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"UN-STICKING" THE STUCK GROUP SYSTEM: PROCESS ILLUMINATION AND THE REFLECTING TEAM

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This paper presents a reflecting team working model that helps un-stick a stuck group system through increased process illumination. Grounded in postmodernism and social constructionism, this model emphasizes the group as a linguistic system. In this group setting, language works to co-construct meaning and generate new narratives for client experiences.

A protocol is provided for using the reflecting team in the storming stage of the group. Principles for language use, landmarks for reflection, and practical procedures for applying the reflecting team are detailed. Appropriately used, the reflecting team method can facilitate member recognition of complex group process and move the group away from stagnancy towards productive working.

Have you ever felt stymied about how to propel a sluggish group dynamic forward when other kinds of therapeutic interventions have failed? Literature depicts that a counseling/therapy group goes through four stages in its life span (Corey & Corey, 1997; Gladding, 1995): the first is the initial/forming stage characterized by setting goals, boundaries, and much dependency on the leader; the second is the storming/transition stage, during which the group encounters greater conflicts; the third is the working stage with increased productivity characterized by deeper self-disclosure, honest feedback, caring confrontation, sense of humor, and group cohesion; and the fourth is the termination stage, during which members are prepared to move into their lives with a newly developed sense of competency. While moving through these four stages, a group can easily get stuck in the storming/transition stage. As Yalom (1995) notes, in the initial stage, members' yearning for acceptance in the group is so strong that they often martyr their own feelings in the cause of group cohesiveness. However, these martyred feelings can transform themselves into hostility towards

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the therapist; members' preoccupation for approval shifts into preoccupation for control. Yalom continues that this hostility is also fed by members' resistance to self-disclosure and unrealistic expectations, and can be enacted through displacing aggression, scapegoating, silence, story-telling, and pursuing secondary gratification. Corey and Corey (1997) concur that these feelings of discomfort will build as the group spins itself deeper into stalemate. Because this turbulence arises prior to the maturity of the group's working stage, the therapist may find themselves operating in a highly charged environment. The consequences of a stuck system can be unproductive and frustrating for both members and therapists.

If group dynamics are left unprocessed, the system becomes bogged down or stuck; the therapists cannot help members gain the self-awareness necessary for self-knowledge and growth. While activating the group into the here-and-now can usually feed power into the group (Donigian & Malnati, 1997; Yalom, 1995), it alone can not propel this sluggish group forward. Process illumination must follow here-and-now activation in order for groups to move ahead (Yalom, 1995). Illuminating complex dynamics between members, leader, and the group therefore is the group therapist's most critical task (Yalom, 1995). Despite its importance, the twists and turns of group dynamics often remain unrecognized by members and inexperienced therapists alike (Luft, 1970). Manifold causes exist: the subtle, implicit, recursive, and complex nature of group interaction renders it elusive to note; intense and immediate experiences prohibit time for reflection; events within the group whirl from one sequence to the next, masking the meaning of interaction; and metacommunication featuring complex group interactions may be difficult to absorb (Luft, 1970). These difficulties in process recognition are compounded by various societal norms (Yalom, 1995) prohibiting overt commentary on interpersonal process.

A blocked system needs a force to propel it forward. Literature abounds regarding how the reflecting team can demonstrate intriguing power in helping systems change in couple and family therapy (Andersen, 1987; White, 1995). Despite its power, the reflecting team model has not been applied to group work. Virtually no study exists on how the reflecting teams can contribute to group process. This article aims to fill this void by providing a protocol of the reflecting team that may supply fuel to push the group dynamics forward.

GROUP AS A LIVING SYSTEM

What philosophical bases lead us to believe the reflecting team can un-stick a stuck group system? We ground our rationale in the new epistemology of social constructionism (Gergen, 1985, 1994) and postmodernism (Becvar, Canfield, & Becvar, 1997; Hoffman, 1990; Lax, 1992, 1995; O'Hara & Anderson, 1991).

These philosophies emerge in an effort to modify the modernist way of viewing human behavior and change.

