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## PRACTICE

### Processing Group Events: A Conceptual Map for Leaders

Rex Stockton  
D. Keith Morran  
Amy Gibson Nitza  
Indiana University

*Beginning group leaders frequently are called on to process significant events in a group. However, little information exists in the literature that directly discusses how to perform this important group function. This article offers a conceptual map for leaders to follow in processing group events. Examples of specific interventions that can be used to facilitate processing are offered along with case examples.*

The group setting provides a unique opportunity for members to learn about themselves by interacting with others. In the social context of the group, members can explore their styles of relating to others, exchange feedback, and learn about the perceptions others have of their behavior. Members also can learn about themselves through an examination of their own vicarious reactions to the work of other members. However, personal growth does not necessarily occur directly as a result of these experiences. Rather, growth occurs when people recognize, articulate, and reflect on the experiences that result from these events (Hammel, 1986). This integration of experiences in a group often is referred to as *critical incident processing* (hereafter referred to as *processing*) (Cohen & Smith, 1976).

The processing of planned and unplanned events involves helping group members make meaning of their experiences. Indeed, the chance to reflect on significant events has been shown to be one of the most important opportunities in the life of a group. In an early study of critical incidents, Liebermann, Yalom, and Miles (1973) found that emotional experiences, although extremely important to group members, did not differentiate between those with successful and unsuccessful outcomes.

Rex Stockton is a professor at Indiana University, Keith Morran is a professor at Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne, and Amy Gibson is a doctoral student at Indiana University. For more information, please contact Dr. Stockton at Department of Counseling and Educational Psychology, Wright Ed Building, Indiana University, 201 N. Rose Avenue, Bloomington, IN 47405-1006; (812) 856-8344; e-mail: stockton@indiana.edu.

Instead, positive outcomes were associated with cognitive dynamics that helped members frame and make sense of emotional experiences. They referred to this as *meaning attribution* (Liebermann et al., 1973). This framework is functionally provided in a group through processing. The ultimate goal of such processing is to help members use this information to make meaningful changes in their lives.

Leaders frequently are encouraged to engage members in the processing of group events that may focus at an individual, group, or subgroup level. It is argued that such processing is essential for making meaning of group happenings and assuring opportunities for both intrapersonal and interpersonal learning (Jacobs, Harvill, & Masson, 1988; Kees & Jacobs, 1990). Processing also provides an avenue for members to reflect on both their group and outside-of-group behaviors in a manner that may serve to build cohesiveness, universality, reality testing, feedback exchange, and many other therapeutic factors that enhance the group milieu (DeLuca-Waack, 1997).

Yalom (1995) emphasized the critical importance of processing in fostering the effectiveness of the group experience. He refers to two tiers that work together to make the group effective. The first tier involves the experiencing of events in the group. However, this experiencing by itself is not sufficient to facilitate change. The second tier, or processing, provides a framework for retaining, integrating, and generalizing the experiences of the first tier. An in-depth examination of what has just occurred is incorporated at the second tier and encompasses the dynamics of processing. Together, these two tiers create a self-reflective loop in which the group is constantly examining and learning from its own interactions.

Despite the clear importance of helping members process significant events in a group, little has been written that specifically defines processing or describes how it can be promoted by the group leader actively (DeLuca-Waack, 1997). In many ways, processing seems to be a concept that is commonly assumed to be understood but is rarely linked to specific leader strategies or interventions. In this article, processing is presented as a leader function that can be learned and applied to promote group member processing of critical incidents and themes throughout the life of the group. In the following sections, we offer a definition of processing, provide a cognitive map to assist group leaders in effectively implementing processing strategies, and describe selected examples of leader skills related to processing.

## PROCESSING: DEFINITION AND PERSPECTIVES

*Processing* can be defined as capitalizing on significant happenings in the here-and-now interactions of the group to help members reflect on the meaning of their experiences; better understand their own thoughts, feelings, and actions; and generalize what is learned to their life outside the group. Processing helps leaders and members understand group happenings, and it fosters the sharing of insights between individuals. It also can help members take responsibility for their learning and growth in the group (Quinsland & Van Ginkel, 1984). In the absence of systematic processing, critical events and learning experiences may go "unknown, mistaken, or only partially understood" (Conyne, 1997).

Processing is a phenomenon that may occur spontaneously, that is, group members may make meaning of their experiences through self-reflection even without specific leader intervention. However, leaders often have a key role to play in initiating and facilitating this procedure. For the purposes of this article, processing refers to a formal attempt by the leader to help members derive meaning from specific events that occur in the group. It is important to distinguish this type of processing from the term *group process*, which refers to the dynamics that naturally occur in a group, or "the nature of the relationship between interacting individuals" (Yalom, 1995, p. 130). The two terms are related; processing, as an intervention, helps members understand and make meaning of the ongoing group process.

