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Co-Creating Meaningful Structures within Long-Term Psychotherapy Group Culture

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Abstract

Meaningful group structures are co-created within the long-term outpatient psychotherapy group through a hermeneutical interaction between structure and immediate experience of structure by individuals embedded in personal and collective contexts. Co-created meanings expand original group and self understandings and further evolve structures that are stable yet do not exist independently of the narratives and affects of the members who interact with them. Group structures do not reduce, expand, or dissolve but change in connection to the experiences and meaning attributions within the group. This intersubjective process mediates the emphasis within group theory upon leader responsibility for culture building that risks over promoting certain psychotherapeutic cultural intentions over others. Three examples of long-term psychotherapy group intersubjective hermeneutical interaction lend insight into global, cultural, and societal groups.

Co-creating Meaningful Structures within Long-Term Psychotherapy Group Culture

The long-term outpatient psychotherapy group embodies a living group culture that grows from a complex interplay of explicit rules and invisible norms, group structure and intersubjective interaction, immediate experience and process commentary. It is often difficult for group leaders to determine how much and what kind of group structure to implement and facilitate, and how much to let evolve through interpersonal group dynamics and individual personal processes. Too much structure will be experienced as inhibiting, institutionalizing, and stagnating and will create a deskilled, leader dependent group with its concomitant negative transference and high member turnover; too little structure will feel unsafe, non-directive, and out of control with resultant emotional wounding and attrition (Evensen, 1976; Evensen & Bednar, 1978; Kernberg, 1980).

Interpersonal structure has been studied in the group psychotherapy field in terms of type of structure (e.g. role, communication, attraction, status, and power structures, Sampson & Marthas, 1990), content and timing of structure (e.g. interventions correlated with developmental phases, Kivlighan, McGovern, & Corazzini, 1984), and structural processes within group systems (e.g. decision-making processes, Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1985). While Sampson & Marthas define it as that which orders and regulates individual and group behavior, Poole, Seibold, & McPhee assert that group structures “exist only *in* the process of interaction. . . . continuously open to change by the play of human creativity” (p. 76). There is a dual nature to structure: it provides rules and resources that group members draw upon to interact meaningfully, but it exists only through application and acknowledgment in interaction.

A summary of early research on structured versus nonstructured groups (Dies, 1983) indicates that structure implemented by a positive leadership style, which matches the developmental needs of the group and takes member personality styles into consideration, leads to more productive and effective psychotherapy groups. Kivlighan (1997) summarizes and supports later studies that indicate positive group member outcome when the leader utilizes a “task-orientation” early in a group’s formation and later emphasizes a “relationship orientation” (p. 36). Both Dies and Kivlighan conclude that while leaders need to be flexible and moderate in their implementation of structure, leaders tend to be more inflexible, and there is need for future research to develop instrumentation and group processes that identify and promote flexibility.

Examining psychotherapeutic intentions helps to identify intersubjective factors promoting or constraining leadership flexibility. Individual psychotherapy research by Hill (1992) defines intention as “a therapist’s rationale for selecting a specific behavior, response mode, technique, or intervention to use with a client at a given moment within a session” (p. 729). Stockton, Morran, and Clark (2004) define group leader intentions as “purposes, plans, and goals” used “in relation to interventions made in a group session” (p. 196). They identified 835 intentions that categorized into six intention categories: directing the group, directing self, gathering information and assessing members, challenging members, validating members’ experiences, and promoting connections and interactions among group members. Richarz (2008) reminds us that leader intentions are a product of interaction between leader subjectivity and the socio-cultural assumptions that presuppose leader intentions. He offers that leader awareness of personal subjectivity and possible countertransference reactions help to keep therapeutic interventions from misguidance by personally and culturally embedded intentions. In addition, I

will articulate an intersubjective hermeneutical (i.e. meaning-making) interaction between structure and experience that supports the leader in this endeavor, and which fosters group safety and freedom to explore intentions, interventions, and group structure.

