

THE THERAPEUTIC EVENT IN GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY: A STUDY OF SUBJECTIVE REPORTS BY GROUP MEMBERS

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The aim of the present study was to identify events in group psychotherapy reported by group members as being of therapeutic benefit to them.

Corsini and Rosenberg's (3) survey of 300 articles on group psychotherapy was a noteworthy effort to isolate the mechanisms of successful therapy from the professional's point of view. Systematic attempts to identify what is therapeutically effective from the patient's point of view have been few.

Luchins (5) consulted patients for insights regarding their own experience in his study of therapy-group members' impressions of therapist-trainees. Talland and Clark (7) asked patients to judge the value of a series of topics in their therapeutic group discussion. Stock and Whitman (6) studied a therapist's and group members' apperceptions of an episode in group therapy. While their primary focus was not on therapeutic effectiveness as such, their approach to the data was primarily through the patient. Their findings with regard to communality of responses and response categories have special relevance for the present study. Heine (4) compared patients' reports, made by sorting experimenter-prepared statements, on their therapeutic experience with psychoanalytic, non-directive, and Adlerian therapists. Post-treatment consulting of the patient with regard to his experience in therapy—including him as a member of the research team—has been a guiding principle in the studies currently being done on the psychotherapeutic process by Bolgar (2) and others at Mt. Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles.

METHOD

Subjects. Ss were adult men and women who came voluntarily for group therapy on a non-paying basis, in the setting of a research institute. Two groups of 11 Ss each, meeting for 1½ hour sessions over a period of 15 weeks, were studied. Group I met in the morning, Group II in the evening. Groups were formed mainly

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on the basis of *Ss* availability for a morning or evening meeting time. All *Ss* were screened by members of the institute staff. Suitability for inclusion in the groups was based on *S*'s ability to (a) function well enough to maintain his broad social and occupational roles in life, (b) communicate his subjective experience in a comprehensive manner when called upon to do so, and (c) serve as a research *S* for 15 consecutive weeks.

Identifying data for the two groups are shown in Table I.

TABLE I. IDENTIFYING DATA OF GROUP I (MORNING) AND GROUP II (EVENING)

	Group I	Group II		Group I	Group II
	No.	No.		No.	No.
Sex: male	3	7	Education		
female	8	4	high school grad.	3	4
Age: 20-30	2	0	college graduate	7	4
30-40	7	4	advanced degree	1	3
40-50	1	5	Occupation		
50-60	1	2	profess. (minister, dentist, teacher, nurse)	3	9
Marital status			managers & propr.	0	2
married	8	10	sales workers	3	0
divorced	2	1	housewives	5	0
single	1	0			

Therapy. The group-therapy experience provided the *Ss* was non-directively oriented. Group I had co-therapists, a male and a female (R. E. Farson and Betty Berzon). Group II had only a male therapist (R. E. Farson).

Procedure. After each session *Ss* were asked to complete a questionnaire on which the following instruction appeared: "Of the events which occurred in this meeting, which one do you feel contributed most to you personally? Please describe the incident in detail — the group members involved, the specific behaviors displayed, the words spoken (if any), your reaction, etc."

RESULTS

Approximately 375 written descriptions were collected, because in some instances *Ss* reported more than one event per session. After eliminating those in which instructions were not followed, or which did not meet the experimenters' definition of an event, 279 usable events remained. An event was operationally defined as having two components: a stimulus incident or condition, and the *S*'s response to it. The former might be a display of emotion by one group member. The *S*'s response might be a newly acquired feeling of warmth, acceptance, or understanding for that group member.

Categories of events. The 279 events were reduced by inspection to three general classes based on the type of response evoked in *S*. Responses were saliently (a) cognitive, (b) affective, or (c) behavioral

in nature. Within these three general classes, nine response categories emerged, as shown below, with an example for each. In labelling the categories effort was made to stay as close as possible to the *Ss'* natural language.

A. *Cognitive categories*

1. *Recognizing similarity to others.* *S* was enabled to recognize shared feelings and problems with other group members who might provide corroboration, model solutions, or a behavior model. *S* came to a condition of feeling "not alone."

Incident: Another group member describes a violent argument with someone close to her.

Response: "I felt every feeling she described . . . she felt so much as I did that I re-experienced all my anger and emotion which I had had in my battle . . . It helped me to find other people acting as badly as I did, and it took away a lot of the disgust with myself. I felt with her . . . feeling for feeling and I opened my shell."