Helping group members process and apply what they have learned is a complex task that requires the leader to combine and integrate several interventions. However, this set of skills has not been clearly identified or operationalized. Thus, it is a difficult task for novice group leaders to learn. For example, Wiggins and Carroll (1993) found that a major concern of participants in a group leadership workshop was how to process interaction dynamics in a group. Clearly, a framework to guide the processing of significant events in a group would be a valuable tool for novice group leaders. It is important to take into account that an awareness of multicultural and gender issues is extremely important in the application of this framework.

As stated previously, leaders often are expected to initiate and guide the processing task, yet they typically receive only minimal training related to such interventions. To get some sense of beginning students' understanding of this phenomenon, we administered an anonymous

survey to two introductory group counseling classes. Initially, we asked students simply to provide a definition of processing. We found that, as a concept, processing was well understood. An informal sorting of the survey responses indicated that, collectively, students' definitions identified a number of meaningful themes, including exploring feelings, making meaning/insight or understanding, providing feedback, evaluating/analyzing, and linking to outside behavior.

Based on this informal survey and our own experiences in supervising groups, it appears that trainees who have been exposed to the richness in the literature, who have observed or participated in groups, and who possess a background of individual counseling knowledge can define processing in a meaningful way. However, implementing these ideas in the moment of the group is inherently more difficult. Therefore, we conducted a second survey using a similar group counseling class. In that survey, we asked students to describe ways to intervene to facilitate processing. We found that their responses tended to focus primarily on the importance of drawing attention to group incidents. However, they seemed less aware of how to facilitate the more in-depth exploration necessary to help group members derive meaning from critical incidents and plan for appropriate change. These conclusions fit with our years of experience in supervising group leaders and highlight the need for providing specific training experiences on this important dimension.

Stockton (in Morran, 1992) outlined a model of group leader training that provides a perspective on the development of expertise from novice to more advanced levels. This model may be particularly applicable to processing skills. The model integrates didactic and experiential instruction and includes three dimensions that are inextricably intertwined: *perceiving*, *selecting*, and *risking*. Perceiving requires that the neophyte group leader develop a cognitive framework for understanding the social situation in which the group exists. This involves bringing to the leader role knowledge acquired through extensive reading, observation, discussion of group-related material, and experience as a group member. This knowledge base enables the leader to use information related to a particular group situation to construct a tentative and flexible conceptual picture of what is taking place. Based on meaningful perception of the group dynamics, the leader then can generate a wide range of appropriate intervention possibilities. After the leader has considered the merits of each option, it is then possible to apply and evaluate the intervention(s) believed to be most promising. As new information surfaces, the leader can adjust and fine-tune interventions in an ongoing manner. In essence, the leader's perceptions of the group

enable the building of a cognitive map to guide future selection and application of interventions. It follows that, as confidence in the validity of those perceptions increases, the leader will become more adept at selecting and risking interventions.

It is important for group leaders to develop a cognitive map that will guide them as they seek to initiate and facilitate processing activities. At any given point in a group session, there is much content and affect occurring that could be potentially valuable learning material. One of the most important roles, then, for the group leader is to select which of the many incidents on which to focus the group's attention. The importance of the selection of material to be processed was highlighted by Cohen and Smith (1976), who wrote, "With each response the group leader uses he simultaneously constructs alternate universes, opens new branches of group movement and inhibits others, and blocks still other pathways" (p. 114). Thus, the selection of an incident to process with the group has important implications for the group as a whole. The following section outlines a series of general steps (a cognitive map) that we believe is useful for group leaders as they seek to recognize critical incidents in the group and to engage members in meaningful processing.

#### A COGNITIVE MAP FOR PROCESSING

It is important to note first that the cognitive map provided here is not intended as a recipe for success. The following set of processing steps is presented merely as a general guide to aid novice group leaders as they attempt to organize their efforts and facilitate the very complex task of processing group events. As leaders develop in terms of knowledge and experience, they invariably will tailor such guidelines to their own theoretical beliefs and preferences. It also should be noted that the following guidelines assume that leaders already have acquired basic knowledge in such areas as group theory and dynamics, group stages, group membership, and group leadership styles.

Processing can be conceptualized as a series of four interrelated steps, which include identifying critical incidents of importance to group members, examining the event and member reactions, deriving meaning and self-understanding from the event, and applying new understandings toward personal change. These steps are detailed subsequently.

