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What Comes Next? Using the Circumplex Model to Assess and Select a Group Intervention

Paper based on a program presented at the 2011 ACES Conference, TN, October 2011

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Introduction

Knowing what a group needs and choosing an activity to meet that need is a challenge for any group leader in any setting, and teaching the group leader to recognize these issues in order to intervene decisively is even more complex. This article introduces and discusses a strategy for utilizing a proven family systems technology for identifying what groups are experiencing and what alternatives would best help them to progress toward higher functioning and applies the process to four diverse group situations.

A trend in group work is to make group leadership less intuitive and more accessible to a wider range of professionals (Conyne, Crowell, & Newmeyer, 2008). This article explores applying the Circumplex Model to assess the group's functioning and strategize the characteristics of an activity that could be applied to challenge and improve its current functioning, particularly if the group is not progressing well.

Stages of Group Development

In a general sense, groups begin and end, and in between a variety of behaviors take place for group leaders and for group members (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2010; Gladding, 2008; Trotzer, 1999). This description is true for individual group sessions and for the overall life of the group. Not always linear in development, group stages are shown to be commonly noted in the literature, particularly in learning groups (Gladding,

2008). Leading a group, and training someone to lead a group, requires the group leader to understand where the group is in its development from beginning to end. While issues in groups can be divided into these three broad stages, the issues at the beginning and ending of groups have several necessary activities (e.g., stating of the group's purpose and reviewing confidentiality at the start, and goal setting and saying goodbye in the end), unique from the ones in between; therefore, the middle sessions will receive most of the attention in this article.

Determining where the group is and what needs to happen to facilitate its development, (move it along), more often resembles “art” than “science.” Between the first and last sessions, what might the group be experiencing and what can the leader do to improve the experience for the members? Depending on the group theoretician (see Table 1), issues such as member acceptance of each other, degree of motivation and performance orientation, and level of cooperation can impact group interaction and development (Gazda, 1989; Gladding, 2008; Trotzer, 1999; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). A leader's imperative is to create a contextualized social system that is dynamic and interconnected in order for group members to experience productivity, skill building, problem solving, or satisfy whatever needs they brought them with into the group (Bemak & Conyne, 2004).

Table 1.

Group Stages. Adapted from Gladding (2008).

Author	Beginning	Middle			Ending
Gazda (1989)	Exploratory	Transition	Action		Termination
Gladding (2008)	Forming/ Orientation	Transition Storming/ Norming	Performing/ Working		Mourning/ Termination
Trotzer (1999)	Security	Acceptance	Responsibility	Work	Closing
Tuckman & Jensen (1977)	Forming	Storming	Norming	Performing	Adjourning
Yalom & Leszcz (2005)	Orientation	Conflict		Cohesiveness	Cohesiveness

Group Leadership

Specific practices need to occur ethically and functionally for groups to begin and end in accordance with group practice standards. The Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW, 2007) has established the Best Practice Guidelines that identifies Planning, Performing and Processing as areas of leadership guiding practice. Between the beginning and ending, group leaders “assess needs and context” (Conyne et al., 2008, p. 14) in Planning, utilize skills to develop a therapeutic style for positive engagement in Performing, and facilitate members' meaning making in Processing. Ongoing assessment is critical to group leaders' selection of effective interventions throughout the group's life;

therefore, the use of the model discussed here could assist leaders in recognizing and addressing member interconnections and organization in preparation for initiating an activity—and would implement the ASGW standards. Having a picture of how the group is functioning, its cohesion and structure, could be helpful in determining what comes next.

Contextual Group Assessment

Group relationships and structure in all settings are influenced by external factors and internal processes. While a group is a unique contextual entity, it is also part of a larger context of setting, membership, purpose, and policies and procedures (Conyne et al., 2008). Group leaders are constantly managing environmental variables that affect the evolving developmental context of members' interconnections, the degree of collaboration with leader and members, the social culture of the group, meaning attribution of members' learning, and how the members apply and sustain their learning into their lives.