Hermeneutics, derived from a Greek verb meaning, “to interpret”, pioneered the idea that individual interior events presuppose and interact with understanding a group as a whole; and the exterior group as a whole (embedded in social, cultural, and global groups) is understood in terms of its individual parts (Dilthey 1900/1976). A hermeneutic circle (Heidegger, 1953/1996) of interior/exterior or part/whole interaction expresses verbally, nonverbally and dialogically as individual and group understanding. Strasser (1985) expands the circle metaphor into a “spiral” (p. 32) representing a process that co-creates meaning as each expression ascends to, and enriches, original understanding. Applied to groups, a spiral of experience, expression, and understanding co-creates meaningful structures that consist of the meanings and properties assigned to them by interacting individuals to whom they provide the basis of interaction.

Notably, when leaders include meaning attributive interventions, group member outcome improves (Dies, 1994; Richardsen & Piper, 1986). Kivlighan and Tarrant (2001) define meaning attribution as “providing concepts for the members to use in understanding their individual experience or group events” (p. 220). However, those concepts cannot meaningfully exist apart from the beliefs and emotions of the individuals utilizing them. Richardsen and Piper (1986) emphasize the need for “appropriate” (p. 834) meaning attributive interventions that accurately reflect the processes in the group and are present at a time members are prepared to work with them. This inter-relationship of meaning attribution and receptivity reflects in studies upon the cohesion construct involved in group climate and culture building. Research summaries reveal cohesion as a complex, dynamic concept (Kipnes & Joyce, 1998; Joyce, Piper, & Ogrodniczuk,

2007) involving relationships between the group participants, between participants and the leader, and between participants and the group as a whole (Piper, Marrache, Lacroix, Richardsen, & Jones, 1983; Burlingame, Fuhrman, & Johnson, 2002). These interdependent factors within the development of group cohesiveness and positive member outcome reinforce that group structures need to change flexibly over the lifespan of a group (Kivlighan, McGovern, & Corazzini, 1984; Kivlighan and Jauquet, 1990).

I suggest that both leader and members co-create 'meaning attributions' through intersubjective hermeneutical interaction between structure and experience and this process safely supports leadership flexibility, and guards against leadership intentions disconnected from group member experiences, group culture, or the social, cultural, and global contexts where psychotherapy groups exist. All types of interpersonal group structure enters the hermeneutical spiral of immediate experience, expression, and understanding including status, authority, attraction, communication, normative, and role structures (VandenBos, 2007) that express through such group interactions as narrative, ritual, role-play, process commentary, questioning, reflection, and interpretation (Dies, 1983; Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2002). The ensuing interplay with group experience is intersubjective in that the structures experienced are products of presuppositions resultant of interactions between individual subjectivities and socio-cultural contexts, which further evolve through socially interacting individuals embedded in personal and collective contexts. The interplay is hermeneutical because it is as though there are individual-dependent structures and structure-dependent individuals that exist as a group only through co-creating meanings. While this co-creative process can also be located within time-limited and problem specific psychotherapy groups, it is within the long-term outpatient group that members demonstrate the high tolerance levels for anxiety, low levels of deviance, and the interpersonal

and diagnostic profiles necessary to enter and sustain this intersubjective hermeneutical interaction (Dies, 1983; MacNair-Semands, 2002).

Understanding group interaction and expression in this way saturates group experience (e.g. intimacy, cohesion, conflict) with new meaning, and structures change in connection to co-created meaning attributions, a condition that Harter (1999) demonstrates is essential for both member self-concept and group culture to grow in healthy, diverse, and generative ways. The following integration of hermeneutics, cultural psychology, and group psychotherapy demonstrates that the hermeneutical spiral is an inherent dynamic in culture building and in psychotherapy group culture building specifically. Three examples of long-term outpatient psychotherapy group travel around the hermeneutical spiral are offered to focus and discuss the interplay of structure and experience that co-creates meaningful group structures.

