*	OR, *	None	8,761
		S10	S3, S4, S9	AND	None	1
		S11	S2, S9	AND	None	148
		S12	S3, S9	AND	None	614
		S13	S2, S3, S9	AND	None	55
		S14	S2, S4, S9	AND	None	2
		S16	Experiential group, train*	AND	None	24
	20/09/2025	S1	Personal development group		None	6

Database/Source	Date	Search	Search Terms	Search Logic	Search Limit	Number of Records
Medline Ultimate	27/04/2025	S1	Experiential group, train*	AND	None	130
		S2	Experiential group		None	460
		S3	Counsel* train*, trainee clinical psycholog*, trainee educational psycholog*, social worker, trainee therapist	OR, *	None	24,435
		S4	S2, S3	AND	None	11
	20/09/2025	S1	Personal development group		None	99
		S2	Counseling training		None	2,386
		S3	Psychology training		None	1,869
		S4	S1, S2	AND	None	0
		S5	S1, S3	AND	None	1
	ERIC	05/06/2025	S1	Experiential group, train*	AND	None
S2			Experiential groups		None	169
07/10/2025		S1	Personal development group, train*	AND	None	0
		S2	Personal development group		None	0
ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global	05/06/2025	S1	Experiential groups		None	300,142
		S2	Experiential groups, group dynamics	AND	None	243,281
		S3	Experiential groups, train*	AND	None	272,497
		S4	Experiential groups, Bion	AND	None	2,804
Google Scholar	07/06/2025	S1	Experiential group training		None	3,790,000
		S2	Experiential group training, Bion	AND	None	20,800

Appendix B: PRISMA Diagram

Figure B1

PRISMA Diagram



Appendix C: Data Charting

Table C1

Descriptive Summary of Studies' Findings

Author(s), year and country	Aims/purpose	Methodology / methods	Population details	Programme	Key findings (Group dynamics)
Kline et al., 1997 United States	Understand students' experiences and perceptions of EG How group participation influenced their preparation as counsellors	QL, grounded theory Two questionnaires with open-ended questions (1 st after the 8 th session; 2 nd after the 15 th session). Analysis: open coding adapted from Strauss & Corbin (1990) [concepts-categories-descriptive names-properties and dimensions]	23 master's students	3 groups (8, 8, 7) 15 x 90m here-and-now, focus on interpersonal feedback and group process awareness. Led by co-leading doctoral students	Two categories about experiences: Interpersonal Awareness (behaviour) and Relational Insight (self-understanding). Three categories about learning: Interpersonal Attitudes, (relevant for interpersonal communication: less afraid, honest communication, sensitivity to others' feelings, acceptance, understanding); Emotional Awareness (awareness of emotional responses and understanding of origin: self-awareness, emotional congruence and openness, relational issues insights); Behavioural Learning (how to confront and being assertive, non-verbal communication, incongruent messages, being direct). Interpersonal learning (verbal and non-verbal communication, impact of individuals' style on others); Insight (interpersonal fears, apprehension about experiencing difficult emotions, personal issues impact interpersonal relationships). Positive reactions to an uncomfortable experience: anxiety and challenges overcome; satisfaction with outcome of risk-taking. Feedback exchange useful.

Author(s), year and country	Aims/purpose	Methodology / methods	Population details	Programme	Key findings (Group dynamics)
					Significance of group experience more meaningful over time. Enhanced empathy and acceptance of others' emotions. <u>Group dynamics</u>: Initial interpersonal fears (rejection, self-disclosure, defensiveness, risk-taking, inadequacies, personal issues). When these were conquered, involvement in feedback-exchange was valued. Authority conflicts. Experimentation with confrontation, being emotionally immediate, giving feedback and assertion. Freedom to learn (experimentation with interpersonal behaviours and style)
Hall et al., 1999 United Kingdom	Perception over time of relevance of small-group work to counselling practice. What skills were enhanced by EG What feelings were generated by EG and how they impacted learning How individuals perceived themselves as	QN, survey-based Retrospective study. Rating the two groups on a 7-point scale (very useful to totally useless) in relation to applications in the professional setting, with colleagues and in their personal	92 responses from individuals who completed master's-level and diploma-level studies in counselling and human relations between one and 21 years before distribution of survey.	Two types: Rogerian small group. Tavistock model of Group Dynamics conference (one week intensive)	No loss of perceived value over time. Distant group ascribed more applications to their work than did the more recent group. Learning of counselling skills (e.g., taking personal authority in the GD small group) > 50% described Rogerian SG and the GD SM as 'challenging', 'enlightening', 'self-awareness enhancing', 'revealing', 'growthful', 'relevant' and 'providing long-term gain'. > 50% described them as 'anxiety-provoking', 'disturbing positively' and 'confrontational'. Both described as stimulating and disturbing experiences. Rogerian SG: long-term damage claimed by two (2.2%) people, 12.4% experienced short-term

Author(s), year and country	Aims/purpose	Methodology / methods	Population details	Programme	Key findings (Group dynamics)
	casualties of group process	lives. Rating for memorability. Rating for educational value of both groups on a 10-point scale.			psychological distress ('uncomfortable', 'hurt', 'challenged', 'battered'). Longer-term benefits deeply meaningful and personally significant. GD SG: 10.9% reported short-term distress, one described themselves as a long-term casualty. Discomforts include the power of withdrawal, silence and absenteeism, as well as more direct confrontation when handled insensitively.
Anderson & Price, 2001 United States	Assess students' perceptions of effectiveness of EG Assess concerns related to dual relationships or privacy invasion Investigate the level of instructor involvement	QN, survey-based 23 questions on the level of involvement of course instructors, students' attitudes about the use EG, specifically, about any dual relationship or privacy issues they had encountered. Survey completed during the final two weeks of their courses.	99 master's-level students from seven counselling or counselling psychology programmes	No description of the programme. 41%: instructor did not lead or observed the group 33%: instructor did not lead but observed sometimes 22%: students did not lead, observe or receive feedback 3%: instructor led the group	Majority of students agreed that EG was an effective and necessary teaching method. One third experienced some trepidation re. dual relationships and privacy concerns or general discomfort with the activity. Many were uncomfortable in the EG and had concerns about having their participation evaluated by others.
Lennie, 2007 United	Establish factors contributing to	Mixed methods (objectivist	88 trainees of counselling at	Personal development	Table with themes (factors contributing to intrapersonal, interpersonal and environmental scores,

Author(s), year and country	Aims/purpose	Methodology / methods	Population details	Programme	Key findings (Group dynamics)
Kingdom	developing self-awareness in groups Establish 'comfort fit' experienced by trainees in EG ('comfort fit'=relationship between the perceived help of each factor in developing self-awareness and its presence within the group) Establish relationship between 'comfort fit' in the group and self-awareness rating	epistemology) Focus groups of 6-8 students from one college at different stages of their training (cross section). Audio tapes transcribed verbatim and analysed through grounded theory. Questionnaire to measure trainees' perceptions of their self-awareness and the extent to which the contributory factors were felt to be both present and helpful in the current PD group.	different points in their training (certificate and diploma levels)	groups (PD groups) - EG to promote self-awareness of counselling trainees. Definition: non-directive, closed, aiming to "offer opportunities for reflection on interactions and other learning of counsellor skills and processes" (Payne 2004, 511).	based on focus group interviews). Responses about preferred time and size of EG. Little variance in self-awareness ratings, but highest scores for those in the middle and end of their training. Trainees more comfortable in EG at the start of their training and less comfortable at the end. Only significant result between environmental 'comfort fit' and self-awareness for those at the end of their training. <u>Group dynamics:</u> Mentions Foulkes, Bion and Nitsun. Considers Agarzarian's idea of the invisible group (greater than the whole of its members). "Impossible not to do anything in a group, and those who take a less vocal role are still adding to the ingredients of the group process". Group an opportunity to reflect on one's behaviour within the group. Comments on EG as part of a wider context (shared classes and social spaces) and how this can impact how individuals communicate within EG (no related findings about this).
Robson & Robson, 2008 United Kingdom	Understand individuals' experiences to understand why for some EG was useful and for	QL Anonymous journal entries of students' experiences. Transcripts	11 students in two counselling training programmes	12 x 60m weekly sessions. Led by a tutor in dual role	12 themes but article focused on one theme only (Safety). Feeling safe was a recurrent theme affecting the subjective experience of the group. <u>Group dynamics:</u> Focus on what created and maintained safety, and why safety was important.