Ecological counseling as a framework (Bemak & Conyne, 2004; Conyne & Cook, 2004) conceptualizes groups as social systems that are made up of individuals linked in a unique way within a specified context. Conyne et al. (2008) identify six ecological concepts as “well suited to assessing groups and group leadership” (p. 6). The ecological concepts are italicized in a summary explained as:

A group is a setting that is defined by its own particular *context*, including its purpose, developmental stage, and the resources available to it. For a group to function well, *interconnections* among members need to be positively formed, so that members do not function as isolated individuals. The leader(s) and members construct a *social system* with agreed-upon rules, norms, and expectations that allow their activities to proceed without either too much rigidity or too much fluidity. In a well-functioning group, the leader need not be the primary force who controls the action. Instead, members and the leader *collaborate* to mutually share responsibility and, over time, the leadership functions themselves. Productive interaction among members emerges, and is measured to a large degree by what *meaning* members assign to their experience as well as how aptly they will be able to apply and *sustain* outside the group the learning and changes that have taken place within the group. (p. 6)

Little wonder that becoming an effective group leader often requires years of experience since an understanding of an ecological counseling model in group work demonstrates that all things are connected (Conyne et al., 2008). From creating a supportive environment in planning, the group leader(s) must strive to perform effectively in order to attend to not only group development, but also individual growth and development. As a result of the process suggested here, a relatively inexperienced leader should be able to summarize in a graph many of these issues and be able to choose a relevant intervention.

Curative Features in Groups

Beyond the fact that a group is a collection of individuals in the same space, there needs to be an understanding of the interconnections among group leaders and their group members. The basis for a productive group experience, according to Yalom and Leszcz (2005), is the therapeutic factor of cohesion in those interconnections. There is continual attention needed by the group leader to the support of relationships between all group members. Most group research shows that the density of those interconnected relationships creates a potentially valuable group experience, with promotion of learning and sustainability of the intended group outcomes. Bemak and Conyne (2004) described the collectivist nature of group work as a broader perspective to consider the relationship and interdependence of group members.

It is within that social system of the group that the level of structure impacts the performance of the group leader and members. Too much rigidity may mean that there is a lack of mutually agreed upon expectations, for example. The group leader is too controlling as a system director, and in essence, demonstrates something like a lack of trust in the group members and their abilities to establish and support the intended group culture. Too much flexibility, on the other hand, may portray something like a lack of interest for the group's goals on the part of the group leader. In either case, all groups have the opportunity to exercise Yalom's therapeutic conditions within a positive social system, such as the instillation of hope or altruism (Yalom, 1985). The classic research study by Lieberman, Yalom, and Miles (1973, as cited in Conyne et al., 2008) highlighted the value of collaboration in determining that leaders considered to be effective did not dominate nor did they turn over all processes to the group members. There must be a balance.

An important key to performing effectually as a group leader is in the use of group processing. The social system within which the group members and leader(s) function is assessed continually in a conscious way by the group leader, and perhaps often consciously or unconsciously by the group members. To the degree that meaning making is considered for every group member, the experiences of the unique contextual system require monitoring of the degrees of cohesion and adaptability in order to achieve a balance of these system variables for a ripe learning engagement opportunity.

Much like family and social phenomena, the broader ecological view accommodates worldviews that include both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Contextualized group practice examines the interplay of family, society, and individual factors that are demonstrated in the members' behaviors, publicly and privately. School counselors operate within a wide variety of contexts pressed upon by policies and challenges contextually unique in each school building, as well as with the unique population.

Group Assessment

Group work assessment has evolved with a variety of tools, most of which are contextually specific to the type and purpose of the group (e.g., Group Psychotherapy Evaluation Scale, Group Therapy Survey, Hill Interaction Matrix-B, Therapeutic Factors Inventory, or System for the Multiple Level Observation of Groups). Since small groups function systemically like the family, there also has been some group assessment using

the actual Circumplex Model (Fish & Dane, 2000). In fact, the development of the Classroom Systems Observation Scale (CSOS; Fish & Dane, 2000) was based on the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems. Classroom teaching and environment have a significant impact on the social development of children and their learning, and classrooms are systems and groups with boundaries and roles and a culture.

Finally, communication may be assessed by the group leader as an ecological perception of how the individual group members interact within their environment, which is the group. Communication is the responsibility of all family or group members, but in groups, leaders set the tone for positive communication and often model skills in giving and receiving feedback that is congruent and supportive. Systems that are balanced have good communication while those that are not balanced have poor communication. Empathy and attentive listening are counseling skills that have been noted to be the group leader's key to healthy communication.

