

This is the first in a series of five original papers from the “Friends Series,” a training that was held once a month on Saturdays at the Friends Hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The series began in the early 1990’s and continued through the decade with two generations of trainers taking up leadership roles. These papers represent some of the earliest descriptions of SCT methods and theory. The theoretical thinking and techniques that emerged during that period continue to be the backbone of the Theory of Living Human Systems and its Systems-centered practice today.

The complete series is available in *Systems-Centered Theory and Practice: The Contribution of Yvonne Agazarian*, 2011, Karnac Books.

These five papers were the first introduction to systems-centered therapy and training at Friends Hospital, between 1992 and 1995. The five papers are: I: Functional Subgrouping, II: How to Develop a Working Group, III: Defense Modification, IV: Subgrouping in the Phases of Group Development, V: Building Blocks of a Theory of Living Human Systems and its Systems-Centered Practice.

Series I: Functional Subgrouping

*Asking “why are you saying that?”
or “tell me more about that!”
is like giving another member’s boat
a push out to sea.*

*Saying “I’m in your subgroup”
is like an encouraging wave from the shore.*

*Working as a member of your subgroup is more than
pushing another member’s boat out to sea,
or waving encouragingly from the shore.*

*Subgrouping is getting into the boat
and rowing too!*

The **subgroup**, not the individual member, is the basic unit of the systems-centered group. Not the obvious stereotype subgroups, like age or sex or race, but functional subgroups. All subgroups naturally come together around similarities and separate around differences. Functional subgroups are different from stereotypic subgroups in that functional subgroups come together around *dynamic differences*, thus mirroring the way that systems develop. All systems differentiate and individuate through a process of integrating ever more complex discriminations: discriminating differences in the apparently similar and similarities in the apparently different.

Once subgroups are “seen” as systems, the therapist can deliberately influence subgroup dynamics in the service of containing and integrating group splits which occur naturally around differences. In systems-centered therapy, the subgroup is the fulcrum of change and there are some specific techniques for mastering developmental conflicts in the group through functional subgrouping. Explicitly encouraging the group to do subgroup work interrupts the spontaneous fight/flight response to differences and replaces it with the discipline of “functional subgrouping” (Agazarian, 1991).

Functional Subgrouping

Systems-centered therapy is the method by which the therapist encourages the group to learn the skills of how to communicate within and between subgroups. When similarities and differences are processed within and between subgroups, integration takes place at the group-as-a-whole level.

“The automatic response to difference is defensive and conflicted. Groups tend to split the ‘similar enough and good’ from the ‘too different and bad’: take in the ‘good,’ reject the ‘bad.’” (Agazarian, 1992). Functional subgrouping exploits the natural developmental process of system splitting and containing. Systems-centered therapy relies on the technique of functional subgrouping to contain splits, metabolize projective identifications and to overcome the compulsion to repeat that is generic to every individual. The technique of functional subgrouping is also the method by which phases of group development are influenced: resistances to change weakened, and the forces that drive the system towards its goals of survival, development and environmental mastery are increased.

Traditionally, in the group-as-a-whole, the first subgroups to appear represent the obvious and most simple “containment” of differences in a group, like sex, age, color, race, and status. Stereotype subgrouping is one of the first ways the group-as-a-whole structures itself to contain its differences and maintain group stability. Later in dynamic development, the group-as-a-whole uses the roles of “benevolent leader”/“malevolent leader,” “the scapegoat” and the “identified patient” as containers for its un-integrated splits around differences. This dynamic is so dramatic in group development, that the less obvious dynamic of “functional subgrouping” can go unnoticed in the developmental process. Stereotype subgrouping is the simplest level of functional subgrouping. Subgroups naturally come together around similarities and separate around differences, thus mirroring the developmental process of discriminating and integrating. Thus the dynamic that underlies the function of subgrouping, mirrors the dynamics of system development and can be deliberately harnessed in the service of containing and integrating group splits. Explicitly encouraging the group to do subgroup work interrupts the spontaneous fight response to differences and replaces it with the discipline of “functional subgrouping.”

The most efficient method for facilitating the subgroup work of discrimination and integration is to encourage the exploration of experience within each individual subgroup before there is any cross-subgroup communication. Thus, by the very process of development, the internal process shifts from the cohesion around similarities to seeing differences in the cohesively similar. This process increases differentiation within each subgroup and increases the permeability potential of the boundaries between the subgroups. When boundaries become appropriately permeable to a transfer of information, similarities between the differing subgroups are perceived and new subgroups can form. This is the process of system integration and the ongoing task of crossing from irreality to reality (and from the unconscious to the preconscious to the conscious).

