

Systems-Centered Group Psychotherapy: How to Develop a Working Group (1992)

by Yvonne M. Agazarian

Boundaries make a group. Boundaries contain the work energy in the group. Clear group goals serve as a light in the dark so that a group knows which direction to go. Boundaries make the difference between the past and the present and the future, between the wishes and fears and the living reality between realities that change and realities that don't, between the different demands of different places of different roles and the different paths to different goals.¹

Boundaries make a group.
Boundaries contain the work energy in the group.
Clear group goals serve as a light in the dark
so that a group knows which direction to go.

boundaries define the difference
between outside and inside
between the past and the present and the future
between the wishes and fears and the living reality
between realities that change
and realities that don't

boundaries are the difference that makes the difference
between the different demands
of different times
of different places
of different roles
and the different paths to different goals.

Inside the boundaries in space and time, group systems appear,
Outside the boundaries in space and time, group systems disappear

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THE PURPOSE OF DEVELOPING A SYSTEMS-CENTERED GROUP

When group reality is frustrating, the frustration generates tension, anxiety and rage. Containing frustration is necessary if the conflictual elements of group reality are to be identified and addressed rather than acted out or acted in.

The purpose of a systems-centered group is to keep both group and individual conflicts contained within the "system" of group-as-a-whole or sub-group structures, so that the group-as-a-whole can learn how to resolve conflicts, rather than relying on the individual members - who will tend to respond to conflict in old, repetitive, defensive or stereotypic ways.

Sub-grouping requires members to by-pass ambivalence and to join one side or another of the conflict. With opposing sub-groups containing and exploring both sides of the issue, the group-as-a-whole and its members do not have to tie up energy defensively or discharge it into the environment. And when the group is ready to cross the boundaries between fantasies, wishes, fears, and actuality - it has the energy it needs to do its work.

WORKING GROUPS ARE GROUPS THAT WORK!

Systems-centered therapists teach groups to work as a system. As the system develops, so the group learns how to separate symptoms from problems, how to identify the particular defenses which prevent them from solving their problems and how to work together to solve their problems.

Systems-centered therapy groups work together to develop a working group system with clear boundaries and goals. By developing a working system first, in which no person works alone, and every person has the support of their subgroup, working at therapy is not always so hard.

SYSTEM BOUNDARIES²

System boundaries define its existence in its environment. A system has boundaries in space and time. Space boundaries mark the threshold between the system inside and outside. Time boundaries differentiate between its past, present and the future. The state of the group boundaries determine the energy that is contained within the group for the work the group needs to do to reach its goals.

The Context of Boundaries. The environment around the group exists in space and time as a system of its own, and communications from the environment are always present at the boundary of the group system. At the beginning of each group, members cross from the environment outside the group to the environment inside the group. The events and climate of the environment will always have an influence at the beginning of each group. The distraught ward, the distracted clinic, or the disorganized office building will all influence the state of the member's system.

1. Monitoring system Boundaries:

Both the individual and the group have boundaries that separate them from other individuals and other groups in time and space. Both individual and group boundaries open and close to information - and whether they open or close depends upon how easily the information fits with how the system's store of information is currently organized. How each group and individual system develops is determined by how information crosses the boundary and how it is organized. (This is quite different from "what" is being said.)

"Monitoring" group boundaries means that the systems-centered group leader will need to develop his perception of them ... be able to "keep an eye" on what kinds of communication is happening

² Boundary permeability functions to enable information input and output across boundaries. Permeability of boundaries between the systems' sub-systems (its sub-groups) determines what can be talked about in a group and what has to be talked about covertly, indirectly or not at all.

Boundary permeability between sub-groups also determines how deviants (like scapegoats, heroes, leaders and identified patients) are created to contain issues that the group is closed to. It is the "function" of internal boundary permeability to equilibrate the system and keep its stable enough to "organize" itself.

Boundary permeability between the system and its external environment "functions" to govern what problems it solves, what problems it avoids - and what path it chooses in its movement towards its goal.

where, and what those communications mean at all levels of the group: in other words, "to monitor the permeability of boundaries of all systems and sub-systems in the hierarchy".

This is important, because the energy available for group work is directly related to the condition of the group boundaries.

1. BOUNDARIES IN SPACE AND TIME

Make sure your group knows where and when to meet.

The state of the group boundaries determine the energy that is contained within the group for the work the group needs to do to reach its goals.

a. SPACE BOUNDARIES³

Where!

There is no group until it gets there - geographically and psychologically. It is important that all members know where the group is meeting and to be there - both physically and psychologically.

i. SPACE BOUNDARIES: OUTSIDE TO INSIDE

Here!

Your first job is to get the energy contained within the group-as-a-whole system - crossing the boundaries from outside to inside. The clearer the group is about how to bring its outside experience into the group, rather than take flight into outside experience, the more relevant information and energy is available to reach the group goals.

ii. SPACE BOUNDARIES INACCESSIBLE TO ACCESSIBLE

How!