The Circumplex Model

The Circumplex Model (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1989) functions as a valuable assessment for counseling professionals who work with couples and families, recognized for many years as beneficial to family systems work (Perosa & Perosa, 2001). The model's popularity in a systems approach to family typology helps to determine a relational diagnosis (Olson, 2000). Olson and colleagues (2000) identified dimensions of interactions that have been theorized and applied in family therapy. The dimensions of "family cohesion, flexibility and communication" (Olson, 2000, p. 145) are concepts from which Olson and his colleagues developed the model with a systems perspective.

The Circumplex Model helps leaders to assess their groups to determine what interventions need to happen, as well as what interventions will address the components of group functioning (Olson, 2000). Similar to what occurs in family therapy, leading groups involves teaching members skills that will enable them to change dysfunctional behavior into more appropriate ways of dealing with the needs of others in the particular system. The Circumplex Model offers a tool to guide the assessment of a group's functioning on two of the three dimensions and aids in the selection of beneficial activities to apply to advance the group's development. Knowing what the group needs and choosing an activity to meet that need is a challenge for any group leader; teaching the group leader to recognize performance issues and to intervene decisively is even more complex. This article provides a strategy for utilizing a proven system/group technology for identifying what groups are experiencing and what alternatives would best help them to progress toward higher functioning.

The Circumplex Model (Olson et al., 1989) is derived from family therapy and systemic thinking by measuring the "three dimensions that have repeatedly been considered highly relevant in a variety of family theory *models* and family therapy approaches" (Olson, 2000, p. 145). Family cohesion and flexibility are perceived by Olson and his colleagues to summarize the functionality of that group (Thomas & Ozechowski, 2000). Over decades, the benefit of plotting relationship interactions along the dimensions of cohesion (with the opposing endpoints being enmeshment and disengagement), flexibility (more commonly known as adaptability, opposing endpoints of chaos and rigidity), and communication has been established in research (Olson, 2000). Since the third dimension is different from the other two and is considered as

“facilitating” them, it is not typically graphed (Olson, p. 149). The resulting graph is thereby simplified into the two-dimensions that will be the focus of this article (see Figure 1).

Cohesion

Cohesion, the x-axis, is defined as emotional bonding of the members of the group. The cohesion construct documents an assessment between separateness of members individually versus togetherness as a systemic whole (Olson, p.145). There are four levels of cohesion: disengaged (too distant or emotionally absent), separated, connected and enmeshed (too close or too involved). A group that maintains a balanced level of cohesion in the separated and connected ranges makes for optimal functioning. To utilize the concept of family cohesion in a group assessment, the leader is looking at the social system and interconnectedness of the individual group members.

