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The Power of Groups

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A Newsletter of Division 49 of the American Psychological Association

Election and Memorial Issue

President's Column

Don Forsyth, PhD

The Power of Groups

I'm not really sure how we managed it so badly. The midwinter meeting of Division 49 was over, and I was getting my car from the hotel's parking service. When the attendant brought my car up from the garage, he somehow locked the car door when he popped out to help me with my luggage. We just stood there, looking at each other, next to my sensible Subaru, motor running, doors locked up tight, double-parked on a downtown DC street.

A group came to our rescue, fortunately. The cabbie waiting for a fare got out of his limo and ambled over to confer with the hotel attendant. Before long, we were joined by a second employee from the hotel, and the four of us commenced to problem solving. But after a 10-minute discussion of locksmiths, coat hangers, and some recent ball game scores, we had made little progress until a second cab driver arrived. The group acted as if they knew him and afforded him a degree of status as they filled him in on the situation. Then, without saying much at all, he produced a tool (a "Slim Jim") that unlocks car doors when it finds its way into the hands of skilled user. A few moments later the door was open, and the group was all smiles as they wished me on my way.

Who can deny the power of groups? Although poets, social philosophers, and the other members of the intelligentsia overlook no occasion to bemoan the growing alienation of individuals from the small, cohesive interpersonal units that once linked them securely to society-at-large—families, neighborhoods, work teams, communities, and even the spontaneously formed groups like my street-corner altruists—those who study groups believe in the complexity and integrity of individuals' interpersonal lives. People are in many respects individuals who seek their personal, private objectives, yet they are also members of larger social units

that seek shared, collective outcomes. Our groups sustain us, and remind us not to ignore our collectivism.

Yet, a group-level explanation of people's thoughts, emotions, and actions is often at odds with a more individualistic orientation. Americans sometimes talk a good group game, but Americans are me-focused. They think that the individual is what counts. This focus is all well and good, but not if group level processes are right there next to the individual level ones, and they are ignored. One of the great ideas of the last century was Sigmund Freud's argument that much of our behavior is caused by internal turmoil and tensions that we ourselves don't recognize, but group psychology offers a similarly powerful idea: that much of our behavior is caused by group-level processes that more often than not go unrecognized. People don't even see groups—they see only individuals. When they think about what has caused their behavior, they drift immediately towards the idea that some mental event pushed them around, when almost invariably it was a group that exerted its influence.



Don Forsyth PhD

The group perspective, then, needs our help, and that is precisely the mission of our division, *Group Psychology and Group Psychotherapy*. We champion the value of groups and all their uses: in making decisions and solving problems, as sources of solace in a far too impersonal world, as networks that link together individuals laboring on shared tasks, as the means to provide therapeutic experiences for members suffering from psychological dysfunction, and so on. And, true to our basic perspective, we do not rely on the work of single individuals to accomplish our goals. Instead,

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President's Column

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the division is a nexus of any number of groups whose members contribute their time, energy, and talents to the division. This issue of the *Group Psychologist* highlights their work, for the “reports” that dot these pages only begin to hint at the work that is being done by so many committees and their members as we strive to reach our goals: the committee on fellows, membership, nominations/elections, the program committee, awards, education and training, finance, publications, and the diversity committee do the lion’s share of the division’s work, and they are complemented by a number of other work groups and task forces, including the Public Information/Education Committee, the Bylaws Revision Committee, Committee on School-Based Mental Health Group Interventions, and the Student and Early Career Psychologists Committee. A number of members also serve on other organizations and entity’s committees, including APA, AGPA, ASGW, SPSP, and InGroup. We form groups to get our work done—to do otherwise would be hypocritical.

The downside to such a reliance on committees is well-known to all of us, but we are *the* groups division: If any organization can harness the power of groups effectively, than we can. So I would encourage members to get more involved with the division—in any way that is feasible given your time constraints. If you aren’t already enmeshed in the divisional intrigues, consider what committee or task force best matches your current interests and strengths—and seek out membership in that group. And make plans to include a trip to Boston in your summer travel plans. Although August in New England might not be your first choice for vacations, with so many Division 49 people attending the huge APA convention will be transformed into a “convention in a convention” where you can meet with your colleagues who share the same mission: “to promote the development and advancement of the field of group psychology and the modality of group psychotherapy through research, teaching and education, and clinical practice.” What could be better? To comment, please visit <http://apadiv49.blogspot.com/>.