³ Space boundaries: exist between every system and its environment at all levels of the hierarchy:

i. Between the group-system and its environment.

The umbrella hierarchy is like a family tree which defines all the systems that are in it - the one you choose is the one that is relevant to the particular group system that you are interested in.

ii. Between the sub-groups in the environment of the system

Does personal information belong in the group or inside oneself?
Another leader challenge! - to reverse the personal tendency to withhold risky information that comes to mind in response to the group process - and to develop a norm in which the judgment as to whether information is useful data or not for group problem-solving belongs to the group - not the individual! The group cannot use information unless it is accessible.

It is helpful to draw group members' attention to an ignored fact of group life - that from the group perspective, no single member can take responsibility for how the group reacts to what a member says. If one stops and thinks, everyone has had the experience that one can say something one time and be completely ignored, and say the same thing another time and be heard! The message is the same but the group is different!

The other half of this way of orienting group members is to point out that every member has absolute responsibility for the effect on the group work of what they withhold from the group!

b. TIME BOUNDARIES⁴

When!

The group that is clear about its starting and stopping times can do their work in real world time and not be too distracted by fantasies that time is forever.

**i. CROSSING FROM THE PAST AND FUTURE
INTO THE PRESENT.**

Now!

Your leader job is to reverse a general tendency to cross

⁴ Time boundaries: boundaries between the existence and non-existence of the system: the parameters of life in the here-and now (past, present and future) in the group and past, present and future outside group.

Time boundaries mark the coming and going of the system in reality: mark the phoenix quality of the life of ongoing groups that appears and disappear. The minute hand moves into and out of the designated hour. The group crosses from limbo into life and out again. Time boundaries are one of the boundaries that are most important and tend to be most neglected. The group that starts and stops on time has a working quality that is never present in a group where the starting and stopping times are blurred. Time boundaries are also those boundaries that seem most difficult for the leader to keep in focus - clock time does not exist in the primal world - and subjective time rarely relates to objective time.

the boundaries into the past or the future as a retreat from the problems in the present of the group.

The clearer the group becomes about using personal past and the present and the future as a source of information that is relevant to the work at hand, the more the group can put its past experience and future predictions to good use.

c. ROLE BOUNDARIES.⁵

Your job is to help group member's not to take things personally! Everyone has had the experience of saying something only to see it disappear into the group without leaving a ripple, and then to see the same thing make a big splash a little while later!

Bewildering, unless the member understands that the context determines the response, not the person. This is why it is important not to take things personally!

Taking roles personally is taking one's experience out of context⁶. The personal

⁵ **Every person who speaks in a group plays an individualized role for themselves at the individual system level and for a sub-group and the group-as-a-whole at the group-role level.**

A good example of role boundaries between one's individual self and one's group self is when the individual insight into the meaning of what one is voicing for oneself is quite different from the meaning that one's voice has for the group and/or one's sub-group. This can be a confusing and dis-confirming experience, even a threat to one's own sense of reality, until or unless the individual understands that although the words are the same, the meaning carried by those words depend upon the boundaries of the system that they are framed within.

⁶ Systems thinking is an ideal frame for understanding the dynamics of human behavior when the behavior occurs in contexts as different as a small group, a large group, an organization, a society or an individual all by himself.

The systems-centered therapists' attention is not on content but on context. The systems-centered therapist does not interpret individual dynamics but attends to the systems communication transactions between subgroups in the context of group development rather than to the denotations of the content in the communications of the individual members.

Unfortunately, crossing the boundaries between roles often require explicit and openly negotiated skills, skills that cannot become consciously available until the individual has learnt to discriminate between the personal experience of the role and the impersonal requirements of the role context which entails being explicit about the goals of the role relationship

The different behavioral demands on individuals as the context and goals change in their role relationships is well illustrated by the different roles requirements in a marriage. Role behaviors appropriate to parents, with the goal of importing babies and exporting adults are different from those behaviors required when the goal is the management of the business of the marriage, different again when the goal is to relate to each other as a man and a woman and different again when, as one human being with another, they are developing the ability to work and be intimate together in the context of personal growth. Much marital conflict would be avoided if the partners were able to keep their roles appropriate to their goals, and not, for example, to have one member of the marriage relate as

experience of one's role is only part of the story: the part of the story that has to do with personal dynamics and history. The full story takes into account the social context: the group dynamics and the group history. Social forces have at least as much, and often more to do with how members experience themselves in groups.

Every member does better if he can understand his group role impersonally and observe his behavior as it serves a function for the group-as-a-whole - and how it relates to the goals. It is important to help your group learn early that the role one thinks one is playing and the way that the group is using the role is rarely the same. Group role's play a containing function for the group - and the hero or the villain leader, the scapegoat or the identified patient are all ways that a system "stores" information in a sub-system until the system-as-a-whole can integrate it. Thus the hero leader today is tomorrow's villain - and today's scapegoat is tomorrow's pathfinder.