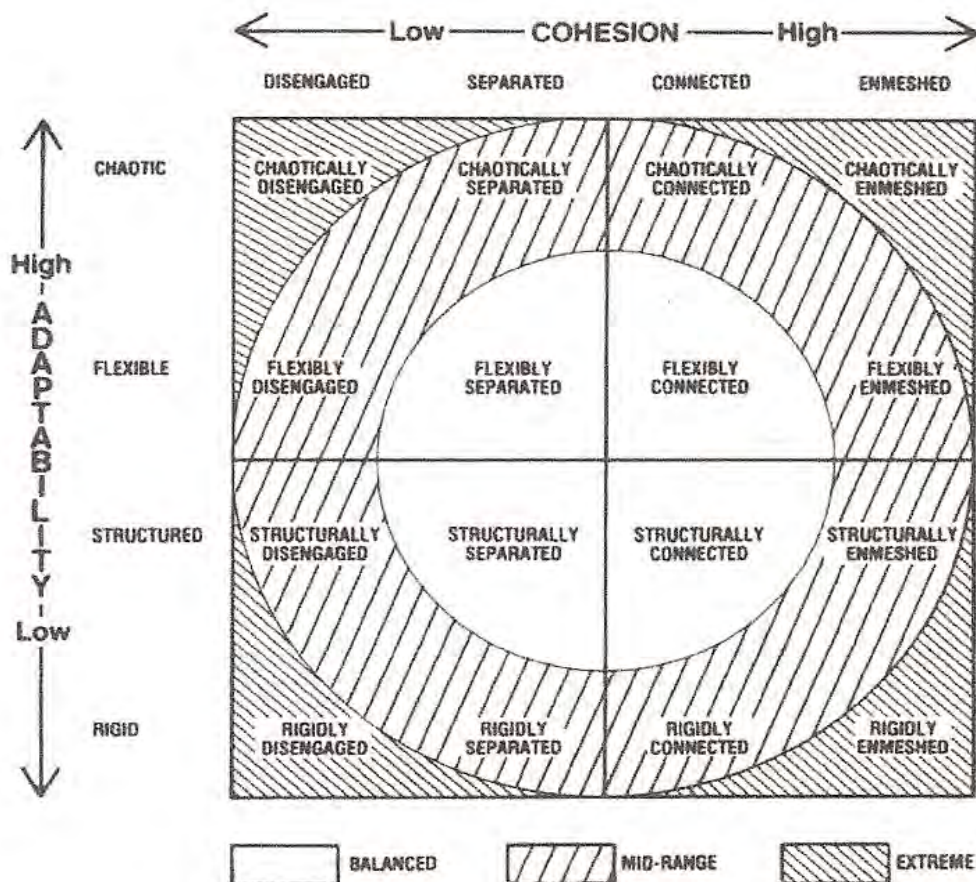


Figure 1. The Circumplex Model

With the Circumplex Model, Olson (2000) sought to measure “emotional bonding, boundaries, coalitions” (p. 145), and with that information the group leader is able to describe how the group members behave as individuals and as a unit on the dimensions of cohesion and flexibility (shown as adaptability in the graph). Plotting group or even classroom interactions with use of a graph as in Figure 1 enables the group leader or classroom teacher to determine the group’s or class’s needs, focus of the

intervention (cognitive, affective, behavioral, and/or structural) and at what level an intervention will be focused (individual, interpersonal, or group; Conyne et al., 2008).

Flexibility

The level of flexibility, or adaptability to change, the y-axis, can be rated for group members individually and the group as a whole. Flexibility focuses on system rules and the changes that take place usually occur within these rules. Families and other groups adapt well or poorly to balance change versus stability (Olson, 2000). While balance can be disrupted when group members perceive a challenge to their normal functioning, individuals and groups work diligently to retain the status quo (Olson, 2000). There are four levels of flexibility: rigid (low), structured, flexible, and chaotic. Too much flexibility allows for chaos, which is problematic in any system. Stable groups adapt to changes in circumstances, change in the leadership, roles of individual members, and relationship rules.

Groups function with varying levels of responsibility in the members and the leader (Corey et al., 2010). The level of structure from the beginning influences the performance throughout the group's life unless collaboration is invited to gain other perspectives towards changes in rules and behavioral norms. Group leaders usually determine the level of structure they prefer in planning the group and form at least a skeleton of group norms from which interactions begin. Corey et al. (2010) asserted that initial structure is a positive factor in developing helpful group norms, so that group members are not too anxious with unclear expectations. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) honored the autonomy of individual group members within sufficient structure to present the group's direction.

Using the Circumplex Model

The recommended process for using the Circumplex Model applies both axes at the same time to identify where the group is, and then the group leader can choose an intervention from the quadrant across the diagonal from the quadrant describing where the group is. The x-axis describes the social-emotional relationship interactions of the group members while the y-axis expresses the rules operating in the group (Olson, 2000). The goal is for the group as a whole to be "balanced" and not remain at any "extreme of the *model*" (Olson, 2000, p. 147). When groups, or individuals, get into trouble, often it can be because they are "stuck" in a pattern; the more extreme the pattern, the more damaging and less functional the system. An axis could be considered individually: if a group were "stuck" on trust issues and was not bonding, or had subgroups that were closed to the exclusion of other members, then that issue by itself might be addressed.

The leader using the Circumplex Model to define the issues occurring in the group on these two axes can select a group technique or an activity that would stimulate exploration on the opposite side of the axis to bring the group back into more balance. The not-trusting group mentioned above could be graphed as disengaged and independent, the extreme left-side of the x-axis (Maynard & Olson, 1987). The leader could affirm the individualism that is present in the group, and then have them explore being dependent and more interactive with each other by doing activities requiring more communication and cooperation (e.g., a trust walk or a team problem-solving activity).

