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Title -

The Group as Agent of Change

As we have seen, it was observed early on that a group of concerned persons had a greater impact than the individual practitioner. In addition, the group came to be recognized as a second family, offering opportunities for deeper insights into old patterns and possibilities for new growth (Spotnitz, 1961).

Little by little, practitioners came to see other benefits. One was the unexpected value of having to respond to a private practitioner in another setting. A patient might seem reasonable in the individual session, but in the group, extravagant reactions of others would precipitate his own overblown responses, the very reaction that was limiting him in his life. Having been thus provoked, the person would display idiosyncratic patterns which members could then help him to resolve. Finally, in the group the patient would play out distortions and misconceptions that he might have concealed from his private therapist. Or even if he revealed them in his private hour, they were often stale, "after the fact," and much harder to work with than when they were fresh. The individual therapist spent much time seeking information

regarding problems the patient reported in his world outside, whereas the group therapist could inquire about processes while they were still "hot." In short, the group, more often than not, provided a chance to touch another human being with an intimacy and "hereness" that proved indispensable to treatment (Kadis et al., 1963).

As we therapists arrived at these discoveries about the benefits of group treatment, we also started to view our treatment methods in new ways. Most important, instead of thinking of the group as a corrective better family, we started to think of the experience as a small-scale replication of a member's total life. It was no longer a mere forum for airing the problems of daily existence; it was life itself—amplified and magnified. This is why we wanted our patients to display the irrationality that harmed them in the world. We could make a meaningful difference if that patient played out his or her self-defeating tendencies in the group.

What struck us again and again—from early in the 20th century to the present was that *the group—and not the group therapist—is the agent of personal change*. Though it was in front of our eyes from the start, it took some 70 years to appreciate and begin to utilize therapeutically the awesome metamorphosing might of the group. We now accept the group, as a whole, as a force for growth which no therapist can equal (chapter 8).

Group therapists scattered over America and Europe are coming together to establish facilities to train leaders in the principles of group treatment. These are free-standing institutions, which were unheard of in the early 1980s when group therapy was treated as a quaint adjunct to individual treatment, relegated to the status of elective, in the established curriculum. The new move was possible only with the realization that the group-as-a-whole is a curative discipline in its own right, requiring a unique mindset and a specific technical repertoire.

With this realization, the Center for the Advancement of Group Studies in New York City shaped itself with one goal in mind—to develop specialists who can turn a collection of disparate strangers into a growth-enhancing interactive environment and maintain the needed conditions for it to function therapeutically. From the day a candidate fills out an application to the day of graduation, we seek to totally immerse him or her in a total group climate. We make it a practice to assign a student a group to conduct as soon as we ascertain that the

fundamental principles have been grasped. We take the student through the steps of converting a mere array of people into a therapeutic community. We guide the student-leader through the intricacies of calls for the latent gift in each member to heed and heal the other.

We provide experiential classes where theory is welded to technique. We encourage airing of problems with other classmates in the same boat. Each week each student discusses his or her treatment group in a supervision group where feelings that seem to handicap are converted into technical interventions to resolve his or her patients' blocks. No matter what we recommend technically, we make sure that individual styles are nourished. Concomitantly, we involve students in a personal group experience where they find models of effective leadership. Students serve on every committee in the institute and are acquainted with our multiple problems. Everything is aimed at one objective—subjectively and objectively—to make the group the ultimate agent of change.

We now know it takes unwavering personal awareness to acquire the multiple skills that make a group therapist (by which we mean a leader who gets the group to do the work). The rewards are enormous, as anyone who has been in a well-running group will attest. As we help the group to function as a therapeutic agent, we may appear to do less, rather than more. In fact, our role now involves making subtle choices at every turn, to strengthen the group members' involvement and interaction. Our group members feel the excitement in the room and reap the results in their lives.

What are some principles of empowering the group-as-a-whole to be the agent of change? First, by choice, we opt to create immediacy in relationships (chapter 8). We want the members to experience themselves and others exactly as they are in the moment—this is the key to our forming a cohesive group. Therefore, we are less concerned with having a member report on his outside life than having the member put into words his or her reactions to other people sitting in our circle. By people's reactions in the group room, the member discovers the true essence of the reactions of those in his real world, which are all too often unstated. Without immediacy, our members could never truly understand one another.

For instance, suppose a man describes the way women treat him, portraying himself as a victim of their wiles and abuses. Relying

wholly on his reports, we might find ourselves powerless as a group. We might offer advice, direction, insight, but we would be far from the mark, because we do not truly know this man. We lack a gut-level experience of the events and the scenarios he describes.

