The Group Therapy Experience
From Theory to Practice
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Group Analysis

Group process is a vehicle for people to identify and deal with their own emotional blocks and limitations. The successful group member finishes not simply with a superior capacity to relate to others, but also with more inner comfort and with a far better ability to realize his or her own potential.

They are better able to love and to work.

When a person speaks to many others and not just one other individual, his own words echo in his or her mind more loudly.

(The truth needs a speaker & a listener.)

That many people vie for attention tends to elicit early childhood feelings of helplessness and competition, feelings that have influenced a person's life profoundly over the years, and can be resolved within the group.

The group serves as a microcosm of reality and is the ideal place to solve real problems.

Fundamental to all group therapeutic treatment is a single truth – people create their own impasses, and in virtually the same ways.

The group arena evokes these impasses, and helps people to recognize and overcome them.

We rest everything on the premise that whatever their problems are in the outside world, they will be manifested in the group and can be resolved right in front of us.
The result is a great new **immediacy**. The group becomes emotionally alive for all the members simultaneously, no matter who is actually speaking.

**How to Do It Wrong**

*Perhaps half the mistakes that group facilitators make stem from a single misconception – that what works with an individual patient will work with a group.*

They mistakenly conceive of the group not as a unit with an identity and a life of its own, but as a collection of individuals who happen to be in the same room.

*The aim of group process is to utilize all the members as players.*

The facilitator must always deem himself responsible to those members not talking as well as to those who are.

A successful group moves forward as a whole. When the facilitator includes all of the members all of the time, the group members themselves assist with maintaining the cohesiveness in the group.

It matters less who is speaking than who is feeling the importance of what is being said. This is another critical feature of group process.

**BRIDGING:**

- Evokes meaningful talk between group members, *to develop emotional connections* where they did not exist before.

- Unites an array of people who, despite similarities, do not ordinarily identify with one another. *It is a mode of getting people to expose their inner lives to one another.*

- Consists of bringing out differences as much as similarities.

*Bridging* is often called for in the *early stages* of group formation; when there are lulls in the group energy; and to get group members in direct touch with what they are thinking and doing in the moment.
An **OPEN ENDED QUESTION** is one that can be answered in many ways. The most common form is asking one group member what he or she imagines that another group member is feeling. This method establishes a bridge to another by a demonstration of awareness of the other person. It activates the desire to be understood.

**DIRECTED QUESTIONING** is a powerful form of bridging that is *asking a question in the form of an interpretation*, as if something we are referring to is a foregone conclusion.

However, we must be *cautious* about superimposing our conception over the regard for the group member’s own awareness of experience. Each person must ultimately be the judge of their own inner states.

**QUESTIONING A MEMBER ABOUT AN INTERACTION TAKING PLACE BETWEEN TWO OTHERS.** This method, more than any other, taps the potentiality of the group by unlocking inhibitions to speak out in each of the group members, especially the more timid members.

### How Group Helps

Good group process helps people appreciate the role that they themselves are playing in both shaping and obscuring their destiny:

- *Groups elicit self-destructive behavior.*
- *Groups enable the members to see how others respond to them.*
- *Groups afford people diverse views of their behavior.*
- *Groups process affords the opportunity for on-the-spot self definition.*
- *Groups afford the chance to practice new behaviors.*
- *Groups elicit self-destructive behavior.*

Many people seek for their individual process facilitator someone they feel comfortable with. Thus they seek the kind of person least likely to elicit their lower self aspects. Group process offers no such haven.

Every group is sure to have someone who elicits our worst selves. We are likely to encounter a nemesis, have our emotional reactions evoked, and quickly.

Sometimes it is not a person but the group as a whole that elicits our transference. Being interrupted and feeling misunderstood are common triggers in groups.

*Groups enable the members to see how others respond to them.*
Individual process facilitator’s emphasis is often on providing acceptance and a secure relationship. Group members do not need to adhere to this, and are free to speak without this discretion.

Group allows for the development of “psychic robustness”, and can help dissolve fears of disapproval. These immediate responses, however accurate or inaccurate, help to propel the group forward. (being engaging vs. being right)

*Groups afford people diverse views of their behavior.*

The most apparent benefit of group process is that someone has not one person observing him, but many. It is easier to discount what one individual says about us, but much harder to discount the collective observation or the consensual opinion of the group.

In polite society, those who react adversely to us typically walk away, seldom telling us how we alienated them. In groups, we can even sort through the ERs people have towards us in order to unearth deeper learnings about ourselves that are out of our awareness.

*Groups process affords the opportunity for on-the-spot self definition.*

Group offers members valuable *in-the-moment emotional awareness* of him or herself. The power of group to do this *in vivo* work is transformative.

The moments when lurking feelings are at maximum energy and most susceptible to coming into awareness and being named, *come when a person is busily engaged in interchanges*, and are gone by the time the exchange has ended.