2. *Increased awareness of own emotional dynamics.* *S* was helped to acquire new knowledge about himself, his strengths and weaknesses, his patterns of interpersonal relating, his motivations, etc. "Increased awareness" ranged from a tentative questioning, to real insights.

Incident: A group member "opens up," and there is discussion about that member.

Response: "*S* gave something today. She bears out my first impression that she is much like my sister with whom my relationships are disturbed (and have been as long as I can remember). I react to *S* like I react to my sister . . . I think I am beginning to glimpse the 'why' of the 'don't like' reaction toward my sister."

3. *Witnessing honesty, courage, openness, or expression of emotionality in others.* Observation, or vicarious experiencing of something significant happening to another was reported as being of personal benefit.

Incident: "The cracking of *R's* defenses. She had been talking with a practiced and genteel manner . . . Suddenly, under pressure, she admitted in an entirely different and direct way that she was a failure in her business."

Response: "I felt that for the first time she was talking honestly from a genuine emotion in response to a strong feeling from some of the group."

4. *Seeing self as seen by others.* This usually occurred as a result of group feed-back.

Incident: "*C's* comment that I sat there like a cold fish."

Response: "It hurt a little, yet I felt it was an honest expression by a member of the group about feelings toward me. It hit home since *T.* had made a very similar comment . . . I feel cold towards people much of the time, often give that impression, I think, even when I'm not consciously feeling cold or aloof . . . It disturbed me, set me thinking about myself."

B. *Affective categories*

1. *Feeling responded to by others.* *S* felt cared for, accepted, understood, supported by others.

Incident: Another tells her, the example she gave was not a silly one, and that he knew just how she felt.

Response: "It meant more to me to feel that the incidents that bothered me were not trivial and silly . . . Other people said also they knew how I felt but I think it was the way he said it, the kindness in his voice and the sincerity with which he said it that gave my self-confidence a big boost-up."

2. *Feeling positive regard, acceptance, sympathy for others.* Such feelings seemed of particular importance if the *S* had previously had feelings of hostility, fear, resentment, or indifference to the other group member.

Incident: One member's description of her emotional problem with her child.

Response: "I gained a feeling of warmth and tenderness (perhaps even affection, although the word is a little strong) for K. Perhaps the greater benefit, though, was the experience of understanding and empathizing with a person who, as recently as an hour and a half ago, was extremely distasteful to me — this being the area of my greatest difficulty in interpersonal relationships."

3. *Feeling warmth and closeness generally in the group.* Here *S* was enabled to feel a sense of belongingness and of identification with the group, and this was regarded as beneficial in itself.

Incident: One member indicates his concern that *S* feels unable to reveal himself in the presence of others. Others then indicate their readiness to accept *S*, whatever his revelations might be.

Response: "I felt rather safe in the group (not comfortable, but acceptable and of some more worth)."

C. Behavioral categories

1. *Expressing self congruently, articulately, or assertively in the group.*

S reported that he had benefited by being enabled to "speak up" in the group.

Incident: *S* speaks out to tell another how she feels about her.

Response: "She had bothered me all along . . . yet basically I had the feeling that I needed to get through to her . . . I guess R. by his comment . . . gave me courage to tell her how I reacted to her. I feel very relieved and a great sense of accomplishment for me to have achieved this."

2. *Ventilating emotions.* Being enabled to express cathartically feelings, especially feared feelings, was seen as helpful.

Incident: Subject expressed in the group emotions heretofore felt to be "childish and humiliating."

Response: "If there is any growth potential in being able to admit emotions which you consider childish and humiliating, then perhaps I've made a small step today. At least, I got rid of a head of steam."

Events were independently sorted into these nine categories by three judges. Inter-judge agreement was measured by an adaptation of the chi square method as described in Bales (1, pp. 100-115). Chi square value computed on an *N* of 279 events was 11.5, $p < .90$ indicating a high degree of agreement.

Frequency of categories. The frequency with which events occurred by category is summarized in Table 2. At least a two-out-of-three agreement was reached by the judges for 273 of the 279 usable events. The following is based on those 273 events.

A Spearman rank-difference correlation of between-group frequency rankings was found to be high ($\rho = .82$, significant beyond the .01 level).