### Identifying Critical Incidents

As leaders observe the unfolding of group interactions, they will be faced with a vast array of possibilities for processing. Only a few of these events can be selected for in-depth examination. Of course, this raises the issue of which specific events should be identified as critical in nature and worthy of group members' time and effort. Although group members eventually may learn to recognize critical incidents for themselves, this task is likely to fall primarily on the leader in the early group stages.

As a general rule, leaders should seek to focus on those incidents that have the greatest potential for enhancing member self-understanding and for promoting change, and that are appropriate to members' levels of readiness. If a shy group member ignores compliments from other members, for example, this might be a very appropriate focus for processing in later group stages, but not so appropriate in early stages. Critical incidents occasionally will be dramatic in nature and, therefore, obvious to both leaders and group members. Open conflict between two members would be an example of a dramatic incident. More often, however, critical incidents will be less dramatic, such as the first time a shy group member speaks out in the group. Although leaders ultimately must base their choice of critical incidents on empathic understanding of group members and their own judgments, some indicators can be suggested:

- Events that elicit heightened emotional or behavioral reactions from members
- Events that illustrate a recurring theme for one or more members
- Events that directly relate to individual or group goals
- Conflicts in the group
- Examples of group member successes or failures
- Emotional self-disclosures
- Events that are dramatic in nature
- Member body language that suggests unspoken reactions to an event

When leaders decide to focus the group's attention on a given critical incident, they, in essence, are making a judgment that the processing of this event holds more potential than would other events. Novice leaders may be fearful of making the wrong choice and, thus, diverting the group's attention away from that which might have been more productive. We encourage novice leaders to consider each processing opportunity in light of potential benefits and member readiness. Once these issues are considered, leaders simply should make their best judgment as to whether the incident should be the focus of immediate processing.

should be processed at a later time, or should not be a focus of the group. Vital group issues are seldom missed because of a single leader choice, because those issues typically will reveal themselves repeatedly over the life of the group.

Once the leader has identified a critical incident of sufficient importance, the next task is to focus the group's attention on the event that has just occurred. This may be accomplished in many ways. For example, leaders simply may share their perception that what just occurred was particularly meaningful and might be productively explored; such direct invitation is often the most effective. Leaders also might invite focus on the event through the use of questioning, feedback exchange, self-disclosure, and a variety of other leadership skills. The use of a traditional go-around may help to get all members focused on the incident. Calling on selected members whose presenting dilemmas have a link to the incident or who already have communicated a response nonverbally are alternative techniques.

### Examining the Critical Incident

Once the group's attention has focused on a critical incident, the next step is to help group members analyze the event and their own reactions to what occurred. The goal for this step is to help members examine the event and its impact on them in the here-and-now of the group. Although the member(s) directly involved in the identified incident will be obvious focal points of examination, leaders should seek to draw in every group member actively. As either participant or observer, each member can be encouraged to examine and assume responsibility for their cognitive, behavioral, and emotional reactions to the event. Leaders can serve as excellent models for other group members by displaying a willingness to examine their own reactions in an open and honest manner.

Because the focus of this processing step is on examination of the critical incident that has just occurred, the leader's key task will be to engage the group in here-and-now discussion. Group members must be taught to think in terms of their immediate reactions. In her investigation of group leader training, Seidner (1998) wrote, "In capturing the immediate through here-and-now intervention, the leader helps the members to use the group experience to understand their behavior not only in the group, but also in their everyday lives" (p. 35). The leader can assist members in focusing on the here-and-now by teaching them to use "I" statements. Helping members move from talking about an event in the less personal third person to the first-person singular "I" statements helps to make feelings more immediate to the member and assists the

member in identifying and taking responsibility for thoughts, feelings, and actions. A related intervention involves encouraging members to talk directly to each other rather than talking "through" the leader.

Often, particularly early in the group, direct questions can be a very appropriate method of helping members identify and express their reactions. Kees and Jacobs (1990) discussed the use of direct questions to assist members in this process: "Good questions ask the unexpected, and cut off superficial storytelling" (p. 24). The goal of such questions should be to shift the members' focus away from the content of the incident toward their individual thoughts and feelings related to it. This can be accomplished through a traditional go-around, asking each member in turn to share reactions. It also may be helpful to choose certain members to call on initially, either because of a particular link to the incident or because they already have clearly communicated a response nonverbally.