Hermeneutics

The field of hermeneutics is vast, spanning many centuries and disciplines. A brief synopsis of the movements which contributed to the development of hermeneutical methodology within the theoretical human sciences follows to indicate its relevance for understanding the long-term psychotherapy group (for a comprehensive historical review see: Ricoeur, 1981; Packer & Addison, 1989; Grondin, 1994).

Hermeneutics originated as a practice of systematically and historically interpreting written texts and symbolic artifacts through a process of understanding from another's point of view. An examination of speech, grammar, and symbols located in and interacting with history and culture cultivated this understanding. An interpretation of socio-cultural contexts and the perspectives within them could follow. This method later expanded to include the investigation of human behavior through the examination and interpretation of social interactions and rituals.

Central to this understanding of human behavior was a methodological shift away from reconstructing phenomena in the abstract subject-object manner of the natural sciences toward relying upon the experience of phenomena immediately from within. Wilhelm Dilthey (1900/1972) introduced the idea of a reflexive awareness: through direct experience of either historic or immediate events an implicit kind of understanding occurs, which psychological description can then make explicit. Every understanding and explanation has a beginning root in experience, and the immediacy of this experience and understanding continues to unfold within the socio-cultural and historical world. For example, psychotherapy group maintenance structures (e.g. meeting time, process focus, fees) are developed from pro-attitudes that are presupposed by experience and understanding in the psychotherapy field; they are immediately experienced by group members immersed in their individual and collective systems, and are expressed in relative understandings and behaviors (e.g. tardiness, selflessness, debt).

Contemporary hermeneutics expanded within social theory by including dialogue as one way that immediate experience unfolds between “situated” (Giorgi, 2005, p. 213) individuals. When one suspends attachment to their personal ideas while engaging the insights of another, individual knowledge enriches and broadens through a dialectical process that “comes to rest on a higher level” (Strasser, 1985, p. 33). While individually articulated truths are not ultimate truths, being open to relativity and dialogue re-presents and reconstitutes the insight within these partial truths. This creates an understanding greater than the individual truths alone (Gadamar, 1960/2006; Strasser, 1985; Giorgi, 2005).

Davidson (2001) contributes an intersubjective understanding to this process. He articulates that sharing an organized body of observable data interactively with others is what allows recognition and joint affirmation of the words, symbols, and conceptual schemes utilized.

This shared environment of symbols between social individuals (a triad of subjective, intersubjective, and objective, according to Davidson) allows meaning-making and action. Symbolic interaction theory contributes that these meanings are not intrinsic; they co-create in interaction (Sullivan, 1953; Blumer, 1969) and the symbolic-interpretive standpoint adds that this shared reality “binds” (Frey, 2004, p. 283) individuals together as a group, which is further interdependent with its context. For example, Shapiro & Ginzberg (2006) articulate several ways the symbol of money, reflective in fees for group therapy, originates and is acknowledged, experienced, and expressed in verbal and nonverbal ways by group members. A range of expression including debt, generosity, esteem, and anger result from the intersubjective interaction between this symbol, the presuppositions underlying it, and the personal values and socio-cultural contexts of the group members experiencing it.

Methodologically, the process of getting from immediate experience and expression to understanding in the human sciences is through entering the hermeneutic circle or spiral (previously defined) wherein one starts with experience that expresses in understanding and ends with a superior understanding, which is integrated and expanded again and again. What makes this process of experience, expression, and understanding distinct from other subject-object methods of analysis is that the experiencing person, and the experience researched, is interdependent and the interactive process takes into consideration human initiative, freedom, creativity, emotions, communication, and value systems. However, it is important to note that the hermeneutic circle is not an experience-justifying “vicious circle” (Heidegger, 1953/1996:153), nor does the hermeneutic spiral expand “infinitely” (Strasser, 1985, p. 131) into a boundariless, frameless interaction. While freely interacting individuals are able to suspend personal beliefs to allow the ideas and fields of others to inform them, they remain relatively

situated individuals embedded in personal, historical, social, cultural, and global contexts that intersubjectively ground a “range of possibility” (Giorgi, 2005, p. 213) meaningfully. This contextual intersubjectivity is further articulated by cultural psychology.