Some functional subgroups appear as obviously balanced dichotomies in the group that the leader can easily encourage the group to explore: cognition and affect; compliance and defiance; closeness and distance. Others are less obvious and have to be “believed” before they are seen: like seeing that fighting members belong to the same subgroup and are one of two group subgroups balancing the groups’ fight and flight response. When the systems-centered therapist manages conflict through functional subgrouping, the group is encouraged to first identify and then to “take sides” in the conflict, and to do their individual insight work in the supported context of the subgroup. This bypasses ambivalence: the common defense against the experience of being pulled two ways by the forces of both sides of the conflict. The therapist encourages a conscious splitting into subgroups and, by so doing, discourages defensive splitting within individuals. The conflict is **contained** within the group-as-a-whole rather than within each individual. Through membership in a subgroup, individuals are supported in their work of exploring one single side of their version of the conflict instead of denying, projecting or acting out in the struggle to contain both at once.

The Difference Between Functional and Stereotype Subgroups

Functional Subgroups

*all subgroups
join around similarities
and split around differences*

*functional subgroups
contain and explore differences
instead of stereotyping
and scapegoating them*

*functional subgroups
join around similarities
and split differences
between them*

*functional subgroups
"contain" all conflict
within the group-as-a-whole*

*as each subgroup
discovers new differences
by exploring the similarities
within them
so each subgroup discovers
new similarities
by exploring the differences
between them*

*when the differences
within each subgroup
join with the similarities
between each subgroup
the group-as-a-whole transforms
into a new group
able to work differently
from the old group*

*re-integrating around similarities
after deliberately splitting
around differences
moves the group-as-a-whole
along the path to its goal*

*functional subgrouping
upsets the social order
by making a place for everyone
and letting everyone
find their place
to make the social system work*

Stereotype Subgroups

*all subgroups
join around similarities
and split around differences*

*stereotype subgroups
come together
around obvious similarities
like black and white,
male and female,
them and us*

*everybody knows
how to make
stereotype subgroups*

*everybody knows
what to do and what to say
to make top dogs,
under dogs and little dogs*

*everybody knows
how to keep the ups up
and the downs down*

*everybody knows
how to keep the ins in
and the outs out*

*everybody knows
how to make scapegoats
of each other*

*stereotype subgrouping
discriminates differences
and won't integrate them*

*stereotype subgrouping
manages
the hatred and fear
that is aroused by differences
by creating
a social pecking order*

*by having a place for everyone
and keeping everyone
in their place
stereotype subgrouping
keeps the social system stable*

By promoting functional subgrouping, the “container” roles (like the scapegoat or the identified patient) that are created through projective identification are addressed, not by focusing on the individual who takes up the role, but in terms of the subgroup that the individual represents, and the role that the subgroup is playing for the group-as-a-whole. In this way, re-integrating projected differences becomes the explicit work of the group-as-a-whole rather than the “problem” of the individual or the subgroup.

Through membership in a subgroup, individual members are supported in their work of exploring one single side of their version of the conflict instead of denying, projecting or acting out in the struggle to contain both at once. When the systems-centered therapist manages conflict through functional subgrouping, members are encouraged to first identify and then to “take sides” in the conflict, and to do their individual insight work in the supportive context of the subgroup. This bypasses ambivalence, the common defense against the *experience* of being pulled two ways. By subgrouping functionally around the two sides of a conflict, defensive splitting is changed into a conscious split in the service of work. Every individual always belongs in more than one subgroup at once, but no individual can *work* in more than one subgroup at once. By deliberately choosing to subgroup, the conflict is deliberately split between subgroups. In this way, the conflict is **contained** within the group-as-a-whole rather than within each individual.

Summary

Systems thinking differs from more traditional thinking about groups in that it is systems-centered, not person-centered. The behavior of members in a group is therefore understood in terms of system dynamics rather than individual psychodynamics. The group-as-a-whole, its subgroups and its members are all defined as systems which mirror each other in dynamics, structure, and function. The most efficient method for facilitating the subgroup work of discrimination and integration is to encourage the exploration of experience within each individual subgroup before there is any cross-subgroup communication. Thus, by the very process of development, the internal process shifts from the cohesion around similarities to seeing differences in the cohesively similar. This process increases differentiation within each subgroup and increases the similarities between the subgroups. When boundaries become appropriately permeable to a transfer of information, similarities between the differing subgroups are perceived at the group-as-a-whole level, integration takes place and new subgroups can form. This is the process of system integration and transformation and the ongoing task of crossing from irreality to reality (and from the unconscious to the preconscious to the conscious). The very process of subgroups mirrors the dynamics of system development.

Systems-centered therapy is a method which capitalizes upon this principle in the group by deliberately promoting functional subgrouping to do the work of discriminating, communicating and integrating perceptions of differences in the apparently similar and similarities in the apparently different.

References

Agazarian, Y.M. (1992). Contemporary theories of group psychotherapy: A systems approach to the group-as-a-whole. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 42(3), 177-203.