Author(s), year and country	Aims/purpose	Methodology / methods	Population details	Programme	Key findings (Group dynamics)
	others a waste of time	analysed by thematic analysis (by the two authors)			Seven subthemes about establishing safety: contracting, sharing increased perceived safety; knowing each other; physical environment; shared focus/purpose (none increases unsafety); feeling listened to/not being heard, disapproved of; size of group. Borrowed Obholzer & Roberts' idea for 'group-in-mind': each member carries an idea of the purpose of the group and behaviour appropriate to the group to explain shared purpose.
Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008 United States	Study trainees' perception of their learning in EG.	QL (constant comparative method based on Strauss & Corbin, 1990) Self-report from a questionnaire at beginning of group and individual semi-structured interviews two weeks before the end of the programme.	11 master's students from the school and community counselling programmes, in two universities	Experiential training group, two groups, 12 x 90m weekly, led by counselling professionals; and 8 x 90m weekly, led by doctoral student in counsellor education and a rotating member of the group.	Three themes: personal learning, group leadership and group dynamics. Results consistent with Kline et al (1997). Increased interpersonal awareness, clearer understanding of client experience. Vicarious learning for leadership role. Increased understanding of themselves as potential group leaders. <u>Group dynamics</u> . Stages of group development participants went through. Application of classroom learning in EG. Initial anxiety and uncertainty. Learning to trust others, step back without jumping in to rescue the group. Progress through stages enabled by the facilitator establishing environment based on trust and create group cohesion. Therapeutic factor: universality.

Appendix D: Frequency Analysis of Reviewed Sources

Table D1

Frequency Analysis of Country of Publication, Methodology and Population Groups

Authors	Year	Country of publication				Methodology				Population	
		UK	USA	Lithu- -ania	Ire- -land	QN	QL	MMD	PG	Master's	Doctoral
Kline et al.	1997		X				X			X	
Hall et al.	1999	X				X				X	
Anderson & Price	2001		X			X				X	
Lennie	2007	X						X	Dip		
Robson & Robson	2008	X					X			Not specified	
Smith & Davis-Gage	2008		X				X			X	
Ieva et al.	2009		X				X			X	
Knight et al.	2010	X				X					X
Luke & Kiweewa	2010		X				X			X	
Kiweewa et al.	2013		X					X		X	
Moller & Rance	2013	X					X		Dip		X
Ohrt et al.	2013		X			X				X	
Young et al. 2013	2013		X			X				X	
Anderson et al.	2014		X				X			X	
Jakubkaitė & Kočiūnas	2014			X			X		Dip		
Ohrt et al.	2014		X				X			X	
StPierre	2014		X			X				X	
Steen et al.	2014		X					X		X	
Kivlighan et al.	2019		X			X					X
McMahon & Rodillas	2020				X			X		X	

Authors	Year	Country of publication				Methodology				Population	
		UK	USA	Lithu- -ania	Ire- land	QN	QL	MMD	PG	Master's	Doctoral
Liu et al.	2021		X				X			X	
Liu et al.	2022		X				X			X	
Smith & Burr	2022	X					X			Not specified	
Urkmez & Singhani	2023		X			X				X	
Zhu et al.	2025		X			X				Not specified	
Total		6	17	1	1	9	12	4	4	17	3

Note. Highlighted in grey are retrospective studies. QN = quantitative design; QL = qualitative design; MMD = mixed methods design; PG = postgraduate level, not specified; Dip = diploma level, specified.

Appendix E: Letter of Ethics Approval

The Tavistock and Portman 
NHS Foundation Trust

Quality Assurance & Enhancement
Directorate of Education & Training
Tavistock Centre
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Tel: 020 8938 2699

<https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/>

Silvia Lauzzana

By Email

20 March 2025

Dear Silvia,

Re: Trust Research Ethics Application

Title: *'Exploring educational psychologists' sense-making of group functioning based on their participation in experiential group during training: A reflexive thematic analysis.'*

Thank you for submitting your updated Research Ethics documentation.

I am pleased to inform you that subject to formal ratification by the Trust Research Ethics Committee, your application has been approved.

This means you can proceed with your research.

Please be advised that any changes to the project design including changes to methodology/data collection etc, must be referred to TREC as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

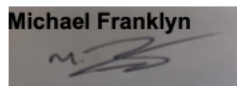
If you have any further questions or require any clarification do not hesitate to contact me.

I am copying this communication to your supervisor.

May I take this opportunity of wishing you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Franklyn



Academic Governance and Quality Officer

T: 020 938 2699

E: academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk

cc. Course Lead, Supervisor, Research Lead

Appendix F: Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Title: *Exploring educational psychologists' sense-making of group functioning based on their participation in experiential group during training*

Please confirm the following:

	Yes	No
I have read and understood the information sheet and have had the chance to ask questions.		
I understand that I am being asked to participate in an online interview and consent to the interview being recorded and transcribed.		
I understand that my involvement in this study, and the data gathered, will remain confidential, subject to poor practice and safeguarding concerns. Only the researchers involved in this study will have access to the data (i.e., Silvia Lauzzana and Lisa Bostock). I understand that in the event of any disclosure of imminent harm to myself and/or others, confidentiality will be waived to keep me and/or others safe.		
I understand that my data will be anonymised to reduce the chance of people linking the data to me. It will be stored securely and may be used in future publications and research in line with the University of Essex's data retention policies. I have seen the Trust's privacy policy and know how you will keep my information safe.		
I understand that the small sample size of participants may have implications for the anonymity of any relevant information. However, every effort is made to reduce the chance of people linking the data to me.		
I understand that participation in this research is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw (stop taking part) at any time until the data are analysed (30 September 2025) without giving a reason.		
I understand that the research findings will be written up as part of a doctoral thesis and may be published in books, articles and online forums, available to the wider public.		

I hereby freely and fully consent to my participation in the study which has been fully explained to me.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS):

.....

Participant's Signature:

.....

Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS):

.....

Researcher's Signature:

.....

Date:

Appendix G: Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Exploring educational psychologists' sense-making of group functioning based on their participation in experiential group during training: A reflexive thematic analysis

The purpose of this information sheet is to provide you with the information about this research project that you need to read and consider in deciding whether to participate in this study.

Who is doing the research?

My name is Silvia Lauzzana and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, 120 Belsize Lane, London, NW3 5BA. This piece of research is part of my course (Doctorate in Child, Community and Educational Psychology) and will be supervised by Dr Lisa Bostock. The awarding institution is the University of Essex.

Email: slauzzana@tavi-port.nhs.uk

The project

What is the project and what is its purpose?

This research seeks to explore how educational psychologists (EPs) make sense of the learning they gained from participating in experiential groups (EGs) during their three-year doctoral training at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. In particular, it aims to explore how this learning informs their understanding of group dynamics as they engage in groups post-training.

The purpose of this research is to explore and deepen our knowledge and understanding of how participating in EG during the three years of doctoral training informs qualified EPs' later practice. The nature of EP work often involves groups, be they teachers and parents in a consultation, school staff in training, small supervision groups and team meetings. This research has potential benefits to EPs and the communities they work with by identifying how EP practice informed by EG learning can support children and young people and their families.

Why have I been invited to participate?

