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Peer support groups for paranoid and unusual beliefs: a qualitative analysis of members' experiences

Roupen Baronian, Danny Taggart, Lisa Wood
University of Essex, LONDON, United Kingdom

Learning Goal:

This is the first study exploring the Hearing Voices Network approach to unusual beliefs. It is hoped that the findings of this study will help increase awareness of the potential benefits of these user-led groups among both experience-based experts as well as anyone supporting people with distressing or overwhelming beliefs.

Abstract Text:

Typically referred to as delusions, unusual beliefs are commonly regarded as symptoms of a psychotic disorder, requiring treatment. Drawing on the Hearing Voices Network's approach to voice-hearing (Romme & Escher, 1993), peer support groups for unusual beliefs aim at providing mutually supportive environments where members can feel less isolated and explore the meaning of their experiences. Different ways of seeing reality are not pathologised and groups are based on the premise that people may have different explanations about the nature and causes of their beliefs (May, 2012). Despite the growth of an active network of peer support paranoia and beliefs groups, to date, there has been no research in this area. **Aims:** The present study aimed at exploring participants' experiences of attending peer support groups for paranoid and unusual beliefs and the impact of participation, as perceived by members. **Methods:** The study adopted a qualitative research design. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 participants and data were thematically analysed. The research team consulted peer facilitators from the London Paranoia and Beliefs Network in order to ensure that the approach was respectful to members' experiences and adhered to the ethos of the groups. **Results:** Four preliminary themes have been constructed from the data: (1) Having our stories heard, describes the humanising impact of finding a voice and sharing one's stories in the witnessing presence of others; (2) It's a little oasis, reflects the feelings of safety and non-judgmental acceptance that the group afforded; (3) From the I to the We, captures the sense of community that the group forged for participants; and (4) It's a learning platform, explores the role of the group as a repository of information and knowledge. **Discussion:** Implications and directions for future research will be outlined and suggested.

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OF HUMAN RECONNECTION**