

Understanding Groups

Introduction

“Whenever there is a problem in a group or organisation it’s members, in their attempts to solve it, tend to become “individual psychologists”, each feeling “it has nothing to do with me”. They identify another person who is or has “the problem”, who is to blame for it. They are satisfied that getting rid of or counselling this difficult, troublesome, or deviant individual will solve the group’s or the organisation’s problem. Making an individual a scapegoat and treating or replacing him or her are “simple solutions” but destructive of the individual and costly for the group or organisation and its task”. From “Rediscovering Groups”.

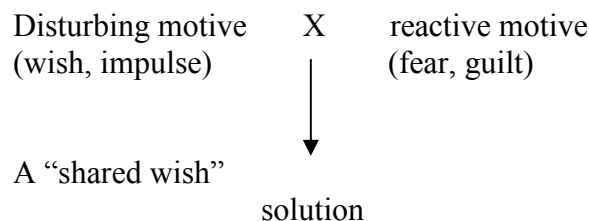
WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING GROUPS

Example

A mental health team, riven with conflict and characterised by a lack of communication between the different team members, who operate as separate individuals rather than as members of a team. It seemed that someone, in the middle of this, was always viewed as incompetent and attacked, or made to feel as if they did not belong to the team. One person in this position left the team and another team member then took his place. Visiting clinicians, who came to the department to discuss referrals and cases frequently left feeling that they had been exposed as inadequate. There was a lack of safety in the group, a feeling that any weaknesses would be exposed, and therefore they were hidden. At one stage the team leader made a complaint about a fellow Consultant working in a different speciality and at the same time attempted to expose one of his colleagues as incompetent on a case that had been discharged some years before, judging that case by against the new standards established over the previous year and the new skills and understandings that had been gained during that twelve month period.

Some ways of understanding this:-

Focal Conflict Theory



In a group, a disturbing motive might involve a wish to be close to others, a wish to be nurtured and loved, angry impulses, a wish to have an exclusive relationship with the therapist or leader, etc.

A reactive motive might involve fears of being abandoned, ridiculed, being criticised, losing control, being overwhelmed by feelings, etc.

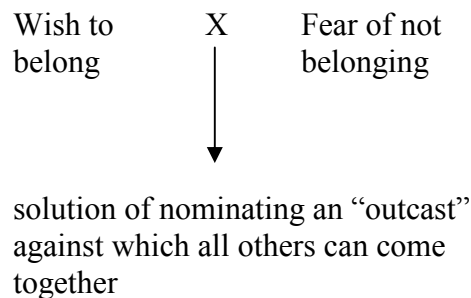
Restrictive solutions: may focus entirely on the fears, abandoning for the moment any effort to satisfy the shared wish. Or it may allow some satisfying of the wish.

Enabling solution: deals with the fear and at the same time allows expression of the wish. Fears are contained and at the same time members can confront and explore the associated impulses and feelings.

Restrictive solutions: might involve talking about trivial issues, blaming others for one's problems, displacing anger that belongs to someone inside the group on to someone outside it, turn taking, mutually maintained denial, etc.

Enabling solutions – acknowledging everyone present has faults, acknowledging that feelings of anger, envy, etc. are human and universal, etc.

So we might see the example in this way:-



Scapegoating theory

The term scapegoat comes from the biblical story of Aaron confessing all the sins of the children of Israel over the head of a goat, which was then sent into the wilderness symbolically bearing those sins. So, the origin of the term indicates the function: to protect the group. In group theory scapegoating refers to the focusing of hostile, sadistic, and hurtful attention on one particular individual. Toker suggests that “the scapegoat is frequently essential for the adequate functioning of a group in that he provides an area into which aggressions can be channelled and focused without presenting a threat to the individual or to the stability and unity of the group. Bion noted the fight-flight groups are prepared to sacrifice individual members in order to protect the group.

An additional idea underpins the process of scapegoating:- that group members project onto others these traits and aspect of themselves that are

unacceptable as ones' own. These projections may not be random but directed to someone who is a "willing recipient".

Garland and Kolodny:- four forms of scapegoating: ostracism, institutionalisation, encapsulation and inclusion through introspection. Ostracism:- the scapegoat is placed in the role of the different one, the troublesome one, the group buffoon, etc. The others attempt to rid themselves of these emotions and qualities by projecting them into the scapegoat.

So, in the example above, there may be a shared fear of being "useless" or a failure, and these characteristics are projected onto a scapegoat, making it possible for the other team members not to recognise their own failings, or at least to avoid feelings of failure and inadequacy themselves.

Or shame – someone is made to feel all the shame in the group.

The idea of "emotional contagion" or "parallel process".

In which teams "catch" the illness of the clients. So, in a team who work with many families where there is a fantasy that if only one family member were ejected this would solve all the family's problems, the team might, somehow, replicate these dynamics.

The same team also went on to institute, as a way of dealing with the waiting list, a model of brief therapy and a policy of not having a waiting list. This created huge pressures to take on a large case-load. What seemed to underlie this was an inability for anyone in the team to acknowledge weakness and a feeling that one had therefore to cope with anything.

We might see this as a replication, in the managers of the service, of family dynamics and parents inability to protect their children from their own and outside demands – indeed, an inability to think about the needs of the children. The demand, instead, is to not complain, to be able to deal with anything, and to meet all demands without complaint or need.

At a more individual level, we might be interested in individuals, their life histories, their particular ways of dealing with conflict, their habitual ways of relating. Are they replicating their own parent – child relationships in the work groups?

Are they narcissists who are (deliberately) seeking power as part of a need for grandiosity, but unable to recognise the hurt they cause? Or other pathology?

Is the scapegoat always pulled into sado-masochistic relationships?

What individual needs are these ways of relating to others meeting?

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