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Seeing Groups

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President-Elect's Column

Seeing Groups

Don Forsyth PhD



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Sometimes I think that only a select few of us—members of Division 49, for example—really understand groups and group approaches to treatment. Last week in class a student, and a particularly bright one at that, looked puzzled when I spoke about group psychotherapy: Is that a method used to treat crazy groups, he asked? Later that same week I was meeting with a professor in the school of business and I mentioned group psychotherapy. He was equally bewildered. Is that a team-building intervention for poorly functioning groups, he suggested? Then, while reading the brand-new *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (2007) I ran across this definition of psychotherapy (p. 757): “any psychological service provided by a trained professional” used to treat “an individual, family, or group (see Group Psychotherapy).” I was pleased to see that groups were listed, but the definition was not quite right. Group therapists are mindful of the interpersonal processes that operate within the group, but rarely are they focused on treating the group per se; they seek to promote the adjustment of the individuals but not the group itself.

These misunderstandings reminded me: Didn't I say something about “improving the public understanding of group psychology” in my bid for the presidency of Division 49? So, I dug out my statement from when I ran for the office, to see what I said I would do if I was actually elected. Since the possibility seemed remote to me at the time, I feared that I had promised, like most politicians, things I could not deliver; an open bar at the Presidential address at the APA convention, a listserv-based email system that delivers timely information about groups and group psychotherapy without distracting spam-like side-effects, and a happy balance between hard-science articles about groups and clinically useful papers in the division journal were all possibilities. I was relieved to find that I had shown an uncharacteristic semblance of self-restraint, for the campaign promises of last year do, in fact, provide a foundation for the presidential initiatives of next year. As president of Division 49, I pledged to promote the shared goals of all members, including (a) disseminating of information about groups and their uses; (b) building networks of alliances among group researchers and practitioners; and (c) enhancing the resources at members' disposal in their studies of and work with groups.

As goals go, these seem to be a reasonable place to start. First, I hope we can redouble our efforts to reeducate the public about groups and group psychotherapy. I find that my colleagues and students do not *see* groups. They focus, instead, on specific individuals, and only if pressed do they recognize the influence of multiple and overlapping social groups. If asked to explain the actions of the individuals they know and work with they readily invoke such concepts as personality, needs, or learned responses, but more

rarely do they recognize that group-level processes are actively shaping responses. When group-level concepts are mentioned, such as norms, leadership, social identity, or internalization, these concepts are viewed as vague mysticism in comparison to favored individualistic explanations. This group myopia is complicated by popular introductory psychology textbooks that sequester group approaches near the end of the therapy chapter, sandwiched between sections with such titles as “alternative approaches,” “sociocultural perspectives,” “family therapy,” or “couples counseling.” Nearly all therapists can lament the way practitioners are depicted in film and television, but group sessions are mercilessly lampooned (remember Bob Newhart's painful sessions with his odd assortment of clients?). And Wikipedia—which is quickly becoming the first place people look for information about anything—offers a tidy 406 word explanation of group psychotherapy that is largely inaccurate. We need to set the record straight about the essentials and uses of groups.

Second, the pledge to build networks is consistent both with the initiatives of APA president Sharon Brehm, as well as the work of current Division 49 President Lynn Rapin. Lynn has taken the steps to organize a summit with representatives from organizations and associations that focus on group-level interventions. I hope to carry on this important work, and possibly increase the number of interconnected organizations, to include groups that focus on research on groups and international organizations. Oddly, those who are interested in groups tend to be less likely to want to actually organize them effectively, and make sure they are interconnected so that their impact and stability is maximized.

Third, and perhaps most uncertain as initiatives go, is the pledge to enhance the resources we provide to our members. This initiative builds, again, on the work of past presidents of the Division, including our most immediate presidents, George Gazda and Lynn Rapin. George and Lynn worked diligently to improve the organization's infrastructure, and the results show in improved efficiency and consistency in procedures. The wisdom of their leadership choices became all too apparent to me when I attended, in January of this year, the Division Leadership Conference organized by APA. This meeting, in addition to reminding me that APA is a huge bureaucracy, reiterated the importance of fiscal management and membership recruitment. As past presidents of 49 have noted, membership is the key to the health of the organization, and we must continue to search for creative, and effective, ways to increase our ranks. Our division is one of the grayer groups, and in the coming year we must find ways to make membership in the division so valuable to members that no one who studies groups or who conducts group psychotherapy would consider not joining the association.

These ideas are, however, just a foundation for my year of leadership, and they will undoubtedly be revised with input from members. If you have any suggestions related to these initiatives, or ideas for other ways that the Division can be of service to you, please get in touch with me at dforsyth@richmond.edu. I look forward to working with the division and its members in 2008, as we take steps to move the study of groups and the use of groups to meet therapeutic goals from the shadows into the limelight.