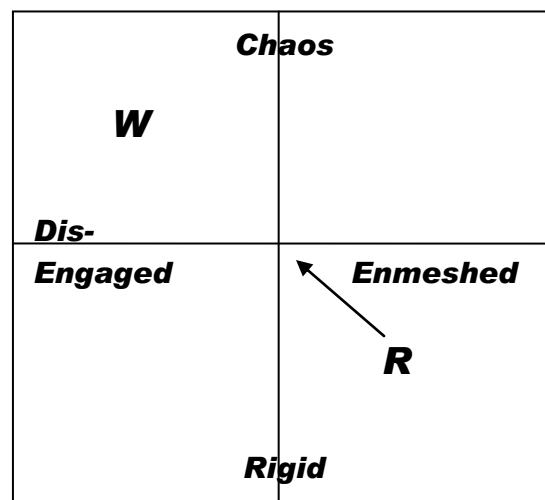
The group with members who are subdivided into pockets of people, seen as those who are on the “enmeshed” side of the axis, can be encouraged toward personal independence and other relationships in the group by applying an activity that would change the structure, such as giving people colors (or numbers or animals) and having the various colors (or numbers or animals) sit in specific places and perform a designated task. The group might attempt some new patterns as a result of the activity. Note the process: The Circumplex Model describes the group’s behavior, where they are (**R**), and the leader can then choose an activity to stretch its normal pattern by using an activity from the other side of the continuum, what they need (**W**). Consider the following examples from each quadrant.

Quadrant I: Activities to Encourage Spontaneity and Independence

R (Where they are): Professional staff have weekly meetings with their clinical supervisors to review cases and monthly meetings with the managers. They have lunch with their mentors every other week. Still, the employee surveys indicate they are “not happy” with their jobs. What do you recommend?

W (What they Want): They want Quadrant I activities that allow them to be spontaneous and more individual.

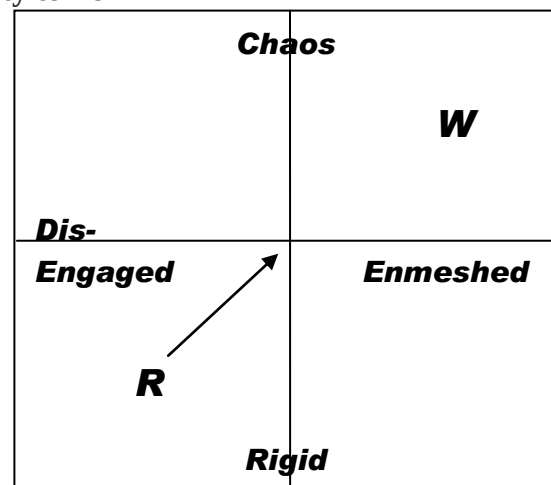
Discussion. The dominant feature of this group is a forced relationship structure, where the group members are modestly connected to each other in patterns that are extremely rigid. On the outside the organization looks good, but the people are not happy. Given the opportunity to choose who would be their clinical supervisors and adapt their work schedules to fit the demands of their personal lives, the morale improved. These changes in structure allowed them to be more flexible and moved the group into better balance.



Quadrant II: Activities to Allow Team Creativity to Form

R: A counselor seems to have learned that being a good group leader means controlling the group. She over-plans and does not allow group members space to interact. She is better when they talk to her rather than with each other.

W: The leader and the group want Quadrant II activities that focus on their genuine and immediate responses to each other.



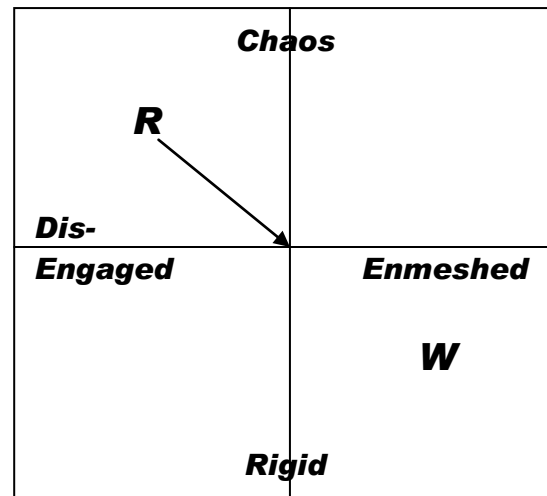
Discussion. The group leader’s supervisor tasked her to do some group creativity building activities and encouraged her to actively listen to what the group members were experiencing. After an initial panic the group leader became better at controlling her level of anxiety and increasing the degree of collaboration with the group members.