The modernist tradition emphasizes universal truths, fixed reality, objectifiable experiences, linear causality, and a decontextualized human mind. This perspective often leads to the individual as the focal point of change (Becvar & Becvar, 1993; Rosen, 1996). By contrast, postmodernism espouses multiple realities, subjective experiences, recursive causality, and contextualized meaning-making. In this framework, the arena for change lies in the interaction between individuals and the world in which they live (Freedman & Combs, 1996; McKenzie & Monk, 1997). Social constructionism, falling under the umbrella of postmodern philosophy, shares a focus viewing therapy as a reflexive and collaborative venture (Becvar et al., 1997). These philosophies guide us to see the group as a cybernetic and a linguistic system.

Group as a Cybernetic System

The group is a system in its own right. Both first and second order cybernetic theories define the group as a self-regulating social system featured by member interaction, feedback patterns, circular loops, emphasis on present patterns of interaction, and repeating patterns of interaction (Becvar et al., 1997; Luft, 1970). However, because first order cybernetic theorists see the therapist as separate from the group system, their focus is on the formation of detached assessment and strategized solutions. These fixed strategies may constrain clients and therapists from seeing potential options lying outside the route of that fixed specific goal.

Conversely, second cybernetics view the therapist as part of the system and place the greatest source of influence within each member. As an interwoven system, group reality is an interactional, rather than an intrapsychic phenomenon (Monk, Drewery, & Winslade, 1997). Problems exist within the interaction, not within the individual. Therefore, we take the position that group therapists and group members co-construct what happens in the change process, each mutually influencing the other (Andersen, 1991).

Group as a Linguistic System

Social constructionism echoes the vision of the group as a social creation in constant flux over time. As a social creation, language is a defining framework for member experience; language can be the problem, and at the same time, the solution (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). If the group keeps talking about the problem, they may maintain the problem. A change in language, however, can lead to a change in member experiences (de Shazer, 1991; Berg & De Jong, 1996). Therefore, we conceive of the group as a linguistic system with language playing a critical role in how members generate meaning from group experi-

ences (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Coale, 1992; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988; Lax, 1992).

Language resonating the philosophy of multiple reality can facilitate the opening of client options (Gergen & Kaye, 1992; Hoffman, 1990; O'Hara & Anderson, 1991). Therefore, in group practice it is helpful for language to emphasize an attitude of tentativeness vs. certainty, curiosity vs. expert knowledge, and alternative description vs. singular and linear interpretation. This socially constructed view of group reality attempts to open space for more egalitarian relationships in therapy. Picturing the group through the lens of social constructionism and postmodernism, this study proposes a reflecting team model to un-stick the stuck group system in the storming stage via process illumination. We believe that when group process is illuminated through the reflecting team, group members are more likely to extract meanings and insights from the here-and-now interaction and the group will move forward.

PROTOCOL OF THE MODEL

Principles of Reflecting Team Language

When a group is "stuck," especially in the storming stage, it craves fresh and liberating ideas in order to advance. The reflecting team can bring new perspectives to illuminate complex group process, thus thrusting forward a once stagnant group system. But how? The key lies in the linguistic system. The meaning-creating ability of language shapes members' future thoughts and interactions (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). Since language is a defining framework for member experience, the language used by the reflecting team plays a critical role in influencing members' experiences. If deficiency or problem-focused language is used, the reflecting team could bring more blockage to group members. Given the defining power of language in the group system, we offer the following principles for the reflecting team while languaging during the reflecting process.

Tentativeness vs. Certainty

Team members use "tentative" language as an agent to activate clients' sense of expertness (Andersen, 1991; Lax, 1992). If the team is not tentative, they run the risk of sounding like experts, leading members to take what the reflecting team says as "the truth" rather than as subjective observations. Therefore, it is important that the team use language such as "I wonder if . . .," "I'm curious about . . .," "Perhaps . . .," or "Maybe . . ." For example, rather than saying, "Janet looks bored tonight," the reflecting team would reflect with tentativeness,

I wonder how Janet is feeling while sitting in the session? I am curious about how she might seem to others?