Cultural Psychology

According to cultural psychology, socio-cultural and human identities are interdependent. Meanings are neither constructed arbitrarily (the symbolic approach), nor reconstructed individually as one sees fit (the individualist approach) (Ratner, 1999). Shweder (1991) depicts this intersubjective approach to cultural psychology: “the intentionality of a person meets the intentionality of a world and they jointly facilitate, express, repress, stabilize, transform, and defend each other through and throughout the life of a person or the life of a world” (p. 102). Lipman (1992) further defines cultural ‘intentionality’ as a significant and influential state that we interact and grow with, but emphasizes that it is not a fixed conception relatively represented to an individual or group (as is the case in social constructivist theory).

A co-created culture is suggested, one which is intentional and forceful but does not exist independently of the experiences of the members who interact with it. Although it includes an interpretative framework, it is not a fundamentally fixed or universal framework, but rather one that allows meanings to live for as long as is useful. Frey (2004) applies this concept to groups: “A group is not a container with a fixed location, static boundaries/borders, or an existence apart from the environments within which it is embedded but, instead, is characterized by permeable boundaries, shifting borders, and interdependence with its contexts” (p. 283).

Socio-cultural and leader identities are also interdependent and organizational and leadership processes will reflect cultural values (Hofstede, 1980). Certain ‘intentional states’ and not others can be consciously or unconsciously adopted or promoted, manifesting in the ways

interactions are interpreted, group resources utilized, interventions implemented, and behaviors handled. Roland (1988) relates this idea to the distinct kinds of psychopathology and unconscious conflict found in different cultures. He suggests that particular types of psychopathology relate to the potentialities developed in a given society through its socio-cultural patterns and historical development, stating, “The actualization of potential always has a price” (p. 325). Perhaps the actualization of power also has a price, as it is not difficult to spot social, cultural, and global groups, throughout history and in the present, where leadership intentions appear disconnected from individual and collective experiences.

Case studies emerging from group systems theory (advanced by Durkin, 1981) indicate that while permeable and shifting internal and external boundaries provide opportunity for group enrichment and growth, the impact of such boundary crossings must be thoroughly examined within a group for it to thrive, and in some cases, survive (Schermer & Hawkins, 2005; Pepper, 2007). This examination includes awareness of the leader’s subjectivity, defined by both unconscious factors (e.g. wishes, feelings, and fantasies, Billow, 2001) and identity (e.g. character, relationships, positions in groups, and therapeutic method, Richarz, 2008), all of which emerge within group experience (Billow, 2006). When cultural context, leader subjectivity, and individual member systems intersubjectively express and are understood through hermeneutical group interaction, a meaningful therapeutic (or humanitarian) frame of treatment can evolve that strengthens member’s ability to examine transference and countertransference dynamics. This process co-creates a group culture, and co-creates *with* a group culture.

Group Culture

Over time a psychotherapy group will develop into a “social microcosm” (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005, p. 44) of the member’s social-relational world. If the balance between immediate

experience and structure is navigated successfully, members will in time display their interpersonal behavior and discover that they have the power to change it. Traditionally, the responsibility for balancing structure with experience belongs to the conscientious and skilled group leader (Dies, 1983; Kivlighan, 1997; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Leader functions that facilitate normative patterns of group interaction include balancing model-setting participation with technical expertise, and judiciously guarding the usage of structured exercises (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