Quadrant III: Activities to Use Structure to Encourage Interaction Among Members

R: You are serving on a multi-level team to guide your agency’s accreditation. Personality conflicts emerge at the first meeting, and the designated leader asks everyone to be “nice.” You have a relationship with the top manager who asks you about the Team. What can you tell her that the group needs?

W: They want Quadrant III activities that focus them on being a team and need the opportunity to explore the process of cooperating.

Discussion. When task groups convene, often the group members are solely focused on the accomplishment of some goal, not on how well people get along with each other. The group leader selected a group technique that involved obtaining consensus from the entire group membership on a simple task in order to provide the experience of successful collaboration. Building on that success and some sense of structure, the group began to trust each other and working connections were formed that continued.

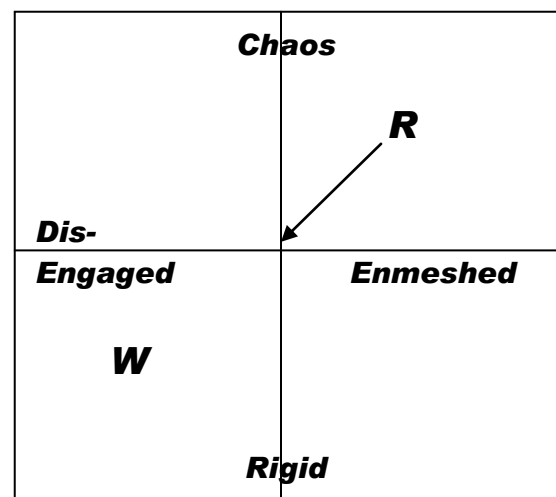


Quadrant IV: Activities to Encourage Individual Development

R: A new counselor is concerned that the counseling group members do not feel good about him, and he minimally does his plans in favor of what the group wants to do. While the group seems to enjoy being together, no one reports making progress in their treatment.

W: They need Quadrant IV activities that focus on the work that has them in the group.

Discussion. Group leaders would enjoy the satisfaction of being well-liked by clients or students in group work courses. In order to provide a balance between support and challenge that inspires individual growth, group leaders need to plan purposefully. In this case, the group leader began to do “Go ‘rounds” that asked each member to offer a personal reflection after a group task, in order to get the members to share the meaning derived on a personal level.



Conclusion

While group leadership is a complex, multi-dimensional undertaking that can require years of experience to begin to master, this examination suggests a way of objectifying the group issues and identifying potential activities to facilitate significant changes in group functioning. Applying the family assessment, Circumplex Model (Schrodt, 2005) to group work offers immediate feedback and suggests the type of activity that might be used to bring the group into more balanced functioning.

The Circumplex Model's main goals include balancing separateness and togetherness, balancing change and stability, and improving communication skills, thus making the model a suitable model when working with a family or group. Schrodt (2005) created a three-dimensional map outlining the Circumplex Model, and explained how using the map can help couples and families work through the changing family dynamics throughout a crisis period. It is expected that families will have *ups and downs*, going through balanced and unbalanced periods. The Circumplex Model focuses on changing patterns and interactions, and helping families to return to a state of cohesiveness. Thus, the communication component is a facilitative aspect of the Circumplex Model, and enhances or hinders the group's "movement on the other two dimensions" (Perosa & Perosa, 2001, p. 407). Visually replicating the Circumplex Model in group work enables group leaders to do assessment and intervention in productive and effective ways. Another helpful aspect is the ability of the client to view the model map as it presents the client with a visual of what the experience looks like, helping them "see" how they are functioning. Considering the original intent of the Circumplex Model to portray a relational analysis, there is a great deal of information that can be culled from the group experience within a relatively simple matrix in order to determine what is being experienced in that unique context in that present time.

Group leaders, classroom teachers, and business meeting facilitators all need to monitor and facilitate individual and group movement, or move along the group as set before them in order to achieve some specific goals. The Circumplex Model enables group leaders to apply an ecological counseling framework and to be more intentional about selecting techniques or interventions with a specific goal and purpose. To the degree that there is mutuality in devising the social system with appropriate structure that allows for flexibility, to the level of attention and intervention on the interconnections among the group members to allow for interpersonal support, group leaders have another tool in the Circumplex Model to be used in group work assessment.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm