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Leading Mutual Aid Support Groups: Difficult Members and Other Challenges

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A counseling group is a dynamic system in which the behavior of any member must be considered as affecting and being affected by their interactions in the group. The concept of role is useful for describing how individual personality is translated into group interaction. For example, problematic group members such as the “scapegoat,” “deviant member,” and the “gatekeeper” are viewed quite differently if their behavior is understood dynamically. Members of the group who are experienced by the group leader as blocking the work may actually be “allies” when viewed from this perspective.

The Concept of Role in a Dynamic System

Two ideas central to the discussion of the individual in the group are role and the group as a dynamic system. Ackerman suggested that the individual has both a private “inner self” and a social “outer self” (1958, p. 53). When clients begin a group, they present their outer selves as their way of adapting to the pressures and demands of the group context. Their pattern of action represents their social role.

More recently the concept of *impression management (IM)* has emerged as a model for the way in which people present themselves to others to effect how they wish others to perceive them. This model is rooted in the early work of Erving Goffman (1959) whose book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, explored the way we consciously or unconsciously shape the image projected to others. More recently, social psychologists have been exploring the topic of self presentation, impression management, and interpersonal behavior in a number of contexts (see Learly, 1996; Schlenker, 2003). In the dynamic system of the group these roles may in fact be shaped by the interaction in the group and serve a group purpose.

Informal Roles in the Group

Whenever a collection of individuals are brought together, an entity called the group-as-a-whole is created. The entity created is more than the sum of its parts

(members). We can't easily see this entity, but it is there. This entity has properties such as norms, rules, roles, taboos, etc., which are only evident in that the group members act as if they exist. For example, when over time counselors notice group members avoiding painful topics, they can infer the existence of shared norm of behavior of avoidance and the existence of an unstated taboo. Every counseling group also creates informal roles for members to help in its work, even though this process might never be openly acknowledged or even recognized. For example, in a counseling group led by a professional who guides the discussion as a leader with external authority, one or more internal leaders may emerge as if they had been elected. By responding positively to them, group members encourage the internal leaders' assumption of this role.

In another example, a member of a boys' adolescent group who exhibits behaviors defined as "weak" may be scapegoated by group members as they project onto him their own concerns about their emerging identity. The group leader who understands this group scapegoating behavior as a form of communication by the group will not make the mistake of identifying with the scapegoat versus the group, and instead, try to be with both at the same time (Shulman, 1967, 2009a, 2009b). If that member quits the group another member may be ready to take his place unless the leader helps the group deal with the underlying issues. The crucial concept here is that the group itself has something to do with assigning and encouraging the playing of the individual role and members, for their own reasons, volunteer for the job.

The "Deviant" Member

One of the most difficult members for group leaders to deal with is the one they experience as the "deviant" member. The term deviant is used here broadly to describe a member whose behavior deviates from the general norms of the group. This deviation can range from extremely inappropriate and disconnected behavior (e.g., a participant who refuses to stop talking at the first meeting or a member who manifests psychotic behavior) to one whose actions deviate only mildly or sporadically (e.g., a member who stares out the window while the rest of the group is deeply involved in a discussion or monopolizes the conversation always raising their own concerns).

We need to make two major assumptions about such behavior. First, deviant behavior in the group is always a communication. The group leader's task is to figure out what the member is saying. The second assumption is that deviant behavior is often "speaking" for group-as-a-whole. That is, just as the group may use a scapegoat as a means to deal with difficult feelings, a deviant member may play an important role for the group by raising an issue or emotion shared by others.

This difficulty in understanding the behavior is compounded by group leaders often experiencing the behavior as negative and directed toward them, thus activating powerful defensive emotions. For example, group leaders may see acting-out behavior in a first session of a children's group as a test of their authority. The message really is: "Who are you and what kind of group leader will you be?" That is most likely a question shared by all of the group members. In a similar manner, when a member of a parents' group inquires in the first session, even politely, if the leader is married and has children,

the underlying questions may be: “Can you understand what we are feeling and can you help?” The young defensive leader who cites his or her graduate training or responds with a rote “We are here to talk about you not me!” is not going to be helpful. In contrast, the leader who acknowledges the members concern and says: “I think you are wondering if I am going to be able to understand what it’s like for all of you. If I’m to understand, you are going to have to tell me” has a better chance of developing a therapeutic alliance.