The alternative which the group makes possible is an immediate exchange. We want this man to tell us how he feels about *the women in the room with him*. We expect, when he does, he will display a criticality about all of them. If so, we are experiencing first-hand how he treats women in his outside life, his wife perhaps, and the kind of behavior in which he engages. To this end, we might ask him what woman in the group appears to be like those he describes. This gives him an opportunity to let loose.

Then, suppose that right after a woman in the room defends herself against his criticism, he rebukes her as inflexible. He compounds the affront by labeling her a "hopeless case." This offends nearly all the group members. They call him overcritical and now we learn that his wife also brands him as overcritical and tough to take.

We have more than a report this time. We are witnessing a vivid example of his self-destructive proclivity. Life is unfolding in front of us, and not only his life but those of the other members who respond in their own different ways to his characteristic behavior pattern. Some criticize him, some hide from his wrath, some deny it, some seek to soothe him, and so forth. Fellow members respond to him with their own ingrained tendencies, which in turn can be scrutinized in the group.

Even if the man had never told us about his stormy marriage, indeed had portrayed his marriage as ideal, we would have learned a great deal about him from his behavior in group. We might have our doubts about his marriage. Perhaps there were heated moments that he withheld from us, or perhaps his wife was so frightened of him and so conformist that his marriage crept along without much real life to it.

In other cases, the member has told us nothing at all about his life. No matter; he can't help enacting his difficulties in the group setting. Every reaction, including no reaction, is grist for the group mill. When through the members' interactions he gains new insights, he may let drop that he has had the same problems at home. Or at the very least, even if he wants to preserve his image with us, he applies his group learning to the rest of his life. In this case, he profits without

giving us credit. We don't need the credit. The point is that by experiencing his difficulties with us, by our living in the charged reality of the moments with him, we have been able to help him. Here the "we" refers to the group-as-a-whole and not to the therapist. The therapist may have set the stage but the group has provided the *personae*. has experienced the problem, and has responded to it differentially.

In every case, in viewing the group as the agent of change, it is not only the person talking who profits from an interaction. Those who experience the interaction—and this means all the other group members—profit too. In the simplest case, suppose that the woman whom this man criticized unfairly felt paralyzed and just sat there looking glum. In a group cultivated as the curative agent, as least some of the members will observe and comment on her apathy. They will see that she is acting like one traumatized. Of course, she is very much alive and making a choice; even at this moment. Without being aware of it, part of her has chosen to sit sullenly, and that choice has a history and a reason. Perhaps in childhood she had no alternative. She may have been punished for making even the slightest objection to her parents' decisions, and now she sits as if she still has no real options.

How likely were we to see this if the woman had merely come in and talked politely to a polite investigator? Her tendency to blank out/fall quiet for her own reasons, might have come out, but not nearly so fast. We would have had to infer that tendency to cover resentment with impassivity from a tepid interaction or from a mild tendency of hers not to confront the therapist or not to face some truth.

In a well-functioning group, the truth comes exploding to the surface. Events impel it outward, and our task as therapists is to keep the group both accepting and responsive so that the whole spectrum of truths can pass before it. Observe that in the example given, if it were not for the man's expression of contempt for this woman, we would not have seen or experienced this tendency of hers. We would not have seen her play dead when assaulted, a tactic that she has already made second nature.

And so, over time, more people display their inner truths, reveal them to others in the room, watch other members deal with painful problems, and deal with triumph and success, not just with defeat and struggle. Once we free people to interact with one another, what we reap is the simultaneous participation in the group by all the members.

The room is alive with discovery and new insights, with new loves and hates and fears. The process is ongoing and constantly creative. In short, if the man who vehemently criticizes women had played it safe and merely lamented problems in his outside life, we would not have experienced him in action. Nor would we have seen or felt his crestfallen response, nor would any group member who might have observed that woman's suffering and posture and brought it to her attention. Take this third person who, let us say, showed compassion while noting the woman's despondency. Perhaps others appreciate the scope of this person's sympathy, and slowly, over time, the group highlights his or her special talent. It may well be that this observer never recognized it as a special skill even after employing it for many years. Who was there to comment on it? Once again, in discovering a latent therapeutic personality among us, the group did the work. It afforded this person the chance to muster skills and display them, and it honored the person, perhaps in a way that his or her own family had never done. The group finds heroes and celebrates them.

