

CHANGES IN PERCEPTION AND INTERACTION IN GROUP THERAPY

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Group therapy for nurses was initiated at Brockton VA Hospital in 1955 when the Chief Nurse, from whom several of the staff nurses had been seeking guidance about their personal problems, suggested that they form a therapy group. The group was organized on a voluntary basis with the senior author as group leader. Sessions were scheduled weekly for periods of an hour and a quarter. Twelve nurses joined the first year and met every week from October until the end of May. This procedure continued for the past four years. Membership varied from year to year with some drop-outs and some new members applying each year.

The basic agreement, set forth by the group leader at the beginning of the year, included the usual stipulations about confidentiality of material, regular attendance, and responsibility to participate in the group work. Psychology trainees acted as observer-recorders, but the group members themselves were responsible for providing continuity by reviewing the events of the previous session as each session began. At the end of one hour the regular sessions were concluded. During the next fifteen minutes the therapist polled the group in round-robin fashion asking each member to comment on his impressions of what had been going on during the past hour. This was followed by the group leader's summary of the session.

One objective of these sessions was to create a group atmosphere in which members would feel free enough to discuss their current feelings and reactions. Content involved relationships at work, at home, in social situations, or in the group setting itself. Since the latter provided the one situation in which all members had an opportunity to share an immediate experience, the leader tended to emphasize the importance of the group setting for fruitful discussion. From time to time the leader or one of the members would note a similarity between a situation outside the group which was being discussed and situations which occurred within the group. It was felt that maximum therapeutic value would be obtained from exploring on-going

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feelings and behavior and from attempting to understand them in the light of previous events in the history of the individual and of the group. It was felt that the group therapeutic process would be helpful in developing more realistic images of self and others by providing the members with opportunities to distinguish more clearly between the demands of reality and their perception of these demands in the light of their individual needs.

During the first three years of this group's history subjective post-evaluations of the progress of the group and its individual members were made by the group leader and the trainee-recorder. However, it was felt that a more definitive investigation into the areas of process and progress should be made. When the social psychology training program was established at this hospital, an opportunity was provided to utilize some of the techniques for analysis of small-group behavior. Two social psychology trainees were assigned to act as observer and recorder. Several hypotheses were formulated and appropriate instrumentation was developed to test these out.

Previous studies (1, 3) have emphasized changes in the perception of self and relief of distress resulting from psychotherapy. We were interested in the effects of this type of psychotherapy upon changes in perception of others as well as of self and in the relationships between perception and interaction.

It was hypothesized that comparisons between data from the beginning sessions and subsequent sessions would show the following changes:

1. Self-ratings will become more positive.
2. Perceptions of self and other group members which are discrepant will correspond more closely: i.e., deviations between self-ratings and ratings of other group members by each subject will become smaller.
3. Positive sociometric choices will be made primarily among the high contributors and negative choices primarily among the low contributors to group progress. (4, 5)
4. Interactions will be directed predominantly toward those members who are most active and who contribute most to the group's progress.

The experimental subjects were ten nurses who volunteered to attend weekly group therapy sessions. Four of these were male and six female. Controls were seven female nurses who worked in one building of the hospital.

After the fourth, fourteenth, twenty-fourth and thirty-fourth sessions, members of both therapy and control groups were given two types of rating forms to be filled out. One of these was a modification of the Semantic

Differential (1) consisting of nine seven-point scales representing the areas of Evaluation, Activity and Potency as follows:

Evaluation: Bad-Good; Worthwhile-Worthless; Pleasant-Unpleasant.
 Activity: Passive-Active; Fast-Slow; Cold-Warm.
 Potency: Strong-Weak; Soft-Hard; Rugged-Delicate.

Each group member was requested to rate himself, his mother, his father and every other group member on these scales.

The second rating form was a Sociometric Questionnaire containing eight pairs of items. Each member was asked to designate the group members with whom he felt most comfortable and least comfortable; those who seemed to have the most friendly feelings toward him and those who had the least friendly feelings; those who understood him most and those who understood him least; those toward whom he had the most friendly feelings and those toward whom he felt least friendly; those whom he thought he understood most and least; those who most helped him and those who least helped him to express himself; those toward whom he felt the group leader had the most friendly feelings and those toward whom the leader seemed to be least friendly; the members whom the leader seemed to understand best and the ones he seemed to understand least.

All group members were independently rated by the therapist, observer and recorder on a three-point scale according to a subjective estimate of their contribution to the group and their own progress, i.e., High, Medium and Low. The three judges rated the ten members identically with the exception of one member whose estimate varied by only one scale point for one judge. The pseudonyms for the members in the three groups are:

High: Bert, Ted and Alice.
 Medium: Ed, Dinah, Bud and Donna.
 Low: Dora, Cathy and Lenore.

In education and in professional status the High and Medium groups were homogeneous with the Low group somewhat lower. The members of the three groups were randomly distributed with respect to age. In regularity of attendance the Highs were least frequently absent and the Lows most. Two of the three High members were male; two of the four Medium members were male; the three Low members were female. The therapy and control groups did not differ significantly in age, education or hospital status.

Synopses of the four group sessions under study follow:

4th Session

Present: Highs—Ted and Alice; Medium—Donna; Lows—Dora and Cathy. Donna complained about her relationships with authority and with subordinate figures as well. She was supported by Cathy and was questioned by Ted and Alice who attempted to relate these situations to what was going on in the group. Ted also attempted to relate his current feelings to experiences in his own personal history.

14th Session

Present: Highs—Alice, Bert, Ted; Mediums—Bud, Ed; Lows—Dora, Lenore, Cathy.