Recent research indicates that members implement important therapeutic factors that interact with the leader and the group culture (Holmes & Kivlighan, 2000; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005; Joyce, Piper, & Ogrodniczuk, 2007). Billow (2006) articulates that the leader “retains the role of eliciting the group’s emotion and thought, making the process tolerable” (p. 261), but this “containing” is reciprocal among all members, intersubjective as well as intrapsychic, and always involves the leader’s subjectivity. The relational/intersubjective perspective (which credits hermeneutics as one root, see: Stolorow, Atwood, & Brandchaft, 1994) speaks to co-created group reflection, and Schermer (2005) offers, “Co-construction of all group experience is a relational product of the interaction and the subjectivities of the participants . . . the subjective co-created reflection of interactions and context” (p. 4). An important application of this concept by Segalla (2006) analyzes the experience of co-creation and mutual influence in terms of the intersubjective affective experiences and value systems operating in groups. Further, I contribute the intersubjective hermeneutical spiral of group interaction, which co-creates structures that gain meaning by the way members experience, express, and understand them, to advance exploration in this direction.

We can examine, for example, how the hermeneutical spiral contributes to Yalom and

Leszcz's (2005) delineation of "process focus", the "power cell of the group" (p. 150). They articulate how the balance, and balancing, of immediate experience in the here-and-now with process illumination is an operational dynamic essential to all effective interactional groups. Members must experience something powerfully in the immediate moment then must double back and perform a self-reflective loop to examine the here-and-now behavior that has just occurred, thereby permitting members "to retain the group experience, to generalize from it, to identify and alter their interpersonal behavior, and to transfer their learning from the group to situations back home" (p. 142). Doubling back with process commentary entails a range of feedback techniques considered primarily (but not exclusively) the responsibility of the group therapist (e.g. labeling single behavioral acts, juxtaposing several acts, combining acts over time into patterns, pointing out undesirable consequences, identifying analogies to member behavior in the world, and complex inferential explanations or interpretations of meanings and motivations, Yalom & Leszcz, 2005, p. 141).

True to the dual nature of structure, 'process focus' is both an operational dynamic and a group structure utilized for understanding individual behaviors, patterns over time, and consequences. If we integrate the hermeneutical spiral as a group process variable, it would here contribute to and further evolve process focus by first inviting the group leader and members to double back and 'experience' the very 'structure' of process focus. This experience would express in understandings about leader intentions behind, for instance, rate and timing of doubling back, selectivity of experiences to examine, feedback techniques used, etc. Opportunity to co-create a more meaningful process focus expresses through understandings and intentions by members embedded in personal and collective socio-cultural and global contexts. Structures that guide group process become a dynamic part of the system engaged in the process of

structuring (Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1985) as members who bring all of the value systems in which they are immersed, experience leader attitudes and pro-attitudes reflective of the system (and systems) in which the leader is immersed. Emotions and dynamics that underlie structure clarify thoroughly, which Pepper (2007) states will strengthen the therapeutic frame of treatment and increase the group's power to examine its here-and-now dynamics. Process focus becomes interdependent with the intentionality of individual members, and both members and structure intersubjectively "facilitate, express, repress, stabilize, and transform" (Shweder, 1991, p. 102) each other.

In this way, leader and members co-create meaningful structures, and co-create *with* meaningful structures, which become rich in experience, expression, and understanding rather than stale, calculated, uniform, or even oppressive. This process in the long-term psychotherapy group also points to such meaning making potential in our global, cultural, and societal groups, creating groups that are sufficiently open to generate, sustain, and compel growth and diversity without reifying the structures or leadership involved.

Hermeneutically Informed Group Interaction

The following three long-term outpatient psychotherapy group vignettes illustrate moments of co-creative meaning making potential. In addition to focusing on how group members utilize symbols or structures for interpersonal and collective growth (Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2002), these examples focus on how group experience is the product of this symbolic activity, and how it interacts with relational, social, and cultural contexts to evolve further meaningful structures. I borrow an interpersonal, developmental, and existential focus from Budman and Gurman (1988) to portray the examples, which are not intended to convey

empirical findings, but offer to connect theory to practice, and practice to social, cultural, and global contexts where psychotherapy groups exist.