If you trained in the 3-year Doctorate in Child, Community and Educational Psychology at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and graduated between 2009 and 2022, you are invited to participate in this study. Up to 15 graduates are invited to participate. As participation is entirely voluntary, it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. You are still free to withdraw

consent at any time and withdraw your data up to the point until the data is analysed (30 June 2025) without having to give a reason. The right to withdraw from the study will in no way influence or adversely affect you. If more than the required number of EPs express interest to participate, provided that they adhere to the inclusion criteria, they will be randomly selected from the responses received.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you take part in this study, you will be invited to an online interview meeting for approximately one hour over Zoom or Teams. In the interview, I will ask you questions about your experience of experiential group during training, your learning from it and how it may influence your understanding of group dynamics as you engage with groups during your work. Your answers will be recorded. After we complete the interview, I will thank you for your participation in the study and no additional steps will be needed from you.

Are there any location restrictions?

There are no location restrictions relevant to this study. The online interviewing is aimed at reducing the inconvenience related to travel time and cost of travel and it allows for participants to feel comfortable in their familiar environment. To ensure the privacy and quality of the interview, it is advisable that you select a suitable environment where you are not overheard or potentially interrupted. Likewise, I will choose a space/room where I am by myself and I will use a set of headphones so that I will be the only person hearing your answers.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Possible benefits include your contribution to the understanding of EPs' sense-making of group dynamics informed by their participation in experiential groups during training. Additionally, participating can provide a space for you to reflect on this experience and how it may have impacted your work. To date, such research does not seem to exist. Potentially, the practical implications of this study include a better understanding of how EPs support children and young people, their families and professionals at individual, group and system levels.

Will I experience distress or discomfort?

Participating in this study is not intended to cause harm (physical or psychological) to you in any way. Interviewing online is intended to make it comfortable and practical for you. I can share with you the interview questions beforehand if you prefer. We can take a break during the interview if you require to do so, and we can arrange a time and a day that is convenient for you and your work. However, if for any reason, you experience distress or discomfort during the interview, you can decide to suspend the interview, take a break or seek the support you need.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recording be used?

Yes. The interview will be recorded through the recording tool provided by the online platform (Zoom or Teams) to allow for the generation of a transcript of your answers. The transcript will be part of the data collection process and will form the basis for the data analysis.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Yes. However, if you tell me something that makes me concerned about poor practice, your

safety or the safety of others, I might have to share that information. I would discuss this with you first, and we can discuss who will need to be informed.

What will happen to the interview recording?

The data that will be processed for this study include your answers to the interview questions and some demographic characteristics (e.g., year of graduation). The anonymised data will form the basis for data analysis.

Every effort will be made to anonymise the data. However, the small sample size of this research (15 participants) may have implications for confidentiality and anonymity.

How will the data be stored?

The transcript will be downloaded onto a secure University of Essex server (OneDrive) and be anonymised. After anonymisation, the original transcript will be permanently deleted from the secure server. Once the programme has been completed, the findings from the study may be used for publication or in future research. If future research is considered, the anonymised data will be transferred from the secure University of Essex server to a password-protected personal computer. No personal names will be stored and reference to any specific events that could identify you will be removed. The anonymised data will be stored and handled appropriately for 6 - 10 years in line with the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust Data Protection Policy: <https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/your-information-and-privacy/privacy-policy/>

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results will be typed up and used primarily for my doctoral thesis in Child, Community and Educational Psychology at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. They may be used for publication (e.g., books, articles, online materials) or in future research. If you take part in this research, you can obtain a summary of the findings by contacting me.

Who has given permission for this research?

The Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Education and Training at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, with whom I am completing my training, has provided ethical approval for this research to proceed. With this approval, details of my research have been considered and it was decided that this project meets the necessary ethical standards to protect the safety and well-being of all participants who are involved.

Further information and contact details

If you have any questions about any part of the research, please get in contact with me and let me know. I would be happy to have a chat with you about any questions or queries you may have before deciding to take part.

Email: slauzzana@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Supervising Research Lead email: lbostock@tavi-port.nhs.uk

If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme in which you are being asked to participate, please contact: Paru Jeram, Trust Quality Assurance Officer (pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk).

Complaints/support

If you are unduly or unexpectedly affected by taking part in the study please feel free to feed it back to me. If you feel unable for whatever reason whatsoever to talk with me, then please either contact my research supervisor (lbostock@tavi-port.nhs.uk) or the Head of Academic Registry (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk).

If you have any concerns about my conduct as the researcher or any other aspect of this research project, you can contact the Head of Academic Registry (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk).

In the unlikely event that you might feel affected by any aspect of this study or wish to talk to someone about any related issues, you may want to contact the following:

Workplace:

Access support services in your workplace.

Supervision:

Access to supervision space for further discussion.

Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP):

Support services available to members of the association (<https://www.aep.org.uk/support-members>).

Online mental health helplines:

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/seeking-help-for-a-mental-health-problem/mental-health-helplines/>

Thank you for reading this Participant Information Sheet. I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Silvia Lauzzana

Appendix H: Recruitment Advert and Poster



Project: Exploring EPs' sense-making of group functioning based on their participation in experiential group during training

The project

This project aims to explore how educational psychologists (EPs) make sense of the learning they gained from participating in experiential groups during their 3-year doctoral training at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. In particular, it aims to explore how this learning informs their understanding of group dynamics as they engage in group work post-training.

How you can participate

I would like to hear from EPs qualified from the Tavistock between 2009 and 2022 who have been working as EPs in either the local authorities or privately.

If you would like to take part, please email Silvia at slauzzana@tavi-port.nhs.uk for further information and to request an information sheet and consent form. Contacting the researcher will not automatically register you as a participant.

Involvement

A one-hour interview with the researcher, conducted over Microsoft Teams.

Researcher

Silvia Lauzzana (Trainee Educational Psychologist at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, London); slauzzana@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Supervised by Dr Lisa Bostock (Deputy Director for Research, Doctorate in Child, Community & Educational Psychology, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, London); lbostock@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Ethical approval has been granted by the Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC).

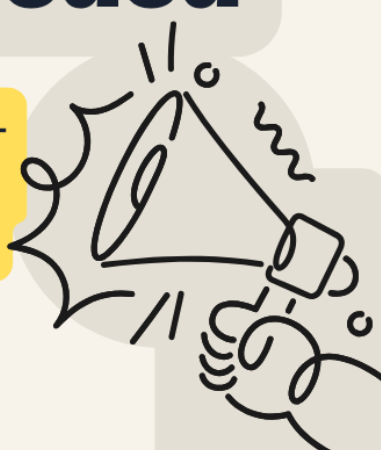
Deadline

28 February 2025

Thank you!

Figure H1

Recruitment Poster



Participants Needed

Calling Tavistock-trained EPs

Exploring educational psychologists' sense-making of group functioning based on their participation in **Experiential Groups** during training

Who can take part?

If you trained in the 3-year Doctorate in Child, Community and Educational Psychology at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and graduated between 2009 and 2022, you are invited to participate in this study. Participation is entirely voluntary.

What does taking part involve?

You will be invited to an online interview meeting for approximately one hour over Zoom or Teams. I will ask you questions about your experience of Experiential Groups during training, your learning from it and how it may influence your understanding of group dynamics as you engage with groups during your work.

Why take part?

- You can contribute to the understanding of EPs' sense-making of group dynamics informed by participation in Experiential Groups during training.
- Participation can provide a space for you to reflect on this experience and how it may impact your work.
- Involvement in innovative research.

If you are interested in participating and/or have any questions, **please contact me**, Silvia Lauzzana, Trainee Educational Psychologist, at **slauzzana@tavi-port.nhs.uk**

Appendix I: Interview Schedule

Introduction

Overview of research purpose

Review of consent and confidentiality

Reminder of right to pause/stop/withdraw

Demographics: end date of course, current role and experience as an EP, age range (21-27, 28-34, 35-41, 42-48, 49-55, 56-62)

Any questions before beginning

My hopes from the interview: experience of EG, learning about group dynamics, impact on professional practice, psychodynamic processes within groups, professional development, and closing.

Experience of experiential group

How was your experience of experiential group during training?

How willing were you to attend experiential group?