"Both/And vs Either/Or"

During the session, "both/and" reflections take the place of "either/or" commentaries (Andersen, 1991). Many members have been socialized to follow either/or logic, leading to restricted vision. The reflecting team can expand this restricted vision by modeling both/and conversation as illustrated below:

Reflecting team member A reflects: "I am struck by the way the group confronted Enario." Member B does not choose to say, "Yes, but I think the group is really trying to show concern towards Enario." Instead, she might say:

I did notice that the session was overwhelmed with confrontation towards Enario, and I also sensed deep caring from the group towards Enario.

Presenting a Smorgasbord of Ideas

The spirit of reflecting is not to "bridge differences" but to "open up more options" (Cantwell & Holmes, 1994, p. 24). Therefore, it may be helpful for reflecting team members to "bounce ideas around" in a smorgasbord fashion about group interactions (Lax, 1991). This may stimulate the member to experience group process as flowing, complex, vital, and multi-dimensional.

Team member A opts not to say, "I noticed that Janet looked insecurely down at the floor throughout the session." Rather, he might say:

I noticed that Janet has been looking down at the floor, and I am wondering what she might be feeling? Does she feel like being quiet today? Or is she meditative? Is she tired? Or perhaps sad?

The reflection above may trigger team member B to comment: "Oh, yes, I remember Janet mentioned earlier that she is worried about her meeting with her father."

Internalizing Humble Talk

Speaking humbly encourages the spirit of collaboration in therapy. Attempting not to project themselves as knowing better than the group members, the team's unassuming demeanor is more conducive to opening up rather than shutting down the group dynamic. One way to show humbleness is to keep the reflections concise and brief (Cantwell & Holmes, 1994). Statements need only be long enough to make a striking point. Everyday language is used in lieu of technical jargon.

For example, a reflecting team member would decide not to say: "I observed carefully and I understand exactly what happened between Enario and Janet." Instead, the team member might want to say,

This reflection is only speculation. Perhaps Janet felt hesitant when speaking to Enario because of his comments about her being a housewife.

Constructive vs. Pathologizing Language

Group is a social microcosm (Yalom, 1995) where clients' ineffective patterns of interaction and personal issues often swirl to manifest themselves in

their interactions. To facilitate change, clients' interpersonal difficulties must be recognized and deconstructed. Reflections are most helpful when they openly address these "difficult things." It is a natural reaction for members to feel defensive when their ineffective patterns are addressed in front of the group. That is why the team must not transport analytical or diagnostic language into their reflections. The team strives to use constructive language, carefully abstaining from words with negative connotations (Biever & Gardner, 1995). However, constructive language is not just positive thinking or affirmation. As Cantwell and Holmes (1995) warn us, "affirmations that are too positive can also leave the client an impression of not being heard, of the client's struggle not being appreciated, or the client's pain not being attended to" (p. 41).

How can one say difficult things in a language that leads to expansion of options? There are two ways. First, the team can provide perspectives that are unusual, but not too unusual. Andersen (1991) describes unusual reflections as

So much unusual that it represents a surprise. Not necessarily a sweet surprise. But so much a surprise that the persons are given a possibility to be moved to another position and from there leave out of and/or add something to the descriptions they had before. (p. 67)

The unusualness of the reflection liberates members from fixed thinking, expanding their vision for alternative narratives. For example, the reflecting team avoids a too ordinary comment: "I wonder what Kim could do to let go of her need to protect others at her own expense?" Instead, an unusual reflection is used:

I am curious about what the members could do to provoke Kim to stand up for herself, and how might Kim feel in response to this?

