

GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH UNDERACHIEVING GIRLS IN A PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

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Although group therapy has proved useful when conducted in the professional office or the clinic, it has been largely assumed that the public school would offer an unfavorable climate for such an undertaking. The following is an account of an experience in group therapy within a public high school, which, though lacking controls and rigorous measures, did prove to be entirely possible, and yielded estimates of appreciable success in several ways.

SELECTION AND ORIENTATION OF SUBJECTS

Forty-three girl students, ranging in age from 13 to 17 years, were divided among four groups of approximately equal size. The girls were selected by their counselors on the basis of having a history of underachievement together with an IQ of 115 or higher. More than half were regarded by their teachers as otherwise exhibiting no problems.

When the counselor offered the girls the opportunity for membership in a group, they were told that acceptance would mean giving up their weekly activity period. Their realization that an affirmative decision meant forfeiting this alternative, perhaps helps account for the relatively few drop-outs.

The therapist and present writer, who was also the school psychologist, saw each girl individually for about a half hour before the first session. During this interview an attempt was made to discover the nature of her goal, and the girl was told that group participation might be expected to provide opportunities for understanding some of the obstacles in the way of reaching it. The realities imposed by time, effort, and other factors were discussed briefly. Although encouraged to tell her parents of her membership in such a group, the girl was assured that no one on the school staff would divulge to them any material she might bring in; moreover, if approached by her parents the therapist would talk with them only with the girl's permission and in her presence. Adolescents, struggling for independence, may be expected to be responsive to this approach which stresses confidentiality.

THE GROUP THERAPY SESSIONS

The groups met weekly for one-hour sessions, 30 in all. At the initial session no further didactic introduction was required, for the girls began almost immediately to verbalize their "gripes." These were directed against one or more of their teachers, accompanied by such phenomena as testing the therapist, and competing with other group members.

Review of the topics brought in, shows that they fell into a chronological order roughly as follows: first, relationships with teachers; then, with parents; next, with peers; and finally with the other sex.

During the first few sessions strong feelings of group cohesiveness developed. One expression of this was the "secret" name adopted by the first group—SPC, "Stupid People's Club." Far from being a term of derision, this appellation held connotations of affection and challenge. Although hostile competitiveness was frequently expressed in the safety of the group, most of the girls also experienced feelings of mutual support. For example, a girl would encourage another member to cry if she felt like it; or show her how less eye shadow would make her more attractive.

From the therapist's point of view, the aim of the group discussions was to clarify each girl's goal, of which she might or might not have been aware; to help her to understand something of the reasons for this choice; and to enable her to find more useful and appropriate compensations for her feelings of inferiority. The emphasis was on the here-and-now, with a minimum of probing. The therapist discouraged attempts by other members to uncover more than a girl seemed ready to reveal. The dreams brought in were met with associations from other members, but interpretations were rarely offered.

At times the therapist took roles suggested by the material brought in, e.g., of the teacher challenged by the girls because he tries to be both a pal and an instructor, of the unpopular student who disrupts the teaching, or of the older sister granted privileges denied the group member. Empathy on the part of the therapist was assumed to be most important in helping the girls feel accepted by their parents and teachers. The active participation of the therapist in these groups enabled all the girls to see the possibility of interacting with an authority without danger. When they felt sure of this, they became free to reveal in the group what they regarded as the worst aspects of themselves, which were previously hidden in the hope of attracting love.

This was followed by various expressions of awareness of the damaging effects of self-depreciation.

Gradually the girl's life style, heretofore invisible in the confusion of defenses, could be seen. Early recollections were of use in this respect: e.g., "Sitting in the carriage I felt I was too big to be there, but could not get out or do anything;" and "I hit my cousin over the eye with a little shovel and the blood came right through the washcloth, but no one was paying any attention to *me*." Adler's concept of personality development as an expression of the constant striving toward perfection became evident as the girls used the sessions as opportunities to reveal what they felt to be shameful conflicts in family relationships, and to find acceptance in the group. Anxiety feelings attached to the opinion of herself as helpless, gradually diminished as the girl gained courage to look at and to appraise the more adequate aspects of herself. Although insight as such was not frequently verbalized, similarities between unhappy sibling relationships and other peer problems were pointed out as the members related their tentative reaching toward others without the old resentments.

MILIEU CHANGES THROUGH TEACHER COOPERATION

Each girl had seven or eight teachers. Following the third session and again at the end of the year, after grades had been recorded, the therapist held group conferences which added up to 240 interviews with 69 teachers. The purpose of the first conference was to explain the place of the therapy groups in a high school. Some of the personality and group dynamics were discussed, and the value of giving each girl an opportunity to understand the critical reactions of her peers was brought out. The teachers were encouraged to find ways of protecting certain students against excessive demands of the environment. It was pointed out that when the students learn to perceive the school world as less hostile, they will fight less or be less fearful. The second conferences were used to record changes noted by the teachers—in terms of academic achievement, social relationships, attendance, and such health problems as had come to the attention of the school.

RESULTS

Attitudinal changes. Evaluation of the group experience by each girl, and the changes observed in her by both group members and teachers pointed to improvement in three areas. (a) Feelings of

strength and worth seemed to have replaced anger. (b) Awareness of the causes and effects of conflicts with authority was achieved, accompanied by increased tolerance of differences in values. (c) Understanding the analogy between sibling relationships and relationship with other peers led to some realization that cooperation does not mean submission.

School achievement. Thirty-seven of the 43 subjects (86%) showed improvement in their final grade averages over those of the previous year. The six who showed no improvement had all dropped out of the group, none later than after the sixth session. The grade improvement was from 79.8 to 87.4 which is significant at the .01 level.

DISCUSSION

Underachievement can be seen as both cause and effect of heightened feelings of inadequacy and uselessness. Our underlying assumption was that failure to find satisfaction in school had its origin in the student's failure in finding her place in the family group, and, further, that changing her relationships with other (surrogate) authorities would in turn lead to more satisfying relationships in the family.

Group therapy within the school provides a favorable climate for development of the student as a social being. Engagement in social action is the best means of freeing the individual from the narrow limits of his subjectivity in the sense of being unduly affected by irrational bias. In lieu of real security the underachieving adolescent clings desperately to these biases, for they give him a sense of strength, false though this may be. To others he communicates hostility in various forms. According to this, desires for dependence and conformity lead to aggressive behavior, which leaves the individual feeling isolated; disappointed, he reacts against this, leading to dependency and in turn back to conformity. Thus in the group we see girls fighting dependency and at the same time dreading isolation.

The question as to whether the presenting symptom of the underachieving student cannot as well be dealt with in the ordinary classroom as in a therapy group must, we believe, be answered in the negative. One reason is that the primary aim of the high school class situation is academic competence, and this is not always compatible with the therapy goal; modification of personality may not be consistent with the perceived role of the history or mathematics teacher. Moreover, in the classroom the student reacts to individuals, not, as in the therapy group, to the relationship between individuals.

SUMMARY

In a public high school, four groups of underachieving girls with IQs of 115 and over, met weekly for one-hour group therapy sessions with the school psychologist for 30 weeks. Emphasis was on free interaction, with expression of feelings. Little attempt was made to elicit or to deal with material not readily available to the individual. Topics were brought in for discussion in this time sequence: relationships with teachers, parents, peers, and the other sex. Evaluation by teachers, other group members, and the girls themselves following group therapy, indicated heightening of self-esteem and improvement in relationships with authorities and peers. Furthermore, in 37 out of the 43 subjects who did not drop out of their group, final grade averages showed significant improvement over those of the previous year.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

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