*Groups afford the chance to practice new behaviors.*

*Group members have a wide range of responses to a person trying out new behavior, and this is essential for learning.*

Each person must have the opportunity to joust with their “personal demons”, and practice this over and over again until the new behavior becomes effortless. This is especially valuable for other members who identify with this type of new behavior.

In group process, a person who succeeds for himself is also succeeding on behalf of the entire group.
An honorable human relationship – that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word “love” – is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other.

It is important to do so because it breaks down human self-delusion and isolation.

It is important to do this because in so doing we do justice to our own complexity.

It is important to do this because we can count on so few people to go that hard way with us.

- Adrien Rich

What the Therapist Feels

Our humanity is our instrument, and our feelings are our humanity.

We can come to trust whatever we feel, and still be in command of what we choose to do. Our own feelings are an ultimate source of our power as therapists.

We must explore the range and types of feelings we have, and how we process them, so we can use them for a wide variety of purposes.

Transference – is the sum total of the client’s perceptions, reactions, ideas, and feelings from the past that he brings into the present.

No specific act is needed from the therapist or the group to evoke a transference; the mere existence of the therapist or the group is enough. Transferences, where they occur, appear independently of what the other does.

The therapist can also have transference with the client; it occurs independently of what the client does. (E.g. – the client looks like the therapist’s uncle)

Countertransference – is the therapist’s reactions to the client’s behaviors, that are colored by the therapist’s own past. It is the therapist’s unconscious reaction to the client’s unconscious feelings/behaviors.

Countertransference is a reaction to something that has happened; transference is a “pre-conceived super-imposition” that occurs without any stimulation from the client.

The Detection of Feelings Through Other Cues
Those feelings that may prove most instrumental to our process work are not so evident. They lurk in rumblings, intimations, impulses, nagging thoughts, etc. The most prevalent cues are *fantasies*, which are often accompanied by *impulses*. *Slips of the tongue, amnesia in the moment, autonomic habits of body posture* are other cues.

Disappointment & Discordant Reactions

One of the most usual feelings to come over us when a process is going well is *disappointment*. This usually occurs when the emotional quality of an individual or group session has become ‘frozen’. It is a shared “blind spot” or a shared desire not to feel a certain way about ourselves, or towards the therapist or group member.

*Discordant reactions* in the therapist, feelings that seem quite the contrary to what is going on in the session, much more often than not are pathways to significant insight. They tend to indicate underlying character issues and patterns that go undetected, and thus uncorrected, over a lifetime.

Toxic traits survive in proportion to the difficulty in seeing them.

Orchestrating a Group

Fundamentally, in a group we are observing two phenomena above all others: *How members express new feelings toward one another.*

*How they evolve their emotional relationships* – how they relate to one another in some new way.

We investigate, primarily, the contexts where this is not happening – that is, where the group is stagnant in our eyes.

Applications of Bridging- Investigative Questions

Much of our success as investigators lies in our ability to recognize similarities among our group members, *especially those not immediately apparent*, but nonetheless strong.

We look to find the “Feeling-Double” of the other in the group, what Loius Ormont calls the “*Doppelganger*, or “ghost-double”.
1) Asking a question that points out a similarity between how two group members act.
(“That’s your pattern, too, isn’t it Laurie? Don’t you also…”)

2) Asking a question that calls forth a similarity between the group member’s underlying feelings, even though they might act quite differently.
(“Tom, what do you make of Steve’s silence concerning his troubles with his co-teacher?” – as we may be aware Tom has similar troubles)

3) Asking a question so a group member can find someone else’s “feeling-double”. (Jessica, do you know anyone else here like that?)

4) Asking a Reconstructive question that searches for a “feeling-double” in the form of a significant person from the group member’s past. Reconstructive questions not only bridge time, but pique curiosity so all members think more about their own past.
(“Does Andrea’s behavior remind you of anyone else’s behavior from the past?”)

Stepping In Hard

There are times when indirect, subtle and/or sophisticated methods fail, or are too slow.

Sometimes we must step in hard, and make a decisive statement for the whole group to hear, with enough force to make our point. We must stand up as the authorities we truly are.

Confrontation is reserved mainly for times when the group has congealed in such a way that they are not useful to one another, or when the group forms a strong, secret alliance that feels impenetrable.

Sometimes this is traceable to the subtle workings of a single individual whom the rest dread. This individual presents as either dominant, or excessively fragile.

When we bring up the unmentionable, we may find ourselves at odds with the entire group, and not just the single offender. This is because the secret motivation of the other members in not “casting the first stone” is their desire to avoid retaliation in the form of exposure of their own flaws, real or imagined.

Sometimes the group will coalesce against an individual for virtually everything he or she does. Then it becomes taboo to take the victim’s side, which is what we must do, and confront the group on it’s lynch-mob mentality.
The only valid reason for confronting a group about some recalcitrant attitude it holds is to free the group itself from the tyranny of that fixed attitude. We need to be in service of liberating group members to see themselves in a new perspective and to form new relationships.