TABLE 2. FREQUENCY OF EVENTS BY CATEGORY, FOR GROUPS I AND II, AND FOR BOTH GROUPS, RANKED BY FREQUENCY FOR BOTH GROUPS

Category	Number of events		
	Group I	Group II	Both groups
Increased awareness of own emotional dynamics (A 2)	46	30	76
Recognizing similarity to others (A 1)	31	34	65
Feeling positive regard, acceptance, sympathy for others (B 2)	10	20	30
Seeing self as seen by others (A 4)	9	15	24
Expressing self congruently, articulately or assertively (C 1)	7	17	24
Witnessing honesty, courage, openness, or expression of emotionality in others (A 3)	10	8	18
Feeling responded to by others (B 1)	7	11	18
Feeling warmth and closeness generally in the group (B 3)	5	5	10
Ventilating emotions (C 2)	5	3	8
	Total		273

A central episode. To gain further insight into the nature of the therapeutic experience the central episode of one session of Group II and the ways in which different group members perceived it, was studied in some depth. The 13th session was selected because it was thought to illustrate rather eloquently the manner in which group members can be helpful to one another. The therapist was present but made no interventions during the portion of the meeting depicted.

The discussion during the session had been about problems related to the direct and honest expression of feelings. One member related a dream she had had, and this precipitated a brief discussion of the relation of dreams to repression. The member, on whom the group was subsequently to focus, remarked that he didn't dream very often but that he did not think he was repressed. Others took exception to this statement, and the member in question was drawn out with regard to his feelings. The next 30 minutes comprised the central episode in which this previously "cold and pretentiously analytical" person (as he was described by another group member) revealed much about his feeling life.²

²The authors will supply, on request, a report containing transcript of the central episode of Session 13, Group II. Address: 1010 Torrey Pines Road, La Jolla, California.

Thirteen events were reported for this session, of which nine involved the central episode directly. Results are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. EVENTS REPORTED BY SUBJECTS FOR CENTRAL EPISODE, BY CATEGORY, STIMULUS INCIDENT, AND *S*'S RESPONSE

Subject	Category	Stimulus incident	Subject's response
Walter	Recognizing similarity to others (A 1)	Group's reaching out to Allan	"I felt like Allan. He couldn't seem to realize people could feel warm toward him."
Wes	Recognizing similarity to others (A 1)	Another group member's commiserating with Allan regarding his mother's rejection of him.	"I again felt the feeling that my mother had wanted a girl and got me."
Saul	Recognizing similarity to others (A 1)	His own remark to Allan about handling tender feelings.	"Many people including myself, do not always know how to handle tender feelings when they are given to us . . ."
Dale	Awareness of own emotional dynamics (A 2)	Allan's and Walter's statements of their inability to express tender feelings.	"This brought home to me the superiority or growth I feel in my new-found ability to express my own . . . Made me feel more competent as a functioning person."
Marion	Awareness of own emotional dynamics (A 2)	Her continued conflict about participating in the discussion.	"I . . . wonder if I am trying to escape something . . ."
Walter	Sympathy for others (B 2)	Group's reaching out to Allan	"Here is a guy who irritates and antagonizes me when he is being cold and pretentiously analytical, yet I felt completely warm towards him when he was talking openly and honestly."
Brent	Sympathy for others (B 2)	Allan's speaking of his desire to express warm feelings and being prevented from doing so by his fear of crying.	"I felt a kinship by memory of a time when I wished I could cry when I was feeling depressed, as though the crying would mean acceptance of one's feelings and a release. I felt closer to him for what he said."
Gretl	Expressing self in the group (C 1)	Sharing with the group feelings about herself and insights she felt she had gained.	"I was happy I was able to tell of my experience and express feelings, which is always hard for me to do."
Florence	Expressing self in the group (C 1)	The general discussion about honesty and closeness.	"I am beginning to be able to express my feelings honestly to others without feeling guilty or afraid I will hurt their feelings."