The second way one can say difficult things in a language leading to expansion of options is to use "problem externalization" (White, 1984, 1989) and "personification of the problem" (Griffith & Griffith, 1994). Problem externalization acts as an antidote to the pathologizing process of social labeling, seeing problems as problems rather than people as problems. The team achieves problem externalizing by giving members' problems a fitting name (i.e., the voice of self-contempt), placing the words "the" or "a" before the problem (i.e., the bulimia), and then mapping the influence of the problem. Personification of problems involves representing the problem with human abilities (i.e., the voice of self-doubt recruits Kim . . .). An example of problem externalization and personification follows:

I am amazed in seeing how *the voice of self-contempt* has enticed Kim into putting herself down when other group members give her positive feedback.

While we give a brief example here, we recommend the reading of White (1989, 1995) and Griffith and Griffith (1994) before employing these principles.

Unshutting the Unspeakable

A culprit blocking a fluid group system may hide in the darkness with the unspoken. One misconception about the reflecting team is that it avoids tough talk (Cantwell & Holmes, 1995). Actually, the reflecting team thrives on “unshutting the unspeakable.” The “unspeakable” is any topic that threatens the members’ or group vulnerabilities. When addressed in a way that generates new meanings, the palpable tension that bogs down the group system can be averted.

For example, in lieu of saying, “I appreciate how Michael offered solutions to Maria’s divorce dilemma,” the reflecting team might reflect:

It is interesting to notice that when Michael talks about Maria’s dilemma, he seems intellectual and impersonal. I wonder if this content-focused style helps Michael dodge the pain about his divorce? Or, perhaps it helps him bypass the feelings about the recent loss of his father?

Letting the Soundlessness Speak

After a striking comment, the reflecting team may allow a few seconds of silence to unfold, granting group members space to ruminate upon it.

For example, while making a reflection, one team member offers: “I wonder what it was like for Michael to sit in the group and listen to so much talk about death and loss in light of his father’s recent death?” (a few seconds of silence follows). The reflecting team pauses for 5 seconds in a respectful silence allows group members, especially Michael, to take in and feel the impact of the statement. This moment might have been lost if another reflecting team member immediately chimed in with a new thought.

What to Reflect?

The principles above seek to add power to change the group system by injecting a new discourse into the stagnant system. Yet, what the team chooses to reflect on, and not to reflect on, can have an influence on the essence of the dialogues that follow. If the team focuses on individual members’ problems, they may inadvertently hold onto attempted solutions that may limit options (Becvar, Canfield, & Becvar, 1997). Keeping this in mind, the reflecting team directs their listening and reflecting on the following landmarks:

Members’ Patterns and Impacts

When listening, the reflecting team pays attention to group dynamics, meta-communications, here-and-now interactions, and members’ narratives that are especially striking. The team then can reflect on the members’ interpersonal patterns of interaction and the impact of those patterns on others, especially those that lead to a stalemate in the group during the storming stage. For exam-

ple: "I am curious about how Enario's habits of giving Kim unsolicited advice may impact Kim's withdrawal from their interaction?" It is only with Enario's awareness that there is even the possibility for his creating new narrative endings.

Members' Movement Towards Goals

Archaeologists dig for artifacts to reconstruct a way of life. We believe the reflecting team can act as group archeologist by choosing to unearth successes and changes, leading members and the group towards their desired goals. This can be done by excavating the small steps members took while progressing towards their goals. The team acknowledges group members' difficulty and then their success in overcoming the difficulty (Neal, 1996). In this way, members are encouraged to take more risks towards change; this risk-taking behavior is one more avenue to launch the group forward from the storming into the working stage. For example:

I am struck by how Michael told Kim about his annoyance when she tried to rescue Janet. This is a step towards her goal. I also see the group *beginning to* move away from "safe topics," *venturing to* confront other members with honest feedback.

Members' "Unique Outcomes"

We believe the reflecting team can help members redraft their perceptions by choosing to reflect on their current "unique outcomes" (White, 1989). In the group context, unique outcomes are exceptions from fixed patterns. The reflecting team can reflect on members' *preferred* styles of interaction and how this ideal behavior could work to break the stalemate in the group. This focus from fixed patterns to unique outcomes facilitates the group progress from the sense of vulnerability, fear, need for control, and displaced anger of the storming stage towards increased trust, intimacy, commitment to the primary tasks of the group, self-disclosure, and cohesiveness of the working stage. For example:

Michael described himself as being unable to feel his own feelings. Yet, I am dazzled by the way Michael admitted his anger and disappointment at the group for not giving enough honest feedback to him last week. His admitting his anger allows the group to be more authentic with him.