What were your expectations of attending?

Could you describe a significant moment during the experiential group that shifted your understanding of group dynamics?

How has your experience changed over time?

Did you gain any personal insights?

How did you see the role of the facilitator?

How did the experience of being in the group compare with your theoretical understanding of psychodynamic group processes?

What aspects of similarities and differences did you experience (or not) during experiential groups? How have these informed your current practice?

Learning on group dynamics

How has your experience in experiential group influenced the way you observe interactions in other groups in your professional life? [What have you learnt about group dynamics?]

How did your experience in experiential group help you understand roles within groups?

How did it help you perceive power dynamics? And group patterns?

How did you experience the boundaries between your role as a participant and as an observer of group processes?

What aspects of **authority** and **leadership** dynamics in the group had the strongest impact on your learning?

What did you learn about **rupture** and **repair**?

Impact on professional practice

Did your **approach to group work** change or developed after experiential group? If so, can you share any examples from your practice?

Has your understanding helped you **respond to challenging group situations**?

How do you understand **consultation** practice based on EG training?

How do you understand work with **school systems** based on EG training?

Psychodynamic processes

What **unconscious group processes became visible** to you through this experience that weren't apparent before?

Could you describe how your understanding of **resistance** or **defence mechanisms** in groups evolved through this experience?

How did witnessing others' experiences in the group expand your understanding of **transference** or **projection** in group settings?

Professional development

What did you learn about yourself as a group member that might influence your professional practice?

Do you think that your professional identity has developed based on EG training? (e.g., management of professional boundaries)

What (if any) changes in self-awareness do you think were the results of EG training? (e.g., understanding of personal triggers)

Closing reflections

Additional thoughts or experiences

What motivated you to participate in the study?

Where did you hear about the research?

How did you experience talking about experiential group during this interview?

Anything that was challenging or difficult to talk about?

Appendix J: Overall Dataset Familiarisation Notes

(16/08/2025)

Based on the transcripts of 12 interviews (of 19), which I have checked against the recordings for accuracy, I feel that I can attempt an overall dataset familiarisation note-taking to highlight some of the recurring themes and some of my thoughts as I went through the transcripts.

Broad themes and subthemes include:

experience of EG

- understanding of the task
- roles in groups (taken up or “imposed by others”)
- understanding of authority and leadership
- perceptions of the facilitator
- changes over time, over the three years, about group development and knowledge about the task
- what EG enables (e.g., space for thinking, sitting with silence/discomfort, talk about similarities and differences)
- time and context impact the content of EG discussions
- connections with group relations conferences
- psychodynamic processes in EG
- conflict and attitudes towards it; politeness
- developmental stage of participants
- boundaries (time, task)

learning from EG

- sitting with silence/discomfort
- about one’s role/s in groups
- power dynamics, who holds the most power in a group
- psychodynamic processes (e.g., splitting, projection, transference, countertransference) visible in groups
- application of learning into EP practice
- team meetings

- consultations
- peer/group supervision
- ELSA supervision

Things that I should be wary of:

- what is it that people remember of EG? Why it might be relevant for them? (**latent** meaning)
- some participants talk about others' reactions and responses during EG. Is this relevant? If so, how?
- Reminder: focus of the thesis is on **what is the learning from EG and how it is impacting EP practice?** However, participants' retelling of their experiences during EG forms the background to their learning. How to include it in the thesis?
- This is not a comparison between Tavi-trained EPs and non Tavi-trained EPs, so I should be careful about how I am going to do the write up so that my discussion does not imply a differentiation in ability to reflect.

Appendix K: Code List Generated by NVivo

Table K1

List of Code Labels

Code Labels	Sources	References
All part of a plan, question mark	3	3
Appreciations for Tavi training	9	14
Attendance	11	14
baD, relying on the outspoken leader	6	10
baD, seeking guidance from the facilitator	3	5
baF	6	11
baF against one group member	3	4
baF, against the facilitator	11	28
baF, baD, Closeness within the group	8	21
baP	3	3
Confidentiality, interviewing so that the confidentiality boundary is kept	2	5
Consultation, example of range of possible emotions	1	1
Defences, going off task	1	3
Different levels of knowledge, experience	1	1
Age and stage of personal development, impact on how EG is experienced	8	18
Being more familiar with Tavi way of learning	5	7
Not familiar with Tavi, psychoanalytic thinking	5	7
Experience of EG	0	0
Anxiety around how others perceive the group	1	1
Being careful about what to say and how	9	17
Conflict, wanted to avoid it as a group	2	5
Being on the fence	3	11
Boundary, confidentiality in EG enabled a sense of safety	1	2
Boundary, disruptions due to uncertainties, room changes, facilitator absent	2	3
Boundary, Managing relationships outside of EG	5	11

Code Labels	Sources	References
Boundary, managing the personal and the professional in EG	1	1
Boundary, other course experiences impacting EG	3	4
Boundary, outside context impacting on EG	5	8
Boundary, outside group experiences brought into, thought about in EG	6	12
Boundary, Personal experiences are brought into EG through emotions	1	3
Boundary, Roles, similar roles outside of EG and in EG	1	1
Boundary, space and time provided CT, safety	1	1
Committed to EG, wanting to engage, to explore CT provided by the group	6	15
CT, facilitator did not handle rupture well, expectations	4	5
CT, facilitator did not handle rupture well, expectations	3	5
CT, feeling contained, safe space	3	7
CT, feeling more contained by Y3	4	5
CT, none at all perceived	4	8
CT, none in Y1	3	7
CT, offered by predictable response from the facilitator, boundary	1	1
CT, uncertain whether that is possible at all	2	4
CT, working hard with the anxiety, defences	1	1
Descriptors, difficulty with finding words for it	5	6
Descriptors, feeling the anxiety, difficulty	4	6
EG experience over time	13	28
EG, an opportunity to define one's identity, to grow	2	5
EG, an opportunity to reflect, think about group dynamics	8	18
EG, an opportunity to see impact of one says on others	1	1
EG, an opportunity to try different roles	1	1
EG, self-indulgent, academic nonsense, defence question mark	1	2
Emotions, raw emotions in EG	4	8

Code Labels	Sources	References
Expectation to become perfect after the course	1	2
Experience of multidisciplinary EG	1	1
Feeling frustrated with people who do not do the task	5	6
Feeling judged by the facilitator	1	2
Needing to know why the trainee facilitator was not there	1	1
No support provided to student having a hard time	1	1
One word descriptors	16	33
PD pss, projective identification, feeling others' emotions	5	8
PD pss, splitting and projection	9	21
PD pss, the group as a mirror of the family	3	4
PD pss, transference	3	3
PD pss, visible in EG	5	6
rupture experienced in EG	5	9
Repair	4	5
Risks, feeling having the power enables taking risks	1	1
Risks, following others who are silent, feeling cannot talk	2	3
Risks, not risking the image one want to portray on the outside	3	6
Risks, not taking risks	3	4
Risks, speaking in EG	11	22
Roles, experimenting and not thinking about the consequences	1	2
Roles, LDS, being positioned to speak	2	5
Roles, LDS, people perceive others as leaders	1	3
Roles, not wanting to be positioned in a specific role	3	8
Safety made it possible to risk more	2	4
Safety made it possible to share different views	4	6
Sense of frustration stayed	1	1
Sense of unease did not go away with time	2	2

