

GROUP PROCESS

(What follows are excerpts from a paper. While the paper is primarily related to group therapy, the points made are also applicable to other uses of group work)

In group process, the interaction between the members of a group, it is the group and the group dynamics which are the central focus, rather than the leader and her personality and technique, and these can be seen as a powerful instrument for growth and change for its members.

The main arguments in favour of **the use of groups in therapy** centre on the value of the group as a social system: the group provides support for each other; the individual finds that his experience is shared by others and therefore feels universal; helping others reinforces self-esteem in the helper; seeing others benefiting can give hope to the client; the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group; the development of socialising techniques through open feedback providing information about maladaptive social behaviour; observation of modelling; interpersonal learning in that the personality is in part the product of interaction with other significant human beings. As Yalom says, "a freely interactive group, with few structural restrictions, will, in time, develop into a social microcosm of the participative members". Many of the problems that people bring to therapy are the product of social adjustment. The client's pathology will in time be evident to the group and through feedback and self-observation the client's awareness will be enhanced. The client can then experiment with other ways of being.

Group members operate at various **system levels** simultaneously, the intrapersonal, the interpersonal and the systems level. The systems processes are the dynamic patterns of interaction that develop between people over time and create a way of being together. Such system processes affect the way people feel about themselves and each other as well as the way they behave in that environment. These system processes account for the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. The therapist holistically attends both to the parts and to the whole, and thus has the complex task of tracking the three levels of activity. The group is seen as a living organism. Phenomenologically, there are four space-time zones, here-and-now (the group-environment field of group members' experiences and actions as represented in the here and now), there-and-now (what is currently happening for each outside the group), here-and-then (the groups's history from previous sessions), there-and-then (past history of group members). The field exists both for individuals and for groups.

The group may also be viewed developmentally. It is important to be aware of what **stage** a group has reached in its evolution and needs to work through each stage before taking on tasks appropriate to the next stage. The **Tuckman and Jensen** model is frequently used; their stages are **forming, storming, norming and performing**, to which others have added **mourning** as a concluding stage. In the first, superficial contact and exploration, group members are unsure and anxious, looking to the leader for protection and concerned about identity, process and safety. The leader engages in contracting and setting boundaries, encouraging interpersonal contact and building a climate of trust. The second stage is one of conflict, in which the testing and probing of each other takes place, and projections are reality-tested. The group's rules and behaviour norms are explored. More open and confrontative contact between members occurs. The major issues at this stage are influence, authority and control. Confluence and isolation may occur here by, for example, the tendency of persons to adopt roles or factions or habitual ways of relating. Groups may establish distinctive group cultures. Finally the group reaches a point of high cohesiveness, in which real contact occurs between members of the group. Members behave interdependently and intimately, with a high level of trust and self-disclosure. A closure phase exists although not all groups enter this phase fully. The leader here helps the group to arrive at a closure and acknowledge any unfinished business. The group says "goodbye", examines any learnings and possibly plans for the transfer of those learnings into the "real" world. This "completion" phase is important in moving through satisfaction to withdrawal, including a mourning for the ending and acceptance of an experience that cannot continue. Groups do not necessarily move easily from one stage to the next and can go back. Clearly the leader needs to be alert to any stuck points that may develop.

Individuals may explore their needs, both individually and collectively. Behaviour may take on a cooperative or confrontative pattern as those needs are worked out in the group context. Such patterns are the group process. They need to be tracked by the leader and if necessary challenged to help the working through of the process. Thus interruptions will need to be addressed. The group may need to attend fully to its senses if it is to produce accurate observations of what it needs. A group may spend a long time discussing, say, points of administration to deflect from awareness of painful needs. An individual may need prompting by the group to mobilise in the most contactful expression of his feelings. Understandings from the action may need to be expressed, including feedback from several people, so that learning can occur and withdrawal be complete. A person waits until the cycle is complete before bringing up her own concern. A person's anger expressed at the end of the session when there is insufficient time to work it through may leave the group with a sense of incompleteness and dissatisfaction.

As facilitator, **the leader** plays a crucial role. Initially she helps to establish safety by making clear and holding the basic ground-rules. These include: confidentiality, speaking in the first person, converting questions into statements, avoiding advice, speaking directly to specific persons and making eye contact, attending to here-and-now experiences and to bodily responses, not interrupting another's work and respecting each other's needs and boundaries, and using responses to enhance group process. The leader may work to help the group to focus on the here-and-now. This includes: bringing "outside" statements into the present and from the abstract to the specific, encouraging responses from the others, teaching persons to offer and receive feedback, helping them to differentiate one person from another in their attitudes towards others in the group, helping people to express "what is not being said" and interrupting the content flow to attend to "here-and-now" concerns. The aim is often to get the group to focus upon itself. The leader helps the group to observe its process. She needs to be able to recognise it herself, for, by example: observing non-verbal data (eg. seating, lateness, attention, movements, glances, posture); noticing what is omitted or perhaps pointing out that when someone speaks he not only speaks for him but also for others (or, when they say "we", they really mean "I"); incongruences; tensions within the group such as a struggle for dominance or the fear of leaving the group; scapegoating, in which the group is focusing its projections on an individual rather than asking "what is happening for me?" and looking at what is happening to the group as a group; identifying repetitive patterns; noticing what is keeping the individual or group from working on the primary task; and tuning into her own feelings and views and expressing them where appropriate. However the aim is to help the group to assume a process orientation itself. The leader may at times make comments on the mass group process, such as the avoiding of anxiety-laden or painful issues ("group flight"), or intellectualisation, or restrictive patterns such as "taking turns".

The leader is thus the manager of a learning process, adding the learning task of awareness of group processes to the task of intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness, working as a therapist to an individual, a facilitator of interpersonal processes or consultant to the group-as-a-system. The skill is to hold a whole number of individual agendas at once and to use his range of facilitative interventions at all levels.

As a social microcosm, and when skilfully led, the group provides enormous potential for learning in interactional process. Given that each person's identity and sense of self is a product of interaction with others, the group has considerable therapeutic power.

Bibliography

Yalom : "The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy". (Basic Books)
Heron : "The Complete Facilitator's Handbook" (Kogan Page)