In a mandatory group for persons convicted of driving while intoxicated (DWI), one member who is in what Prochaska and DiClemente (1982) describe as the pre-contemplation stage, openly and most strongly resist accepting he has a problem. When the group in the third session finally begins to discuss “triggers” that lead to drinking and relapses, he begins to cry and reveals that he had been driving drunk when he crashed, killing his wife. This helps to explain why he expressed such strong denial of an alcohol problem, a denial shared by many of the mandated attendees, and why he held out so long. He was the member with the most guilt and the strongest feelings needing to be defended.

Reaching for the Underlying Message

Group leaders are often surprised to find normal reactions and feelings underlying initial deviant behavior. For example, a group member whose first comment is to challenge the need for the group itself or who responds defensively about his own need for help may seem deviant at first but not after the source of the behavior comes to light. All that is needed, at times, is to confront the group member directly and to ask about the meaning of the behavior. Two skills are involved: the *ability to tolerate deviant behavior* and the *ability to reach for the underlying message*.

Consider the following example from a group for children who were having trouble in school. The meetings were held after school. John started acting up as he entered the meeting room. He picked a fight with Jim, knocked over his desk, and appeared ready to tackle the group leader next.

GROUP LEADER: John, what’s up? You have been mad since you walked in here. (John remains silent, glaring, with his fists clenched.) Did you just come from a fight with someone? Or was it Mr. Smith (the teacher)? Did you have an argument with him?

JOHN: He’s always picking on me.

GROUP LEADER: Okay, now slow down and tell me what happened. Maybe we can help you on this one.

The group leader was able to reach for the meaning behind this behavior instead of getting caught up in a battle of wills. The leader understood his role, was clear about the purpose of the group, and understood that children often raise their problems indirectly by acting out. The group member may not always immediately respond to the group leader’s efforts to reach past the behavior; however, he or she often understands the group leader’s meaning and will respond to the invitation later. Clarity of role is important, because if the group leader is concentrating solely on his or her limit-setting function (e.g., stopping the fight), he or she may miss the other part of the work. The skill

often involves setting the limit and reaching for the meaning of the behavior at exactly the same time.

Deviant Behavior as a Functional Role

As mentioned earlier, deviant behavior may in some way reflect the feelings of the group as a whole. The deviant member can be viewed as a member who feels a particular concern or emotion more strongly than the others in the group. This sense of urgency causes the deviant member to express the more widely-held feeling, often in an indirect manner.

It is critical that the group leaders not dismiss such a member too quickly with a facile diagnosis, such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder. This would constitute the mistake of attempting to understand the behavior of one member of a dynamic system (the group) apart from the behavior of other members. The first hypothesis should always be that the member might be speaking for the group as a whole. In the first session of a couples' group led by this author, an older member (Lou) attacked "professionals" who were not helpful to him and his wife over the years. On reflection, his comments were actual raising the authority theme (relationship to the leader), which was an issue for the whole group. His concerns and fears about how the co-leaders would lead this group were shared by other members. When the group leader responded empathically to his feelings and then asked: "And are you concerned we might act the same way?" an important discussion of the authority theme began not just for Lou but for the whole group.

The following examples demonstrate two specific ways in which deviant behavior operates functionally: in opening up a discussion of group purpose and in deepening the work already in progress.