Healthy detachment, always a prerequisite for our work, has its highest priority when we confront people directly.

With confrontation, the subject matter is so strong that it needs an especially light touch, and it needs to be devoid of any strong emotion on our part. The acquiescent therapist is often hiding from the group's wrath or disappointment. Mistaken for kindness or 'objectivity' can be the therapist's fear of becoming unpopular.

Confrontation, when needed, is fundamental to our process, and our popularity is far less important than our product.

Don’t Be a Fixer

“Don't fix what isn't broken.”

Therapists have the companion fault of “fixing what is broken”. This takes the form of attempting to make adjustments for group members that, in reality, they must make for themselves.

Only with experience do we tend to learn that we cannot cure anyone. We accomplish nothing lasting if we try to fix people’s patterns ourselves.

Sometimes, the hardest thing for us to do is wait; allow patterns to play themselves out, let awareness develop over time, etc.

Learn to oppose blunt attempts to change or stifle harmful patterns immediately or prematurely – this will only render superficial or temporary changes or tend to suppress the harmful pattern. (This is fleeing into health.)

Allow people to witness their patterns consciously, as opposed to changing them. They need to be internally motivated to examine this pattern happening; recognize that is depriving them of certain fruits of life; that it is exerting an undesired impact on others; recognize it happening in the moment, experience it happening, and ultimately uncover why it happens.
Groups will also tend to stifle or prematurely stop a group member’s harmful pattern; don’t go along with the group!

*We are not to become fixers of anything that happens in the group.* Any attempt of ours to induce a remedy bespeaks a disbelief in the healing power of that individual or group’s process.

If we allow the individual or group to remedy themselves, they will do more than just fix the problem – more than just return to some original state of function. They will lift themselves into a transcendent state, one that we ourselves might have never imagined.

### The Geography of Resistances

Resistances are mechanisms of repression and sameness, embedded in the character structure. They once served the person, but now stand in the way of emotional growth.

Freud – resistance is an integral part of the psyche, and we can actually see them sitting in the person in front of us.

Reich – resistance is any activity that is in the service of concealment.

Fried – group analyst – “resistances are the forces that curb attachment to the group, that interfere with sharing experiences, and that undermine solidification and consolidation”.

*Group resistances* – the collective resistance of the group – are tasks are being able to define them, make them readily identifiable in the room, and then working with them.

They are the ultimate danger to a group’s progress, and are more important to deal with than individual resistances, as they have more power to set the tone of the group, as well as limit it or undermine it.

This type of wholesale congealment is an effort to avoid a certain truth and the feelings that would accompany it.

All resistances are contagious, and seductive. They promise peace as a way of avoiding uncomfortable or unpleasant realities or truths.
The key is to recognize the presence of resistances in action, to describe their precise operation (to ourselves, if not to the others) and finally, to begin resolving them.

*This gives us the opportunity to resolve lifelong problems not amenable or accessible via any other approach.*

**Their Curious Desirability**

We want our group members to resist one another *in the group* – to create stumbling blocks for themselves in front of us in exactly the same way they do in their lives.

*Always we want to invite exchange among members,* rather than to do individual therapy with a member, especially with someone who resists the facilitator.

Blatant resistances are almost always conscious; we do not want to reward resistances by giving special attention to those who employ them consciously. The primary problem all group facilitators face is identifying the truly subtle resistances (“unflagging congeniality”; endless pseudo-analytic talking ‘about’ feelings”, etc.)

The subtle resistor has a stake in not having their resistance seen and identified, and has layers of concealing their resistances.

The challenging resistances are those that touch us emotionally but that we cannot identify, sometimes for a long time. We’ll feel dismayed, irritated, blank, incompetent, without knowing why.

All resistances in some measure protect us from fully facing a painful truth about ourselves. We use them because they are successful in this capacity.

If one knows fully what the truth is, and how one conceals it, a resistance itself becomes worthless.

Therefore, we want the resistance to play out in every variation and in every detail, within the group.

**Unveiling Resistances**

*Surface individual resistances among group members:*
By asking someone who had felt negatively affected by someone's resistance to identify it and name it for that person.

By asking someone who also has that resistance (and is aware of it) to identify it and speak about their own resistances.

By asking the group as a whole what they think is missing in an individual's way of being present or responsive.

By re-creating the situation that evokes the group member's resistance so that it is easy to identify by the others in the group.

_Surfacing shared group resistances:_

By asking the whole group what it thinks is missing from the group itself.

The facilitator might speak to or furnish the missing element themselves in order to call attention to the resistance that is happening in the group.

Certain techniques, which we would not use for dealing with an individual’s resistance, are superbly applicable when dealing with the whole group's resistance - such as engaging in the resistant behavior yourself!