SYSTEM GOALS⁷

2. KEEP THE GROUP GOALS IN FOCUS:

a father or a mother while the other is attempting to relate as a business partner or a lover.

Within the context of sub-group support, the individual members learn how to contain, within themselves and within the group, the experience of the frustration that is generated whenever any part of their individual selves or the group crosses the boundaries in time, space or role.

Boundaries in time are from past, present and future; boundaries in space are from the outside of the group to the inside and boundaries in role relate directly to the context of group, subgroup and member work in relationship to the primary and secondary goals.

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Context is a major influence on the dynamics of groups that leaders need to keep in the background of their minds all the time.

⁷ Systems goals are explicit and implicit, primary and secondary. Primary goals are internal to system and are in the service of the system survival and development. Goals that are external to the system determine the direction in which the system moves and are in the service of mastering the system's relationship with its environment (environmental goals.) Secondary environmental goals play different roles in keeping the system stable. Every system at every level has internal and external goals, and what these goals are can be intuited by how the systems behave. Each system is viable as long as it maintains itself in sufficient equilibrium to survive, develop, mature and master the environment.

To keep group goals in focus. To keep the group system related to the explicit environmental group goals in focus in the realities of space and time. To keep the group system related to the implicit survival and developmental goals in focus in the realities of system developmental issues and environmental influences. To keep the relationship between the explicit and implicit goals congruent.

Where to!

Goals are Primary and Secondary; Explicit and Implicit.

Keep reminding the group what its goal is. The group cannot work in the direction of its explicit goal if it doesn't keep it in mind. Goals orient the direction of the group energy. The group energy is always related to two kinds of goals:

i. PRIMARY GOALS⁸

Primary group goals are Internal system goals that relate to the survival and the development of the group.

When you help the group to maintain its boundaries (in space and time) you give the group healthy guidelines for both survival and development.

ii. SECONDARY GOALS⁹

Secondary goals are the External System goals that relate to the solving of the problems in mastering its environment.

Every system in the group - like the sub-groups and members and the

⁸ **PRIMARY SURVIVAL GOALS (Internal to the System)**

Internal system goals are oriented around system survival and development. System survival depends upon the system remaining in sufficient equilibrium to be able to maintain itself and to keep itself viably organized. System development is dependent upon the systems ability to process differences, perceive the similarities in the apparently different and differences in the apparently similar, and integrate those perceptions into its existing organization. Through this ongoing process of integration and reintegration the system matures from simple to complex. To the extent the group and sub-group systems discriminates between similarities and differences and integrates those discriminations, the implicit goal of survival and maturation is met. To the extent that the group either blocks the work of discrimination or integration, group energy is bound in preventing system boundaries from becoming permeable. Differences are isolated from the system and less energy is available for necessary maturation of the system and survival in the environment. It is for this reason that monitoring the boundaries between the system's sub-systems and the system and its environment is a very important function in systems-centered leadership.

⁹ **SECONDARY ENVIRONMENTAL GOALS (external to the system)**

Secondary goals of the system are those goals that are always related to the secondary goals of environmental mastery. To the extent the secondary goals of the systems are explicit and kept in focus, the group will can direct its available energy to clarifying its goal, finding its path to the goal and to solving the problems that lie along the path to its goal.

group-as-a-whole and you - have different problems to solve in route to their external goals.

3. EXPLICIT GOALS¹⁰

Explicit goals are goals that are explicit: the goals that are stated for the system, or the goals the system says it has! Explicit goals are not always the same as the implicit goal - the goal that is implied by the way the system behaves.

iii. IMPLICIT GOALS¹¹

Keep an eye on implicit goal behavior. If what the group is doing goes in the opposite direction to what the group is meant to be doing, the group will only have whatever energy it can spare from its implicit goal to do its work on its explicit goal.

When you see a group saying one thing and doing another, point it out to the group and ask what it will cost the group to move away from its explicit goal -and whether it is worth it. (Remember, it may be!)

3. SUB-GROUPS

Asking "why are you saying that?"
or
"tell me more about that!"
is a little like
giving another member's boat
a push out to sea.

¹⁰ Explicit goals of the system are those goals that are explicitly stated for or by the system. They are most often, but not always, related to the systems goals of environmental mastery. To the extent the explicit goal of the system is kept in focus, the group will direct its available energy to clarifying its goal, finding its path to the goal and to solving the problems that lie along the path to its explicit goal.

¹¹ Implicit goals of the group system are those goals that can be inferred or are implied by the way the group behaves, and are most often, but not always relate to the primary system goals of survival and maturation.