First Dora, then Ed attacked Alice, Bert and Ted who were sitting at the upper end of the table near the leader for excluding them from the discussion. The High members banded together and defended themselves, attacking Ed as being imperceptive. Dora blamed herself while Ed accused Alice of being a phony.

24th Session

Present: Highs—Ted, Bert, Alice; Mediums—Dinah, Donna, Bud, Ed; Lows—Lenore.

Dinah reluctantly presented a problem regarding change of job but stated that the group was too analytical, referring the Highs. Ed and Donna partially supported the value of insight while Bert was ambivalent. Alice and Ted combined with Donna to discuss Dinah's problem. Ed finally asked the group to leave off playing with Dinah's feelings.

34th Session

Present: Highs—Ted, Bert, Alice; Medium: Ed, Dinah, Bud and Donna. Lenore, Dora.

Ed let the group know he doesn't trust it. Bert and Ted agreed that trust is an important problem related to authority figures. They raised the question of promotions and ratings—how can you be honest? Alice criticized the leader for stopping an attack on Donna—Bert agreed. Ed introspected, helped by Bert's gentle probing. Bud discussed dependency needs. Ted wished he could be more open with his superior. Bert and Alice engaged in free-associations to the mystification of the others. Alice talked about difficulties in communication and understanding.

RESULTS

I. Semantic Differential Data

1. The ratings of four control group members, all female, were available for comparison between the first and third testings (4th and 24th weeks). Their difference-scores for these testings were compared with those of the four female members of the therapy group which were available for the same testings. The deviations between self-ratings and ratings of others were summed for each subject on both testings. The difference between a subject's total self-other discrepancy score on the first testing and the score on the second testing was interpreted as indicating greater or less perceived distance between self and others over time. A larger total discrepancy score for any subject on the third testing than on the first testing indicated greater perceived distance while a smaller discrepancy score on the third testing than on the first indicated less perceived distance.

The therapy group members showed a greater decrease in self-other discrepancy than did the control group on the Activity ($p < .10$) and Potency ($p < .10$) factors but not on the Evaluation factor.²

2. Self-ratings of five therapy group members were available for comparison between the first and fourth testings (4th and 34th weeks). Table 1 shows a significant downgrading of Self in Potency with all other distributions falling short of significant change. However, the trend is evident for less positive ratings of Self (10 out of 15 ratings being lower and one higher), Mother (7 out of 15 lower and 3 higher), and Father (7 out of 12 lower and 4 higher) as compared with ratings of the group leader (7 higher, 6 lower).

TABLE 1
CHANGES IN RATINGS BY THERAPY GROUP MEMBERS FROM FOURTH TO THIRTY-FOURTH WEEKS

	Self (N = 5)			Mother (N = 5)			Father (N = 4)			Group Leader (N = 5)		
	+	0	-	+	0	-	+	0	-	+	0	-
Evaluation	1	2	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	2
Activity	0	2	3	1	3	1	2	0	2	3	0	2
Potency	0	0	5*	1	0	4	1	0	3	2	1	2

* Significant at .06 level according to binomial test.

² Mann-Whitney U-Test.

The general downgrading tendency after thirty-four weeks of group therapy is surprising unless it is interpreted as reflecting greater freedom to be *critical of self and of those most intimately related to self* (Mother and Father), to be less defensive with less need to idealize. On this basis, it might be hoped that a sounder basis for enhanced self-esteem could be achieved through continued exposure to therapy. The trend toward less distance between Self, Mother and Father may also indicate a beginning of *greater acceptance and integration of qualities previously rejected as parental rather than one's own*. It is apparent that in this group there was as yet little transference of such perceptions to the group leader as a substitute parent.

The fact that High and Low as well as Medium contributors to group progress made their negative sociometric choices most frequently among the Mediums possibly resulted from a feeling of ambivalence about the Mediums. The other two groups appear to have been more definite in their behavior while the middle group vacillated from one role to the other. This vacillation and uncertainty conceivably could have produced feelings of discomfort in the others as well as in themselves. No such clear-cut pattern was observed with respect to positive choices.

The shift of direction of negative affect statements from negative sociometric choices to positive choices again seems to reflect a growing feeling that positive choices would accept such negative expressions of feeling. This was vividly illustrated in a session in which one member characterized another as a "snot" and a "no-good bum" whose needling had upset him some time prior to the meeting when he had not been feeling too well anyway. The second member responded rather sharply that this needling was probably due to the fact that his accuser had disappointed him in something he had promised to do and neglected. They concluded by agreeing that they could talk to each other in this way only because they knew it was safe in that basically they had positive feelings about each other.

SUMMARY

A therapy group of "normal" subjects interested in help with their personal problems was studied by means of *self-ratings, sociometric choices and interaction patterns*.

Ratings of self and of other members of their own group by a therapy and control group were compared. Ratings of self and others including Mother and Father by therapy group members after the fourth and thirty-fourth sessions were compared. *Changes over time in sociometric choices and in interaction among therapy group members* was described.

Results were interpreted as supporting the hypothesis that after a number of weeks in a therapy group, members would tend to feel less distance between themselves and other group members. Therapy group members also felt less distance between themselves and both parents. At the same time the tendency of members to rate themselves and their parents less favorably than they had at the beginning of therapy was thought to indicate a diminution of defensiveness.

While total interactions were directed primarily to the most active contributors to group progress, as predicted, negative affects were directed not to the low contributors but to the mediums. This was discussed in terms of the effects of role vacillation. No clear-cut pattern of direction of positively toned acts was observed.

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