### **Deriving Meaning From the Critical Incident**

Once members have clarified their reactions to the critical incident, they then can be assisted in making meaning from these reactions. The goal of this step is to help members take what was learned from examination of the immediate event and discover how that self-awareness applies to their interactions, experiences, and problems in general. For example, the member who just discovered that being assertive did not lead to rejection by other group members may now be more open to considering the possibility that problems at home or work are related to a fear of conflict and subsequent passiveness. Such realizations, based on actual group experiences, often can represent the beginning of meaningful life changes.

How can group leaders actively facilitate members in deriving meaning from group events? Feedback is a key mechanism in the facilitation of interpersonal learning, because it represents a direct attempt to help others see themselves as they really are. In helping members make meaning of their reactions, leaders need to model effective feedback-giving and also promote the exchange of feedback between all group members. Critical incidents tend to illuminate characteristic themes and behavioral patterns for each individual involved and, thus, provide a wealth of opportunities for meaningful feedback exchange. Morran, Stockton, Cline, and Teed (1998) described a variety of group leader interventions/functions that are designed to facilitate group members in giving, receiving, and using interpersonal feedback.

In addition to promoting feedback exchange, leaders also can facilitate the making of meaning through a variety of other interventions. It

is often helpful for leaders to share their hypotheses with group members directly. It is our observation that novice group leaders often are hesitant to share hypotheses with members, for fear that the hypotheses will not be correct. Hypotheses do not always have to be correct to be effective; if done in a tentative and flexible manner, even incorrect hypotheses often will stimulate group members' thinking. When the members are free to state that the hypotheses do not fit, that in itself can represent important growth. It also can stimulate further hypothesis generation, which can come closer to the group member being able to gain additional insight.

As the group develops, members also can be encouraged to share hypotheses with each other. Leaders also may help members compare their reactions to the present critical incident with reactions to past incidents in an attempt to identify similarities and/or differences that might reveal meaningful insights. This making of connections among incidents becomes increasingly valuable as the group develops. In addition, it is often useful to help members relate what they have learned to their goals for the group experience.

As members begin to be able to verbalize some important learning or insight they have gained from an incident, other members are apt to be able to personalize some part of this to their own lives. Although this does not have to be leader-initiated, leaders can assist in this process by pointing out commonalities.

It again should be emphasized that, to the extent possible, all group members should be engaged in the attempt to make meaning from their reactions to a given critical incident. Even the members who happened to be observers rather than direct participants may have discovered things about themselves in a vicarious manner. Such learning epitomizes the essence of the group experience and should be capitalized on by leaders and members.

### **Promoting Change**

The ultimate goal of a group experience is for members to make changes in their everyday lives. The final step in processing, then, is to help members begin to apply what they have learned to their lives outside the group. It is often useful at this step to help members examine previously set goals and consider new goals. As a result of new self-understandings, members often are motivated to increase their commitment to accomplishing meaningful life changes. By making goals the focus of discussion, leaders can help members consider realistic avenues for change, thus further strengthening the resolve to change.

A number of strategies can be employed by the leader to promote member change. A brainstorming session can help members generate plausible strategies that might be employed for change. The use of journaling can encourage members to reflect on and integrate their learning experiences. In addition, have members summarize their experiences by restating their goals for the group and clarifying their learning since the beginning; this can be followed by other members giving feedback as to how they have seen the member grow and change. Homework assignments based on learning that has occurred can facilitate the generalization of such learning to specific situations outside the group. Finally, role-playing can be an effective method of helping members put these new insights into practice. The group can serve as a safe social situation in which members can gain experience by trying out new ways of behaving, problem solving, and relating to others.

### A Case Example

The following case example, adapted from the Association for Specialists in Group Work (1992) videotape series, is provided to illustrate the types of member interactions and leader interventions that are typical of processing in the group.

John, a member of a counseling group, stated during the first group meeting that he was having a problem with being late to his job and would like to work on that issue in the group. During the third group session, John walked into the group late and apologized for his behavior. As is typical of this early stage of the group, members reacted with advice-giving and problem solving.

*Step 1.* According to the cognitive map described previously, leaders initially needed to decide whether this was an incident in need of processing. Factors that were taken into consideration included the fact that the incident was directly related to John's stated goal for the group. In addition, the body language of the other members indicated to the leaders that they were having a stronger reaction than was being verbalized; the leaders detected covert hostility regarding the incident. Referring to the list of possible factors that suggest the need for processing, the decision in this case was easy. Although incidents do not always present themselves in such a dramatic fashion, similar cues can be used. An example of a statement the group leaders could have used to initiate processing of this incident is, "I'm sensing two things going on right now. We are wanting to help John, but at the same time we are angry at him for not being fully committed to the group." In addition, the leaders may then ask any particular member about his or her reaction to the event.