Saying "I'm in your sub-group"
is like
an encouraging wave from the shore.

Working as a member of your sub-group
is more than
pushing another member's boat out to sea
or
waving encouragingly from the shore.

Working in a sub-group
is getting into the boat
and rowing too!

SOME ADVANTAGES OF SUB-GROUPING:

No member needs to work alone. No member needs to take things personally. When one member gets stuck, another subgroup member takes the next step in problem solving and when the stuck member is ready, he can join the subgroup work again. Every step a member takes is for himself - for his subgroup - and for the group-as-a-whole.

a. KEEP THE GROUP-AS-A-WHOLE AWARE OF ITS SUB-GROUPS

Sub-groups come together around similarities. Sub-group support encourages sub-group members to give information in a non-ambiguous, clear and audible voice, and to deepen the experience that they are sub-grouping around.

Sub-groups separate on differences - sub-group dialogues exchange contradictory information across boundaries, process and integrate it.

b. KEEP INDIVIDUALS AWARE OF THEIR SUB-GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Individuals can belong to more than one sub-group at the same time. This can be confusing and individuals may want to simplify their inner experience by being loyal to one at the expense of the other.

Keep members aware of their sub-group memberships. Encourage them to contain the conflict of belonging to more than one sub-group so that they can get the full benefit of their membership in each one.

c. KEEP SUB-GROUPS AWARE THAT THEIR JOB IS TO JOIN THEIR MEMBERS!

Orient people to the responsibility of publicly owning their sub-groups. Acknowledging "joining" a sub-group is the first step to working in it.

Help sub-groups become aware that the work of sub-grouping is to build on what others of their sub-group members say, by sharing what is similar in their own resonating experience, and thus deepened the exploration of the issue that is at the heart of the sub-group. Avoid the emphasis of differences (which keeps people "safe and separate" from the impact of the resonance).

By encouraging sub-grouping around the differences in the group, differences are contained and explored first, before there is an attempt to resolve them superficially, or to fight over them instead. Subgroups contain for the group the conflicts in the group, by containing the splits while the group-as-a-whole develops methods of integrating them.

SUMMARY: DEVELOPING A WORKING GROUP.

Systems-centered thinking solves a major problem for the therapist in that it is no longer necessary to think one way about individuals dynamics and a different way about the dynamics of the group-as-a-whole. Individual and group system dynamics mirror each other - what therapists learn about one adds something new to what is known about the other. This is the second of four papers that accompany the Friends Hospital series (listed below) on the Systems-centered approach to Group Psychotherapy.

Subgrouping means that every step an individual member takes is for himself - and for his subgroup - and for the group-as-a-whole.

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Working in a sub-group
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and rowing too!

Developing a working group means making clear boundaries to contain the work energy of the group and clear goals to direction it.

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Defense modification means that from the first few minutes of the very first group, the systems-centered therapist influences group direction by teaching the group to how to modify its defenses.

The journey is to * drop the social defenses so that we can meet each other to begin with. *
differentiate between defenses, tension, anxiety and the conflicts and feelings they mask * see how we
build a group reality which no-one wants to live in * contain the frustration without acting out or acting
in * accept the chaos of the unknown without blaming or labelling * and marvel at the emerging that
we can't explain!

Tactical Defenses:

airs and graces, the listening look,
the deflecting question.
and the ritual:
good morning how are you the weather
is fine did you hear about so and
so thanks for a wonderful time.

Bypass Defenses:

better the defeat in the past
than the unresolved fight in the present
better the shadow world of the paper-tiger
than the unexplored jungle of now

Characteristic Defenses:

repeating now what happened before
is a skilful way of creating the reality
that one least wants to live in
but has survived once and can survive again

Unconscious Defenses:

the difference that makes the difference
in the unknown chaos of the group
that make sense in strange and mysterious ways.

Phases of Development mean focusing the group on the defenses that relate to its phase of development. Defiance and compliance are directly related to the therapist in the first phase; suspiciousness, withdrawal, alienation and despair are related to intimacy with each other in the second.

The phases of development of a systems-centered group
are the context in which individual developmental issues
are revisited and re-mastered.

First Phase

two sub-groups balance the power and control
a flight into pleasing compliance
a fight in rebellious defiance
fear of a murderous rage
and the wish for a magical cure.

Second Phase

Two subgroups balance closeness
too far for some - too close for others
enchantment and disappointment
suspicion, alienation, despair,
and the emptiness of being together alone!

Third Phase

the containment;
the inner life of the love, the hate
and the many thresholds of reality
and calling a spade a spade.

With opposing sub-groups containing conflicts
and exploring both sides of every issue
the group-as-a-whole
does not bind work energy defensively
or discharge energy into the environment,
but works to cross the boundaries
between fantasy, wishes, fears
and the here-and-now actuality of the hard work

in reaching therapeutic goals