Code Labels	Sources	References
Silent members in EG, who do not speak or not a lot	6	11
Silent members, feeling frustrated at them not risking	4	5
Silent members, silence addressed in EG	1	1
Silent members, thinking that they are checking out	2	2
Sitting in silence is uncomfortable	5	10
Subgroups	2	2
Those who hold the POWER in EG	1	2
Time boundary, experiencing it as weird, uncontainig	4	5
Unsafe to speak, reveal aspects of oneself	5	9
What can happen in EG is difficult to comprehend immediately	2	2
Facilitator's INP about wanting to be nice, harmony	1	1
Facilitator's INP useful to understand the group, inc S & D	5	14
Facilitator's INPs about thinking the same, being agreeable	4	5
Facilitator, difficult role they have to play	1	3
Facilitator, dual role	1	1
Facilitator, expectations from them	7	21
Facilitator, gentle	1	2
Facilitator, LDS, not competent leader	1	3
Facilitator, LDS, seeing them as competent	6	16
Facilitator, little intervention, unhelpful	4	5
Facilitator, unclear role	1	3
Facilitator, understanding their role changed with time	3	4
Facilitator, understanding their role to help members reflect at deeper level	2	3
Facilitators facilitating EG	11	20
Feedback about the interview	18	27
GRC experience impacted EG	3	7
GRC, helps understanding doing EG	5	9

Code Labels	Sources	References
Handout	4	4
Impact on practice	3	3
Accepting own limitations, can't get it right all the time	1	3
Assuming group dynamics as a default, wary of naivety	2	3
Being respectful of others when thinking about group dynamics	2	3
Being sensitive to, curious about group dynamics, generic	2	2
Boundaries, respecting time, task and role boundaries	3	9
Consultation, being conscious of who is in the room, how that might affect dynamics	2	2
Consultation, role of the EP is facilitating the conversation	1	1
Consultation, time bound impacts sitting with silence, juggling different expectations	3	4
Critical incidents, holding emotions	1	1
CT, importance of CT in consultation, when facilitating groups	6	16
CT, modelling as a way of being, embedded in practice	1	3
Defining the role of the EP as collaborative	6	10
Fascinated to observe group dynamics	4	6
Helping people in groups see things from different perspectives	5	13
Information on group dynamics can inform the next steps	1	1
LDS, role of balancing flow with direction	3	5
Learning from EG may fade over time	4	4
Managing discomfort, difficult emotions of others	4	6
Managing group dynamics, conflicts, taking risks	4	8
Managing uncertainty	2	2
Observing group dynamics within groups	9	19
Online supervision, not the same as in person	1	1
Organisational change, working with emotions	1	2

Code Labels	Sources	References
PD psss, hypothesising	7	8
PD psss, observing projections	5	5
PD psss, observing splitting	7	9
PD psss, projective identification, feeling others' emotions	6	14
PD psss, recognising the group being off task (ba group)	3	4
PD psss, recognising the primary task	1	1
PD psss, reflecting in supervision	1	1
PD psss, responding to projection	5	8
PD psss, responding to splitting	2	2
PD psss, social defences against anxiety	3	4
PD psss, thinking about them	9	13
PD psss, transference in supervision	1	1
Providing reflective group spaces, value of	2	3
Providing some guidance, no guidance is paralysing	1	1
Reflecting on own responses from relating with others	3	3
Reflection in peer supervision	1	1
Reflection on action	5	11
Responding to POWER dynamics within school groups, teams	5	7
Roles, reflecting on different roles played by people in groups	12	19
Roles, reflecting on own role played in groups	10	21
Roles, silent members have an impact too, have emotions too	2	3
Roles, understanding people's valencies	2	4
S & D, Being able to celebrate differences in people's views	1	1
S & D, being confident in talking about differences	3	5
S & D, Being curious about other people's spiritual positions	1	1
S & D, difficult to talk about it in the team	3	4
S & D, group dynamics impacted by	1	2

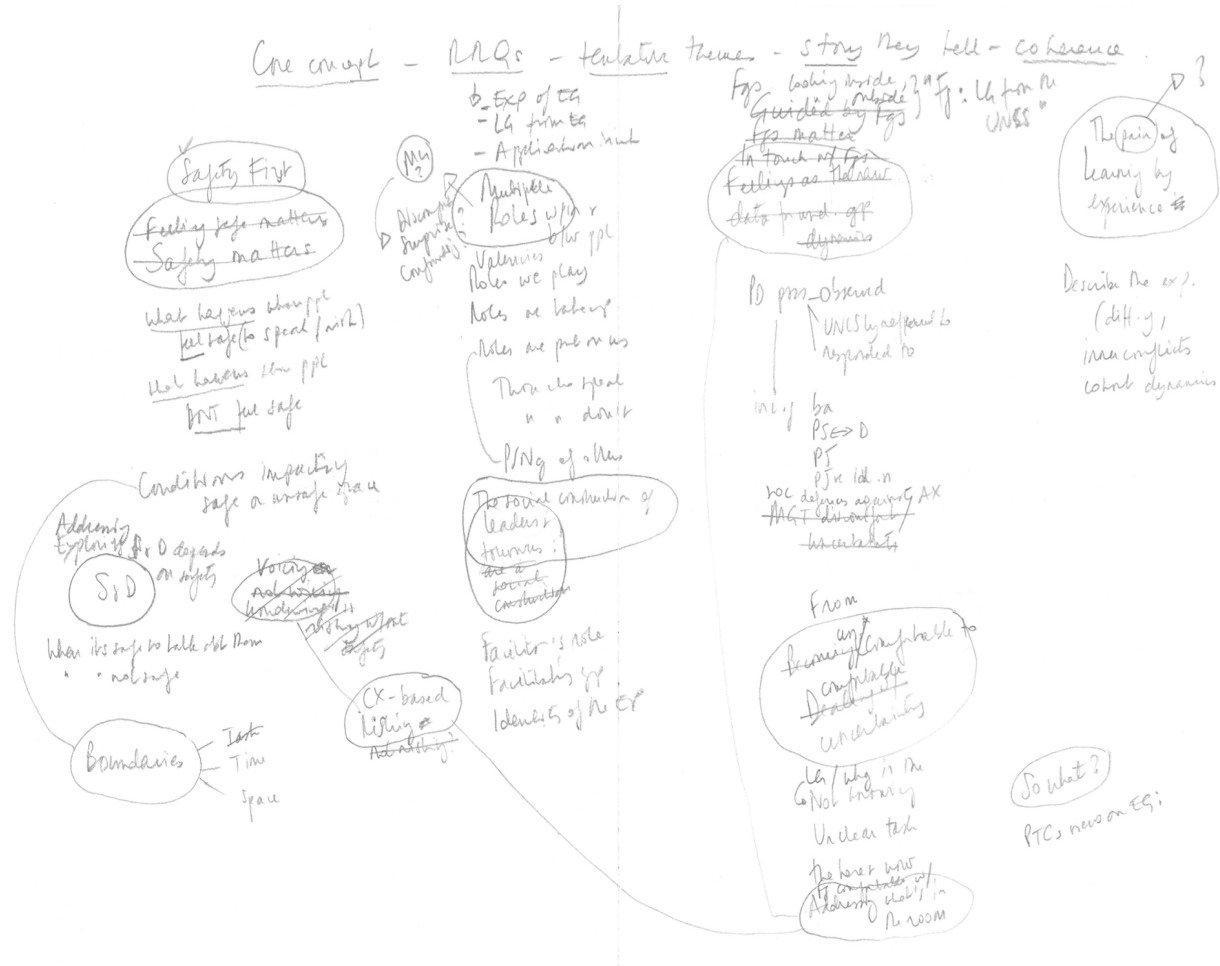
Code Labels	Sources	References
neurodivergent differences, not just the unconscious		
S & D, thinking about that, possible impact	2	4
Sensitivity to the function of communication in supervision groups	1	1
Silence, being more comfortable with it, understanding purpose	6	17
Silent individuals, how to enable speech	1	1
Slowing things down	2	3
Starting from a blank slate, accepting, removing biases	1	1
Supervising trainees, discussions on group dynamics	2	2
Supervision of groups, using own feelings as data	2	4
Supervision of staff using a PA lens	1	2
Supervision, own clinical supervision important to manage groups' emotions	1	1
Supervision, talking about PD pss in that space	2	2
Tavi principles permeating everything	3	4
Understanding that groups are complex	2	3
Using own feelings as data	1	1
Voicing, not voicing wonderings	15	38
Learning came later	8	8
Learning from EG	20	174
Acknowledging the value and dread of EG	11	23
Becoming more comfortable being in groups	1	1
Being able to sit with uncertainty, anxiety	6	7
Boundaries, importance of consistency and predictability	1	2
CT, created by the complex dynamic between people in a specific moment in time	1	1
CT, learned the importance of CT	1	1
EG, not about learning concrete strategies to use in groups	1	2
Extreme cases enabled learning	2	2
Homeostasis, function of groups	1	1