Deepening Discussion in a Parenting Group

Expressions of negative opinions in a group often serve as a lever for the group leader to deepen a discussion. In one group on parenting skills, an argument occurred when Mr. Thomas expressed the view that "all of this talk about worrying about the kids' feelings is nice for counselors but doesn't make sense for parents. Sometimes, the back of the hand is what they need." The other members pounced on Mr. Thomas, and a verbal battle ensued. Once again, for new group leaders who are not clear about their function, the expression of an idea that runs counter to their own view of good parenting would arouse a strong reaction. A new group leader could be angered by the jibe about counselors and might try to "educate" Mr. Thomas. Instead, this leader saw Mr. Thomas as expressing a feeling that was, in part, true for all of the parents but was not considered "proper" to express in this group. The leader reached to support Mr. Thomas:

GROUP LEADER: You are all attacking Mr. Thomas's position quite strongly; however, I have a hunch there must be many times when all of you feel the same way. Am I right? (Silence)

MR. FISK: There are times when the only feelings I'm interested in are the ones he has on his behind when I let him have it.

With the group leader's help, Mr. Thomas gave permission for the parents to begin to discuss the reality of parenting, which includes anger, loss of temper, and frustration. The group leader continued by asking Mr. Thomas why he felt he had to express this position so strongly.

GROUP LEADER: You know, Mr. Thomas, you come on so strong with this position, and yet you don't strike me as someone who doesn't care about how his kids feel. How come?

MR. THOMAS: (Quietly, looking down as he spoke.) Feelings can hurt too much.

GROUP LEADER: What do you mean?

MR. THOMAS: It wasn't easy to talk with my kids when their mother died.

GROUP LEADER: (After a silence.) You really know what that is like, don't you? (Mr. Thomas just nodded.)

MR. SIMCOE: I've never had to handle something that tough, but I know what you mean about it being hard to listen when your kids are pouring out the hurt.

In summary, the deviant member who challenges the authority of the leader or provides negative feedback on the work of the group, raises a point of view contrary to the group's norm, or fights strongly and with emotion for a position may play an important functional role in the dynamic system of the group. The deviant member can be an ally for the group leader if the leader can listen to the member as a messenger for the group.

The Gatekeeper

A group can be ambivalent about work in the same way an individual can be, and individual members can take on the function of expressing that ambivalence. This can be described as a gatekeeper role, in which a member guards the "gates" through which the group must pass for the work to deepen. When the group discussion gets close to a difficult subject, the gatekeeper intervenes to divert the discussion.

People often use humor or conflict to protect the gate that can lead to difficult and painful areas, described by Bion as a form of "fight/flight" (1961). A group member, usually one who has learned to play this role in most areas of her or his life, will act out, crack a joke, make a face, start a fight, and so forth in an effort to get the group members and the leader distracted. If the group leader observes a pattern and notes that the use of humor or conflict results in an *illusion of work*, a discussion without affect or real content, then the individual may be playing the role of gatekeeper. The role is supported and encouraged by the group members who also have a stake in avoidance. The pattern sends a signal to the leader that members need help to deal with this painful area. Often, identifying the pattern and simply asking: "What makes it so hard to talk about this?" changes the culture of the group. As members talk about what makes it hard to talk about "it," they are talking about it.

In a group for adolescent teenage girls who were survivors of sexual abuse, the group leader was careful to make sure that each member had control over if and when she

disclosed the circumstances of her abuse. Whereas they had no control over their abuse as young children, it was important that they had control over disclosing it. One member exhibited a pattern of acting out when the discussion became serious in response to a member's disclosure. She sang ribald songs, jumped on a table and danced provocatively, and otherwise exhibited sexualized behavior. At the start, the group members encouraged the diversion. It was only after the group leader addressed the behavior and reached for its meaning that the girl revealed the extent of her abuse, in which her father had taken her to bars, had her literally dance on tables and passed her around to patrons, trading sex with her for drinks. The gatekeeper is often the group member who has experienced the issue even more powerfully than the others and has the most to protect. In this case, the gatekeeper also had the greatest need for support and her "deviant" behavior was a loud call for help for herself as well as all of the members.

Conclusion

This view suggests that the group leader always has two clients: the individual and the group-as-a-whole. The perspective also suggests that the often stated dichotomies forcing a choice between the individual versus the group or forcing a choice between addressing content versus process are false. The leader needs to find the connections between members. Strategies that suggest direct or indirect ways of "diverting" the member or "containing" the member are missing the underlying meaning of the behavior for the member and the group.

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