The Contextualized Self

The reflecting team can promote members' self-insight by contextualizing their issues. The team can acknowledge how social and political realities influence group members by tying human behaviors to societal context. This helps members de-pathologize themselves, thus freeing them from the oppression that ties them to their fixed pattern. This freedom provides space away from stagnancy towards growth. For example: "I am curious about how *society's view of feminine beauty* may influence Janet's appeal to the bulimia."

Procedures

Because the reflecting team is brought into the group during the difficulty of the storming stage, the therapist must introduce the team to the group with sensitivity. Before the reflecting team meets the group members, the therapist briefly introduces the team and describes their function for the group. The following procedure below may help therapists apply the reflecting team to their group practice during the transition stage.

Mid-Session Procedure

Taking a Listening Position. During the session the reflecting team sits in the periphery of the room while the group members and therapists conduct their group in the center of the room. The first step is to listen without preconceived notions about how the group should work. The second step is for the team members to be cognizant of how they impact the group members simply by being in the room. Because we do not advocate the use of a one-way mirror between the group and the reflecting team, the team should stay as unobtrusive as possible. This sensitivity can be enacted as the reflecting team listens without exchanging eye contact or whispering with each other. Note taking also can distract the group from their uninhibited here-and-now interaction. Note taking may provoke team members to feel compelled to verbalize all of the ideas written in their notes. This may inhibit the team from conversing naturally.

The Reflecting Team in Dialogue. During the group session the reflecting team may take the initiative, suggesting that it is a good time to pause for reflection. If the members and therapists agree, the team proceeds. Similarly, group therapists may request reflections from the team at any time, and may feel free to request the team's reflections more than one time during the session. When a therapist reaches an impasse, one of the reflecting team members can interview the therapist about the session in front of the group. This can be done by the team interviewing from the center of the group, asking such circular questions as: "What concerns led you to want to discuss this topic at this moment?" and "What understanding or explanations do you have about this dilemma?" (Davidson & Lussardi, 1991, p. 150). After this interview the reflecting team reflects in the inner circle, while the therapist and the members listen in the outside circle.

Before offering reflections the team makes two acknowledgments. First, they admit that their reflections cannot avoid internal subjective editing. Next, the team offers the group the options of either listening to the reflections or else to simply float with their own thoughts. These acknowledgments exhibit an attitude of respectfulness towards the members, as well as a sense that the reflecting team acts as participant-observers, not experts. While offering their own reflections, the team does not speak to the members or the therapists. Instead, they speak and make eye-contact only with each other. This behavior allows more space for members to engage in their own inner dialogues.

Ending Reflecting Team Conversation. The therapist can signal for the team conversation to end while the team is still talking. This entices an open-ended atmosphere, signaling that there is still a lot more yet to be said.

Resuming Group Session. Members and therapists now go back to sit in the inner circle and the reflecting team resumes their original place outside the circle. Then the group session resumes.

Members Reflecting on Team's Conversation. Therapists can ask questions to facilitate members sharing their reactions to the reflecting team's conversation. Some of these questions may include: "Were there particular ideas that were most striking or helpful for you?" and "Was there anything you wish the team had not said or is there anything you wish to add to their reflection?" If time permits, give all members a chance to respond. If time does not allow, then keep the comments short. After the members finish their comments on the reflecting team's conversation, therapists may briefly add their own ideas evoked from the reflecting team. However, the last comment or last work belong to the group therapist and the members. The group session then continues to address the members' agenda.

Post-Session Reflection

If the mid-session reflections have not been requested, then only post-session reflections will be offered. Post-session reflections are similar to mid-session reflections, with only minor differences. Mid-session reflections are offered most often in response to an impasse bogging down a session, while post-session reflections address the session more holistically.