Code Labels	Sources	References
Learned about the value of reflective group spaces	1	2
Learned about themselves	5	9
Learned to manage, contain the conflict	1	1
Learned when to speak and when not, to LISTEN	6	8
Learning about others within EG	1	1
Learning about the POWER of the group thanks to EG	1	1
Learning to be vulnerable in groups	1	1
PD pss, projection	1	1
PD pss, projective identification, feeling and responding to others' emotions	1	2
POWER of the group, an entity of its own	1	3
Raised awareness of people's heightened anxiety in groups	1	1
Recognising one's valency in groups	11	21
Reflecting on why other people bring what they bring in a conversation	1	1
Reflecting, Reflecting in action	2	2
Roles, aware of one's POWER in groups	1	2
Roles, becoming conscious of self in role and roles taken up	14	36
Roles, LDS, becoming conscious about leader role	5	7
Roles, LDS, what can make someone a leader	2	5
Roles, reflecting on own role, power, within groups	4	6
S & D, Becoming conscious of what might be just under the surface in groups	1	1
S & D, learned to be ok to be different	1	1
Silence means agreement, assent	1	1
Silence, being more comfortable with silence over time	5	6
Silent members are having an impact on the group too	6	9
Silent members, wondering about what might have caused them being silent	1	1
Slowing things down	1	1

Code Labels	Sources	References
Number of TEPs in cohort	9	10
Diversity in the cohort	10	17
Online EG, a different, nice way to be together	3	4
Online EG, checking out of the experience	7	10
Online EG, not the same as in person	5	6
Other parts of the course also help learn about group dynamics	10	21
Others' perceptions of Tavi-trained EPs	7	9
Regrets, could have made a better use of the space to think things through	6	16
Regrets, wished being braver	1	5
Remembering, back to how it was	15	23
Remembering, difficult to remember Y3	4	6
Remembering, number in cohort	2	2
Remembering, Y1 was more memorable	4	5
S & D, academic differences	2	4
S & D, agreeing with each other, not voicing differences	6	10
S & D, being able to present different opinions	4	9
S & D, discussed	2	5
S & D, hierarchy within the social graces, did not share as felt not relevant in comparison to others	1	1
S & D, impacting sense of belonging to the group	1	1
S & D, neurodivergent members, how they might be affected in EG	1	1
S & D, sharing experiences others could not understand was frustrating	1	1
S & D, splitting	1	1
S & D, touched upon, not explored	12	23
Task, being off task, avoiding	5	5
Task, bringing up topics to discuss (off task)	3	7
Task, doing it right	9	13
Task, feeling unprepared for the experience	3	5
Task, getting it better with time	4	6
Task, getting used to it, more comfortable with, over	3	5

Code Labels	Sources	References
time		
Task, it did not become clearer with time	3	4
Task, just being there together	4	5
Task, not being told what the task is	4	4
Task, not seeing the point of EG	1	1
Task, sitting and just be is hard	2	2
Task, there is no task	1	2
Task, uncertain about what to do in the beginning	11	18
Task, uncertain but trying	2	2
Task, uncertain throughout	2	3
Task, wondering about the purpose, wanting to get something out of it	2	4
Tavi experience, feeling incompetent, deconstruct to reconstruct	3	6
Theory and experience together help make sense of EG	9	18
Views on EG as a training experience	8	23
Views on numbers of TEPs in EG	2	2
We, examples of speaking as we instead of I	2	3

Appendix L: Generating Candidate Themes and Subthemes



Appendix M: Candidate Themes and Subthemes: Definitions and Code Labels

Table M1

Definitions and Code Labels for Each Candidate Theme and Subtheme

Theme	Subtheme	
Safety first <u>Definition:</u> This theme explores the core idea of the importance of felt psychological safety within experiential group and in groups in general for individuals to be able to speak, be open and curious, and challenge others in ways that are appropriate. The theme encompasses the experience of felt safety or not, the learning that trainees developed from that experience and how they apply that learning in their work with groups.	The containing function of boundaries: task, time and space <u>Definition:</u> This subtheme explores the idea that boundaries such as a task that is perceived as clear, time and space boundaries provide a containing structure that can contribute to felt psychological safety. This subtheme considers what happens when boundaries are not clear and how important they can be when working with groups. This subtheme fits within the “Safety first” theme as it provides examples of how boundaries are perceived as helpful in containing anxiety, and therefore can contribute to create a sense of safety.	The cost of avoiding difference <u>Definition:</u> This subtheme explores the idea that the emphasis on getting on well can be at the cost of courageous exploration of differences among individuals within teams and in groups. It includes the importance of the wider context in providing either a facilitation or an impediment to the courageous exploration of differences. Crucially, for the trainee EPs having to attend classes and work with the cohort outside of EG can provide a deterrent to exploring differences for not wanting to rock the boat and avoid the conflict. This subtheme fits within the “Safety first” theme as group members necessitate to experience psychological safety to explore potentially explosive topics.
Codes Being careful about what to say and how (Experience) Conflict, wanted to avoid it as a group	Codes Boundary, disruptions due to uncertainties, room changes, facilitator absent (Experience) Boundary, Managing relationships outside of EG	Codes rupture experienced in EG (Experience) Repair (Experience) S & D, Being able to celebrate differences in

Theme	Subtheme
(Experience)	people's views (Impact)
Being on the fence (Experience)	S & D, being confident in talking about differences (Impact)
Boundary, confidentiality in EG enabled a sense of safety (Experience)	S & D, Being curious about other people's spiritual positions (Impact)
Committed to EG, wanting to engage, to explore (Experience)	S & D, difficult to talk about it in the team (Impact)
CT provided by the group (Experience)	S & D, group dynamics impacted by neurodivergent differences, not just the unconscious (Impact)
CT, facilitator did not handle rupture well, expectations (Experience)	S & D, thinking about that, possible impact (Impact)
CT, feeling contained, safe space (Experience)	S & D, academic differences
CT, feeling more contained by Y3 (Experience)	S & D, agreeing with each other, not voicing differences
CT, none at all perceived (Experience)	S & D, being able to present different opinions
CT, none in Y1 (Experience)	S & D, discussed
CT, uncertain whether that is possible at all (Experience)	S & D, hierarchy within the social graces, did not share as felt not relevant in comparison to others
Risks, not risking the image one want to portray on the outside (Experience)	S & D, impacting sense of belonging to the group
Risks, not taking risks (Experience)	S & D, neurodivergent members, how they might be affected in EG
Safety made it possible to risk more (Experience)	S & D, sharing experiences others could not understand was frustrating
Safety made it possible to share different views (Experience)	S & D, splitting
Sitting in silence is uncomfortable (Experience)	S & D, touched upon, not explored
Unsafe to speak, reveal aspects of oneself (Experience)	
CT, learned the importance of CT (Learning)	
CT, importance of CT in consultation, when facilitating groups (Impact)	
CT, modelling as a way of being, embedded in practice (Impact)	
Facilitator, little intervention, unhelpful	
(Experience)	
Boundary, managing the personal and the professional in EG (Experience)	
Boundary, other course experiences impacting EG (Experience)	
Boundary, outside context impacting on EG (Experience)	
Boundary, outside group experiences brought into, thought about in EG (Experience)	
Boundary, Personal experiences are brought into EG through emotions (Experience)	
Boundary, space and time provided CT, safety (Experience)	
CT, offered by predictable response from the facilitator, boundary (Experience)	
EG, an opportunity to define one's identity, to grow (Experience)	
EG, an opportunity to reflect, think about group dynamics (Experience)	
EG, an opportunity to try different roles (Experience)	
Time boundary, experiencing it as weird, uncontainable (Experience)	
GRC experience impacted EG	
Boundaries, importance of consistency and predictability (Learning)	
CT, created by the complex dynamic between people in a specific moment in time (Learning)	
Boundaries, respecting time, task and role boundaries (Impact)	
Task, being off task, avoiding	