Group example #1: Co-creating interpersonal structure

During a group meeting within the second year, Steve shared sadness and frustration about his inability to connect with his wife Pam, who was not a member of the group. Previously, he had described Pam as emotionally withdrawn and unwilling to engage in activities they had enjoyed throughout their 25-year marriage. Leader interventions heretofore centered on a present-centered focus and group members were earnest in their efforts to be empathic and helpful to Steve. Questions asked included: Who in the group reminded Steve of Pam? How do members experience Steve's interpersonal style? How does the group feel about their methods for helping Steve with this problem? At this meeting, group members reported frustration and hopelessness when Steve claimed his efforts to change his communication style with his wife (a communication structure understood and expanded by previous group interactions) still met with little response.

When a member burst forth, "I wish Pam were here so we could understand why?" the leader asked if the group would like to try a structured exercise to help immediately experience Steve's relational world, and to indirectly understand Pam's perspective, thereby infusing both Steve's interpersonal structures and the group interactional structure with greater meaning. A positive response led to a Narrative Therapy exercise (Freedman & Combs, 1996) that coached Steve to tell the story of his marriage from Pam's perspective referring to himself in the third person. During this enactment, one group member spontaneously jumped in and began role-reversing dialogue as Steve. This discourse was alive and enriching. Steve was able to reveal for the first time how sad and depressed Pam had become since the debilitating injury to their

son through military combat three years ago. The group experienced indirectly the deep grief in Steve's marriage, understood its effects upon Steve's interpersonal world both with his wife and with group members, and spent several groups expressing empathy for Steve, and reacting personally to the revelation of his pain. At one point, after a long, empathic group silence, Steve expressed how connected he felt to the group members. This led to an understanding that Pam's silence "is not really that silent", which expanded his tolerance for ambiguity, and his ability to sit quietly with her at home.

This experience, expression, and understanding served to evolve a meaningful group culture that included further role-play exercises, which enhanced indirect member experiences of each other's relational worlds. For example, Steve asked group members to role-play other members of his family. The leader facilitated this by introducing "Family Sculptures" (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 2006, p. 218) and later "System Games" (Satir, 1983, p. 237). Through these experiences and expressions, Steve came to understand that his family blamed him, in part, for their pain because he had encouraged his son to go into the military structure (Steve was a retired officer). This understanding led to individual and group explanations that meaningfully contributed toward evolving national and international structures for security and safety, acted upon by a variety of member initiated outside of group, socio-political actions.

Experience, expression, understanding, and meaning-filled structures evolved in both Steve's marriage and group culture during the re-visit to Steve's relational structure around the hermeneutical spiral because both leader and members co-created a new interplay between structure and experience. This interaction opened the door to increased levels of group functioning, potency, and skill, which helped carry it into long-term growth.

Group example #2: Co-creating meaningful group rituals

Developmental events intersect the long-term psychotherapy group experience: births, deaths, aging, retirement, adoptions, kids entering school or leaving home for college, and career changes are some general examples. Group structures once useful become outdated, inhibiting, or excluding. Integrating member stages and ages into group culture building demonstrates most clearly how group members and leader not only co-create meaningful structures, but also co-create *with* meaningful structures as they become outdated. The following group example depicts the evolution of a meaning filled “group ritual” (Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2002) as it facilitates, expresses, and stabilizes a variety of developmental events:

In one group meeting at around the sixth year, a celebration was occurring for Bill who had reached a significant developmental milestone in his struggle to stay clean and sober. At the inception and formation of this group clear rules had been articulated by the leader and explicit norms established concerning secular celebrations and the therapy format. The leader felt that group sessions were for psychotherapeutic work and secular celebrations could occur, if desired, outside of the therapy session. Often groups do begin to share with each other their outside interpersonal life through wedding invitations, retirement parties, baby showers, etc. This group had not chosen to do that, and experimented instead with keeping interactions within the group therapy format to guard against draining affective experiences in extra group activity. However, as Bill approached the seven-year anniversary of his sobriety date, group members requested some in-group symbolic acknowledgment of this significant anniversary. Over the years, members had experienced Bill’s painful struggle to stay sober and they understood the growth involved, both for Bill and between group members.