Brent	Feeling warmth in the group (B 3)	Allan's speaking of his desire to express warm feelings and being prevented from doing so by his fear of crying.	"I begin to feel that I could cry in this group, that the group would accept it. I feel warmer to the group as a whole by reason of our reaction to Allan."
Tom	Feeling warmth in the group (B 3)	The entire session.	"It impressed me as being one of greater understanding and love among most of the members I felt closer to the group than in any of the other sessions."
Tom	Witnessing openness, in others (A 3)	Dale's statement that he is able to cry and is proud of it.	"This impressed me deeply. He said it with such matter-of-factness. I have cried on occasion since adulthood, but very rarely. I felt tremendous relief from tensions but I was not able to be proud of it"
Allan	No agreement beyond "affective" (B)	The general discussion which pinpointed what I was not sure of about my feeling of love from others.	"I feel I am now in the process of exchanging different types of feelings hostile feelings for love feelings."

DISCUSSION

Certain points regarding the findings are noteworthy:

1. Added reliability of the categories is suggested by the strong similarity in the order of frequency with which categories of events occurred in the two groups studied, in spite of differences in composition (see Table 1).
2. Of all events reported 67% fell into the *cognitive* categories. This underlines the importance to the group-therapeutic process of the opportunity for restructuring the self-image through group feedback, and group validation of the universality of problems in interpersonal relating. The intellectual nature of the Ss' research task, of course, may to an unknown degree account for the high proportion of responses falling into the cognitive classification.
3. Out of 273 events, only 42 directly involved the therapists. Also, Ss frequently reported instances in which benefit accrued to them through *vicarious* rather than direct experiencing in the group. Both suggest that the main mechanisms of therapeutic effectiveness reside in the interaction among group members. Certainly such interaction bears careful and continued study.
4. The wide distribution of reported events in the central episode session attests to the variety of ways in which group members per-

ceive benefit as the result of a common group experience. This is in line with Stock and Whitman's findings (6).

5. The categories yielded in the present study and the classes of mechanisms identified by Corsini and Rosenberg (3) in their survey of the literature on group psychotherapy are similar and thus corroborative.

Heine (4) found significant differences between patients of therapists of different schools in the factors they report as being responsible for change. This suggests that particular norms might obtain in a given group as to what is therapeutic, depending on the school of the group therapist. The extent of the influence of such norms would seem an issue for investigation.

Following the lead of van Kaam (8), the authors constructed the following synthetic description of the therapeutic event in group psychotherapy from the categories yielded in the present study:

In group psychotherapy personal benefit accrues to the group member when, in response to a stimulus incident or condition in the group situation, he is enabled to recognize his similarity to others/gain increased awareness of his own emotional dynamics/witness honesty, courage, openness or the expression of emotionality in others /see himself as he is seen by others/feel responded to/feel positive regard, acceptance, sympathy for others/feel warmth and closeness in the group/express himself congruently, articulately, or assertively/or, ventilate emotions in the group.

In other words, the group member perceives benefit to himself insofar as he consciously experiences: (a) a more realistic image of himself, (b) enrichment in his feeling life, and (c) increased relatedness to others.

The broad, humanistic implications of this last point would seem to offer the possibility of extending the perimeters of the therapeutic relationship to include what may be its more proper realm, everyday life. All three findings become more meaningful insofar as they can be translated into the language of everyday use, and that is the task of both the practitioner and the researcher in psychotherapy.

The writers of this paper are led by their findings to speculate on varied possibilities for maximizing personal growth in therapeutic groups, such as structuring by instrumented feed-back, arranging vicarious experiences, and extending availability of the therapeutic experience through self-directed or leaderless groups.

It is abundantly clear here, also, that the group provides conditions for therapeutic growth that are not typically available in the individual therapy situation: the opportunity to witness honest expression of emotionality in others, to recognize similarity to others, to give help and support to others, to see oneself as others see one, and perhaps most importantly of all, to discover, express, or accept oneself in intimate relation to others in the group.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Therapeutic events in group psychotherapy were identified by collecting from subjects in two eleven-person therapy groups post-meeting written descriptions of the event in each session which contributed most to them personally. The groups met once a week for fifteen weeks.

An event was defined as a stimulus incident or condition plus the subject's response to it. The 273 usable events were classified according to whether the subject's response was saliently cognitive, affective, or behavioral. Within these three general classes, nine categories emerged. Events were independently sorted into these categories by three judges with high inter-judge agreement. The frequency with which events occurred in each category was computed. Furthermore, group members' individual responses to the central episode of one session were reported in detail. Findings suggest that the group member perceives benefit to himself insofar as he is enabled consciously to experience (a) a more realistic image of himself, (b) enrichment in his feeling life, and (c) increased relatedness to others.

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