Theme	Subtheme	
	Task, bringing up topics to discuss (off task) Task, doing it right Task, it did not become clearer with time Task, just being there together Task, there is no task Task, wondering about the purpose, wanting to get something out of it	
Discovering roles and valencies: self and others in groups <u>Definition:</u> This theme focuses on understanding roles in groups at two levels: participants’ developing understanding of themselves as self-in-role (or person-in-role?) and their understanding of the roles other people play in groups. It encompasses the three levels of the research by looking at the experience of playing different aspects of oneself in EG, the participants’ discovery of their valencies in groups, and their understanding of people’s valencies and roles (including power dynamics) when working with groups. This theme also include the developing identity of the EP (or the role of the EP) within a framework that considers power dynamics.	The social construction of leaders and followers <u>Definition:</u> This subtheme focuses in particular with participants’ experiences of the leader and follower roles in EG, and how these then inform their understanding of these roles in groups after qualification. As EG deconstructs these role provoking uncertainty, it highlights participants’ expectations of the leader role in groups, and the uncomfortable feelings raised when these expectations are not met. This subtheme fits within the “Discovering roles and valencies” theme as it is about the roles people may play in groups, whether consciously or not.	Silent participation: contribution or withdrawal? <u>Definition:</u> This subtheme examines participants’ perception of quiet members within EG. Participants’ views and feelings about quiet members are ambivalent, with some being frustrated by them while others accept their contribution notwithstanding being quiet. This subtheme fits with the theme of “Discovering roles and valencies” because it considers the different roles of talkers and those who tend to be quiet.
Codes EG, an opportunity to see impact of one says on others PD psss, the group as a mirror of the family (Experience)	Codes baD, relying on the outspoken leader baD, seeking guidance from the facilitator baF baF against one group member	Codes Online EG, checking out of the experience (Experience) Silent members in EG, who do not speak or not a lot (Experience)

Theme	Subtheme
Risks, speaking in EG (Experience)	Silent members, feeling frustrated at them not risking (Experience)
Becoming more comfortable being in groups (Learning)	Silent members, silence addressed in EG (Experience)
Learned about themselves (Learning)	Silent members, thinking that they are checking out (Experience)
Learned when to speak and when not, to LISTEN (Learning)	Silence means agreement, assent (Learning)
Recognising one's valency in groups (Learning)	Silent members are having an impact on the group too (Learning)
Roles, aware of one's POWER in groups (Learning)	Silent members, wondering about what might have caused them being silent (Learning)
Roles, becoming conscious of self in role and roles taken up (Learning)	Roles, silent members have an impact too, have emotions too (Impact)
Roles, reflecting on own role, power, within groups (Learning)	Silence, being more comfortable with it, understanding purpose (Impact)
Consultation, being conscious of who is in the room, how that might affect dynamics (Impact)	Silent individuals, how to enable speech (Impact)
Consultation, role of the EP is facilitating the conversation (Impact) – EP ROLE	
Defining the role of the EP as collaborative (Impact) – EP ROLE	
Helping people in groups see things from different perspectives (Impact) – EP ROLE	
Roles, reflecting on different roles played by people in groups (Impact)	
Roles, reflecting on own role played in groups (Impact)	
Roles, understanding people's valencies (Impact)	
Tavi experience, feeling incompetent, deconstruct to reconstruct	
	baF, against the facilitator
	baF, baD, Closeness within the group
	baP
	Roles, LDS, being positioned to speak (Experience)
	Roles, LDS, people perceive others as leaders (Experience)
	Roles, not wanting to be positioned in a specific role (Experience)
	Facilitator, expectations from them
	Facilitator, gentle
	Facilitator, LDS, not competent leader
	Facilitator, LDS, seeing them as competent
	Facilitator, unclear role
	Facilitator, understanding their role changed with time
	Facilitator, understanding their role to help members reflect at deeper level
	Roles, LDS, becoming conscious about leader role (Learning)
	Roles, LDS, what can make someone a leader (Learning)
	LDS, role of balancing flow with direction (Impact)
	Providing some guidance, no guidance is paralysing (Impact)
	Task, not being told what the task is

Theme	Subtheme
Tuning into affect: feelings as information about groups (or Affect as information) <u>Definition</u>: This theme includes the use of feelings as data, one's own and others' feelings and emotions that may be felt and manifested in group situations. It encompasses the psychodynamic processes of splitting, projection, projective identification, and the basic assumption group mentalities that can be experienced in EG and in group situations post-training, processes that can be perceived at the level of the experience, the learning and their consideration post-training. Codes Consultation, example of range of possible emotions Defences, going off task Descriptors, feeling the anxiety, difficulty (Experience) Emotions, raw emotions in EG (Experience) Feeling frustrated with people who do not do the task (Experience) PD pss, projective identification, feeling others' emotions (Experience) PD pss, splitting and projection (Experience) PD pss, transference (Experience) PD pss, visible in EG (Experience) Learned about the value of reflective group	When to voice affect-based hypotheses <u>Definition</u>: This subtheme explores the conditions for the participants to share their wonderings and hypotheses with others (based on their feelings and what they can perceive from others in the group). It is more specific to the application level of the research, where participants can apply psychodynamic principles such as splitting and projection to understand group dynamics post-training. This subtheme connects with the theme "Tuning into affect" as it explores what participants do with the information they draw upon from the feelings and emotions felt by them and others in the group. Codes Supervision, talking about PD pss in that space (Impact) Voicing, not voicing wonderings (Impact)

Theme	Subtheme
spaces (Learning)	
Learned to manage, contain the conflict (Learning)	
PD psss, projection (Learning)	
PD psss, projective identification, feeling and responding to others' emotions (Learning)	
Raised awareness of people's heightened anxiety in groups (Learning)	
Reflecting, Reflecting in action (Learning)	
Slowing things down (Learning)	
Critical incidents, holding emotions (Impact)	
Information on group dynamics can inform the next steps (Impact)	
Managing discomfort, difficult emotions of others (Impact)	
Managing group dynamics, conflicts, taking risks (Impact)	
Organisational change, working with emotions (Impact)	
PD psss, hypothesising (Impact)	
PD psss, observing projections (Impact)	
PD psss, observing splitting (Impact)	
PD psss, projective identification, feeling others' emotions (Impact)	
PD psss, recognising the group being off task (ba group) (Impact)	
PD psss, recognising the primary task (Impact)	
PD psss, reflecting in supervision (Impact)	
PD psss, responding to projection (Impact)	
PD psss, responding to splitting (Impact)	
PD psss, social defences against anxiety (Impact)	

Theme	Subtheme
PD psss, thinking about them (Impact)	
PD psss, transference in supervision (Impact)	
Reflecting on own responses from relating with others (Impact)	
Reflection in peer supervision (Impact)	
Reflection on action (Impact)	
Responding to POWER dynamics within school groups, teams (Impact)	
Slowing things down (Impact)	
Supervising trainees, discussions on group dynamics (Impact)	
Supervision of groups, using own feelings as data (Impact)	
Supervision of staff using a PA lens (Impact)	
Using own feelings as data (Impact)	

The dread *and* value of learning through experience

Definition: This theme explores the almost inevitable dread or anxiety that is part of the process of learning. It encompasses participants' experiences and the realisation that learning can be painful. This realisation can also be the reason why some participants may have decided to risk less, to avoid the pain. The other side of the ambivalence of learning is the participants' acknowledgement of the value they place on the experience despite being anxiety-provoking. Valuing the space, rather than being an immediate realisation, can take time to develop,

EG across time: the struggle to make it work

Definition: This subtheme is specific to the experience of EG over the three years of the course, and it describes the changes in participants' experiences of the EG space and their understanding of the task over time.