Bill loved the outdoors and often took refuge in hiking when he felt an urge to drink, so the leader and members co-created a brief ritual where participants could find and bring a small

stone for Bill and write upon it words of strength. This structure evolved deeper experiences of cohesion, diverse expressions of support, and increased understanding about group potential, and a similar ritual co-created when a member adopted a baby after a long struggle with infertility. Gradually over time, members independently began organizing other celebrations within the group, increasing in frequency and generalizing to all manner of events: birthdays, promotions, and even material acquisitions. Additionally, food and tea began to appear and the group meeting was lasting later into the evening. The leader remained actively curious about this evolving structure so members could experience, understand, and explain its significance within their group culture.

In one explanation, group members expressed that they were celebrating both the individual person *and* their experience of increased group cohesion and ability to work together. Understanding ensued about how the quality of food and tea symbolized the positive regard the group had for a member, and care was being given to provide excellent, if not superior, value each time. One member then suggested that these meanings might now find more potent, and growth producing expression if directed back into interpersonal group interactions. Members and leader collaborated to pare back down to the simpler symbol exchange reserved for significant developmental events within the group psychotherapy culture (i.e. omitting extra group milestones indirectly related to group history or process). This structure was flexible enough to allow a diversity of new experiences, expressions, understandings, and meanings to grow, but simple enough to temper competition, elaboration, and a disproportionate allocation of group time spent in execution.

This example demonstrates how when the leader, members, *and* co-created structure enter the hermeneutical spiral, structures will exist only for as long as they hold group

significance and potency and will evolve meaningfully along with the maturation of the group and its members. This lends insight into familial, social, and cultural rituals, which if not balanced with experience, can become uniform, stale, impotent, oppressive, and dysfunctional.

Group Example #3: Co-creating meaningful transition and termination structures

Many losses occur within long-term psychotherapy groups, amplifying the co-creative need for meaningful structures. Quite usual are diagnoses of serious illness, the deaths of loved ones, national and international emergencies, natural catastrophes, and outbreaks of war where loved ones live or visit. These existential events pull on us as collective national, cultural, and global groups to assist each other in humanitarian ways.

One way this affects a long-term outpatient psychotherapy group is when existential crisis compels extra group interaction. For example, members may need to receive assistance during a debilitating injury getting to and from group; or perhaps member's extended family contacts or resources in other states and abroad can assist another member in national and international emergency. These levels of extra-group interaction can entail meeting family members and friends, and meaningful group structures must evolve to experience and understand these interactions within the group culture. Pepper (2007) warns that extra-group contact that builds into the structure of a group may change the frame of treatment and weaken the group's power to process experiences within the group unless the emotions and dynamics that change the frame are thoroughly understood. Because some types of outside contact are inevitable, this can become a positive group factor (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) if extra-group experience is described to the group, experienced, expressed, and understood. For example, the meaning of confidentiality grows in understanding as members decide how to generalize it to outside experience (e.g. how members choose to be introduced or utilized and what kind of information can be shared).

Concurrently, if members meet the family or partner of another member, this experience can enhance understanding, empathy, and meaning during in-group family role-plays.