It can hardly be said too often that a successful group is one that does all these things and more. A successful group therapist is not a person who does great things directly for individuals in the group circle. Our goal as therapists is to promote and preserve the group's ability to do what we ourselves could never hope to achieve entirely on our own.

But how, outside of cultivating immediacy, do we get a group to work as a whole and as an agent of change? Our plan, in broad terms, is to set the criteria for this to occur; after which we deal with resistances on the part of the members to letting this happen. For it to happen, for the group to operate as a therapeutic instrument of benefit to all the members, we tell the members what is expected of them. They are to start the sessions on time with everyone present, to report their thoughts and feelings about one another, and, if they do on occasion talk about their outside lives, to see some connection in the group. We ask the members to refrain from all physical actions toward one another in the room.

It may seem naive to begin with the expectation that the group will comply unflinchingly. However, in reality, we expect the members to deviate, to flout the premises that would ensure cooperation. We make the group aware of such deviations, not necessarily the member.

With our present perception of the group itself—and not the analyst—as the therapeutic agent, we expect other group members to identify deviations. Surely others in the room—some if not all—must have felt a speaker's dryness and lack of affect. It had meaning to them, doubtless reminding some of similar behavior by a parent who never expressed emotion toward her or him, or who withheld affection. Likewise, if a member is repeatedly late, surely others in the room, and not just the therapist, feels slighted, or even resentful, because that same person took so much of our time when he needed our input last week.

Now we invite group members to interpose themselves, describing any deviation and, above all, telling us how they feel in reaction to the person's breaking our informal rule. The withholder of emotion is starving them and they have reactions. The latecomer is disappointing them and they feel it. As the other group members respond, they see that they can indeed speak up, that others listen to them; they see that they have the power to influence others. Above all, the individual who departed from the contract is not merely flouting a master in the room; he or she is exerting an impact on others and will soon find out what it is.

The previous scenarios afford the simplest illustrations of how a group does the work. Not just individuals but little knots of people may resist the contract, and another knot of people will welcome their actions. Years ago, I introduced the notion of subsets (a word taken from mathematics) to denote a smaller collection of people than a subgroup (two or three as against four or six). The subset within the group acts or feels in a similar vein. They are a set within the whole, and they exert a collective force as a set. For instance, a subset within the group might accept and even welcome a member's speaking without emotion. They find their own feelings intolerable—feelings of envy, rage, anxiety or jealousy, and they join in the avoidance of these emotions.

The group therapist must learn to identify subsets for himself or herself before addressing the behavior. Always, the subset is defying the expectations we have set down. They are sundering the group. Since we need the group to operate as a whole, we must arrange for other members to confront this defection. Once again the group does

the work—this time not with individual deviants but with subsets of members.

The failure of a group member to recognize a resistance, or his or her failure to confront that deviation, is itself a deviation. Such failures may be motivated by fear of confrontation or by emotional blindness or in some cases by unbridled aggression. No matter. They are as costly to the group's performance as are an individual's resistance. In short, the group members are all involved in the actions and the reactions of everyone present. They all have the chance to profit at all times. There is no making rounds in a well-run group. Every member speaks for a multiplicity of others.

When a group runs organically in the way described, though resistances—individual resistances and subset resistances—are a daily occurrence, we multiply the opportunities for the group members to profit by an understanding of these resistances. There is a curious paradox in our explicit statement of an expectation we know will be violated. The expectation does not merely elicit resistances, it defines them; it enables the group to spot them and to employ them for the good of all.

How do we turn a group into such a band of players—enlightened, motivated, active—into people who think about the experience repeatedly when they are not in the group room? One purpose of the Group Center is to impart the necessary techniques, and another is to encourage the exchange of ideas about group therapy which in turn will enlarge our lexicon of understanding. Both the students and instructors are expected to contribute in peer groups, during supervision, at lectures, and during all phases of the training process.

Finally, true understanding in our field, the stuff that we impart and exchange, is more than an understanding of ideas and techniques. It is the understanding of how we feel as group therapists and of what our feelings mean in the room—what our own feelings say about us and what they say about the group. With what we see, and with what we learn about ourselves as we go along, we develop our skills at turning a group into a therapeutic instrument and at making sure it functions consistently that way.

A well-conducted group provides its members with a marvelously rich experience. Members recall, decades later, comments that others made to them, ways that they revealed themselves and ways that they

changed. It is unforgettable for many people, if not for all. And the therapist is no less a beneficiary of the wealth of this experience.

REFERENCES

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