General Systems in Group Therapy

The Principles of Group Psychotherapy
AGPA Distance Learning Event

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A THEORY OF LIVING HUMAN SYSTEMS IN A NUTSHELL

A Theory of Living Human Systems defines a hierarchy of isomorphic systems that are energy-organizing, self-correcting, and goal-directed.

Core Constructs

Hierarchy: Systems come in threes. Every system exists in the environment of the system above it and is the environment system for the below it.

Context: Each system in the hierarchy of systems functions as a system-centered context.

Isomorphy: Systems are similar in structure and function and different in different contexts.

> **Structure:** Systems-centered structure defines boundaries in space, time and context that are potentially permeable to energy/information.
>
> **Function:** Systems survive, develop, and transform from simple to complex by the process of discriminating and integrating differences in the flow of energy-information.
>
> **Energy:** The systems-centered flow of energy and information is defined as a force field of vectors approaching or avoiding system goals.

The Four Systems Defined for Systems-centered Practice

> The person system
> The member system
> The functional subgroup system
> The system-as-a-whole

The Application of a Theory of Living Human Systems

Systems-centered consultants use a systematic, sequenced, and replicable series of methods and techniques to reduce the restraining forces that inhibit the inherent system drive towards the goals of survival, development, and transformation.

The Systems-centered Methods

> **Contextualizing:** increases the awareness of the relationship between the functional roles that are appropriate to the context and goals of each system in the hierarchy.
>
> **Boundarying:** influences the appropriate permeability of boundaries to the flow of information-energy by reducing the noise in the communications within and between systems in the hierarchy.
>
> **Functional Subgrouping**: a method for discriminating and integrating differences instead of stereotyping or scapegoating them. Functional subgroups come together around similarities instead of separating around difference. By exploring the differences in the apparently similar within each subgroup and the similarities in the apparently different between each subgroup, differences are contained and integrated in the system of the group-as-a-whole.
>
> **Vectoring:** directs the flow of energy-information towards the primary system goals of survival, development and transformation by reducing the restraining forces that inhibit the system drive.

The Hierarchy of Defense Modification

The hierarchy of defense modification is the method by which restraining forces to system goals are systematically weakened in the process of contextualizing, boundarying, vectoring, and subgrouping in each stage of system development.

Developed by Yvonne M. Agazarian.

FUNCTIONAL SUBGROUPING

Goal: To discriminate and integrate differences instead of scapegoating them.

Integrating the differences in what is apparently similar and the similarities in what is apparently different is the process that enables us (and all living human systems) to survive and develop.

Saying "anyone else" when we have said what we want to say encourages others to join us and build on our contributions. Building on each other's ideas builds functional subgroups which in turn help us to integrate our differences.

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Say "anyone else" when you have finished saying what you want to say.

Look around so that everyone in the group feels invited to join you.

Don't give up if it takes time for someone in the group to join you.

When you are joined, expect the person who joins you to reflect what you said.
> *Being reflected tells you whether you have been understood...*
> *If you feel understood, nod, to signal that you feel joined, and it feels good.*

If you don't feel joined, say so!
> *Speak up! And let the joiner know if you don't feel joined.*
> *Work together to get a good enough join.*
> *It is resonant joining that builds functional subgroups.*

When you join someone else, reflect what they said.
> *Keep in eye contact when you join.*
> *When you meet another's eyes you meet each other's energy.*
> *It is energy that builds a subgroup.*

Once you have joined, separate and look to the group.
> *When you have been joined, the next step is to build with your own experience.*
> *As you find your own words, look around at the group.*
> *Work along with your subgroup as it builds itself.*
> *When you build with your own ideas, you bring energy into the subgroup.*

Stay attuned to your subgroup.
> *If you lose touch with your subgroup, say so!*
> *Ask the working subgroup to put up their hands so you can rejoin them.*
> *When you no longer resonate with your subgroup, say so.*
> *Say "I dropped out of the subgroup."*
> *It is important for subgroup members to know where the energy of the subgroup is, so it is important for you to let them know when your energy has gone!*

When you have a difference…

Ask if there is room for a difference.
If the answer is "not yet," wait until the group is ready.
(If the group is not ready there will not be energy to work.)
Hold on to your difference until the group is ready.
Test the water every so often so that the group doesn't forget.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES, WHICH COME EASIER FOR YOU?

Some of us are more attuned to similarities than we are to differences. Some of us are more attuned to differences than we are to similarities. One way to tell is by observing how we tend to subgroup.

SIMILARITIES

When you want to join every subgroup as it passes you by, think twice!

Some of us are more attuned to similarities than we are to differences. This tendency is related to our attachment style, and leaves us with a tendency to ignore some of the differences between ourselves and others that it might be important to pay attention to. This tends to leave us open to disappointment when we discover that our relationships are not as close as we thought they were. One benefit of learning how to subgroup functionally is the opportunity it gives us to develop the part of us that notices differences as well as similarities. There are always differences in what is apparently similar, and similarities in what is apparently different.

It is important to be able to see both similarities and differences.

Some of us experience similarities much more easily than differences; therefore, it is easy for us to see the similarity between us and every other subgroup. Learning to subgroup functionally means seeing both similarities and differences. The subgrouping challenge is to notice the inklings that let you become aware that you could also join a different subgroup. Take opportunities to start a different subgroup. It takes practice!

DIFFERENCES

When no subgroup is quite right …

Some of us are more attuned to differences than we are to similarities. This tendency is related to our attachment style, and leaves us with a tendency to ignore some of the similarities between ourselves and others. This tends to leave us feeling somewhat unrelated and alienated and alone. One benefit of learning how to subgroup functionally is the opportunity it gives us to develop the part of us that notices similarities between ourselves and others, so that we experience some common humanity. One way to do this is to work to build on others rather than split away from them.

Developed by Yvonne M. Agazarian.
Please use these exercises only for yourself. You are not yet qualified to practice with anyone else.

Systems-Centered® Training: Suggested Readings
Winter 2019

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