The following group example addresses existential loss. In this case, terminal illness is the dynamic with which the group enters the hermeneutical spiral. Meaningful structures, and structural meanings, are co-created around the experience and understanding of the finitude of life, loss, and grieving:

At about the eighth year in one group, members collaborated to provide food and transportation to Lin, suddenly diagnosed with a late stage terminal illness. While in earlier years of group development outside involvement kept to a minimum to discourage sub-grouping and compromises in confidentiality, this structure was experienced impotently in this crisis and members expressed readiness to co-create extra-group structures of involvement that would hold greater meanings of support.

Within this hermeneutical process there were expressed concerns about how much outside group participation is appropriate, the unequal availability of individual members, determining who would co-ordinate extra-group care, and where that would happen (within or outside of the group). Understandings arose about the balance of appropriate caretaking versus co-dependence, and the difference between therapy groups and support groups. For example, when one member gave Lin a ride home from group, it was difficult to know what to do when Lin's husband needed help driving the kids somewhere. When this experience was shared in the group, Lin expressed her need to empower and not rescue her husband from increased parenting and domestic responsibility during this transition. Group understanding about this particular meaning of support in Lin's family system helped evolve structures with therapeutic boundaries.

Group maintenance experiences occurred around finding the balance of time allotted

within the group for processing this profound existential experience versus concerns perceived as more trivial. As the group intersubjectively experienced and understood the way illness was progressing in Lin's life, a meaning filled group structure evolved to include the first fifteen minutes of each group session for present-centered reactions to this painful experience followed by process commentary. After, the leader led a moment of silence to honor the gravity of the situation before moving into other group experiences. In later months when home confinement became necessary for Lin, group structure evolved again to include check-ins at the beginning of group sessions about Lin's courageous efforts to live and the experience and understanding of this by the group members, before a moment of silence and focus upon other group interactions.

During Lin's final 10 days at a hospice home, the group arranged with the health care personnel to have a confidential group meeting in her room, which included verbal and non-verbal expressions of support. After, they coincidentally met some of Lin's family. Lin came from an Asian American culture that meaningfully approached death through certain rituals and customs. Group experience of these customs interacted with psychotherapy group culture and created a cross-cultural understanding that compelled the group to co-create a transitional ritual for Lin. They wrote statements of gratitude and strength upon ribbons to wrap around a small pillow for her to hold in her last days of life, and early days of death. Later, out of reverence for Lin, the group chose to hold her group membership space open for several months, increasing meaningfulness by paying for the open space, and the leader participated in this as well.

This evolving, co-created, meaning filled group structure gave Lin continual experiences of group connection, helped the group to understand loss and their individual patterns of handling loss, generated expressions of grieving, and led to further experiences of separation as

“less anger laden, and less guilt laden, making separation a genuine maturational event” (Mann, 1973, p. 36). This existential experience grew personal and cultural understandings about living and dying, and structures evolved within and outside of the group to facilitate deeper meaning-making interactions between members, and with life.

Conclusion

In each of these vignettes, the co-created structures added diverse meanings that deepened and enriched with each experiential interaction with the structure, symbol, or norm around the hermeneutical spiral. As the immediacy of group member experience intersubjectively unfolded in the midst of the socio-cultural world, meaningful structures co-created with and within the group culture.

This dynamic hermeneutical interaction furthers the development of group theory and practice by inviting leadership style, cultural intention, social interaction, and process focus itself into group experience, expression and understanding, which further evolves meaningful theoretical and practical structures. This interaction is a process and not a protocol; it avoids reifying its own concepts by entering those very concepts into the hermeneutical spiral.

As a group process variable, the impact of this interaction between structure and experience can be measured in future empirical research through outcome assessments administered throughout the developmental lifespan of a long-term group to determine if it has relative levels of stage specificity or a definitive pattern of evolution. Specific group structures need assessment for degree of mediation, as some structures may be more amenable to meaningful evolution than others may, and many group factors intersect outcome as well. Locating and facilitating this process within social, cultural, and global groups can contribute to co-creating meaningful structures that operationally carry human development into long-term

growth.

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