Tolerating not-knowing

Definition: This subtheme focuses on one of the learning from EG that is about becoming more comfortable with uncertainty. It encompasses both the learning and application levels. This subtheme fits with the "The dread of learning through experience" because it describes how one of the learnings that comes from the dread of the experience is tolerating uncertainty.

Theme	Subtheme	
and some may appreciate it only when looking back, after the course has finished.		
Codes	Codes	Codes
Appreciations for Tavi training	EG experience over time (Experience)	Being able to sit with uncertainty, anxiety
Task, sitting and just be is hard (Experience)	Sense of frustration stayed (Experience)	(Learning)
Acknowledging the value and dread of EG (Learning)	Sense of unease did not go away with time (Experience)	Managing uncertainty (Impact)
Extreme cases enabled learning (Learning)	Silence, being more comfortable with silence over time (Learning)	
Learning came later	Task, feeling unprepared for the experience	
Views on EG as a training experience	Task, getting it better with time	
Views on numbers of TEPs in EG	Task, getting used to it, more comfortable with, over time	
	Task, not seeing the point of EG	
	Task, uncertain about what to do in the beginning	
	Task, uncertain but trying	
	Task, uncertain throughout	

Appendix N: Developing Themes and Subthemes

Figure N1

i-Pad Hand-Drawing Showing Developing Themes and Subthemes



Appendix O: Log of Excerpts Used in the Findings Chapter

Figure 01

Log of Excerpts by Participant by Theme and Subtheme

PtC	Number of exons we used where
P1	[redacted] 18, 19, 19, 19, 1, T-STR: 1, 1, 19 T2-STR: 19, 19 T3-STR: 19, 19
P2	T1: 19, 19, 19 [redacted] 19, 19 T1-STR: 1, 19, 1 T2-STR: 19 T3-STR: 19
P3	T1: 19, 19, 19, 1, 1 [redacted] 19, 19, 19 T1-STR: 19, 19 T2-STR: 1, 1
P4	T1: 19 [redacted] 19 T1-STR: 1, 19 T2-STR: 1, 19, 19 [redacted] 19
P5	T1: 19 [redacted] 19, 19 T1-STR: 1 T2-STR: 1 T3-STR: 19, 19
P6	T1: 19, 19, 19, 19, 19, 1, 1, 1, 1 [redacted] 19, 19 T1-STR: 19, 19
P7	T1: 19 [redacted] 19 T1-STR: 19 T2-STR: 19 T3-STR: 19 T3-STR: 19
P8	T1: 19, 19, 19, T1-STR: 19, 19 T2-STR: 19, 19, 19, 19 T2-STR: 19
P9	T1: 19, 19, 19 [redacted] 19, 19, 1 T1-STR: 19 T2-STR: 1 T3-STR: 19, 19
P10	[redacted] 19 T1-STR: 19, 19, 19 T2-STR: 1 T3-STR: 1, 19, 19 T2-STR: 19
P11	T1: 1, 19 [redacted] 19, 19, 1, 19 T1-STR: 1 T2-STR: 19, 19, 19, 19, 19
P12	[redacted] 19 T1-STR: 19, 19 T2-STR: 1, 1 T3-STR: 19 [redacted] 19 T3-STR: 19
P13	T1: 19, 19, 19, 19 [redacted] 19, 19, 19, 1, 1, 1, 19 T1-STR: 19, 19, 19
P14	T1: 1, 1, 19, 19 [redacted] 19, 19 T1-STR: 19 T2-STR: 19, 19, 19
P15	T1: 11, 19, 19 [redacted] 19, 1 T1-STR: 1, 19, 1 T2-STR: 19 T3-STR: 19
P16	T1: 19, 19 [redacted] 19, 1 T1-STR: 19 T2-STR: 1, 1 T3-STR: 19
P17	T1: 19, 19 [redacted] 19 T1-STR: 19, 19 T2-STR: 19 T3-STR: 19
P18	T1: 19, 19 [redacted] 19 T1-STR: 19, 1, 19 T2-STR: 19, 19, 19 T3-STR: 19
P19	T1: 1 [redacted] 19, 19 T1-STR: 19, 19, 1 T2-STR: 1, 19 [redacted] 19
P1	19, 19 T1-STR: 19, 19 T2-STR: 1, 19, 1, 19 T3-STR: 19, 1
P2	19, 19 [redacted] 19 T1-STR: 19, 19, 19 T2-STR: 19, 19
P3	19 T1-STR: 19 [redacted] 1 T2-STR: 19 T3-STR: 19, 19, 19
P4	T1-STR: 1, 19, 1, 19 T1-STR: 19
P5	19, 19, 19, 1 T1-STR: 19, 19, 1, 19 T3-STR: 19, 19 T3-STR: 19
P6	T1-STR: 19 [redacted] 19
P7	1 T3-STR: 19 T1-STR: 19, 19
P8	T2-STR: 19 [redacted] 19, 19 T3-STR: 1, 1, 19, 1, 1 T1-STR: 19
P9	19 T1-STR: 19, 1, 19, 19 T3-STR: 19, 19, 19, 1, 19 T1-STR: 1, 19
P10	19, 1, 1 T3-STR: 1
P11	T1-STR: 19 T3-STR: 1 T3-STR: 1 T1-STR: 19, 19
P12	19
P13	19 T1-STR: 19, 19 T2-STR: 19, 19
P14	T1-STR: 19, 19 [redacted] 19, 19 T3-STR: 19 T1-STR: 19, 19, 19
P15	19, 1 T1-STR: 19, 1 [redacted] 19 T3-STR: 1 T3-STR: 1 T1-STR: 19
P16	T2-STR: 19 T3-STR: 19, 1 T3-STR: 19 T1-STR: 19
P17	19, 19, 19 [redacted] 19, 19 T2-STR: 1, 1 T3-STR: 19, 19, 19
P18	T3-STR: 19 T1-STR: 19
P19	T3-STR: 1 T1-STR: 19

Note. T = theme; ST = subtheme; 1 = summarised excerpt; 1q = excerpt under 40 words; 1Q = excerpt over 40 words.

Appendix P: Handout Describing EG to Trainee EPs

M4 Year 1: experiential group

The group has a primary task:

It is to learn about the **dynamics of small groups, the sub-groups within them and the formation of leadership and followership relationships**, as these phenomena happen in the experiential group.

It is a **‘here-and-now’ event** in which the behaviour of the group is what the group and the facilitators will look at closely, so that **the group has the opportunity to study its own behaviour** as it happens. The facilitators, who are not members of the course team of the group, but are members of staff at the Tavistock, offer their comments for members of the group to consider.

The group will address the task of learning about itself and what kinds of state of mind it, and its individual members gets into, in the “here and now”. This may involve consideration of the individual, year group, training course, and organisational preoccupations, and the interplay between them all. These phenomena, as they emerge in the group, may also mirror broader societal preoccupations, and states of mind.

Sometimes the group state of mind will be more self-protective (defensive, suspicious, anxious, seeking to avoid challenge or adventure). The group facilitators’ comments are intended to assist the group in exploring what is happening and trying to understand. This will include attempting to understand some of what lies “beneath the surface” of the group, or help the group think about and understand how it does, or does not approach this complex task.

The aim of the experiential group is to help itself, and the individuals in it to get the most out of being a member of and working and learning in this group, and groups generally. It aims to help group members better to fulfil their potential and to reduce the constraints of irrational beliefs, or thoughts and feelings based on more or less covert rationales, such as unconscious fears related to survival, competition, and belonging for example. Members may, incidentally, learn about themselves as group members and the roles they take up most readily.

The M4 Year 1 group will meet fortnightly (except on the occasions where block placements mean this will not be possible) throughout the academic year starting at 1.00 pm and finishing at 2.00pm.

Note. Emphasis in the original.