*Step 2.* The second step in our cognitive map occurs as the leaders help members begin to recognize their anger at John over the incident. As stated previously, the goal of the second step is to help members examine the event and their own reactions in the here-and-now of the group. In our scenario, the leaders used the body language of the members to encourage several of them to identify and share their reactions (mostly frustrations) to the event. A number of other strategies could be used to facilitate this goal. For example, the leaders first could have discussed their own reactions to John's lateness. Additionally, they could have done a go-around, giving each member an opportunity to talk directly to John, rather than through the leader. The judicious use of questions also could have been used to guide members through this process.

*Step 3.* The third step is to help members make meaning from these reactions. This occurs in our scenario as the members begin to explore the possibility that there is more to John's issue than just his lateness. For example, at this point, the leaders might have hypothesized that John's lateness stemmed from a need to maintain distance and avoid intimacy with others. This, in turn, would keep him from having to be totally honest with others. Thus, the leaders asked John directly if there might not be more to his lateness than he was aware of. At that time, John was unable to make meaning of this and was therefore unable to respond with any depth. It is not unusual for this to occur; however, this hypothesis can be revisited at a more appropriate time. Members with long-standing patterns of behavior often need to explore an issue several times before being able to truly make meaning of behavior.

As stated previously, important learning can take place as members observe other members struggling with their dilemmas. It is possible to gain insights into one's own behavior by observing others work through their issues and making connections to their own lives. Even when members could not make an immediate connection to their own lives, it was possible for them to understand that there was more to John's issue than his lateness to group. In this scenario, the leaders noticed that Jeff, another group member, was questioning John intently. To help Jeff make meaning of this event, one of the leaders asked him to think about why he was asking the questions. Through an exploration of his own behavior, Jeff was able to identify connections between John's situation and his own at an earlier time.

*Step 4.* The final step involves helping members generalize their learning from the incident to their lives. Due to a variety of factors such as emotional reactions and defensiveness, the ability to generalize from an event does not necessarily occur in a single group session. What may

be too painful to learn in one setting may be much more easily comprehended when some time and distance have occurred and when members have had some time to reflect and work through their feelings. Our scenario is a good example of this. At a later session after the group clearly had entered the working stage, John began to share some insights he had into his problem at work. He disclosed that he had falsified his résumé when hired for the job, in that sense misrepresenting himself to his employer. The leaders sensed that John was now ready to examine his behavior less defensively than he had earlier. Thus, to facilitate John's learning, he was encouraged to get some feedback from other group members and develop a plan for change.

The processing of this significant event completed the cycle of processing described previously. John's early defensiveness about his behavior solicited advice-giving from other members and an inability on his part to share deeper feelings concerning why he was late. By following the steps described previously, the leaders were able to help John, as well as other members, develop personal meaning. This brings full circle how processing a significant event can enhance the development of the therapeutic factors in a group, either at the initial event or through later reflection. After John was able to self-disclose and make meaning regarding his lateness, other group members were able to feel closer to him and share affirmations with him, as well as make disclosures of their own. The result was a therapeutic spiral. The group had come full circle, from its inability to deal with inappropriate, overt behavior to a fuller understanding of each other and a shared intimacy that produced therapeutic results.

### CONCLUSION

In this article, we have defined processing, provided a cognitive map for group leaders, and described selected leader skills that can be used to promote effective processing of critical incidents in the group setting. Although it is hoped that the presentation of a cognitive map will be useful to novice leaders, certain cautions are warranted. Leaders should bear in mind that such a map merely provides general guidelines that must be adapted to the particular situation as well as to the particular style of the leader using it. Although presented as a series of steps, processing is actually much more complex than can be depicted on paper. In many cases, the various steps will blend together at times and seldom will occur neatly in the space of one group session. More likely, the group may exit and reenter the sequence any number of times, with all four steps completed by some members and only one or two steps by other members. Such flexibility is critical to the application of the model

because, to be effective, processing must be geared to both the stage of group development and the readiness of individual group members. Despite such cautions, the model still provides leaders with a basic mental checklist of tasks that should assist in effectively processing critical incidents with group members.

Much of our current knowledge of processing is based on clinical experience. Because it is such a critical dynamic of successful groups, it would be useful for future research to focus on the relation of processing interactions to group outcomes. Researchers also might explore productively the effects of various leader interventions on the quality and quantity of processing that occurs among group members. Finally, investigators might begin to identify the critical component parts of processing and their relation to major therapeutic forces within the group.

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