Post-session reflection starts by noting striking interactions occurring during the session (Andersen, 1992). A team member may reflect with something like, "When I heard . . ." or "When Enario was confronting Janet about her evasiveness, I thought I saw . . ."

After the therapist signals for reflections to end, members are again invited to respond. The following questions may provide helpful options: "If you could create a metaphor about how you were affected by the team's reflection, what would it be?" and "What do you think might happen differently in our next group session because of this reflecting session?" After members finish their comments, therapists can add their own ideas evoked from the both the reflecting teams' and the members' comments.

DISCUSSION

The reflecting team model benefits group members in the storming stage by speaking the unspeakable in front of the group, allowing many new ideas to be expressed. These new ideas provide the fuel to push the group dynamics forward. Further, by inviting all group members to respond to the team's reflection, various perspectives are honored as being equally valid and potentially useful

to the group (Davidson & Lassardi, 1991). This works toward a deconstruction of power differentiation in the counseling relationship, while simultaneously making members feel more included and visible. When invited to contribute their feedback to the reflecting team, group members experience their own agency; their tendency to view the reflecting team as experts is lessened (Anderson & Swim, 1995; Davidson & Lassardi, 1991). The reflecting team also provides a particular audience, adding power to the members' new narrative. Finally, the language of the reflecting team has a modeling effect on members. As group members repeatedly hear the team's inclusive conversation, they may choose to adopt this language into their own personal lives. All of the benefits above coalesce to infuse the group experience with new feelings and perspectives, empowering members to change (Davidson & Lassardi, 1991). As group members note:

I was struck by how the reflecting team was called in during mid-session. This is the third group session and I have been feeling increasingly inhibited and vulnerable, but I didn't know why. I am glad the reflecting team talked about how the group dynamics have been revolving around the interaction of only a few members, about how the silence spoke of us not trusting our own feelings.

I sense that the reflecting team might be on target . . . our experiences might change if we silent ones were to speak up with our inner dialogues. I guess I have been using my own silence to keep me safe in the group.

The reflecting team benefits group therapists in many ways as well. The reflecting team offers the temporarily tongue-tied group therapists a much needed resource for generating new ideas that move the group forward in the storming stage. The therapist may learn vicariously while witnessing the reflecting team working first hand, a critical element for the growth of the therapist (Landis & Young, 1994). As Davidson and Lassardi (1991) indicate, it is not sufficient for therapists to merely read about how group as a linguistic system works in the postmodern era. Experiential learning is needed. Witnessing the reflecting team in action provides therapists with a live illustration of how these ideas operate. Therapists also benefit as they leave the session with more open-mindedness and fresh perspectives about members (Davidson & Lassardi, 1991). As group therapists note:

In the storming stage before the reflecting team stepped in, I was feeling a bit tangled in a catch 22 situation. So, the reflecting team offered me a much appreciated temporary time-out from the group process. I learned from listening to the language the reflecting team used to help move the group forward. It was like viewing a derailed train being put back on its track.

Since the two reflecting team members did not look at the group or at me while reflecting, it gave me further incentives to reflect on the insight they gave. Through their transparency, I was able to see the group members with a fresh

perspective. I felt excited when the team wondered what would happen if Michael is able to stay with Maria's pain.

Given these potential benefits, some therapists may wonder how they can afford reflecting team members. Because the reflecting team is most necessary for only two to three sessions during the storming stage, therapists may invite colleagues to serve in this capacity. Additionally, reflecting team members can be found in well-trained interns on practicing sites. While the reflecting team model proposed by this article is not necessary for psychoeducational group, the possibilities for implementing the reflecting team model are boundless. Reflecting teams can be used in many other settings that can benefit from process illumination, including: mediation, negotiation, supervision, and training. We hope group therapists find this model inspiring for their daily clinical practice, and that our reflecting team model sets possible groundwork for new thinking on process illumination in group therapy. Therefore, we advocate continued research in this arena.

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